SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON WIDOWHOOD[1]

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Anthropology is the comparative study of society and culture, usually practised by the method of participant observation, but its theories and methods can and have been applied to literary texts. In this paper I shall consider the status of the widow in various societies and cultures based on my eclectic reading which ranges from the Bible to modern novels and short stories. In my own fieldwork, conducted in Israel, Wales and Hungary, I have of course encountered many widows and widowers though I have never made a study of their social position, hence my resort to examples taken from a range of literature. I shall not be addressing the problems of widowers, interesting as they are, in this paper.

The social situation of the widow varies with the society, conceived as a structure of relationships and institutions, the culture, which includes norms, values and beliefs, and with the individual who operates within the society and culture[2] that to some extent constrains her. I shall begin with the book of Genesis and then consider the situation of the widow in selected texts from English, Hungarian and Guyanese literature.

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

My first example of the interaction between society, culture and the individual is derived from Genesis chapter 38. This chapter provides us with an

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[2] Of course individuals may belong to one or more societies and cultures simultaneously.

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example of a widow who flouts one norm of her patriarchal and patrilineal society by sleeping with her father-in-law, in order to conform to another norm, namely to produce an heir for her deceased husband so that his social identity, expressed by the perpetuation of his name, may persist even though he is physically dead. The widow is Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah, a founder of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Tamar's first husband, Er, the eldest son of Judah, was killed by God for some unspecified transgression. Since that marriage was childless it became the leviratic obligation of Judah's second son, Onan, to marry and to impregnate his brother's widow so that Er might have an heir. Onan failed to fulfil his duty as a levir by practising *coitus interruptus* with Tamar and he too was killed by God.[3] Judah's third and only surviving son, Shelah, was too young to assume the duty of levir so that Judah ordered Tamar to don widow's garb and to return to her father's home and wait until Shelah had reached sexual maturity. Then Judah promised to recall her. It is clear that Judah having lost two sons married to Tamar, had no intention of honouring his promise to call her back so that she could bear a child for Er. Indeed, his own name was now in jeopardy. Years elapsed without any summons from Judah so that Tamar took the initiative and resorted to unorthodox tactics to fulfil her conjugal duty to Er.

Disguising herself as a prostitute, she solicited her father-in-law and instead of accepting the standard payment for her sexual services, she requested some personal items from him, an essential insurance policy as it turned out. Tamar became pregnant by Judah, who believing she had played the harlot and so dishonoured his family, demanded that she be put to death. At that point the resourceful Tamar flourished Judah's tokens and declared discreetly that she was pregnant by their owner. Judah, realising that Tamar had been more virtuous and honourable than he had been, desisted from further sexual relations with her, which in this case constituted incest. The result of Tamar's stratagem was that she bore twins, who in fact replaced Judah's dead children and who were subsequently grafted on to his lineage, as if they were his legitimate sons.[4]

In this type of patriarchal and patrilineal society a woman's role is one of subordination to her father and subsequently on marriage to her husband or his surrogate. Her status depends on her ability to produce children, especially sons. A childless widow will have little social security in old age. Tamar without her own children was vulnerable. As a mother of sons she could count on their support and she could exercise some influence, if not authority over them and their wives, in her role as mother-in-law and future grandmother. Within this culture her freedom of action was constrained but she could take initiatives within these constraints. Thus Tamar could flout the rules of incest and adultery to produce children for her late husband. In her case her illegitimate means justified her legitimate ends.

[3] Cf. Mars (1984) for a discussion of Onan's crime.
[4] Cf. Genesis 46:12; Number 26:19, 1 Chronicles 2:3; Matthew 1:3.

Tamar was an isolated widow, alone in her father-in-law's household and her own natal kin were shadowy figures who were to accept her as a widow until Judah called her back. She was expected to wait passively but decided to take an active role in her destiny. She is the only woman to feature in the story. The men to whom she is related by marriage, Onan and Judah, treat her badly by failing to fulfil their obligations towards her. By contrast she triumphs by fulfilling her duty to the family into which she has married. Our next example, also from the Bible, features three widows, two of whom support one another in adversity and who eventually achieve their goals.

THE BOOK OF RUTH

The three widows in this story are Ruth, Orpah, and their mother-in-law, Naomi. Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, had emigrated from Bethlehem in Judah to Moab together with their two sons, each of whom had married Moabite women who were named Orpah and Ruth. Elimelech and his two sons who had produced no children had died in Moab leaving the aging widow, Naomi, very embittered. She urges Orpah and Ruth to remain in Moab while she returns to Bethlehem, since she has no more sons to act as levir, nor is she convinced that her daughter-in-law would be prepared to wait if she did remarry and bear sons. Orpah decides to remain in Moab but Ruth insists on accompanying her mother-in-law to her natal home, saying, "Your people are my people. Your God is my God" (Ruth 1:16).

The two women return to Bethlehem and settle in the household of Boaz, a wealthy farmer who is a kinsman of Naomi. As a widow Ruth works in Boaz's cornfield and is favoured by her employer who permits her to glean more corn than is usual. Naomi instructs Ruth to bathe, to put on fine clothes and to lay beside Boaz who is sleeping on his threshing floor. Boaz wakes in the night to find Ruth beside him and asks about her intentions. She tells him that he is her redeemer, *i.e.* levir, since he will redeem her husband's land, which she and Naomi were obliged to pawn to alleviate their poverty. Boaz considers this reply very virtuous but responds that he is not free to act as levir since there is another man more closely related to her late husband and who therefore has a prior claim on Ruth. Boaz approaches this man and suggests that he redeem the land of both widows and act as levir to Ruth. The man waives his claim to Ruth, so that Boaz is now free to marry her in a leviratic union, which he does. Subsequently Ruth bears him a son, Obed, who is the grandfather of King David.

In this example the two widows combine forces to enable Ruth to marry, to produce children for her late husband, and grandchildren for her mother-in-law. Naomi is clearly the dominant person, perhaps by virtue of her age and possibly by her familiarity with Israelite mores. Naomi rewards Ruth for her loyalty by setting

up the liaison with Boaz who conforms to the norms of his society by first supporting the two childless widows and by eventually marrying the younger. As with Tamar, Naomi and Ruth take an active role, within the constraints of their society and culture, to ameliorate their situation, which can only improve if they can find a husband for the younger widow who is capable of producing children. Both Tamar and Ruth exploit their sexuality to find an unorthodox but effective levir to perpetuate their husband's name, and in the case of Ruth, to restore the family fortune.

"THE SON'S VETO"

My next widow is from a different era and from a very different society, namely nineteenth-century, Victorian England. The text is a short story by Thomas Hardy, entitled "The Son's Veto".[5]

A simple, uneducated, rustic girl, Sophy, is employed by a country parson as a parlour maid. The parson is married but his wife dies and he is left as a childless widower, about forty years of age. Sophy realises that the parson, Mr Twycott, will have to shed some of his household staff and offers to resign because a local gardener, Sam Hobson, has proposed to her but her employer requests her to stay on. Shortly afterwards she informs the parson that she has had a tiff with Sam and that the marriage is off. While caring for her employer she injures her leg and becomes lame. Out of pity, and also self-interest, the parson proposes marriage to Sophy, who accepts,

> Sophy did not exactly love him, but she had a respect for him which almost amounted to veneration. Even if she had wished to get away from him she hardly dared refuse a personage so reverend and august in her eyes, and she assented forthwith to be his wife (1987; 126).

In order to escape local censure for his *mesalliance* Mr. Twycott moves to a parish in London where his new wife becomes an isolate. The couple have a son, Randolph, who receives an elite, public school education and who is ashamed of his mother's ungrammatical, rural English and her humble origins. After Tycott's death Sophy finds herself a young widow with a schoolboy son whose career has been mapped out by her late husband; he will study at Oxford after which he will be ordained as an Anglican priest. After the death of her husband, her health, both mental and physical, deteriorates, and she spends much of her time gazing out of the window at passers-by. By chance she sees her old sweetheart, Sam, who is now the manager of a market garden in London and who observes that she is homesick for Wessex. In a spontaneous response she accepts his diagnosis but immediately

[5] Harold Orel (ed.), *Victorian Short Stories: An Anthology.* London: Dent, 1987.

retracts her statement to declare that London is now her home and that she has a son at public school "one of the most distinguished in England". Sam addresses her deferentially, "I forget ma'am, that you've been a lady for so many years." To which she replies,

> 'No, I am not a lady,' she said, sadly. 'I never shall be. But he's a gentleman, and that-makes it-oh, how difficult for me!' (131)

They meet a few times and Sophy's health improves; Sam proposes marriage but she tells him that she has to inform her son and is afraid to do so. Sam informs her that she is the adult not the child and should be in a position to act on her own. Eventually she broaches the subject of remarriage and initially Randolph is in favour until he learns that her intended is a tradesman.

> I am ashamed of you! It will ruin me! A miserable boor! A churl! A clown! It will degrade me in the eyes of all the gentlemen of England! (135)

She hopes that he will relent and waits a few more years before repeating her desire to marry Sam. Finally she approaches Randolph again and seeks his approval for her marriage to Sam. Now an undergraduate and on the way to ordination she suggests it would be advantageous to his career if she got out of his life by marrying and returning to Wessex. Cruelly he makes her bend down and swear on the cross that she will not marry Sam without his consent. She acquiesced hoping that his heart would soften after his ordination. But he remained intransigent, "His education had by this time sufficiently ousted his humanity to keep him quite firm" (136). Subsequently, and consequently, her health deteriorated and she died four years later and was buried in her native village, mourned by her loyal Sam now a successful shopkeeper.

In this class-structured society, Sophy is disadvantaged by her lowly origins, by cultural attitudes to gender, and by her own reluctance to pursue her individual desires and interests. Even as a widow, ostensibly free to decide her own future, she becomes a prisoner of her own socialisation as an uneducated, lower class, woman, who though formally the wife of one gentleman, and the mother of another, has lost her freedom of action. The one man who in terms of class is not a gentleman, Sam Hobson, is a "natural gentleman" who treats her with loving respect and dignity and with whom she flourishes. Although he shows enterprise in advancing his economic position, he too is socialised to consider her a lady so that he cannot press his suit too hard and urge her to defy her snobbish, selfish, bullying son, who is anything but a gentleman and a Christian for all his pretensions.

Randolph is so absorbed into the circle of aristocratic gentlemen as to be totally self-absorbed and egocentric. His lack of filial care and love together with his manifest contempt for his mother's lack of schooling induces her to believe that he is an alien, and she confides to Sam,

> "I almost fancy when I am miserable sometimes that he is not really mine, but one I hold in trust for my late husband. He seems to belong so little to me personally, so entirely to his dead father. He is so much educated and I so little that I do not feel dignified enough to be his mother" (133).

Sophy, who has become a lady by marriage, knows her place. She has been socialised to the point of passivity and resignation though she shows some resistance by daring to go out with Sam while a widow. However she proved unable to take the decisive step to defy her son and assert her right to lead her own life. Her son's callous behaviour in effect condemns her to death. Sophy is psychologically and morally destroyed and her subsequent death merely confirms that psychological destruction. Her plight recalls that of those Indian wives who practised *suttee* on the death of their husbands, except that unlike them she suffered a slow lingering death.

As an individual her submissive character is unlike that of Tamar, Ruth and Naomi, who were socialised in a patriarchal society to accept a passive role but who resisted and took action to pursue their interests and rights.

"THE CIRCUMCISION"

The main character in this novel by Győrgy Dalos, which is set in the 1950s Stalinist Hungary, is Robert (Robi) Singer, a twelve year old, Hungarian, Jewish boy, who is raised by his unnamed, energetic grandmother and his helpless, obese, mother, Erzsi, who is lame as a result of a congenital hip displacement. Both women are widows. Robi's grandfather was taken prisoner by the Russians in World War I and never seen again; his father died a few months after the end of World War II from tuberculosis, which he had contracted in the Forced Labour Brigade.[6]

Although "a half-orphan", Robi had been in several Jewish orphanages since the age of four, having been taken to them by his anonymous grandmother, who was aware that her daughter, Erzsi, was unable to care for herself, let alone for her son. Indeed when Robi returns home at weekend it is he who escorts his mother around town and helps her to cross the road since she is agoraphobic and also hypochondriac. In short she is a helpless, hapless, figure, who has lost her ability to type and who is employed part time as a receptionist on a nominal wage. His grandmother works for the Handkerchief Dyers Cooperative, always hoping to receive her elusive bonus, which she intends to spend on a winter coat for her grandson.

[6] According to Hungary's own Nuremburg laws, Jews were debarred from serving in the army but were conscripted into unarmed labour units, many of whom were sent to the Russian front where they perished in their thousands.

Grandmother is the dynamic, dominant, healthy person in the household, and her daughter, aged forty-two, is still as dependent as when she was a child. Indeed it was Robi's grandmother who engineered Erzsi's marriage when the latter was thirty, to thirty-six year old Bandi who aspired to be an art historian but who had never been gainfully employed. Erzsi lacks any domestic skills and on the one occasion she tries to cook a meal it ends in utter failure. However she does have some limited success in her love life when after vacillating, she has an intermittent, two year, affair with a sixty-plus, unsavoury, married, Jewish tailor which she keeps secret from her mother, but which she confesses to Robi who thus becomes her confidant. Before the affair developed, content with his companionship and averse to sleeping with him, she discusses the situation with Robi, who asks if "she will do it with him". Indignantly she rejects the question and says she is neither a "common pro nor fast". Whereas Robi and his friends knew that a prostitute was a woman who had sex with a man for money, his mother had another definition.

> She considered every woman a whore who cheated on her husband when she should have been giving thanks to the Almighty for not being a widow (73–74).

The lover dies and the grandmother cannot comprehend her daughter's mood. It is Robi who, to help her cope with her grief, suggests that she attend the burial. Erzsi cheers up and grandmother observes: "Poor dear, she won't listen to anybody but her son".

Mother is not the only burden that Robi has to bear since he is approaching his *bar mitzvah*[7] but the ceremony will not be held without his circumcision (*briss*) which should have taken place when he was eight days old.[8] His teacher of religion at the orphanage urges him to undergo the operation together with Robi's best friend, Gábor Blum, another "half-orphan", who had also not been circumcised. Robi is worried about surgery since a botched operation on his hand had left him maimed. Robi's apprehension is reinforced by his grandmother who is unwilling to have him circumcised because she recalled the times during the war when the Arrow Cross[9] men would debag suspected Jewish men and kill them when identified by the lack of a prepuce. She still fears Germany since it was re-arming and moreover there were now two Germanys to worry about. To her relatives, especially her brother-in-law, she supports Rob's circumcision, but covertly she procrastinates and tries to prevent it. Every time she registers Robi in a new Jewish home she rationalises his lack of a *briss*.

[7] Cf. Mars (1990).

[8] Before and after World War II it was not uncommon for Hungarian Jews to refuse to circumcise their sons.

[9] The Arrow Cross were the Hungarian allies of Nazi Germany who were installed in power a few months after the Germans invaded Hungary in 1944.

In terms of her role as a Jewish grandmother she is remiss in her obligation to raise him in the family's religion. She instructs him to reply to anybody who asks his religion to say that he is "a Hungarian Jewish communist. You can't go wrong with that" (45); she encourages him to escort his mother to prayer services of Jews for Jesus; when he comes home at weekend she serves him pork sausage telling him: "You'll be eating enough kosher the rest of the week" (120). Grandmother is also a paid up member of the Communist party and takes Robi with her when she pays her dues to the functionary who tells Robi that it is enough to be a Hungarian communist and to omit mention of his Jewish origin. (The party official, Klein, is himself Jewish.) Robi is close to his grandmother in the physical sense since they share a divan bed, in which she sleeps on the outside so that she can get up in the night to tend her daughter whenever necessary. Tough and resilient as she is, on one occasion Robi catches her sobbing as she works at her sewing machine. In response to his concern she informs him: "I can't take it any more. I can't live with your mother any longer" (98). Then she expresses her ambivalence about never having remarried when she could have done so. Her rejection of the idea had been prompted by the fear that any new husband may not have proven a good stepfather but in retrospect she regretted her decision so that Robi reflects: "Grandmother isn't kidding when she says she's sacrificed her life for her daughter" (101).

Robi, together with his friend Gábor, attend a meeting with the rabbi, the principal of the orphanage, and their tutor, Balla, to discuss their forthcoming *bar mitzvah* and *briss.* Gábor is accompanied by his mother and Robi by his grandmother. Neither his beloved tutor nor his grandmother had informed him in advance of this meeting and Robi believes, rightly, that the pair had colluded to get him there. He feels that he has been taken for granted and is therefore piqued. The rabbi informs the boys that the meeting is a formality. Normally they would not be allowed to proceed with their *bar mitzvah* because they have not been circumcised. However, as a dispensation the boys only have to make a public declaration that they are prepared to have a *briss.* Gábor promptly does so but Robi impulsively refuses to the consternation of his friend and his tutor, but not apparently, his grandmother who seems to have read Robi's mind well. Robi is ambivalent and regrets his initial refusal but feels he now has to persevere with his decision though he is given chances to recant. In the end he states that he cannot consent to the *briss* because he asserts that he is a Jew for Jesus. Grandmother is invited to make Robi reconsider his decision but she supports him saying: "I will not influence my grandson in this matter" (149).

Because of his refusal to declare his willingness to undergo circumcision he is expelled from the Jewish orphanage. Grandmother rewards him by purchasing the long-promised coat even though she had not received her bonus. Then she accompanies him to the state school in order to enrol him. Again he has to prove his origins since the school is under party pressure to practice positive discrimination in

favour of the children of peasants and workers whereas Robi is from a bourgeois background. When asked his father's occupation Robi replies, "art historian", but grandmother corrects this and says her son-in-law was "a victim of fascism".[10] Puzzled the official records him under the rubric of "other" (154).

Communist-ruled Hungary was a much more complex society than that of the ancient Hebrews, which was based on kinship and descent. In the books of Genesis and Ruth there was no scope for action outside the domain of kinship and marriage for a widow. Robi's grandmother operates in a very different society so that we must be careful not to assign undue weight to her identity as a widow. She has other identities as a mother, a grandmother, a sister-in-law, a worker, a member of the Communist Party, a citizen of Hungary, a Jew. She has been a widow for thirty-eight years during which she has raised both her daughter and her grandson for whom she is a surrogate mother. The abiding dependence of her daughter imposes a strain on this strong, resourceful woman, which she inadvertently manifests to her intelligent grandson. Grandmother comes to resent her own daughter for whom she sacrificed the chance to remarry and who restricts her freedom of action. Grandmother's identity as a Jew is ambivalent. She is proud to define herself as "a Hungarian, Jewish communist" and initially enrols Robi in Jewish schools, but does not wish him to be circumcised, nor to eat only kosher food. In fact she wants him to move more freely in the world of non-Jews and so registers him with the secular, state school and takes him with her to the offices of the party. Significantly this passage of Robi from the Jewish world of his childhood into the wider society is marked by his refusal to undergo the *briss* and by the author's switch from the Hebrew calendar, with which the story begins, to the Julian calendar with which the novel concludes.[11]

Her widowed daughter, Erzsi, is inadequate, not because she is a widow, but because of her weak personality. She is inadequate as a mother, a daughter, a worker and even as a lover, since her affair, which is half-hearted, is one into which she is inveigled, rather than one into which she enters as an equal partner.

Two other widows feature briefly in the novel. The first is the mother of Robi's friend, Gábor Blum, who is seen to act as a mother in the interests of her son, unlike Robi's own mother, whose maternal role is assumed by his grandmother. The second widow, old Mrs Fleischman, is a distant relative of grandmother, who is not prepared to marry her long-term partner in order to retain her widow's pension which she supplements by breeding parakeets (131). In this case the welfare state enables the widow to have financial independence and allows her to break the traditional norms of both the Jewish and the Hungarian, Christian society.

[10] Reference to the Jewish victims of Nazism was taboo under the Communist regime so that victims of the Holocaust were subsumed under that phrase.

[11] "In the year 5716, as the month of Tevet was drawing to a close" (7), "he glued Grandmother's membership stamp for January, 1956 into her membership book" (153).

“THE SHADOW BRIDE”

I now turn to a novel, “The Shadow Bride”, written by the Guyanese author, Roy Heath. The widow is Mrs Singh, born in Kerala and transported on marriage at the age of sixteen by her wealthy and much older husband to Guyana where she is completely isolated. He turned to India for a bride because unlike Guyanese, East Indian women, those from the homeland were subservient to their husbands. At the age of twenty-one she was widowed and obliged, alone and without any kin, to bring up her only son, Betta, on whom she dotes. In her short marriage she suffered five miscarriages. Much later we learn that Mrs Singh had murdered her husband by poisoning him. Early in her marriage she had worshipped him as a god (224) so that there is an element of deicide in her homicidal act. She was questioned by police about her husband’s death but released after her oldest servant, Aji, perjured herself and swore that her mistress was a loving wife. This act of devotion enables Aji to speak her mind freely to Mrs Singh unlike the other members of her household over whom she rule like a patriarch. In defiance of her husband’s wishes she does not send Betta to the public school but keeps him at home where he is tutored by the Muslim, scholar-priest, the Mulvi Sahib, who lodges with them until Betta leaves home to study medicine in Dublin and later for one year in London. Although Mrs Singh is a Hindu she is not doctrinaire and recognises the superior pedagogic skill of the Mulvi Sahib.

After the death of her husband Mrs Singh cuts her hair short, ceases to wear saris and dons men’s clothes. In short she transforms herself socially into a man and as such arranges the marriages of two of her maidservants and provides their dowries. Indeed her authority over her numerous dependents is that of a male in terms of both East Indian and Guyanese culture. In fact the Mulvi Sahib describes her as “a man with breasts” (274). However, though others recognise her remarkable strength, she herself observes, “my strength is a burden” (74). So too is her twenty-five years of self-imposed chastity after the death of her husband. She had been loth to marry because of her concern for Betta. However at the age of forty-six and still an attractive woman, with a long repressed libido she quasi-marries an itinerant, Hindu priest, the Pujaree, whom Betta considers a charlatan, and installs him in the conjugal bed. The Pujaree becomes financially dependent on Mrs Singh who lavishes generous presents on him, for example a motorcar, and donates large sums to his temple, which thereby attracts numerous adherents and generates further wealth and status. She renounces her power over the household and assigns it to the Pujaree who persuades her to replace the household shrine of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, in favour of Durga, the destroyer, who may have been responsible for the five miscarriages. Thus she exchanges her independence and dominance for submission to a man who proceeds to Hinduize the household.

The mystical presence of her late husband pervades Mrs Singh's being so that the Pujaree exorcises his ghost. Shortly before she dies she reflects on her status as a widow,

> There was no doubt that her husband had decreed she was not permitted to have close relations with any man and his spirit hovered above her, surveying everything she did and said. She was certain of this the first time the Pujaree made love to her in the conjugal bed, when momentarily, she felt she was being ridden by two men. Hers was the curse of widowhood, with which she had been made familiar since childhood from the women's conversations that often came to an abrupt end at the approach of a man (412).

The one person that she has never been able to control though she had tried is her son, Betta. He returns to Guyana as a doctor of medicine, determined to help his people the East Indian indentured labourers who work in the sugar plantations. At first he establishes his private practice in his mother's mansion where, as an idealist he treats without payment his poor patients, much to the annoyance of his mother who eventually dismisses these impecunious sick persons without his knowledge. When he discovers her interference in his work he leaves to work on the plantations as a doctor. His mother considers this an act of desertion. Without consulting his mother he also finds his own bride; refuses a dowry; and marries in his bride's home. His mother detests his wife, Meena. Obliged to flee from the plantations after an attempt on his life, because he opposed the harsh and inhumane treatment of the workers, he returns with his family to his mother's home seeking temporary accommodation for his wife and two daughters. Under the influence of the Pujaree, who wishes to destroy the mother-son bond, she refuses his supplication. During these discussions, the servant, Lahti, summons the Mulvi Sahib and asks him to intercede. When he too pleads for Betta Mrs Singh dramatically strikes him on the face after he criticises the Pujaree and calls him a kept man. The Mulvi Sahib then offers to put up Betta and his family in his own home.

Meena becomes pregnant for the third time and the Pujaree assures Mrs Singh that the child will be a boy. Mrs Singh is determined to raise this future grandson as her own, and when Betta visits her to seek a reconciliation she drugs his tea and extracts a promise that he will deliver the boy to her and his step-father, the Pujaree. Betta reneges on his promise and his mother resolves to harm the child. After his birth, on the advice of the Pujaree and with the latter's evil, mystical power she visits the mother and child, bearing gifts. On first seeing his grandmother the newborn emits a fearful shriek "as though a centipede was attached to his back" (356). A few months later the child develops a speech defect and also becomes lame.

The power of the Pujaree is now complete over Mrs Singh's soul (379) and she readily submits to his will, indeed she is content to be subservient as she oscillates between dominance and dependence. As she herself notes, because she was raised as a girl to be subservient first to her father and then to her husband she developed "a terrible desire to exercise power" (35) which she duly did. Strong as she is, she realises that she needs men, "I am helpless without them. This terrible dependence on men" (370). Powerful as he now is, the Pujaree goes too far on one occasion and Mrs Singh rebels. During a conversation she tells him that she no longer counts in her mother tongue, Malayalan and the Pujaree points out that this "was a sign that she no longer thought in that language" (380). She replies "in stilted English: 'I am nothing then'" (ibid.). Too readily the Pujaree concurs: "In a way you are nothing" (ibid.). That same day she informs him that she is closing down the house and going to live with Betta and his family. The Pujaree is perplexed but he reasons that though he had managed to rupture her ties with almost everyone he had failed, despite trying, to destroy "Mrs Singh's passion for her son, an unnatural bond, in his view" (382).

On the advice of the Pujaree she had expelled everybody from her home though she later had relented to readmit Sukrum, a malevolent and maleficent, malingering servant whom she had forced to marry Lakti, even though she knew that Sukrum would destroy his wife, which he duly did since she died under suspicious circumstances at the age of twenty three. After banishing the Pujaree Mrs Singh remains alone in the house with the evil Sukrum who has brought in some disreputable characters. One day Sukrum enters her bedroom and rapes her. Waking up alone after this trauma, her first words are: "Betta! What will your father say?" (416)

Dressing in her wedding sari over which she had put a shapeless garment, she arrives like a beggar and seeks refuge in Betta's home where she lives in a modest room like a servant "in a state of utter dependence on her son" (429). Her face develops leprosy-like pustules so that immediately after the rape she takes to wearing a mask.

One day when her detested daughter-in-law comes to feed her she grabs her round the neck in "a masculine grip" and threatens to strangle her but in fact cuts off her hair with a pair of scissors (435) which she then uses to commit suicide (437).

COMMENTARY

Even this long synopsis cannot do justice to the complexity of this sophisticated novel. The widow, Mrs Singh, is an exile from Kerala who arrives as a child bride in an alien country far from home and bereft of kin. Initially she is totally subservient to her husband according to the traditions of Indian society.

Much later she yearns to return to Kerala to die among her own people but feels she cannot because she has given birth in Guyana and thereby put down roots (100). After the death of her husband she builds up a body of dependents, some of whom worship her and other who resent and even hate her patronage. Exercising patriarchal power and behaving like a man she controls the lives of those who live under her roof. In the grounds she holds religious ceremonies for the East Indian community, both Muslim and Hindu.

She arranges the marriages of her two maidservants, Rani and Lakti, to men they do not love and supplies their dowries. Rani resists Mrs Singh's control over her weak husband and in order to exercise her own parental authority over her son, which is threatened by her mistress, succeeds in breaking away with the support of the Pujaree. The second servant, Lakti, who is the illegitimate granddaughter of the late Mr Singh, is obliged to marry the wastrel, Sukrum, who Mrs Singh knows will cause his bride's death. Mrs Singh acknowledges that she is offering her as a sacrifice to Sukrum and so she defies the wishes of her husband who had urged her to care for Lakti after his death. After the rape of Mrs Singh, Lakti appears to her in a vision, and she confesses to the ghost: "You've always disturbed me, child. I've done terrible things to my husband on account of you" (426). When Lakti asks why she allowed Sukrum to rape her, she replies: "Because of what I had done to you" (ibid.). Mrs Singh recognises that "she had been contaminated by the tyranny of conscience" (ibid.) and that she had "offered herself to Sukrum as a sacrifice to her past" (ibid.).

WIDOWHOOD

Mrs Singh had been a widow for twenty-five years during which period she had acted like a man, not just any man but a patriarch with the *potestas* of that role. On her self-declared marriage to the Pujaree she had ceased to wear trousers, both literally and metaphorically, and had reverted to wearing saris and assuming a subordinate role. We can appreciate that her widowhood is not a permanent status; that a widow can change that status by remarrying but in doing so in this society she reverts to dependence and subordination, albeit willingly. It seems that social and cultural interpretations of widowhood overcome her individual drive for power and independence and drive her back to dependence on men, first the Mulvi Sahib, then the Pujaree and finally her son, though the latter finds no joy in his exercising of power over his mother. But he too feels "he could not have acted otherwise" (437).

Mrs Singh is a passionate woman in both her loves and her hates which can change from one to the other as she herself remarked to Lakti's ghost, when she stated that she worshipped both her husband and the Pujaree for a while: "That I can love like that, and yet be able to destroy someone" (427). Her passion is also manifest in bed with the Pujaree, who mused,

> She was two years older, but he discovered that her youthful looks did not belie her powers in bed, where she performed feats the likes of which he had never heard in his years as a priest and collector of conjugal tales (229).

In the moments before her suicide when she is in the act of throttling her daughter-in-law, she confesses to herself that she does not know who she is. In short she has lost her identity.

> The Pujaree said that I was generous, but my generosity is not mine. Keralans are hospitable *as a people,* so I don't know what I am really like. The Mulvi Sahib said I was own-way and wanted to be a man, yet the Pujaree saw me as the most feminine of women. … I don't know what I am (435).

Her gender ambivalence, characterised as we have seen by the Mulvi Sahib's phrase, "she was a man with breasts", is manifest in various ways. First, in her independent phase as a widow by cutting her hair short and wearing men's clothes; second, by striking in public a high status man, the Mulvi Sahib, to whom she had earlier prostrated herself; third, by getting drunk at a banquet; fourth, by publicly kissing the Pujaree "passionately and long" (290); fifth, shouting out loudly that "East Indians should kiss more often" and adding as an encore, "Kiss and do other things" (289).

Mrs Singh makes various references to the predicament of widowhood. Before she marries the Pujaree, she has an imaginary conversation with him,

> You don't know what I've had to put up with since my husband died. I've had nothing … no love, no understanding (44).

She also informs her son of her loneliness since his father's death (57). She complains that the Mulvi Sahib had abandoned her when Betta went abroad to study. The Pujaree tries to explain the Mulvi Sahib's position as a Muslim, which prevented him from living alone with a woman and also from visiting her, but she rejects that explanation,

> Many people think there's something disgusting about a widow. She's like a used cloth. I can see it in the way some people talk to me. A woman without a man (75).

Betta recalled how his mother exploited the popular idea that a widow was helpless in order to bend people to her will by saying to them "because I'm a widow" (76).

Widowhood is both a status that liberates a woman from the normative subordination of marriage in a patriarchal society like that of the East Indian immigrant community in Guyana, but at the same time as a widow she faces either

the pity or the opprobrium of that society, in which widowhood becomes a stigmatised identity. The widow has an anomalous status, betwixt, between and without marriage, she is in a social limbo. Mrs Singh is conscious of this ambivalence when she tells Aji that she only wanted to please her husband, “my eagle... And through my indescribable grief I found out what freedom was” (103). Later when she talks to her young servant, Rani, about marriage she again remarks that her husband was her god, “But it didn’t stop me from seeing myself as his prisoner” (224). For her marriage represented sacrificial servitude but widowhood too had it burden since the community considered that status problematic and the weight of public opinion, and perhaps her own needs, forced her back onto dependence on another husband.

When the Mulvi Sahib pleads with her to readmit her son and his family into her home he appeals to her standing in the community and urges her to conform to the standards to which that community subscribes. In sociological-type critique of the concept of community, she exclaims:

> “Ah! The community!… I mustn’t only support the community; I must be a model for it. A model for whom? For Muslim women who look out on the world from a window and dare not show their faces to men? Or for Hindu women whose husbands keep a gooseberry rod to beat them with when they answer back? Do you mean the women when you talk about the community, or the men? The men who despise us for being widows and hate us for remarrying. I’m not a model for the community” (277).

Despite all her efforts to defy social demands and in spite of her having achieved personal autonomy as a widow in society, it is the weight of customary, traditional norms that ultimately constrain her and oblige her to relinquish her independence. “The curse of widowhood” (412) is not only the control of her husband from beyond the grave, but the tyranny of the community, which she rejects, and which supports such masculine control.

In Guyanan, East Indian society, the role of a woman was generally confined to the domain of kinship and marriage. Mrs Singh managed as a rich widow to exercise control over a household composed of diverse dependents and hangers on. Insofar as she wielded such patriarchal power she was an anomaly and she herself felt the position so onerous that she relinquished it and submitted to the Pujaree’s conjugal authority, which she had accorded him. Aware, almost too late, she extricated herself from his power to regain her independence, which in fact was now a state of alienation and loss of identity, which culminated in her humiliating rape and subsequent suicide.

In the domain of kinship and marriage she occupied several statuses, the norms of which she flouted. Thus, after first being a dutiful wife, she murdered her husband; defied his wishes about the education of their son; broke her promise to

establish a charity for the poor after his death; had him, a Hindu, buried in a Christian cemetery. As a mother she interfered in her son's medical practice; rejected him and his wife and children; invoked black magic to cripple her grandson; as a mother-in-law brutally assaulted her son's wife.

She certainly was not a model in the eyes of the community. Before her marriage to the Pujaree, though she was a Hindu she was religiously tolerant and liberal, but afterwards under his malign influence she became a Hindu fundamentalist, who would only drink Indian tea in her home, wear only saris and insist on the teaching of Hindi and Urdu. As a Hindu by switching from the worship of the god of prosperity to the god of destruction, she eventually sealed her own fate. As an employer and patron she sought to dictate the lives of her servants, their husbands and their children, and only Rani, by her determination and with the collusion of the Pujaree, managed to escape her clutches.

CONCLUSION

I shall draw four conclusions from these disparate literary sources. First, all these cases emphasise the general economic and social subordination of women to men, and in particular the social weakness of widows access to resources, and hence to respect and status, is achieved through men. Even Mrs Singh who achieved economic success by illegitimate means, namely by the murder of her husband, chose socially to subordinate herself to the religious charlatan, Pujaree. Despite her wealth and economic independence she sought his social authority and support so that she could retreat to the position of dependence on a man as demanded by the norms of her Indian culture.

Second, however, these examples also demonstrate the ability of some women to adapt and manipulate relationships in order to achieve more autonomy, respect and status. What is significant in the case of ancient Hebrew society and culture is that once they have exercised their resourcefulness and initiative as widows they revert to traditional dependence on their husbands and later their sons in their role as newly remarried women. However, their status as remarried women even in that patriarchal society is infinitely better than that of Hardy's Sophy in class-ridden, Victorian, England, where she is condemned to social and, eventually physical death, by her son's insensitivity and cruelty.

Third, widows have two weapons, or assets, to achieve a modicum of autonomy, first their sexuality and second, their power or influence over their sons. As the first weapon wanes, so the second waxes.

Fourth, how widows use these weapons varies with the society in which they are located and with its culture. In kinship-based societies such as those of the ancient Hebrews and the East Indian communities of Guyana, the roles that

widows can play are limited and become even more restricted if their kinship networks are attenuated. Thus Tamar's natal kin are remote and shadowy although they accept her back as a widowed, childless daughter, whose future seemed bleak, since she would have limited scope for action. In this predicament she managed to create and extend her own network and the roles that she could adopt therein by resort to deception, the seduction of her father in law.

Ruth who does have her own natal kin in Moab opts to leave them and to identify with her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, and to migrate to the latter's homeland in Israel. Naomi's kinship network becomes accessible to Ruth and she is able, again by a cunning stratagem, to fulfil both her own desires and the culturally stipulated roles of wife and mother.

Both Tamar and Ruth are outsiders, the former a Caananite and the latter a Moabite. Their resourcefulness and willingness to flout traditional norms and to initiate action on their own behalf may stem from their immigrant background, a fact reinforced by Mrs Singh's behaviour. The latter, by dint of her economic clout is able to construct a social network of dependents but the effort in maintaining it proves too onerous so that she chooses to revert to the traditional role of a woman dependent on a man. First, the Pujaree, who is transformed from a client into husband, whom she subsequently banishes, and second, her reversion to widowhood when she becomes dependent on her son. Eventually she finds this traditional role unacceptable so that she escapes it by taking her own life. By contrast, Sophy remains in her own country, though her rural background is far removed from the urban milieu of her late husband and to the public school and university of her son whom she sees as an alien. Transplanted to London, Sophy is bereft of social support. She has no network of kin and her own son, who could have been her prop, is antagonistic to her wishes. Her response to her predicament is one of resignation and submission which in the end proves fatal. Her suicide is different from that of Mrs Singh who commits the act wilfully and physically whereas Sophy simply fades away.

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