

**WIDOW-HOOD AND THE SUBSEQUENT  
ENTRAPMENT OF WOMEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY  
OF PRE-INDEPENDENT TO CONTEMPORARY PERIOD**

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**Abstract**

Anita Desai's "*Fasting Feasting*", though a novel of contrast between two cultures, brings out the suppression, denial and negation of life to the woman folk due to orthodox, religious and social customs existed and enforced by the male dominated patriarchal society of India. The first part of the novel elaborates, how opportunities to the girl children are denied. Be it education, choosing of avenues for self-sustenance or even selecting one's own life partner. It is decided by the self-centred parents and the aged at home in order to fulfil their whims and fancies and there by getting the females entrapped in a self-destructive and agonising life.

The life of widows was much more disgusting and painful than any other life on Earth. The torture, subjugation and hardship of widowhood is well depicted in Indian history and various other socio-religious books. In the ancient princely state of India, a widow was supposed to immolate herself, mostly without the wilful consent of the individual or her dear ones which was termed as "sati" to prove her love and affection and chastity. Later on the active intervention

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of the Governor General Lord William Bentinck of the East India Company and the sustained campaigning by social activist, William Carey and Raja Ram Mohan Roy paved the way for abolishing this undesirable and inhumane practice. After independence the Indian government made various legislation to protect the interest and well-being of the widows and their wards. But inspite of all these efforts they were treated as outcaste for social gathering and even family functions. The patriarchal hegemony laid out stringent do's and don'ts for them including their food and clothing; devoid of ornaments and other aesthetics. Even confronting a widow face to face was considered as a bad omen.

Anita Desai's "Mira masi" in "Fasting Feasting" depicts a partially liberated widow of independent India, who atleast have the freedom to travel across pilgrim centres. Exempting this privilege, she too is entrapped as a soul seeking liberation from the authoritative, uncivilised custom of isolation and suppression. The past two decades saw few welcome changes to embolden widows and women at large. Serious legislation, women empowerment programs through education and employment gave the much awaited gender and social equality. Right to legitimate parental property, liberal and simplified widow remarriage acts and improved social awareness has contributed for the required liberation of women and widows.

### **Widowhood and the subsequent entrapment**

Marriage is a universally accepted social institution, which permits union of two individuals, a male and a female and their families for the purpose of sexual gratification and procreation, whose offspring also will have social and legal validity and approval. The custom of marriage existed from time immemorial. It differed ritualistically and procedurally from place to place and culture to culture. When religion got deep rooted among civilisations, marriage became more defined and refined with passage of time. Though a universally accepted social institution, it differed according to region, religion and culture. Most countries, the world over legitimised marriage, and enacted legislation to prevent misutilisation of existing social norms in marriage by un-scrupulous elements in society. In India after enactment of the, constitution, required rules and necessary legislation were framed for various religious groups to make marriage a legitimate social institution to protect and foster the overall well-being of the country.

From time immemorial marriage existed in India, the details of which can be traced back to our puranas. But it varied in style according to culture and area, mostly influenced by socially determined rules of incest, prescriptive marriage rules, parental choice and individual desire. The common type of marriages existed in India were, arranged marriage, polygamy, child marriage and marriage through elopement. The recent times, post independent India, saw gradual legal changes aimed at improving the rights of the wives by giving legal identities to property and inheritance. Society and marriage as a social institution was forced to conform to the legal framework, thereby reducing arbitrary divorce and the resultant hardship faced by married women of India and their offspring.

A far more important and serious predicament suffered by the married women in India was widowhood. Even today they are not completely devoid of the torture and subjugation. The centuries old custom of subjecting women to the agonising hardship of widowhood can be traced back to many historic books and literary works. Indian society, predominantly being a patriarchal society, gave very little freedom to widows. They lose all privileges and authority within the family and the society at large. They were confined to the four walls of the house wearing white outfits and devoid of any ornaments and make ups. Social and family gatherings were out of bounds for widows and she is served with non-spicy food which is considered to generate sexual passion. The only place a widow is permitted to visit is the place of worship, that too by covering from tip to toe. Even confronting a widow face to face, was considered as a bad omen at many places of India among various castes and tribes. The princely state of India saw many atrocities committed towards widows. The primary aim of such out casting and isolation of widows was to amass the wealth of the deceased, which otherwise should have gone to the widow and her offspring, typical of an agrarian society. The status of a woman is suddenly reduced to the level of a bonded labour and sometimes to that of a slave soon after the demise of her husband. Widowhood is ceremoniously thrust upon her for the rest of her life. The offspring too suffer of neglect and lack of basic amenities for grooming their life. This uncivilised custom continued till independence with a greater or lesser degree in most part of India without impunity. The dawn of independence saw a revolutionary change in this system by legitimising marriage and the right to property as legacy. Since then various additions were made to this law to make it more fool proof and ensure social and gender equality.

The most inhuman of all the treatments meted out to a widow can be traced to the 'Sathi' system which was prevalent in India which can be traced back to 7<sup>th</sup> century poet Banabhat<sup>1</sup>. According to the system a widow was made to sit with the body of her husband in a funeral pyre and immolate herself or jump in to the burning cinders and perish. This was considered as a holy rite to showcase the widows' love and affection towards her deceased husband and the woman considered as chaste. Though the practice of widows being cremated alongside the dead body of a husband had existed among the Egyptian civilisation and elsewhere in ancient Europe, China, Indonesia etc, burning alive in a funeral pyre was considered the most in-human of all, often done without the wilful consent of the individual. This also left the offspring high and dry without any one of the parents available for support and nourish them.

The first and foremost initiative to eliminate this heinous system was taken by the Mughal emperor Akbar. In his promulgation<sup>2</sup> in 1582, prevent the use of compulsion for 'Sathi'. It became unlawful, wicked and therefore a punishable offence in 04<sup>th</sup> December 1829 through a regulative act of the then Governor General Lord William Bentinck of East India company. The sustained campaigning by William Carey<sup>3</sup>, a Christian missionary and Raja Ram Mohan Roy is laudable and influenced the general public to a greater extend to join hands against 'Sathi' system. A similar system of collective immolation was prevalent in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh called 'Jauhar', who preferred death rather than being captured alive and dishonoured by victorious Muslim invaders

The Hindu re-marriage act of 26<sup>th</sup> July 1856 of the British East India Company, in response to the campaign of Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar<sup>4</sup> greatly helped in reducing the number of widows undergoing 'Sathi', who otherwise were expected to live a life of austerity and abnegation, to protect what it considered family honour and family property. The death of RoopKanwar, a girl in her teens on 01<sup>st</sup> October 1987 in Rajasthan let out a huge public outcry to ban the system. As a result 'Sathi' prevention act 1987 came in to force. There were sporadic incidents even after this, but most of it were found to be suicides. For the past few decades, there is no reported incidence of 'Sathi'.

The life of a widow is well depicted in *'Fasting Feasting'* by Anita Desai through 'Mira Masi'. "Her widowhood developed an unsettling habit of travelling all over the country, quite alone, safe in her widows white garments, visiting one place of pilgrimage after another like an obsessed tourist of the spirit". The place of worship and a matted floor in ones- own house is abode to a widow. Eat non spicy vegetarian food, wear colourless cloths and keep away from familial and social relationships are all un-written rules bestowed upon a widow for her following un-questioningly. The relatives hardly care for the health and wellbeing of the widows. In recent times, it is observed that one's own offspring neglect or abandon the widowed mother in their old age. In order to alleviate mis-treatment to widows, Government of India enacted a bill in the parliament called The widows protection and maintenance bill,2015, which offers legal protection and economic assistance to widows and her children for education, health care and sustenance.

Though there was a lot of legislation and social campaigning towards protection and rehabilitation of widows in India, the plight of widows seems to be unresolved. First of all the rigid social fabrication resolutely create hindrances to the free and fair enforcement of existing laws. Educational backwardness is another reason for subjecting the widows to relentless torture and subjugation. The recent improvement in women education and employment has made them more independent and self-sustaining which made widowhood more sustainable by making widow an un-avoidable part of society. Another area which needed reformation is the dowry. Today the legitimate property the women deserves from her parents are conspicuously handed over to the family of the groom as dowry without any records, mostly published only when the marriage leads to divorce or widowhood, which need to be changed. The hypocrisy of 'Shagun' to be replaced with legally inherited property right which the women shall own until death or voluntary repatriation.