
Window to Widowhood: An Analysis of the Societal and Cultural Atrocities inflicted on females in the absence of the ‘mandatory’ Male Companionship

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India is a multireligious nation with a rich cultural heritage. Hence it is inevitable that the practices of various communities would differ drastically. However, a common criterion observed in nearly every faith and practice is the restrictions imposed on women. Our culture is often considered biased in the way that it has separate rules for men and women. Men live in a liberal society, while women live in a conservative, authoritarian society. Married females are expected to adhere to the rules and regulations enumerated by their male counterparts while in the absence of such a protective male companionship, the women are subjected to much anguish with questions emerging regarding their ethics, character and chastity. Widows in Indian society are considered ominous and are excluded from religious and cultural festivities. This Research Paper makes an effort to paint pictures of such pitiable situations and bring to light the challenges encountered by single women, divorcees and widows globally. Additionally, it aims to shed focus on the atrocities heaped on them under the veil of religion and culture. This study emphasizes the necessity for paradigmatic change in our thinking today in order to understand the issues faced by these women.

Keywords: Widow, Single Woman, Biased Attitude, Atrocity, Culture, Opportunity

Introduction

Indian Society is an amalgamation of varying traditions and cultures. It is known for its impressive historical heritage. Often considered as an ideal of a diverse society, India endorses respect and reverence towards individuals of backgrounds other than one's own. However, there do exist certain aspects which appear common to every faith and school of thought, which unfortunately continue to malign the country's image globally. Our culture stubbornly insists on the requirement of male companionship for a female's wellbeing. As a consequence of this, unmarried women, divorcees, single mothers and widows are marginalized and discriminated against. Widows especially are disadvantaged and subjected to oppression in society. They face a number of challenges, including, but not limited to those imposed by the law, religion, tradition, and even the community and society. Widows are typically the most disadvantaged of all women. Their basic human rights to food, shelter, clothing, dignity, and other needs of existence are denied to them, in addition to imposition of restrictions on services, full participation in social and communal life, as well as other festivities and joyous events. They are constantly reminded of their loss and widowed status by the society. Their identity is suppressed to include only the absence of a spouse while every other important trait of their personality are disregarded. Apart from suffering due to society's conservative mindset, they are further persecuted on the basis of unrealistic portrayals in popular media and literature. The lives and status of widows are negatively impacted by a wide variety of societal prejudices that exist

in contemporary culture. There are several challenges that widows encounter in every part of life and getting past each day becomes a Herculean task for them. Social stereotypes prevent widows from leading free lives. In certain places, seeing a widow first thing in the morning is still regarded as unlucky. Widows are viewed as an isolated group in contemporary society due to a variety of social stereotypes.

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of the study was to determine how widows, divorcees and single women fared in society. The study's primary goals in this context are to highlight the condition of women especially, single mothers, divorcees and widows. Social prejudices were seen to have had an effect on widows, divorcees and single women's psychological, economic, and social statuses.

The study, however, has a narrow focus because it won't try to address every problem associated with widowhood. The three features of widows described above were primarily seen in the study.

Examples from Contemporary Literature: 'What will people say' by Mitra Phukan

Mitra Phukan has carefully addressed a topic that is still taboo in most of our country -that of a widow's remarriage or relationship-in her most recent book, "What Will People Say? A Novel. "Mihika, protagonist of story lives in Tinigaon, an unremarkable city in Assam, and most of the elderly adopt cold, patriarchal high moral stances that contrast with the warmth big city dwellers and the young, both rich and poor, exude as they support the middle-aged woman's right to find happiness with a partner again. Single women of all ages breaking down societal barriers without the comfort and ease of circumstances.

Psychological aspect: Society's beliefs

Being a woman, we always run into problems when we choose to live alone. Widows and unmarried women are viewed like vulnerable people in the workplace. They are already financially independent and have a respectable income. The fact that they are single compels society to assume they live pitiable lives. Despite their utmost efforts, they are not considered self reliant or capable. A shadow of unrequited pity and compassion looms over their lives. It is seen as an aberration if they are found to be content. It was not just the middle-aged and older people who clung to tradition. Quite a few younger people (Phukan, 2023, p. 1)

Not only the elderly, but also the young hold on to some traditional beliefs and are unwilling to break the cycle of stereotypes. Younger generations are also very traditional and have established ideas about how women should behave. According to them, women should adhere to certain rules and recognize their limits. But when it came to older people, things still remained as rigid as they had been for centuries. Especially for women. And especially, very especially for widows. (Phukan, 2023, p. 3)

In society, widows, divorcees, and those who had never married faced numerous constraints. It is difficult for them to live freely in society; they are regarded as though they are taken for granted. They could go out in mixed groups, but never as a twosome with a man who was not connected to them. They couldn't date a man and then go out with him. No wonder her husband divorced her. I don't blame him at all. A woman like that... (Phukan, 2023, p. 4)

If a woman was not shielded by a male, she was the subject of much rumor. If nothing could be found in her acts or lifestyle to point to, something could always be invented, inflated, and embroidered. Single, independent women managing their own lives are not only insufficient in our culture, but also an aberration. Perhaps seeing a lady who is both happy and single is too much for our society. As a result, they prefer to describe them as failures' or characterless' merely because they do not have a husband. She has no shame, that woman...it's we who have to avert our eyes (Phukan, 2023, p. 79).

Society did not notice the agony in the woman's eyes as they murmured words laced with hatred and loaded with venom. These same people, men and women alike, were not nearly as rigorous when it came to applying the same norms to men. Men were after all men and could do whatever they wanted.

Gastronomic Restrictions:

In patriarchal societies, widows have been subject to dietary restrictions, sometimes even to control their emotions and desires. A widow shouldn't have to live in gloom. Many older women in conservative families who had lost their husbands years before had ceased eating any form of flesh since the day their husbands died. Fish, poultry, any form of meat, and even eggs were forbidden. Onion and garlic were forbidden.

Societal Standards on Appearance:

It is perplexing why women are always subjected to restrictions and why people choose what they should and should not wear, with widow ladies being compelled to wear only traditional attire. You should wear a dupatta or a scarf at all times when you are in the office. "You never know which leech will come along (Phukan, 2023, p. 17)". Widows' clothing standards in Indian society have altered with time, but there are still some traditional rules and expectations that impact how widows dress. "Alone woman, your age, staying alone....people gossip, you know (Phukan, 2023, p. 20)".

Psychological and Physical Need for Companionship:

She was a widow, hatred word, and she was starved of touch. No just sexual touch, through there was that, too. With her...what? Boyfriend? Friend? Partner? The person was close to? Significant other? (Phukan, 2023, p. 27)

Bonding and emotional communication, which both rely on touch, are directly related to loneliness. Human touch has a significant role in how we communicate with others. However, some cultural hugging was not cultural. Social interaction is a powerful form of bonding that humans and other primates share, according to an evolutionary viewpoint. It can act as both a catalyst for loneliness in the surroundings and a means of connecting us to our social network.

Single women, widows, and divorcees had physical cravings as well, but because of societal stereotypes, they had to suppress them and consider how others would perceive them.

Suppression of Identity:

In the framework of modern Indian society, a woman's fight is to discover and protect her identity as a wife, mother, and most crucially, as a human being. She dedicates her entire life to becoming

the perfect wife and mother. She feels as though she has no position or identity during this procedure.

Who would have thought that she, always part of somebody else's name, would be so happy to be herself, today? So and so's daughter, so and so's daughter in law. Aditya's wife. Veda and Rohan's mother, Radha's mother in law. At work she was Dr Mihika Barthakur. (Phukan, 2023, p. 42)

Women nowadays are educated, economically independent, and more aware of their own identities. They rebel against patriarchal society and seek to find their own identities amid the hostile world of men.

Clamour and Curtailment of Religious Devotion:

Religion was the only permissible diversion specially for widows. Women are encouraged to engage in devotional activities, the more intense the better, after their husbands die, and even while they are married. After their husbands passed away, it was a common occurrence for women to become more religious; it didn't matter if they were young or old.

Widows are supposed to practice their religion more, however there are also some prohibitions on certain religious acts. She did not go to the Durga Puja celebrations any more. As a widow, she was not entitled to the red phot, the dot of vermilion that the priest put on married women's foreheads as blessings. (Phukan, 2023, p. 71)

Due to its strong ties to fertility and the fact that there was no designated color for widows, red was strictly forbidden for women whose husbands had passed away.

Capitulation to Societal Expectations:

In a patriarchal society, women are required to shift both their identities and their social circles. Women must always compromise in every situation. The fact that she had acquaintances who were not female was unique in and of itself because, once they were married, very few ladies had their own male companions. Their husbands' buddies became acquaintances, but they were never truly friends with them. In a patriarchal society, it is anticipated that following the death of the spouse, a woman will live alone without any male partners.

Ever since he heard about you and this man, he's been furious. He's not able to accept it all. (Phukan, 2023, p. 126)

In that traditional worldview, she needs to make compromises throughout her entire life. Elders do not accept widows being given a second chance to live their lives.

Conclusion:

Therefore, the effects of social prejudices on the position of widows and their families must be regarded as a developmental issue rather than just a problem for women. As so many women do after losing a spouse or partner, including young ones, it is not the solution to shut themselves off from the outside world. It takes guts to have come back to life, a mark of the strength and perseverance of a woman.

But now, without all these labels, she was gradually becoming herself as well. A woman who is independent, she adores this independent. She has her own identity. Our own happiness, our lives, depend on ourselves. Nobody else(Phukan, 2023, p. 230)

In the past, women were dependent on others and unable to care for themselves. Without a man in their lives, they were unable to exist on their own. However, in the text, Mihika was telling Sita to stop doing this and start thinking about herself in an effort to challenge the stereotypical mindset of the culture.

Widowhood is simply a part of a human being's biological and social life. While it definitely causes much anguish, it is neither a criterion for dejection nor a symbol of socio-cultural isolation. Death has been part of the human life cycle since the birth of the race, and hence it is derisory that we have started to discriminate humans on the basis of this basic phenomena. The passing away of a partner is grievous to the survivor, who has every right to mourn as per her own beliefs. The society has no business in imposing restrictions on widowed females and justify such atrocities in the name of culture and tradition. Widows themselves who feel obliged to alienate themselves as a manner of honoring their late husbands, should introspect if this is what a devoted and loving spouse would want for them.

To stand up again, and go for love, and life, instead of retiring into a cocoon (Phukan, 2023, p. 83)

Every human being has her own dignity, her own characteristics and identity, which need to be upheld under any circumstance.

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