



REMARKABLE JOURNEY OF WIDOWS: EXPLORING EVOLUTION AND INDIVIDUALITY IN MUSHARRAF ALI FAROOQI'S THE STORY OF A WIDOW

Mrs. Ayushi Takayia

Research Scholar

Lovely Professional University, Phagwara

Email Id: ayushi.27270@lpu.co.in

Abstracts

Since time immemorial, widowhood has been relegated as a jinx in Indian society. But with time the word has lost its meaning as in today's era a person's psychological and physical health is given more importance than following the tough path of widowhood. In earlier days, this was escorted by pain and emotional sufferings, and it broke down a person mentally to such an extent that a person could never be enticed by sense of happiness. Widowhood was more challenging for a woman in the past era. Now, this particular sect of woman is well aware of all her rights. Despite being surrounded by the boundaries of customs and traditions, they articulately put forward their voice and express their desires courageously. This paper explores the emergence and evolution of widows in the recent times and this will be demonstrated through the work of a Pakistani writer Musharraf Ali Farooqi "The story of a Widow". The protagonist of the novel evolves beautifully when she hears her own voice and seeks individuality.

Key Words: Widowhood, Hidden Desires, Emerging Status in Society, Pain, Sufferings, Individuality.

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Introduction

Musharraf Ali Farooqi is a Pakistani-Canadian author, translator and storyteller Born in 1968 in Hyderabad, Pakistan he always tries to bring and establish Urdu language publishing program specializing in children's literature and classics. He also owns the title of Founder of a publishing house KITAB. He has written numerous books but actually shows his feminist bent of mind in his renowned novel "The Story of a Widow" which is an emancipated voice of all unvoiced widows. The focus of this paper is totally on raising a voice against the stigmatic restraints associated with widowhood. The novel gets highly appreciated as it exhibits a widow as the manifestation of courage and virtue which indeed is a result of social and economic changes in the contemporary world. Since the novel is published in 2015, it demonstrates relevance of social changes and economic changes that lead to empowerment of widows. This paper through the novel taken gives you a profound and clear picture of the web of thoughts knitted by a widow's mind for remarrying. Widow remarriage is again a constructive effect of the socio-economic change on widowhood. Widow Remarriage was very common among the young widows and 80 percent of them who do not have a child at the time of widow hood were remarried (Agarwala.1967).This taboo is



being deconstructed in the present paper as the protagonist Mona, a middle-aged woman with two young children, thinks of remarrying his new neighbour Salamat Ali.

In the past era, a widow was considered as a stigma to the society. She was unable to participate in marriage and other auspicious rituals. Her life was just confined to household works and in return she was given shelter and food. The term 'shelter' is used deliberately in the paper because it would be inappropriate to call it a home as it was just for the sake of hiding her from the outer world. The patriarchal society made this obligation for preventing their erroneous pride. They thought that keeping widows as hostages/captives would obviate the risk of getting disgraced in society. The irony was that sometimes these captivated widows got exploited by the male members of the family itself. Despite of being a victim of the patriarchal sphere, these women were intentionally made voiceless.

"There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard" (Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things)

Seeking Individuality

If we directly switch ourselves to the contemporary world, there is great shift of psychology of society. Moreover, widows now-a-days tend to seek individuality and aspires to be an independent and self-sufficient being. This way their little ones, if they have, have chances of succour financially and emotionally. Only a woman who is aware of her self-worth can provide her children and family with all kinds of happiness. In fact, this fills them with the courage to face all odds of life and elevate their voice confidently.

"You cannot have everyone else's happiness in mind as well when you go out seeking your own. It's not as if what you wish to off with your life is going to take away anything from theirs." (Musharraf Ali Farooqi, The Story of a Widow)

This quoted text concisely expounds that the protagonist of the novel, Mona, tries to overcome the passive widowhood and is all ready to embrace the colourful life beyond that horizon. She faces hurdles and obstacles, for she goes against the stereotypes that exist in society.

"Don't expect the whole world to gather around and offers its blessings for every choice you make in your life. It doesn't work like that" (Musharraf Ali Farooqi, The Story of a Widow)

You decide your own path to seek peace and happiness. So does the protagonist Mona, who wishes to fulfil the void in her life with happiness and also to strengthen her own individuality.

Challenging Double Marginalize of widows

Since beginning the widows have been asked to perform several abusive practices without being told the relevant and logical reason. These practices are forced upon widows by any of the women members of the family. These women execute the principles of patriarchy, ultimately suppressing the ill-fated widows and oppressing their desires and dreams. Not only this but they are also threatened to get ostracized from the family and society if they fail to follow the practices of widowhood. This shows that these widow women are doubly marginalize in the society as they are first oppressed by the patriarchy and then under the umbrella of patriarchy they are exploited and degraded by the female members who preaches the false ideas and notions of patriarchy in order to take control over the subordinate females in the family. However, in the present world where feminism, is indeed a boon for the unprivileged ladies, teaches every single lady to voice their opinions and breakdown the chain of tyranny of



this patriarchal world. It also teaches them to confront the false customs and rituals to omit them from the society. “Who is the family to decide what I must or mustn’t do?” Mona demanded (Musharraf Ali Farooqi, The Story of a Widow)

In the above quoted text, Mona tries to challenge the oppression of a family that is forced upon a widow. She is uplifting her voice and making a stance. This is how the text beautifully unfolds the evolution of a contemporary widow who is now an individual with a definite identity who can express her desires making bold and courageous decision which is again her right as a human or as an individual.

“One day when she looked at the portrait, she considered how blessed she had been in life. She contemplated her good fortune in finding an upright man like Akbar Ahmad as her life partner and felt grateful for his bounteous legacy, which released her from all financial cares. Akbar Ahmad looked back at her, his face cast in an expression of long suffering. Mona’s eyes welled up with tears.”—from The Story of a Widow

The text from the novel shows that how Mona has compromised her dreams and life for the man who is incapable of being a good husband. Many times in the text this has been mentioned that Akbar Ahmad, Mona’s husband is a good father but not a good husband. The below written quote is again an example showing the incapability of Akbar Ahmad as an eligible husband.

“You always maintained that he was a good father, but so what if he was a good father? How does that redeem him if he was a bad husband?”(Musharraf Ali Farooqi, the Story of a Widow)

Even after Akbar’s death, Mona manages to live peacefully, keeping herself busy in household activities, chatting with her neighbours and friends. She never complains about anything as she is moulded that way to lead a widow’s life. But one day when she meets her neighbour’s Mrs. Baig’s new tenant Salamat Ali, there knocks, at the door of her heart, a lady with hidden and suppressed desires. She at once gets attracted towards the man. Again she thinks of society, her in laws and relatives, according to whom a woman should be flawless and the lie of a widow should never be disgraced because of her aspirations. But she chooses her own path of freedom and of love. Here she depicts every widow who in this patriarchal society tries to discover and uncover her own voice, identity and her true self. She doesn’t let anybody take decision on her behalf, rather she walks on the self-made path with grace. This is how the protagonist is shown as an embodiment of enlightened individual, who wonderfully shapes her future.

“Mona told herself that even if her recent feelings were a delusion, they were by far preferable to the thirty years of immaculate deception she had suffered in her first marriage. Yet she had to forgive Akbar Ahmad - perhaps because he was already dead.”(Musharraf Ali Farooqi, the Story of a Widow)

From the extract of the text, we can unambiguously say that Mona is, indeed, a practical woman, which is one of the features of a modern woman. Mona gives wings to her dreams and let her past thoughts fly away and gets herself emancipated from the shackles of traditions and customs. Time and again it gets proven that a woman in real sense drags other woman into her past and never let her live in her utopian world. In the present text also, Mona’s daughters Tanya and Amber, are against her thought of remarrying Salamat Ali, as they think that Mona is not a young girl who should remarry.

“Their casual discussion of the characteristics of the man who had shown interest in their mother had seemed unreal to her.” (Musharraf Ali Farooqi, the Story of a Widow)



“It would have been different if Daddy had died young. Everyone knows it’s difficult for a young woman to raise kids by herself. Everybody would have understood that you had done it for us! Now, however-,” (Musharraf Ali Farooqi, The Story of a Widow)

These above quoted texts from the novel explicitly reveal the extent up to which the mind-set of Mona’s daughters is still in the clutches of fear of society. These two girls are adamant and do not consider and recognize their mother’s loneliness and misery. They do not agree with the fact that having a partner who loves their mother will accomplish her wishes and devoid her of distress.

Tug of war between emotions

Wasn’t I a good mother to them, a good wife to their father? Why is it necessary to prove it to the world, too? If they suddenly die, must I die too? (Musharraf Ali Farooqi, the Story of a Widow)

Marriage can be defined as a unidirectional flow of love, affection, care and responsibilities. It is unidirectional because in this process a woman is expected to play all the roles for family, pouring out everything she has and in return, she is asked to make sacrifices once she becomes a widow. She puts her utmost efforts to make everyone’s dreams a reality, but her life turns upside down once she is tagged with the label of widowhood. Her status in the society becomes low and she has to be submissive to her fate. Sometimes woman like Mona strives to elevate her status in the society and does everything that gives her a sense of satisfaction and gratification. But then being an ideal woman, a scuffle between various emotions takes place in her inner sense. She finds it ambiguous to voice her unheard words. She is unable to understand whether the society will accept her musings or just ignore it thinking it an irrelevant issue to review.

But being a contemporary woman, Mona becomes successful in this war, accepting Salamat Ali’s proposal and puts forward her strong opinion. Moreover, she does not pay any heed to her overzealous well-wishers who try to minister her thoughts. She remains affirmative and assertive of her school of thought and belief.

Emerging social abutment for widows

With the advancement in all spheres of life, people now are concerned about the psychological wellbeing of a widow. The narrow horizons of mind are getting broadened and it lessens the psychological pressure exerted upon a widow who has to face the hardships of life after her spouse leaves her. Social abutment given to widows is a push towards the betterment of them and the society as well because every citizen of a country needs to be happy, then only a country can flourish in true sense. Emerging trends in education and advanced corporate life also help encouraging the widows to be more independent and self-reliant. In this contemporary world, widows are nurturing their children on their own and making an indelible mark and inspiring everyone around them. So is our central character of the story, Mona, who despite being a widow, is living her life on her own terms. Moreover, there can be seen a change in the mind set of few people in the story when Mona’s sister Hina unhesitatingly encouraged her sister in every aspect and agrees with her on her decision of accepting Salamat’s proposal.

Widow chastity

Widow chastity is basically a belief that a widow should never remarry and indulge in making marital relationships. This is taken as immoral thing if a widow expresses her desire to remarry to fulfil her desires and to attain mental piece. However, this is not an objective thing. Some widows never remarry due to their own reasons, but this is an obligation that works as an adhesive for widows. Though the story is of a Pakistani lady Mona, still it depicts the



adversities of widows across the world. Just like in India, in past, we had ‘Sati system’ where a widow was made to sit on the funeral pier of her husband. Quoting Gayatri Spivak,

” White men are saving the brown women from brown men” (Gayatri Spivak, Can the subaltern speak?)

This means that British ended the Sati Pratha in India. So according to this, the Englishmen actually saved the brown/Indian women from the brown men. The female class, especially the widow females are often seen as the subaltern. The term Subaltern means someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalized or oppressed. This term was coined by an Italian Marxist and Communist Antonio Gramsci. According to Spivak, women are the subalterns because they are not allowed to speak for themselves. They are always represented through others.

Widow chastity can be one of the reasons of Sati Pratha. Widows, in the ancient times, were not free to choose their path towards their goals and dreams. They were considered as a mere object of sexuality and ceased to stop being so once they lost their spouse. But with time, it is getting important to understand that chastity has nothing to do with remarriage, as having a partner gives you a zone to purgare out your emotions, making you feel secure emotionally and psychologically.

Conclusion

Although the widows like Mona, are expressive and struggles to get their voice heard by all, still there are so many widows in the world who are actually deprived of their basic rights as human. So it becomes a moral duty of everyone around them to make them aware of their basic rights. Widows should seek the strength within their own self. No one can provide them the fire they need to overcome the traumatic vibes and relive their life as a dignified human being. They are not born to lead a dark life with unwanted baggage on their shoulders. Even the government of India has framed some laws for widows so that they can be live respectfully and can grab the opportunities and rights.

1. Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act 1956

Under the East India Company rule, this act was enacted on 26 July 1856 which legalized remarriage of Hindu widows in all jurisdictions. It was the first important social reform law after the abolition of Sati by Lord William Bentinck. Due to which widows are entitled to remarry on their choice.

2. Property rights of the Widows

Earlier, widows who decided to remarry were forbid by the law from inheriting their deceased husband’s property. As stated under the provisions of the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, widows who choose to remarry still have a right on their deceased husband’s property. She is grouped under Class –I heirs of her deceased husband and shall have the right to inherit. However, the Hindu Succession Act also prescribes that certain widows who cannot succeed or inherit. “Certain widows remarrying may not inherit as widows. Any heir, who is related to an intestate as the widow of a pre-deceased son or the widow of a brother shall not be entitled to succeed to the property of the intestate as such widow, if on the date the succession opens, she has remarried.”(Widowhood in India - Shivalika Verma, New College, Pune)

These laws made and executed by the government helped many widows to get what is already theirs .Hence, it is again a prominent step taken by the government to make widows safe and not letting them go in wrong hands. No one can minister them, they can think of their good or bad, wrong or right. These changes actually raised



the standard of this sect of society. Through this novel also, a beautiful message has been conveyed to all the widows across the world.

Now-a-days several employment schemes are framed for widows so that they can learn and earn. Such kinds of initiatives are a ray of hope in their life as their dream of being independent gets fulfilled. Not only this but this also gives the opportunity to interact with the outer world unlike the ancient times, when a widow was expected to remain inside the four walls and forced to live a life of pain, misery and distress.

The major purpose and aim of this paper through the novel and other references is to bring in light the changes that happened over a period of time for the betterment of widows. A thorough comparison has also been made to highlight the life of widows in the ancient and contemporary time.

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