

Subjugation of Widows: With Reference to Githa Hariharan's Short Story "Revati"

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Abstract

It is said that the scientist looks at the extraordinary and explains it in terms of the ordinary, whereas it takes a writer to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary. A short story writer is like a miniature artist - with a few strokes she must sketch out enough of the narrative to draw in the reader. Githa Hariharan is primarily known as a novelist - her novel *The thousand faces of Night* had won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First Novel. But here she reveals herself as a master of the short narrative as well. The second published literary works of the renowned Indian English writer, *The Art of Dying* (1993) won wide applause for its relevant and bold theme. The twenty stories in this short story collection are based on the contemporary Indian life and demonstrate the writer's literary skill with a precision of style and magical imagery. Hariharan is also a social activist who portrays social issues in her literary works. The present paper attempts to discuss how the modern writer- Githa Hariharan presents the disappointment widows face in the modern society. She makes the purpose of her writing limpidly clear in "Revati", one of the short stories in her collection entitled, *The Art of Living*. Revati is about a child widow, who suffered throughout her life. The story highlights the plight of Revati who passes her entire life in loneliness. She is considered to be a burden on society. She is considered to be an unnecessary interference in the respective families. In Revati, Githa Hariharan has focused on the marginalization of women in Indian society. In the patriarchal Hindu society the identity of women is always determined by her husband. Different factors were responsible for woman subjugation. They can be categorized as social, cultural, traditional, and so on. Culture and society had imposed many kinds of norms on women. The modern feminist writers have been attempting several times to put forward the frustration of widows in their writings.

Keywords- *Patriarchy, Subjugation, Culture, Humanity*

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The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

UGC Approved- (Sr. No. 62952)

A woman's life consists of many stages and at each stage she needs to play a very different role. The stage of widowhood is a very crucial one during which she undergoes extreme loneliness and frustration. Almost all women short story writers of contemporary India have attempted to present this picture of a widow in middle class families. Plenty of restrictions on women in the name of widows are still in practice in India. Primitive customs rooted in deprivation have given us child-marriage, and worse, the widowhood of many of these little girls. Child-marriage and not allowing remarriage for child-widows are worse among the worst Indian customs, and "Revati" the short story by Githa hariharan typify it. Revati takes on the problem that the country still faces. In the story *Revati* by Hariharan, the past and present discourses on women are expressed through the character Revati. The narrative is centred around Reavti as child-widow, whose identity is constituted by the absence of and loss of her marital status and consequently her position is very fragile and contested. Even in the modern educated middle class families, the identity of widows is definitely at stake. In many cases, they even lose their economic freedom. Bagul S.A. in her article "Gender Issues and Marginality: A Study of Githa Hariharan's Short Story "Revati" explains that "...female identity becomes highly problematic, being positioned within a rigid familial system results in a crisis and even more so when this position is threatened or lost" (2011, 1).

The major social scourge that lurks behind the Indian society is child- marriage. At an age when the girl ought to be in school with books and friends, she is forced to get married. This custom affects much more terribly when the innocent baby bride becomes a widow at that stage of life when she even does not know the meaning of marriage or widowhood. Revati, a victim of child- marriages, "... an old woman, at least seventy" ("Revati" 96) and, "was ten" ("Revati" 93) years old when she was married. Some months later, becomes a child-widow. She does not know that she is a child-widow for many years. The family members sometimes make fun of her and she remains an undesirable person in the family. She is merely tolerated by relatives, as if she is an undesirable child, but also an orphan who required occasional appeasement" ("Revati" 92). Through this story, Hariharan brings to light the age old customs that victimize women. Though Revati was a widow but she was independent. She receives a degree, obtains a teaching job and becomes independent. "She was independent, she deposited her own earnings in a bank account, and she had more than enough for her old age" ("Revati" 93). Irrespective of her job and financial independence, she remains "an unpleasant remainder" of the past. A widow in Indian context has to remain outside the family structure. People around Revati made fun of her and intolerant of her behavior. The narrator too avoided her. The narrator is newly wedded daughter-in-law of Revati's sister. Different gender discourses on widowhood are mentioned at the beginning of the short story *Revati* are shown below:

When I first met her, I too had read of *sati*, dowry deaths and child-widows.

I would shudder as I put down the book or newspaper. I pictured an innocent

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girl brutally held down, her head shaved clean and her bangles broken.
("Revati" 92)

The novelist's distressing depiction of the social mores governing the daily life of the abandoned widows, and the fear, disregard and contempt with which the outside world views them, creates an awesome picture in the minds of the readers. Hariharan exposes the cruelties against widows. The widows are as the tradition demands, expected to give up all their material possessions, often her head will be shaven, her bangles [bracelets] removed and must she go dressed in white garments. Entering into widowhood is more hazardous, painful and humiliating to women than to a widower because of the discrimination, ritual sanctions of the society against widows. With the result, widows in India not only suffer with social and economic sanctions but also face many psychological consequences, loneliness and in many cases deprivation causing emotional disturbances and imbalance. At the end when Revati retired from her work, and visited her family, no one treated her as a family member. They consider her as an imposed burden on them. "It was ten years since she had retired from her teaching career. She now lived alone, at least for a small part of the year. The rest of the time she visited her brothers and sisters for long stretches, her bulky frame in the wrong place at the wrong time, always in the way" ("Revati" 95).

Revati is a relic of the past, she does not fit in with the supposedly "modern" attitude of the family that is voiced by the narrator. But her anachronistic existence seems to be rather an excuse for the family to further marginalise this figure, and thus the ancient tradition of ostracism of widows is repeated. Even after she becomes a grey-haired woman, she is ignorant of the "feminine niceties". According to Indian culture, most of the women have their food only after everyone has. The narrator says, "usually we women waited till all the children had eaten, then the men, before we sat down to eat what was left over" ("Revati" 94). As Revati lives out of family circumstance, she is not leading her life like other women. She shows her passion for eating. Revati subverts this practice by devouring food greedily takes bath for hours and sighs greedily when she sees other new sarees. She looks fat and ugly and often-insists the narrator to eat enough so that the ghosts would not harm her. The family members always criticise her for her frank appetite for food. They neither care about her life nor her sufferings. Hariharan emphasizes, a woman is primarily an individual with her own space and self:

She was an unpleasant reminder of a world gone by. A child- widow was a thing of the past, a page from a history textbook that should be safely contained between cardboard covers. Not what she was, as large as life, walking, talking, eating huge mouthfuls of our food. ("Revati", 93)

The family thinks of arranging some company to her. A mentally retarded relative is living with Revati as a companion and a body guard. Revati's sexual urge is revealed through her passion towards the mentally retarded relative. Finding sexual pleasure after

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husband's death is socially unacceptable. There is displeasure among all the family members regarding the weak-minded fellow. They send him away with a hundred rupee note. Revati's deviant behaviour of not conforming to existing ideologies creates havoc and restlessness among her relatives. Narrator says, "Again, there was some muted discussion conducted, at least among the women, in discreet whispers and corners. How were we to make Revati understand?" ("Revati" 96). The female code is continuously undermined by the ambiguity of Revati's actions and her representation which subverts the notions of female chastity, modesty and silence. The dichotomy that is established by the narrative between the family and Revati reinforces her role of the rebel against the socially approved forms of womanhood. Revati does not confine herself to the margins of widowhood. She rebels against the norms of widowhood. She escapes from the world of reality in to the world of madness. The narrator and her mother-in-law are seen stroking and pacifying Revati to become still to entice her wandering mind to come back to them.

In *The Art of Dying* (1993), Hariharan again narrates a short story, 'The Remains of a Feast' with similar implications. It tells us about the explosion of the suppressed desires of a Brahmin widow. The story is a first-person account of a young woman's memories of the last days in the life of her great-grandmother. The ninety year old cancer struck Brahmin widow, whose entire life has been one of denial dictated by the rules of caste, class, gender and religion. She suddenly revolts and desires everything that has been prohibited for her- bhel-puri from the fly infested bazaar, perhaps touched by untouchables, cakes with eggs in them, from the Christian shop with a Muslim cook, Coca-cola laced with the delicious delight that it might be alcoholic. Finally, when she dies the granddaughter, a medical student who was her partner in crime, covers her body with a bridal red sari, as her grandmother must have desired. Widows seem to follow rules based on tradition because they have internalized them. They keep doing what other widows did without asking, resigned to a kind of fate—such as placing restrictions on their own diets. Widows are forbidden to wear colours, flowers, henna or turmeric decoration, or jewellery, or to eat meat. They are expected to shave their heads, sleep on the ground, do menial work, fast, and pray for their dead husband. Whether young or old, widowed women leave behind their colourful saris, flowers on her hair and her bands are broken by force after her husband's death. The old Brahmin widow vents her oppressed feelings in the form of demands. She protests against the practice of widows' wearing pale brown sari. Ratna as a modern woman helps her grandmother to break the conservative norm. Hariharan attacks the enslaving hypocrisy of a patriarchal tradition that has developed over thousands of years of socio-economic imperatives and now disguises itself as a religion.

'The Remains of a feast' have greater connotations and give us a look into Hariharan's point of view. The female identity becomes a problem. A woman who has been positioned in the rigid family system faces problems when she becomes a widow. The absence of a woman's husband makes her fragile in Indian society. A woman's helplessness forces her to

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follow her husband into the funeral pyre. Whereas Hariharan's protagonist, Revati remains alone and lives independently. She supports herself by taking up a teaching career, visits her brothers and sisters. She is marginalized in society. Hariharan makes her woman revolt against the family ideology, which is considered the bedrock of Indian society. They rebel against the socially accepted norms of womanhood in traditional Hindu society.

The present story throws light on rigid customs and traditions of Hinduism. Particularly Indian widows, how they lead a painful life. In India and probably elsewhere irrespective of religion, caste, class and education, millions of widows are deprived of their universally acknowledged human rights. Their essential needs like food, shelter and cloth are forbidden. Widows' needs are marginalized in Indian society and they are not taken into mainstream. Even in an educated civilized society, they are isolated and placed under several restrictions. The traditional religious society had imposed severe sanctions on widows. The widow undergone physical, mental, moral and spiritual agony, by the cruel hands of the society had inflicted unbearable pain on them. By using the first person technique, the author gives us the lonely life of Revati. It focuses on women's issues, cultures and customs of India. There are various social flaws and evils flowing in the veins of patriarchy which is curse for the women as well as jolt on humanity. Hariharan condemns the patriarchal authority and the imbalance in social order. Women suffer subjugation, as there is a lack of societal values and norms. Hariharan brings out the indifferences and opposes them vehemently. Hariharan occupies a coveted place in the annals of contemporary women novelists, who has been focusing more and more on her works with social messages of some kind.

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