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## Exploring the Subject of Hindu Widowhood in Koirala and Shah's Short Stories\*

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### Abstract

*Nepali Hindu widows have been discriminated in social, cultural and religious activities that have affected the psyche of the widows. People debilitate widows and consider them vulnerable and insecure. The research paper has explored the portrayal of Nepali Hindu widows' conditions in B. P. Koirala's "To the Lowlands" and Prem Shah's "A Husband" from the viewpoint of new criticism. The conflicts, tensions, symbols and meanings of the lives of the Hindu widows portrayed in the selected texts are analysed from a new critic's perspective. The study has exploited exploratory qualitative method. Koirala has portrayed a Hindu widow who left the house because of abuses by her brother-in-law and tortured by in-laws. She moved to the plain (tarai) with four men including Gore for happy life. But Gore stole the widow's gold and money despite her marriage proposal. Shah portrayed a widow Nirmala who was teased and abused by a driver and her sister's probable husband. She wants to make up her face, but she was frightened with her elder brother, sister and mother because of restrictions imposed upon Hindu widows. Koirala and Shah have depicted miserable widowhood in the Nepali Hindu society. Although sati tradition has been abolished and remarriage of widows are encouraged in the present time, widows are psychologically shattered because of Hindu socio-cultural viewpoints on them, and Hindu widows still sacrifice their lives through psychological sati in Nepali society. The analysis of widowhood in the stories contributes to understanding the condition of widows in Hindu society.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Hindu society, humanity, patriarchy, widow.

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**Koirala, Shah and the Subject of Hindu Widowhood**

Bisheswar Prasad Koirala (1915-1982) and Prema Shah (1945-2017) are Nepali short-story writers who have written against all forms of injustices either from the state or community. Koirala is considered as the symbol of Nepali renaissance. Koirala and Shah have been for humanism, abolition of injustices and liberalism from various forms of restrictions and discrimination in Nepali society. They seek social, religious and cultural transformation along with political changes in Nepal for social justice. Psychological realism can also be found in their literary works. The research paper aims to expose the socio-cultural conditions and struggles of the Hindu widows as portrayed in Nepali short stories, particularly in Bisheswar Prasad Koirala's "Madeshtir" ("To the Lowlands") and Prema Shah's "Logne" ("A Husband").

This study discusses the representation of vicious discrimination and injustice to the widows in Hindu society in the stories. Since the past, widows have been regarded as disadvantaged and marginalized individuals in the Hindu society in Nepal. More restrictions have been imposed on widows in socio-cultural functions and ceremonies; people consider them as sinister persons. When the husband of a woman expires, she becomes a widow. In the Hindu patriarchal society, Hindu widows have encountered various problems of widowhood in their lives. They have to follow strict social customs and rituals in Hindu society: they are not allowed to wear jewels and red dress; they are supposed to wear white dress, and they face economic, social, cultural, violence and mistreatment, family conflicts, homeless widows having no children, and psychological problems.

In the past, the cruel practice of sati tradition existed. Then it was abolished and encouraged widows to remarriage, but still in Hindu patriarchal society widows continue to bear the same unjust norms and principles. "[A widow's] condition, her role, her place in the family and the question of her remarriage, became the subject of a great deal of writing both discursive and creative" (Basu 228-29). In comparison with urban areas, widows in rural areas have even worse condition. "Beyond the economic difficulties faced by widows, authors have also pointed to social, cultural, and political limitations widows often encounter" (Jensen 358). Nepali literature like short story has depicted the theme of widowhood as an important issue. Widows have to undergo various physical and mental problems in Hindu society. "Examining some literary

representations of the widow can be of aid towards understanding the societal perception and comprehension of women belonging to this social category” (Priyadarsini 63). The question of Hindu widowhood has come into prominence in literature and the real life.

This study is delimited within few translated English versions of Nepali short stories that have presented Hindu widows. Different writers’ different stories sketched Hindu widows are purposively selected to explore the variety of social conceptions and treatments to widows in the Hindu society and to present how different short story writers deal with the problem of widows in specific conditions in Hindu societies of Nepal. “The multiplicity of representations is indicative of the fact that there is diversity both in the perception of a widow and her imagined subjectivity and of widowhood experiences across various socio-cultural contexts” (Priyadarsini 66). It has used an exploratory qualitative method and the new criticism (Tate, Wimsatt, Brooks, Warren). From a new critic’s perspective, the tensions (traditions and change), ambiguity, imagery (symbols, metaphors and similes) and conflicts in the texts are analysed to explore the conditions of Hindu widows, the discriminatory behaviours to widows and how viewpoints to widows are formed and transformed. It also provides a humanistic bent. How do characters’ behaviour, appearance, dialogue and interaction show the theme of Hindu widows in the stories? How do images and ambiguity used in the texts reinforce the understanding of the Hindu widows? This paper explores how Hindu socio-cultural norms, attitudes and practices affect the widowhood with the viewpoints of new criticism in the selected stories.

### **Representations of a Hindu Widow in Koirala’s “To the Lowlands”**

The setting of Bisheswar Prasad Koirala’s “To the Lowlands” begins with the symbols of “morning”, “the confluence of two rivers” that indicate the emotions, sexuality and positive hopeful life: “Morning came to the confluence of the Sunkosi and Tamakosi rivers” (201). Only strong few persons without fear can cross the river: “the trees and shrubs seemed to stand back in awe” (201). The men were on the way to the lowlands for earnings and new life; they work as coolie if they get works. They stayed at the house of a widow. The widow is compared with ‘a swan’ and poor men are ‘crows’: “the widow in their midst ... was a swan among a flock of crows” (202). The image of ‘swan’ symbolizes purity, spirituality, innocence, grace, beauty, loyalty,

devotion, monogamy and pleasure of a widow at her personal sacrifice. As a swan mates once in a lifetime, a Hindu woman devotes to the husband in her life. It also expresses a contradictory meaning of love and death. “The Hindu-Indian tradition again and again imprints in the hearts and minds of the women that women should obey her husband, undergo suffering and should be chaste. If they violate this tradition they will face the same problems as the Hindu epic women faced” (Sahoo 65). Therefore, the symbol of ‘swan’ truly represents the condition of a Hindu widow who loves to live a lively life but the Hindu society and culture drags the Hindu widow near to death. The symbol of “crows” mean the mediator between life and death; in the Hindu society, men make the life of women or pull them to the death.

The widow as a mother gave shelter and food (*chiura* and sugar) to the “four homeless people beggars or coolies” (202) in the Lowlands. The widow was young beautiful and cultured woman, and she looked at the young Gore and sympathized more to him: “the widow was looking at Gore”, and “she added to Gore’s share from her own” (202). This indicates the psychological romantic attachment of the widow with the young Gore; that seems odd and dishonesty for Hindu patriarchal society.

Hindu family considers a widow as mean woman who causes the death of her husband, and therefore they attempt to put her aside from their family. This understanding and behaviour make a widow’s life worse and push her to the death. The widow says, “I’m on my way to the lowlands. I have no husband. My in-laws are not blind. My brother-in-law was disrespectful. I couldn’t stay in that house with no husband” (202). In the Hindu society, a widow confronts such problems. The family minimizes the basic needs, food, and shelter for the widow, and physically or psychologically force to leave the house. The family members consider the widow burden and unfortunate. The death of the husband poses financial, social, cultural and familial problems to live in the family. The widow is not treated well by her in-laws; the in-laws misbehave with her with verbal and physical abuse, insulting and indifference.

Although her brother-in-law does not respect her, the widow has humanity; she empathized to the four homeless and hungry people although they were not her relatives: one of them said to her, “Why should you feel fond of us? We are not your husband, your sons, your father?” the widow said, “But you are people, nonetheless”

(202). The widow expects the treatment as human to her from her in-laws. But she has been disrespected from the family. She left the house and followed the unknown four jobless poor people to the lowlands. This event shows her great pains experienced in the house: "I couldn't stand anymore of my in-laws' complaints. And the place where my husband died filled me with dread". The family misbehave the widow, and she "wants to set up a lovely home in the lowlands" (203). This shows her condition in the family of the dead husband.

Four men and a widow moved on to the lowlands; not all are well familiar with each other. On the way, Gore was tired and walked slowly behind. The widow stopped to wait for him, and she put her white cloth on his head to avoid the direct sun on his head. The widow about thirty years old and Gore about twenty-five trudged behind other three people. The widow expressed her suppressed desires for life and sexuality with the next man (Sharma 41). The widow was fond of Gore and talked with Gore: "How old are you, after all? Settle down in a home of your own! Look after a wife; bring up children! How much longer can you go on like this?" Abruptly, she suddenly asked him, "Don't you like women, then?" She expressed her psychology of remarrying with a young man Gore and wished to settle in the lowlands. She proposed Gore, "In the lowlands, I shall set up home and grow some crops. But a home's not a home without a man. So, I just thought— why don't you and I set up house together?" (203). The marriage proposal from the side of women was shocking thing in the traditional Hindu society, and the society did not imagine that the widow can propose a man to marry her. The widow shows her dysfunctional behaviour from the viewpoint of Hindu culture imposed upon widows. Gore was also from the traditional Hindu society; "Gore looked at the widow in astonishment." Something that is unusual and unfamiliar causes surprise to individuals; the widow was not normally allowed to marry in the Hindu society although there has increased widow remarriage in the present time.

The widow read Gore's face and concluded that he would not marry her. She conveyed her wish to settle down her life and endeavoured to convince him: "Am I not good enough for you? So, what if I'm old? My longing is like a name in my heart. Won't I ever have children? Won't I ever have sons and daughters, a home of my own, a man of my own?" (204). The widow revealed her desire to have a husband and children and settle down in the lowlands. She asked rhetorical questions that she had rights to

remarry and give birth to children. “The widow was on the verge of tears. She blushed, hung her head, and walked on in silence.” This event truly portrays the condition of Hindu widows in Nepali society. She again sought to persuade Gore to be newly-weds and spent the rest of life easily: “Gore, I have a little jewellery. Some money, too. We could buy some land. I could make a home. If you were mine, it would all be yours” (204). The poor Gore does not have money even to have food; therefore, he thinks that her jewellery and little money can be the source for his living.

The next morning Gore stole the widow’s jewellery and money and disappeared. “The widow's heart was heavy. She was surprised by her companions' lack of concern. Were they not even the slightest bit saddened by the disappearance of someone who had been their comrade through such hard times? She began to collect her belongings, and then her heart came into her mouth— the bag of jewels was gone!” This indicates how people cheat widows in the society. One of them said, “Gore must have taken them. So, they're stolen now, and I'm not surprised.” The family members and other people swindle widows, and exploit them variously. Then the widow lost her hope to live a life again: “I'd thought it all out, what I'd do with those jewels. I was going to buy some land, get married again, set up home, have a son. . . . Now my hopes are all destroyed.” She wept and wailed loudly” (204). Wealth and money had been the major problems of the widow. She worried about her food and shelter and more about her desire of new family life. The narrator reports:

She was in the twilight of her youth now. She had hoped that her jewels and her money would attract a young man to her, a man she could make her own. She had longed to fulfill the dream of her youth: her own little home, sons and daughters. It had all collapsed like a house of cards. She imitated her companions and gazed with joyless eyes down to the plains in the south. (204)

There was no hope for better life for the widow. She did not have money; therefore, she was driven to backward sections of the society. The widow’s complete economic dependence on others made her life vulnerable in the society. “In a Hindu society, religious and cultural practices have maintained implicit and explicit rules” (Tiwari and Bhattarai 50) upon widows. In this story, the widow in silence follows the men to the lowlands after Gore steals her ornament and money. “Symbolic ideas of a cultural system are usually given social expression in ritualised pattern” (Chakravarti 2248).

Thus, this story “To the Lowlands” has presented the real situation of widowhood in the Hindu society.

### **Widowhood Portrayed in Prema Shah’s “A Husband”**

“A Husband” written by Prema Shah presents the psychological condition of a Hindu widow in the Nepali society. After the husband expires, the wife becomes a widow and has to suffer too much in her life because of the people’s treatment to her in Hindu society. The widow named Nirmala “looked pale and tired” (278) after husband died. She involved in making up her sister Urmila’s face because a young boy had come to see her sister Urmila. For the widow Nirmala, “The whole affair seemed quite unreal: cream, powder, lipstick, rouge” (278). A widow was not allowed to make up in traditional Hindu society. “Her mascara-rimmed eyes were too tired to dance here and there with the liveliness they'd once had, and there was no longer any zest for life in her heart.” The widow lost her energy and joy from life, and she has to trudge in her rest of life. This is the injustice to a woman whose husband expired. “Although Urmila turned and smiled at her, she felt stung by her sister's total beauty. Everything froze to ice inside her” (279). Nirmala also wanted to make up like her sister but Hindu culture did not allow her and she suppressed her desire to make up her own face. Her sister’s make up and beautiful face hurt Nirmala. The widow had been jealous at her sister’s beauty after she did make up.

Nirmala suddenly plucked the flower from her hair and tore it to shreds. Urmila was shocked.

"Why did you do that, sister?"

Nirmala's fair, slender face broke into a sweat. She stared wildly at Urmila, and then, without thinking, she plucked the tika from her sister's brow. (279)

This indicates Nirmala’s dysfunctional behaviour; she “experiences some sorts of psychological problems over the course of [her] life” (Tyson 101). It demonstrates the widow’s discontent with her circumstances where a widow is eschewed using make up. She performed her anger, resentment and disgust against the Hindu society by throwing her sister’s flower and *tika*. The widow Nirmala was psychologically disturbed because of the Hindu socio-cultural norms about the widows.

"Mother! Nirmala, child, what's this you're doing?"

Nirmala jumped, and the lipstick she had been running along her lips fell from her hand. In the mirror she saw Godavari standing in the doorway. And she saw herself, made up like a butterfly. She felt shaken— she did not know what on earth she could have been thinking of to make herself up like this. Crushed by the enormity of her deed, she stared fixedly into the mirror' as Godavari confronted her.

"I see, Nirmala, my child! So, you're making yourself up as well, are you? And look— you're wearing a tika, too! You, a woman with no husband!" (279)

The widow Nirmala desired to make up her face but Hindu people denied so. These happenings represent the Hindu socio-cultural norms and a widow's psychology in her life. The Hindu patriarchal society does not allow a widow to put a *tika*. She had to suppress her desire and pleasure, and the suppressed desire got outlet. In the Hindu society, widows are allowed to only wear white clothes, *sari* and they are forbidden to wear *pote* and *sindoor*, a red powder that is put on the forehead of married Hindu women. This Hindu culture psychologically tortures widows. "Nirmala poured out the rest of the water from the glass and hurriedly rubbed the makeup from her face." The widow hurriedly washed her makeup because she is worried about Hindu socio-cultural practices that a widow should not wear *tika*.

"Godavari, I beg you, don't tell anyone! Please don't tell anyone!"

"Would I talk about your private affairs?" Godavari went out, smiling.

Nirmala felt thoroughly ashamed of her weakness. She hadn't been able to hide it from Godavari. What would Godavari tell everyone now? She'd exaggerate the whole affair. Nirmala's face turned red, and she wiped away the rest of the rouge and powder with her handkerchief.

"If mother or elder brother had seen me made up like this. . . ! Or Urmila . . . !" (281)

The widow experienced that she had done a great crime by making up her own face. She begged with Godavari and feared with her elder brother, her sister Urmila and mother if they knew her makeup. "His driver, she assumed. He started to whistle when he saw Nirmala; this she disliked, and so she returned to her room." The unknown driver also teased Nirmala. The widow Nirmala accidentally entered her elder brother's room where she met a young man who had come to see her sister Urmila. The young man held her hand and felt warm; she began to dream of having a husband.

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She did not sit down but trembled all over. The man shifted his seat until he was much closer to her. "Sit down for a minute, won't you?" He tugged gently at the edge of her veil, and she offered no resistance. After a moment, he took hold of her hands and set her down close beside him. There she sat, nonplussed. The warmth of his touch consoled her a little. She began reassembling her fragmented dreams. . . . Gardens full of flowers, a sky full of flowers, a road covered with flowers. (282)

Nirmala dreamt of having a husband in the flowery environment. This event exposes the psyche of the widow Nirmala to remarry a young man and live a happy life. But Hindu socio-cultural practices dishonour the widow; Nirmala panicked and stampeded for the exit.

Then the long dream was shattered again, as she felt a sharp pain in her left cheek. She put her hand to her face and felt that it was hot and red. She stood up so quickly it made her feel giddy, and the man laughed unkindly. She looked at him distrustfully. But he stood up carelessly and, without a word, walked over to the window that looked out over the street. She felt like telling him that he was unfaithful and slapping him back in the face. But she didn't raise a hand. Who was he to her? He was Urmila's man. . . . She felt chilled. Then she rushed out of the room and met Urmila in the hallway. . . . Nirmala shoved her against the wall. (282)

Her dream was smashed when her husband expired and disintegrated again when she met a man who had come to see her sister Urmila. Nirmala was psychologically shattered not only because of her husband's death but also because of Hindu socio-cultural beliefs. Nirmala possessed passion and lust, and desired maintaining physical beauty and intimacy with a man as her husband. She could not show her desire and panic to her family members and society because of Hindu practices. She attempted to deny and avoid her desires for life and lust. She could not console her psyche, and "she took two sleeping tablets from the bottle on her table and gulped them down. Then she laid her head on her pillow and let out the sobs that were hiding inside her. She wanted to hide herself from the Hindu society. "Because the conscious mind is not aware of its submerged counterpart, it may mistake the real causes of behaviour. . . . Our actions are the result of forces we do not recognize and therefore cannot control" (Dobie 56).

Nirmala had ignored the patriarchal Hindu perspectives to a widow and attempted to shatter the Hindu assumption but the mentally preoccupied assumptions in men caused her pathetic and feeble conditions. Nirmala as a widow in the Hindu society was psychologically disturbed and totally shattered; such Hindu norms prescribed to widows should be rejected for humanity.

Widows are normally presented as helpless; widows experience abuse and harassment from family members and other men.

A woman who is a widow is discriminated against, abused, harassed and deprived of social and economic rights, including property rights. There are many cases of young widows being vulnerable and victimized - both sexually and emotionally - within the family and in their communities. Religious beliefs, cultural values and social norms further prohibit the young women from taking part in any family or public activities. (Tiwari and Bhattarai 58)

Widows are restricted in various religious functions. To control and contain the ungoverned sexuality of the widow, the laws of Manu prescribes for her a regime of harsh and continuous self-flagellation and self-deprivation (Manu V.157-61) while to enforce the ban on remarriage, she must also endure the process of sensual and aesthetic mortification that entails divesting the body of all ornaments (cited in Kane 584). These writers have drawn attention to “the lifelong condemnation of the widow to a life deprived of all the good things of life and sexual exploitation by male members of the family or society” (Basu 228). In a Hindu society, widows have to control their sexual desire and manage their economic status to care of themselves and family members. Widows are often mistreated by the family members and other men in the society. The widows’ “psychological problem is a part of being human” (Tyson 102), sense of self. The widow experienced low self-esteem, insecure sense of self, fear of abandonment, fear of betrayal and fear of intimacy with other men in Hindu society of the story.

### **Conclusion**

The above discussion has exposed the rendition of socio-cultural conditions of widows in Nepali patriarchal Hindu society in B. P. Koirala’s “To the Lowlands” and Prema Shah’s “A Husband”. A widow is considered as a burden by the family and is

psychologically and/or physically forced to leave the home. Strict Hindu rituals and patriarchal customs are imposed upon the widows; the injustice and discrimination to the widows make their life miserable and inhuman. The widows are not allowed to make up and remarry in Hindu society; even men hesitate to marry widows. The widows feel insecurity in their life. Although the women from the above-discussed stories were widows, they were young women, they had passion for lustful desires and life, and they desired a husband and children but could not attain due to the Hindu presumptions about the widows.

The writers have focused on the suffering of widows under Hindu patriarchy: every plot event, character, tension, image, ambiguity and conflict have contributed to the representation of the subject of Hindu widowhood in the stories. Women's sense of self is provided only in her relationship with men. Therefore, the widows expressed their desire to have husband to live in the society. They thought they would feel security from humiliation, suspicion, hatred and various violence in patriarchal Hindu society if they remarried with men. In the past, widows had to physically bear *sati* tradition, but nowadays widows have to psychologically undergo *sati* although *sati* tradition was abolished and the practice of remarriage of widows is increasing. The analysis of widowhood in literature aids to understand the conditions of widows in Hindu society of Nepal. Further research on B P Koirala's and Prema Shah's works may be from the perspectives of the psychoanalysis, feminism, Marxism, and reader response theory.

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