

## Retelling of the Concept of Widowhood through the Stories of B. L. Gautam

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B. L. Gautam

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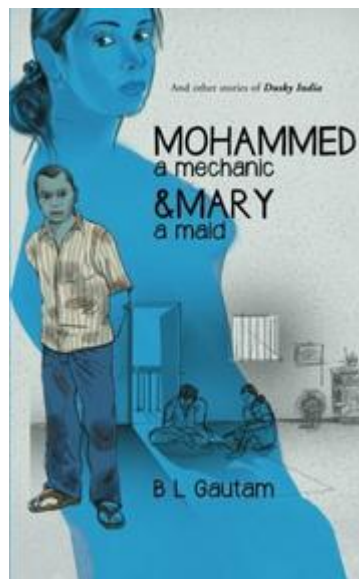
### Abstract

The present paper makes an effort to bring out the agony, pain and deep-seated desires lurking somewhere deep in the corner of their hearts. With the beginning of twentieth century and a rise in the social movements, the pleas of the widows were also taken into account. In the present paper, I have taken the short stories, “Mohammed A Mechanic and Mary A Maid” and “Easy Savitri” written by B. L. Gautam. In both the stories the women protagonists are widows and the fate they experience are somehow the result of their state of being ‘widows’. However, the stories I am dealing with are contrasting in social set-up where one is the story of modern day city the other one is dealing with the rural framework. The stories are quite metaphorical as the names of its characters are taken from mythology who were chaste and totally devoted to their husbands. Where Mary is depicted as a maid in one story and Savitri is shown as a whore. So, these women characters are shown in complete contrast to the images already existing in the psyche of the human beings. The stories are a well thought out description of the lives of these

widows in their consecutive backgrounds giving readers a peep into their psyche and their designed lives.

**Key Words:** lurking, pleas, protagonists, metaphorical.

### **Difficult Processes of Developing an Identity**



As women we have all gone through a diverse body of experiences. We have laughed and cried together on several occasions, we have grown up hoping the world would change for the better. If on one hand we have been thankful for the privileges life has accorded to us, we are equally conscious of the difficulties woman undergoes in the process of forging her identity. There is a definite bonding and empathy we share in reading, relating and interpreting women. In the course of my study, I have come across literature that is probing the many anxieties and frustrations in women's lives. It is also striving to recreate and rewrite a possibly new script of commitment and liberation, of affirmation and intervention. This paper seeks to pull those who have been pushed away from the centre by a constant politics of power and exclusion into a landscape of silence and seclusion. I am going to put my point forward with the analysis of two short stories namely, "Mohammed A Mechanic and Mary A Maid" and "Easy Savitri" written by B.L.Gautam.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 14:9 September 2014

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## **Unheard Voice in Past Literature**

The Indian situation, as far as the question of women's identity is concerned, presents a very complex picture. Woman's voice was unheard of in literature for the last few centuries but still it has not become sweeter. No one even thought about the possibility of her voice whether sweet or bitter. Irony is that women in this world lose out by being women. The social inculcation is such as to incline them towards the so-called natural vocation of women, i.e., to be a wife and a mother. Subordination or acceptance of male authority, whether of father, husband or son, is a cherished Indian value sanctified by tradition. Their choices and potentials are so often thwarted by the societies of which they are integral part. The enclosed space indicating a woman's lot in the traditional Indian set-up is in response towards the eulogized Sita/Savitri prototype or rather the ideas and beliefs provided by *Manusmriti*. As Anees Jung opines, "I had not known then that silence could be a language through which women in this land realized themselves, I owe that legacy to my mother, a legacy which I am just beginning to unravel and understand." (Jung, 1987:20)

## **A Product of Man's Need**

The traditional woman in Hindu culture was the product of man's need/requirement. Woman in any position or state of mind is potentially dangerous to man, hence a man has to be both wary of her and control her. It is this outlook, which dominates the traditional Indian male attitude even today. However, this kind of orthodox attitude was alien to the Vedic period. The respect she enjoyed during that time is incomparable to the present day. She was seen as the 'Divine Shakti' in *Kena Upanishad*. In the period of the *Smritis*, which followed the Vedic age, *Manusmriti* was written by Manu, the lawgiver of Hinduism. Manu's philosophy was:

During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth, on her husband; her husband being dead, upon her sons, if she has no sons, upon the near kinsmen of her husband; in default, upon those of her father, if she has no parental kinsmen, upon the sovereign, a woman must never govern herself as she likes.

## **Relative Existence**

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Thus, she was denied the right of free existence. She, in order to appropriate her existence has to be in a relation with man whether it is as a wife or as a mother. Her existence is relative, and relational only with man. Even in present scenario, a woman is viewed only in terms of her relation to her husband, her children, her in-laws, her family, etc. Why she just cannot be herself having an independent identity of herself? Why she needs a relation to define herself? Why she is denied the opportunity of exploring her individuality on her own terms? And above all, Why she just can't be a normal human being? Why so many questions creep in only because of her being a woman? These are the questions which are lurking in every woman's heart since her birth which are rarely being answered and are ignored for their worthlessness by the patriarchal lot.

Where tradition is still the style  
This style when takes a shape  
When shape comes forth in color and candour  
It is the sentimental  
Indian Wife.

### **The Role and Stability of the Family**

The survival of Indian Civilization depends on the stability of the family. The backbone of the matrimonial harmony includes the patient endurance, love, submissiveness and the forgive and forget policy of the wife. The Woman as wife plays an important role in upholding her position as wife and mother. The classical Hindu wife has to confirm to the concept embodied in the famous Sloka *Grahini, Sachivah, Sakhi, Mithah Priya-Shishyalalite Kala Vidhu* meaning that as a wife, woman has multiple roles to play. She has to be a counsellor, the playmate to the partner.

Karyeshu Mantri, Karaneshu Daasi  
Rupecha Lakshmi, Kshamayaa Dharitri  
Bhojyeshu Mata, Shayentu Rambha  
Shat Karma Yukta, Kula Dharma Patni. (Achary: 351)

(A woman should serve her husband as minister while counseling, by her looks she should be as Goddess Lakshmi, like the earth in forbearance, as a Mother like feeding and in bed, she must be like the celestial beauty).

## **Wife**

The nature of Indian wife is such that she readily accepts life with all its vagaries. The matrimonial ties, however cherishable and strong, are always in the danger of dissolution under the annihilating blows of various forces. As a wife and mother, service, sacrifice, submissiveness and tolerance are her required attributes. Excessive endurance and series of adjustments she makes in her life faithfully and obediently are her admired qualities. In the words of Mary Ann Fergusson, "...in every age woman has been seen primarily as mother, wife, Mistress and as sex object in their roles in relationship to man" (4-5). As a woman grows, she is inculcated with the ideas of self-abnegation, of pride in patience, of the need to accept a lower status through the mythical modes of Sita, Savitri, and Gandhari.

In scripture, in law, in sacred ordinances, in popular usage, a wife is declared by the wise to be half the body of her husband, equally sharing the fruit of pure and impure acts; of him whose wife is not deceased, half the body survives; how should another take the property while half the body of the owner lives (The law according to the Dayabhaga School c.1200 A.D.). If a woman is seen purely in relation to her husband then, what could be the status of those who have lost their husbands? They are victimized for being a woman which deepens further for being a widow. The paradox is that the women themselves are held responsible for the death of their husbands as, "the dayan had eaten up her own suhag" (Easy Savitri).

## **Widowhood**

Widows are regarded as outcasts and denied access to socio-cultural life of their own family/community. Question of widowhood is linked with the issue of women's subordination and their struggle for empowerment within the patriarchy. A close look at some of the widows in the writings of Tagore, Raja Rao and Anita Desai deals with the problems of adjustment and belonging. Restraint, control and abstention are looked at as crucial to a widow's life.

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Keeping in view the patriarchal obsession with woman's "purity," it is not surprising that much of nineteenth century novels in India focused on this theme. Discrimination suffered by the disadvantaged will be my aim to show in this article. It brings out women's agonizing tales of repression and rebellion. I will try to look at the conflicts and contradictions, the anxiety and absences that determine the predicament of Indian widows.

Widows had no rights and their lives were determined by "Prescriptions, Injunctions and Laws" to regulate social behavior. They were made to follow a specific code of conduct to restrain them from erratic, impulsive and immoral desires. And if they do not follow this, they are taken to be immoral and unwomanly.

### **Mary the Maid**

In the story "Mohammed A Mechanic and Mary A Maid," Mary, the maid to Negis is the central character and the entire story revolves around her. She is just twenty three years old and has lost her husband who was a drunkard. But life has never stopped for anyone and it is on a role every time. She is poor and in order to feed herself and her family she restarts her profession of a maid now at Negis, the typical Sahabs of upper class bureaucracy in Mumbai. Physically, she was very attractive and seems that the death of her husband had not impacted her beauty. She soon became the topic of everybody's discussion especially at Mohan Batteries, the hotspot of that area and everybody wanted to have her only as a mistress not as a wife. Rajesh Bajaj, owner of Mohan Batteries has a dig on Mr. Negi that, "Negi must be visiting heaven at least once a day then." Soon Mary became a part of Negis household as she was pleasant, smart and pretty good at her work. Mrs. Negi, popularly known as Tara Madam, a senior officer of Sales Tax under the State Government of Maharashtra and posted in Nasik. She visited her husband only at weekends and their only son, Rohit was in hostel. Mary had her age and her looks at her favor which made her Mr. Negi's favorite. She was the apple-candy of every male person in the colony, which everyone wanted to consume. She was 'objectified' as 'sexy doll' with which they all wanted to play. She is described animatedly by Bajaj as, "Look at the breasts, tight and shapely. You think of her hips and you will have erection. When she passes from here, all eyes escort her till the

colony's gate. This lame locksmith too, the bastard keeps rotating the key in the hole for nothing; you can see a blue film in his eyes.”

She is a maid, poor, a woman, and a widow, so, she is dehumanized into a commodity by the patriarchal society. She is seen available to them with no choices and desires of her own.

Mary knowing her limitations never tried to answer their lusty looks and always ignored them. She was trying to trespass the boundaries imposed upon her by the system, she didn't want to suppress her desires and wishes. However, she was aware that her relation with Mr. Negi was transient and had no future, but was enjoying it as much as she could.

She was a normal girl and had the same desires, aspirations and dreams as any other girl of her age would have. She had found a companion in Mr. Negi who could satisfy her physical desires and also made her feel like a wife. She was missing the wifely role in her life after the untimely death of her husband. “She often hurled those wife-type angry looks if Negi crossed three pegs or if he didn't turn down his friends' proposal for dinner at some oft-mentioned restaurant, or sometimes for his over-indulgence into those man-man jokes,” Bajaj never missed to observe these stances between them. Mr. Negi was having what he wanted and Mary got another chance to play her role as a 'wife,' which she wanted to do and also got to wear the clothes of Mrs. Negi. In the absence of Mrs. Negi, she enjoyed herself as Mrs. Negi and gave commands accordingly.

### **Mohammad the Mechanic**

Mohammad, the mechanic at Mohan Batteries was very much like the others at the place. He was completely occupied with himself. He is, “oblivious of his surroundings. But no, Mohammed has been a teetotaler all through his life. He eats also very less. Necessity quietly and slowly becomes habit. He is fond of nothing.” Like Mary he was also very poor but unlike her, he never tried to control his limits. He had lost all sense of change and had accepted his state as his fate. He was an orphan and showed no sign of emotions towards his fellows throughout the story.

Only with Mary, we see him come out of his cold and controlled behavior. He detested Mary's commands as it hurt his self-respect. He never tried to go near her and always tried to have a control over himself, but when Mary's pregnancy is revealed to Mrs. Negi, he starts living with her and she also starts bringing food to him as a wife does. So, Mary as the name is suggestive of 'Virgin Mary' who stayed a virgin even after giving birth to 'Jesus Christ' (according to Catholics' belief), was completely in contrast to her. She has depicted the modern day state of a widow who is dehumanized and commoditized as an "object." She has the normal human emotions, desires, feelings, longings and dreams as others have, but her being a widow makes all her desires immoral and are deemed disgraceful to her. She is supposed to be bereft of basic human emotions and sensibilities.

### **Easy Savitri**

Likewise, in another story entitled, "Easy Savitri", set in rural India, we are shown the predicament of Savitri, the protagonist and the disgrace she suffered for being a widow. Her husband Prabhati was a lanky young man and an asthma patient. On the wedding night, when Savitri took the lead, she was kicked off and called a 'whore' by him. From then onwards, the word 'whore' got attached to her and never left her. Soon she became a 'game' for him; she was dehumanized as an animal. When she was beaten up by Prabhati during her pregnancy, he avoided hitting her on the stomach. "It reminded Savitri of her mother's advice, "Aye chhori, be careful, don't lash the buffalo now. And not at all on the belly. She is carrying now. Her signs are as a female calf this time; one more buffalo in next three years, God willing." She suffered silently without ever questioning his authority; she would hush her inner bird every time it came to squeak. One winter night, he suffered an asthma attack and died, for which Savitri was held responsible. She and her daughter were treated as sinful creatures who brought disgrace to their family. When her husband died, he left huge debts on the family and Savitri being the head of the household had to pay for that. She recalled the train journey and felt the same for herself at this decisive moment, "A new world comes to you at a fast speed and goes past without staying for a moment. Watch it, feel it. Good , bad or ugly. But quickly."

She knew mathematics well and readily accepted that only working as a labor cannot sort out her monetary problems. So she used her body to earn money for her family and to pay back

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the debts and to have her land back from Gurdaram. The word “whore” attached to her by her husband was now given to her by the society also. She is a widow but she broke the restrictions imposed upon her by society. In fact the journalist who is writing her story also did the same to her daughter, Pankhuri. He made her pregnant and then left her but Savitri got her quickly married off, to save her daughter face the fate which she had undergone. In order to survive and earn money, she suppressed the voice of her conscience and did that which she felt was appropriate. She made money out of her body which is a commodity for the persons consuming it. She is looked down upon for her characterless immoral behavior.

Hence whether it is a city, a village, a rich society or a common society, the condition of widows is the same. They are victimized and made to suffer for their loneliness. They are mistreated and are taken as ‘things’ which are on display. The predicament of women is the same in the Indian society, where they are deprived of essential human emotions and desires and are marginalized for being ‘widows.’ Deepa Mehta’s “Water” takes up this issue as a significant challenge and seeks to highlight the vituperative measures adopted by orthodox Hindu Brahmins to suppress and segregate women from the mainstream. Any attempt to walk out is treated with disdain. As a critique of social reality, it brings out tales of women’s agonies of repression and rebuke and their undying spirit to come out of the stereotypical images and to celebrate the liveliness of life.

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