

TASTE OF NOSTALGIA: CRAVINGS & WIDOWHOOD

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Abstract

Patriarchy controls the lives of Indian widows through agencies like religion, customs, traditions, and culture. Hegemony assists them with the crutches of dependence but does not slacken control so that they may utilize their skills to become independent. Doubly marginalized, these widows across the span of the Indian subcontinent were actively imbibed into feminism only by the 21st century. Literature, in the meanwhile, has given these subaltern voices a platform to create awareness and sensitize readers so that their lamentable plight and the deceptive treachery of patriarchy is exposed. The researcher has selected a few Indian English narratives that have for their characters, widows who are victims of the hegemonic principles laid down by manmade Hindu Scriptures for the code of conduct of widows. The study also attempts to observe the change in the trend of the behavior of widows. Buttressed by the feminist movement, these women find their space and rebel in their capacities against their perpetrators and seek solace in nostalgia which becomes a way to escape the sordidness of their suffocatingly regulated existence.

Keywords: Patriarchal marginalization, widowhood, denial, feminism, rebellion, nostalgia and craving, escapism.

When the present no longer holds any hope or promise of happiness, an individual crawls into the protective shell of memories and searches for solace in the lap of nostalgia. Countless people, dejected in life, wounded with failures surrender, even though they can have hope; it is appalling to note that one section of women in India are beyond hope of any reunion with happiness and freedom - the widows.

Patriarchy urges into action stepping over the dead husband to reach out to every widow in order to tie her down with sermons on abjuration, chastity and abstinence. An austere life follows which must be exemplary for a widow indicated by the Sanskrit word *vidhva* which means destitute. The patriarchal society never fails to remind a widow that her life after her husband is bereft of all colors and celebrations and everything else that these may metaphorically symbolize. Patriarchy, with the agencies of religion, culture and tradition control the life of a widow. It is a symphony they play like an orchestra.

R.W. Connell has highlighted culture as an aspect of Symbolic Relations in his "Power and Control Wheel" where he asserts that "the dynamics of power by the "perpetrator" and the various methods to exert this power such as, coercion and threats; intimidation; emotional abuse; isolation; minimizing, denying, and blaming; using children; economic abuse; and male privilege. These are also the means by which widows are kept in subordination" (65). Consequently denial, abstinence and fasting become the keywords that define a widow's life becomes a guide.

Furthermore, the change in fortunes so depressingly drastic that a woman is stripped of her identity and instead, given a bland epithet of an unfortunate woman an *Abhaagan* in Hindi which is as bland as her white attire. To realize that the widow is denied the simple and harmless pleasures related to something as basic as food is heartbreaking. Although strict norms suggested for widows exact upon them religious rituals- their muted rebellion is seen in the ways which they use nostalgia as a mode of escapism.

"Remains of The Feast" by Githa Hariharan from her collection the *Art of Dying* is another sharp reminder of the sadistic pleasure that patriarchy allows itself to relish in the name of regulating the life of a widow. Susie Tharu in her seminal work "The Impossible" remarks that widow is a person whose life is marked by the death of someone. Society decides that she needs protection and regulation (261). Martha Alter Chen in her book *Perpetual Mourning: Widowhood in Rural India* observes that according to the orthodox Hindu model a woman is by nature wild, sexual and dangerous and this sexuality has to be curbed by the control of the male. Thus, a wife may be controlled by her husband, but a widow, due to absence of male control become dangerous. A perceived threat by a widow's unbridled sexuality is also the reason for the focus on both remarriage and levirate. Hence severe regimens of fasts and self-control are prescribed to a widow, even more if it is a young widow.

The celestial symbol of romance for a married woman transforms into a guide for a widow. The lunar calendar become a prescription of fasts for Sumitra in "Constant Craving":

"The moon is our savior, pray to him to give you the patience to be a widow. Fast, Sumitra, fast when the moon tells you. Our body should not be warm and plump, smelling of rich food onions and garlic [...] but try to look pale and thin as if the blood has drained from your veins" (87).

Uma Chakravarti in the article “Gender, Caste and Labour: The Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood” has also traced the linkage between stringent control of a widows “sexuality and upper caste status. The “rituals of widowhood”, she asserts, “incorporated certain basic features, signifying symbolic rejection/ deprivation of the widow’s sexuality”. Tonsure of the widow’s head is the community’s way of reiterating its power of control over the widow’s sexuality” (65).

Sumitra from “Constant Craving” found the Ekadasi fast most exerting as she had to spend 24 hours without water. “What she found bewildering was that, instead of getting used to the strict regime of fasting and eating less and less food, her body had turned defiant and decided to rebel. It craved foods it had never tasted even as a young girl. For the last one month, on Monday fasts she had dreamt of chole, paneer tikka, dahi kachori and even tandoori chicken – which she had never eaten in her life” (88).

It is not surprising that her memories and desire keenly aware of the exacting spirit of patriarchy, melt into the manifestation of a dream wherein she sees her dead husband insisting upon feeding her choley chaat. That a dream grants her conscience the permission to break her fast and surreptitiously ask the servant boy to buy the chaat for her on the sly is both ludicrous as well as pathetic.

Sumitra clearly chalks out her plan of action “she would sit on the chair near her husband’s picture. It would please him to see her obeying his wishes. She would eat very slowly, nibbling at the hot green chilli which always came with the choley... she would not swallow quickly but allow only tiny morsels to go down her throat, bit by bit, so that the delicious, hot, spicy, sour and salty flavor would linger” (89).

Sumitra also reminisces that once in her younger days she had been severely punished by her father for having eaten the same *chaat* from roadside vendor. Bursting with anger he had exclaimed, “Greedy girl, I will teach her a lesson she will never forget” and truly, she never forgot- the taste of the choley samosa chaat garnished with raw onions (88).

In “Constant Craving”, Sharma leaves the craving and unsatiated. This feeling of dissatisfaction ruffles unsuspecting readers who are deeply disturbed at the end when Sumitra throws a backward glance with a continued longing at the murder of crows enjoying the feast and wonders if there were chopped raw onions garnished on the *choley*.

Githa Hariharan’s Rukmini, a Brahmin widow of ninety brews up a rebellion as she realizes the brevity of her life owing to a terminal illness and demands all the innumerable unfulfilled wishes of her heart be satisfied. R. W. Connell has highlighted culture as an aspect of Symbolic Relations in his “Power and Control Wheel”. He comments in the Gender and Power Model that “Whenever we speak of ‘a woman’ or ‘a man’, we call into play a tremendous system of understandings, implications, overtones and allusions that have accumulated through our cultural history” (65). Thus, culture assumes significance in understanding power relationships.

Rukmini’s case is a complex one as she is doubly guarded- first as she is a Brahmin and secondly she is a widow. As a Brahmin, she is conditioned to her high caste snobbery that restrains her from consuming food prepared by anyone who is a non-Brahmin. Secondly, even this restricted privilege becomes further reduced as she becomes a widow.

Her great granddaughter Ratna who is young and studying to become a doctor joins hands with her and succumbs to every demand that Rukmini makes. Rukmini consumes tastes and flavours unknown to her before, with a hungry relish. The act of defiance becomes more delightful than the taboo foods themselves. Rukmini’s reckless and rampant hunger for flavours denied shocks the entire family.

“A month later we had got used to her unexpected, inappropriate demands. She had tasted by now, lemon tarts, garlic, three types of aerated drinks, fruit cakes laced with brandy, bhel-puri from the fly infested shop” (13).

Rukmini is excited about expecting eggs in the cakes and alcohol in colas! The cravings of her soul are satiated and just like the loud burp that she gives after having a cola reader also experiences a certain catharsis. Soon Rukmini invites more censure as she is suddenly conscious of her looks. She orders Ratna to bring her tweezers, hair removal cream and at the end asks for a red saree with a golden border. Ratna cannot acquiescence with the last request as her mother, symbolizing the society takes over the moment Rukmini breathes her last. Her mother rebukes Ratna for trying to drape Rukmini’s dead body with her red and gold festive saree, reiterating the power and control that society wields over the desires and wishes of widows.

Consequently, this becomes a narrative that not only reveals the ugly insecurities of patriarchy, but also highlights the sheer negligence of the women who have been crippled by society’s self-designed norms. There is only a stringent imposition of rules but the imposers deny any responsibility with regards to their victims what so ever.

Indir Thakur from Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s narrative *Pather Panchali* has an even sorrowful plight. Patriarchy swells and prospers because its guardians, more than men are senior women of the household. Being a married woman, which is a privilege in patriarchy, Shorbojoya is completely unsympathetic towards Indir, she pushes Indir out from her own home, moves her into a tiny hut and later blames her for being a burden on them and worsening their pecuniary condition. Surviving on a diet regimen of fasts, water and boiled rice, Indir Thakur, old, skinny and bent, is left to wander around the village and meets a very tragic end at a kind villager’s home:

“If she closed her eyes Indir Thakrun could see it all as before. She could see the wife of the Ray family, beautiful and pure as the goddess Jagaddhatri.... But now she and all the others were gone and no one was left with whom old Indir could talk and exchange memories”(7).

Indir speaks of kings and queens, narrates stories of her youth and her early life that was full of splurging luxuries to Little Durga who is besotted with the stories like all children. Durga’s excitement and involvement in these ballads and stories are not the focus here; that Indir constantly recalls them indicates the solace that nostalgia brings to her unfair life.

Taking into consideration narratives such as the ones discussed above, one can claim that Indian English writers have given a voice to the grievances of widows that seem to have been neglected in the politics and power dynamics between the two major genders. Widow welfare is one of society’s most prominent blind spots as it is fenced around ‘safely’ by religion and regressive beliefs of Manu. Although Jasbir Jain positively remarks “Women’s writing struggling against internalization of role models thrust on women has learned to express the untold narrative of being a woman” which is quite evident through the writers of the stories discussed in this article (1).

Furthermore, literature is a cultural construct and a rich source for interpreting the past. Women’s writing attempts to focus on “both the manifestation of a female sensibility, a feminine reality, and on its significance as a means of bringing about an awareness of this reality” (2). Widows recreate a happier world around them thus escaping into nostalgia. Memories are their rich treasure trove and fantasy their ultimate refuge. Food and memory thus make sweet in ways into the sordid lives of Indian widow, that society has carefully managed to maintained in their despicable quotient since the times of Manu.

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