

**PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS OF WIDOWHOOD IN BANI BASU'S A
*PLATE OF WHITE MARBLE***

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Abstract

Widowhood, a socially constructed tag operates in multifaceted avenues in bestowing cataclysm to women by means of physical, psychological, and economic measures. The society imbued with culture is artfully adept in formulating yardsticks to quantify the seemliness and piety of the widow at the cost of garbling woman's individual identity, ambition, desires and self-respect. Caught between societal pressures and self the widow often wields silence as a survival strategy to ease out the tension, but it culminates in adverse psychological disorders like aversion and inferiority complex thereby concealing her individuality in the dark. Indian writer Bani Basu in her eminent work entitled *a plate of white marble* presents a down to earth life of a widow named Bandana who stands at crossroads of diffidence and remorse invigorated by stigmas. This paper raises pertinent questions about widowhood by foregrounding the interconnections between societal norms and mental state by analyzing the struggles of widow in locating herself in a prejudiced society which access the merit by means of abidance to visceral customs and practices.

Keywords: feminism, widowhood, psychosocial, culture, identity, patriarchy.

Introduction

“Societal rules and norms specify the type of Behavior that is expected of individuals occupying certain roles They don’t just behave or act the way they like; they must follow what their society requires” (Agoben 2)

The society exerts a great deal of influence in shaping behavior, attitude and mental health of beings who constitute it. Individuals are obliged to follow the codes of behavior which are both implicit and explicit in order to become part and parcel of it. At the outset nothing seems to be shady in society’s promotion of role playing and behavioral attunement because it boosts up the virtues of integrity, cooperation and commitment as many sociologists believe. But there is a negative side in society’s part of inculcating deportment in individuals because it is biased and inclined towards privileged group propelled by culture. Though multiple factors like institution, rank, power and wealth constituted by culture help society in regulating behavior, gender acts as a predominant catalyst. Therefore, society androcentric in nature works in favor of men by hurling women in the abyss of injustice. The intersection of social and gender norms provides a critical insight in analyzing the mental state of the being, especially women who suffer from the bouts of psychological illness like anxiety, depression and inferiority complex when they fail to adhere to those established norms which are counterintuitive and slanted.

Indian novelist Bani Basu’s regional novel *a plate of white marble* rooted in Bengali culture explicitly reflects the nuances of the “influence of social factors pertaining to the interrelation of mind and society” (OED 2012) by deploying widowhood. It highlights how in the name of culture and social norm woman like Bandana suffers for no mistakes on her part and waste her life by enduring excruciating tortures which culminate in psychological breakdown and physical illness. It is explicitly apparent that society’s enforcement of behavioral code is the central source for Bandana becoming ill, but on the contrary, it feels pity for her as if it has no part in it. This double play of societal role should be given serious investigation to understand its politics in subverting widow. Though she tries to transcend the boundaries set by society at one point her own family members stop her for the fear of earning a bad reputation like easy going and characterless exclusively branded for women. Besides, it weighs down her spirit which yearns to become an educated, independent and career-driven woman. Because for a widow there is no life of her own after her husband’s demise as Mohini Giri points out “Widowhood is a state of social death” (Jamadar et.al. 57). With this argument the research examines how society wields women as a puppet in molding her behavior and life in relation to social aspects of family, work, religion etc. Besides, it spotlights how Bandana establishes a life of her own by battling her psychical pressures laid by society and acts as an epitome of inspiration for other women who lost their lives like her.

Widowhood as Untouchable

Widowhood, a socially constructed appellation marks threatening struggles and challenges for a woman to reconfigure her disordered psyche by adjusting her identity in relation to social roles. Because for a married woman, identity and social roles are inextricably linked to her husband position and priority. The eminent psychosocial theorist Erikson says that identity grounded in society is an important fact in determining the mental health and well-being of an individual because he or she has a desire to be part of and encouraged for importance in their social environment (1968). But for a widow everything turns topsy-turvy because the loss of spouse

means endless ostracism and strict code of conduct from the family which acts as a significant social factor in shaping the life of a woman. The protagonist Bandana enjoyed sophisticated status by participating in religious rituals, helping mother-in-law in the kitchen, sharing meals with family, engaging in conversation with relatives, etc. which gives her a sense of belonging and oneness with her family, but after her husband Abhimanyu death the family, which viewed her as a goddess and lucky charm turned out to be a betrayer by claiming her as a jinx. Though her family members didn't directly address her as Jonah they express the contempt by means of forcing her to rigorous rituals and behavior confined to widows in order to kindle the sense of agony and self-aversion. This sudden shift of behavior within her own family members is the foremost cause for her mental breakdown and depression.

The title *a plate of white marble* symbolizes a practice in Bengali culture where widows are forbidden to share food and utensils commonly used by the family members. Besides, they are proscribed to have family meals. Usually a woman's role in a family structure is inevitably linked to preparing and sharing food with her family. The feel of sharing strengthens the bond and creates a sense of belonging amidst family members. Because a woman usually desires to have freedom in domestic relationships which complements mental health. But Bandana is not allowed to do any such thing and she is merely treated as a prisoner for no mistakes on her part as Bani Basu points out, "a woolen mat placed at one corner of the dining room. In a stone glass there would be water, and on a white marble plate would be a coagulated lump made of half a quarter kilo of rice" (46). Bandana when comes to term with the untimely death of her husband is already in a state of shock and at this point it is her family who should stand by her side, but on the contrary they make her go through a hell of tortures by exhausting her physical health. Though Bandana seems depressed and physically ill because of emotional aspects, the main reason is the lack of healthy food as widows are offered nothing other than "broth of boiled rice, potato and green banana" (11). It is not like Bandana naturally didn't have any appetite to have a good meal rather her mother-in-law monotonous saying "the food does not go down her throat" (47) tunes her psyche and thereby forces to develop a distaste for food. Because society has made a yardstick to measure one's true feelings toward dead ones by means of self-abnegation. The reason for Bandana silently following this regulation is her psychological depression and fear of being branded as heartless and characterless woman who doesn't have genuine affection for her husband. Besides Bandana is an orphan therefore she has no one to support from her side and is in dire need of her in-laws patronage. The society is skillful and steadfast in creating such behavioral patterns and customs to trigger psychological illness and dilemmas thereby to instill fear in other woman so that she would serve her husband well even at the cost of self-destruction. Bandana's mother-in-law feels worried like how she can serve her such food as she says, "Where are you gone Khoka! Come and see, come and see my suffering for once. How can I possibly serve this child with such food?" (10). But indeed she plays the role of an imposter and it comes to spotlight when Bandana asks her "why not serve then something that doesn't pain you Ma, something that I can eat" (11). If Bandana mother-in-law is genuinely concerned about her she could have served her good food in secrecy without patriarchal knowledge to restore her health. But she doesn't because she privileges her power and welfare of her family members as Skeggs points out, "the discursive position available gender relations that women are encouraged to inhabit and use. Its use will be informed by the network of social positions of class, gender, ethnicity through which, it ensures that it will be taken up" (Huppatz 26).

There is a strong interconnection between food and mental well-being. Though food consumption is viewed as a mere life sustainable phenomenon, it has an inextricable role in creating good moods and stable mental health. Society and culture act as a prime factor in figuring out the choices of food for an individual. If an individual is ill the key social factor, poverty is pointed out as a reason. But in case of Bandana's mental depression and physical ill health poverty is not the reason rather society's regulation on her food choices throw her into bouts of anxiety and makes her encounter horrible nightmares. The social factor of food taboo and hierarchies within family structure is the cause for Bandana's malnutrition and mental breakdown as Wood points out, "Complex relations emerge within in this familial arrangement that are central to the decisions made around food production, food preparation, and diet. While the power dynamics in this context are diverse, the interaction of age and gender often situate young women and children at the low-end of intrahousehold hierarchies" (2). In this context Bandana's position is at odd ends when compared to other women in her family because they have husbands and role play within familial structure.

Bandana is so much fond of fish, therefore she is affectionately called as a kitten by her father and uncle. Even after marriage, her preference for fish continued because her in-laws hardly cook vegetarian food. Bandana has developed the habit of regularly eating fish since childhood as her uncle says, "Bandana had never been able to eat a meal without fish" (48) and this highlights her obsession for fish. But after she becomes a widow the society stops her from consuming non-vegetarian food. The society's expectation of sudden changes in her behavior causes her trauma. Unable to give vent to her pent up desire to consume her favorite food she experiences mysterious dreams which blocks her rational thinking which is vividly described as follows,

Warm tears would stream out of her eyes in pain. Leaning her head on the side post of the bed, Bandana would lie exhausted, taking his for another reaction to her grief. In her fatigued state, she would slip into a deep daze, not sleep really, and in that dazed state she would dream that it was raining heavily. Going to shut the windows, she would see that this was not rain! Not water! Something akin to hailstones was falling! O Ma, these were not hailstones, they were fish! Pieces of fish were tumbling down helter-skelter on to Bandana's window. (48)

The dream is a manifestation of Bandana's concealed desire and yearnings. To elaborate further it is a sort of repressed desire which an individual couldn't give it an open acknowledgement as it causes censure and disparagement as Freud points out, "disagreeable sensation, which occurs also in dreams, does not preclude the existence of a wish; everyone has wishes which he would not like to tell to others, which he doesn't not want to admit even to himself" (41). It is obvious that Bandana couldn't let go of her desire to eat fish, but she has been forcefully channelized by society to develop a distaste for it that is why when she dreams of fish she calls it as 'humiliating, distressful and impermissible dream'(48) which picturizes her traumatized psyche. Society's food regulations give her a sense of hurt pride by constantly reminding her as someone who is no way related to her family. Bandana is clever enough to understand the society's biased notions and it becomes evident when she asks why it is she alone has to follow all those predicament and why not Abhimanyu's mother and father as she says, "Abhimanyu's death only her loss to grieve over and not her mother-in-law's? If a widowed woman is expected to lose all taste for food in her sorrow, a sonless mother should also be subject to the same predicament.

And, why just the mother? What about the father? Did the father love his son any less?" (51). Besides, Bandana also questions society's androcentric nature by pointing out whether Abhimanyu would have followed all those rules if she had been dead. This dilemma and question in Bandana's mind explicitly illustrate that though Abhimanyu's death caused her misery she could have easily overcome it, but society's enforcement of biased regulation and deprivation makes her passive and susceptible to unbearable mental breakdown although she is innocent as Douglas points out, "The society does not exist in a neutral, uncharged vacuum. It is subject to external pressures; that which is not with it, part of it and subject to its laws, is potentially against it" (4).

Identity Politics in Widowhood

"Identity is a social-psychological construct that reflects social influences through imitation and identification processes and active self-construction in the creation of what is important to the self and to others" (Adams 433). To situate identity within the context of familial and social structure women is kept locked in marginal positions because identity as a multi-construct shaped by gender relations is at heart androcentric and whirls around economic dominance. Women are ascribed identity only in relation to men as Sarup points out, "identities are not free floating; they are limited by borders and boundaries" (3). The borders and boundaries for women are a society and patriarchy who forbid to have any personal identity which marks accreditation. That is one of the reasons for Bandana not feeling any sense of distortion in her identity as long as Abhimanyu lived because for her being Abhimanyu's wife balanced both identities. But the moment after she loses Abhimanyu she starts facing identity crisis because she is no longer Abhimanyu's wife therefore her family ruled out her as an insignificant object by depriving of her presence and rights. But it is not the case with men because society never decree to create man role or identity in relation to woman. Besides, men form their identity of "self with social validity" (Kasim 8) which helps them to move forward in life even in the absence of their female counterpart.

Personal and social identity should go hand in hand to render a sense of contentment and positive development as Adams highlights, "Balance between the processes of interpersonal differentiation and integration is critical for healthy human development" (431). But Bandana struggles to bring a harmony between the two which results in physical ailment and depressive mood. Until Abhimanyu lived Bandana never felt a need to have any personal identity because the praise and privilege bestowed by the social identity blindfolded her. The society cajoled and made her to believe steadfastly that there is no distinction between social and personal identity for women. The goals of both are one and the same that is to get married and wholeheartedly perform domestic chores so she happily embraced it and felt gleeful of her role as wife, daughter-in-law and mother. It was only after her husband's demise, she realized the deceptive and fickle nature of social identity which gifted her nothing other than intolerable isolation by deepening negative beliefs as follows, "you are an orphan, you are a widow, you are finished" (75). The society has created an image that for a widow spending time in isolation is the ideal one, but Bandana's heart wrenching cry challenges it and shows its deadly effects in vivid image as follows,

There is no one, no one, not here, not here. You are alone, alone, alone, remain alone, no one will ever come any more, your days will pass like this, thinking,

thinking, see if the days pass, you are not there, nor is he. Not there, not there, not there, not there...That is how her days passed...Alone in her room, helpless, hopeless, tortured, she felt like tearing her hair with her two bare hands. (75)

After she understands the biased role of social identity as a widow, which insists her to do nothing other than to confront isolation and alienation which will end up in self-destruction she craves to construct a personal identity by taking honors courses to give vent to her socially stigmatized self and tells her father-in-law, “Baba, I’m thinking of studying. I will take my exams again” (73). The educated and well-to-do father-in-law Kashinath Babu could have helped her to escape the restrictions, but he didn’t because the ego of chauvinism overpowers him and he silences her with the flimsy excuses of health and travel. Besides, he could have thrown her out of the house, but he needs Bandana help to secure money and jewels for his daughter Koli marriage therefore he tolerates her presence in the household.

Another distressing trauma of widows caused by social identity is the dress and appearance. The way one dress not only tells about a person, but also situates his or her value in a social and cultural context as Entwistle says, “the dressed body is not only a uniquely individual, private and sensual body, it is a social phenomenon too, since our understandings and techniques of dress and our relationships to cloth are socially and historically constituted” (94). The society which insulates women with obligations insists Bandana to wear white saree with black borders. The politics behind this color code is that it expects to lead the rest of her life ahead like a ghost by being invisible and away from all worldly pleasures. Besides, the black color symbolically indicates that she is a bad omen and should devote her time in praying to god to absolve of her sins. It is here Bandana’s self comes into conflict because dressing in white saree reminds of her husband’s demise and robs of her femininity. In the later part of the novel she changes her appearance and dressing style for the well-being of her son Abhiroop who becomes sick as per doctor’s suggestion. Though her in-laws know that she dresses that way to restore her son’s psychological health they chastises her as meanly as follows,

She is an unlucky bride. She brought misfortune to our family. First, swallowed up my price-like son. Now on top of that, she is flouting the customs. There are so many houses around us, so many families. Nowhere has there been such a disaster within six-seven years of marriage. And when has any young widow roamed around angling jewellery and sporting coloured saris? (115)

If we do scrutinize what weapon the society wields against widows to bring them down is guilt consciousness. Whenever Bandana tries her hand in challenging her social identity, she is made to feel at fault for forgetting her husband and enjoying life according to her whims and fancy. It is clearly illustrated by Bani Basu in an incident where Bandana leaves her in-laws house and starts living independently with her income as a school teacher. She feels a sense of home and freedom after liberating herself from the suffocating behavioral code formulated by her in-laws. Her new job as a school teacher erases the sense of being alone because seeing new faces everyday makes her overwhelmed with the feeling of being inclusive as she says, “People. Gradually getting used to seeing so many people, her heart would fill up....Inside her heart, someone was constantly murmuring---I am also one of you. Amongst you, I too will work like everyone, move around, go about. Please, for Heaven’s sake do not isolate me” (143). The prime reason for Bandana to abide her social identity is to stay connected with the society and family, but whatever she does she receives nothing other than stigmatization and alienation. Bandana

never feels isolated after she gets separated from her in-laws rather feels guilty, which is induced by society's assumptions, talk and censure. She along with fellow teachers plan for a picnic and discusses about a list of food to be cooked. Pratima lists out non-vegetarian food and then suddenly stops to say, "Oh ...we have to think of vegetarian food for at least two people" (154) looking at Bandana. It is a widely prevalent society's rule that widows are decreed to eat vegetarian food so like everyone else Pratima without giving thought to ask Bandana for her opinion decides vegetarian food for her. The assumption and belief of Pratima that she abides to codes of widowhood makes her sullen. Besides, she questions herself what society would say if it comes to know about her changed lifestyle and behavior as she says, "If she had told them otherwise, what then would have been their reaction? Hate? Shock? Taunts? Ridicule?" (154). This self-interrogation doesn't end up there rather transcends beyond in evoking guilt consciousness which complements self-aversion and depression as Bandana says, "I have forgotten him, Kaka. I do not grieve for him anymore. That umbrella pain has left me these days. What kind of a faithful and devoted wife am I! I am eating merrily, dressing up, alive and happy" (p. 155). This shows how even after creating personal identity Bandana is not allowed to live her life in peace because society never lets woman to step out the shroud of social identity. The politics behind this game play is patriarchy who is keen to enjoy the sophisticated and dominant lifestyle procured by woman in the name of marriage at the cost of inflicting mental breakdown in woman like Bandana. That is patriarchy implicitly wants to threaten women folk that their lives would come to standstill clad in deprivation if they didn't take care of their husbands well. Therefore, all rituals, beliefs and practices are used as an instrument by patriarchy to direct women in devoting their lives to their husbands' well-being and to remain submissive by taking pride in their social identity as being wives.

Overwhelmed with guilt Bandana appears to be completely at a loss and a crossroads. But towards the end of the novel she turns out to be a confident and a wholly new woman with well-built identity. When she is on the verge of losing all hope and to enter an irrevocable despair state caused by pangs of guilt conscience an enlightenment strikes her through a friend Ghoshal, who makes her encounter a different world and reality filled with helpless children who yearn for love. Bandana's realization that the world is far bigger than an individual and society drives her to the path of philanthropic lifestyle where she decides to spend her life in serving orphans and differently abled children. By committing and transforming her life to greater cause she brings a balance between both identities which stood as two different poles and it is evident through her sense of feeling content and inclusive as she says,

What is the benefit in converting life into a chain of meaningless rituals?...Our strength is not only for ourselves or for our families alone....If you share this world's joy with even one helpless child, can show even one poor person the right way to survive, then from that one fountain, will flow for you a stream of joy.
(322)

This way Bandana not only let go off her agonizing self, but also got herself positioned in a wider space of society which formerly traumatized, ostracized and burdened her with a groundless and unjustifiable code of behavior and conduct.

Conclusion

Bandana acts as a mouthpiece for expressing widowhood psychosocial impacts irrespective of cultures across the world. Social factors such as family, religion, community, etc. act as an inevitable phenomenon in oppressing women in diversified ways by regulating and punishing conduct to match its need and expectations without any justice. For instance death is a natural phenomenon, but society has manipulatively used it as a tool to get down women by rituals and code of behavior in order to flag the established hierarchies of patriarchy by elusively evoking guilt conscience which in turn complements psychical troubles. It is important to raise the woman's conscience about the politics behind society and corrupted ritual trapdoors by encouraging them to develop an independent personal identity which liberates and leads to the holistic well-being and development of both individual and society. Bandana by devoting her life to noble cause not only liberated herself from traumas induced by society but also acts as an inspiration for many other innocent souls who suffer like her. Besides, she also positively effaced the anxiety, inferiority complex, depression, and self-aversion by bridging a balance between two dynamic identities thereby becoming both individuated and connected.

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