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**INTERSECTIONALITY AND MARGINALIZATION: EXPLORING THE TRAUMA OF  
WIDOWS IN MAMONI RAISOM GOSWAMI'S IN THE SHADOW OF THE DIVINE  
FLUTE PLAYER**

**Gitarthi Goswami<sup>1</sup>, Farddina Hussain<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Women's Studies, Gauhati University.

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Gauhati University.

gitarthi1990@gmail.com<sup>1</sup>, fardinah@gauhati.ac.in<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:**

This paper explores the complex socio-cultural conditions faced by widows, focusing on the intersection of gender, class, and caste in Indian society. Drawing on literary works such as *In the Shadow of the Divine Flute Player* by Goswami, it examines how the experience of widowhood is shaped not only by the loss of a husband but also by the broader social structures of patriarchy, caste, and class. The paper applies the framework of intersectionality, which highlights the interconnectedness of various aspects of identity, to understand how the widows' lives are shaped by multiple layers of oppression. Through the characters of Saudamini, Sashiprova, and Mrinalini, the paper analyzes how upper-caste and lower-caste widows experience marginalization differently, with the former facing ritualistic and emotional isolation and the latter enduring economic hardships and social exclusion. Additionally, the paper discusses the psychological trauma experienced by widows due to cultural expectations, including celibacy and social alienation. The concept of acculturation is also used to explain the process by which widows adapt to dominant cultural norms while struggling to retain their individual identities. The study underscores how the intersection of gender, class, and caste creates a unique form of oppression for widows, with significant consequences for their social, emotional, and psychological well-being.

**Keywords:** *Widowhood, Patriarchy, Intersectionality, Identity, Trauma*

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## **Introduction**

Discrimination against women can be understood through various societal institutions, such as family, marriage, class, and the caste system, where female sexuality is often misunderstood or misrepresented. This paper aims to explore the subordination of widows through the lenses of class and caste, focusing on Mamoni Raisom Goswami's novel *In the Shadow of the Divine Flute Player* as the primary text.

According to Louis Dumont and Michael Moffatt, the caste system operates as a system of consensual values – shared beliefs accepted by both the dominant and the dominated groups. Caste-based exploitation is seen as more profound than class-based exploitation because it strips individuals of their identity and dignity, while class-based exploitation primarily denies them economic power or status.

Both class and caste hierarchies play significant roles in Indian society. Caste hierarchy is grounded in notions of ritual purity, whereas Class hierarchy is based on political and economic status. Despite their differences, both systems are rooted in exploitation and dominance. In Brahmanical society, caste hierarchy is closely tied to ideas of purity: Brahmins are seen as pure, while Shudras are considered as impure. When a Brahmin interacts with a Sudra, the former is considered 'polluted' or 'contaminated' by association. These ideas of 'purity' and 'impurity' foster alienation among marginalized or subordinated groups.

Within these socio-economic structures, caste is a key factor in understanding the condition of widows in society. Caste not only enforces subordination but also amplifies the trauma experienced by widows, making it a significant aspect in analyzing their social position.

## **Factors Responsible for the Conditions of the Widows:**

The condition of the widows is dependent on various factors like religious, social, economic and psychological. The religious institutions like the Satras are influential in controlling widow's sexuality. The Satras pose a threat to their independence by emphasizing on women's chastity

and purity. The widows also face injustice and unequal treatment as compared to men within the same social and religious framework. The priests within the Satras can enjoy more privileges than the widows. They can pursue their physical desires according to their own will. They have every right to indulge in innumerable relationships and are also entitled to marriage outside their own caste. But the widows are viewed as commodities and their sexuality is viewed as something which requires strict monitoring and control. As a result of this, they are also denied access and participation in social functions.

The widows also suffer from economic inequality. They have no one to support them financially after the death of their husbands. So they have to devote themselves to the activities of the temple in order to earn something for their last rituals. Being left with little or no choice for any opportunity to work, they are often dependent on some external source for their living.

The women also experience alienation and depression due to rigid social norms and conditions. Many widows become habituated to these norms whereas some are rebellious and are seen to question the validity of such norms as seen in the character of Durga in *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. She is a symbol of resistance. Her rebellion against the rigid norms of the Satra challenges the patriarchal structure that confine her.

### **Role of Class and Caste in Determining the Widows Condition:**

The condition of widows is shaped by a combination of religious, social, economic, and psychological factors. Religious institutions, particularly the Satras, play a crucial role in regulating the sexuality of widows. The Satras reinforce the notion of female chastity and purity, which limits the widows' independence. These institutions emphasize the idea that widows must maintain a state of moral and physical restraint, while men, including priests within the Satras, are granted privileges. Unlike widows, priests can engage in multiple relationships and even marry outside their caste, without facing the same societal scrutiny. In contrast, widows are often treated as commodities, with their sexuality tightly controlled, leading to their exclusion from social functions and events.

Economic inequality is another significant factor in the condition of widows. After the death of their husbands, widows often lack financial support and are forced to rely on religious institutions or other external sources for survival. Many widows are left with limited or no opportunities to earn a living independently, and their only means of subsistence is tied to the temple or similar establishments, where they work primarily for their funeral rituals.

Psychologically, widows suffer from feelings of alienation and depression. The rigid social norms surrounding widowhood often lead to emotional distress. While some widows accept these societal constraints, others, like the character Durga in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. Durga represents a symbol of rebellion against the oppressive norms of the Satra, challenging the patriarchal structure that confines her. Through her character, we see the emotional and psychological toll that these oppressive norms have on women, and the potential for resistance against them.

### **Caste as a Tool to Control Female Sexuality:**

In order to analyze the relationship between caste and gender we need to examine how reproduction is organized and controlled in India.

“Class, Caste and Gender are inextricably linked: they interact with and shape each other, the structure of marriage, sexuality and reproduction is the fundamental basis of the caste system. It is also fundamental to the way inequality is sustained: the structure of marriage reproduces both class and caste inequality and thus the entire production system through its tightly controlled system of reproduction” (Chakravarty, 2018:25).

Gender subordination is rooted in the system of endogamous marriages in India because endogamous marriages does not provide any scope for the growth and diversity of different castes. In fact, it helps in the dominance of one particular caste. However, this is prevalent within the Brahmanical society. This practice of endogamy can be traced back to the ancient times and such practices were common both in the Dharmashastras and the Ramayana. In Ramayana,

Rama declines Surpanakha's proposal of marriage because she was a Brahmin and he was a Kshatriya.

Subordination of women is basically rooted in Brhamanical Patriarchy. "Brahmanical Patriarchy implies the model of Patriarchy outlined in the Brhamanical Prescriptive text to be enforced by the coercive power of the king, or those who act on behalf of the king." (Chakravarty, 2018:53). Within the Brahmanical patriarchal order, women have to face subordination because there is stringent control of female sexuality within the system. The ban on remarriage of the upper caste women enhances the control of female sexuality. Women are not allowed to remarry after the death of their husband. This kind of control over female sexuality is seen in the case of upper caste widows. In the novel, *In the Shadow of the divine flute player*, a critical analysis of the life of the widows shows that this kind of control over female sexuality was prominent in the society. Upper caste women are not allowed to mix up with men of lower caste and they are also prohibited from having sexual access with lower caste women.

The origin of female subordination can be traced back to the ancient texts like Dharmashastra and Manusmriti. The 'VarnaSamkara' theory is rooted on the principles of exogamy. Where marriage takes place between different castes. It goes against the principles of endogamy and allows for the mixture of different castes. According to this theory there are two principles: Hypergamy and Hypogamy. Hypergamy takes place when a man of higher caste marries a woman of a lower caste. On the other hand, Hypogamy takes place when a high caste woman has union with lower caste man. According to the norms, Hypergamy is regarded as pure and natural as it provides scope for the production of new caste, whereas Hypogamy is regarded as unnatural and contemptible and such a union often leads to severe punishment and is also considered as a crime. Control of female sexuality and subordination of women is rooted in the distribution of land and property. A person's blood is considered to be bilateral according to the ideology of the caste system i.e., a person inherits the caste of both parents. Therefore, according to the Dharmashastras ideally both parents must be of the same caste in order to achieve ritual quality and anyone who violates these norms would be severely punished.

Although the Brahmanical text advocates strict adherence to the social norms, yet they also provide ground for non-conformist attitude by women who try to bring disruption to the entire Hindu social organization by defying the norms laid down for them by the Brahmanical social order. However, in order to prevent such chaos and disruption in the social order, there was a need for the interference of a powerful force who would control the sexuality of women and this kind of sexual subordination was basically enforced by the king. Upper caste women are meant to preserve and protect the caste and the rituals laid down by their caste, therefore, their sexuality has to be strictly controlled.

The right to private property and patrilineal succession of land were the two factors responsible for the control of female sexuality. Control over female sexuality meant only legitimate reproduction, which would not allow anyone to have any illicit relationships outside marriage and thereby ensure legal birth of children. Female sexuality had to be managed and controlled in order to channelize marriage into legitimate motherhood. A woman's right to land ownership was dependent on her legitimate relationship i.e., in order to enjoy the property rights, she had to confine her physical relationships only to her legitimate partner i.e. her husband. Any possible relationship outside marriage would curtail her ownership of private property/land legally because as per the societal norms right to property norms was dependent on patrilineal succession. So if a woman has a relationship outside marriage then she will not be granted any land ownership because she might bear many children from her relationship with her illegitimate partners.

The subordinate position of women can be traced back to the epics and myths. In Manusmriti, Manu allotted to women the habit of lying, she is depicted as an epitome of anger, meanness, treachery and bad conduct (IX.7). Women are considered to be impure since such times because they are the recipients of the guilt of Brahmacide, the heinous scene of killing a Brahmana, along with the Earth and Trees which was shifted upon them by Indra, when he killed Viswarupa. Manu who is considered to have a profound impact on Brahmana ideologies states that women must be guarded by their husbands regardless of their age, so that the wife cannot have children

born from their illegitimate relationship with other man. By carefully guarding the wives, man will be able to “preserve his family, lineage and the purity of the offspring”(Chakravarty, 2018:89)

So even reproduction which was the exquisite right of women was under control. By considering women as sinful and vulnerable to the external environment, man tried to control the reproductive right of women, because if the sexuality of women is uncontrolled and unprotected then that would pose a threat to the entire social order.

Women's subordination in general and the control of her sexuality in particular can be traced back to the customs and practices during those times. For eg, the 'Pativrata' practice was prevalent during those times. They could only observe fasting in name of their husbands. In terms of performing domestic rituals too, women didn't have any right. They were part of the rituals but they could not perform the rituals by themselves. The practice of 'Pativrata' was another means to control women's sexuality because by practicing this, women would not only maintain fidelity towards their husband but would also remain chaste and pure. A woman's identity is always seen as relational. In childhood, her identity is established in terms of her father in widowhood under the husband and in widowhood under the son. A husband's status is also measured in terms of the wife's fidelity towards him.

The gradual shift of agro based economy to private ownership of land also enhanced the need to have control over female sexuality. Patrilineal succession of land requires legitimate motherhood, so in order to ensure legitimate reproduction female sexuality had to be managed and controlled. As per the codes mentioned in the ancient texts, women subordination took place at three levels, firstly at the ideological level, where women were compelled to abide by concepts like 'Pativrata', second was the right to discipline and the third was the power of the king to punish women for their errant behavior. 'Pativrata' was regarded as the only means of women to attain chastity. In Ramayana, Sita was the epitome of the 'Pativrata' norm. Sita had to go through an ordeal to prove her fidelity towards her husband, when she was accused as impure by Rama, in order to prove her fidelity to her husband, she had to go through the 'Agni-Pariksha'. She invoked the god of fire 'Agni', to prove her fidelity by bringing her out from fire without burning

and accordingly she was successful in the ordeal and thereafter she stands as an epitome of the 'Pativrata' norm.

The second level of subordination allowed men to guard his wife and even use physical punishment against women who violates the codes laid down for them by the patriarchal structure. The ancient myths also tells us stories about errant women like Renuka, the wife of the sage Jamadagni , who are not capable of sustaining their devotion towards their husbands. Initially she was so chaste that she could mould mud bowls out of wet mud and carry water in them for her husband. One day she happened to see the image of a passing Gandharva flying overhead and instantly that induced infatuation in her and thought to herself how handsome he was. The moment she had that thought the devotion towards her husband was destroyed and that day she couldn't mould the clay bowl to carry water for her husband. The husband out of rage, ordered his son Parashurama to cut off his mother's head and the son followed the order of his father obediently and acted accordingly. Chaste women do not require force to remain devoted towards their husband but when they are not chaste, force can be used to keep them committed towards their husband. According to the customs, a man is believed to lose progeny if his wife shows infidelity towards him.

The Brahmanical texts and popular literature like the 'Buddhist Jataka' text advocates the use of violence for the ones who violates the rules laid by patriarchy. This was the second level to control women's sexuality. The ancient texts also ensures the loss of progeny for man whose wife violates the rules laid down by Patriarchy and indulge in adulterous relationship. The third level of control over female sexuality was vested upon the king. The king had the right to punish any women who would indulge in adulterous relationship because adultery was considered as a crime then.

### **Religion and the position of the Widows:**

Religion plays a significant role in regulating female sexuality, often restricting the personal freedom and agency of women, particularly widows. In MamoniRaisomGoswami's novel *In the Shadow of the Divine Flute Player*, the character of Saudamini illustrates the oppressive societal



norms that widows face in traditional Indian society. Through Saudamini, the author critiques the societal exclusion, ritualistic practices, and the lack of personal agency imposed on widows. Saudamini's mental anguish and her resistance to these constraints highlight the resilience of marginalized women who are forced into painful and rigid societal molds.

Saudamini, a widow, begins a relationship with a Christian youth after her husband's death. However, the lover is never named in the novel, drawing attention to the religious connotations surrounding their relationship. In Indian society, it was considered a severe violation for a woman to engage with a man outside her caste, let alone another religion. Saudamini's relationship with a man from a different caste and religion makes her a social outcast, further threatening the existing social order. Her parents, fearing the loss of their social status, decide to send her to Vrindavan, hoping that her separation from the Christian lover would erase the 'impurity' she had supposedly brought upon herself. This demonstrates the intersection of religious and social pressures that governed the behavior of widows and dictated their personal relationships.

Religion does not, however, play a neutral role in the lives of all widows. While Saudamini faces severe consequences for her relationship, her fellow widow, Sashiprova, continues her affair with a priest without facing the same level of punishment. This contrast highlights how religious and social norms are not applied equally, with women's actions being judged differently based on their caste, class, and social standing. Saudamini's quest for a job also illustrates the intertwining of economic, social, and religious factors. Despite her qualifications, she faces barriers in finding employment due to the rigid patriarchal and caste structures that limit her agency. Her mother, Anupama, recognizes the family's financial strain and encourages her to seek work, but the social and economic restrictions on Saudamini render her efforts futile. Anupama, her mother understood the condition of her daughter and told her daughter repeatedly, "There is a vacancy in Shahji's Girl's School and Gyan Godari's Laxmibai Balika Vidyalaya might also appoint you if you ask them. Remember no one has left any fat inheritance for you, and the only thing your father will leave for you will be the burden of his beloved dispensary." (Bhattacharya, 2019:92)

The novel also emphasizes the role of caste in the policing of women's sexual behavior. In a caste-based society, adultery is viewed as a serious crime, particularly for women from higher castes. Ancient texts such as the Arthashastra and Manusmriti prescribe severe punishments for women who engage in relationships outside of their caste. According to these texts, a woman who violates her duty to her husband is subject to public humiliation or even capital punishment. The purity of women was seen as essential to maintaining the purity of the caste system itself, and deviations from these norms were considered a threat to the social order.

The enforcement of patriarchal norms often involves violence, both physical and psychological. In the case of Saudamini, the society indirectly controls her sexual desires by prohibiting her relationship with the Christian youth, reinforcing the idea that women's sexual impulses must be tightly controlled to uphold societal purity. The novel reflects a historical period when practices like Sati (widow burning) and child marriage were prevalent. Child marriage, particularly pre-pubertal marriage, was rooted in the belief that a woman's womb was pure before puberty and that her sexuality was the property of her husband. After puberty, a woman's body was considered 'polluted' through contact with other men, which reinforced the idea of purity and impurity tied to female sexuality.

Goswami's portrayal of Saudamini and the societal constraints she faces demonstrates how deeply religion, caste, and patriarchy shape the lives of widows, controlling not just their economic opportunities but their personal desires and relationships. The intersection of these social forces creates a complex web of restrictions that widows must navigate, and Goswami's work highlights the resistance and resilience of women within this framework.

### **Widowhood and the loss of Personal Identity:**

In Brahmanical patriarchy, a woman's identity was traditionally understood solely through her relationship with her husband. When a woman loses her husband, her personal identity is often lost as well. She no longer has a social existence outside of her role as a wife, and her worth is primarily linked to her role in reproduction. The practice of Sati, where a widow was expected to

die by jumping into her husband's funeral pyre, exemplifies the extreme ways in which a woman's existence was tied to her husband. Failure to conform to such practices led to marginalization and ostracism from patriarchal society. As Chakravarty (2018) notes, "Once the woman ceases to be a wife, especially a childless wife, she ceases to be a person; she was then neither a daughter nor a daughter-in-law."

However, the experience of widowhood differs between the upper and lower castes. Lower-caste women were often allowed to remarry, as this could ensure reproduction and contribute to agricultural labor. In contrast, upper-caste women were expected to remain isolated after their husband's death. This distinction arises from differences in economic roles: upper-caste women, who did not engage in agricultural work, were expected to focus on domestic tasks and uphold the "jajmani" system, while lower-caste women were involved in agricultural production and could remarry to sustain this process.

For upper-caste women, widowhood represents not only the loss of a husband but also the loss of personal identity. Before marriage, their identity was tied to their father; after marriage, it was defined by their role as a wife. If childless, the loss of a husband further exacerbated this erasure of identity, as a woman's existence was often understood in relation to her ability to produce sons. The death of a husband for an upper-caste woman thus signifies social death, as she is no longer seen as valuable in a society that equates her worth with reproduction.

The marginalization of upper-caste widows is more severe than that of lower-caste widows due to the stricter societal expectations placed on them. Upper-caste women are subjected to more rigid patriarchal norms, with codes of honour, shame, and respect heavily regulating their behavior. This exacerbates their sense of isolation and identity crisis, as they are excluded from social life and often treated as outcasts. Consequently, many widows experience a lifetime of loneliness and despair, trapped in a society that defines their worth by their relationship to men.

### **Trauma of the Widows in the Shadow of the Divine Flute Player:**

In Mamoni Raisom Goswami's novel *In the Shadow of the Divine Flute Player*, the plight of widows in Assamese society is explored through the character of Saudamini. The widows in the

novel are marginalized and bound by rigid social norms, which cause them emotional trauma and turmoil. Widows are subjected to harsh rituals and are often denied the opportunity to live life on their own terms after the death of their husbands. In Assamese society, widows are viewed as symbols of bad luck and are socially excluded, forced to lead lives of isolation and despair.

The widows in the novel grapple with an identity crisis. They are required to suppress their personal desires and aspirations to conform to societal expectations. The tension between individual desires and the need to comply with social norms creates an inner conflict. The loss of a husband not only signifies the loss of companionship but also results in the loss of agency, identity, and dignity for the widow. Saudamini's character exemplifies this struggle. She faces intense social alienation, unable to fit into the community of the Radheshyamis, yet also unable to escape it. Her trauma is intensified when her parents decide to send her to Vrindavan after she begins an affair with a Christian lover. The family's decision to isolate her deepens the emotional distress she faces.

Saudamini's trauma is also a result of the cultural expectations imposed on her. As a widow, she is expected to wear white clothing and live a life of seclusion, following the rituals observed by other widows. However, these rituals only exacerbate her trauma as they constantly remind her of her husband's death. The emotional burden of being forced to sever her relationship with the Christian lover further contributes to her psychological and emotional turmoil, impacting her sense of agency and her right to lead a fulfilled life.

Repressed sexual desire plays a key role in Saudamini's trauma. Widows are expected to renounce love and companionship, leading to the suppression of their physical and emotional desires. This repression becomes a source of psychological distress, contributing to the trauma of widowhood. Similarly, the character of Mrinalini also experiences trauma stemming from the loss of personal identity. Her inability to establish her own identity in a society that denies her individuality deepens her psychological distress, raising existential questions of self-worth and purpose.

Saudamini's trauma can be seen as a metaphor for the existential struggles faced by all widows in patriarchal societies. In such societies, women are often regarded as 'other,' and their

identities are defined in relation to men. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is relevant here, as she argues that "man defines woman not in herself, but as relative to him: she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (Beauvoir, 2014:16). The restrictions imposed on widows, which they are forced to follow even against their will, contribute to their trauma. They are trapped in an internal conflict, unable to fully integrate into their community or escape from it due to the social restrictions they face.

### **Widows' Conditions and Intersections of Class and Caste:**

The concept of intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a framework to understand how various aspects of a person's identity—such as 'gender', 'class', 'caste', and 'race'—combine to create different forms of discrimination and marginalization. Intersectionality emphasizes that these social categories do not operate independently but intersect, influencing the experiences and challenges faced by individuals. In the context of the widows, their marginalization is shaped by a combination of their 'gender', 'class', and 'caste', which collectively define their identities and the way they experience oppression.

The theory of intersectionality emerged as a critique of the traditional, class-based frameworks that overlooked how other social identities—particularly 'gender' and 'race'—interact to produce unique forms of inequality. For example, the experiences of discrimination faced by a black woman are not solely shaped by her race or gender in isolation but by the intersection of both, which cannot be understood separately. This is critical in understanding the situation of widows, particularly those in Indian society, where 'class' and 'caste' intersect with 'gender' to create layers of oppression. In the novel *In the Shadow of the Divine Flute Player*, the intersection of 'class' and 'caste' profoundly impacts the lives of widows, especially those from an upper-caste background. Widows, as a group, face multiple forms of oppression:

Gender oppression as women, Class oppression as widows, particularly those from higher social strata, and Caste-based oppression, especially for upper-caste Hindu widows who are subjected to both societal and religious expectations. Widows, particularly those from upper-caste backgrounds, often find themselves subjected to a complex web of restrictions. For instance, a

widow's identity is often tied to her relationship with her husband, and once widowed, she is marginalized from the social structure. The narrative critiques the patriarchal system that enforces gendered roles, where men hold authority over religious texts and traditions, using them to control women's bodies and lives. This societal structure is oppressive, reducing women to their reproductive functions, such as menstruation, childbirth, and sexual purity, often using these to subjugate them.

Through the character of Saudamini, the novel examines how 'class', 'caste', and 'widowhood' intersect. Saudamini, despite being a widow, enjoys certain privileges due to her upper-caste status. She is not forced into poverty or social exclusion like lower-caste widows. However, her widowhood still forces her into a life of ritualistic isolation, controlled by religious and cultural obligations, which dictate that she abstains from personal desires and happiness. Thus, while her social position shields her from extreme poverty, it does not protect her from the emotional and psychological isolation that comes with widowhood in a rigidly patriarchal society.

The concept of acculturation can also help understand the plight of widows in the context of cultural and social change. Acculturation refers to the process by which individuals or groups from one culture come into contact with another, often more dominant culture, and adjust to it. In the case of the widows in the novel, this process occurs as they are forced to adopt the prevailing cultural norms and practices of widowhood in a patriarchal society. However, these widows also retain their original cultural values and traditions, creating a tension between personal identity and societal expectations.

Acculturation, particularly in the form of social pressure, forces widows to adapt to restrictive norms—such as wearing white clothing, leading a celibate life, and renouncing personal desires—while still grappling with their original sense of identity. For characters like Saudamini and Mrinalini, this cultural shift contributes to their trauma, as they must reconcile their individual desires with the demands of society. In this sense, acculturation represents both a psychological and social change, where the widows are coerced into conforming to the dominant cultural norms while struggling to retain a sense of their original self.

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**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the conditions of widows, as portrayed in literary and theoretical contexts, reflect the deep-rooted inequalities in Indian society shaped by gender, class, and caste. The experience of widowhood is not only defined by the loss of a husband but also by the multiple layers of social marginalization that women face due to their gender and social standing. The intersectionality of 'caste', 'class', and 'gender' creates distinct forms of discrimination that vary between upper-caste and lower-caste widows, with the former experiencing emotional and ritualistic isolation and the latter suffering from poverty and exploitation. The analysis of characters like Saudamini and Mrinalini highlights the profound psychological and emotional trauma that widows endure, as they are forced to conform to rigid societal norms. Moreover, the concept of acculturation reveals the tension between personal desires and societal expectations, illustrating the internal conflict that widows face as they navigate their identities in a patriarchal society. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the need to address the systemic nature of widowhood as an intersectional issue, advocating for social reforms that consider the layered experiences of widows in Indian society.

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