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## Debunking the stigmatized widowhood: A study through the autobiography of Padma Desai and Indira Goswami

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### Abstract

The paper explores the various trajectories of Indian widowhood, stigmatized society and patriarchal patterns related to widowhood. The social frameworks of operation, repression and superstition forced them to live a life of non-existence. Violence and abuse are the toolkit of the society to push them to the deep dark corner of the public or private places where they become almost invisible. Widows in Indian society are tortured innumerable ranging from self-immolation in the deceased husband's funeral pyre (Sati), shaving of the head, imprisonment in the home, strict simple food and clothing to control over sexuality. This paper will focus on the changing narrative of Indian widows and their voice against the prejudice and stigmatization of Indian widowhood. Both the autobiographies focus on this social evil of widowhood and stand up to break the social barricades posted against widows. Both Padma Desai and Indira Goswami challenged the horror and torture inflicted on widows of their time while breaking the stereotypes themselves.

Key Words: Women, Widowhood, patriarchy, Indian society and stigma.

Widow. The word consumes itself –  
Body, a sheet of newsprint on the fire.

- Sylvia Plath

'Widow' the word commonly known in India as 'Vidhava' comes from Sanskrit word 'vidh' which means 'be destitute'. And in societal front also, the state of widowhood is the state of economic, social, cultural and emotional deprivation. Stigmatization of widowhood camouflaged with superstitions debases their existence to mere shadows. They have been shamed and shunned by the society and forced to live the life of living dead. They suffered innumerable in the hand of superstition, social custom and systematic patriarchal narratives. Symbolized as misfortune and evil they are secluded in their private spaces had a social death. They face an acute problem of child-bearing, remarriage, mental and physical violence and exclusion from inheriting property. They live with guilt of a crime that they have not committed. They are abused as 'husband-eater' and prostitute: they are

abandoned and forgotten. The utter dehumanization and de-sexualization of widow make them 'a shadow-thing'. This paper focuses on two autobiographies of Padma Desai and Indira Goswami who raises the issue of stigmatized widowhood and defying the prejudiced and superstitious rules and regulations against widows.

### ***Padma Desai's Breaking Out: An Indian Woman's American Journey***

Padma Desai's autobiography, "Breaking Out: An Indian Woman's American Journey" is not only the documentation of her inner self but also speaking it aloud against the social restraints, oppression, discrimination and several biased social practices of her time. She truly breaks out all the social prejudice and constraints which helped her realise her individuality. It is both a journey out and in where she not only travels from India to America but also from community hood to person-hood, from adjustment to achievement.

She voices against the prevailing unjust social tradition, norms and practices of her time. She questions the dowry system and the degraded position of Women in Indian society, and the pressure to produce male children in time to find approval of the family. She examines about the tools which are used by the Indian society to subordinate women:

"These practices, directed against brides and families, involved payments to the bridegrooms and their families raging from outright cash and jewellery to household appliances, in an extended list of demands..... Upon entering the husband's family, the woman must only submit to its mores and excel in household chores and capture the hearts of the elders, especially male, but also in due time provide a male child, thereby securing an enduring seal of approval."  
" (Desai, 5-6)

Biologically, Men and women are distinctly different and psychologically they are made different through the social construction. Many social norms and regulations are inflicted on women in particular subordinate them. And according to Manu, women should alone be held responsible for everything:

"The Production of children, the nature of those born, and the daily life of men, of these matters the wife is visibly the cause. Offspring, the due performance of religious rites, faithful service and heavenly bliss for the ancestors and for oneself depend on the wife alone." (Qtd. In Uma Chakravarti, 71)

Male dominated society with their regressive perceptions on women made the lives of women miserable. She remains the only victim and the worst sufferer in her entire life and even if at the time of birth also she is unwanted and unwelcomed:

"....the rising practice of female infanticide (facilitated by the early detection of the sex of the fetus) attests to the lower social and economic status of girls even in places where dowries are not paid. In Haryana and Punjab, India's prosperous rural states in the north-west, more female foetuses are aborted than elsewhere, according to the latest (2011) census data. In India, boys continue at a premium." (Deasi, 8)

Her autobiography is not just a personal tale, telling only about her family and her own sorrows and joys, failures and achievement, but also on social issues like female subjugation, gender discrimination and biased social norms impositions on widows and women. She focuses on female suppression in the society, their untold sufferings, and the role of patriarchy and the social structures of Indian society.

Women in general particularly widows in India are the victims of social debasement and social disgrace. Discrimination of widows is a common phenomenon which is deep rooted in the traditional values and beliefs of any community. Widows in India are struggling with a lot of problems due to the

strongly rooted doctrine of patriarchy and social stigma. Across Indian societies, women continue to fight against gender inequality and societal restrictions on them. Particularly, Widows are facing a lot of hitches and adversities in the family and society because of the traditional rules, prejudiced cultural practices and beliefs in the society. Widows are marginalized in Indian family and society. They live in acute pain, suffering, insecurity and even violence. Even in an educated civilized society, they are secluded and placed under several restrictions.

Widow in India lives in a total state of destitute and deserted, though they live their life but their every right to lead a life is withdrawn. They have no social life; they are forced to live an abandoned life as “unwanted insiders”. Severe restriction on food, clothing, resources and even on sexuality makes them most discriminated and stigmatised group.

“In contemporary India, widows must endure the ‘gothic passions, buried sorrows and forlorn mysteries’. Women’s education can make a difference but educated Indian women, even when young; continue to be widows, believing it is their choice. Watchful outsiders, guardians of hidebound practices, and family insiders-pursuing their own interests- have neither the motivation nor practising survival strategies nor the concern to shake the status quo. As widows, Hindu women in particular, are trapped inside the belly of a boa constrictor, devising and practising survival strategies. How can a patriarchal system which has inflicted so much pain on them attain on them attain justice for them without imagining their world, much less inhabiting it?” (Desai, 55)

Widows are shamed and shunned and held responsible for the death of their husbands. They struggled or basic needs and humanitarian treatment from the society And the condition of widow in India is deplorable:

“Given these ironclad practices, early widowhood is the worst calamity that can befall a young bride. She runs the risk of belonging nowhere. Early in my childhood, I remember the young widow of father’s first cousin embracing death by setting herself on fire.” ( Desai, 7)

Though it is not their free choice to live in such dismay but seems to be their only choice, as sometimes it is forceful execution, sometimes it is so traditionally deep-rooted that it is hard to question and break. As women are treated like commodities and left on the responsibilities of different masters at different time, so they did not live life of their own, they are at the mercy of someone else’s and that someone is definitely a male. And as widow she “belongs to nowhere” as she is so morally depressed and socially bounded that she ignored to be her own:

“I have continued watching the predicament of women in my family and outside who suddenly lose their husbands, and wondering if widowhood for Indian women has become less traumatic in its impact and less ominous in its consequences. As with most social issues relating to India, it would be foolhardy to come up with a definitive answer for a country, vast and mostly rural, where girls, illiterate and brought up under parental authority, tend to be married young with nary a voice in the decision. I doubt that their heads are shaved when they become widows but their subsequent status in rural India would tend to be defined by family and community strictures.’ (Desai, 49)

As widows are seen as a financial handicap on the families and they are forced to being in the state of self-denial are caste out from society, not for religious reasons, but because of tradition, so they live the rest of their lives in poverty and isolation. Loneliness becomes their only companion, Indian widows are forced to live the life of mourning and never allowed to live in present:

“I wonder how Freud would have analysed the predicament of widows in the Indian cultural context where the line between free choice and submission to traditional strictures is tilted towards the latter. When I visit my sister-in-law, I am greeted by large portraits of their husbands

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in the living rooms suggesting bonds and memories which they want to nourish and keep alive for themselves, their children and grandchildren." (Desai, 51)

As women in Indian society are taught with the spirit of compromise and adjustment, which forced herself as not to think herself as a human being. The social implication becomes compulsion, and this compulsion becomes so deep-seated that it looks almost natural. And for widow the status becomes degraded further than woman. They suffered a life not worth living, with full of disgrace and humiliation.

"In her final days, Kaki was cared for by father and mother out of duty mixed with kindness. They also believed that these circumstances were imposed on her, Kaki having no choice but to submit to them. These strictures still remain involuntary, even merciless, in rural India where widowhood continues to be regarded as a stigma. In urban India, the rules of widowhood have become less stringent but the label continues. Whether carrying a stigma or a label, a widow is a widow is a widow, an imposition perpetuated by highly prized and meticulously cultivated norms for Indian girls to be giving and self-effacing. If a little girl, unlike a little boy, is brought up under parental authority to be a pleasing, accommodating person, she will grow up as an adult unable to distinguish between an externally imposed rule and a voluntarily determined choice." (Desai, 54-55)

Narrative becomes the most vital part of any social construct or deconstruct. And in a society, there is always a privileged section that makes the narrative to suit them. It's a measure to subordinate the unprivileged and portrays a inferior narrative, so that they cannot question or raise their voices:

"Although official cultural norms uphold the values of equality and tolerance, cultures continued to transmit camouflaged messages of inferiority of historically subordinated social groups through stereotypes and other imagery. These deeply ingrained schemas commonly structure attitudes, perception, and judgment despite the individual's conscious good will (Valian 1998). As a result, people often consider themselves objective and yet they systematically discriminate against "different" others while favouring members of their own social group (Piper 1990; Young 1990)" (Qtd. In Amar Nath Prasad and S.K. Paul, 7-8)

Her father showed kind-heartedness in rescuing his brother's shaven-headed widow and brings her into his home but like most widows of the time, she cooks, cleans and runs his home.

"All her days, she wore a red sari. In my sub-caste, red, an auspicious colour, was apparently intended to compensate widows for their deprivations. I do not remember Kaki wearing sandals. She did not need them because she hardly left home. Nor did she wear jewellery. She always covered her head. She had to because it was shaven.....Kaki, silent, meticulous and caring, was in charge while Mother potted around in the garden, visited the neighbours or was away shopping" (Desai, 43-45)

Widows in Indian society live a life of social death, where she leads a life of seclusion, isolation and loneliness. Indian society never cares for widow's need and requirement. They are not allowed to live their own life in their own way.

"Perhaps these women choose to remain widows and sublimate their urges by fulfilling family obligations or undertaking outdoor activities." (Desai, 51)

Widows in India remain under the social bars of restrictions and resentments. Though it seems that it is their chosen decision to live in seclusion, actually is a social imposition. As Desai discusses:

"I believe that the acceptance of permanent widowhood in Indian cities is involuntary and imposed by social strictures." (Desai, 52)

The chapter on Kaki segues into a commentary on widowhood: "I grew up instinctly sensing that Kaki 'unrespited, unpitied, unreprieved' had a marginal status, and I could ignore her wishes, the signals in the environment turning me into a thoughtless sponger. When I look at her picture, I see in her face Hinduism's timeless repression of women in her situation rather than the natural ravages of time."

### **Indira Goswami's *An Unfinished Autobiography***

In "*An Unfinished Autobiography*" Indira Goswami portrays all the dark and bright aspects of her life. She voices her inner struggle as a depression patient. But as a true fighter she fights hard to drive out her melancholy mood and suicidal tendencies and develops positivity towards life despite of many adverse situations and events. She was never clear about her strand in life or confronts her inner self from which she kept running most of her life.

Throughout her autobiography, she struggles to establish her true self, because she splits between her free self and the idea of socially imposed feminine self. Though she doesn't completely surrender herself to the gender biased social norms and regulations, but she always remains in the dilemma whether to restrict her to socially demarked boundary or follow her heart or true self.

Apart from portraying her inner character, struggle and growth, she also pens down her experience as a widow and raises voices against the stigmatized social restrictions inflicted on Indian widowhood. She describes in detail about the plight of widows in Vrindavan.

In India, widows are found to be harassed and tortured socially, economically and psychologically. It represents a crisis in women's life. They are socially boycotted and victimized psychologically. It is a shattering experience and only one who suffers, realizes exactly the inner turmoil that she is going through her life. She leads to loss of her position in family and kin groups, reduces her participation in religious activities, changes her food consumption pattern, and life style etc. So lack of emotional, financial and social support, they always feel insecure. Human rights are intrinsic to all human beings irrespective of nationality, place, sex, color, language, caste, class, religion or any other aspects, but, unfortunately, the violation of women's rights has become a social epidemic. Indira stands against biased social practices prescribed for widows:

"I have had but little faith in the rigorism of traditional customs and practices.....i remember to have seen in my childhood, several young Brahmin widows whose lives were steeped to the lips in misery for those stupid practices of age-old customs and beliefs. The case of an aunt of mine, who had lost her husband in her late teens, is still fresh in my mind. The Brahmin woman, who had gone to console her on the day of her bereavement, had warned their own daughters to keep away from the widowed woman, 'touch her not, no, you must not! Only recently she is widowed. She carries in her the pollution of sin.'" (Goswami, 56)

A widow, in Indian context, has to follow a strict pattern of life, where she is no more a human being, but a socially boycotted culprit, who is responsible for her husband's death. At the time, when a woman requires the emotional and mental support of her family and the people around her, but to the contrary society becomes hostile to her. At this point of time, Indira becomes more vulnerable towards sexual desires and expected her husband day and night. She confined herself to a single room and abandoned the world, which could not bring solace to her searing heart. The dark isolated room symbolized the hollowness and nothingness in her life. Indira writes, "*Who can determine how the abrupt end of a happy conjugal conjugal life affects the poor wife? Most of the time, as I realized, a sense of endless, ruthless pain suppressed all the yearnings of the flesh*" (Goswami, 54).

Being a widow means the loss of life for an Indian woman. Widows are forced to lead a gloomy life, devoid of all joy and happiness of life. Indira throws light on the various attempts made to "de-feminize" and "de-sexualize" widows at that time. Their heads were shaven. They were supposed to

be clad in white saris. They devoted themselves fully in worshipping the God and lived an austere life. They were considered inauspicious and were cut off from all the social and religious gatherings. *"I often heard him observe to the people of the neighborhood that for a woman to become a widow meant the total loss of all her hopes and aspirations, and that for such a woman there was no difference between life and death."* (Goswami, 169)

In Vrindaban she witness the most miserable and horrible examples of widowhood, where they are devoid of many basic human rights. They are not treated as human beings and they are tortured and assaulted publically. They suffered a lot in order to survive and most of them end up in deplorable condition.

*"The decrepit woman was a horrible spectacle. I do not know if it is in the power of a writer to give an exact description of the woman that lay before me, but as far as I am concerned, it is beyond me. Her bald head was drooping so low, as almost to touch the ground. Her breast was only a wisp of loose skin. So was her belly. The veins in her body were distinctly visible. It was, after all, a human form. A form turned monstrous by extreme old age and acute poverty."* (Goswami, 155)

In the city of god, she becomes more acute to the pain and sufferings of widows. Though they come to this place in order to get some peace of mind, but they become the worst sufferers. *"The heart-rending accounts of helpless widows, declared adulteresses consequent upon men's brutal assault upon them, and finally abandoned to their fate at Vraj, were known to people all over the country."* (Goswami, 173)

In the city of God there is no place for devotes as the Radheshyamis are the worst sufferer. Nobody wants to take care of them as everyone feel they are mere burden: *"Later, I heard from many others that nobody wanted to provide shelter to the Radheshyamis unless they had money for their last rites. Who is obliged to pay for their funerals?"* (Goswami, 119)

Her attitude towards life gets changed after her husband's death. The sky, which is symbolic of one's hope, ambition or will to live, is a recurring metaphor in her autobiography. After the death of her husband Madhu, she has not been able to look up at the sky and confront it, which meant she could not confront her own life without her husband:

*"And the sky above was wide and clear. But I could not look up at the sky above my head. After Madhu's death, I simply could not.....I walked slowly along the path, all alone, engrossed in the tumult of my mind, touched by the chiaroscuro of the sun and the sky- the sky that I hadn't look up at after Madhu was gone."* (Goswami, 87)

Indira proves herself as a real fighter who not only fights on the surface, but also with her inner self. Though from within she is a tormented soul and a victim of cruel destiny, but she finally comes out as a winner by fighting all odds and huddles of life and her own inner self.

The third part of the autobiography entitled as "The City of God" is the longest and the most crucial one, which gives us a glimpse not only of Indira's life spent in the unpleasant and unhygienic conditions of the city of Vrindavan but also the immorality and dirt, poverty and superstition at its apex. It voices the untold sufferings of Radheshyamis and their inhuman condition in the city. This chapter also shows the hypocrisies of saints and sadhus. She finally combats as a winner fighting out all obstacles of life.

The death of her father and her husband left her traumatized and she almost reached to the brink of madness when she started taking sleeping pills to kill herself. The untimely death of her father forced her to attempt suicide, but her fate brought her back to life. Her attempt of suicide led the hell fire lose upon herself. Another tragic event, which came as a shock to her, was the death of her loving and caring husband Madhu. She could not enjoy the heavenly conjugal life with her husband for a longer period. She becomes the worst sufferer after her husband's death which leads to the beginning of her

widowhood. Her mother wanted her to read scriptural literature and lead the ascetic life of a widow. But, she saw how the stiffness of customs had taken a toll on her aunt and how she was considered “polluted” after her widowhood. As she refused to observe the traditions, she became more isolated and lonelier. Thus, in her own life she stood in the periphery because of her gender, in spite of her birth to an upper-class Brahmin family. Indira Goswami faced the life full of struggle and adversities bravely. Her fate challenged her to survive in the most wretched conditions of her life. She plunged into the sea of suffering as a true fighter, struggled courageously against the strong waves of the fate, and reached to the shore as a more experienced and matured fighter.

### Conclusion

Padma Desai and Indira Goswami highlight the plights of widows in Indian context. They shed light on the problems and issues faced by widows. Both the authors give voices to their untold stories, disheveled lives and never-ending life-long grief. They take on every superstition and cruel tradition imposed on widows. They detail the traditional widowhood rites and their transition from womanhood to widowhood. Padma Desai aggressively attacks on every biased system and tradition associated with widowhood with reference to her Kaki. She revolts against the faulty traditional beliefs and inhuman treatment against widows. On the other hand Indira Goswami, a widow herself not only voice her inner struggle as a widow, but also the miserable conditions of widows deserted in the sacred streets of Vrindavan only to be tortured and exploited. Padma Desai and Indira Goswami unveil the predisposed and imperious patriarchal narratives vested on widowhood. They voice their traumas and revolt against discrimination and debasement of widows from social front.

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