



**OLD WIDOWS & WOODROSES: A REFERENCE TO THE SHORT
STORIES OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI, ANITA DESAI,
& ABBURI CHAYA DEVI**

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ABSTRACT

In the patriarchal Hindu society the identity of women is always determined by her husband. A widower is allowed to remarry, but a widow is not even allowed to dream of it. Even in the modern educated middle class families, the identity of widows is definitely at stake. In many cases, they even lose their economic freedom. The modern feminist writers have been attempting several times to put forward the frustration of widows in their writings. This paper attempts to discuss how the three modern writers - Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Desai, and Abburi Chaya Devi – present the disappointment widows face in the modern society.

A woman's life consists of many stages and at each stage she needs to play a very different role. The stage of widowhood is a very crucial one during which she undergoes extreme loneliness and frustration. Almost all women short story writers of contemporary India have attempted to present this picture of a widow in educated higher middle class families. Three stories, one each of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Desai, and Abburi Chaya Devi are

selected to study the disappointment of the old widows or mothers on learning that they are nowhere in the worlds of their children to whom they gave birth and life.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writes about women, their love, their joy and pain, and their difficulties and disappointments in maintaining human relations. Her short story "*Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter*" from *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* is about an old woman's loneliness in an alien culture and explores the culture shock faced by Indian women who have made such immigrations. In India Mrs Dutta was used to living on her own for the past three years since her husband died. Of course, she missed her husband, but gradually she found it rather pleasant to be mistress of her own life. In spite of her son Sagar's requests to stay with him in America she had preferred to stay alone in India among all the neighbours. But the pneumonia that hit her changed everything. Earlier, whenever she was ill, she used to feel that people around her waited impatiently for her recovery. But now being alone she found "no one whose life was inconvenienced the least hit by her illness" and as such no reason to get well. When this thought came into her mind she got so frightened and felt as if she was dead. It was then her desperate and blurred vision caught in the portrait of her grandchildren Pradeep and Mrinalini and decided that her place was with them. This thought took Mrs Dutta to the other side of the world with a new hope to live.

It has been two months since Mrs Dutta's arrival to America to live with her son and his family. Being a woman from a traditional family she still resorts to her age old habits like waking before the rest of the household, taking an early bath, chanting 108 names of God etc. At 9 am when the son, daughter-in-law and the two grandchildren leave the home, Mrs Dutta recovers her spirits in the kitchen which is her favourite place. She enjoys herself while preparing her son's favourite dishes and setting the things right in her own way.

When she first arrived in California, Mrs Dutta wanted to go over and meet the neighbours and offer them the sweets she had carried from India. But her daughter-in-law, Shyamoli did not allow her to do so as such things were not the custom there and the neighbours might even say something unpleasant to her, because "Americans don't like neighbours to invade their privacy". For Mrs Dutta, who comes from a buzzing city like Calcutta, the word privacy is something beyond her understanding.

Mrs Dutta is confused in this new country where all the rules are upside down. "Her mind feels muddy, like a pond in which too many water buffaloes have been wading". Shyamoli's aggressiveness at her husband reminds her of her own days and she recalls how dutiful and

uncomplaining she was as a good wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. Mrs Dutta gets embarrassed by the display of marital affection between Sagar and Shyamoli. When she thinks about the grandchildren heaviness pulls at her entire body. Like so much in this alien land they turn out to be a disappointment. Their impatience when she tries to tell stories of her girlhood and that of Sagar's childhood whose memories she had carried to share with them, their "most transparent excuses when she asks them to sit with her while she chants the evening arati", their excitement while discussing on phone about glittering alien world of Power Rangers or Spice Girls - all those leave her wrenched by doubt and often compels her to remind herself: "They're flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood". Mrs Dutta finds it quite scandalous the children watching TV for hours; their talking back when she tells them to turn it off; their engrossment in their own world of games provided by the modern technology; their rudeness in referring to elders in a disrespectful way or at Shyamoli's letting them go unpunished or unrebuked. She recollects how many times had she slapped Sagar for something far less, though he was her only child.

Washing clothes and drying them is yet another problem Mrs Dutta faces in America. She doesn't like the dirty clothes to be stored for a whole week before putting them in a washing machine and that too along with the clothes of others. So she takes to washing her clothes in the bath tub, when she is alone; she then hangs her sari, every day, along the redwood fence that separates her son's property from the neighbours. Her request to put up a cloth-line in the backyard was declined. She puts all the dried clothes away before Shyamoli returns.

Mrs Dutta feels proud of herself on her "fitting in so well" by finding "new ways of doing things, of solving problems creatively". Ignorance, as Mrs Dutta knows is a "great promoter of harmony". But she does not anticipate that hanging her sari on the fence everyday proves to be her unknown error of her life creating a drift between herself and her son's family. The day Shyamoli comes home with disheveled hair and her cheeks blotched with a hectic colour, Mrs Dutta unexpectedly overhears Shyamoli's discourse with Sagar only to understand that she is most unwelcome there and that she has created a hard time to her. Mrs Dutta also learns that the neighbour had requested Shyamoli to tell Mrs Dutta not to hang her clothes over the fence. Shyamoli takes this very seriously, as for all these years she has been so careful not to give "Americans a chance to say something like this..."

On learning this Mrs Dutta shrinks against the wall. Shyamoli's words pour into her ears like smoking oil:

“I’ve explained over and over, and she still keeps on doing what I’ve asked her not to . . . leaving dishes to drip all over countertops. Ordering my children to stop doing things I’ve given them permission for. She’s taken over the entire kitchen cooking whatever she likes . . . I feel like this isn’t my house anymore . . . Some days I feel like taking the kids and leaving”.

From the dark passage where she stands, Mrs Dutta observes two shadows of the children going to their mother and she thinks they probably have seen their mother crying first time. She hears Sagar trying to console her in a “miserable tone”. She observes “all the four shadows on the wall shiver and merge into a single dark silhouette”. Mrs Dutta stares at it and understands its solidarity - “man, wife, children - joined on a wall, showing her how alone she is in this land of young people. And how unnecessary”. Thus life with her son and grandchildren in America turns out to be a total disappointment to Mrs. Dutta.

Anita Desai’s stories deal with specific situations and behavioural patterns and explore the nuances of different relationships. Desai presents her characters’ interior landscapes, their hopes, desires, anxieties, and fantasies. “Winterscape” from her second collection *Diamond Dust* is about the sibling and filial relationships in a cross-cultural framework. The story is a painting of the entire winterscape – the last stage of the two old widow sisters living in their native country while their son lives abroad.

Asha being the first child in the family "grew up knowing she was an ornament and a joy" and develops into a happy and confident woman, whereas, Anu, born three years later, when everyone wanted a boy and not a second girl, is "swaddled" in the air of "disappointment" everyone feels at her birth. Given her "weak position", she grows up into a timid, nervous, diffident person, who always clings to Asha. Asha is married to a wealthy farmer, but she could not have a child. Anu is married to a clerk and gives birth to Rakesh very soon. Asha takes over the responsibility of the child and Anu feels grateful for this. The child becomes the bond to hold the two sisters together.

When Rakesh grows up and moves to Canada, his life creates a distance between him and his mothers who are now widows. He does not realize that he had hurt them deeply by not inviting them to his wedding and goes on to establish his own family. But the lives of his mothers continue to revolve around him and keep treasuring the photographs and the gifts sent by him. The theme of the child as a unifying bond between the two families of diverse racial and social backgrounds is again presented, after ten years of parting, through Rakesh's child.

With mixed feelings of excitement and nervousness the mothers arrive in Canada. Rakesh is quite embarrassed to see them in their skimpy apparel. "He had forgotten how thinly they tended to dress, how unequipped they might be." Though his wife Beth is initially reserved, she takes care of all the needs of her mothers-in-law. She connects with the old ladies through "settling them in." On the other hand Rakesh is "awkward and ill at ease." He feels himself in their way and does not know what to do with himself or with them. He just smiles "vacantly." The mothers unpack all the foods they had brought, laughing as they recall how he used to pester them for these as a child. To them, he is still a child. When he eats them "a glistening look of remembrance" covers his face like a film of oil on his fingers, but he also glances sideways at Beth, "guiltily, afraid of betraying any disloyalty to her".

Rakesh is caught between two cultures and has conflicting loyalties. Though he wants to reach out to his mothers, he is unable to do so. The old women do not feel at home in the alien land. After the first flush of warmth, they realize that their son cannot communicate with them and there follows a strained silence on both sides, the distance, the time, and a certain change in living styles as also cultural values made the gap rather too wide. Their son disappoints them. Their attempt to re-create the warmth and homely feeling of an Indian farm in Canada ends up as a failure. Ironically it is Beth who intuitively understands "their hopes, expectations, confusion and disappointments." She is exasperated with Rakesh as he fails to connect with his mothers, but is "secretly relieved to see how completely he had transformed himself into a husband, a Canadian". His world and interests have changed, he has transformed from a son to a husband and father.

The lack of communication with the son makes the mothers unhappy and depressed. They sense Beth's hostility and her incomprehension of their relationship and feel cold, alienated, and unwanted. Literally and symbolically, the Canadian winter proves to be too hard for them. But like the winterscape – "the white photograph" of them standing draped in white, watching the snowfall – the old ladies remain silent, uncomplaining. They have created a space for themselves, however small and "fragile". Their departure results in great relief, both for themselves and for their son. Their lives come in touch and this brief contact effects subtle changes and re-adjustments in the self and the surroundings. The son is happy to be by himself at last. At the surface level

Desai cleverly appears to criticize the inertia and repetitiveness of an older generation, but in fact it is the intolerance, impatience and conservatism of a younger

generation that is under scrutiny; how they hate, unfairly, to find that their background has altered without their consultation; how sulkiness prevails, even deep into adulthood¹.

Abhuri Chaya Devi is a prolific feminist writer in Telugu and has, in her works, depicted the oppression and discrimination women face with delicate irony and a sense of humour. She is awarded the Central SahityaAkademi award in 2005. Her short story collection *Bonsai Batukulu*, translated into English by E Nageswara Rao as *Bonsai Life & Other Stories*, portrays the life of women who live mechanically under the control of family members. “The Woodrose” from this collection depicts an emotional picture of an old widow and her helplessness through the symbol of woodrose. Having no work to do in the house, the protagonist makes the habit of sitting in the balcony every evening and watching the passers-by. Whenever she goes into kitchen to do something, her daughter-in-law Kamala does not allow her to do anything and asks her to take rest. During her busy days, when she wanted rest no one allowed her “a moment’s respite from the unending chores in the house”. Now it is rest all the time till she is tired of it. When she was younger she was thinking “being old would be a very happy time – relaxing in an easy-chair, playing with all the grandchildren, telling them stories, gossiping with neighbours, nagging everybody in the house, supervising all and sundry.” She had never thought old age would be so boring. Moreover she has learnt “there is a big difference between growing old in the village and growing old in a town.” In big cities everyone is for oneself, without caring for others, and when they do, there is no “informal air or intimacy”. Hence she has chosen to watch the passers-by from the balcony.

The mother once finds Kamala planting the seed of some creeper and learns that it is of woodrose. Being not heard of its name earlier, she gets curious to know how those flowers look like, if they have any fragrance, if they can be used for *puja*, and so on. She wonders to note that they do not have any fragrance but look beautiful and won’t fade away if kept in a vase. Anyway, she does not like the idea to get flowers of no fragrance. She prefers to grow plants that give sweet smelling flowers like jasmines which can be decked into plaits of women, or else to grow vegetables which can be cooked or given away to neighbours and friends too. With such an idea, she had planted a few vegetable seeds, sometime ago, which sprouted beautifully. But a few days later she found no trace of them. Though the son and the daughter-in-law said they did not know about them, she understood that they must have pulled them out mistaking them for weeds. She observes, her words, now-a-days, have about as much value as a blade of grass. They

do quite opposite to what she advises, and they are one in doing so; other times they quarrel each other over trifles.

The protagonist does not rejoice the daughter-in-law's not letting her into the kitchen. After his return from abroad, where he spent three years, the son is not able to enjoy the spicy food prepared by his mother; she cannot cook biryani or bake cakes like Kamala. The sweets and delicacies she used to make have become "old-fashioned". "As are the adults, so are the children" ignoring her words and always spending their time reading comics.

Once the protagonist finds Kamala arranging in a vase "some shoots with roses the colour of sandalwood" along with yellow and red roses. She finds them strangely attractive in spite of being dry and brittle. She learns from Kamala they are woodroses and in that arrangement called *Ikebana*, she is mixing both fresh and dry flowers to show age and youth together. "The woodrose stands for old age and the fresh rose symbolizes youth." The protagonist takes pleasure with the arrangement and says it represents mother-in-law and daughter-in-law together.

From then on, the protagonist eagerly watches the woodrose creeper growing and spreading thickly up to the terrace wall, and getting dotted with pretty, bell-shaped yellow blossoms. She develops some strange affinity with the creeper and eagerly waits for the woodroses to bloom inside the yellow blossoms.

One Sunday, she goes to the balcony and gets astonished to see her son cutting down and pulling out the creeper. Though she shouts at him he doesn't pay any attention. She goes to Kamala and requests her to do something to stop her husband from cutting the creeper, but Kamala simply mutters that he would not listen to her. The protagonist again goes to her son and requests him not to pull the creeper, but quietly moves away on his shouting at her. She recalls how affectionate he was as a boy and how he never used to bear even a casual remark against her from his father.

That night, at the dining table, the mother again asks her son the reason for pulling out the creeper. He carelessly replies that the creeper had become a nuisance covering the veranda grill, blocking the light into the hall and spreading all over the window of the room upstairs. He further says the creeper might have crept all over the terrace ready to cover up the whole house. Though it had flowers, he says, it also had mosquitoes.

Dumbstruck, the mother goes away and lies on her bed. Flooded with a stream of thoughts, she could not sleep. The woodrose creeper fills her mind and she feels a lot of pity for it. She imagines her own situation might be the same in the future and she gets scared of it. She

feels “the affection between two people should not grow as thick as that dense creeper. If it grows, the youngsters may cut it off and throw it away.”

The sons of the widow mothers presented in all the three stories, of course, care for their mothers; they are happy with the presence of their mothers. But they fail to establish a bond between the past and the present; they have got so used to new life-styles and the culture-gap is so dense that their coming back to tradition is almost impossible. Having lost their husbands, the poor widows sacrificed their entire lives for the growth of their sons with a hope that their future is all for their sons, hence they cling to them. As the mother in “The Woodrose” feels, mothers only know how to “cling and entwine all round the others”. Finally, they understand that they are left with only the memories. As Mrs Dutta puts it, “It is the lot of mothers to remember what no one else cares to . . . We are the keepers of the heart’s dusty corners”. Like the dry and brittle woodroses, with no fragrance or freshness or colour, the widows too are deprived of happiness or joy at their life’s winterscape, ready to break any time with frustration.

The stories are woven around the most sensitive and enduring bonds of the family. They explore the distance created by education and cultural displacement and how the younger generation is fascinated by the West or its culture and how the older generation is affected by it. The subtle and miserable change from familial closeness to a kind of polite distancing, the shameful contempt of younger generation for its elders, forms the theme of the stories.

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