

Denied Agency, Identity Crisis and the Burden of Loss: How Patriarchy, Cultural Codification shapes Widowhood

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Abstract

The conventional understanding of Widowhood is the loss of a spouse, but the idea of widowhood is more than the loss of a spouse. It is an experience that transforms the lives of women and affects their social standing, identity, and livelihood. The stigma associated with widowhood, isolation, and societal structures exposes the larger issues: the Intersection of gender, psychological trauma, identity crisis, loss of autonomy, economic standing, strict austerity, and systematic exclusion. They have legal rights, but the implementation gap and patriarchal interpretation often hinder their effectiveness. It is not only limited to the financial burden or social standing, but the loneliness may cause emotional stress, depression, anxiety, and trauma for a lifetime, and it also causes generational trauma for the children. This particular paper aims to unpack the widow's lived reality and plight, going beyond the Monolithic perspective of personal and spousal loss, but a socially constructed experience and interwoven with systematic problems as well.

Keywords: Widowhood, Socio-Cultural Construction Of Widowhood, Economic Dependence, Loss Of Identity And Agency, Psychological Implications.

Introduction

Being a woman in itself is a complex and paradoxical phenomenon, especially in a country like India. When a female child is come into this world, they are often celebrated as the goddess Lakshmi, who is the goddess of wealth, and Durga, who is the true embodiment of power, strength, and virtue. But the irony is that the same girl, once grown, is rarely seen as an independent individual. Her identity and agency to make any decision lie in the hands of men and are always linked to the men around her. At birth, she depended on her father. After marriage, her identity is tied to her husband, and later, to her son. This means a woman often exists through others—her sense of self becomes secondary.

Widowhood further intensifies this negation of personhood and even robs her sense of self. It has long been interlaced with cultural and patriarchal traditions, in which a woman's social worth is defined through her marital status. As a wife, she is celebrated. But when her husband dies, her identity collapses into one of dishonor, shame, and misfortune. In some communities, widows are even referred to as "husband eaters," blamed for their spouse's death as though misfortune came through her existence.

This reflects not only the deep societal stigma of widowhood but the tragic loss of dignity and personhood it entails.

Cultural codification and the social relegation of Widows

In a patriarchal society, women face numerous restrictions, but widowhood exacerbates and intensifies them. These include limitations on remarriage, property rights, and personal autonomy—even the freedom to dress and carry oneself. In conservative families, widows are often forced to follow strict austerity and are expected to relinquish color, Ornaments, joy, and certain foods, As Dipti Mayee Sahoo observes,

"Orthodox Hindus believe that onions, garlic, pickles, potatoes, and fish fuel sexual passions by stimulating the blood, but these are the same foods necessary to avoid malnutrition or even death"

-Sahoo, 2014, *An Analysis of Widowhood in India: A Global Perspective*

Such practices reinforce the belief that her identity is solely linked to her husband's. There are deep-seated societal stigmas attached to widowhood, where women are socially relegated and consigned to the periphery,

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especially in traditional communities where their presence is considered inauspicious, like marriage or in performing sacred rituals like “Kanydan”.

The Paradox of the Widowhood: Financially Free and Socially Bound

The idea of independent women is very prevalent in modern times, as it reflects the concept of *agency*, giving women the power to assert themselves in a male-dominated society. When we talk about women's empowerment, the financial independence of one woman is mostly placed at the forefront of the discourse. However, no matter how independent financially women are, financial independence does not guarantee full-fledged agency. The socioeconomic condition of the women is still very fragile, and when the widowhood is intersected with these factors, it exacerbates and highlights these aspects and meticulously impacts the overall well-being. Widows who are financially stable and progressive rarely receive the same societal respect that men do. Her voice and choices are often given less weight. But who are the women who manage to be financially independent? Primarily, those who are educated. Yet, educational attainment among widows remains a serious concern in India. This disparity in access to education perpetuates generational cycles of poverty and reinforces structural inequalities, making life even more precarious for them.

Story of Baijanti Mala: Surviving Widowhood in the Margins

Baijanti Mala, a widow from a Dalit caste community in a rural village of Bihar, India, lost her husband at a very young age, when she was around 27. She is now approximately 48 years old. She narrates the journey of her life, beginning from her teenage years. Like many girls, she had dreams, hopes, and the ambition to do something meaningful in life. She got married with great aspirations for the future.

Her husband at the time was loving, but his nature was conflicted, torn between affection and episodes of aggression. During those days, the practice of dowry was still prevalent, and under family influence, she had to go through dowry abuse. Her married life was not entirely cruel and not truly kind; it was a mixture of affections and underlying stress. They had two beautiful children—one son and one daughter.

When her husband died, she was left with both children. Her son was just 7 years old, and her daughter was almost 1 year old. Both her husband's brothers were unmarried and of marriageable age, and her father-in-law had already passed away. Living in her in-laws' home became very difficult. In a household filled with unmarried men, it was hard for her to live without her husband, and she was unemployed at that time.

She returned to her natal home with her daughter. But her in-laws did not allow her to bring her son. They didn't even let her meet her mother properly. They influenced her 7-year-old son, saying that his grandmother would not survive without him. They allowed the daughter to go with her mother but kept the boy.

Now, the tension was that the grandmother could not live without her grandson, but here was a woman who had just lost her husband and was now being forcibly separated from her son. She had no hope left. She filed a case in court, but as often happens, the system dragged—*“tarikh pe tarikh.”*(date after date) Multiple arguments were raised, stating that she wouldn't be able to raise the child alone, that he was the *“kul ka deepak”*, (lamp of the lineage) and that he should remain with his father's family to have a good life. The court ultimately ruled that the child could reunite with his mother only after he turned 18.

They never stopped her from taking her daughter because they considered her *“paraya dhan”*—someone who would eventually leave, and for whom they would have to arrange dowry.

So, now Baijanti was not only a widow but also a grieving mother, deprived of her son. She says:

“Mujhe raat raat bhar neend nahi aati thi. Mujhe apne bete ki yaad aati thi. Kayi baar maine marne ka socha, par beti ka chehra dekh kar himmat kar leti thi. Mai bechain rehti thi... Mujhe mere pati aur bete dono ki yaad aati thi.

(I could not sleep through the night, and I kept thinking about my husband and my son. Many times, thought about ending my life, but the sight of my daughter gave me the courage to live my life and carry on.)

Her son was influenced against her, and the siblings were separated, too. That emotional separation—the loss of her husband and then her son—was the most painful part of her life.

In the meantime, after returning to her natal home, she used her education (she had passed Intermediate) and—with her mother's support—secured a teaching job. She worked for six months without a salary and then started receiving ₹1500. Slowly, she became financially independent. She showed courage and began to work hard to ensure a better life and quality education for her daughter.

However, during auspicious functions like marriages, even when she was invited, her presence in rituals was seen as inauspicious. She noted that a girl child doesn't only need to protect herself from the outside world but also from within the home itself, where boundaries like “good touch and bad touch” are blurred by bias and silence. Society viewed her differently—like a woman without male support—and took her for granted.

That's when she sent her daughter to a hostel for both safety and better education. She felt that in hostels, there were responsible authorities who ensured security.

Even now, while she is financially stable enough to provide food for herself and her daughter, she doesn't receive the same recognition or respect in society, whether in the workplace, during community gatherings, or in decision-making spaces. Her voice is easily dismissed. She says,

"First, I am a woman, then I am a widow, and then I am Dalit. These three identities push me further away from respect and inclusion."

This story also highlights the psychological pain she endures. It creates generational trauma, where grief and marginalization seem to pass from the mother to the daughter. Her daughter, too, hesitates to take part in public life. Baijanti's presence in her natal home caused discomfort for her brothers and their wives, who saw her as a burden. They fought with her often and suspected that she would try to claim a share of the ancestral land, though she never demanded anything, even though she had a rightful claim.

After both her parents passed away, her situation worsened, and she was forced to leave her natal home, even though her job was in that very district.

As for her son, now an adult, he remains unemployed. The grandmother who insisted on keeping him has passed away. His uncles, now with their own families and homes, have distanced themselves. Despite the legal rights now available to widows, Baijanti has no land in her name neither at her natal home nor at her marital home.

Today, her mental state is one of constant uncertainty, full of fear, unpredictability, and emotional exhaustion. Yet, she does not give up. She says that despite all the hurdles, she is determined to fight her fate, and she's committed to giving the best possible education to her daughter, to break the cycle of grief, caste, silence, and struggle.

Conclusion

Widowhood is not just a singular identity and monolithic idea of personal loss, but it intersects with gender, caste, class, societal, and cultural stigma, loss of agency, and identity crisis. They not only face the institutional neglect, but there is an invisible hierarchy of respect, voices, and belonging, and this hierarchy there even when they are financially independent and legally empowered.

"When we try to understand the widow like Baijanti Mala, it reveals how the emotional grief intersects with the legal exclusion. Widowhood should not be viewed through the lens of mere sympathy. They do deserve the respect, dignity, and recognition as an individual. It is important to shift our perspective from seeing it solely as a tragedy to recognizing it as a site of resilience."

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