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The uprooted vine: Tale of an unfortunate widow

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Abstract

The paper based on the novel *The Uprooted Vine*, that portrays the life of a child-widow Snehalata who commits suicide, is an attempt to examine the circumstances which compel her to take such a drastic step at the time when social reform movement was very much in existence in Bengal and reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar were being followed by the educated young men as their real heroes. It was the time of transition and the educated had already taken cudgels to eradicate the social ills such as child-marriage and widow burning among the upper-caste Hindus. To ameliorate the status of women, the need to educate them was being felt. Against such a prolific background what and who provoked Snehalata to end her life when she was under the shelter of an educated foster father who himself had taken pains to equip her with education.

Keywords: 19th century Bengal, middle-class, Hindu widows, emerging educated class, social-change

Introduction

The 19th Century Bengal, known for its social reform movement and stalwart social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was at the crossroads of tradition and modernity like the rest of India. Driven by the desire of social upliftment of the deprived and marginalized and at the same time, to revive and uphold their pride in the indigenous socio-cultural practices to counter the effect of Western influences; the emerging middle-class, educated Bengali men started debates around the subject of female education and widow remarriage. Equipped with modern English education and exposed to the Western ways of life and their ideology, college going young men grappled with contradicting emotions related to their own familial and social traditions and customs. The individualistic and the so-called liberal attitude of the West ignited newness in their ideas, compelled them to evaluate their social and moral codes, yet the conviction and courage required to bring about a substantial social change was still missing. This paper is an attempt to explore - what was "missing" on the part of society, especially men? Courage or Sincere Will?

Published originally in Bengali as *Snehalata ba Palita*, in 1892 by Swarnakumari Debi, the novel was translated in English by Rajul Sogani and Indira Gupta to be published in 2004 under the title *The Uprooted Vine*. The daughter of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and elder sister of Rabindranath Tagore, the novelist was born in the transitional age when modernity was making its presence felt routed through Western education in the echelons of upper and middle-class Bengali families during the 19th century. Born and brought up in a generous and educated family, Swarnakumari Debi received her early education at home and after marriage, her husband Janakinath Ghoshal supported her intellectual and literary pursuits. She was a prolific writer and wrote fiction, memoirs, travelogs and essays on a variety of subjects. She also edited a literary journal *Bharati* started by the Tagore family from 1884 to 1895 and again from 1908 to 1915 till the death of her husband. With an aim of bringing upper-class educated women of Bengali families together for the greater good of destitute women and widows, she started Sakhi Samiti. She strongly believed that education and skill development would be more beneficial for widowed girls than remarriage. Though the Sakhi Samiti could not achieve the avowed goal, it provided a platform to young women to come out of their cloistered atmosphere and exchange their ideas and thoughts among themselves confidently and freely.

The Uprooted Vine ^[1] is the story of a young widow Snehalata, in whose name itself 'Sneha', affection and 'Lata', dependence is embedded. Orphaned in her childhood, she gets shelter in the home of a distant relative Jagatchandra Gangopadhyay alias Jagat Babu, a successful

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doctor, whose mother treats Snehalata as future bride of her grandson, Charu. Jagat Babu was very kind and considerate towards Snehalata who was docile, tender, dutiful, studious and disciplined, an exact opposite of his wife and own daughter Tagar. He took special care of this pale, slender and demure girl's education and gave her lessons regularly at home. Equipped with modern education and a man of progressive outlook, he wanted the women of his household to be educated and aware of the contemporary world, a desire thwarted mercilessly by his second wife who is addressed as Mistress in the novel. The death of his first wife, whom he taught reading and writing, and treated as a cherished partner, was an irreparable loss for him. His second wife was all resistant to any kind of change in her role and status of a traditional woman. She spurned all his efforts to discipline and educate her, or bring about any change in their household. She ruled over her home and husband uncontested as she came from a wealthy family and could garner their support against her husband's wayward modern ways. Scared of her tantrums and temper, Jagat Babu had accepted defeat and, sparing himself from the obligation, appointed a tutor to teach his children at home. His daughter Tagar was a replica of her mother, a pampered and unruly girl who abhorred books and any kind of learning and she had her mother's full support in this. Micheal Madhusudan Dutt at the age of seventeen proclaimed "In a country like India...the importance of educating the females...is very great; for unless they are enlightened, they spread the infection of their ignorance in the minds of those they bring up^[2]."

Jagat Babu's fondness and appreciation for Snehalata is a constant irritant for the Mistress and she wants to get rid of this inauspicious girl who devoured her own parents. She is critical of Snehalata's inclination for learning and feels threatened lest she should charm her Son away from her. Rebuffing all suggestions of Snehalata's marriage with her only son Charu, she manages to marry her off with Mohan, a boy suggested in the known circle. A kind-hearted, educated boy from a joint family, Mohan takes pity on his child-bride and is thrown out of the family for fulfilling his wife's wish to visit her parental home. Jagat Babu decided to sponsor his studies of engineering at Roorkee but fate had its own plans. Mohan dies of ill-health before he could finish his education and start a life with his wife. Once again, an ill-starred Snehalata is left a destitute who has nowhere to go and no one to call her own except Jagat Babu. The family of her in-laws is insensitive and blames her for snatching away their son from them and finally causing his death due to her ominous and sinful presence.

Snehalata is left at the mercy of the Mistress at Jagat Babu's home. Enduring the Mistress's animosity stoically, she leads the life of anonymity as an astute widow without any complaints and immerses herself in the household chores. However, Jagat Babu starts paying more attention towards her studies as the pursuit of knowledge would keep her alive and anchored in life. Over the time, she becomes proficient in Bangla and acquires a fair amount of proficiency in English, yet the books and kind of content she would read are closely monitored by her mentor. Jagat Babu would allow her to read only such books that would keep her faith in her religion intact and would not divert her from the path of austerity and chastity. "Having been placed in adverse circumstances since childhood, her sweet nature had taken recourse to a fortitude which turned into a firm reliance on

God as she matured intellectually^[3]." Her life would have taken a different turn had she not been spotted by Charu who was heart-broken after the death of his wife and was pouring his sorrows in his amateur poems. The childhood attraction and hope draw Charu once again towards Snehalata who is also appreciative of his poems and protective of him. It was Charu whom her child heart had accepted as husband before her marriage with Mohan. They both relish and value each-other's company as they have suffered identical pain and loss. Under the influence of progressive ideas of social reformers and his peer group, Charu becomes a strong votary of widow remarriage and proposes Snehalata for marriage. Snehalata is a pious widow who could never think about remarriage. Coaxed and persuaded by Charu on the one hand, and swayed by her sense of morality and loyalty towards the family of Jagat Babu, she writes an unfinished letter which becomes the cause of her ultimate doom. Getting a whiff of Charu's attraction towards Snehalata, Tagar gets precautious and alerts her mother about her son's intentions. Enraged and infuriated, the Mistress alleges Snehalata "Inauspicious wretch! After destroying three families you are now eyeing my precious son? You are trying to trap my innocent son^[4]?" Both the mother and daughter plot to send Snehalata to her in-laws' home and to avoid suspicion, Tagar first takes her to her own home.

Tagar's mother-in-law, herself a widow, was a friend of the Mistress. Right from the beginning she desired Snehalata as her daughter-in-law. She was aware of the ill-treatment and discrimination Snehalata was subjected to by Jagat Babu's wife, yet could never confront the Mistress as her son Jiban's education was being sponsored by them. It was Jiban's mother who had suggested the match for Snehalata. Jiban who opposed any suggestion for marriage before he attained the age of twenty-one, agrees to marry Jagat Babu's daughter mistaking Snehalata for his would-be bride. He is smitten by her pure and innocent beauty and impressed by her passion for learning. He dreams of a rewarding and meaningful life with her, but he is utterly heart-broken when the reality dawns upon him. He cannot retrace his steps at the last moment as it involves the life and honour of another girl, though he feels a little comforted to know that Snehalata is his cousin's wife and a part of his own family. The day Jiban married Tagar, Snehalata lost her husband. He is a great admirer of her virtues and respects her profoundly. Seeing Snehalata at his home, he is pleased yet altogether unaware of his wife's intentions of sending her to her in-law's home. Jiban's mother accompanies Snehalata to her husband's home where she is welcomed with all the choicest expletives by Mohan's Jethima, who is also a widow. She brashly asks them both to leave as an inauspicious widow like Snehalata had no place in their house. Kishori, Mohan's younger brother has some diabolic designs and convinces Jethima not to throw Snehalata out of her in-law's home.

Kishori, a flamboyant and spendthrift man, is devious and sly. He is the only surviving male in the home after the death of his brother Mohan and his father Kunja Babu. In order to devour the share of his elder brother's widow, called Jethima; Kunja Babu, a crafty and selfish man had allowed the wily widow to rule his household as per her whims. Jiban's mother, also a daughter-in-law of the same house had been thrown out of her home along with her son after the death of her husband. Toeing the foot-steps of his

father, Kishori allows Sanehalata to stay in his home lest she should claim the share of her dead husband's property. Kishori's depravities had already emptied the coffers of their home and Jethima was reduced to the status of a pauper. Kishori's wife Kamala is a conscientious woman. She supports Snehalata and comes to her rescue whenever Jethima is callous towards her. Jethima alleges her of going wayward in the company of Snehalata, yet she is aware of this poor widow's plight and encourages her to befriend her children. Snehalata treats her as her younger sister and sympathizer. Finally, her life would have allowed her a little breather with Kamala and her children, but Kishori approaches her one night with malefic intentions and threatens her of dire consequences if she objects to his proposal. Utterly disoriented, dejected and impoverished, this widow has no recourse but to ask Jiban's mother for salvation. She would prefer a life of hardships and physical labor than to compromise her honour and chastity. Kishori lets her leave as he no longer considers her a threat because "According to our law if the son dies before his father, his widow does not have a claim to his property and is reduced to a state of destitution. She has no right to food or clothing either [5]."

Charu and Kishori were mutual admirers from their college days, as both were shallow minded and profane. Charu held Kishori in great estimation and used to be awestruck by his bohemian lifestyle. Snehalata's sudden disappearance from his home and life left him unsettled. He was waiting for her reply to his proposal of marriage when she vanished without leaving any clue of her whereabouts. Charu's mother and sister succeeded finally in convincing him of Snehalata's dubious and frivolous nature when Kishori fabricates a letter addressed to Jagat Babu, in which she has complained against Charu and proves him guilty of her dilemma. In a drunken stupor Charu had confessed his longing for Snehalata to Kishori. Gullible as he is, Charu gets trapped in Kishori's machination and reading this fictitious letter, starts loathing Snehalata. Within no time, forgetting this ungrateful and unfaithful widow, he gets remarried to the girl of his mother's choice. Kishori also contrived that Snehalata's genuine letters do not reach Jagat Babu. Getting no response from Jagat Babu, Snehalata resigns to her fate and blames herself for causing her foster father suffering and embarrassment. Snehalata's long absence from home starts troubling Jagat Babu and he is intrigued by the recklessness on her part. He is distressed on learning that Snehalata shifted to her husband's home without seeking his permission. He starts questioning his role in her life and is extremely disappointed by her callous attitude towards him. Jiban's mother brings Snehalata to her own home. Tagar is wary of her presence in her home as her husband is highly appreciative of Snehalata's sagacity and skills. Attractive and graceful even in her widow's attire, Snehalata's resilience and good-nature troubles Tagar a lot. She is well-aware of the influence Snehalata's company could exert on any male including her husband. Jiban, on the other hand, is glad that his children would be groomed well by a sensible, disciplined and kind-hearted person like Snehalata. Tagar is relieved of her household duties, an arrangement which suits her as she is free to visit her parents whenever she feels like. Jiban also indulges her with gifts and sweet-talk as he is sure that his wife's displeasure could throw Snehalata out of his home. In order to demean Snehalata in front of Jiban, the jealous and insecure Tagar narrates the whole episode of

Charu and Snehalata's proximity to him and how she and her mother got rid of the cunning widow and saved Charu. She wants to poison his mind against Snehalata, but it has contrary effect on Jiban. He gets all the more influenced by her purity of her mind and soul. Infuriated by the careless and unscrupulous advances of Charu, he starts blaming him for Snehalata's humiliating present status and not fulfilling his promise of marriage with her. He feels all the more sympathetic and respectful towards her. Overwhelmed by the sense of grief for her, he bursts out in front of Jagat Babu when he is on a visit to his home and accuses him and his son Charu of cruelty towards Snehalata. He blames Jagat Babu of leaving the unfortunate girl all alone in this harsh world. Jagat Babu is taken aback by the accusation and repents for his misunderstanding. He sends a word for Snehalata to come back home and also decides to give half of his property to her for her future security. Confronting Charu, he accuses him of violating the honor of a pious girl and declares his decision for the division of his property. Charu is taken aback by his father's declaration and shows him the unfinished letter written by Snehalata which proved that she was a willing partner in the act. Snehalata could not stand this much disgrace and manipulation on Charu's part. She is all the more heart-broken when she finds Jagat Babu getting convinced by Charu's arguments. Completely orphaned and abandoned at the moment and losing the trust of her foster father, her only sustenance and hope in life, she consumes poison and ends her life.

Life starts moving ahead for the rest of them without any setback or guilt and gradually she is lost in oblivion. Jagat Babu holds himself responsible for Snehalata going astray and compromising her chastity for the romantic notion of remarriage. He believes that her education and reading of books coaxed her to think of an alternative life than that of devout religiosity expected of a pious Hindu widow. Had she not been educated and developed in intellect, she would have been satisfied with her lot and the tragedy could have been averted. He ultimately gets convinced of his wife's ideas and beliefs that women's education has the potential to cause more harm than benefit for the Indian society. He doesn't try to inspect and find out the truth of the whole episode, he simply accepts Charu's version and holds Snehalata guilty.

The novel interrogates the sincerity of intentions of the so-called progressive, educated middle class men of the late 19th century Bengal. It appears that it was more of a fashion and pretense to talk about social reforms, women's education and widow-remarriage among the educated, in practice they reinforced and maintained their age-old taboos and traditions as far as women's status was concerned. All the men who professed their love and care for Snehalata in the novel had their own valuation and expectations from her except Mohan, her husband who could have been her real redeemer, had early death not separated them. It is he who gets appreciation from the author, his child-bride as well as the reader. He is touched by the agony of separation that his bride experiences being removed from her foster parents' home so early in life. The hostile atmosphere of his home, Jethima's inimical attitude towards Snehalata, lack of any friend or confidant of her age and his own absence from his household are the constant concerns which pull him more towards her. He is still dependent on his father for his upkeep and education, yet defying them all, he rescues Snehalata from the distress and takes her to her parental

home. The writer very aptly mentions that “A young husband’s friendship and sympathy is the only comfort for a child bride at this stage. His support helps her to adjust to the new household gradually. Forgetting her own parents and family she unhesitatingly accepts the husband’s house as her own ^[6].”

The man who Snehalata revered and treasured the most, Jagat Babu, her foster father, desires to realize his own dreams of modeling an ideal woman out of Snehalata. His feeble personality gets somewhat revitalized when Snehalata receives all his directions attentively and expresses her gratitude through submission and veneration for him. He is well aware of his timid character and resolve in life and compromises at every step, bogging down to the societal and familial pressure. He confides in detail how his decision to marry a widow after the death of his wife was challenged and rebutted by his family causing the death of the poor girl. Neither could he save the life of a widow when he was young nor could he gather courage enough to confront his wife and retain Snehalata in his home as daughter-in-law despite his and his dead mother’s intention and promise. He rather convinces himself “If she were married to Charu she would have to face the animosity of the Mistress all her life. On top of it, if Charu does not love her it will be a great tragedy ^[7].” Charu, a mere boy, had a childish tiff with Snehalata and out of anger blurted out that he did not love her any more. Jagat Babu seems to be in search of an alibi to wriggle out of the nasty situation created by his wife back at home. Convincing himself that it was “all maya, an illusion” he “uprooted Snehalata from his heart” even though “In her absence his life would become a wilderness ^[8].” He is well aware of his wife’s malignant attitude towards the poor girl, yet could never come to her rescue openly. His fondness for Snehalata is untainted, yet his lack of courage and strong will-power multiply problems in her life. She, in fact, is a means to assuage the guilt of his youth and he wants to materialize his dreams of following Brahma Samaj by adopting and rearing an orphan girl according to its principles. The superficiality of all his high ideals and philosophical ideas gets exposed and he is proved to be a frail, outdated man deeply entrenched in the patriarchal mores of Hindu society who strictly opposes widow-remarriage. Very soon he absolves himself of all the guilt as “He is convinced that it was shame and remorse which drove her (Snehalata) to commit suicide ^[9]” and “He is a proper conservative Hindu now ^[10].”

Jiban is another man who is a silent yet ardent admirer of Snehalata’s elegance, fortitude and virtues. Heartbroken by the revelation of truth about his wife’s real identity, his love for Snehalata transcends the physical desires and acquires a spiritual hue. The tragic end of her married life on the day of his own wedding leaves a scar on his psyche. Not able to help her in any way, he accepts his fate and moves on with life with Tagar as his wife who is nowhere near Snehalata in any respect. Jiban is neither timid nor lacks fortitude of character yet his initial resistance to the idea of marriage snatches Snehalata from him. Oblivious of the temperament, circumstances and requirements of this orphan girl, he does not pay any heed to his mother’s insistent suggestions and stubbornly refuses to marry till he attains the age of twenty-one, a pledge he could not finally uphold. He is torn between the sense of remorse and his duties as a husband towards Tagar. All his efforts fail to accord a respectful space to Snehalata in his home. As a mute spectator, he

finally fails when Tagar cries out on her face and alleges “You don’t even die. Here again you are trying to seduce with your tears? Carry on then, I am going to my father’s house ^[11].” Jiban is a strong supporter of women’s education and he believes that girls should not only be given education but a share in their fathers’ property as well, so that a widowed girl is not considered a financial burden by her own kith and kin. Allowing widows to remarry or to stay in widow’s *ashrams* according to their own choice would offer them a chance to lead dignified life. Jiban pricks Jagat Babu that tormented, unsheltered and penniless widows like Snehalata can find solace only in widow homes and draws home the urgent need to impart education, skills and employment for such unfortunate girls. It is a desperate effort on his part to save Snehalata from the indignities barged upon her all the time by his inconsiderate wife. He wants a decent and secure life for Snehalata which only Jagat Babu could provide her. Unaware of what could unfold in Jagat Babu’s home where she had no sympathizer except her foster father, he unintentionally hastens her death.

Challenging Charu, who under the sway of social reform movement had earlier avowed to be in love with Snehalata to the extent that he was prepared to sacrifice everything including his father’s property, social standing, caste and reputation for her, Jagat Babu declares his intention to bequeath half of his property in her name to amend the wrong done by his son. A shallow and fickle-minded person, Charu had already thanked his stars for reversing his intention of marrying her as the decision could have been disastrous sans the wealth and support of his family. By now, he was happily remarried and abhorred and shunned Snehalata as a crafty and ungrateful temptress. Forgetting all the ideals of Brahma Samaja and social reform movements, he started writing articles in defense of Hindu conventions wherein “The main thrust of his arguments was that widow remarriage was a despicable practice and anyone who supported it should be excommunicated forthwith ^[12].” He lacked conviction and commitment in his life. His father’s intent of dividing his property between him and Snehalata is intolerable to him and he strongly defends himself and succeeds in manipulating his father against Snehalata.

Finally, Charu appears to be replicating his father’s life. Under the influence of Brahma Samaj, both father and son planned to marry widows after the loss of their first wives yet relented under the familial pressure, pushing both the widows to commit suicide. Both lacked real willpower and intention to bring about any change and risked their social acceptance and reputation as essentially, they believed in the orthodox practices of their religion. The agony and the marginalized destitution of the widows did not concern them. They both believed that Indian women should follow the age-old religious injunctions meticulously and should not pervert their minds through modern education and new ideas, the byproduct of Western influences. The great reformer of Bengal Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar rightly laments that “In a society in which menfolk have no mercy, no religion, no sense of justice, no sense of good or bad, in which mere conventionality is considered the chief activity and the supreme religion, let no more women be born ^[13].”

The novel also elaborates upon the role of well-settled and privileged women in maintaining the status-quo in society. The Mistress and her daughter Tagar are confident of their rank and vociferously guard and possess what belongs to

them including their husbands. They enjoy an upper status in society as they are also assured of the support of their parental families. They are aware that their rights would remain safe and protected as long as they succeed in keeping other women out of their personal space. Neither the Mistress nor Tagar possess any extra skill or art than to keep their husbands under a tight noose. They are frightened of Snehalata's potential as both of them are conscious of her superior virtues, intellect and beauty. Mohan's Jethima, herself a childless widow, exercises great control over the household. Her bitterness and rage are misdirected towards Snehalata, her being an orphan and not bringing sufficient amount of dowry. Jethima is self-assured as her parental family is strong enough to support her claim in her husband's property. Jiban's mother who has experienced the onslaughts of life as a poor widow lacking support from her maternal home, is the only woman who is considerate towards Snehalata and could identify with her predicament. Kishori's wife Kamala is another woman who sympathizes with Snehalata and defends her. Her untimely death is another great shock for Snehalata. Snehalata is herself conscious about the reason for baseness in women's character. She understands that social taboos and irrational practices such as child marriage and lack of women's education keep them cocooned in their constricted world keeping their intellect sharply curtailed and nature, jealous and selfish.

Conclusion

It can, thus, safely be concluded that in the 19th century, Bengal was face to face with opposing social-cultural forces. Modernity in the garb of Western education and social reform movements, was making inroads in the Indian society but very few educated men supported this social revolution. Deep rooted socio-cultural moorings and unflinching faith in the orthodox religious and caste-based practices prompted them to challenge any kind of radical change. They resisted believing that such deviations from the accepted ethical and religious path would cause moral decay and depravity in women who are the upholder of *dharma* in the Hindu society. Like Jagat Babu and Charu, they could only talk about the necessity of women's education and widow-remarriage half-heartedly, but lacked conviction and will-power to act when the occasion demanded. This scenario was not specific only to Bengal of the 19th century, it was more or less the same in other parts of the country as well. Among Indian women, upper-caste, middle-class Hindu widows have suffered the most underprivileged and marginalized status for centuries. Though we have come a long way and widow re-marriage is no more a social taboo, yet we need to uproot the anxiety and reservations that our religious orthodoxy has implanted in our psyche that widowhood is the outcome of some bad *Karmas* of the previous births and should be accepted and atoned stoically. The indoctrination of such beliefs is so deep that most of the time widows themselves refrain from participating in the rituals of marriage and child-birth, apprehending the ill-effects of their presence and participation or they are shunned as bad omens. Widow-houses in Bengal, Vrindavan, Varanasi and Haridwar; and constricting practices related to them still exist in our cultural and psycho-social structures. Different codes of social conduct and religious practices are the markers that hinder a widow's way of assimilation in mainstream society even

today. She may have attained education and financial independence, yet a young widow becomes a cause of concern as her sexuality is considered to be a potential threat for the honour of the family. What we need to uproot out of our heart, mind and soul is not some Snehalata, but the prejudiced socio-cultural and religious practices which impel Hindu widows to go through a living death.

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