

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

EXAMINING WIDOWHOOD IN RAJINDER SINGH BEDI'S *EK CHADAR MAILI SI*

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Article info

Article Received: 07/02/2023

Article Accepted: 12/03/2023

Published online:16/03/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.1.181](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.1.181)

Abstract

Rajinder Singh Bedi belonged to the group of progressive writers who delved deep in delineating the social reality in his writings. Bedi is hailed as one of the four stalwart progressive writers sharing the space with Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Krishna Chander. He was associated with Progressive Writers' Movement. He is accredited to have written many stories, novellas and poems. The issues related to women occupied some degree of centrality in his writings. Widowhood is a taboo for women. Women after the death of their husbands are forced to live an abject life. His *Ek Chadar Maili si* received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1965 and is still considered one of his eloquent novels depicting the social reality. The novel was originally written in Urdu and was first translated into English by eminent writer Khushwant Singh by the title *I Take this Woman*. This paper attempts to explore the stigma of widowhood in Indian rural society in the novel *Ek Chadar Maili Si's* translated version *Ordained by Fate*.

Keywords: Progressive Writers' Movement, Socialist Realism, Widowhood, Leviration, Patriarchy

Socialist Realism has been an intrinsic feature of the Indian Progressive Writers' Movement started in 1935 in India. Socialist realism is the attempt of art to capture society as accurately as possible. Maxim Gorky is regarded as the founder of socialist realism. When he returned to the Soviet Union in 1931 he along with his followers helped to establish this new literary tradition. The first congress of the Soviet Union put forth its doctrine as " Truthful historically concrete representation of reality into its revolutionary development. Social realism insists that literature and politics are all of a piece, with literature providing a vision for the future socialist reality.

Socialist realism also coincided with the ideals of the South Asian Progressive Writers' Movement started in 1936 in Lucknow following the publication of a short story collection *Angarey (Embers)* in 1932. *Angarey* was the short story collection that appeared in 1932. It had the stories by Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmad Ali, Rashid Jahan and Mahmudjafar. the immediate censorship on *Angarey* caused a furore among writers as Qamar Rais says: *Angarey* was not just a mere collection of short stories but a sophisticated protest against established traditions and conventions. Following its publication and censorship Sajjad Ali, who went to England and studied Marxism. There his alliance with Mulk Raj Anand made him oppose fascism.

Progressive Writers Movement that is regarded “as the most powerful literary force on the literature of south Asia during the first half of the 20th century” was actually founded by Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmad Ali and several other writers. The manifesto of AIPWA (All India Progressive Writers’ Movement) was published in eminent Hindi writer Premchand’s journal *Hans* (Swan) in October. The development of socialist realism blended perfectly with the goal and definition of Progressive literature :

It is our belief that the new literature of India must respect the basic realities of our present-day life, and these are the questions of our bread, plight, our social degradation and political slavery. Only then will we be able to understand these problems and the revolutionary spirit will be born in us. All those things which take us toward confusion, dissension, and blind imitation conservative; also, all that which engenders in us a critical capacity, which induces us to test our dear traditions on the touchstone of our reason and perception, which makes us healthy and produces among us the strength of unity and integration, that is what we call Progressive.(8)

Rajinder Singh Bedi was one of the foremost writers of Progressive Writers’ Movement. He through his candid expression and realism carved a place for himself along with Ismat Chughtai, Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chander. He was a truly unique and distinguished literary personality. Born in Sialcot, Rajinder Singh Bedi worked as post office clerk and wrote stories and novels in Urdu. Bedi in an interview to Mahfil asserts:

I was not aware with the Progressive Writers Movement. Since I wrote about the common people, their joys and sorrows, I was told that I was a Progressive writer and quite honest, I very willingly accepted this tag.(139)

He was also a film director, dialogue writer and script writer. Rajinder Singh Bedi’s short stories and novels depict the human being in true colours. He raises socio-political issues such as the impact of colonialism, the effects of partition and the exploitation of people living at the margin. He is

eloquent as far as women’s questions are concerned. Through his novel *Ek Chadar Maili si*, he has projected the practice of widowhood in rural India.

Widowhood is a state associated with the death of the husband. It is a rigorous practice that dramatically altered the life of a woman after the death of her husband. Several restrictions are imposed on her life. According to Meera Khanna, “The widow is uglified to deprive her of the core of femininity. It is an act of symbolic castration. She is deprived of the red dot between her eyebrows that proclaims her sexual energy.” In India, widows live a cursed life. And they internalize such practices by following the other widows. They were to live an austere life and this “austerity led to their material and emotional - sexual exploitation”. (Chandra, Sudhir, 55)

The provision of widow remarriage was also there in Rigveda as it recognised remarriage as a permitted thing. Even there was a tradition of Niyoga in Mahabharat as The Gautama Dharmasūtra, (28.21-22), clearly mentions that in case a person died sonless, his wife could raise an offspring through niyoga who was to inherit the property of the departed. The brother-in-law of the deceased was considered suitable for it.

Leviration has been an age-old custom in India as a form of widow remarriage. In Punjab and Haryana it is known as chadar andazi. The origin of this custom is supposed to lie in Punjabi’s unwillingness to leave their land. *Ek Chadar Maili si* narrates the tale of Rano the widow of Trilok who after her husband’s death is forced to wed her brother-in-law by the society. The novel was translated by Khushwant Singh into English by the title *I Take This Woman*. The novel critiques the objectified status of a woman who is homeless and is completely at the mercy of her husband’s family. After the death of her husband, her survival becomes a big question.

Widow remarriages were promoted to reform the plight of women in India but it is again the patriarchal intrusion that distorted it. Settling property in this manner indicates one thing that such an offspring definitely belonged to a widow’s

husband. The status of widows and the social conditions imposed in widowhood however, varied from region to region. There were only two options open to widows, enforced celibacy and the rigid misery of widowhood and enforced remarriage, prevalent in some areas. The decision in both cases was not in the hands of the widows.(Bindu). Vibha Chauhan in her article "Gender and Beyond" states: "Patriarchal intrusions had distorted this custom otherwise the custom was emancipatory for women in Punjab ". Gurjeet Kaur coins the positive side of widow remarriages in Punjab as as the situation of widows was better in Punjab due to the local customs. Such remarriages are knowns as Karewa, chadar andazi , chadar pana heri hui In the Punjab, several words were used to denote widow remarriage such as 'Karewa ' 'Jhanjarara, ' 'Karao, ' 'Chadarandazi, ' 'Chaddar Pana, ' 'Heri-Hui, ' 'Rakhewad and 'Rikhorar.' etc in different part of Punjab.

Rajinder Singh Bedi's novella *Ek Chadar Maili si* also revolves around this customary practice and its impact on the lives of individuals.

Rano the protagonist of the story, was married to Triloka, an ikka driver. Rano's parents married her off to Triloka "in return for the promise that he would give her food and shelter"(13)and disappeared. Now she has no other place except Triloka's home. At times she felt that she had no parental home to call her own" where she could seek security " Rano gave birth to four children and always looked to her brother-in-law Mangal as her own son as he was a few years elder to her eldest daughter. Mangal also revered her just like his mother.

Rano was adamant to make Triloka abstain from drinking as she always hated alcohol. Her prohibition infuriates Triloka and he thrashes her badly. Ironically Jindan, her mother-in-law who never leaves any opportunity to unbraided her, encourages him. The women folk living in the neighbourhood intrudes but " none had guts to go down and disengage them" except Channo but Rano shouts " All of you go away. Go away ...! Don't you too get beaten?" (16) Her statement substantiates that domestic violence was normal practice in the

patriarchal society. Even women like Jindan were responsible for this, and instead of opposing it, encouraged their sons to beat their wives.

Mangal rescues Rano finally but initially he too was reluctant to interfere but Rano here once again reflects on her helpless and homeless state as even if she dares to leave her abusive husband where would she go ?

" Everyone's worst enemy should never give birth to a daughter. The moment she grows up a little, she is sent packing to her in laws's house and the moment her in laws get annoyed with her they send her rolling back to her parents. Alas! A time comes when this cotton ball is so completely soaked in its own tears that it refuses to budge" (17)

In Fact, she had no place to seek shelter. The situation exacerbated with the death of Triloka as he was killed wrongly by a young man who doubted him to be a rapist. The death of Triloka was a misfortune for Rano as she behaves hysterically thinking about the future of her and her children. Even in a fit of madness she tries to smack her daughter and finally breaks into tears she curses herself

" You wretched creature with no parents and no husband either, now there is no home that you can call your own." She lamented . " At your age , there is no place for you even in brothel...Now you are not fit to be a tart ." (26)

Widowhood is a 'social death' (Chakravarti ,2248) and most of the time widows are addressed as husband eater and in Punjab as In the northern Indian state of Punjab, a widow is referred to as bitch, which means "prostitute" in Punjabi.(Sahoo) Her life becomes miserable after the death of her husband as her mother in law abuses her

You slut! You witch !you ogress ! you ate my son, now you are waiting to swallow the rest of us. Get out of here ! just go whichever way your fancy takes you ...now there is no place for you in this house"

Since Rano had no place to go so she begged her to let her stay on. Jindan's curses and taunts and the

growing problems of survival enhanced her sorrow as she sings:

A home without

A husband is no home

A body without

A soul, is a corpse (32)

Triloka was the bread winner so after his death the family had no means to survive. Her children were badly affected and being the single parent she becomes more conscious about them especially her adolescent daughter. She would often "dress her up in old stained clothes and dishevelled her hair in order to save her from lusty gaze of people" She would tell her about social imperative and would get worry if she get delay in her menses not only this she would also keep a concoction handy to avoid any mishap. More than that she was concerned about her marriage. The children of widows are often affected, both emotionally and economically. Widowed mothers, now supporting their families alone, are forced to withdraw children from school and to rely on their labour. Moreover, the daughters of widows may suffer multiple deprivations, increasing their vulnerability to abuse. Rano endures Jindan's harshness and curses only because of her homelessness. Finally, she protests against her when she is asked to evict, she says: "Why should I get out? What haven't I done for this family? haven't I given it sons? Haven't I given it a daughter? What is it I haven't? (34)

Actually, Rano was unaware of the law of the land that denies her rights to her children and in any case if she is allowed to take them along with her, how would she make them survive? As there were no provisions for Widows' rehabilitation except a local tradition institutionalized by the community *Chadar andazi* as this was the only way to let her stay in the house. Rano who had always seen Mangal as her son and Mangal who was ten years younger to her always looked her as mother were to get married. It was a provision that was basically concerned about rights on women's body. As the village woman Pooro suggests Gianchand

"I am of the opinion that Mangal should take Rano under his mantle. Moreover, why should a woman of this village go out, or look around to satisfy her needs? That is likely to bring a bad name to the men of the village...(39)

Women like Jindan and Pooran dai were the female agents of patriarchy who instead of having any empathy kept on implicating the patriarchal norms. The situation exacerbated when she found Jindan's intent to sell Waddi to six men for some rupees, Rano came for the rescue of her daughter but she was still in the conflict regarding the marriage and security of Waddi. She even thinks to sell herself to make provisions for her marriage and if it is not possible, she would take Waddi to the city and sell her at a higher price. She suddenly comes back to her consciousness and in order to survive she had no other option. she couldn't defy that social compulsion in the voices of other women who validate the decision of *chadar andazi*

"Look here" said Channo, "Do you or don't you want to live in this village? Do you want to appease the hunger in this hell of a belly of yours or not? Do you want to cover your shame or not? Who do you think you are with all these moralistic pretensions of yours? ...Aren't you going to arrange the marriage of your daughter or not? (44)

Whereas Rano was experiencing a strange sensation Mangal who was in a relationship with a muslim girl Salamat was shocked to hear this verdict of the panchayat. The verdict was imposed without consulting the individuals concerned. He could not bear this verdict as according to him, it was coloured with incestuous colouring he retorted:

No. Never such a thing will never happen ...Even if Lord Irvin or George the Vth too come to me, I won't do it. She is as old as my mother. I can place my head on her feet but not let her head on my feet"(48)

Even though he fled from the home, he couldn't escape his destiny. The group of people found him and brutally treated him to follow the verdict. They dragged him and beat him to such an extent that he

appeared as “strange looking bridegroom with no turban and daubed with mud “When Mangal was made to sit besides Rano he was bleeding profusely and Rano was unconscious but all the women there were convinced that in the end everything would turn out right”. (58)

While these two people were completely estranged with this new relationship the community was celebrating the occasion by singing wedding songs. Mangal’s unwillingness to accept a new role. As he was a carefree, idle and dissolute fellow wandering and teasing others all the time was reluctant to marry her. But this marriage with Rano soon transformed him and he began earning money and giving it to Rano. Whereas the bond between Rano and Mangal was validated by the society but Rano’s own daughter Waddi felt disgusted and she insulted her own mother and dug her nails on her mother’s face. This added to the agony of Rano who had agreed for this provision only for the sake of her children’s survival.

The society that had devised a way to end the problems of Rano through *Chadar Andazi* also wishes her to be happy and Rano too desires to hold her right on Mangal and finally she succeeds as she had “understood the relationship which a soiled and worn-out sheet had bestowed upon her”.(85). She had a battle with him over an old bottle of orange liquor from Tiloka's trunk, during which her head is smashed against the wall, and this fight becomes the turning point of their evening together and Mangal's return to his former self. When her mother-in-law inquires about the noise, Rano replies that a cat made it, which causes Mangal to feel deeply appreciative and ashamed. Mangal is completely transformed. He is not only a loving husband but also a caring father of those four children.

Conclusion

Rajinder Singh Bedi’s *Ek Chadar Maili si* depicts the social reality of Widowhood. Though customary practices of Chadar andazi for the rehabilitation of Rano, widow of Triloka seems a kind of coercion at the onset as it was against Rano and Mangal’s individual wishes but gradually it turns out to be a better decision whereas Rano found a loving and caring husband in Mangal, Mangal too

transformed from an irresponsible lad to a responsible family man.

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