Widowhood:
A Cultural Study and Its Impact on Diasporic Female Identity

Shrimoyee Chattopadhyay
PhD Research Scholar, British Studies Programme,
Doctoral School of Literary & Cultural Studies, University of Debrecen
(Hungary)

Abstract:

From the South-Asian perspective widows are considered as inauspicious and harbinger of bad luck. They are subjected to abusive practices, such as violation of human rights, and physical and emotional violence, under the pretext of social and cultural taboos. However, this paper explores how widows contest stereotypical norms, as established by the conventional South Asian society, in the diasporic context. Through a comparative analysis of the female characters in the novels of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), and Krutin Patel's film, *ABCD: It's About Choices* (1999), I argue that widowhood provides some sort of emancipation to these diasporic women. The narratives highlight the struggles that the protagonists, Ashima, Jasmine, and Anju undergo after the demise of their husbands. Women are considered to be the bearers of their home culture. When diasporic women migrate from their home countries to the host nation, along with their physical displacement, they also carry their cultural traditions with them. So, even when they are away from their homeland, these women are expected to abide by their native traditions. However, despite the struggles, these widows have been able to gain agency to a certain extent, which would not have been possible in the presence of their husbands owing to the stereotypical notion that men make all the important decisions in the family and women are expected to conform to them. Although it has to be acknowledged that the nature of their agency varies. While Lahiri's protagonist, Ashima and Mukherjee's heroine, Jasmine

are able to adapt to the host culture, Anju, in Patel's film, finds it difficult to assimilate in the American traditions. Furthermore, I will probe into the intersectional differences, such as differences in class, social status and age that exist among the widows, which have a significant impact on their identity formation.

Keywords: Diasporic widows, Female agency, Female identity, Intersectionality, South-Asian Diaspora

Introduction

Widowhood, especially in South Asia, is synonymous to damnation. As Deepshikha Doley points out, widows are seen as "witches" and "man-eaters," and are made to "drink the bathwater of their husbands' dead bodies and have unprotected sex to 'cleanse themselves of the sin of causing their husbands' death'" (Doley, 2020). In a patriarchal society in South Asia, widowhood is "much more than merely losing a husband" ("Empowering Widows," 2014, p. 2). While a widower can carry on with his usual life, a widow has to follow stricter rituals, which can sometimes be seen as "savage" (Young, 2006, p. 200): "The hair is cut, or shaved off, in many cases leaving cuts in the scalp...The clothing and the jewellery the widow wore during her husband's lifetime are cast off, and rags or rough clothing put on" (Young, 2006, p. 200). She has to follow a certain kind of food, and is usually prohibited from eating meat as it is believed that non-vegetarian food, such as fish and meat, may arouse sexual desires in her. Widows not only suffer socially and culturally but they are also financially challenged as in some cultures widows lose all their possessions which they had acquired during their marriages. They are either treated as "social pariahs" ("Empowering Widows," 2014, p. 2) as they are not welcomed to participate in any family occasions, or, are completely abandoned and discarded by their own families.

However, in this paper, I argue that contrary to the stereotypical notion of widowhood in South Asia, which is associated with pain and suffering, the literary narratives I analyse show that widowhood provides a

certain extent of agency to the diasporic female characters within the space of the neoliberal West. In order to explore the non-conformity of the widows to the conventional South Asian norms, I will make a comparative study of the female characters in the literary works of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), and Krutin Patel's cinematic narrative, ABCD: It's About Choices (1999). I will rely on the theories of Jon Anderson, Michel de Certeau and Doreen Massey to show that the places in the metropolitan cities in the West contribute to the transformation of the female identities. My analysis will highlight that there are ambivalent Third Spaces in the neoliberal cities, to use Homi Bhabha's term which are characterised by his notion of hybridity. I intend to argue that these ambivalent spaces become the sites where the diasporic widows subvert their traditional rules associated with their home culture. To probe further into the contestation of widowhood norms my paper will explore that female agency should not be considered as a monolithic concept, rather, the intersectional differences, such as differences in age, class and social status, should also be taken into account. To highlight these intersectional differences among the widowed characters, I will turn to the theory of Kimberle Crenshaw. But before going into the analysis of my selected literary narratives I will discuss about the conditions of the widows in different parts of South Asia and the challenges they face in their daily lives.

Conditions of South Asian Widows and the Challenges They Face: A Brief Overview

Widows in South Asia are doubly discriminated: first, because they are women, and secondly, because they have lost their husbands. In a conventional South Asian society, identities of women are mostly determined by their husbands. Therefore, after the demise of the husbands, these widows become "'invisible' group of women" ("Widowhood," 2001, p. 2). Although the overall condition of widows across South Asia is wretched and pathetic, the challenges they face often vary based on the region. For instance, in India, widows are seen as "evil eyes," "purveyors of ill fortune," and are addressed by derogatory names, such as "witch," "dakan," and "whore" ("Widowhood," 2001, p. 6). These widows are economically and sexually exploited and are abandoned to temple sites, for example, Mathura, Vrindavan, Tirupati and Varanasi ("Widowhood," 2001, p. 6). While the older widows live

in these temple places for the rest of their lives, the younger ones are forced into prostitution. I will provide some case studies to explore the miserable conditions of the widows in the temple sites:

> Showkat Shafi reports on 7 March, 2016 in Al Jazeera about a 85-year-old widow, Manu Ghosh, who lives in Vrindavan. Manu says, "I used to wash dishes and clothes in people's house to earn money, but the moment they *heard* that I am a widow, I was thrown out without any notice...I had to sleep on the street as even my family abandoned me after my husband's death. I was married off to him when I was 11 years old and he was 40. My daughter died of malnutrition as I could not give her food since nobody wanted to help a widow. After her death, I decided to come to Vrindavan" (Shafi, 2016).
>
> Kai Schultz reports on 27 August, 2019 in The New York Times that Nirmala Maheshwari, a widow, who is abused by her family, starved and beaten by her own son and other relatives, has taken refuge in Vrindavan. Her own family has considered her as a burden. After her husband's death she seems to lose all her social value (Schultz, 2019).
>
> Meera Khanna reports on 31 August, 2021 in *Think Global Health*, about an upper-middle class woman, Reena Ahuja, who used to live a comfortable life with her husband, son and daughter-in-law. After she loses her husband to COVID-19, her son evicts her from her own house, accusing her to be responsible for her husband's death. She is subjected to physical and sexual violence, and is refused of any rightful inheritance of her husband's property (Khanna, 2021).

According to the reports of the United Nations, only six states in India have made "amendments in their respective laws to recognize coparcenary (joint ownership) rights of women" ("Widowhood," 2001, p. 6). But lack of literacy and strict legal actions have failed to eliminate the violence on widows in most parts of the country.

Similar to the widows in India, who are victims of verbal and physical abuses, Bangladeshi widows are forced to work as domestic servants. They work for long hours with little or no income. They are mostly separated from their children. Although, in theory, a Bangladeshi Muslim widow is "better off" than an Indian Hindu widow: "the Koran encourages remarriage

and a widow cannot be disinherited. Under sharia, a woman is entitled to one-eighth of her husband's estate, and half her male siblings' share of the parents' estate" ("Widowhood," 2001, p. 7). However, in practice, Bangladeshi widows, especially in the rural parts of the country, are subjected to patriarchal oppressions, evicted from their possessions and deprived of their rights. According to the UN reports, Bangladesh becomes a major hub for trafficking of young girls to the brothels in India: "Widows' daughters who are without male protectors and not enrolled in school are especially at risk to this trade" ("Widowhood," 2001, p. 7). Although several NGOs and governmental organisations have been set up in both India and Bangladesh in order to protect the widows, necessary actions are yet to be taken.

The conditions of the widows are no better in Pakistan as compared to India and Bangladesh. In theory, "destitute widows are reported to be supported by a small pension or zakat" ("Widowhood," 2001, p. 7). But the system being corrupted, the widows are often deprived of any financial support. In addition to the neglect that the widows suffer the Honour Codes in Pakistan hides the cruelty inflicted upon these women with imprisonment and even death as the young widows are suspected to bring shame to their families ("Widowhood," 2001, p. 7). The challenges faced by the widows in Afghanistan are equally terrible. Most of the widows who live in Kabul have lost their husbands in war. As per the UN reports in 2001, approximately 2 million war widows live in Afghanistan, who are the sole earning members of the families ("Widowhood," 2001, p. 7). However, as per the Taliban rule prevalent in Afghanistan, the widows are not allowed to leave their homes and denied employment. They have lost the access to international food aid. According to the Talibans, the aid is to be collected by a male member of the family, but, as the widows do not have any male relatives they are deprived of the aid. Unemployment in the country has increased the number of beggars in the streets. Widows and their children suffer from malnutrition and severe health conditions, which often lead to suicides ("Widowhood," 2001, p. 7). Similar to the scenario in Afghanistan, war widows in Sri Lanka experience substantial impoverishment and marginalisation. The Small Fisherman's Federation has been set up for the rights of widows of fishermen who have drowned at sea ("Widowhood," 2001, p. 7). Despite the fact that several NGOs and institutional reforms have been established to create awareness for the plight of the widows, the conditions faced by these women are worse in the developing countries.

Representation of Widowhood in the Diasporic Narratives

In contrast to the physical, economic and sexual violences that the widows endure in South Asia, I read widowhood as a mode of agency for the diasporic female characters in my selected literary and cinematic narratives. In Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake,* the readers are informed about the demise of the protagonist's husband over a telephonic conversation between Ashima Ganguli, a Bengali immigrant from Calcutta, and a hospital attendant. Ashima accompanies her husband, Ashoke, to the US. She loses her husband when he goes on a work trip to Ohio: "Ashima hangs up the phone... She begins to shiver violently, the house instantly feeling twenty degrees colder" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 169). In accordance to the norms in India Ashima complies with the life of a widow: "For ten days following [her husband's death]...[she eats] a mourner's diet, forgoing meat and fish...only rice and dal and vegetables, plainly prepared" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 180). Being a financially dependent wife it takes a while for Lahiri's protagonist to manage her life in the US after she becomes a widow: "For most of her life, she reminds herself, a wife...Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone...she sobs for her husband. She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 278).

While Lahiri's heroine moves from her homeland to accompany her husband in the US, Bharati Mukherjee's primary character in *Jasmine* travels to America after the death of her husband, Prakash. After becoming a widow Jasmine moves to the US to fulfil her dead husband's dream of better educational opportunities in the West and to escape from the political turmoil in India. Though the protagonist speaks of immigration as a "matter of duty and honor" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 97), it is clear from the narrative that the displacement has saved her from the pangs of widowhood in India. The readers get a picture of the lives of widows in Punjab through the portrayal of Jasmine's mother after her husband has expired: "When Pitaji died, my mother tried to throw herself on his funeral pyre. When we wouldn't let her, she shaved her head with a razor, wrapped her body in coarse cloth, and sat all day in a corner. Once a day I force-fed spoonfuls of rice gruel into her" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 61). Therefore, the protagonist's plight to America can be considered as an escape from the atrocities of widowhood in her homeland.

Similar to the novels of Lahiri and Mukherjee which provide a glimpse of the conditions of South Asian widows in the West, Krutin Patel's film also depicts the life of an Indian widowed mother in America. The very opening of *ABCD: It's About Choices* portrays Anju, the protagonist, sitting on a bed, busy with her crochet and talking to her dead husband's photo, which is hanging on the wall behind her: "I wish you could be here to see the children. You would be so proud of them" (Patel, 1999, 0:02:11). Though the film does not provide details about Anju's displacement and married life, the narrative explores the widow's loneliness and struggles in the host nation as her children are busy with their own lives.

Significance and Impact of Diasporic Space on the Identities of the Widows

It is my contention that as the female protagonists are away from their homeland, they are in a privileged position compared to their situations in India. Despite the fact that the freedom and liberty which the widows enjoy in the neoliberal West are deceptive, the metropolitan cities guarantee a degree of protection for these women which they have not been entitled to in their home countries. The places in the West become the sites where "cultural activities happen in particular ways in particular contexts" (Anderson, 2010, p. 6). For the diasporic characters these places become the breeding ground where the interchange of culture takes place. As Doreen Massey argues, places depend "crucially on the notion of articulation" (Massey, 1994, p. 8), which suggests that places become sites where the construction of identities as well as the difference between the subjects can be recognised. In order to understand the significance of the neoliberal places, the "construction of the subjects within them" (Massey, 1994, p. 8) is to be taken into account as subjects, that is, the female characters in this case, become "part and parcel" (Massey, 1994, p. 8) of those places.

In defining the impact of spaces within the neoliberal places, I will rely on Michel de Certeau's theory. According to de Certeau, individual spaces are "practised" places (de Certeau, 1988, p. 117), suggesting that places are transformed into spaces when individuals appropriate them. Thus, I will argue that the delimiting places are transformed into "spaces of enunciation" (de Certeau, 1988, p. 98) in the literary narratives I analyse. Furthermore, while the female protagonists transform places into empowering spaces they

perform acts of subversion which eventually have an impact on their identities. In the flux between their home and host cultures the diasporic characters tend to create an in-between space which is akin to Homi Bhabha's notion of "third space" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). This ambivalent space becomes the site where the diasporic characters subvert their conventional norms. For instance, in Mukherjee's novel, the protagonist, who has been at the mercy of her father and her brothers in India, fulfils her American dream by becoming a part of the "unmapped exotic metropolis" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 184). Even though Jasmine, at first, finds America "humiliating" and "disappointing" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 29), it is the same metropolis where "miracles still [happen]" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 197) for her. America helps her redefining her identity. She not only gets a job in each city in the US where she traverses, which serves as her financial freedom, she also acquires a family of her own. Similar to Jasmine, Ashima too, becomes financially independent. She overcomes her dependency on her husband and starts working at a public library in America: "Three afternoons a week and two Saturdays a month" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 162). Both Jasmine and Ashima become citizens of the neoliberal cities which promise the citizens "the liberty and near-equality of movement and opportunity in exchange of their concession to the liberality of markets" (Zeigler, 2007, p. 154). Thus, the protagonists' engagement in the market economy in the US grants them a degree of empowerment.

Widowhood as Agency: A Comparative Analysis of Diasporic Female Characters

Although all the protagonists in my selected novels and films are from South Asia and they are all widows by the end of the narratives, they cannot be considered as a monolithic group. To explore the intersectional differences between these characters I turn to the theory of Kimberle Crenshaw. Crenshaw defines intersectionality as a concept "to denote the various ways in which [race, gender, class and sexuality] interact to shape multiple dimensions" of women's experiences (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). In the diasporic narratives that I analyse the protagonists differ based on their age, social status and class. As the South Asian diasporic community is not a homogeneous group, therefore, "ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242, italics in the original). Both Anju and Ashima in *ABCD: It's About Choices* and *The Namesake*

respectively, belong to the middle-class background. But Patil's protagonist is depicted as a stereotypical Indian widow; conservative and traditional. She is reluctant to accept the host cultural norms. Till the end of the film she does not seem to be a successful immigrant. She is never seen to step outside her house. She detests American culture and does not show any interest in integration. Ashima, on the other hand, adopts a hybrid identity by the end of the novel: "Ashima will return to India with an American passport. In her wallet will remain her Massachusetts driver's license, her social security card" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 276). She decides to spend "six months of her life in India, six months in the States" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 275). She is no longer "the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 276). Thus, it seems she is able to adapt to the host cultural norms.

Besides the differences in the identities of Anju and Ashima as individuals their behaviour towards their children also varies. In the beginning of Lahiri's narrative, Ashima chooses a bride for her son, Gogol. But the marriage does not last long. Later she is represented as more open– minded when it comes to choosing a partner for her daughter, Sonia. She lets her daughter choose her own partner: "Something tells her Sonia will be happy with this boy – quickly she corrects herself – this young man. He has brought happiness to her daughter, in a way Moushumi had never brought it to her son. That it was she who had encouraged Gogol to meet Moushumi will be something for which Ashima will always feel guilty" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 276). On the contrary, Anju is obsessed with the marriage of her children. It seems her main goal in life is to marry off her children. In one of the episodes, she compels her daughter, Nina, to ask the astrologer about her marriage prospective: "When will she marry?.. Ask the question...will I have children? Will they be Indian children? At least half-Indian. Oh Nina!.. What a nasty child!...I am just a lonely old woman with such little time left. I just cannot communicate with my daughter. We are always fighting" (Patel, 1999, 0:43:31-0:45:12). Thus, Anju struggles as a widow. Though she does not suffer economically and is portrayed to have a comfortable life, she seems to be emotionally distant from her children. In contrast to her, Ashima evolves as an empowered individual. Although in the beginning she is a shy woman, dependent on her husband, as the narrative progresses, she learns to drive, works in an American library, and have American friends.

While Lahiri's and Patel's protagonists belong to the middle-class background, Mukherjee's primary character, Jasmine, is from a working-

class background. She refuses hyphenated identity. After her displacement to the US, she identifies herself more with the culture of the host nation and distances herself from the "artifici-ally maintained Indianness" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 145) in America. Though the narrative does not provide any details about her financial status, it is clear that she has some jobs in the host nation: "[she is] a professional, like a school teacher or a nurse" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 175). Although Jasmine leaves her homeland to escape from the pathetic life of a widow, in America she further experiences traumatic situations, such as being sexually molested. However, with the love and support of the people whom she comes across in America, Jasmine evolves as a "fighter and adapter" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 40). The novel opens with an astrologer's prediction of her "widowhood and exile" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 3), but, by the end, she challenges the prophecy: "Watch me re-position my stars, I whisper to the astrologer" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 240). Thus, despite her social and personal trauma, which includes the political revolt in Punjab and the murder of her husband, respectively, Jasmine comes to terms with her past experiences and is successful in redefining herself as an empowered individual.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the conditions of the widows in South Asia: they are associated with bad luck, they experience all sorts of violence including physical and sexual abuses, and they are deprived of their possessions. Though the widows are equally oppressed all across South Asia, the amount and nature of torture vary based on the countries. In contrast to the social and economical positions of widows in South Asia, my selected narratives have portrayed widowhood in a somewhat positive manner. As I have shown, with the help of the theories of Jon Anderson, Michel de Certeau and Doreen Massey, the places in the West act as the sites where the culture and the subject are reunited. Relying on de Certeau's notion of "practised" places (de Certeau, 1988, p. 117), my paper has highlighted how diasporic female characters appropriate the geographical locations and transform those areas into emancipatory spaces. I have argued that despite the obvious limitations the diasporic space in the neoliberal West acts as a middle ground, similar to Homi Bhabha's notion of an ambivalent "third Space" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). Within this ambivalent space the diasporic widows contest the

stereotypical South Asian notions of widowhood and they gain some sort of agency in the Western metropolis. My analysis has foregrounded that contrary to the conventional norms in South Asia, in which women's identities are depended on their husbands, the diasporic widowed characters have successfully discarded their traditional rules. The demise of the husbands has proved to be beneficial to them as they have transformed themselves from shy, dependent women to empowered individuals, for instance, Ashima in *The Namesak*e and Jasmine in *Jasmine.* With the help of Kimberle Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, I have further pointed out that although all the widowed protagonists are from South Asia, there are certain intersectional differences between them. While Ashima and Anju belong to the middle-class background, Jasmine is from a working-class. Moreover, despite the fact that Lahiri's and Mukherjee's protagonists become financially empowered and are able to adapt to the host cultural norms by the end of the narratives, Patel's heroine detests American culture and is reluctant to assimilate. However, one of the limitations that this paper incurs is that as my analysis is primarily based on the literary narratives, therefore, in order to trace how widowhood becomes a mode of agency for the diasporic women, a critical survey needs to be conducted beyond the literary works.

References:

Anderson, Jon. (2010). *Understanding Cultural Geography: Places and Traces*. First Edition. Routledge.

Bhabha, Homi K. (1994*). The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. (1991). *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violenceagainst Women of Color*. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241-99.

De Certeau, Michel. (1988). *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Berkeley: University of California Press. Print.

Doley, Deepshikha. (2020, November 8). "*The Plight of Widows." The Hindu*. 01:16 am IST. https://thehindu.com/opinion/open-page/the-plight-of-widows/article33046135.ece

Khanna, Meera. (2021, August 31). *India's COVID-19 Widows*. *Think Global Health*. https://thinkglobalhealth.org/article/indias-covid-19-widows

Lahiri, Jhumpa. (2003). *The Namesake*. New Delhi: Harper Collins. Print.

Massey, Doreen. (1994). *Space, Place, and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. 1.

Mukherjee, Bharati. (1989). *Jasmine*. New York. Grove Press. Print.

Patel, Krutin. (Director). (1999). *ABCD: It's About Choices [Film].* Eros Entertainment and Laxmi Pictures.

Schultz, Kai. (2019, August 27). *India's Widows, Abused at Home, Have Sought Refuge in This City for Centuries.* The New York Times. https://nytimes.com/2019/08/27/world/asia/india–women-widows. html

Shafi, Showkat. (2016, March 7). *Widows in India: My Children Threw Me Out. Al Jazeera*. https://aljazeera.com/gallery/2016//7/widows-in-india-my-children -threw- me-out-of-the– house

United Nations. (2001). *Widowhood: Invisible Women, Secluded or Excluded.* Women 2000, 1-20.

UN Women. (2014). *Empowering Widows: An Overview of Policies and Programmes in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka.* 1-76. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital–library/publica-tions/ 2015/09/empowering-widows

Young, Kate. (2006). *Widows without Rights: Challenging Marginalisation and Dispossession*. Gender and Development, Taylor and Francis, Ltd. on behalf of Oxfam GB, 14(2),199-209. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20461136

Ziegler, Garrett. (2007). *East of the City: "Brick Lane," Capitalism, and the Global Metropolis.* Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts, 1(1), 145-67.