



Traumatic Widow Women Switching to Sovereignty: A Conceptual Study in the Works of Rama Mehta

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ABSTRACT:

Since from ancient times, marriage is considered as an important social institution. It is for building a union between man and woman to lay the foundation of a family. Perhaps sometimes the outcome of this union can be optimistic and on the contrary may turn to pessimism. In this particular work, an emphasis is laid on the condition of widowed Hindu women, how they are escaping from the clutches of orthodox society in which they are never allowed to remarry once becoming a widow. It also signifies the changing perception of society towards a widow and her widowhood.

Key words: marriage, domination, divorce, widow, torture, mental illness.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Marriage exhibits in almost every culture but may vary in its form from place to place and from religion to religion. It is regarded as an essential sacrament to be performed by each and every Hindu disciple.

‘Marriage is an contractual agreement which formalizes and stabilizes the social relationship which comprise the family.’ (Nambi 3)

In Indian society which is mainly patriarchal in nature, man comprises the active position and woman a passive one. The suppression begins from the first step marriage that is finding the perfect match. At that time also it is the boy’s family who is regarded superior with their demands for marriage.

“On such occasions they felt ill at ease, self conscious, and embarrassed. From the questions asked to them, they felt as though they were on exhibition and had to perform well.” (Mehta 106)

From the above lines it can be clearly observed how the domination of patriarchal society suppresses the mental thoughts of a girl who is not even married at the moment. In society man is considered as a high masculine figure which has the power to protect, subjugate and dominate, while woman as high feminine, to reproduce, form family, begetting a son and should be protected from outer world. According to society, after marriage the world of a wife is only surrounded by her husband and she can't go beyond it and is should end with his husband only.

“In India, marriage and family dominate the life of women. The primary duty of the woman is to be subservient/loyal to the husband/his relatives and her children. After marriage, husband and relatives control all outside relationships.” (Sharma 243)

If the husband of a woman dies than she was left with his relatives and she has to contain if even atrocities are done on her by her in-laws, she can't go back to her mother's home.

II. PERCEPTION OF SOCIETY TOWARDS A WIDOW:

Once the husband died, the perception of people or family members towards the widow alters constantly which furthermore deepens the wounds of the girl. As she was passing with the trauma of the loss of her husband the negligence of family arise more emotions and feeling of loneliness in the house of her husband. In India widows are frequently regarded as “evil eyes,” the source of misfortune and unnecessary weight on poor families. Even sometimes the girl is regarded responsible for the death of their son in the family, saying that she has bought misfortune to the family.

Soon after the death of her spouse she is deprived with all the comforts and leisure she has been enjoying after marriage. She has to wear black clothes, abandoning all her jewels and bright colorful clothes; she can't wear red any more. She is considered as unlucky on the auspicious occasions in the family or society; she was advised to stay away on such sacred occasions and also denied to enter temple and other religious and sacred places. She is regarded as ‘Ashuddh’ by the so called priests and orthodox people of the religion.

“The widows, some of them young girls, were in black, the contrast of their saris with those of the married women like a blot in the spectrum of bright colors.” (Mehta 33)

The above lines speculate how the widows are publically separated. The dress code which is imposed on them to wear after their partner's death distinguishes them from the others, and which always kept them realizing the fact that they are widow.

“Widows’ deprivation and stigmatization are exacerbated by ritual and religious symbolism. Indian society, similar to all patriarchal societies, confers social status on a woman through a man.” (Trivedi 37)

In Indian society the status of women is dependent on his husband, moreover on his life. She is regarded as “Lakshmi of the House” only till the husband is alive and soon after his death she become the conveyor of woe to the family. In addition to it she has to suffer economically also, as the support of her financial expenditures has expired. She has to be dependent on her in-laws for her expenditures, and they are minimized.

In ancient times, woman is forced to burn herself on the pyre of her deceased husband to demonstrate herself to be veracious wife or ‘ardhangini’ to her husband and accompany him even to the next world.

‘They pleaded that the practice of "self immolation", was not merely a sacred duty but a "privilege" of believers’. (Ahmad 7)

This practice was performed nearly in the early nineteenth century in certain parts of India. It was called ‘Sati Pratha’. The people who supported it claimed that it is a sacred duty of a wife and it is a sort of privilege to her to die with her husband. However, this act is now considered as suicide, no more as altruistic, and laws are made against encouragement and its glorification.

III. PERCEPTION OF WOMEN IN RAMA MEHTA’S WORKS:

Rama Mehta inhabits a unique place among the Anglo-Indian writers for the reason that she possesses a deep insight in the lives of women, her plight, tears, fears, emotions and in addition devotion towards family and society. Her works displays an authentic picture of Indian women and then advancement in the status of women. Rama Mehta dealt with different aspects of women and the modification in her character can be clearly depicted in her works. Her perspective towards a widow gives a bright impact on the contemporary world.

“All fifty women were in favor of widow remarriage, and felt all strictures attached to a widow by orthodox Hindu society were completely unjustified. They rejected all the ethical and moral arguments advanced by conservative Hindu against widow remarriage, and supported every move that would free widows from orthodox pressures. (Mehta 125)

The preceding lines discloses the perspectives of some educated Hindu women whom Rama Mehta interviewed and found that with the change in their educational status they are moving towards with independent thoughts. Their perspective for a widow are totally changed, they did not consider them as an inauspicious symbol, rather they are in favor of widow remarriage and denies the orthodox norms which clings on widows restricting them on their each and every breath, making lives unbearable for them.

“They were wholly against the practice of enforced perpetual mourning on a widow. They were entirely against the practice of widows shaving their hair, or not putting on glass bangles and having to be always in mourning colors.” (Ibid 126)

Here the societal norms are unswervingly unexpected. They deny the rituals of wearing white or black, or shaving the hair and abandoning glass bangles. Women are now aware of the facts and the rights granted to them. The discernment of society is touching the thresholds of modern thoughts and is restricting the inhuman behavior of the orthodox, thereby challenging it in an open arena.

“It was criminal to accept everything as part of one’s predestined fate and that she should fight to get her share of the money from her brother; she should stop wasting her life just being pleasant to everyone.” (Mehta 134-135)

The preceding lines are from Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli* disclosing the thoughts of the protagonist about a widow. The constrictions related to widowhood should not be accepted as one’s fate rather one should attempt to change her future and challenge the rigidity of the customs. One should not relinquish just to please the family and society and forsake her own freedom. Here the independent and subordinate thought displays the changing scenario in women existence.

“This becomes more important keeping in mind the fact that it has been women’s peculiar biological and psychological condition that has proved her destiny. The modern thinking aims at exploding this myth.” (Mehta 9)

Though this has been observed that, somehow women themselves are responsible for the atrocities done on them, as some of them continuously living under patriarchal setup considered it to be accurate to pursue their ancestors. They fear to underestimate them which is somewhat be called superstitious. But in the contemporary world there being no space for such type of superstitions, as people are now well educated and they prefer logical thinking over inconsequential minds.

“Things were changing though slowly; there was not the same prejudice against widows in secular society as in orthodox society. They could establish a life for themselves and be accepted without undue attention.” (Mehta 127)

Women are now carving their own destiny smashing the conformist society on its head. They are now not dependent on a man to lead their life in a happy and cheerful way, they need no one except their own propensity and aptitude to explore.

IV. WOMEN MOVING AHEAD TO A BETTER WORLD:

All of the above problems and challenges faced by a widow or a woman in general needed to be solved and for this purpose many forward thinkers of that century came forward to make reforms in the system to make difference for the subjugated section of women. Social reformers were among the first who challenged the subordination of Hindu women. They fought to give women some degree of dignity and status, but within the framework of Hindu revivalism. These social reformers included the Arya Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj, people like Jyotiba Phule, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasager, Lala Lajpat Rai, etc. (Malik 27)

Lord William Bentinck approved the Sati Regulation act, XVII of 1827 on 4 December after assuming the governorship of Bengal. It was because of Raja Ram Mohan Roy who boarded on a massive assignment of social reform. His first and foremost action was to wage a determined crusade against Sati pratha. He pleaded to the colonial government and started championing for the cause of women. The instruction was clear, brief and indisputable in its criticism of Sati, affirming it illegal and punishable act by the criminal courts. Though this act was started by the colonial rulers but it exactly benefitted Indian women and helped in restricting the tortures and atrocities of an orthodox society on a widow. It can be marked as the beginning of the revolt against the society.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasager – an eminent scholar and erudite, who received the degree Vidyasagar (ocean of learning), a much harder achievement than in Ph.D. in Sanskrit, at the age of 21 – started the movement of legalizing widow remarriage. Under his leadership the movement succeeded and the British government passed a law on 26th July 1856 legalising widow remarriage. His only son elected to marry a widow and the father presided at his son's wedding. (Malik 27)

With the purpose of improvement in widow's position, Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. The act somehow didn't made difference at that time and failed to serve its purpose. But, as time passed with the efforts of some social reformers gradually changes are perceived in the position of widow women. Meanwhile widows home have been build to provide them shelter with emotional support, and they were also been educated and trained to be self reliant.

Mahatma Gandhi has also contributed to empower a woman by giving her chance to take part in the freedom struggle laid by him with other revolutionaries. Though slowly but it added a new perspective of women to the society, watching women walking beside Mahatma Gandhi.

Moreover, the Hindu Widow's Right to Property Act, 1937 gave enhanced rights to Hindu women on account of property matters, but this too gave a inadequate estate, which is to be held by her till her death and then it goes back to her dead spouse's heirs. The Hindu widow's right to property was greatly enlarged by Hindu Succession Act, 1956. Section 14 of the Act stated that any property possessed by a female Hindu, whether acquired before or after its commencement, was to be held by her as a full owner and not a limited one.

(Malik 27) But it was not so easy that it seems to be to get the share of property which she deserves from her husband's family. Sometime the father-in-law must not ready to share his property with anyone, or the elder brother and siblings of her husband denies sharing their property with a woman. In this case the widow has to claim for property involuntarily by going to a court nearby and this may include struggle and possibility of threat by her in-law.

The late twentieth century saw a drastic transformation in the attitude and thoughts of people. Women now had an access to education and outer world and even they have started going abroad to pursue excellence in higher studies. They are moving out of their houses to be economically independent and took up jobs wherever possible according to their capabilities and became self reliant. This somehow, also influenced the category of widow women; they too began exploring in search of knowledge and started supporting themselves, no more relying on others is it their relatives under whose protection she was left after her spouse's death.

V. METHODOLOGY:

Research methodology of this work includes an in-depth analyses and interpretation of the selected works of Rama Mehta. To support this study appropriate and significant number of critical writings which deals with my topic and books and journals on themes like culture, customs, tradition, widowhood and gender issues related to this work will also be included.

VI. FINDINGS:

It has been found that with education and awareness women would have better opportunities to cope up with the challenges of life and in addition to upgrade their status in society. It is also been noticed that women of contemporary era are heading towards a more liberal world and are not bound by the conservative and conformist laws of the patriarchal society. Though in some rigid orthodox societies, the custom and rituals are carried out with strict hand and for that awareness programs and campaigns should be organized either by government himself or the non-government organizations may also play vital role in it.

VII. CONCLUSION:

This can be noted that the suppression and subjugation of widow women is not because of one's religion but because of its recipients who make these orthodox norms and follows them with rigidity be it sadistic and severe for the receiver. This is very much relevant in the present world that first the women herself should change her mindset, not to receive the situation as her destiny but should attempt herself to change it. And also, it is the society which has to develop and change its orthodox perspective according to the needs of the contemporary world.

Though, in the contemporary India, it can be clearly observed that the position of women is changing simultaneously in all fields, be it the educational sector, political sector, social sector or be business sector. Though a widow woman has fewer opportunities compared to others but even though she is applying her best in shredding the thread which limits her to a boundary.

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