

# Literature and Films: Interrogating Widow Abuse

## Abstract

Feminism is an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at the place of work and within the family, and conscious action to change this situation. Any voice or action raised against any kind of oppression or suppression is an ism - be it racism, sexism or feminism. The struggle to fight against any oppression is based on the principles of democracy, social justice and humanity. In the light of this desire for social justice, the present paper is an attempt to focus on the plight of widows in Indian society as depicted in literature and films. The paper takes into account some path breaking socially relevant novels like Tagore's *Chokher Bali*, Gowardhan Ram Tripathi's *Saraswati Chandra*, Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Ek Chadar Maili Si*, Indira Goswami's *The Saga of South Kamrup*, which have inspired main stream cinema. Films are considered to be a powerful medium to mould the perceptions of society. The paper will examine literary adaptations on celluloid which have sensitively portrayed the trials and tribulations of widows in Indian society. Literature and films are complementary to each other as is evident in the manner in which these classical novels have been dramatized on celluloid and have made an impression on the socially conscious viewers.

**Keywords:** Stigma of Widowhood, Humiliation And Widow Abuse, Social Hypocrisy, Suppression of Physical Desires, Women's Sexuality, Widow Remarriage, Emancipation of Women, Female Bonding, Breaking Social and Cultural Taboos.

## Introduction

All these four novels are women intensive projects and can be studied as feminist texts. Feminism as is generally understood and accepted, by and large in India, is an imported western concept strongly identified with white bourgeois concerns. For this reason many progressive women working with women's issues and rights object when they are called feminists. Women writers like Ismat Chughtai, Mahasweta Devi, Shashi Deshpande, Indira Goswami believe in emancipation of women but at the same time shy away from being called feminists. As far as feminism is concerned in the Indian context, it can be used as a convenient umbrella term encompassing any person, element, process, form or production that promotes woman's journey towards agency and empowerment. It is in this sense that the novels for this paper have been studied and examined. Gowardhan Ram Tripathi, Tagore and Bedi despite being male writers were sensitive towards the vulnerability of widows in the Indian social set up.

The intensity of emotions captured by them indicates that they are aware of the latent sexuality in young widows. Their novels expose the hypocrisy of Indian social customs and traditions that tend to suppress the emotional longings of widows. Discussion on the issue of women's sexuality is a subject of restraint in our society but these novelists have dared to explore the physical and mental deprivations and the sexual frustrations of widows in their novels. A keen awareness to the happenings around them motivated them to make a conscious effort to reform society. In a country like India where sati was once practiced and widow re marriage was unheard of, there has been a considerable change in the attitude of society towards widows. But in spite of this, the treatment meted out to widows is unjust. The stigma of widowhood leaves them to lead a neglected, lonely and unfulfilled life. They are still supposed to bring ill luck, they are held responsible for the death of their husbands and their presence at religious ceremonies is considered inauspicious. They are an unwanted burden on the family and society. These neglected women often become easy victims of men's lust within the family and also in society. Old customs and traditions are so deeply rooted that widows are still humiliated and abused. Mohini Giri a leading Indian activist for widow's rights was



**Alka Saxena**  
Associate Professor,  
Deptt. of English,  
D.A-V. College,  
Kanpur

quoted as saying that many Indians shrug off widow abuse. It's been like that for centuries as the accepted way of life.

#### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of the study is to examine the trials and tribulations of widows specially in the Indian social and cultural context. The study takes into account some path breaking novels which have the Indian widow as its protagonist. Novels like **Choker Bali, The Saga of South Kamrup** and others have attracted main stream cinema to transform these novels to celluloid. Since films are popular among masses, hence the message of treating widows with dignity can be conveyed effectively through this medium. Literature and films can address social evils and suggest ways to bring a positive change in the mindset of the people.

It has been a common practice for film makers to adapt literary works on screen. This trend started in the 30's and flourished in the 50's. Bimal Roy made the maximum number of films whose subjects were borrowed from literature. Gowardhan Tripathi's **Saraswati Chandra** was also adapted on screen and was much acclaimed by the public. It is difficult to assess the impact of *Saraswati Chandra* on Gujrati literature. It remains unsurpassed as a milestone for Gujrati novel for more than a century. Set in 19<sup>th</sup> century India, the novel is a soul stirring saga of two lovers kept apart by fate, circumstances and traditions. *Saraswati Chandra* is a compassionate man who has lofty ideas for the welfare of society. His father fixes his marriage to Kumud, an educated girl who is fifteen years old. She belongs to an affluent family. Chandra defies the customs and goes to visit his fiancé. A short lived romance takes place and Chandra leaves with the promise of getting married soon. But on returning home a family feud mars the proposed marriage. Chandra leaves home and writes to Kumud that he will not be able to marry her. Kumud is then married to Pramod Dhan, who is a drunkard. In desperation Kumud tries to end her life but is saved by nuns of a hermitage. She happens to meet Chandra again. He too has renounced the world and lives with a band of sadhus. In the meantime Kumud gets the news of her husband's death. She becomes a widow and wants to spend her life in seclusion. The nuns encourage her to get married to Chandra. But she is aware of the social constraints and replies, "I'm forbidden from tangible contact with my Chandra, nor do I covet it. I adhere to the path of morality that bids me to cherish and honour my marital bonds and to abhor sensuality and its source"(193). She feels that her path has been charted by social tenets and says "A caged animal is not entitled to be illumined by the sunshine. Similarly I bound to my vows; do not have a right to be loved by my Chandra"(193).

Chandra's only concern now was to purge universal misery and he wanted to dedicate himself to social service. He is ready to accept Kumud but she is fully aware that even if she lives in close proximity of Chandra and helps him in his social work she would be scorned by her parents and her in-laws. Her fears are not baseless. Her widowed aunt is strongly against the prospect of her re marriage. She says that the stigma of widowhood is strongly engraved on

Kumud and it could not be wiped away. A family member points out that when Ravana was killed, and Mandodari became a widow, it was Lord Rama who solemnized her marriage to Vibhishan. But this reference was dismissed by saying that that dharma was different but in real life nothing is greater than the dharma of the samaj. Society still expects a widow to remain a recluse and follow the restrictions imposed upon her by age old customs and traditions.

Chandra wanted to build Kalyan gram, an ideal welfare enclave in which Kumud would be there to assist him. He felt that that women could play an important role in moulding the society. Expressing his concern for women's emancipation he had told Kumud, "In our Kalyan gram, cultured women would mature into independent, able and integrated scholars and emancipate the women around the world. People cannot see the role of women in administration, but without women there can't be a home..... Absence of emancipated women in a society only produces webs of strife and anxiety" (222).

In the last section of the novel the debate rages only on one issue: whether to facilitate the union of these two yearning hearts; if yes, how to formalize it? The question of a widow's re marriage and its acceptance by society was a very complex one. Chandrakant, who is Chandra's friend, was also of the opinion that Kumud's second marriage will cast a slur on the solemn aspirations of Chandra. He feels that by marrying a widow, Chandra would lose his dignity and it will alienate him from the masses. Moreover it would also blunt Chandra's faculties. It would be vain to believe that human welfare could be achieved by spurning material relationships yet nurturing platonic love. People would not understand this. He suggests that the only way in which Chandra could realize his aspirations would be by marrying Kusum, the younger sister of Kumud. As for Kumud she should take care of her in-laws and assist the married couple in their mission as and when required. Thus personal love is sacrificed for a higher and nobler purpose. While their love could not be consummated the lovers though apart are one emotionally and spiritually.

From 19<sup>th</sup> century Gujrat, let us look into the socio- religious scenario of Assam through the eyes of Indira Goswami, one of the best known names in contemporary Indian literature. She is the recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award 1982, Assam Sahitya Sabha Award Jnanapith Award 2000 and many other prestigious national and international awards. Her works have got recognition for their avocative prose and the compassionate portrayal of suffering humanity----- widows in Assam and Vrindavan, migratory laborers and riot victims. One of her novels, **The Saga of South Kamrup**, has been made into a successful Assamese film entitled **Adajya**, by Swatantra Bordoloi in 1996. It has also been made into a television serial for Doordarshan.

Goswami has used literature as a medium to bring about social change. The Saga of South Kamrup, deals with the socio- economic conditions of satras (religious Vaishnavite monasteries), in remote districts of Kamrup district in Assam. Goswami openly criticizes the repression of widows in an orthodox

Brahmin society. The focus of the novel is on the three widows of one family viz. Durga, Saru Gossainee and Giribala. The youngest of these is Giribala, who is the sister of Indranath, the hero of the novel. Saru is about thirty and is the widow of Indranath's uncle. Durga is in her forties, and is the sister of Mahaprabhu, Indranath's father. All the three have been widowed at a young age and are childless. With the passage of time Durga has learnt to live according to the orthodox customs imposed upon widows but Giribala shows signs of resentment. Saru follows the middle path. She has managed to free herself from some of these restrictions but she is still orthodox to a great extent.

Durga adheres to the traditional image of a widow. She has been ostracized by her in-laws and has lost all claims to her husband's property. Now in this joint family she spends her day worshipping the clogs of her husband, which is considered a sacred duty of widows to keep alive the memory of their departed husbands. She spends her life hoping that some day she will get a chance to join the group of pilgrims and immerse the ashes of her husband in the holy waters of the Ganga. Saru Gossainee often remembers the wonderful days she had spent with her husband. She had enjoyed all the comforts of life when her husband was alive but now she was struggling to find some freedom in a patriarchal society. With the help of Mahidhar, a jajmani Brahmin, she looks after her land. Saru is drawn towards Mahidhar and often her sexual desires arouse when she watches him. Beneath the widow's white mantle, she nurtures a plethora of colorful fancies, multi spangled emotions that arouse her latent sexuality. All the time she is concerned about the welfare of Madhihar for she feels that if he is removed from her life she would not be able to survive.

Giribala, the third widow portrayed in this novel dares to rebel. She tries to construct a new world of uninhibited love for herself where social and moral restrictions don't confine or cage her. But ultimately she has to pay a heavy price for her unconventional pursuit. Giribala, a young widow returns home after the death of her husband who was an infidel. Giribala had no love for him and was tormented by his infidelity. Just after marriage he had told Giribala his relationship with other women will continue for he believed that "there cannot be any enjoyment in bed with the woman one brings in marriage. Absolutely none." Giribala hates the scorn that she sees in the eyes of the married of her neighborhood. They consider a widowed Giribala as an ill omen from whom married women should keep a distance.

In due course she meets Mark. Mark is an European missionary who has come to the sattras in connection with some research work on rare Assamese manuscripts. Indranath permits Giribala to assist him in interpreting these texts. Mark is pained to the tragedy of a youthful widow. Giribala too is attracted towards him. Both of them go on excursions in search of manuscripts from monasteries and temples. Giribala cherishes the company of Mark and is not concerned with the disapproval of the society over their intimacy. Giribala's in-laws want to take her

back because their family reputation is at stake. Giribala is rebellious and impulsive. She rebels at all the petty customs that restrict the freedom of widows.

A widow is not supposed to eat meat and other delicious food items after the death of her husband. But Giribala flouts this norm at the shradha ceremony, when she is unable to resist the temptation and starts eating with relish the meat cooked on that day. She is caught red handed and is beaten up by her mother. The villagers too look down upon her for her misconduct.

It is not only the need for food but also her physical needs that keep erupting from time to time. Her sexual yearnings are effectively described through the symbol of the fine satin colorful umbrella. This ceremonial umbrella had been held over her husband when he had first visited her house. But now a widowed Giribala is reminded of Mark's physical beauty and attraction at the sight of this umbrella. She herself is perplexed as her thoughts drift towards Mark:

"The satin seemed to undulate, shining and shimmering, dazzling her eyes. She got up slowly from the bed and walked softly towards it. She began caressing the cloth. It was soft and smooth like Mark sahib's skin....so soft, so smooth....she rubbed the silk on her cheeks, her neck, her breasts....all over her body in soft languid movement of her hand....as if she desired to pull all the silk on to her, wrap herself in its softness"(152). Suddenly a whisper escaped from her innermost being 'Oh please take me out of this wooden coffin! please!'"(153).

When Giribala is alone with Mark she tells him of the 'sins' she has committed-like eating meat, not offering flowers and tulsis on her husband's sandals, and of course her love for Mark. She honestly confides to Mark "But, sahib, what a strange thing! I don't feel guilty of any sin at all. Even after taking goat's meat that day! It didn't shake me a little bit"(198).

Mark is moved by the plight of Giribala. He loves her too but is aware of the social implications of this liaison. He remembers the pathetic state of Gossain widows: "Scores of images of Gossain widows passed before Mark's eyes. Widows who have stretched out their existence within four walls, who have never seen the road outside. Widows who had died without fulfilling their cravings...out of fear of social censure"(295).

When Giribala hears that her in-laws are planning to take her back she sees her refuge in Mark. She escapes from her house and goes to take shelter in Mark's cottage. In the meantime her family also sets out to find her. When she is found in Mark's cottage, the villagers blame him for seducing a Brahmin widow. The public opinion is that she has become impure and hence must undergo a religious ritual for penance. As per the ritual a small hut was erected for the burnt offering of a goat. Giribala was too in the hut and was supposed to come out of the hut once it was set on fire. But Giribala chose to be engulfed in flames. The flames symbolize sexual passions and so this self immolation is a symbolic fantasy of fulfillment of desire.

In Tagore's *Choker Bali*, similar passions were aroused in Binodini's heart that nearly burnt

down Mahendra's house. Tagore's *Choker Bali* (1903) has been hailed as the first novel by an Indian author. At the core of this novel lies the dilemma of a young and beautiful child widow Binodini who ultimately gives in to social pressures and dedicates herself to the service of mankind. *Choker Bali* was adapted into a film by Rituparno Ghosh in 2003. The film is a strong feminist statement and is a sensuous adaptation of Tagore's novel. It is a film that probes several issues like relationships and temptations, Bengali society of the 1900 and its traditions and customs and above all the plight of a widow who refuses to conform to the expected image and status of widows in Bengal. Binodini, who is widowed within a year of her marriage, moves into Mahendra's house, the man who was once offered her hand in marriage and had refused. The conjugal bliss of Mahendra and Ashalata is shattered by the arrival of Binodini. She is drawn towards Mahendra, who is also besotted by her beauty, charm and wit. Binodini is impulsive, passionate and pulsating with life and untamed desires. She refuses to take the sexlessness of her widowhood and tries to seduce Mahendra. She is envious of Mahendra's conjugal bliss. A love starved Binodini longs for fulfillment and love. She refuses to believe that the death of her husband could transform her into a sexless being. Their relationship becomes a scandal and it shatters the domestic tranquility of Ashalata. Mahendra's friend, Behari, is also attracted towards Binodini but he knows that such a relationship will be doomed so he restrains himself.

Binodini is accused of being a seductress. The complexities of her relationship with Mahendra make her realize that she should reconcile to her fate and leave him. She realizes that despite her zest for love and life she can not defy the social conventions. She displays her supreme capacity for self control, climaxing in her rejection of Behari's offer of marriage. She reconciles to her widowhood in order to avoid the stigma attached to widow re marriage. The once voluptuous woman undergoes a sea change and finds that she is powerless in society that can only constrain her. Like Kumud, she also devotes herself to charitable work and gives a new purpose and meaning to her life.

In Binodini we have a combination of the dangerous and bold Giribala and the self sacrificing Kumud. The film is an artistic and impressive adaptation of the novel. The captivating moments of the film are the shots that capture the love and longing in Binodini's eyes. The feminine gaze is effectively focused and picturised. Another artistic beauty is the symbolic use of red and white color contrast. Ashalata's red conveys the bliss of marriage while Binodini's white is an obvious symbol of widowhood. Binodini's love hungry soul derived a vicarious thrill in watching and instigating the drama of conjugal love. The game was painful to watch but it aroused in her the frustrated longings and fascination. The episode in which she lies in Ashalata's bed and pretends to be asleep is very sensuous. Her latent desire to don the red is obvious in the manner she spreads the red shawl over her white saree. Mahendra felt that she was purposely posing for a picture. On the insistence of the naïve Asha,

Mahendra had agreed to take a picture of Binodini. He gazed at her beauty from various angles on the pretext of fixing a suitable position for the camera. He even took the liberty to adjust her loose strands and to lift her red shawl over her feet. He keeps on spoiling one exposure after another just to prolong his enjoyment.

Another memorable novel that deals with the inner conflicts of a widow and focuses on the complexity of relationships is Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Ek Chadar Maili Si*. The novel has been translated into English by Avtar Singh Judge and is entitled *Ordained By Fate*. This sensitive novel has been adapted into a fabulous script and the role of Rano has been played by Hema Malini, who has given a dignified performance. The movie is set in rural Punjab and centers around Rano's fight against social customs and traditions. Generally in Indian society, a woman's status is determined by the man in her life. Rano is shown to be an ideal daughter in-law and wife who silently bears the taunts of her authoritative mother-in-law, Jindan. She also bears the brutal and violent outbursts of her drunken husband, Trilok. Despite being a victim of domestic abuse, she can hold her head high in the village and lead a respectful life because she has a husband. But when Trilok is killed under a case of mistaken identity, Rano is left to fend for herself. All of a sudden her status is reduced and she becomes an unwanted object. Jindan who had earlier spared no occasion to abuse and insult her becomes harsher in her treatment. She blames Rano for bringing about the death of Trilok. "You slut! you witch, you ogress. You ate my son and now you are waiting to swallow the rest of us....now there is no place for you in this house"(22). She spared no opportunity to kick and beat her. Rano was so badly tormented that she was convinced that, "Any woman who lost her husband had no right to live in his house anymore. Infact, she had no right to continue living anywhere in the world"(28). Suddenly she had become so worthless in life. She tolerates the suffering and abuse for the sake of her children. She literally fell at Jindan's feet and begged her to stay in the house.

When Rano is widowed her neighbour, Chano, had banged her hands against the walls and broken her bangles. Another woman, Puran Dai, brought a handful of dust and it emptied it on Rano's head; thereby conveying that society had defined her status as a widow and imposed its customs upon her. The same Chano was aware of Rano's pitiable condition and suggested the age old custom of chaddar andazi. It is a custom which allows widow re-marriage with the husband's younger brother. This custom is quite common in the Jat community. Chano's suggestion was considered by the village counsel who opined that to ensure her well being Rano should marry Mangal, her brother in-law, under the custom of chadar andazi. The very society that rebuked a widow could accept her if she started living under the shadow and protection of another man.

Mangal was ten years younger than Rano and she had looked upon him as a son. Suddenly overnight she was his wife. Mixed emotions almost stunned her and her inner conflict and arousal of passions is very difficult for her to understand. From a

bubbly housewife to a vindicated widow and then once again a married woman, Rano undergoes drastic emotional upheavals. Rano who was in her early thirties, found it strange that the awareness of being a woman had reawakened in her with a fresh vigour. The following passage describes her mixed feelings, "Although she didn't have the pride and bashfulness of an untouched virgin, she did have enough confidence that her femininity could arouse desire in men even now. Her own desire, which had been submerged under her humdrum life, had got a new lease of life and was now ready to burst out like a spring gushing out after breaking the earth's crust"(41). Ever since Mangal had taken her under his mantle the women of the neighborhood had stopped pitying her and were thankful to god who had provided her a home where food and clothing were assured and above all her status in society had also enhanced. Rano is ashamed of and in a peculiar way also happy in the new relationship. In this passion we find the traditional combination of mother, sister and prostitute.

Under the direction of Sukhwant Dhadda, **Ek Chaddar Maili Si** is an intellectual film that raises many social issues, the most important being the status of a widow in a conservative society. The film adaptation of all these four novels has been very successful because it has incorporated the main theme with conviction. The portrayal of the psychological trauma and the physical and emotional passions of the of the widow heroines has a great impact on the audience. These films based on the novels show the pathetic condition of widows in Indian society right from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to modern times. They also brings to the fore a very important issue that apart from becoming the victims of the prying eyes of men, the women too fail to give emotional and psychological support to the widows. Usually when we talk of feminism it is treated as a war between the opposite sexes, we tend to fight for equality with men. Perhaps a more sympathetic understanding among women themselves could bring about their empowerment. Female bonding must be established so that at least oppression among women could be curtailed. Once women are determined to stand in support of one another, their collective strength can definitely weaken the male bastion. If the

unity and strength of Chipko women's organization can protect trees from being felled, a similar bonding can also prevent the exploitation and abuse of women.

Mahasweta Devi's, **Rudali** is by far the best example of female bonding and survival. **Rudali** too has been adapted as a film as well as a play. The relationship between Sanichari and Bhikini (both exploited widows) emphasizes the value and necessity of partnership and sisterhood as essential survival kits, in a male dominated society. Both have been abandoned by their family, but by supporting each other they turn their weakness into their strength. By pairing up they provide each other with company, and they pool their resources to ensure economic stability. The two become rudaalis and start earning enough to support themselves. The scene in which Bhikini combs and grooms Sanichari's hair is an intimate, woman to woman activity which signifies caring and tenderness. They share their woes and promise to stand by one another in future. Sanichari, remembers that her mother had once said that a woman's worst enemy was other women, but Bhikni dispels this by saying that sisterhood and solidarity can be the greatest strength of women.

#### **Conclusion**

The four novels which have been adapted to films deal with the sensitive issue of widow abuse, which is still prevalent in our society. Widows are treated as social outcasts and are neglected by their own family members. The thrust of the study is to eliminate widow abuse and bring about a change in the thought process of the people so that widows too can live and enjoy life without any feeling of fear and guilt. To achieve this status, female bonding is extremely important and can be instrumental in changing the fate of widows.

#### **References**

1. Bedi, Rajinder Singh. *Ordained by Faith*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2007.
2. Goswami, Indira. *The Saga of South Kamrup*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1993.
3. Tagore, Rabindra Nath. *Binodini*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1994.
4. Tripathi, Gowardhan Ram. *Saraswati Chandra*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2007.