

**Widowhood as a curse: A Realistic Portrayal of Widows of India by****Indira Goswami****Ms. Diksha Bhagat**

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English

University of Jammu

**Abstract**

Widowhood is a major concern and cause of deplorable conditions of women. It is considered as one of the major concerns of womanhood whereby women are made to suffer psychologically, mentally, socially, culturally, and even physically. Widows throughout the world face discrimination in one form or the other. In Indian society too, widows are considered as nothing but burden on both family as well as society. Though the concerns of widows have time and again come to prominence yet their deplorable plight is not much improved which has become the motivation behind the present research. Widowhood is a state of helplessness whereby a woman is treated as an 'outcast' and 'untouchable' like Dalits even if she belongs to a rich upper-class society as soon as she loses the 'privilege' of having a husband. Patriarchy has moulded its culture and traditions in such a way that women are rendered as 'objects' meant for the use of men. Indira Goswami through her works widely explores the plight of Indian widows who meet various types of injustices in patriarchal society including ostracism from the society. Further, the paper explored how widows are juxtaposed with untouchables so as to make their plight known to the world.

**Keywords:** widow, culture, patriarchy, victim, identity.

The definition of patriarchy itself justifies the differential treatment it provides to the two sexes: "Patriarchy is often defined as the differential access to power of the two sexes in a given society or the generalized power of men over women" (Ray 5). It uses the agency of both culture and religion by providing "men's control over religious texts and traditions" (Ray 5) in order to manifest its prejudiced motives. Thus, it has cleverly manipulated both the agencies of 'religion' and 'culture' to justify its biased motives. Patriarchy thus, using such interventions has limited the role and characteristics of women merely to their biological, physiological and sexual attributes. Further, it has demeaned and degraded these biological functions by providing negligible social value to them. Patriarchy provides a prejudiced view about the important bodily processes of feminine body associated with reproduction like menstruation and childbirth as it has used these very processes as tool to subjugate women as because of such bodily functions women are rendered as 'weak' and 'fragile'. In order to meet its desired ends, patriarchy also uses the various strategies like dividing women on the basis of various factors like class, caste in order to avoid promoting sisterhood so that they would never get united under a single flag and

would protest against such 'favouritism' practiced by patriarchy which would provide threat to the patriarchal institution.

Women are denied any independent identity of themselves as their identity mostly remains associated with father before marriage and after marriage they are associated with their husbands. The religious scriptures of Hindu religion are also profound with examples which portrays the patriarchal moulding of religion to secure the vested interest of men while subjugating women as in *Manusmriti* or *Manava-Dharam Shastar* also which contains basic principles preaching the ways of moral living, it is clearly mentioned that women should ascertain their respective identities not on the basis of their calibre or intelligence rather should seek their father or husband's identity in order to define themselves, "In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She should not have independence" (Doniger and Smith 116). Women are considered as secondary beings who are 'frivolous' and 'promiscuous' and need a constant check on their sexuality as their sexuality is considered dangerous by patriarchy and thus, it tries to curb it, "Woman appears as a definitional tool, the 'other'. She is body and sexual being, inferior to man, a threatening enigma to be feared and controlled" (Ray 3). However, the condition of woman becomes even more pathetic and pitiful if by any means her husband dies. She now is termed as a 'widow' and all of a sudden, the place, position she holds in social stratum now undergoes a change. She does not acquire the same position of respect and honour in the society as she is now casted as an 'outcast', 'impure' 'ominous' and is even considered responsible for the death of her husband: "A widow is a woman who has vanished her husband by death and has not married once more. It is a very old expression which can be traced beyond the Vedic language to Indo-European origin. Widowhood highlights a calamity in a woman's life "who is socially boycotted and victimized in Indian society and is a offense against woman which is a cruel reality in life" (Ahmed and Anjum 81). Widowhood is thus rendered as a curse on women in general as women enjoy privilege and status based on the position of their husband in the society and when they lose their husband, they also lose their place and value in the society and often become the victim of social apathy as their presence is now considered 'ominous' for any celebrations like marriage or any other festivity. Although widows have been redeemed from the brutal practice of 'sati' wherein widowed women were made to burn themselves on the pyre of their husbands or buried with the dead bodies of their husbands, still the condition of living widows is deplorable as compared to other women of the society. They are stigmatised as 'bad luck' or 'unlucky' as the society treats them as if they have brought up bad luck to their family and are even considered as responsible for the death of their husband.

The plight of widows has remained deplorable since the earlier times of Vedas to the present times. Widows occupy a large section of women population. According to the 1991 census, there are near about 33 million widows living in India. However, a large section of widows in general are found in the areas like Vrindavan, Varanasi, Haridwar, Puri and other such religious places. These places are known for their vast accommodations to widows who live in deplorable situation in such places. Widows as such are viewed as liability on both family and

society. Women after the death of their husband are regarded as unfit for the society as the primary role of reproduction and production of 'sons' with which women are ascertained with, is now dropped due to which they are treated as reproductively 'passive' and thus is no longer 'useful' member of society. Women thus, now as 'widows' are viewed as a liability on both family as well as society as they are now ineligible for the only role which is provided to women by patriarchy, i.e., producing male off springs. Their sexuality is now seen as a threat and if their sexuality is not curbed it is believed that it would pollute the purity of family lineage if they would be impregnated by any other man out of their family. They are also accused as the one who brought bad luck on the family and are responsible for the death of their husband because of their 'sins'. Thus they are made to repent for the sins by leading the rest of their life lonely in repentance. They are thus forced to live the life of a recluse and are thus, sent by the family to far off religious places like Vrindavan where a large number of widows live so that they now could give up worldly pleasures and would devote their time in religious duties. Further, widows are usually forced to move out of their homes especially if they are child widows or if they were not able to produce any child as they are now seen as a potential threat who can acquire materialistic possessions of their husbands. They are thus, forced to live on streets or are dropped in places like Vrindavan which is a hub of widows. Thus, there are two types of widows one who live with their family especially with their sons and other who live as a recluse in holy cities.

Further, these areas also become a source of exploitation of widows as there are very few means available to widows to earn their livings. There is no clear evidence of when such practice of widows living in Vrindavan (the holy city associated with Lord Krishna's birth started) began, however it is believed that the last avatar of Lord Krishna i.e., Mahaprabhu Caitanya "brought a group of women from Bengal here in order to escape the practice of now banned Sati" ("Fault Lines"). After that incident, widows throughout the country started migrating to the city primarily for the religious purpose and secondarily for their need basis as they are not supported by their families. These widows generally earn their food by singing hymns in temples and begging in the streets as they are not able to make their both ends meet. Widows, as such are not able to earn much, so widows are often forced into prostitution as there are no other means available to them. Thus, widows face exclusion from the society and are made to undergo physical, mental, psychological and social torture because of such standards of society for widows. Widows face a large number of other such socio-cultural and religious restrictions including food habits as they are not allowed to eat food containing spices or even pickle and have to eat food without onion or without taking into consideration the health of widows as it is believed that such food items increase sexual appetite which is considered unethical for widows as they are required to lead a simple and restraint life with strict principles. In accordance with such strict disciplines, widows were also made to undergo tonsure whereby they were forced to shave their heads in order to purify them. There are various other restrictions which are imposed on widows like they are not allowed to wear any form of jewellery including nose pin and are asked to wear simple white dress in order to mark that their widowhood. Further, the question of widow remarriage was disputable and as such was unimaginable.

The plight of widowhood can be traced in Indian context from Vedic times. In Vedic period, there have been witness of symbolic self-immolation of themselves, whereby widows were asked to accompany their husband's dead body in the funeral for some time after which they were asked to return to the land: "In one of the funeral hymens of the Rig Veda, the widow lies down besides the dead man and his bow is placed in his hand, then the bow is removed and the woman is called on to return to the land of the living" (Kapur 2). However, it is still not clear whether the ritual was limited only to aristocratic society or was prevalent in all societies of that time. This symbolic burning of the widows in Vedic times becomes the major impetus behind the practice of actual burning of widows on the pyre of their husband followed in medieval times. The advent of Bhakti movement and increase in devotion to God among people also impacted the situation of women and widows too. Women tried to cross barriers of gender roles imposed on them by patriarchy and began to spend their time and energy in the devotion of God. Widows also remained devoted to religious movement and as such rejected the set standards of marriage and family. The practice of sati was also a common thing of this period as the life of a woman was considered empty and futile without her husband and ending up their lives on the pyre of their husband was considered better than living without their husband.

However, the condition of widows underwent a considerable upliftment in modern times after the advent of British in India. The British administrators were greatly surprised to witness the deplorable plight of widows undergoing the practice of sati along with presence of child widows in large number who were forced to live in a deplorable plight for the rest of their lives without having committed any crime. These cruelties along with restriction imposed on widows to remarry and tonsuring of widows which was basically a largely practiced ritual of eighteenth and nineteenth century were considered "barbaric nature of Hinduism" (Ray, 1999, p.132) by British government. Therefore, in order to curb such malpractices, British government in India introduced legislation in 1829 to sojourn sati practice and also legalized widow remarriage so that widows especially child widows could remarry as they have no one to support them. Such initiation was majorly supported by Indian activists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar though some orthodox Indians objected such laws as "unnecessary 'interference'" (Ray, 199, p.132) of British government in their socio-religious practices.

Indira Goswami, also known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami, is one of the most influential writer, poet and editor of the contemporary times, was born in 1942 in Guwahati, Assam. She belongs to upper class Assamese Brahmin society. She is a staunch feminist as she has rigorously attacked the rigid norms of society which undervalue and marginalize women. She has used literature as a tool to bring social change in the society. She has raised the issues related to women like patriarchy, gender, caste, childhood experiences of girl, marriage related issues faced by women as well as widowhood. Herself a widow, she has written explicitly on the plights of widows, especially the Radhaswamis of Vrindavan. Indira Goswami, as a widow also has spent some time in Vrindavan the experiences of which she has openly laid bare including the various atrocities like poverty and prostitution faced by these

widows in the 'god's city'. She has raised the concerns of young widows who are forced to live a depressible life where they remain without the touch of any color or companionship.

Indira Goswami originally wrote her autobiography in Assamese as *Adha Lekha Dastabez* (1988). It was later translated into English as *An Unfinished Autobiography* in 2002 by P. Kotoky. She spent her early childhood in Amaranga village in South Kamrup. She has her schooling in Pinemount School and Tarinicharan Girls' High School in Assam. She was graduated from Cotton College in 1960 and did her Masters in 1963. She also did research on the comparative study of Tulsidas' *Ramcharitramanas* and *Ramayan* written in Assamese language by Madhav Kandali in 1973. She was married to an engineer; Madhavan Raisom Ayenger which was short lived for only eighteen months as her husband died in a car accident while posted in Kashmir. The incident took a toll on Indira Goswami's mental and psychological health. Earlier she was broken with the untimely death of her father so much so that she tried to commit suicide in 1961 but was saved from such a mishap. However, the death of her loving husband, Madhavan Raisom Ayengar in 1965 after just eighteen months of her marriage shattered her completely and she was forced to live her life as young widow. Her life journey is full of thorns as she was forced to go through the brutal treatment that society usually inflicts on widows. However, she took her pain and agony as a fuel to ignite her passion of writing. Her autobiography is replete with the various torments which she underwent as a widow and how she was able to continue her journey of life in spite of such bitterness, "The realization slowly dawned upon me that the justification of our life lay not in itself, but in our earnest endeavour to live for others" (Goswami *An Unfinished* 25). The struggles which she met on her journey of life matched well with the predictions that were made by a fortune teller as he saw her life full of impediments and hardships, "The astrologer had a reason to worry . . . According to his predictions, misfortunes would come upon her thick and fast to bedevil her life . . . He had not visualized the metamorphosis the girl would undergo after her baptism of fire engendered by her misfortunes" (vii-viii). She was able to survive the life full of sufferings and bitterness with grace and patience through the act of writing which made her endeavor of life worthwhile and also when she communicated and related with other women she was overpowered with the feeling of compassion as now she came to the realization that her sufferings are nothing in comparison with others pains and sorrows. She thus, decided to live for others and tried to uplift other women especially widows, with the purpose of which she undertook writing. Her writings provide ample of characters that are portrayed as victims of patriarchy and their struggle for overcoming the shackles of it. Preeti Gill also confirms the above statement ". . . to me she was very much a feminist writer stating her views strongly and effectively in story after story and engaging with the social injustices and the inequalities she encountered" (Goswami, *Uddipana* 121). When Indira Goswami decided to write about the recesses of her soul and life experiences, there were very few women at that time who mustered the courage to open up their private life so vividly in the form of life narrative. Her autobiography, thus, presents a medium through which patriarchal standards are attacked as Indira Goswami decided not to live her life as a 'victim' rather she

decided to retaliate back by writing about her pains and exposing the double standards of patriarchy.

Indira Goswami has used the genre of autobiography not only to provide the details of her life instances rather she has purposefully used the genre as a medium of “re-creation of the self” (Sodhi 13). Her autobiography, *An Unfinished Autobiography* is divided into three parts. The first part is entitled as “Life is No Bargain” which provides an account of her life from childhood to her visit to Shillong and the untimely death of her husband. The second part of the autobiography is “Down Memory Lane” which depicts her traumatic life post her husband’s death and her taking up the profession of teacher in in Goalpara Sainik School in order to evade the haunting memories of past. The third part which is the most important part of her autobiography is entitled as “The City of God” which provides a detailed description of her life in Vrindavan or “The City of God” which was full of dirt, squalor and unhygienic condition of living. She confesses that she saw a very contrary image of the “The City of God” which was full of superstitions, pain and agony rather containing peace and spiritual contentment. In fact, Vrindavan truly symbolizes her agonized life as “Vrindavan in Indira’s autobiography tellingly enacts the drama of the unaging spirit’s sojourn in the wasting body” (Goswami, *Uddipana* 87). In the first part, “Life is No Bargain” she describes her experiences as a growing up woman as she becomes conscious of her physicality and how she was treated in the society based on her physique and the class to which she belonged. She also exposes the ‘patriarchal standards’ that society imposes on women belonging to upper-class society, the various ‘codes of conduct’ and norms of ‘dharma’ which were preached by the society in order to restrict life of women. The notion of pre-marital love or sex was considered as a taboo especially in Vaishnavite Brahmin society. Women were taught to hide their body and were not encouraged to acknowledge their physicality or become proud of it. They were not even free to talk about their ‘body’ or ‘sexuality’. It exposes the double standards that patriarchy imposes on women so that they would never acknowledge and admire their abilities, intellect and even their bodies.

Indira Goswami was a sensitive girl who was unable to bear the loss of close ones so much so that she tried to commit suicide when her father died, to whom she was very much close. However, her impulsive act brought nothing but more challenges into her life. She now was left with no other option but to marry even though she was warned by some *purohit* not to get married ever as it would lead her into more darkness, “Better to cut her into two and set her afloat in the river than give her in marriage” (16). However, she was left with no other option after her attempt of suicide as society did not approve her sensitive behavior and started raising question on her attitude. So she hastily married an Ahom, an upper class boy, however, her dilemma remains that she was not able to consummate her marriage because of lack of emotions and love. Therefore, her marriage was annulled for which she felt liberated as if she was “transformed into an automaton” (23). She married Madhavan Raisom Ayenger in 1965 which transformed her life into a happy one. However, her happiness did not last long as her husband died after just eighteen months of her marriage in a car accident when they were living in Kashmir. Her whole world collapsed upside down and she could not reconcile with the fact that

she has now been rendered as a young 'widow', the inauspicious name every married woman is in fear of. She felt as if her life has become meaningless as widowhood and that too at a tender age is considered as terrible tragedy. She describes the trauma which she underwent as a widow as her life was shattered and she started living on sedatives so as to meet death as she felt her existence 'meaningless'.

In the second part, "Down Memory Lane" she has vividly described her lived experiences as a widow in Indian society. She joined the profession of teaching in Goalpara Sainik School so that she could spend her time away from her memories of past so as to overcome the feeling of grief and sorrow of losing her husband or in other words 'the whole world' for a wife. Widows are expected to follow strict discipline of life whereby they are bound to renounce all the worldly pleasures including the food varieties and decking up with Kumkum, Bindi and lipstick and are asked to remain draped in a white piece of saree which is devoid of any color which symbolizes their life as 'colorless' and 'meaningless'. Thus, the society which earlier required women to 'feminize' and 'sexualize' themselves had set a completely contrary standards for women who by any chance lose their husband. They are now looked down in the society as they are considered as 'sinned' and 'polluted' women who should now devote their life in prayers and meditation so as to wash away their sins. Indira Goswami throws light on the various attempts made by the society to "de-feminize" and "desexualize" widows. Widows are even made to cut their hair as it is believed that their hair are polluted and cutting the hair of widows represents an attempt to cleanse them of their sins. Their presence is considered as inauspicious for any type of social and religious gatherings. Indira Goswami exposes the various restrictions which are imposed on widows especially Brahmin women by making reference of her aunt, a widow who suffered exclusion from mainstream socio-cultural activities of the family as she remembered her as "seated on a wooden plank during the days of the *ambubachi*" (menstruation) (56). Brahmin women used to deal with widows with much scorn and contempt as they considered them ill-boding so much so that they forbade the touch or even shadow of widows which would bring some ill fate, "Touch her not, no, you must not! Only recently she is widowed. She carries in her the pollution of sin" (56). Indira Goswami was aware about the hostility of Indian society towards widows so she tried to limit herself to the closed dark secluded room which also highlighted the loneliness and emptiness she suffered because of widowhood as widows suffer from exclusion and disapproval from both family and society at a time when they direly need it.

In order to have some motive to live, she started a research work based on the comparative study of Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas* and Ramayan written in Assamese by Madhav Kandali under the guidance of her mentor Prof. Lekharu. Her research work led her to visit Vrindavan and see the plight of *Radheshyamis* or *Radhaswamis*, the widows residing in the holy city. By witnessing the plight of other widows in Vraj, she came to a self-realization as she was able to relate her self with the pains of other widows. She became aware with the fact that sufferings of an individual are not only limited to his/her own trauma rather it is a symbolic representation of sufferings of large group of people. This relates with the concept of "collective

identity” provided by Stanford whereby Indira Goswami can relate with other widows in order to reconcile her identity as a ‘widow’ and ‘woman’, “Women’s sense of collective identity, however, is not only negative. It can also be a source of strength and transformation” (Smith and Watson 75). The image of ‘Vrindavan’ she witnesses presents a sharp contrast to the image of ‘City of God’ she has created. The city of Vraj or Brij is associated with the image of childhood, naughty memories of Lord Krishna and his playful activities with *Gopis* as described by Shubha Tiwari, “Brij Bhumi has tons of meaning for us. Vrindavan is the place where Lord Krishna spent his Childhood days – the *gopi* days, the *makhan* days, the charming, naughty childhood days with Yashoda. The child Krishna forms a very thick and deep layer of the subconscious of every Hindu” (214). However, what Indira Goswami witnesses in Vraj is a total contrast to it, “Indira Goswami’s Vrindavan comes nothing less than a deadly shock” (215). In the streets of Vrindavan, rather than having the glimpse of playful memories of Lord Krishna, Indira Goswami witnesses “tricksters, religious hypocrites, the priests exploiting the devotees in the name of the religion” (Gupta 6). The worst sufferers of the such hypocrisy are *Radheshyamis* who devote their whole life in the service of Lord Krishna who neither hears nor sees their deplorable plight. She has also described the details of the residence of these widows in ashram, ‘Harabari’ where they live in pathetic and unhygienic conditions. They are provided with small rooms and required to follow strict disciplines which if they are seen violating, could lead to a great penalty even their expulsion from the ashrams. They live on the earnings made by singing bhajans in the temple. Indira Goswami also visited various saints and *sadhus* in the quest of spiritual gains and to reconcile with her past trauma. However, in spite of her visits to various *sadhus* like Deboria Baba, Mauni Baba and various others she was not able to overcome from her trauma and was unable to find inner peace. She has highlighted the corruption which existed in such religious institutions as these saints only looted young widows and poor people in the name of religion which she exposes through her conversation with one of the *sadhu*, “I shall one day sit in meditation in that hovel. You shall have to sit beside me for some time. But you must not have a thread on.... However, red garlands and leopard skin you can put on. There are pieces of such skins in our godown. Many do their meditation in this manner. A number of young girls like you also have gone through it” (138-139). However, she always viewed Vrindavan as a ‘phoenix’ which has the ability to re-rose into power in spite of facing various threats of invasion like by Muslim invaders who tried to invade the city many a times, “Vrindavan is a city that rose up like Phoenix, again and again, after it had been razed to the ground with every attack by Muslim invaders” (162). She gets motivated by the spirit of stableness of Vrindavan in spite of various upheavals which rekindled in her a hope in her even when everything faded out and helped her remain motivated and consistent in her life in spite of various ups and downs of life.

Indira Goswami has time and again depicted the pangs of physical and carnal desires which she felt after the death of her husband. She describes the pain which a widow undergoes physically and psychologically as a lot of restrictions are put on a woman after she loses her husband. She cannot eat with her desire neither she can dress to her pleasing rather she is asked to lead an austere life totally devoted to prayers and meditation as if she has committed a serious



crime and is now seeking forgiveness from God. Indira Goswami also depicts the trauma she underwent after she lost her husband as she shut herself up in a room and gave herself up to her 'loneliness' as she yearns for the affection of her husband, "Who can determine how the abrupt end of a happy 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" (54). However, she gradually came out of the web of memories of past and started living her life as a teacher and researcher. Though, her heart desired to free herself from societal boundaries and start her life afresh by indulging in a new relationship but she was not able to overcome the societal pressure which was exerted on widows of that time as she confesses, "True, of lovers and admirers and well-wishers I had no end, but I had not been to bed with any of them" (14). However, she was able to finally muster the courage to focus on her 'self' rather than on society and its norms as she now was able to "think of herself not in terms of society but in terms of her individual and autonomous self" (Gupta 7). Prof. Lekharu encouraged her as a guide to seek her own 'self' and build up her own 'identity'. She allowed herself to indulge in a relationship with Kaikos Burjor Satarawala who worked as an engineer-in-chief in the Hindustan Construction Co. Ltd. Though she was not able to reconcile with fact that she actually has transgressed the set boundaries of society as a 'woman' and 'widow' yet she tried to pacify herself with the newly found perspicacity, ". . . it was a time for some self-assessment. Self-assessment in relation to a man who offered himself at your door? Didn't my teacher encourage me to be ready for such a situation? Then why this sense of self-reproach?" (196). As a woman born and preached in a patriarchal set up, she cursed herself for such transgression but was finally able to accept the new fact of her life boldly rather than hiding it and living with a remorse. She credited her teacher Pof. Lekharu as her mentor and guru, a fatherly figure for her for providing her the moral support and new perspective of looking and celebrating the beauty of things even her body and physicality rather than living in regret and remorse, "My teacher inspired me to be neither a famous writer nor an eminent scholar, but an individual endowed with all human qualities. Nothing measures up to humanity. For my teacher, humanity alone was the prime consideration, and nothing else. (220). Thus, through the act of writing her autobiography she was able to accept her flaws, faults and pains and sorrows so that she can live a peaceful life without any regrets and complaints and would further provide an inspiration for other widows to follow their heart rather than giving up to societal pressure.

Indira Goswami has repeatedly focused in her writings both fictional and autobiography on the plights of widows especially young widows who suffer at the hands of patriarchy by being turned into 'objects' rather than individuals. In the short story entitled "the Offspring" she presents the deplorable plight of a young Brahmin widow named Damayanti who suffers from an appalling condition just because she has lost her husband. Further, she becomes the victim of social apathy and criticism as she turns herself into the institution of prostitution because she is unable to feed herself and her two young daughters. She has been compared with the mythical character of Damayanti in *Mahabharata*, a woman of strong character and known for devotion to her husband, Nala. But Damayanti of "the Offspring" has no husband to wait for and struggles day and night to keep herself and her daughters alive. Indira Goswami exposes the economic

crisis that befalls upon a woman who becomes a widow along with other difficulties. Damayanti has no source of earning to support her rather than a meager income that she gets by making sacred threads and puffed rice used for rituals of temple. However, she is removed from her duties as she is considered 'impure' and 'contaminated'. Further the tenants of her land starts dominating her as they now perceive her a 'widow' who is powerless and starts taking liberty of not giving her any share of paddy grown in her land. As such Damayanti is left with no other option but to trade her body for supporting her family. She becomes an 'object' or commodity for the use of men and her body becomes a tool to satisfy and offer pleasure to men such that even men of her father's age like Pitambar Mahajan and Krishnakanta would lustfully look at her as if she is mere flesh without any emotions of her own, "Damayanti did not reply, but bent down to squeeze out the water from the wet folds of her mekhela. Her blouse had stretched tight and was pulled up, revealing the white flesh which to the two men looked as tempting as the meat dressed and hung up on iron hooks in a butcher's shop!" (15)

However, the already difficult life of Damayanti becomes all the more harder with the entering of two men namely Pitambar Mahajan and Krishnakanta, a village priest. Pitambar Mahajan is a rich person of the village who utterly wishes to have a son so as to continue his progeny. However, he is unable to beget a son from both his wives as one of his wives died and the other one was bed-ridden with some acute illness. Pitambar finally decides to use the young widow of his village who has taken up to prostitution for begetting a son. He is in turn encouraged by the priest of the village namely, Krishnakanta who agrees to be a mediator for negotiating the bond between the two. Pitambar Mahajan thought that if she agrees to his wishes she would be able to overcome her economic crisis and in turn he would be able to get a son in reward. So he decides to visit Damayanti for negotiation. However, the double standards of the patriarchal society are clearly laid bare by Indira Goswami by the character of Pitambar Mahajan as he decides to visit Damayanti not in daylight rather at night so that no one could see him and he could be saved from defamation. Though he did not want to disclose his visiting to Damayanti to others but would muster the courage of facing the society's criticism and rebuke if she agrees to his condition. Thus, the notions of honor is exposed by Indira Goswami as a respectable man is defamed if he visits a prostitute but is ready to even marry a prostitute if he is able to get a son. Further, the same prostitute could gain position and standard in a society if she marries a man of upper class.

Damayanti patiently listens to the bargains of Pitambar Mahajan patiently and also accepts his gifts. However, she does not meekly submit to the ideology of Pitambar Mahajan and rather offers him only her body. Pitambar Mahajan thought that he would eventually convince her to marry him after she has accepted his offer initially. He also agrees to stay with her that night so as to please her and started visiting her every night so as to support her financially and also to keep other men away from her. At last, Damayanti becomes pregnant with the child of Pitambar Mahajan to which he became immensely happy. He thought that now he would finally be able to have a son so that he could die away in peace. However, his dreams are shattered when one day Krishnakanta informs that Damayanti has lost his child. He became immensely

sad by acknowledging the fact of loss of his child, however, he thought Damayanti would have met a natural miscarriage. But he was largely shocked when he came to realization of reality that Damayanti she has deliberately aborted the child. Damayanti explained him her conception that though she was forced to trade her body due to her economic crisis even to men from lower caste but she could not marry a lower caste man or carry out the progeny of a lower caste man, “I have myself induced this abortion. It did not happen of its own accord. It is enjoined upon me to earn a living even if I have to sell my body for it. But I belong to a high caste which is superior to yours. I can sleep with a man of a lower caste than mine. But I can’t marry him to give him a child” (Goswami 30). Though she has to sell her body as a trade to earn a living but at the end she reiterates back to the patriarchal norms by acquiring the right to decide about the matters of her ‘womb’ and her ‘self’. Indira Goswami at the end portrays Damayanti not a weak and docile widow character rather a strong woman who commands a right to control the matters related to her body and sexuality. She refuses to surrender to patriarchal obligations rather demands a right to choose man whom she would marry or whose progeny she wanted to increase. The control of her ‘womb’ in a sense provides her the authority to rule over her bodily affairs rather than meekly suppressing to the pressure exerted by some men who wants to control her body and sexuality according to their own needs. This sense of regaining sense of authority can be seen from the words that she shouts to Pitambar Mahajan when he tries to dig the grave of the child, “What will you get there? Yes, I have buried it! It was a boy! But he is just a lump of flesh, blood and mud! Stop it! Stop it!” (Goswami 30).

In her novel, *Nilakanthi Braja* originally written in Assamese and was later on translated into English with the title *The Blue-necked God* by Gayatri Bhattacharyya. Like many other works of Indira Goswami, the novel primarily depicts the awe-stricken pathetic condition of widows in India, especially in the God’s city, i.e., Vrindavan.

*The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (1988) is another work by Indira Goswami which is originally published in Assamese as *Dantal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah*. The novel is set in the Amranga Sattrra, in South Kamrup in Assam “just on the eve of independence” (Kashyap 44). It exposes the deeply set prejudices prevalent in Indian society which becomes the reason of subjugation of Indian women particularly caste system. Further, she provides the picture of prejudices set against upper class Brahmin women especially the sufferings of widows with the help of three characters Durga, Saru and Giribala. The three characters are portrayed as widows of upper class Gossain/Brahmin caste who respond differently to their same stance of ‘widowhood’ and as such represents the different set of ideology prevalent in different generations of widows. Indranath, the protagonist of the novel is the only son of Gossain who is heir apparent of Sattrra. He is portrayed as man of ideal and progressive thinking though “constrained by the limitations prescribed by cruel generation” (Kashyap 44). The elder one of the three widows is Durga, the aunt of Indranath who is shown as a submissive widow who decides to stick to the very norms and traditions of the society that are formed against widows. She believes that it is futile to strive against the set norms as there is no other way to survive but to meekly submit to the set bigotry against widows. The deeply biased prejudices against widows

can be shown through the practices like they are kept far away from auspicious occasions and even their shadow is avoided by other women as it is believed that it would bring bad luck. Durga continues to live in Indranath's house with the vague hope that one day her in-laws would respectfully take her back to their. She lives on with the hope of gaining *punya* by immersing the ashes of her husband in a sacred place of Puri in Orissa. She is presented as mostly "sitting beside the fire . . . with the health gradually failing her . . . her body as blackened by the smoke from the fire, her figure almost resembling a living skeleton due to losing weight over years" (Kashyap 45). The deplorable condition of Durga evokes feeling of great pity for the condition of widows in India who are left with no other option but to die a slow death. Saru is another widow who is duped by a Brahmin and is forced to lead a miserable life because of betrayal. Saru Gossain has appointed an assistant named Mahidar to look after his crops and other financially matters. However, Mahidar is portrayed as no other than a trickster who befools innocent and defenseless women like Saru in order to meet their vested interests. He is caught in the act of not only duping *baina* from the buyers of her land but also stole the jewelry of Durga due to which she is unable to immerse the ashes of her husband. The deep-rooted notion of victimhood of widows is exposed by Indira Goswami through the words of Saru Gossain to Durga, "it's our fate that we are born as women. We should learn to lead our lives with patience and tolerance" (Goswami 99). Thus, through the character of Mahidar India Goswami exposes the wolves in the form of humans who make it impossible for women especially single women and widows to survive in the world of men. The widows of Gossains thus, led a miserable life full of filth and depravity.

Another character of widowed women in the novel is Giribala who has recently lost her husband. She presents a sharp contrast to other widowed women of her society as she is portrayed as a rebel who does not submissively accept the unfavorable traditions set against widows. She does not indulge in long episodes of sobbing and mourning for her husband as is expected from a widow as she hates her husband because of his infidelity. So she does not feel sorry for his death as she remembers his harsh words, "Since we are already married...you'll have to tolerate some of my habits...I love women. I like their company" (Goswami 140). When women of neighborhood came to visit her after her arrival in her maternal home, she felt enraged by the useless melodrama that these women engage in as she came "roaring like a tigress in rage. Her hair had come undone and flew wildly. Her *gatala* had come off and her clothes were in disarray...She screamed. 'I am alive! I will live on and have a better life than all of you'. . ." (140). She is shown as an active, and fiery woman who demand freedom of free will as she "did not want to exist, just for the sake of remaining alive" (153) but fighting for one's cause rather than meekly submitting to one's fate like Durga. She was often rebuked and considered ominous by women folk of her society for transgressing the norms laid for widows as she still used *sindoor* on her forehead. She did not restrict herself to any practices that were a form of shackle on widows which is evident from the fact that she even ate mutton which is considered as a forbidden food for widows as she was fed up with her simple diet of eating plain rice and pulses with uncooked vegetables and pinch of salt, "she forgot everything...religion and rituals, wisdom

or restraint...started gulping it down in great haste... (Goswami 144). After witnessing such a transgression an upright widow like Durga fainted and Giribala was made to undergo ritualistic purification in order to remove the 'sin' she has committed, "this drama of purification and ritualistic atonement went on for quite a long time (Goswami 147). She wanted to free herself from such suffocating norms of society so much so that she was ready to break chains of society to free herself up. Indranath encouraged her to educate her self which she welcomes very dearly as it would open to her new doors, unlike other women of Gossains who were not allowed education, "Here girls from Gossain households still don't go out in public, let alone to school" (Goswami 66). The spheres of education and intelligence were considered useless traits for women as people believed, "What's the use of intelligence in a girl? It will bring nothing but blemish on the family's name. Women's education is of no (Goswami 286). Education provided a chance to Giribala to come out of the four walls of her home which was usually restricted for Gossain women. She was even allowed to assist Mark, the British Christian monk who had come to the village to transcribe ancient manuscripts of Sattrā. She was drawn towards Mark Sahib as she believed him to be soft hearted, passionate and kind. She wanted him to respond to her advances but Mark was not as strong as Giribala though he liked her very much. She at the end entered his hovel forcefully one night and proclaimed that "I will not go back to that graveyard! I don't want to be buried alive. I'd rather die" (Goswami 295). She was caught by villagers and members of her family and was asked to undergo the purification sacrament for having an illicit relationship with a man of lower caste but she preferred to end her life in the same hut which was used for her purification ritual then to submit to the pressures of the society. Though she mustered the courage to transgress the boundaries of society but was unsuccessful like other protagonists of Indira Goswami. Her suicide symbolizes her choice of freedom and liberation than to live on others terms.

Thus, Indira Goswami portrays the plight of widowhood and how it affects the life of a woman in almost all possible spheres like social, economic, political, psychological, physical, emotional spheres as well. She has written explicitly on the condition of women in India especially widows where her women characters become an easy victim of patriarchy, some even challenges the norm of patriarchy and others become a staunch rebel. However, what is a common thing among her women characters in her all works is that in spite of coming from different strata of life, meeting different challenges in life, behaving differently in different situations they still are shown as persons prone to their fate as almost all of them face an unhappy and tragic ending as they are unable to overcome the devastating circumstances of their life and becomes a victim of their own plight. Such way of dealing with her characters highlights the inclination of these characters to the real life of Indira Goswami who in spite of resisting and fighting the various odds of her own life was unable to come out as efficacious person being able to change her life circumstances much and living her life according to her whims free from any societal pressure.

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