

## Performative Mourning: Deconstructing Gendered Widowhood in the Select Works of Githa Hariharan

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### Abstract

*Widowhood can be a dreaded experience. After the demise of the partner, it is extremely difficult and challenging to adapt to the massive changes and lifestyle henceforth. But this experience is not the same for all and can significantly vary for men and women. The article conceptualises widowhood as an imposed performance that encompasses a set of rituals and practices varying drastically for men and women. The article brings out the contrasting experiences of widows and widowers in Githa Hariharan's selected works, including two novels namely *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, *Fugitive Histories* and two short stories namely "The Reprieve" and "Revati". Employing Judith Butler's theory of Gender Performativity and Bell Hooks' view of patriarchy, the research tries to sketch widowhood as a performance that patriarchal structures seek to neutralise by imposing distinct and contradictory gender roles for widows and widowers.*

**Keywords:** widowhood, gender, patriarchy, grief, loss

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## Introduction

Marriage is a most sacred and loving bond shared between two people who promise to share their life with one another for the rest of the years. Marriage serves as the foundation for family formation and gives one a partner on whom they can rely for emotional, physical, financial and social support. This marriage unites two individuals in a loving relationship fostering stable emotional security and life-long companionship. With years of marriage, individuals develop interdependent routines, lifestyle, identities and support systems concealing the bond into a much stronger one. Nonetheless, the loss of a partner extirpates one's entire reason for existence. The death of the partner with whom one has built their family, home, peace and happiness completely destroys them. It causes irrevocable damage and fractures the psychological well-being and daily functioning of the spouse who is alive. This loss could be one of the disruptive incidents in an individual's life and often leads to loneliness, depression and questioning of life and identity.

Widowhood is the period of being a widow or widower (Horne 1). The death of one partner in a marriage makes the other 'widowed'. A wife whose husband is dead is called a widow, while a husband whose wife is dead is called a widower. Both the widow and the widower experience widowhood. The experience of widowhood is significantly harrowing that some people experience widower's syndrome wherein the widowed partner dies relatively after a short span after the partner has passed away because of excessive grief.

Widowhood, thusly, an excruciatingly painful experience wherein the widowed person's will to live becomes dull and sparse. But this experience is not the same for men and women. Both the widow and widower experience the loss of their partner, but the way they experience their grief and loss is shaped by societal and patriarchal structures that expects the widow and widower to mourn differently.

Githa Hariharan, a highly commended contemporary Indian writer tries to point out this gendered experience of widowhood in her works. She is a feminist activist who tirelessly works to showcase the real-life treatment of women in her writings. Hariharan was born in Coimbatore and completed her education in Mumbai and Manali. She pursued her Masters of Arts in Communication at the United States of America. She began working as a staff writer for the WNET Channel at New York and continued as an editor in a publishing house in India. Hariharan established herself as a serious writer in her debut novel. She won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992). Her marvellous compositions include novels that address social issues like power politics, extremism, communal and caste violence and highlight the importance of education in *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), *Fugitive Histories* (2009) *I Have Become the Tide* (2019) and *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994) respectively. She has also written short story collections called *The Art of Dying and Other Stories* (1993) and *The Winning Team* (2004).

### **Aim and Objectives**

The article investigates to brings out the contrasting experiences of widows and widowers in leading their life after the death of their partner in the select works of Githa Hariharan. It aims to bring to light how mourning the loss of a partner is a gendered performance shaped by patriarchal and societal expectations that force one to grieve in a particular manner based on their gender.

### **Methodology**

The article adopts qualitative research through textual analysis of chosen works of Githa Hariharan. The chosen works for the study are namely two novels titled *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *Fugitive Histories* and two short stories titled "The Reprieve" and "Revati". All the four texts have one thing in common that calls for further research. The connecting factor for all the four texts is that the protagonists of all the texts are either widows or widowers. Though the focus of both the novels is not about the experience of widowhood, they are still chosen to highlight the difference in the treatment of widows/widowers. The theoretical framework is drawn from Judith Butler's concept of Gender Performativity and Bell Hooks' idea of patriarchy damaging both men and women. Butler argues that genders are not innate or physical but that which is formed through "a stylized repetition of acts" that are done over and over again (519).

### **Widow's Mourning**

Butler puts forth that gender is a performance and the society being shaped by patriarchal and cultural practices, expects widows to publicly 'perform' their mourning. Across the world, widows are expected to perform widowhood through clothing, dietary restrictions and limited social appearances. Moreover, they are advised to embody visible grief to be socially legitimate. "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler 520).

In the novel, *Fugitive Histories* (FH), Mala is the widow grieving the death of her husband, Asad. She has been the ringside viewer, cheerleader and critic of Asad for over thirty years. His death left a huge void in her life. After his death, she felt deep sadness and displayed her sadness in various ways. Mala sent her two children back to the cities they reside and wanted to prove that she can manage by herself in the house in Delhi. She tells her son, Samar that "everything is all right" (Hariharan, FH 4) to bring the conversation to an end. Clearly, she mourns the death of her husband but is not able to hide her grief well. Mala finds it extremely difficult to sleep at night. She has insomnia and abandons her bed at nights to go to the terrace for a cup of tea and cigarette. The day threatens to stretch out its rested arms and to make it through one more day seems like an achievement for Mala. The night is a reprieve "but only if it brings sleep with it" (Hariharan, FH 56). Mala worked as a librarian in a school and but now after being widowed, she went through Asad's cupboards and sorted it all day. She folded rolled-up kurtas, shirts, sweaters and jeans. While sorting, Mala reminded herself that the point was "to clean, sort out,

classify. Not to give in to the temptation to read one of the letters, or recall a crumpled old movie ticket...or pull out a document Asad had once searched for” (Hariharan, *FH* 4). She also had to resist the “sudden whiff of a shockingly familiar smell” in the clothes and wonder “is this his cologne or his skin?” (Hariharan, *FH* 5). Mala missed her husband and displayed her grief in such ways. She had an emotional attachment with Asad and embodied her personal grief through these actions. She also reserved the tin trunk - the one Asad used to call his all-purpose box and never opens it to clean. She postpones the cleaning of his personal things so that she will have a part of him with her in her bed. Mala, a recent widower, thus while going through their grief, publicly displays her loss and sadness. Though it was her personal process of coping to the loss, she had displayed all behaviours that a widow should possess.

In the short story “Revati”, Revati was married when she was just ten and became a child widow within a year. As put forth by Butler, gender is constructed by a set of stylized behaviours that people consider mandatory, inevitable and normal. In Indian subcontinent, widows are expected to be ascetic, feminine, sacrificial and prioritizing men/others over themselves. After nearly fifty decades of widowhood, Revati stopped fitting into all these assigned regulated roles and lived her life as a widow as she wished. She slyly gazed at bridal Benarasi silks with the “face filling with a wistfulness, hideously unashamed and undisguised” (Hariharan, “Revati” 92). Rajeswari and Anitha in their article, “Gender Performativity and Resistance: A Reading of Power Structures in Joanne Harris’ *Chocolat* Series” says that the “gender roles are created by their daily practices and patterns, where females are supposed to do their household chores and to live a suppressive life” (81).

Revati never showcased any of the feminine niceties. She bathed for a long time, paying no attention to neither the long queue outside nor the water shortage problem. She gluttoned food enough for two men and always sat first to eat along with the children, while the other women in the family waited till the children and the men in the family have had their meal. The way in which she dined was also not the way widows are expected to behave. She opened her mouth horribly wide and stuffed great big balls of food into her mouth. In between she would sip water, gargle it round her mouth and suddenly gulp it. All of these actions of Revati never aligned with the role of widow.

As a widow, one is expected to be detached from the luxuries of life but Revati admires others’ saree, eats voraciously and practices none of the soft, calm feminine practices. “Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (Butler 522). Mathew in her article corroborates with this and comments that “her voracious eating probably makes her more ‘masculine’ than the ‘expected feminine’ (59). Her long sessions in the bathroom were subject to “endless and humorous speculation in the family” (Hariharan, “Revati” 94). Because of all this, the family members always humoured her and most of the time she was “merely tolerated” (Hariharan, “Revati” 92). The family even hired a very distant cousin to

take care of her so that Revati's visit to her brothers and sisters' houses would be cut short.

Apart from the feminine characters, a woman is presumed to be beautiful always. Wilson in her article points out that "objectification serves to codify" (p. 2) Butler's view of gender being a performance. In Indian subcontinental cultural context, a woman must be appealing, curvy and attractive (Jarín 27) to be taken seriously. Revati was "short, squat, with a scaly, swarthy skin, coarse grey hair, and shamelessly aggressive buck teeth" (Hariharan, "Revati" 93). Since Revati was neither physically attractive nor fitted into the prescribed gender role, she was often ridiculed and considered outcast by her own family members. Her family members claim that she would have been easier to tolerate, if she "had been beautiful...or attractive or loving or...a good cook or helpful with the children" (Hariharan, "Revati" 93).

### **Widower's Mourning**

Like women, men are also expected to perform certain behaviours that are socially valued. These behaviours are taught as masculinity with traits such as being "assertive and aggressive, courageous, almost invulnerable to threats and problems and stoic in the face of adversity" (McVittie 119). Being the providers and protectors is the sole identity of men in the society. Men take on the role of providers and focus only on that, missing on the little joys of life. Hooks in her work states that "masses of men in our culture may believe that their ability to provide for themselves and families is a measure of their manhood" (ch. 6). For men, their professional life acts as a scale by which their masculinity is measured.

Vasu, in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master (GVM)* and Nagaraj Rao, in the "The Reprieve" were both widowers. More than being widowed, they were both retirees who were dismissed from their profession that had defined them for a lifetime. Vasu had been a teacher at the P.G Boys' School, Elipettai for nearly four decades. Being a master was his whole identity. After his retirement, he did not know what to do and began noticing trivial things in his house. He became ill and there was no clear cause for the worsening of his health. His wife, Mangala was long gone but it was after his retirement that he started getting memories of her. Similarly, Nagaraj Rao was a senior advocate who was always cluttered with anxious clients and their problems. He felt a grief appropriate to a new widower, but the conscious demanding thoughts about his wife "had to do with his retirement" (Hariharan, "The Reprieve" 43). It had been twenty years since Mangala's death and it was more than six months after Rao's wife's death. But it was only after their retirement, the widowers missed their wives; more than missing they had thoughts about their partner only after their first wife - their profession was no more.

Another aspect of masculinity portrayed as a dominant trait is stoicism. Men are expected to not show their emotions and feelings. Hooks states that "the first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women...but acts of psychic self-mutilation" (ch. 4). Being stern and stoic is often seen

synonymous with masculinity and this expectation forces men to not express their feelings.

Vasu and Rao both were good providers for their family but they had no real connection with their wife or children. Talking about their loss and details pertaining to their partner felt like a heavy task. Widowers in the society often do not acknowledge their emotional side that Rao felt that deep personal questions about how he was feeling after the loss seemed “almost obscenely intimate in nature” (Hariharan, “The Reprieve” 41). He also felt inquisitive and curious to find out the subject of conversation between his son and daughter-in-law at nights. He had this curiosity as he and his wife had “talked only about the children or the many problems of the household” (Hariharan, “The Reprieve” 44). Vasu, on the other hand, was not so curious when he found his wife’s tin trunk and the little treasures that were wrapped in a soft silk sari. There was a small mirror, two boxes of kumkumam, a small packet of old photographs, wedding invitation and two or three pieces of her dowry silver. Seeing all this, Vasu “felt very little emotion” (Hariharan, *GVM* 39). All the things inside the tin trunk were related to Vasu and his wife, even then the sight of those things never triggered any intense feelings for him. “Patriarchy requires men to suppress emotions. Boys are taught to disconnect from their feelings. This emotional disconnection follows them into adulthood” (*hooks, The Will to Change*). Vasu and Nagaraj Rao felt the loss of their partner only after their retirement. Even then, they felt very little emotion. Though both the widowers have lived with their wives for several years, they did not know any of their interests or how their wife’s life was. This realization came only after being widowed and retired. Rao, in his seventies, far away from his town after his retirement, wondered what his wife’s life was like. He wondered about the dream she had which made her giggle like a little girl in her sleep a few days before she died. He also never knew whether his wife missed her parents, brothers and sisters or was she lonely or too busy or vacuous to care. For fifty years she had been a “unobtrusive wife in the background” (Hariharan, “The Reprieve” 42) who ran the machinery of thirty-member household. For Vasu, he had never known that his wife was capable of stitching beautiful tapestries. It was years after her death he unboxed the tin trunk which hoarded two large bundles of thick coarse sheets with embroidery of flowers, leaves, tame birds and animals. Vasu knew her more “as a cloudy memory than as a person (Hariharan, *GVM* 41).

### **Conclusion**

Widowhood, a painful and challenging process, is shaped by a set of societal expectations and prescribed roles for men and women. Widows are expected to publicly display their experience through clothing and behaviour. Mala’s grief is socially legible though the activities she does are her way of coping to the loss. By performing such activities, she without her conscious effort fitted into the prescribed script of widowhood, that expects widows to be subdued and ascetic. But, Revati on the other hand is ridiculed and punished for not fitting into the society’s qualities for a ‘good widow’. She is merely tolerated and is mostly unwelcomed within her own

family. Men, on the other hand, are protected by these prescribed roles and are not expected to express their grief. But as put forth by Conell, this masculine “identity is not easily performed or necessarily desirable in itself” (McVittie 119). Widowers’ realisation of the emotional ignorance they had practiced often comes too late after the death of the partner. Prioritizing work and leaving off the emotional connect with the family makes the widowhood experience more depressing for widowers. Studies show that “widowhood was indeed more depressing for men than women” (Lee S59). Widowers go into depression as it is after the death of the partner they confront the emptiness of their life. Vasu only realises after Mangala’s death that none of them “could fill her place, even the three of them put together” (Hariharan, *GVM* 138). It was a reprieve for Nagaraj Rao when he hallucinated his wife standing in the kitchen that he “fell into the dark safety of the outstretched arms” (Hariharan, “The Reprieve” 47).

Thusly, both widows and widowers are trapped into performing their gender roles and scripts during their grieving process. These performances obstruct authentic healing and further push the widowed person into more emotional turmoil. Widows are over-identified with emotions and widowers are expected to be estranged from it. Patriarchy and its prescribed rigid gender scripts make widowhood into a much more challenging and draining process than it already is. The widowed are, thus, curtailed from addressing their loss sincerely, exposing patriarchy and its gender system as a major failure, as it torments both the genders and hinders meaningful recovery.

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