

Widowhood in Indian Cinema and Margins of Food

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Abstract:

Some personal experiences perhaps made me conscious of the marginalised position of widow in Indian society. This consciousness drove me to focus on the way food is used as a powerful metaphor to evoke the marginalized and subjugated state of a widow in Hindu civilization, in critically acclaimed films like *Water* (directed by Deepa Mehata) and *Goinar Baksho* (directed by Aparna Sen). In both the films, the widows are seen to reminiscence the taste of some foods which they tasted as child but are now forbidden to taste, because they are the victims of both child marriage and child widowhood. This forced restriction and their attended impotent discontent speaks volumes about the pervasive nature of women's subjugated marginalization in every sphere of life. Women are so eulogistically synonymised with domesticity and especially with kitchen, but ironically, she is not free to cook and feed herself. Even food has its own chain for her. This paper therefore proposes to explore the complex issue of food and women's subjugated marginalization with reference to the above two films.

Keywords: enforced widowhood, Indian cinema, marginalisation, women, food

The notion of widowhood — its socio-religious complexity — first struck me the day my paternal grandfather passed away and took with him the colours of my grandmother — whom I lovingly call 'Dadimaa.' His body was draped in the white *khafan* (the white pieces of cloth that is draped around the dead body following certain Islamic religious strictures) when he was to go for his final journey. But his better half, who stayed back — alive — was also draped in a new white sari. And all colours of gold and silver were also taken off to mark her dedication and love for her husband. White became the new colour of her life. And it was something which was not easy for me as a child to reconcile with, because I could not understand the necessity of this change in her life. Then I questioned them all, why only she will wear white and not us because we too lost our grandfather; we too are mourning, then why she alone will follow this ritual? Now, I don't remember how others answered me, but I do vividly remember what my Dadimaa said. She very calmly said: "for whom shall I deck myself up? The colours were for him (i.e. her husband)." So, that is how she has grown up; believing in this ritual. Though in Islam, there is no specific rules for leading the life of a widow, but may be due to cultural influence, this ritualistic dress code is still followed by most Indian Muslim women. So, it was from this personal experience that I became conscious about the life of a widow. Then I noticed another dear grandmother — the grandmother of a close friend of mine — whom we lovingly called "Thappa" (a version of Thakuma) — piously living the

life of a widow. And it is from her life that I became conscious of the importance of food and its ritualistic restrictions in the life of a Hindu-widow. This consciousness perhaps drove me to focus on the way food is used as a powerful metaphor to evoke the marginalized and subjugated state of a widow in Hindu civilization, in critically acclaimed films like *Water* (directed by Deepa Mehata) and *Goinar Baksho* (directed by Aparna Sen). In both the films, the widows are seen to reminisce the taste of some foods which they had tasted as child but are now forbidden to taste, because they are the victims of both child marriage and child widowhood. This enforced restriction and their attended impotent discontent speaks volumes about the pervasive nature of women's subjugated marginalization in every sphere of life. Women are eulogistically synonymised with domesticity and especially with kitchen, but ironically, she is not free to cook and feed herself. Even food has its own chain for her. This paper therefore proposes to explore the complex issue of food and women's marginalization with reference to the above two films.

Goinar Baksho (The Jewellery Box), a 2013 Aparna Sen directed film, is based on Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's novel *Goinar Baksho* and a short story *Rashmoni Sonadana*. As suggested by the title, the focus of both the novel and the short story is jewellery box and jewellery and it is in relation to this jewellery box that the entire plot of the film is woven. The film presents three generation of women and their changing socio-political scenario and how the jewellery box — a valuable material asset — significantly gains different meaning and usage for the three generation of women. The jewellery box originally belonged to Rashmoni or Pisima ((played by Mousumi Chatterjee) — one of the lead characters of the film. The jewellery box is then handed over to the nice-in-law of Pisima or Somalata (played by Konkona Sen Sarma) and finally it is handed over to the grand-daughter of Pisima or Somalata's daughter or Chaitali (played by Srabanti Chatterjee). The plot of the film beautifully unravels how the box of jewellery helped women of these three succeeding generations to live a life of dignity and how it was used as a means to attain freedom — freedom in different sense of the terms for the three generation of women.

The film opens with a girl being disrobed and then someone else putting on her a white sari and cutting her long jet black hair ruthlessly — symbolically at once declaring the advent of widowhood in that girl's life. Interestingly it is to be noted that in this entire first scene the girl's face is not shown — only her bare back is visible — nor do we hear her voice — no voice of protest or lament — when this widowhood is imposed upon her. This very denial of a facial identity or a distinctive voice at the very onset of the film, which opens with the act of imposing widowhood, is significant because it suggests that this is no story of a particular unfortunate young child-widow, but this is the sad reality of many nameless, voiceless widows of India in general and Bengal in particular. This young girl is Rashmoni, who becomes Pisima in the later stages of her life. As the story unfolds it is revealed that she was married off in an arranged marriage at age eleven, and widowed shortly thereafter. She spends the remainder of her life in her father's house, apparently as a chaste widow, hiding her wedding jewels from her greedy relatives in the joint family. Principally, as the title suggests, the story of the film revolves around her wedding jewels, which she keeps sequestered in a box, and is occasionally seen to secretly put on all her jewellery and look at herself with admiration — she feels good to see herself decked up in gold, which in actuality she is denied because of her enforced widowhood. The greedy family members feign respect for her with the hope that she would give all her jewellery to that person who pleases her the most. But she knows the truth and would hand it over to someone who respects her as an individual and not for her

possession. Thus, through the character of Pisima — wearing white sari and cropped grey hair and her act of secretly decking herself up with all her wedding jewels — the repressive nature of enforced widowhood is presented very tellingly. But the film also uses culinary patches to address the issue of enforced denials in the life of a widow. Immediately after the film starts, Pisima is seen befriending the new bride of the family, her niece-in-law, shortly before dying. The rest of the film depicts how the niece-in-law is visited by the spirit of the matriarch, who demands that she hide the jewellery box from her greedy relatives and finally how the spirit of Pisima allows Somalata to pawn her jewellery to help the family overcome the bankrupt situation of the family. During one of her many visits in the form of a spirit, the spirit of Pisima is heard relishing the smell of meat being cooked by Somalata. Somlata asks the spirit if she would taste some — because now being a spirit she is beyond societal restrictions. But the very question offends the spirit and the spirit says that even though she is a spirit but she cannot defy scriptural dictates and that her entire life was of penance and denial and tasteless food. She narrates now she used to hate those tasteless foods which she was forced to consume all her life just because she was a widow. And then the spirit is seen to mislead Somalata into adding more salt to the cooked meat so that none can really relish the food and the spirit takes pleasure in this spoiled dinner and sees it as an act of revenge. Thus, though the film has been categorized as a ‘horror comedy’ and the issues of denial and marginality in the form of food, colour code of dress or physical desires have been presented under the veneer of comedy, it actually depicts the pathos of a widow. The marginal status of a widow is well depicted in the film and the short episode dealing with food helped to portray the nuances of marginality all the more profoundly.

In the film *Water*, a 2005 Indo-Canadian film, written and directed by Deepa Mehta with screenplay by Anurag Kashyap, it explores the lives of the widows at an ashram in Varanasi, India. The film is set in the year 1938, when India was still under British occupation. Child marriages were common practice and widows had (and still do have) a marginal position in society. The film starts with the story of Chuyia (played by the Srilankan child artist Sarala Kariyawasam) — an eight-year-old girl, whose husband suddenly dies. In keeping with traditions of widowhood, she is dressed in a white sari, her head is shaven and she is left in an ashram, to spend the rest of her life in renunciation. She is a victim of both child marriage and child widowhood and is the youngest entrant in that hellish ashram. There are fourteen women who live in the dilapidated house, sent there to expiate bad karma, as well as to relieve their families of financial and emotional burdens of caring for widows. Initially, the child widow, Chuyia, is seen to throw tantrums in the ashram just like a child who fails to understand the very concept of marriage, widowhood, penance, repentance or sin. She is a child who loves to eat laddoo but the sheer poverty of the ashram life and the enforced belief to lead a life of denunciation and penance, designates ‘laddoo’ the status of an object of desire. In the ashram, a very elderly sickly woman is seen to lament the fact that how as a child she savoured the laddoo and other foods — but specifically laddoo — during her wedding but immediately after that she too became a victim of enforced widowhood and thereby could never again taste those tasty laddoos which she loved so much as a child. Before her pathetic death this elderly woman is seen to pine for ‘laddoo’ and Chuyia manages to bring a ‘laddoo’ for her. Thus through this apparently simple trope of a ‘laddoo’ Deepa Mehta very pertinently portrays how the widows are forced to live a life of denial and how pathetic this marginalization is.

The film depicts just the lives of fourteen widows in one of the ashrams of Varanasi, but India is a home to millions of widows who live this life of enforced denial. The number of widows living on the

streets of Vrindavan alone is estimated to vary from 1,780 to 5,000. Their stories are hardly heard and their tales of survival almost never known. According to Anne F. Stenhammer, Regional Programme Director, UN Women South Asia, “India has an estimated 35 million widows as per the 2001 Census, and their lives are often mired in poverty, neglect and deprivation” (Sahoo 55). “A survey done to assess the situation of widows in Vrindavan by the Guild for Service and UN Women revealed that the widows are extremely poor, living well below the poverty line defined by the World Bank and the Planning Commission. Although 70 percent of the women had heard of the Destitute Widow Pension Scheme, only a quarter of all widows received pension” (Shoo 55). But the question that remains to be answered is that even if they avail a meagre state sponsored financial help, will this society allow them to live their life on their own terms? Will their life be full of colours and tastes? I am particularly concerned with ‘taste’ or ‘food’ in this paper, because food is not only the most essential thing for survival, it is also an important identity marker and Donna R. Gabaccia — a renowned food critic — rightly says, “We are what we Eat.” But, here in these films we find, the widows’ identity are constructed by the fact that ‘what they are not allowed to eat.’ And this very denial of ‘food’ vivifies the fact that how food is used to enforce marginality in the lives of Indian widows.

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