



**A STUDY ON SELFHOOD AND REFORMED WIDOW IN PARVATIBAI ATHAVALE'S HINDU  
WIDOW: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY THROUGHOUT THE NATIONALIST PERIOD**

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**ABSTRACT**

the nineteenth-century gender reconstitution reshaped the figure of the companionate and educated wife. Simultaneously, in order to grapple with the charges of inhumanity levelled against Hindu orthodoxy by colonial and missionary rhetoric of the time, nationalist gender discourse reimaged the reverse of the faithful wife – the chaste widow. Many attempts have been made to explain and also to explain away the upper-caste widow's plight. Her predicament is sometimes related to a male terror of the lustful wife, who may simply poison her husband in order to get rid of him. Manu is convinced of the fickle character of women who despise their husbands and are willing to give themselves to even the most obnoxious of men. As a result, the miserable state of widowhood is considered as a deterrent to possible husband-killing. The full control and tyranny exercised over the wife under the pretence of pativrata dharma is also perceived as instilling in men a fear of retaliation that women faced when forced to follow strict wifhood regulations. The most severe punishments are kept as a deterrence for upper-caste women in the symbol of the abhorred widow. According to Judith Butler, the boundary of the subject's domain and claim to autonomy and existence is established by first constructing a dreaded "zone of uninhabitability" for "abject" and excluded beings. This can easily be applied to the widow of the upper caste. Widowhood is best understood in the context of the Shastras' numerous prescriptions and proscriptions. "Just as a snake-charmer forcibly takes a snake out of a hole, so a chaste wife snatches away her husband's life from the messengers of death and ascends to heaven with her spouse," it is said. The chastity, constancy, and devotion of the pativrata are vested in the husband's lifespan, according to a study of Hindu women's vratas and festivals, as well as an analysis of Maharashtrian women's folk tales and oral culture. Dr. Jayant Athavale points out that newlywed girls observe Mangalagouri on every Tuesday in the month of Shravan for the first five to seven years after marriage in order to ensure the husband's long life. The ritual feeding of a married woman, as well as the exchange of kumkum, glass bangles, mirror, and comb, demonstrates married women's fear of widowhood, as they are ideologically saddled with the onus of averting the husband's death.

**KEY WORDS: Widows, Autobiography, Selfhood, Reformed, Tricky and Twisted**



## **INTRODUCTION**

The 'autobiographical contract' between a 'real' writer and the reader, notes Philip Lejeune, is based on trust and is anchored in an implicit agreement between the two parties concerning the authenticity of the autobiography. "Retrospective prose narrative produced by a genuine person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in especially the story of his personality," Lejeune defines an autobiography. According to Roy Pascal, the autobiographer's relationship to himself and other people should be more true - "the truth of belief, the truth of his outlook, and the reality of his facts." Other genre critics, like as Georges Gusdorf, reject any simple definition of 'real' selfhood because one's level of consciousness changes through time and is influenced by introspection, all of which have an impact on the present. Furthermore, no autobiography can ever be comparable to life in all of its rich and teeming diversity, rendering any straightforward and appropriate description of existence impossible. Selfhood is constantly viewed via the lens of the cultural ideas that define it, and so contains a huge array of crisscrossing identities that may never be entirely available to an autobiographer on a conscious level.

At another level, the seemingly innocent 'life-writing' is frequently a ruse in which the artist/writer selects her personal material and excludes others in a highly political decision to shape it towards a desired objective, as in post-fact rationalisations and posturing. Memory, notes Arthur Melville Clarke, is "tricky and twisted," and it plays a crucial role in writing one's self in retrospect, because it selectively 'smothers the unpleasant' in some cases and gives it "an exaggerated prominence" in others. This arranging of the raw material, which is collected from chaotic, perplexing, and often arbitrary life-instances, gives 'life-writing' structure and aids in imposing a pattern or 'design' on the autobiographical text. According to Gusdorf, it is this dramatic and selective recall of the past that renders concerns of truth and falsehood irrelevant and confers literary creativity, beauty, and harmony on the genre. Much has been written about autobiographies' 'fictive' character, but they are nonetheless regarded to transmit an artistic and literary reality, albeit one that differs from the truth, whatever that means. Autobiography, according to James Olney, is a "monument of the self as it is developing, a metaphor of the self at the summation moment of composition" in his earlier book *The Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. A reading of the self as metaphor,



according to Ranjana Dwivedi, helps to reveal the truth in a "artistic, imaginative way" that is "more universal than personal, more meaningful than the factual." Doris Sommer, on the other hand, takes up the idea of autobiography as metaphor and applies it to her argument that self-written works, particularly those that are testimonial in form, are metonymical rather than metaphorical. This is the case when they use relationality and acknowledgement of difference to extend the 'I' to encompass the collectivity of the community rather than a metaphorical substitution of the lone self with the collective identity of a group.

## **WIDOWS**

Widows were accused of "eating up" their husbands and were frequently treated as ogresses. Ironically, and without a hint of irony, this claim, as shown in Shevantibai Nikambe's novel Ratanbai, might be made by senior widows such as Kakubai, who are also the targets of collective revulsion as accursed husband-eaters. Maharashtra's folklore is rife with the figure of the pativrata, who, through her piety and exemplary living, prevents widowhood. The pious lady scorned by her husband is empowered to save his life while on a cruise by magically saving the sinking ship in "The Unwanted Wife." A mother who is a devotee of the deity Gowri deflects the power of a girl's curse that her daughter will become a child widow in "The Story of Mangala Gouri." As a result, the woman's failure to maintain this auspicious state of maangalya bhagya through the power of the pativrata is considered as an indictment of the wife, who now becomes accountable for the husband's death. To use an improper Christian term, this cardinal sin must be punished with the most deplorable of social roles — that of the upper-caste widow, doomed to death as a sati or death-in-life, stripped of all social respectability. Actual and imagined imbalances in familial and socio-religious hierarchy were sought to be addressed by wishing widowhood (rather than death) on the lady seen a threat. For example, Vidyut Bhagwat delves into Eknath's song about a woman's irritated and somewhat amusing request to Goddess Amba to make her annoying sister-in-law a widow.

All of this is compounded by the concept that earlier sins or bad Karma in former lives have resulted in widowhood in this one. This life must therefore be patiently endured in order to secure a



better deal in the next. Religious expediency takes advantage of this sense of shame for past transgressions and uses it to shift attention away from the present. It also contains the widow's sexual capacity to upend social conventions by causing her to agonise over her previous'sinful' existence and then set her hopes on the future. When it comes to the widow's sexuality, Charu Gupta writes, "What was most precious to the husband during his lifetime became an enormous threat to his community after his death." The widow was both an offer and a menace outside the safety of the chaste female's household status. As a result, ascetic widowhood remained the greatest model. In a primarily western perspective, Luce Irigaray wonders how a patriarchy that views women as a "commodity" or a "thing of transaction" for male pleasure can support a woman's numerous sites of sexual pleasure.

The upper-caste lady, on the other hand, whose basic existence was defined solely by her devotion to her husband, could never risk sexual initiative for her own sake. Outside of the role of the obedient and sexually accommodating wife, whose primary purpose was to enable pleasure for the husband, a good wife had very little sexual autonomy. Such a wife is known as 'padmini,' or the woman who, despite sexually seducing her husband, was also viewed as chaste because she was just fulfilling her dharma as a perfect wife by doing so. The widow had to atone for her'sin' and restrain her delegitimized libido via hard and regulated austerities, penance, prayers, fasting, and abstinence after the death of her husband/god. When considering the perceived repression of sexuality in the nineteenth century, Foucault correctly observes that power places sex in a binary system, in which the licit is viewed in connection to the illegal. The laws of prohibition, which are used by power over sex according to Foucault, can be understood in the context of the widow for whom sex was forbidden, at least in theory, because the female body now had access to innumerable ways of sexual pleasure dissociated from the sanitised regulation of sex in marriage. The widow, according to Manu, should eat only flowers, roots, and fruits and should never speak the name of a stranger male. She had to be patient until she died, keep her vows, be celibate, and be pure. The Vrddha-Harita is very explicit about how austerities can be used to suppress the widow's sexuality:



**She should stop adorning her hair, chewing betel nut, wearing perfumes, flowers, ornaments, and dyed clothes, eating from a bronze vessel, eating two meals a day, and applying collyrium to her eyes; she should wear a white garment, control her senses and anger, avoid deception and tricks, be free of laziness and sleep, be pure and of good conduct, always worship Hari, and sleep on the ground at night on a kusa kus**

Such a long list was designed to dampen the widow's spirits to the point where she wouldn't be able to engage in sexual activity even if she wanted to. The strict control of the high caste widow's mind and body, as well as her exile to a marginal existence, exemplified Brahmin caste exclusivity. During the Peshwai, the State was brutal in enforcing gender standards in order to protect upper-caste dharma. According to Uma Chakravarti, the last Peshwa, who was considered a debaucher since he married eleven times, including one while on the point of death, saw no conflict in carrying out his 'obligation' of upholding Brahmanya by imprisoning a widow for committing 'adultery.'

A survey of literature and discursive writing, particularly by women, is a real gold mine of the widow figure. In expressing the liminality of widows in Brahminical culture, the literary and discursive writing of the time chosen for this study demonstrates a remarkable sensitivity. Rakhmabai, who identified herself as a "Hindu Lady" in a letter to The Times of India, accuses Shastric law of turning the widow into a "social leprosy," "unbeloved of God and loathed of man - a social pariah and home drudge." 68 Even if the widow herself was an afflicted creature to be shunned like the plague, she was astute enough to recognise the pecuniary exploitation of the widow's labour. She is astounded by the barbaric manner in which a six-year-old child can be treated as harshly as a sixty-year-old widow with no exceptions. Because of her position within the Sutar caste, Rakhmabai could be able to stand outside patriarchal Brahmin discourse and challenge it. Tarabai Shinde, a member of the Maratha caste, found it simpler to wage a ferocious attack against Brahmin males. She slammed masculine hypocrisy and double standards in regards to widowhood, as well as the social stigmatisation of a widow Vijaylakshmi for infanticide. She rants that widows had a better right to life than widowers because they had to fend for their children, in a blistering attack on the blatant privileging of widowers over the helpless widows. Those males who recommended Sati for the widow, on the other hand, should be burned at the stake with their wives.



She is enraged and asks why men should be permitted to live and marry after their wives have died. "Why do you want to survive your wives?" she writes. To knead cow dung and form cakes out of it for your own cremation?" Cornelia Sorabjee's description of a widow who fought tooth and nail to wrest possession of her land from the paternalistic British government, which claimed that widows following purdah were helpless and had to be brought under the Court of Wards, is another example of feminist consciousness. "In my perspective, I could not do worse with bandaged eyes and hobbled feet than you do with your eyes open and limbs unbound," the spunky and independent widow retorts, dismissing the patronising offer to manage her affairs. Sorabjee's Parsi-Christian identification enabled her confront the stock figure of the sly Brahmin priest because she was outside the retributive scope of upper caste males. Padma Anagol has traced the emergence of a feminist movement for material rights in the way that numerous widows disregarded native patriarchal limits by maximising the colonial legal system to their own benefit. They also demonstrated against the colonial government's discriminatory and condescending policies. Most of the women who wrote during this time did not share the male reformers' concerns about widow remarriage, preferring to consider widows as more independent women who could learn skills to support themselves.

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POETRY ABOUT WIDOWHOOD**

In an autobiographical poetry about her widowhood and the torture of being defeminized, Bahinabai Chaudhari demonstrates her grit and courage in preparing to face life in the new unsavoury attire of widowhood. Her spirit will not be stifled by the removal of her marital signs. "The vermilion mark/ is wiped off my forehead; / just the tattoo remains/ to welcome fate/ The bangles are broken,/ but the wrists can still/ grapple with fate," she writes after she's out of tears. 72 Two anonymous pieces - a speech and a newspaper article – that appeared as appendices to Baba Padmanji's novel *Yamuna Paryatan*, a tale on widowhood, make a scathing attack on Brahmin social and religious orthodoxy. The speech on widows' situation condemns parents for marrying off tiny girls to widowers in their fifties. The author advocated for an end to this practise and for widows to be encouraged to remarry.



Uma Chakravarti's research of writings written by widows in the Poona Home, such as Radha Inamdar, demonstrates how personal "experience" of widowhood provides an insight distinct from male reformers' "knowledge" and the masculine fixation with channelling widows' suppressed libido. She compares tonsuring of the head to rape and claims that the widows found it repulsive and disgusting. The feeling of being constantly policed by family members for deviations from chastity norms, drudge labour, awareness of being marked off from other women in the house through attire and appearance, seduction of widows by rapacious men within the family, and being coerced into self-deprivation were among the woes of these widows.

Pandita Ramabai, on the other hand, provides the most comprehensive explanation of widows' material and ideological oppression, blaming Hindu religion and upper caste patriarchal norms for Brahmin widows' plight. Her extensive understanding of the Vedas, as well as the scriptures' gendered, casteist slant, made her acutely aware of the structural ways in which widows were oppressed among the upper castes.

As a result, Ramabai was aware of the various levels of widow suffering, with the most abject captivity reserved for the last category stated above. Pandita Ramabai was also astute enough to link the plight of the child widow to societal double standards that allowed elderly widowers, particularly among kulin Brahmins, to marry young girls without social consequences, leaving them widowed shortly after. Ramabai launches a scathing attack on avaricious Brahmin priests who "devour widows' households," encourage poor ignorant widows to leave their homes through emissaries, and then "rent them out to wicked men" after stripping them of their valuables and enticing them to surrender to their "unholy desires." The fact that she was a Christian convert put her outside the grasp of priests who could have otherwise ostracised her may have given her the courage to take on the orthodox Hindus once more. She could also use her liminal position to inspire widows to reclaim their true place of dignity, selfhood, and self-worth in society because she was the widow of a Sudra and had no other kin who could be exposed to Brahmin orthodoxy's excommunicating ploys.



Parvatibai was born in the Konkan village of Devrukh around 1870. According to Rev. Justin Abbot, her father was recognised for his piety, and her mother for her efficiency. She, like the other girls of her time, received no schooling because it was deemed unlucky for a girl to study. Parvatibai became a widow early in life, complete with tonsured head and widow's garb. She was responsible for her son's upbringing. She began working at the Widows' Home in Hingane, a Poona suburb, at the age of twenty-six, founded by her brother-in-law, Professor Dhondo Keshav Karve, an acclaimed social reformer of the period. She also aspired to gather knowledge that would assist her in her work for the Home. In order to gather finances for the Home, she travelled to several locations and gave public lectures. She made the somewhat courageous personal decision not to shave her head in 1912, and faced the wrath of a traditional society.

She then embarked on a perilous journey to America in order to study English and learn about their educational practises, which she hoped would be useful in India. She worked as a housemaid and tried to learn English at close range because she had no money and no one to rely on. She subsequently went on to work as a dishwasher in a hospital, when she had a health crisis. After working in a variety of venues, she was given the opportunity to speak to women at the Hotel Astoria and prestigious Women's Clubs, advocating for India's women. She also paid short visits to London and Paris before returning to India. In her memoirs, she also expresses her thoughts on a number of women's issues that were hotly disputed at the time.

Parvatibai Athavale, like other Indian women autobiographers, did not wait for the genre to be "domesticated" by men and "local forms to be formed," as Meenakshi Mukherjee puts it. The refinement that a university degree confers on male writers is lacking in Parvatibai's memoirs. Parvatibai, on the other hand, and other women who used the autobiographical genre "did not self-consciously think of their endeavours as literary projects." Apart from her stated desire to enlist the help of other widows in the cause of the nation's regeneration, Parvatibai wrote in order to engage in a dialogue with readers, as Jasbir Jain would put it in relation to women writers. Meera Kosambi writes that she "rarely occupies a subject stance" and, like other female autobiographers, has "poor self-worth" because autobiographies are "normatively designed to be instrumental." 80 Using the pen to create a selfhood, despite assertions of good and unselfish motivations, is an act of rebellion



and self-assertion in and of itself. It's also laden with the dangers of writing politics for an upper-caste widow. Before the two can be reintegrated in the text, it requires an initial alienation of the self - a "fracturing of the collective identity in order to write the 'I' into prominence." Though self-effacement appears to set the tone of the work as an endorsement of self-erasure as a widow's norm, a close reading of *Hindu Widow*:

An autobiography reveals a self-discovery journey that largely excludes others. The autobiography never devotes a significant amount of time to either the husband or the son, or to anyone else for that matter. Her quest, her never-ending efforts, are the subjects of her writings, which are tastefully interspersed with her advice to other women for emphasis. Parvatibai refuses to wallow in emotional situations, contrary to what is typically expected of women's autobiography in a conflation of gender and genre. In the absence of any depiction of nature, the tale is nearly stark. In that respect, the autobiography is unfeminine, yet perfectly in line with a Brahmin widow's expectations. However, beneath the act of self-abnegation, a subtext emerges that, like a "palimpsest," discloses underlying illicit experiences and an obsession with personal development. This demonstrates the "dissimilarity between identity and discourse," as Porter Abbot calls it, in the "performative" act of writing the self. Various aspects of her selfhood are woven into the narrative – the naive and hardworking girl-child, the hesitant child-bride, the unassuming wife who is silent about her husband, the grief-stricken widowed mother, the earnest would-be-social-reformer, the diligent student, the sincere maid, and many others.

A detailed examination of Parvatibai Athavale's autobiography exposes her personal experience of widowhood, as well as the manner in which this awareness is both a "schooling" in the male reform agenda's "humanist language" and a departure from it. It depicts her own goals to overcome the constraints of widowhood, as well as the tactics she employed in the growth of personhood and the formation of selfhood in a culture that frowned on any individualistic statement of self. While her critique of Brahminic patriarchy sheds light on her observations of other widows' lives, it also reveals significant gaps and silences in her construction of widowhood.



Because widowhood is the flipside of marriage, understanding Parvatibai's experience of marriage is critical to understanding the influence of widowhood on her consciousness. Her mother's concern is revealed in the autobiography, as she tries to marry off the overgrown eleven-year-old Parvatibai to whoever will accept her, despite the fact that they had broken social traditions by not marrying her much sooner. The way neighbours tease the mother about her unmarried daughter's sexuality is represented in the way they tease her: "What a big girl she is, and she's not married!" (Hindu Widow: An Autobiography, 8 – emphasis added; when in parenthesis, the text is abbreviated as HW). This widespread social concern over female sexuality's potential power is centred on the threat to patriliney and caste purity, and it is reflected in literature by the widespread idea that an unmarried girl would soon devote herself to anyone she desired. Thus, Parvatibai's father happily accepts an arrangement with a lame man earning a meagre fifteen rupees per month in the Customs Office, with no kin to call his own, as a godsend. Furthermore, her opinion and agreement regarding her marriage to a lame guy is certainly never sought, because such a concept would never occur to the bride's desperate parents, who are terrified of being tormented in hell if they fail to marry her before menstruation. "I was not satisfied with the marriage arrangements at all, but I said nothing," she adds (HW, 11). The girl's socialisation as a non-person does not alleviate her anger of the unequal union. Despite her best efforts to avoid becoming a burden to her mother, Parvatibai could not bring herself to enjoy the wedding's music, food, and other festivities.

## **CONCLUSION**

In her autobiography, Parvatibai not only discusses her personal deformities, but also the condition of other widows. The author, who had opened the book on an apologetic note, now claims that her experience as a woman, a widow, and a social worker qualified her to truly share her perspectives with others who would benefit from her words of wisdom. "I have firsthand experience of the degradation associated with the practises to which widows are subjected," she claims. "What must be the state of a child-mind widow's as she sees around her what she cannot enjoy," she asks again, referring to the tonsuring of widows' heads. No one who hasn't been a widow in her youth can comprehend it... It is not enough to conduct occasional Social Conferences in large cities to eradicate this scourge" (HW, 49-50). Her comments, when referring to social reformers' intellectual



zeal, imply that male social reformers could never completely understand the colonisation of a woman's body at the hands of dehumanising rituals designed to discipline and control her. She resents their capture of a space that should have been reserved for women, and she criticises other male social reformers for never putting their words into practise. Her public service in support of the Widows' House refutes Partha Chatterjee's claim that women's agency could only be found within the confines of the home, as evidenced by their autobiographies. As a result, she criticises male reformers for organising inane conferences without genuinely addressing widows' problems. More importantly, she is able to pinpoint the causes for the widow's unwillingness to take control of her own body. "Is being foisted on helpless, ignorant, and utterly dependent widows" under the guise of renunciation of the world, she writes (HW, 49 - emphasis added). She is astute enough to recognise that widows' apparent passivity and complicity in their own defeminisation is a result of the material compulsions that bind a weak widow to the ideology of normal widowhood.

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