

Widowhood In Ambai's Kitchen In The Corner

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Widows all over the world are facing a lot of problems and hardships in the family and society because of traditional norms, cultural practices and beliefs in the society. Across all societies, women continue to struggle for gender equality and women's rights issues. The most unpleasant, crucial unfortunate state of a woman is being a widow. In any society the word widow is inauspicious, misfortune, unwelcome and self-deprecating.

They were forced to withdraw completely from the social life of the community and were made to follow a severe discipline which made their existence a virtual social death. Efforts were made during the early colonial period to work toward reforms to improve the condition of widows in India. Yet, gender discrimination exists in India over the centuries. Women, particularly widows all over the world are the victims of social stigma. Discrimination of widows is a common phenomenon which is deep rooted in the traditional values and beliefs of the community. Widows have abundance of problems all over the world due to the doctrine of patriarchy and social debasement. Some of the major problems they face are, responsibility of child-bearing, lack of companionship, violence against widows, hindrances in remarriage, control over sexuality, victimization, and psycho-social adjustment with her own family and society. In all the developing countries, millions of widows and their children live in the condition of acute insecurity, deprivation and violence.

Even though we have Civil laws of inheritance, customary laws relating to marriage and inheritance, land ownership and child custody there exists a large gap between the legal measures and practices due to the rigid patriarchal attitude towards women. [Achuthan, N.S.338-408]

Widowhood is a transition stage from one marital status to another state after the death of the husband. Even today, entering into widowhood is more hazardous, painful and humiliating to women than to a widower because of the discrimination, ritual sanctions of the society against the widows. With the result, widows not only suffer with social and economic problems but also face many psychological consequences, loss of self and identity, loneliness, self-alienation, self-estrangement and in many cases deprivation causing emotional disturbances and imbalance. Both Laurence and Lakshmi have created the widow characters with strong sense of self-confidence, potentiality to face the world. Some of the characters show extraordinary performance in their stories.

In India and probably elsewhere irrespective of religion, caste, class and education, millions of widows are deprived of their universally acknowledged human rights. Widows' needs are marginalized in Indian society and they are not taken into mainstream. Even in an educated civilised society, they are isolated and wrapped under several restrictions. Because of the question of control over their sexuality, widowhood is insisted on women to confine them in their homes. In India a widow is seen as a woman who failed to safeguard her husband's life. So they are considered as ritually inauspicious and were not allowed to attend any social and religious functions and so they restrict their right to live in public sphere. They are not allowed to wear coloured sarees, bangles, forced to wear unattractive attire, ornaments, hair style, etc. These kinds of restrictions were very rigid in the community. Further their presence is prohibited in social, cultural and religious ceremonies. After attaining widowhood, most widows in India are subjected to economic decline, social isolation and related deprivation.

A widow is a person who is subjected to innumerable miseries not due to her fault but due to ignorance, superstition and the social custom followed by the patriarchal society, her agony and sufferings have not been reduced even after the social reformation and passage of time. Due to the deep recorded operation of

patriarchy, widows have been silently suffering in the society. Apart from the economic problems, widows even in educated, middle class families continue to be placed under immense psychological and social pressures.

As Meera Kumar, a women's activist who has written extensively on the subject of widowhood says, "The traditional Hindu blessing for a married woman is 'Sadaa Sowbhagyawati Bhavaa,' thereby implying that marriage is the only desirable state for a woman." No wonder the widow is marginalised and reduced to a social non-entity. "On the one hand society reveres the mother as a demi-goddess. But she cannot be a goddess unless she sports sindoor and bangles. There is an absolute dichotomy in the attitudes to the woman as pativrata and as widow."

The characters in the stories show a strong sense not only of common suffering but also of common strength. Clearly, each widow had negotiated the specific circumstances of her widowhood with dignity and courage, whether by taking up a job for the first time, by cultivating her own land, by educating her children, by fighting for her property rights, by establishing an independent household, establishing a reputed life with dignity, struggling for identity, moreover fighting with their own selves to come out of the social taboos framed by the patriarchal society and psychological pressures.

In Ambai's long story *Veetin Moolayil oru camayalarai*, widowhood is represented as a phase of physical deprivation. Bari-Jiji, the elderly lady of the house is deprived of her three course meal. She is also forced to resort to vegetarianism on account of her widowed status. The following lines convey a distinct status ascribed upon a woman's body owing to her widowed status.

...Bari-Jiji lost her rights to kumkum, betel leaves, meat and spirits; she also lost in the matter of everyday meals. Every day there was meat cooked in the kitchen. In a democratic spirit, the vegetarians in the family (actually only Bari-Jiji) were served potatoes. Bari-Jiji celebrated her loss in the battlefield with loud belching all night long, by breaking wind as if her whole body was tearing apart and then muttering in the toilet.[VMC 200]

This deprivation resulted in excessive greed for food. She started storing food in the secret pockets of her heavily pleated skirt. It is also interesting to note that Bari Jiji's deprived body sought compensation psychologically through a pretence of possession. She pretended being possessed by Goddess Amba through which she managed to extort her share of all the forbidden food items, such as meat and spirit.

....Once in six months, Bari-Jiji began to be possessed by Amba. Amba always chose the moments when Jiji and Papaji were seated at evening times with their pappads and their drinks. At first there would be a deep 'he' sound which came from the pit of the stomach. When they came running to her, panting with fear, she would yell in anger, 'Have you forgotten me?' The instant Jiji bent low and asked reverently, 'Command us, Ambe,' the orders would come. 'Give me the drink that is due to me. I want kesar kasturi. I want a kilo of burfi. I want fried meat..... When she was given all these things, she would say, 'Go away, all ofyou.' And for a while, there would be loud celebratory noises emerging from Bari- Jiji's room.... [VMC 199]

Both the writers have portrayed widowhood as a curse for women. But the women characters understand their real position of their drugged life and approach with positive attitude. Infact widowhood is period of liberty for women to take decision on their women without depending on other male in the family, if the woman is educated, financially sound enough and self confident.*The small dark kitchen, considered to be a 'sanctum' for women like Jiji, is not a source of power but a barrier which women need to overcome in order to efface their socially gendered and individual identities. Ambai's words could be heard through Minakshi's voice as:*

"Your womb and your breast will fall away from you;
the fragrance of your cooking will evade from you; the
glittering of your jewels will fade away ... Not trapped,
nor diminished by gender, but freed"

Hence, Minakshi presents a vision of freedom for Jiji,even at the end of the story: it is this quest for self realization and liberation that finally energies as Ambai's overall theme. Through this story, Ambai makes a clarion call to rethink and rebuild the role of women's 'space/place' and in turn her 'power', according to the current socio-political atmosphere.

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