

The Widow Syndrome: A Selective Study

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Widows are the 'creations' of that pervasive belief in our society according to which marriage is the ultimate aim and end of every woman's life. Until not so long ago, the term widow used to signify not just one who had lost her husband but one who had lost her entire life. Interestingly, the term has its gender match in 'widower' in the English language, but in several Indian languages there is not an equivalent of widower. Even if an equivalent were there, it is used very sparingly, although one knows there is no dearth of widowers in any society. Similarly, the word 'sati' lacks a gender antonym, for while the funeral pyre of the husband was as much meant for the surviving, the living wife, the surviving husband did not march into the fire lit for burning to ashes his deceased wife's body. In the past the satis used to burn themselves in the pyre lit for their dead husbands, and very often they were hardly wives; rather, they were innocent victims of child-marriages, too young to have tasted the pleasures of life. Still, they were never considered too young to be scorched by the burning pyre. The alternative to death by fire was far from attractive; it was living by fire. A cursory glance at the social history of our country convinces us that to be a sati was perhaps a little easier than to be a living widow. The present paper looks at some of the manifestations of the widow syndrome in our fiction.

By the widow syndrome I mean the patterned behaviour found in the fictionalised portraits of widows in writers like Saratchandra, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Sivarama Karanth, and M.K. Indira. What these portraits have in common are certain loaded signifiers that point to certain ever-present aspects of the Indian widow. Loneliness, hysteria, insanity, sublimation, spirituality and enlargement of sympathy are the more obvious ones and characterise the spouseless women characters in the writers mentioned above.

Extreme loneliness envelops Phaniyamma in M.K. Indira's *Phaniyamma*, Mookajji in Sivarama Karanth's *Mookajji's Visions*, Tatri in Lalithambika Antharjanam's "Life and Death," and Savitri, Kiranmayi and Jagatharini in Saratchandra's *Charitraheen*. Phaniyamma and Savitri become widows at the age of nine; Mookajji at ten. Phaniyamma's husband, a fifteen-year-old boy, died within a year of his marriage. Thus she was a widow before she had attained puberty. She lives to be one hundred and two, and thus she spends nearly a century in utter solitude. M.K. Indira's tale deals with the heroine's overlong widowhood during which she is ostracised not only by the community but even by her own family. She is barred from auspicious occasions and confined to the endless cooking tasks in the kitchen.

Shut off from the world of flesh, Phaniyamma does not even know what carnal impulses are; in fact her budding feminine impulses were shaved off along with her hair at the age of thirteen when she attained puberty. Hair is regarded as a symbol of fertility, and its removal is therefore more than the removal of beauty. All her life Phaniyamma lives in utter austerity devoting herself to God and fellow beings. Gradually she develops into a goddess-figure.

Karant's Mookajji, or Mookambika as her maiden name was, was married to a boy of fourteen or fifteen. Unlike Phaniyamma who came to live with her parents after her marriage (she was to be called by her husband's people after she attained puberty), Mooka had gone to her husband's house after marriage, only to come back to her parents after eight months when her husband died of jaundice. She chose for herself loneliness and silence. Again we see a woman transcending her physicality and assuming prophetic powers and evolving into a goddess-figure. Mookajji's loneliness is intensified because she is obliged to silently witness the arrival and departure of several generations. "Death comes to everyone," she murmurs. "It seems I am the only one without death." One of the ways in which she comes to terms with her loneliness is by talking to herself. Her incoherent and interminable monologues earn for her the label of a mad lady, and many people keep away from her.

Saratchandra's Savitri, on the other hand, is a totally different figure. She is shrouded in mystery. It is only when the author unveils the mystery that we learn that this young woman who wins respect wherever she goes, even if she works as a maid or nurse, had been widowed at the age of nine. Unlike Phaniyamma or Mookajji, Savitri does not consign her self to loneliness. She works for her livelihood, meets people, helps them, cherishes a platonic love for Sateesh which she eventually sacrifices for the sake of his future, and passes through several agonising situations in which she is totally misunderstood. Savitri's loneliness is essentially psychological; she is alone in the crowd. The traumatic events through which she passes are mercifully spared to Phaniyamma and Mookajji; unlike them Savitri is not a victim of social ostracism.

Tatri of Lalithambika Antaranam's story "Life and Death" is a young widow who falls a victim to hysteria. She loses her husband at the age of nineteen, after a year of blissful married life and two and a half years of nursing the bedridden husband. She lived isolated from human company in the late husband's house like a living corpse. Like Phaniyamma, Mookajji and Savitri, Tatri is also austere and religious in her lifestyle. But she is haunted by memories of her blissful married life. She was not an innocent child at the time of her marriage. She had fallen in love with the young radical whom she married and later nursed. Having had experience of physical and emotional joy, she finds it difficult to suppress her throbbing sexuality. She is thus different from the child-widows. At forty seven Phaniyamma happens to see her cousin Subbi who has been separated from

her husband and forced by a family friend, an astrologer, into making love with him covertly in the night. Phaniyamma cannot understand the strange phenomenon and breaks into a sweat. She cannot look on, and so she rushes away and, chanting the name of the lord, huddles under the blanket, trembling all over. For the first time she feels her widowhood is a blessing, for otherwise she too would have been forced by her husband into a similar act! Unlike her, Tatri has more experience of life. So when the younger brother-in-law who resembles her late husband goes to the chamber of his bride, Tatri's whole body burns with desire and she turns hysterical.

Howsoever she tried, the honey bee refused to move away; it continued hurting her with its stings. With a fatigue shadowed by sinful thoughts it ended in an unconscious ecstasy of wish fulfilment. (*Glimpses*, p. 184)

Her brother-in-law and his bride are called out from their chamber to attend to Tatri when she starts screaming, her eyes bulging out and lips twisting.

Hysteria, which becomes a sort of refuge for Tatri, is only a step in the journey towards sublimation for Mookajji. She has passed through a phase of hysteria but her motivation was not sexual. Phaniyamma has no fond memories of marriage to lean on, but Mookajji's solitary monologue to the fire god reveals that she misses her married life.

You were the witness to my marriage. Tell me, what did you do for me in the end? You swallowed his life. No, not life. . . . That you cannot swallow. You swallowed his body. He was burnt to ashes. You did not eat him wholly. Had you done so, you would have found him hard to digest. So you left behind some bones of his. My uncle carried them to Rameshwar and submitted them to the water god. (*Mookajjiyude Kinavukul*, p. 195)

When she went to a temple festival, young Mookajji had the first stroke of hysteria. As the goddess was being worshipped with lamps, Mookajji started up roaring loudly and shaking uncontrollably. She tore off the clothes from her youthful body and ran about naked in the crowd, laughing and shrieking, her hair all dishevelled. With amazing strength she resisted those trying to check her and in fact attacked them. Finally they tied her hands and feet and carried her to the house where she lay unconscious for three days. Earlier too she had been subjected to exorcism when her schizophrenic self-talk was taken to be a sign of possession. Mookajji outgrew such hysterical attacks and evolved into a quiet and self-controlled lady able to comment on the world with benign detachment.

Sublimation has been Phaniyamma's way too, though she does pass through the stage of hysteria. The dishes that she cooks, always for others, never tasting a morsel herself, become symbolic of her way. As she grows older, she is able to take a broader view of life and to reject the rigid upper-class orthodoxy. At eighty she sets aside objections raised by her family and assists a low-caste woman in childbirth. When Dakshayani, one of her great

grand nieces, becomes a widow at seventeen and refuses to get her hair shaved off, Phaniyamma comes to her rescue.

Nowadays the widows in town, even those with children and grandchildren, do not shave off their hair. If she does not want her hair shaved off, why should anyone bother her? Does impurity reside on the hair? This poor girl has not even seen the world properly. Why should she be punished? (*Phaniyamma*, p. 116)

When the orthodox people refuse to listen to her, Phaniyamma boycotts the ritual and refuses to partake of food or water.

Dakshayani the rebel lets her hair grow again, gets impregnated by her brother-in-law, delivers a male baby in the husband's house itself and brings him up - all in the face of stiff opposition. Hers is the path of the rebellious younger generation, but this is not one that would suit Phaniyamma or Mookajji.

Another rebel like Dakshayani is found in Saratchandra's *Charitraheen*. She is Kiranmayi who is forced by her mother-in-law to yield to the doctor who treats Kiranmayi's dying husband. Out of spite she enjoys her freedom when she becomes a widow but finally ends up in madness.

Whether they conform by denying themselves or rebel by asserting themselves, these women characters signify the blank space left in women's lives by the death of their husbands. No void would have been caused if these women had departed earlier than their husbands. As such, many feminists might take exception to the sublimation or self-denial which is practised by Phaniyamma, Mookajji and Savitri. The feminists might have much appreciation for the rebels like Dakshayani and Kiranmayi. Jagattarini in Saratchandra's novel is another fascinating character in this context. When ignoring her wishes, her husband travels to a foreign country for his higher studies, Jagattarini treats herself as a single parent in relation to her children whom she raises with great difficulty. She maintains her aloofness even when he returns home as a rich man. When he sends their son to England for studies, again disregarding her wishes, she withdraws to her mother's house from where she comes back only after her husband is dead. At peace with herself and her widowhood, she rules over her children.

The Indian widow is always a symbol of self-denial. She refuses to rebel against her fate no matter how hard it may turn out to be; she stoically resigns herself to it. Her spirituality and nobility have been held in high esteem by society. Today the widow is no longer ostracised, although in certain Indian communities she is forbidden to actively participate in ceremonies and functions. And although opportunities for remarriage are limited, she is no longer barred from remarrying. Life is still harder for the widow than for the widower, but there has nevertheless been much improvement in her environment. However, even in this changed environment our fiction continues to supply the images of the widow which are based on earlier models. These models continue to maintain their grip

on our imagination. To many an emancipated person, they embody a negative attitude to life, but this reading is not universally shared. There are others who see a straight correlation between the widow's self-inflicted torments and her transcendence and all-embracing humanity.

Phaniyamma, Mookajji, Savitri and Tatri are all examples of this self-inflicted suffering. Of these Tatri alone is not able to transcend her worldly impulses. Phaniyamma toils hard from morning till evening and eats only once and that too most frugally. If anybody so much as touches her when she sits down to eat, she is obliged to take a ritual bath before returning to the food. A child once touched her as she was going to eat at the end of the day. Its mother, feeling sorry for Phaniyamma, gave a beating to the child. That made Phaniyamma go without food. Why should an innocent child be punished out of concern for her? It is quite a marvel how she survives on her daily diet of just a fruit or two. And she is able to extend a helping hand to the entire village community and become its guiding light. Mookajji also eats sparingly and often goes without food. She is always lost in her reverie. Quite unconsciously a transcendent quality descends on her. The mere touch of any object sends her back in time so that she is able to recapitulate the past around it. She also develops the power to prophesy. Saratchandra's Savitri is forever fasting and performing penances; so sacrifice, especially if it involves self-torment, comes naturally and easily to her. In "Life and Death" Tatri's observance of all the rites and rituals fails to leave a deep spiritual mark on her, for she had lost her innocence during the days when her husband was alive. She does not touch the heights scaled by child-widows who, being denied the common joy, experiences a superior joy.

Untouched widows such as Phaniyamma and Mookajji go along the way to sainthood. Nevertheless they raise important questions as to the role of society in cutting them off from the mainstream and the extent to which this role can be justified. Not every widow is, or can be, a Phaniyamma or a Mookajji. There are also any number of widows who favour Tatri and Dakshayani and sometimes even someone much worse as their role-models. Perhaps a broader and more critical scrutiny of Indian fiction is necessary to discover the entire range of manifestations of the widow syndrome.

NOTE

The fictional works selected for this paper are written by four major Indian writers.

Saratchandra Chatterjee (1876-1938) is the author of several Bengali novels like *Devdas*, *Srikant*, etc. *Charitraheen* (1917) is one of widely translated works. In its Malayalam translation, it is titled *Sateesha Chandran*.

Lalithambika Antharjanam, one of the earliest feminist writers in India, has published several collections of poems and short stories in Malayalam and a novel called *Agnisakshi*. "Life and Death" is a short story written by her in 1946. An English translation of it by the present writer appears in *Glimpses: The Modern Indian Short Story*, ed. Aruna Sitiesh (New Delhi: Affiliated East-West Press, 1992).

M.K. Indira, one of the innovators of the modernist movement in Kannada, has written 64 novels and 314 short stories. *Phaniyamma* is perhaps her best-known novel. Citations in the paper are my translations from the Malayalam version of the novel by K.K. Nair and Payannur Sridharan (Kottayam: DC Books, 1984).

K. Shivaram Karanth is a great Kannada novelist whose novel *Mookajji's Visions* has won the Jnanpith award. Citations from the Malayalam translation *Mookajjiyude Kinavukal* by M. Rama (Kottayam: DC Books, 1987), translated into English by me.