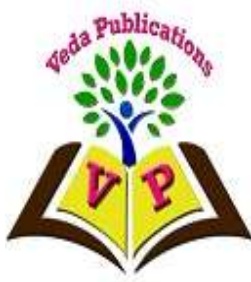




PRESENTATION OF WIDOWS IN LITERATURE AND FILM, A PATRIARCHAL GRATIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

Widows have remained the utmost sufferers in Indian society. Patriarchal domination has always been cruel to them. There is none to hear their physical and mental agony. In literature and film these oppressed women characters are presented in many ways. In this paper I would like to show how many writers and film directors have presented them in their creations and how their personal attitude to these unfortunate creatures is reflected. The widows have also become the victim of matriarchal consciousness about their rituals, food habit, dress code and a life of seclusion. The paper would also discuss this matter. Both the patriarchal and matriarchal system has become a punishing authority to them. When a woman lives with her husband she remains within the mainstream of the society, though in a subjugated manner, compelling the critics to call her the second sex. But unfortunate death of her husband throws her to the darkest hell of the society making her the last. In Indian literature their plight has been really reflected. Their marginalization and loneliness make their living horrible. Many literary pieces and film script show how they hope to live and want to be loved by others. Their appearance in white sari and shaven head is shocking but the mental harassment they are forced to bear is more terrific. The society celebrates the suppression of their desires. From Binodini (*Chokher Bali*) to Bandana (*Swet Patharer Thala*) –in fact all the widow characters in literature or film have been accused of infidelity. Losing their own individuality they only become transgressor to the whole world. Compelled by their loneliness or to keep the mere existence they sometimes depend on a man who is not necessarily her lover. But they are termed as vamp. Contrary to this, some authors and film makers, though a fewer one, try to project these widows in a different manner-embodiment of goodness and self-confidence to fight against the biased social laws. The paper will also highlight this.

Keywords: *Seclusion, Transgressor, Infidelity, Vamp.*



INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times the Hindu society of India and especially of Bengal has been an instrument of torture for women. That they are also human beings is forgotten all the time. But the women who become widow, sometimes because of their marriage with old men, are the most unfortunate members of the society. Very little has been done for their emancipation. Their better living is a concern for none. Leading a secluded life, though being a part of the social system, becomes inevitable for them. But the suppressed voice succeeds to reach to the literary and filmy creations. Perhaps the whole social system is shaken from within by their presentation in literature and film. The widows are seen from various perspectives in these two powerful media.

DISCUSSION

The dictum of the Hindu shastra which has been misinterpreted most of the time has always been detrimental to the social upliftment and equalization. A division and hierarchy have always been maintained for the benefit of a small group of religious fanatics. After marriage a woman is supposed to have the identity of her husband. She is told that her own home is that of the husband. So, after the death of her husband she loses her home and identity. She is sent to any religious places for the rest of her life. Even her own parents fail to give her shelter for the fear of being ostracized by the society. Even if she manages to stay at her in-laws' house she faces physical and mental torture. She is denied to have any right on her dead husband's property. Before promulgation of Sati Prohibition Act(1929), a result of desperate effort by Raja Rammohon Roy the widows were burnt alive. But it is true that this inhuman system continued for a long time even after this. Rammohon Roy published many articles championing the cause of the widows. He condemned polygamy and showed how ancient Hindu laws have been misinterpreted to deny women equal right of inheritance. Pundit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar fought very hard for the introduction of Widow Remarriage Act(1856), which allowed them to marry a man for her better living and protection from the wrath of religious orthodoxy. In modern times there have been some changes in their lives but the basic problem remains the same. They are still forced

to suppress desires and their presence in social gatherings is considered an evil. Hungry men do not leave a scope to get a sexual favor from a helpless widow. When this kind of social problem of such a magnitude is depicted in literary pieces and films it becomes universal and demands attention for the possible solution.

The situation and challenge in a widow's life have been addressed in various ways in literary writings. The social and cultural background in which they are shown changes from time to time. Sometimes the widows are presented as mere submissive creatures who want to keep up with the social norms. Sometimes using their intellect and courage they try to voice against the injustice and misbehaviour. In some cases they are ridiculed in such a manner that their self-esteem is severely attacked. In one of the much heard Gopal Bhar stories, a Bengali series namely *Ek ebong Adwitiya Gopal* Gopal's aunt is mocked as a miser. Being a widow she does not eat fish. Raja Krishnachandra challenges Gopal to bring some money from her. He plays a trick on her food. Secretly he mixes some prawn with her vegetables and charges her for violating the food norms meant for a widow. Being threatened that the incident will be made public she has to give money to Gopal. It is a bitter truth that this food habit has been an instrument of torture against widows through ages. Any kinds of benevolent work by widows are even seen as sin if it goes against the social order. The hiding of her husband's death for six months by Subhas Kakima in Ashapura Devi's short story *Anachar* is perceived as a serious offence by the village moralists. Nobody is ready to accept the real reason behind it. She kept the death news a secret because she did not want to give any shock to her seriously ill father-in law. Just after the old man's death she makes the news public. Everybody questions her behaviour without considering her mental agony. Even 'Pisima', a widow herself abuses her for not following the strictures laid down by the society for the widows. Only Manotosh, the narrator understands the situation and feels for Subhas kakima. But the writer does not present Manotosh as a revolting youth. He feels but never acts. He lacks the courage to protest against the organized butchery of a female self. When one old



man comments, "khaborta buror kane uthlei to machh khaoa, saree para ghuche jeto" [i.e. if the news has been heard by the father-in-law she had to stop eating fish, wearing sari]. This kind of prohibition in food and dress code provide the so called moralists a sadistic pleasure. The writer fails to portray the female protagonist as a protesting human being. Rather Subhas kakima wants a religious remedy—"bidhoba hoye jene sune sadhabar acharan kora! Hindu dharmo ki etota anacharer bhar saite parbe?" [i.e. behaving like a married woman while being a widow! can Hindu religion be able to tolerate such a sinful act?]. When Manotosh meets her in the evening only to solace her, he is reminded that it is not sober to converse with a young widow. Thus the hollowness of the society is exposed. The patriarchal social force is so dominating that nobody can stand beside a widow even if it is only to sympathize. Sometimes the authors and filmmakers have tried to create sympathy for these sufferers but they are in a bit of anxiety and fear. And this fear is also generated from the weakness to fight against the age old social order. A Bengali poem 'Sahamaran' by famous Bengali poet Satyendranath Dutta is a befitting instance in this regard. The protagonist is a widow who has been saved by a Muslim boatman when she falls in the river from the burning pyre. She becomes a widow because she was forced to marry an old man to maintain her father's religious sanctity- "kulin pita kuler gole /pariye dilo burar gale /holam parer bash". After a few days or months the husband dies which is very natural. But the girl blames her own fate for this. The widow gets severely burnt but ultimately saved and loved by the boatman. She gets new life and earns herself to maintain the family. It may seem that by choosing a Muslim lover the poet shows us a picture of communal harmony. But what is the actual fact? Is the poet afraid of finding a Bramhin youth or at least a Hindu man as the lover or husband? It is not an exaggeration that till today a Hindu girl who marries a Muslim boy is often assumed as dead by her parents. Almost a same incident happens in Henry Derozio's narrative poem *The Fakeer of Jungheera*. Nuleeni is a upper caste lady who was married to a Bramhin. Her husband died in early youth. She loved Fakeer, a follower of Islam. After her husband's death she was brought to the pyre to

be sati. women were singing song praising sati. But she was reluctant to be sati and in search of a new life she escaped with the robber chief Fakeer. They were leading a life full of love and mirth in the cave of Jungheera. Ultimately Fakeer is killed by the family members of Nuleeni. She cradles him in her arms and dies together with him. The poem shows how the right to be loved is denied in case of a widow. And this denial of love and domination of expression of desire is best found in Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Chokher Bali*. Binodini, a young widow falls in an extra-marital relationship with Mahendra who is married to Ashalata, a naïve gentle girl. Binodini always wanted a space to express her desires and emotions. Though Rajlakshmi, Mahendra's mother is a widow herself, she never understands her feelings. After knowing the truth she throws her away from her house. In this novel Tagore shows Ashalata's character in complete contrast to Binodini. Everyone bears disregard and hatred for Binodini. She is thought to be immoral. But the author's presentation of Binodini generates sympathy for her in the reader's mind. The author exposes the society's sham rules which were always an impediment to the betterment of these unwanted insiders. Though fellow feeling among widows are not seen in this novel it is strongly present in Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's short story *Drabamoyee kashibas*. A widow Drabamoyee lives alone in a remote village Gopinathpur in Bengal. A pet cow and some trees in the premises of her house are like family members to her. But her neighbour Na Thakrun, a widow herself helps her always. They share the joy and pains of their lives. Being insisted by one of her grandsons who occasionally come to see her she goes to Kashi where she has to share a room with another widow Niraja. But she never recovers from her homesickness. On the other hand Niraja totally devotes herself in the religious practices. Drabamoyee never liked it and returns to her village with the realization that-"ei bhitey amar Gaya Kashi". [i.e this native home is Gaya Kashi to me]. The author has ridiculed the then system of sending widows to religious places luring them of a heavenly life after death.



Not only in literary writings but in films also the issue of the widows has been addressed differently. Though most of the films are based on these writings (as in *Chokher Bali*) but still some films have added new dimensions to this issue. The film *Swet Patharer Thala* (1992) directed by Prabhat Roy deals with the problems and challenges a widow faces in modern society. After losing a loving and caring husband she becomes helpless. The love which he once received from her in-laws vanishes. She feels it hard to maintain the dress code and food habit meant for widows. She refuses to wear white sari to save her only son from any mental shock. Being deprived of financial inheritance she has to leave her in-laws' house and joins a job. Though initially she faces harassment there she also gains self confidence. She becomes engaged in a relationship with an art teacher. She was afraid of her son's reaction to this. Responding to her personal need Bandana decides to marry the man. The film may shock the middle class viewers but it clearly shows the sufferings of a widow whether she is educated or not, working or not. The film also gives a message that only financial empowerment of a widow can give her the potential to survive in this society. Even today widows are being sold for the monetary gain of her husband and in-laws. In the film *Dor* (2006) directed by Nages Kukunoor the main character Meera becomes a widow in her youth when her husband is murdered in his workplace in Saudi Arabia. Belonging to a traditional Rajasthani Hindu family she has to follow the rituals very strictly. But when she hears that her father-in-law has decided to sell her to the local factory owner Chopra to get a waiver from his debt she becomes restless. In such a deplorable situation she pardons the murderer of her husband. On one side the film shows the plight of a widow and on the other hand it shows how much broad-minded a widow can ever be. Like Meera in this film, widows like Chuiya, Kalyani are forced into prostitution to earn money for running a Hindu ashram in the film *water* (2005) directed by Deepa Mehta. The head of the ashram Madhumati though a woman herself never proves to be sympathetic to these helpless young widows. The film also depicts the unfulfilled love of Kalyani as it has been almost the same to all widows. Though it is rare, fulfillment of love is also

found in films like Raj Kapoor's *Prem Rog* (1982). Devdhar and Manorama liked each other since their childhood. But Manorama belonged to a powerful high status Thakur family. She was married to another rich and handsome Thakur. Her husband dies just after the marriage and when her elder brother-in-law rapes this helpless widow she returns to her parental home. But she is not welcomed there. She is forced to maintain a very tough livelihood. The plight of widowhood is neatly described in this part of the film. Overcoming huge obstacles Devdhar cures her from trauma and panic. Ultimately they tie the knot to live happily thereafter. The film was highly acclaimed by the feminists as it shows that a widow can also change her own fate if she gets a true friend's help.

CONCLUSION

Widows are the part of our society. They need the same treatment like any other human being. Their life, dress, food and entertainment should be like any other person. But it is not easy to fight against religious orthodoxy. Even today art and journalism is attacked in the name of religious tradition. In this discussion it is clear that the issue is so complex and sensitive that the writers and film makers are always in a flux. Sometimes they have shown the courage of challenging the social order firmly but in some cases there are in hesitation and anxiety. They should be more bold and fearless. If widows are presented as normal human beings in these two powerful media, in real life also they will be able to obtain respect and love.

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