

## CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER BASED NOTIONS OF WIDOWHOOD IN SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE

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This study aims to discuss the status of widow in comparison to the status of a widower, specifically about their right to re-marry, as portrayed in literature as a cultural reference and the Qur'ān as a religious framework. As cultural reference the novel *The Story of a Widow* by Musharraf Ali Farooqi<sup>1</sup> and the short story *The Eternal Vine* by Ismat Chughtai<sup>2</sup> have been selected for the study respectively. The novel and the short story take into account the presumed status of the widows and widowers in South Asian society. For the purpose of this study, comparative analysis of the novel and the short story under discussion is done using the comparative model proposed by Tilly<sup>3</sup> in integration with the comparative model proposed by Walk<sup>4</sup>. The article uses the Theory of Intersectionality proposed by Crenshaw<sup>5</sup> as the reference theoretical framework. The aim is to see how the male category is portrayed as the privileged one having a right to remarry even at an old age to a young girl while the female category is portrayed as the submissive category having no right to remarry at all. The evidence from the texts is studied in the light of Qur'ānic verses about widows as reference from the category of religion.

**Keywords:** Widowhood, South Asian Literature, Ismat Chughtai, Musharraf Farooqi, *The Eternal Vine*, *The Story of a Widow*.

The present research paper aims to discuss the status of widow in comparison to the status of a widower, specifically about their right to

remarry, as portrayed in literature as a cultural reference and the Qur'ān as a religious framework. It also aims to bring to light the multiple categories of difference that intersect to form oppression and a source of manipulation for the widows in South Asian society. For this purpose, the novel *The Story of a Widow* by Musharraf Ali Farooqi and the short story *The Eternal Vine* by Ismat Chughtai are analyzed. As literature is a reflection of society, it is assumed that the behaviors shown in literature are practiced in the society. It is also aimed to focus that the categories of gender, literature, and culture intersect together to act as a source of oppression for the widows while religion actually liberates them specifically with respect to remarriage.

The frame of reference for the comparison between the selected novel and the short story is the cultural and religious notions of widowhood as portrayed in literature for a female in contrast to a male in South Asian society. For cultural category the selected literature serves as the reference of comparison and for religious category the reference from Qur'ān serves as the framework for the comparison to explore the gender based rights of widows/widowers. The rationale of comparison is the issue of unequal attitude/behaviour of society towards widows and widowers essentially the privileged status enjoyed by the widowers and the submissive status of widows in contrast to it. The organizational scheme of comparison selected for this research is text-by-text to avoid repeated alteration between the two texts.

Musharraf Ali Farooqi is a renowned Pakistani-Canadian writer, novelist, translator, storyteller, folklorist and essayist, born in Hyderabad, Pakistan in 1968. *The Story of a Widow* is the narrative of a lady in her early fifties, Mona, who has recently gone through the trauma of death of her husband. She has grown-up and married daughters, Amber and Tanya, happily living in their houses. After the death of her husband, Akbar Ahmad, she lives in her house all alone, resuming her childhood hobby, gardening, to which she couldn't give any time during the thirty years of her marriage, due to her tough schedule in serving her husband with his needs. This is how she plans to live the rest of her life. However, a revolutionary turn comes in her life with the arrival of a tenant Salamat Ali in her neighborhood, at the house of Mrs. Baig, her very nice friend. Salamat Ali himself has lost his wife a few years ago and has no children. The major turn comes when he sends Mona a marriage proposal, upon which, she has to face bitter attitude by her own daughters and all family on her decision to re-marry. In contrast to it, the widower in the

story, Salamat Ali, being a male, faces no difficulty at all by anyone upon his decision to re-marry.

The writer of the short story Ismat Chughtai is a sub-continent/ Indian writer of Urdu language. She is well known for her story *The Quilt* which appeared in a Lahore-based literary journal. She was among the pioneering Muslim women to attain the degree of bachelors in art as well as in education, and has written many short stories, most of which have been translated into English. *The Eternal Vine* is the narrative of marriage of a girl in her teens to a widower in his fifties. Uncle Shujaat, the antagonist of the story has recently lost his first wife, and his sisters are in search of a 'young' girl to marry. Kaneez Fatima, a young widow is considered for it but she is not allowed to re-marry by her mother-in-law. Finally, a girl named Rukhsana is selected for marriage to Uncle Shujaat. Rukhsana, the protagonist is a teenage girl of the age enough to be Uncle Shujaat's daughter. Happily married, Uncle Shujaat becomes intoxicated with the beauty of his wife. With the passage of time, however, he starts to doubt her loyalty to him, accusing her of adultery. In the end of the story, Uncle Shujaat dies due to excessive use of chemical products to keep him young.

### **Thesis Statement**

*The Story of a Widow* by Musharraf Ali Farooqi is a novel that probes deep into the status of a widow in a society, and the questions raised by her family about her right to re-marry, though she has this right given to her by her religion. In contrast to it, the widower in the story, Salamat Ali, being a male, faces no difficulty at all by anyone upon his decision to re-marry. Similarly, *The Eternal Vine* depicts the privileged status of a widower in a society, as Uncle Shujaat faces no hindrance, rather is supported by his family in his decision to re-marry. In contrast, the young widow Kaneez Fatima is not allowed to re-marry by her in-laws, though she too has this right by her religion. The purpose of this research is to explore, with the help of comparative study, gender inequality resulting in oppression for females, in South Asian society. This oppression for widows is due to cultural behavioral norms attached with the female category of a patriarchal society. Thus, the intersection of categories of religion, gender, literature and culture create coercion for the widows, which is important to highlight in the field of research. The problem of gender injustice for widows in comparison to widowers as portrayed and

propagated through literature, though a serious issue, has rarely been researched earlier in literature. For this reason, the present research will open further arena for researching into the respective field.

### **Socio-cultural Intersection of Gender and Religion**

Gender is conventionally used as a term to differentiate between different classifications of nouns, including masculine, feminine and neuter or for the biological categories of male and female. With the passage of time, however, gender has come to be used as a cultural category rather than biological, with a set of habits being associated with both male and female categories.<sup>6</sup> This categorization is used in the story and novel under discussion too, where being female or male alone decides the set of rights to be granted to widow or widower, respectively.

The above phenomenon of differentiation on the basis of gender is termed as 'gender injustice'. In contrast to it, 'gender justice' can be understood as a process that induces the women to question the authorities in their home, workplace, society, or the country for restraining the females' right, on the basis of their gender, in taking decisions of their own will in any matter of their lives.<sup>7</sup> The novel under discussion asserts the above-discussed idea in that the widow, subjugated and oppressed by her family and the society, in general, has to stand up to decide the matters of her life all by herself, thus fighting for gender justice.

The concept of intersectionality is based on the notion of addressing more than one categories of difference, for example, race, gender, class, etc., intersecting together to form oppression, this multiplicity of categories playing a vital role in examination of complex problems in the society.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Collins (2000, 18)<sup>9</sup> takes intersectionality as to "particular forms of oppressions, for example, the intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nations". In her theory of Intersectionality and the Matrices of Domination, she defines intersectionality as an "analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black women's experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women" (299).

Crenshaw's (1989)<sup>10</sup> notion of "The power of Intersectional Feminism", is the critique of antidiscrimination doctrine and the intersectionality of feminism, gender, ethnic and class divisions. For Crenshaw, the strategy of resistance and oppression can't be addressed

by considering a single mode of resistance, instead, modes of resistance are multiple and are intersectional. Crenshaw's Intersectional feminism examines the overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination that women face, based not just on a single category for example gender, but on ethnicity, sexuality, economic background and a number of other axes. The theory of intersectionality has found its widest application in the field of feminist and women studies, as noted by Hancock<sup>11</sup> that "the embrace of intersectionality has received its widest acceptance in feminist theory". According to Zinn,<sup>12</sup> critical scholars in fields such as feminist studies apply Collins' intersectional concepts such as "outsider within", "matrix of domination", "interlocking oppressions" in their own intellectual projects, which shows applicability of this intersectional framework in feminist and women studies. The view of Lykke<sup>13</sup> about intersectionality is noteworthy, who defines it as a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities.

Singh<sup>14</sup> notes that patriarchy encourages the identity of a woman only in relation to a male, as a mother, daughter or wife, which means she doesn't have an identity of her own, rather she is only defined in relation to her male relatives, who are the ones to decide her fate, also that the a woman is conventionally supposed to be all-giver, having the qualities of submission, passivity, sacrifice, compromise and tolerance, for her to be acceptable in the society as an ideal woman. In contrast, "To be a man in patriarchal society means to appear to be in control" (28). Singh further holds the institution of family as the one to encourage, regulate and perpetuate the subjugation and suppression of women.

The society has unequal attitudes towards men and women, this gender discrimination being the manipulation and coercion of women by the hands of men.<sup>15</sup> This is the result of categorising male a dominating, and females as a subjugating category, which is utterly wrong, for both are equal by birth. This is advocated by Weininger<sup>16</sup> as 'The ideas 'man' and 'woman' cannot be investigated separately; their significance can be found only by placing them side by side'. Similar equality for males and females can be seen in the verses of Qur'ān.

### **Research Methodology**

In this research, the researcher makes use of the *Theory of Intersectionality* in feminist and women studies, proposed by Crenshaw<sup>17</sup>

to see how gender injustice is perpetuated in the society through the representations in literature: widowers enjoying the right to re-marry, whereas widows being interrogated and questioned about their right to re-marry. The categories of difference are religion, gender, literature and culture. For this purpose, the comparative analysis method proposed by Tilly<sup>18</sup> is used to comprehend, understand the status and role of widows as expected and presumed by the subjects in South Asian society. He proposed four types of methods for comparative analysis, including individualizing, universalizing, variation-finding and encompassing methods. Out of these, method used as a model in the current research is the variation-finding method, which is defined by Tilly<sup>19</sup> as ‘establish[ing] a principle of variation in the character or intensity of a phenomenon by examining systematic differences between instances’ (82). The frame of reference can be described as the canopy under which we place our objects of comparison, it can be a theme or an idea in the light of which the objects are to be compared.<sup>20</sup> For the present research the frame of reference for the comparison between the selected novel and the short story as the widowhood as portrayed in literature for a female in contrast to a male of South Asian patriarchal society and compared to the Qur’ānic verses which clearly define the rights of widows of any society.

### **Comparative Analysis on Religious and Cultural Perspectives on the Status of Widow/ Widower in South Asian Society**

And those who are taken in death among you and leave wives behind - they, [the wives, shall] wait four months and ten [days]. And when they have fulfilled their term, then there is no blame upon you for what they do with themselves in an acceptable manner. And Allah is [fully] acquainted with what you do. (The Qur’ān, II:234)

Literature of a society is a reflection of the culture in which it is produced. In this regard, any social behavior depicted in literature, in general, is internalized by the subjects of that society too. This way, literature arguably is a means to see the practices and culture of a society. If seen from a critical eye, literature, somehow, becomes a means of subjugation and oppression for some specific subjects in the society; and a means for privileging other subjects. The literature under discussion, namely the short story *The Eternal Vine* and the novel *The Story of a Widow* are considerable in this regard as they place the widowers and widows in a specific position one as the privileged, the

other as the subjugated - in the society, by their portrayal in the respective narratives, as revealed by comparative analysis of the texts.

In the short story under discussion, the status ascribed to widowers is that of a privileged category who enjoy their right and complete freedom to re-marry even in old age. This is one of the striking characteristics of the story under discussion, and is evident from its' very first line,

Bari Mumani's shroud was not yet soiled when the whole family began worrying about a new wife for Uncle Shujaat. A bride was now eagerly sought. Whenever the women sat down after a meal and started leisurely work on garments for a dowry or a son's bride-to-be, the talk invariably turned to the question of probable matches for Uncle Shujaat.<sup>21</sup> The widower Uncle Shujaat, upon his decision to re-marry, despite his old age, is happily granted right to re-marry by his whole family. Rather, it would be apt to say, that he, as portrayed in the story, being male in the society, didn't need the right to be granted to him. Instead, he took the decision of re-marrying all by himself as no consent or permission on his making the decision is shown to be taken by him from his family. Instead, 'When inundated with proposals, he became confused and handed the matter over to his sisters'<sup>22</sup> which shows his independence in his taking the decision to re-marry. This independence is lacking in the case of the widows; Kaneez Fatima in the short story and Mona in the novel. As discussed above, in contrast to widowers who are given the right to re-marry, Kaneez Fatima, the widow in the story under discussion, is oppressed by her mother-in law and is not allowed to re-marry. When the name of Kaneez Fatima is proposed by one of the relatives for Uncle Shujaat, it is discarded due to her mother-in-law who 'Since her son's demise [she] has jealously sat guard over her daughter-in-law'.<sup>23</sup> This behaviour of the society as shown in literature is followed in some areas of the country too, as it is substantiated by a research, according to which 'In many families, as a custom in Chitral (a District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), widows are not allowed to remarry as the property of that widow will remain with their heirs'.<sup>24</sup> In this way, the widows, unlike widowers who enjoy their rights to re-marry, face oppression and are not given their due right by the family and/or society, which comes under the rubric of gender inequality. Therefore, this is a grave situation, and the need of the time is to raise voice for the rights of the widows.

The status of the widower in the novel under discussion is different from that in the short story. Salamat Ali, in the novel, enjoys a privileged position. Throughout the entire novel, there is no hint of restriction of

family or society upon him for his decision to re-marry, which confirms the notion of privilege for the widowers in the society.

Similar to the character of Kaneez Fatima in the short story, the widow Mona (the protagonist of the novel) also faces oppression due to being female, unlike the males as discussed above who enjoy and use their right to re-marry. Mona, having grown-up children, and being in her fifties, faces utter opposition of her family on her decision to re-marry after the death of her husband. The evidence of this can be seen in the novel when upon getting the marriage proposal by Salamat Ali, Mona's daughter Tanya says to her, "What are you confused about? It would have been different if Daddy had died young. Everyone knows it's difficult for a young woman to raise kids by herself. Everybody would have understood that you had done it for us! Now, however-".<sup>25</sup> This is highly questionable as widows have equal right to marry according to their wish, and family, by no means, has the right to question this decision. Mona is not in any way involved with Salamat Ali, but upon receiving his proposal, she is interrogated by her very own daughter in a rude manner, as if she had done something gravely bad, "*What are you going to do?* the hostility in her daughter's [Tanya's] voice was too obvious for Mona to ignore".<sup>26</sup> This attitude of Tanya as portrayed in the novel stands for the society on the whole, towards the widows. This interrogative tone is much louder when Tanya further questions her mother, rather orders her to refuse for the proposal, which depicts the behavior of whole of the society, "Why didn't you say no to this man right away?"<sup>27</sup>

The grave oppression faced by the widow Kaneez Fatima as portrayed in the story is evident as due to her widowhood, she is not even allowed to leave the house, 'The poor girl isn't allowed to leave the house'.<sup>28</sup> This is utterly negation of the rights of not only a widow, but a human in general too. The widower is allowed to re-marry, while the widow is not allowed. Even more ironical is the fact that for the widower too, preference is of an unmarried girl, not a widow, 'Why should he go running after used goods when people are ready to present their daughters to him?'<sup>29</sup>. Due to this behaviour, mostly the widowers normally get married, while the widows remained unmarried.<sup>30</sup>

In the story above discussed, the widower happily married by the support of his whole family, and his sisters themselves found him the match. In contrast, Mona's family, upon her receiving a proposal, instead of supporting her to re-marry, shuns and accuses her of staining the family's reputation by receiving a marriage proposal in the age of fifty.

Her uncle says to her, “Everyone who hears of it will spill on us!... They’ll think there was something in our niece’s behaviour or conduct that encouraged him to take matters to this extreme. And a neighbour to boot! How rumours will fly!”<sup>31</sup> This is substantiated by a UN report, according to which, in Pakistan, ‘the Honour Codes oppress all women, with a blanket of silence hiding the cruelty; and sometimes imprisonment, or even death, is inflicted on young widows who are suspected of bringing dishonour’ (2001, 7)<sup>32</sup>.

For women, it is portrayed in literature that marriage after being widowed is deemed a sin, as portrayed in the previous story as well as in the novel under discussion that “A widow who seeks a second marriage was looked upon as a harlot in their society”<sup>33</sup>. If a woman is widowed, she is expected to give up any desire of remarrying, as Mrs. Kazi asks Mona’s sister Hina that she must discourage Mona “from throwing away the labour of a lifetime! A woman’s reputation is all that she gains in this life. And this talk of a proposal of marriage-isn’t it also a little too late in the day?”<sup>34</sup>

In South Asian patriarchal society, religious hypocrisy is at its peak. It is shown in literature that Islam is misused as a tool or device of exploitation by the people. That is, subjects of the society use quotations from Qur’ān to support their stance, though it might be a wrong stance to take, in order to exert their power and restrain others according to their will. This is termed by Omelicheva<sup>35</sup> as ‘instrumentalization of religion’. This religious hypocrisy is evident in behaviour of people, who seldom act upon religious obligations, but are most active when it comes to defend their points with the help of Islam.

Religious hypocrisy is also portrayed in literature with respect to the status of widows and their right to remarry. According to Yilmaz<sup>36</sup>, “Religion has always supplied the ready-made material for representing, asserting, and legitimizing old and new forms of authority”. Evidence for this lies in the novel under discussion, in which Mrs. Kazi uses the same tool to target Mona’s issue of proposal and remarriage, saying that “In good families it was considered very scandalous at one time to marry after one’s spouse died. Especially for women. And some consider it very disreputable still!”<sup>37</sup>

However, in the light of Islam, widows have a complete right to remarry and the society has, by no means, any right to hold it back or keep widows from re-marrying, as according to a verse of Qur’ān, ‘Those among you who pass away and leave wives behind their wives keep

themselves waiting for four months and ten days. So, when they have reached (the end of) their waiting period, there is no sin on you in what they do with themselves in recognized manner. And Allah is All-Aware of what you do' (II: 234). In a similar manner, widows are given a right in inheritance too, as told in Qur'ān, 'For them (the wives) there is one-fourth of what you leave behind, in case you have no child. But if you have a child they get one eighth of what you leave' (IV: 12). Therefore, in the light of Islam, there is no forbiddance for widows about re-marrying. Rather, they have equal rights as the widowers to marry as per their will and choice, and the family or the society have no right to prohibit them in doing so.

In short, widows have equal right as the widowers to take all the important decisions of their lives. They also have the right to re-marry according to their own will, after the death of their husbands, which is proved by the Holy Qur'ān too, but is not shown in literature to be followed by the society.

### **Conclusion**

Concluding the whole discussion in the light of the comparative analysis of the short story *The Eternal Vine* by Chughtai and the novel *The Story of a Widow* by Farooqi, it can be asserted that the status of the widows is falsely portrayed in literature as creatures to be oppressed, commanded and limited to the confines of their home. It is shown that culture, gender and society act as the major source of oppression for widows, while literature acts to give voice to the widows, and religion elevates and liberates them. Thus, the categories of oppression turn out to be gender, culture and society, all taken together form multiple oppression for widows like Mona and Kaneez Fatima, as per Crenshaw's Theory of Intersectionality in feminist studies (1989)<sup>38</sup>, while the category of religion acts as a liberator, and literature functions to give voice to the widows. In this way, the status of a widow in the South Asian society is portrayed as oppressed in literature in order to highlight the problems faced by them. On the other hand, widowers are portrayed as a privileged category, having right to re-marry by their will and choice. In this way, gender inequality is perpetuated in society by presenting it in literature. This research will be of benefit to those interested in the sphere of literature and the status of widowers and widows in any patriarchal society. Furthermore, it can open a new sphere of research into the

problems faced by middle-aged or old-aged widows regarding their autonomy and role in the context of any South Asian patriarchal society.

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