

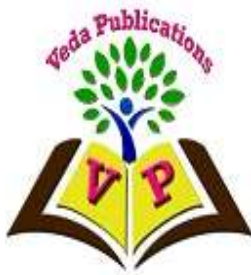


## DEVASTATION OF SANCTITY IN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS: A THEMATIC STUDY OF WHELAN'S *HOMELESS BIRD*

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### ABSTRACT



The paper makes an attempt to expose the gruesome reality of annihilation of sanctity in cultural institutions such as marriage, education and religion through Gloria Whelan's novel *Homeless Bird*. These institutions crush women's individuality and drive them to a subservient status rather than provide security to them. They intensify sufferings to women instead of ensuring happiness to them. Whelan represents women's predicament as a widow through the character Koly. Koly, being a girl, is prevented from getting educated and has been given to a sick boy in the name of marriage. After becoming a widow, she undergoes many misfortunes which indeed hinder her empowerment. Whelan, the American writer who has been inspired to write an Indian story, recommends remarriage and education for women like Koly who have lost their husbands at an early age.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Education, Religion, Child Marriage, Dowry, Widowhood, Remarriage.

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It is a paradox in Indian culture that modernity is booming outwardly but the traditional mindset is deeply entrenched. Gloria Whelan, an American author has made out a case for emancipation of women, who they think are subjected to all sorts of invidious discriminations. Even though people have accepted modern means of living that improved our lifestyle, Indian values and beliefs still remain unchanged. Gloria Whelan's *Homeless Bird* has therefore become a sociological study of the Indian women for whom Women Liberation Movement is still a far cry, as they hold a mirror up to the social and cultural institutions like marriage, education, religion that crush their individuality and drive them to a subservient status. These institutions, instead of ensuring the happiness of individuals, intensify their suffering. In these institutions, it is the victim who suffers while the victimiser walks away with self-conceit.

Child marriage is an age old practice prevalent in India, mainly in the states of Bengal, Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Haryana till today. The development and modernization of India along with the implementation of the strict rules of marriageable age to be eighteen for girls and twenty-one for boys have resulted in a considerable downfall in the number of child marriages. Though many social reformers have fought against several social evils such as Sati, widow remarriage, child marriage, casteism etc, there is lack of awareness in small villages where the illegal practice of child marriage is rampant.

In the name of marriage, the lives of young girls are ruined eternally. They are married to old men owing to poverty. To avoid giving more dowries for girls, parents get their daughters married to older men. In *Homeless Bird*, Koly reports, "Stories were told of girls having to marry old men . . ." (6). At times, the traditional marriage is a kind of compulsion. Because of the cultural practice, young girls are pushed to marital life. Many children in India are forced to get married at a premature age. The life of Koly exemplifies it. Even her father says, " She is dressed like a woman, but she is only a child..." (16). Though these young girls know nothing about the bridegrooms whom they are going to marry, they are

compelled to learn to love them. In *Homeless Bird*, Koly asks her mother,

'What if I don't like him?'

'Of course you will like him.'

'But what if I don't?'

Maa impatiently slapped at a fly.

'Then you must learn to like him.'

(13)

Koly is forced to accept her bridegroom whom she has never met or seen and she has to love him. Though Koly questions it, Chandra, her sister-in-law accepts her groom saying, " I will learn to love him..." (68).

Through the marriage of Hari and Koly, the readers come to know the locale of this novel, though it is not openly pointed out in the novel. Their wedding shows the cultural practices of North-Eastern states in India. On the wedding day, they are made to repeat the following verses: " I am the words, thou the melody; I the seed, thou the bearer; the heaven I, the earth thou "(18).

Marriage, one of the cultural institutions is a new beginning and powerful commitment between a man and a woman. As a social institution, marriage plays a great deal of importance in the lives of husband and wife. In the novel, as Koly and Hari have not grown up, they are unable to comprehend the commitment in the sphere of marriage. Koly's mind always lingers on her own family rather than her husband and his family. She is all the time longing for her parental home thinking that she has been taken away "from my home and my maa and baap and brothers" (5). On the other side, even though Hari's parents know that he is a young boy and "as for his age, there is plenty of time for him to grow into a man," they plan for his marriage (19).

Marriage is one of the most sacred and holy ceremonies in Indian society. But the horror of the dowry system has made this ceremony one of the dreadful institutions. Although dowry system is one of the most hated systems, surprisingly it is growing day by day. Nowadays this problem has created a lot of hue and cry in India. The dowry system plays the most devastating role in the lives of Indian women. It has spread out its tentacles far and wide in the society affecting almost every section of the society. In *Homeless Bird*, Koly's father who is finding a dowry



for her says, "It will be no easy task . . ." (1). Koly's mother does not want Koly to go to school because the money for education can be better given for her dowry. "The money for books and school fees is better put toward your dowry, so that we may find you a suitable husband" (3). It explicitly demonstrates that even in this digital era there are women who are unaware of the importance of education in the villages of some Indian states.

In the novel *Homeless Bird*, to get money for the dowry, Koly's mother sells three brass vases, a brass wedding lamp and a cow. "A gift of money had to be paid to my bridegroom's family for taking me" (6-7). Money is the main concern of both the families of Hari and Koly. To get money for Hari's medicine to cure his tuberculosis, Hari's marriage is arranged and on the other side, Koly is married to Hari, a young boy since Koly's family is "too poor to buy a decent husband" (6). A girl child is thought as a bad luck since dowry has to be given to her husband's family. Koly questions whether marriage is like buying a sack of yams in the marketplace. "Was my marriage to be like the buying of a sack of yams in the marketplace?" (11). In addition to money, Koly is given two bangles made of glass beads, some plastic toe rings and silver earrings. The day she steps into her husband's home, Koly's mother-in-law asks her to give her silver earrings. Koly is insulted by being slapped by her mother-in-law when she rejects to give her silver earrings. She feels unwanted in their home on the first day itself. The system of dowry has also become a primary source of Post-marital disputes.

On the day of Chandra's wedding, Koly is deserted and she feels very bad as her wedding sari is given to Chandra. Koly compares her wedding with that of Chandra. "Instead of a frightened gawky girl and a young and doomed bridegroom, there were a handsome man and a happy and beautiful bride" (77). Though Koly feigns a smiling face, she is totally miserable inside. She feels, "Inside I was miserable and did not know how I would be ever happy again. My life seemed to be over. What was there to look forward to but years and years of slaving away?" (75). It is obvious that Koly's childhood has been crushed by cultural practices and she craves for a colourful childhood.

From time immemorial, the clash between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is a never-ending dispute. This incompatible relationship affects women psychologically. In the novel, Koly is tortured by her mother-in-law and made to do all household works. Her mother-in-law never gives rest to Koly and makes her work continuously ". . . with her never-ending orders and scoldings" (52). She is treated less than a bandicoot. Once, her mother-in-law screams at her, "you are no better than the bandicoot that burrows under our house and eats our food. Go home to your miserable parents!" (52). Koly is treated like a servant who works for food. She understands that it is not she who is wanted but only her dowry is needed.

The problem gets worse in case of a widow, especially if a woman loses her husband at a very young age. In that scenario, woman is looked upon as a burden by the entire family and much worse she is forced to lead a life of a recluse. When Koly becomes a widow after Hari dies of tuberculosis, her mother-in-law never feels sorry for Koly. Instead she chides her that she is an unfortunate woman. "It was an inauspicious day when that girl came into our house" (71). In the institution of marriage, a woman is suppressed by another woman in the form of mother-in-law. But Koly's father-in-law regrets for Hari's marriage and Koly's widowhood. " 'We should never have let you marry our son,' he said. 'It was not fair to you. We wanted him to get well. We thought if we could bring him to the holy river, there would be a chance. You must be like a daughter to us now' " (45). Mr. Mehta, though Koly is a widow, does not disrespect her. He cares for Koly as his own daughter and teaches her to read and write. It is obvious that Mrs. Mehta is unsympathetic towards her daughter-in-law. Even Koly's widow pension has been furtively received by her. When Koly comes to know and questions it, she is all the more estranged by her mother-in-law. After Mrs. Mehta becomes a widow and Koly consoles her, her harsh words express how much Mrs. Mehta is fanatical towards her traditional ideas.

I was sorry for her. We might have been a comfort to each other and once I even said, 'Now we are both widows.'



Sass drew herself up. 'What do you say? Do you have a daughter who has married well? Or a son who died in the holy city of Varanasi? We are not the same.' (92)

In ancient Hindu society, widow remarriage was considered as a sin because a widow was expected to mourn the death of her husband throughout her life. As in the case of women like Koly, widow remarriage is essential since she has not yet started living her life happily and contentedly. Staying happy is the birth right of every citizen and women are no exception. She also needs a partner who supports her through the ups and downs in life. When Raji proposes Koly to marry him, she hesitates to accept his proposal as the society in which she lives does not allow remarriage for a widow. Raji whole-heartedly accepts Koly, a widow as his life partner. The revolutionary change that has occurred in this 21<sup>st</sup> century India is that not only widow remarriage is legal but Indians in general today support the institution of widow remarriage. But still a section of orthodox citizens is strictly against the custom of a widow marrying again.

Indians are conservative by nature. So, their blind faith and age old superstition have stood against the female education. Now, people have started realising the value of female education. They do not hesitate to send their daughters to schools. Now in India one can find women professors, lady doctors, lady scientists, lady politicians and lady ministers. But a large number of women are still in dark as it is seen in *Homeless Bird*. Women in the novel are deprived of the institution of education. The society is so biased that it appreciates education for men and not for women. Only Koly is not allowed to go to school. Her brothers go to the boys' school in their village. Though there is a school for girls in the village, Koly is not allowed to go there. She has even begged her mother to send her to school. But her mother, instead of encouraging her, discourages her saying that school is a waste for girls.

Koly is very eager to get education. She even hides herself under the windows of the school to listen to the students saying their lessons aloud. She even begs her brothers to teach her. But "When I begged them to teach me the secrets, they laughed

at me" (3). It shows education for women is a laughing stock in some of the sections of Indian society. On the other side, her brothers feel that education is more like sitting in a hot school room all day than learning something new.

False ideas have been laid against women education to prevent women from stepping into school. It has been spread falsely if a girl learns to read, her hair falls out, her eyes cross and no man will look at her. One can understand how much the patriarchal Indian society opposes women education. Education for women can be helpful in eradicating many social evils such as dowry system, unemployment, etc. They should be educated in the interest of national progress. In *Homeless Bird*, only men are educated and no woman is allowed to get education. Koly is not allowed to get education in her parental home and she learns to read and write with the help of her father-in-law. Education is not considered valuable by women except Koly in this novel. Her mother fails to understand its significance. She is worried only about taking care of her house. When Koly describes her mother, she says "My maa had no use of books." (3).

Another issue which makes women not interested in getting education is the conservative notion of associating women with chores. In the novel, Koly's mother, Mrs. Mehta and Chandra are proud of learning cooking, the entire household works and housekeeping. They do not give significance to education. It is clearly shown through the incident when Koly asks her mother whether Hari would mind that she has no education. To that, her mother replies, " 'You can cook and keep a house, and you embroider as well as I do. Should a wife sit with a book and let the work go?' " (8). Though Koly is willing to learn, Chandra, the daughter of Mr. Mehta who is a school teacher, is not interested in learning. When Koly asks Chandra, she answers, "I have no need. My parents are looking for a husband for me"(57). In Indian society, even small children imbibe the notion that marriage is more important than education. Naturally, they do not understand the worth of education and they fall preys in premature stage.

Though Mr. Mehta is very much interested in teaching his daughter-in-law, Mrs. Mehta does not



like it and deliberately makes Koly work. When Koly is found reading, she is called lazy and is sent off to the village on an errand by Mrs. Mehta. "From then on if she caught me reading, she would call me lazy and set me to a task or send me off to the village on an errand" (64). This incident emphasizes women's indifferent attitude towards education.

Religion, another cultural institution plays a central and definitive role in the life of Brahmin widows. The unfortunate women who cannot commit Sati or are prevented from it are doomed to lead the most austere life. Among the Brahmins and some higher castes, the widows are made to wear white sari without ornaments and eat single meal. Their presence at family public functions is totally forbidden. In *Homeless Bird*, the predicament of Koly is brought to the limelight by Whelan. Being a thirteen year old child, she does not like to wear white sari, the icon of widow. *Columbia World of Quotations*, a website quotes the famous American poet Sylvia Plath's words: "Widow. The word consumes itself. . . ." When Koly enters the city of Vrindavan, she is anxious to leave the city because of the sight of thousands of widows. She says, "However difficult my life would be in Delhi, I would not be surrounded by thousands of widows to remind me that my life like theirs, was over" (99). The Brahmin Hindus follow a custom that if husband dies, the widow should not go back to her parental home. So Koly is unable to go to her parents. She weeps heavily saying that "I could not go back to my parents and be a daughter again. I was no longer a wife or a Bahus, a daughter-in-law. Yes, I thought, I am something. I am a widow. And I began to sob" (46). Her condition becomes worse when Chandra gets married.

The condition of the widows in rural areas is pathetic. After the death of husbands, many times they are driven out of their homes and left to fend for themselves. In many cases, these widows who are driven out of their homes often land up in religious places. The condition of widows in Vrindavan, Varanasi, and Mathura are well documented and researched upon. Many widows flock to the holy city of Puri for solace. They are living in a very difficult condition. Similarly, in Orissa many widows land up in Puri city, one of the most religious places in India. In

*Homeless Bird*, the readers get a clear picture of the city of Vrindavan crowded with thousands of widows through the narration of Koly. Some widows look peaceful and some others look thin, hungry and miserable. The widows are chanting in temples for four hours without interval to get food that is given by the monks. "The temple was filled with chanting widows in white saris. Some looked peaceful, almost joyful. Others looked thin, hungry, and miserable, as if they wished they were somewhere else. Their hunger reminded me of my own" (100). Since some widows are very hungry, they steal food from the temple. "The widows in their white saris stole silently from the temple. A terrible panic came over me" (101). The widows in the city of Vrindavan are homeless and hopeless. Many a time, there are many widows who cannot find enough space in the widow houses. They have no food to fill their stomach. They are deserted by their families. Social, cultural, traditional and solaced religious practices systematically oppress widows. Customary practices of treating widows as objects, commodities, and burdens affect the widows psychologically. They earn to lead a happy life like others. But they are marginalised by the orthodox society. The predicament of Brahmin widows in the city of Vrindavan is projected by Whelan in the novel.

Whelan exposes the social evils prevailing in India through the text *Homeless Bird*. Kalpana Sharma says, "India is one amongst 13 nations worldwide with some of the highest prevalence of child marriage" (3). Whelan depicts how child marriage and dowry system stifle the lives of women in the institution of marriage. For women she recommends education, one of the cultural institutions. She emphasises the importance of widow remarriage in the lives of widows like Koly. The widows are the neglected and the voiceless segment of the society. The oppressive traditional society has been looking down upon the widows after the demise of their husbands. They are denied even the basic human rights like attending ceremonies. Such social discrimination in the institution of religion should be put off from the modern society.

Whelan has really done her best to expose the cultural practices and cultural institutions which



are intertwined in the lives of people. They have explored the Indian culture, its practices and its institutions, and focused readers' attention on the evils predominant in cultural values, the gender discrimination that is prevalent, and the inhuman treatment meted out to widows irrespective of their age. If such evils should disappear from our culture, such an exposure is essential. For many readers, it is an eye-opener, and it must have created awareness and shaped many reformers.

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