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A Thematic Study of Sujata Massey's novel "The Widows of Malabar Hill"

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Abstract: Sujata Massey has introduced a new addition to the cult of mystery fiction in the form of her sleuth, 'Perveen Mistry', Bombay's first female solicitor. **Set in the 1920s of British Raj India; Massey** showcases multiplicity of themes in her 2018 fiction, '**The Widows of Malabar Hills**' ranging from a multi-cultural Indian society to the pitiable conditions of women in that pre- independence India. This research paper aims to discuss a few of the novel's themes.

Keywords: Mystery, Thriller, Historical fiction, Domestic fiction, sleuth.

Introduction: Set in **Bombay of 1920s**, the personality of Perveen, the protagonist of Massey's novel, is motivated by Cornelia Sorabji, the first female to graduate from Bombay University, the first lady to contemplate law at Oxford College, and the first ever female lawyer to practice law in India. Sorabji took an avid interest in social reform against the evil of child marriage. She was worried about the absence of legitimate portrayal for 'purdahnashins', women who were kept in seclusion to avoid any contact with the male world. Massey, about choosing Mistry as the heroine, says:

"I wanted to have a female sleuth who had a job that was actually possible at the time, and remembered that woman lawyer (Cornelia Sorabji)"

Apart from Sorabji, Massey also draw inspiration from Mithan Tata Lam, the first woman to admitted at the Bombay Bar in 1923. Sujata further adds:

"...looking at what their backgrounds were that gave them that extraordinary push to do the impossible and become the first woman lawyers in a man's world."

About the author: Winner of the Agatha and Macavity Awards, Sujata Massey is an American mystery author and historical fiction novelist. **Sujata Massey's** novel "**The Widows of Malabar Hill**" is the debut novel in the series of Perveen Mistry novels. Apart

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from Perveen Mistry series, Massey has written a total of eleven novels which pertain to the Rei Shimura series including novels like: **The Salary Man's Wife (1997), The Flower Master (1999) and The Kizuma Coast (2014) etc.** Massey stands class apart in the genre of sleuth fiction as she is among the first few to bring a certain freshness to the genre by introducing Perveen Mistry, thus breaking the lack of female representation in this genre.

Theme of Gender Inequality and Female Exploitation: Under the garb of a 'whodunnit' story, Massey effectively carves a bleak picture of the inequality against women prevailing in the pre- independence, pre- partition India. Perveen, who is solving the suspicious case of Omar Farid and his three widows, was herself a victim of abusive marriage. The plot moves back and forth in time to highlight the exploitation of women coming from different religious as well as financial backgrounds. In 1916, the story of the novel revolves around Perveen and her unhappy married life with Cyrus. She was humiliated at her in- laws place including physical, mental and emotional torture. She was kept in seclusion during her menstruation period as her mother-in-law thought she was impure and would contaminate others as if menstruating was some sort of disease. Perveen endured all this for the sake of her love for husband.

However, the turning point came when she came to learn about her husband's continuous rendezvous with prostitutes and when she tried confronting him, she was hit badly. This made her move away from this abusive marriage.

Coming back to the present timeline of story in 1921, Perveen vows to take stand for three widows as soon as she finds something shady with the signed papers and prepares to dive deep into the alleged fraud and murder mystery. The three widows of Omar Farid were purdahnashins and were kept in immense seclusion. Thus, the author presents a picture of both the Paris and the Muslim cultures and their oppressive practices towards women.

Picturesque view of contemporary India: Sujata Massey wonderfully describes the cultural divide in 1920s India as she writes:

“The boundaries communities drew around themselves seemed to narrow their lives- whether it was women and men, Hindus and Muslims, or Parsis and everyone else”.

At the heart of a female centric mystery novel, Massey provides the readers with absolutely authentic visuals of the multi-cultural society in 1920s Bombay and Calcutta. In the hands of a skilled writer like Massey, the city of Bombay comes to life with all the depictions of geographical settings to streets to houses to food and festivals.

Allison Leotta, author of “The Last Good Girl” rightfully says about “The Widows of Malabar Hills”:

“Sujata Massey is one of the most talented writers working today. In her hands, 1920s Bombay comes alive with the sounds, sights and smells of a place and time where women were still second class citizens...The Widows of Malabar Hill is an extraordinary novel”.

A take on Human Relationship: Sujata Massey’s novel says a lot about human relationships. Father-daughter relationship between Perveen and her father Jamsledji is very beautifully carved out by the novelist. Perveen’s father is a feminist and she walk of her life contrary to the popular belief of that time, he made her daughter in every decision of hers. He is her biggest cheerleader. He supports Perveen in the decision of getting married and then moving out of it eventually.

Keeping the father-daughter relationship aside, the novel also weaves a lovely tale of friendship between Alice and Perveen. Alongside this, a beautiful portrayal of love and support is depicted in the house on Malabar Hill. All the three widows of Mr. Farid share a cordial bond amongst them. All of them are mutually supportive. Love and brotherhood and unity can be felt among their children as well.

Conclusion: To summarise, it can be undoubtedly said that Massey has skillfully brought out the freshness in the historical and detection fiction genre. Her protagonist, Perveen Mistry, is a breath of fresh air. Massey has created a huge culturally diverse universe alongwith a blend of the traditional and the modern ideologies of various characters introduced in the novel. In doing so, a wide range of themes come handy to the plotline and needless to say, Massey has handled them all with utmost grace and beauty. The beautiful universe created by Massey can best be described by this quote of **Bapsi Sidhwa, “Ice Candy Man”;**

“Perveen Mistry is a rarity: a female solicitor in a bastion of masculinity! An astonishing heroine-fearless, intelligent and determined- she makes a memorable debut in Sujata Massey’s “The Widows of Malabar Hill.”A gripping whodunnit, full of excitement and heart, the novel also delightfully evokes Bombay in 1920s...”

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