

The Silent Voices: Child Widows and their Enlightenment Beyond Tradition in Mona Verma's *Lost and Found in Banaras* (2018)

Dr. Keja Priya S*  

Author's Note

This study is supported by the fund received from the University Grants Commission for Junior Research Fellowship.

Abstract

*A significant form of "social death" that deprives children of their rights and innocence is child marriage and its tragic consequence, child widowhood. Within the framework of traditional and superstitious Indian society, this article examines these themes through an analysis of Mona Verma's book *Lost and Found in Banaras*. The protagonist, Brinda, was married to an eleven-year-old boy at the age of three and was subsequently abandoned by her family after her young husband was lost in a flood. Labelled a "bad omen," she is compelled to live in mourning at the Nirmal Ashram in Banaras, a city renowned for its large population of marginalized widows.*

Submitted: 03.01.2026 Revised: 02.02.2026 Accepted: 12.02.2026 Published: 15.02.2026

*Kejapriya S, Reg.no: 23114014012038, Junior Research Fellow, Department of English, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelvel - 627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Funding: The University Grants Commission for Junior Research Fellowship.

Copyright: ©2026 Kejapriya S.

License: This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

Citation: Kejapriya S. "The Silent Voices: Child Widows and their Enlightenment Beyond Tradition in Mona Verma's *Lost and Found in Banaras* (2018)". 21CILS: 21st Century Indian Literary Studies, , vol. 1, no. 1, Feb. 2026, pp. 10-19.

The present study aims to examine the consequences of child marriage and the sufferings of the bride when she becomes a widow and to consider how child widows are treated by society. The study also posits that the intervention of educated individuals such as Sia and Uday disrupts the cycle of suffering and silence. These characters demonstrate that, although tradition marginalizes, education and enlightenment provide essential means of reclaiming identity and agency by promoting economic independence and highlighting the widows' plight. While tradition and lack of education marginalize child widows in India, enlightenment facilitated by educated intervention offers a path toward restoration and agency.

Keywords : child marriage, child widowhood, intersectionality, tradition vs. modernity, education, and enlightenment.

Child marriage is the marriage of children under the age of 18. Child marriage and child engagement are often related to traditional and religious beliefs. It can be considered superstitious. Nour says that “over 60 million marriages include girls under the age of 18 years: approximately 31 million in South Asia, 14 million in sub-Saharan Africa, and 6.6 million in Latin America and the Caribbean” (51).

The British colonial government raised the minimum age for females in the first marriage to 14 years in British India in 1929. The law had two distinct features: it was announced in 1929 but implemented six months later in 1930, and the law applied to only British India, which was directly ruled by the British government, but not to Princely States (Indian Native States), which were under their indirect control. (Roy)

Early and child marriage are primarily caused by structural injustices in Indian society. These disparities are then perpetuated and reinforced by Indian norms and practices. We think that early and child marriage are signs of more profound structural injustices, but norms are frequently blamed for them (Early and Child Marriage in India 34). “It is said that Mahatma Gandhi found 600 widows under the age of one, which started the ‘VidhwaKumari Movement Act’, which eventually led to the Sardar Act of 1929, which raised the legal age of marriage of girls and boys in India” (Watson 6).

In *Lost and Found in Banaras*, the author highlights three main themes for the readers. The first two are child marriage and child widowhood. The story depicts how the three-year-old protagonist, Brinda, marries at a young age and, shortly after, becomes a widow following a flood on the Jalangi River. Her own family abandons her after losing her husband. The second theme revolves around the Nirmal Ashram in Banaras, where families abandon their child widows. Brinda lives there, but there is a threat that a local landowner wants to seduce one of the child widows; however, Vasanti, who runs the ashram, opposes this. The third central theme examines how Banaras prompts individuals to reflect on their destinies, even as they return to the city for different reasons.

In *Lost and Found in Banaras*, there are two villages. They are Dhubhulia and Guruni, the bride's and the groom's villages, respectively. Both the villagers strongly believed the myth that when lord Shiva married Parvati, she was only eight years old. Even before the girl child attains puberty, they will give away their child to another family in the name of marriage, and then the bride will return to her parents' house until she reaches the age of childbearing. They used to give away their girl children in the name of marriage, that too to an older adult. The novel *Lost and Found in Banaras* opens with a detailed description of the celebration that was not for a festival or a carnival but for the marriage of the three-year-old protagonist, Brinda. The entire village was very eager to celebrate Brinda's marriage, even though she did not know what was going to happen to her. She was still sleepy and worried about the keychain she had lost. The groom is Bisbaas, who belonged to the BorJarti clan and was only eleven years old. He was also not interested in the marriage because he was inspired by the preaching of the YMCA about the banishment of child marriage. He was very much interested in continuing his studies, but due to his parents' compulsion, he reached Dhubhulia for the marriage. Their marriage was planned on the special day named Akshay Tritiya. Here, both the bride and the groom become the victims of child marriage. But the treatment of the bride is entirely different in society. There are so many restrictions on them, too, in the name of tradition. Even though they are too young, maturity will play a vital role in their lives after their marriage. In every child marriage, the bride loses her childhood immediately after her marriage, when society imposes many restrictions, and maturity plays an important role.

The customs followed during Brinda's marriage seemed bizarre to her. She felt sleepy throughout the event. As a three-year-old, she should have had the freedom to sleep and play with her friends, but she was required to wake up early and was compelled by her family to remain still for long periods in preparation for her marriage. "Get up, Brinda!" Malay shook her. Brinda lazily shifted in her sleep, turned over onto her back, and went back to sleep, revealing a spot on her pillow where drool had left a wet patch" (Verma 18-19). When the groom arrived at Brinda's house, her father, Malay, woke her to get ready for the marriage. However, she was too sleepy to wake. After waking, she asked her father about her lost keychain. "Did you find my key chain?" (Verma 19). She was very calm, while everyone else was busy with the preparations for her marriage. As the youngest bride, she was unaware of the arrangements and remained in a playful mood; such behavior shows her innocence, a trait only children possess. During the marriage ceremony, while the priest was chanting, she was asked to place the sticks into the fire; even then, Brinda asked about her keychain.

When Brinda said she wanted to go to the toilet, both Chidiya and Chuhiya mocked her, so Brinda went to her mother-in-law to ask her to go with her. However, she was busy preparing a feast for the villagers. Mona Verma beautifully illustrates how Brinda was so innocent and was expecting some company, as follows:

'I want to go to the toilet'. Brinda whispered into Chidiya's ear. Chuhiya squeaked with laughter covering her gaping mouth with bath hand as if it were some outrageous proposition.

'I will ask Ma' she got to her feet to look for her mother.

Meanwhile, Bithika was busy preparing for the feast that was laid out for the entire village. (Verma 26)

As a three-year-old child, Brinda did not even know how to address the members of her husband's family. Even before she learned to speak properly, she was sent to live with another family in the name of marriage, arranged with a young boy of eleven who was not interested. When Bisbaas's twin sisters called Brinda 'Bhagini', she did not understand that this was how her husband's sisters should address her, and she replied that her name was Brinda, not Bhagini.

'Bhagini!' they squealed with delight. Brinda could not have been happier to have chanced upon a company to look forward to. She smiled back, 'My name is not Bhagini' shaking her head. She whispered, 'It's Brinda!' she added shyly. Chuhiya and Chidiya, barely a few years older, laughed. (Verma 25)

At three years old, she was overcoming unimaginable challenges. Mona Verma, in her novel *Lost and Found in Banaras*, clearly illustrates all the incidents. After a few hours, when the flood arrived, the things Brinda experienced were entirely pathetic. Brinda's life became miserable and tragic immediately after her marriage, when she was only three years old.

She was staying with a family whose members she was unfamiliar with. And for whom she came, there was Bisbaas. Still, he was also not interested in the marriage, so now Brinda's condition is downright pathetic, as she longs for company, or perhaps hope, among unfamiliar faces. When the flood was ferocious, everyone was lost. The situation frightened her, and she was grabbed by a tree between its spiny branches. While searching for his family members, Bibhuti could only find Brinda. After seeing Bibhuti, Brinda was somewhat hopeful. She saw him as her only hope. She was longing to go back to her father's house. Brinda was repeatedly telling that 'I want to go home' (34). Bibhuti was sad that he lost all his family members in the flood and could not find them; he was also suffering from a deadly disease of that time named Tuberculosis. So he wanted to safeguard Brinda before his death. Thus, he decided to bring her back to her father's house. When Bibhuti and Brinda reached Brinda's village, Dhubhulia, the situation was totally unfavorable to them. Neither of them imagined a situation like that.

The whole village gathered in front of Brinda's house, and they were gathered there not to support Brinda, but because they considered her a bad omen and wanted her to leave that place. They were unwilling to take her back to their village in the name of tradition. When Brinda was standing in front of her father's house, no one came forward to accept her. They were caught between tradition and their feelings for their Brinda, but in the end, tradition won. Bibhuti tried hard to explain things to Brinda's family, but they were stuck in tradition and could not overcome it.

“She’s your daughter, Malay, she is just a child. It is her fault.’ He hissed” (Verma 38). Brinda’s father stood, showing no reaction. At the same time, Malay has borrowed money from the village head for the harvest, so he could not do anything against the village head or the villagers. Suppose he took back her daughter, who the villagers considered a bad omen. He will have to keep borrowing money for the upcoming years as well. “The crops had failed this year, and his land was not free. The Pradhan had lent him money for the next harvest, and he was caught in a nexus of borrowing years after year” (Verma 39).

The society’s customs and practices were what made Brinda suffer greatly, and that was the only thing that led the people in her village and her family to consider her a bad omen. The tradition was what made Brinda stand out when she was only three, and it was because of it that her own family members abandoned her. Then there stood only Bibhuti, who remained Brinda’s only hope, though not for long. After Malay refused to take Brinda back, Bibhuti was forced to send her to the Nirmal Ashram in Banaras because of his health.

‘Where we are going, Baba?’ she asked again.

Bibhuti looked down at her.

‘To your new home,’ he replied dryly.

‘*Our* new home, isn’t it?’ she repeated after him, excitedly.

Bibhuti turned his face away. (Verma 48)

Even Brinda was unaware of what had been happening to her. Still, she believed Bibhuti when he said he would take her to his home and be with her. But Brinda’s excitement made Bibhuti even guiltier. He could not answer Brinda’s questions because he could not tolerate what had been happening.

Though he was forced to send her to the ashram, it was a curse to Brinda, which made her lead the life of a widow at three years old, even before her husband died; he was only lost but not dead. When she started leading a life as a widow, she completely lost her childhood. Right from there, society brought her childhood to an end.

The detailed description of the widows and their appearance who live in Banaras. They used to wear an old white saree and a rosary around their neck and shave their heads; most importantly, they surrendered themselves to God. Bibhuti could not miss the sea of white that lined the narrow alleyways leading to the ghats. Barely covered in a single, unstitched, five-yard white cloth that has long lived past its use, they were shrunken, emaciated bodies with disillusioned faces. Shaven heads with a rosary around their neck and a long sandalwood tilak extending from their forehead to the bridge of their nose, decorated with all the taboos so as not to be able to induce any carnal pleasure in men. With all yearnings consigned to formidable margins, they had surrendered to an unforgiving God in a bid to assuage some grief of being uncared for and to constantly reiterate their motive to make themselves believe in their ill-fated destinies (Verma 46).

The widows were begging in front of the temple. Some were singing, and some were chanting while begging. Bibhuti also thinks about how the widows were mentally affected by their condition in society and about their longings and then their anger towards society for marginalizing them.

They banged their pitted metal bowls on the ground to attract the attention of the motley mix of passers-by for alms. Some were singing, some chanting in wheezy asthmatic breaths, and some profusely begging the passers-by for a mere one meal of the day, however insipid. (Verma 47)

When they reached the Nirmal Ashram, Brinda could not understand where they were or why they had come there. She was in a state of total confusion. When she asked Bibhuti about the place, he could not answer her and looked helplessly to the ashram's head. The little Brinda kept asking, and she got the answer to her question from Vasanti, the head of the ashram. Brinda could not accept it and tried to leave the Ashram with Bibhuti.

She clasped Bibhuti's leg tightly. He took her by her trembling shoulders and knelt on the ground, looking her in the eye. Brinda understood that there was a lot more to the situation than what met her eye and was yet to come across.

'No Baba...' She retraced her steps, all the while pulling him out of the doorway, towards the street.

'This is not a home.....it's not like our home in the village.' (Verma 54-55)

From the above-mentioned lines, we can clearly see that this marks the end of Brinda's childhood, during which she lost her only hope, Bibhuti Baba. She could no longer accept it, but did not want to stay there. However, her fate left her alone in the ashram. Suddenly, Bibhuti ran away and left the place as quickly as possible with the help of a rickshaw.

The child widows' feelings will always be unnoticed by others. They were treated as bad omens, and they were not allowed into the temples. Most of the time, they were considered untouchables. They are twice removed from society, which means they were doubly marginalized. The following lines illustrate why Banaras was called the city of widows. "If Jaipur is called the pink city of India, Banaras, allied with a symbolic dimension, may be considered as the 'White City' because of the highest level of concentration of widows in the city" (Konar 3).

In *Lost and Found in Banaras*, we can find the sufferings, longings, and enlightenment of the educated people. Before bringing up those things, Mona Verma gives a brief description of Banaras, the city of widows, and the Nirmal Ashram, where the widows live. The description of Banaras is as follows:

Banaras is not just the past revisited. Its enigma hits you instantly and takes you back to the atavistic fulcrum that lends it, its bearings. The oldest city in the world, shrouded in a haze of ash and soot, the solemn river with its mud-lined banks, the worn stair flight leading to the burnished façade to temple steeples, ochre robes and an air dense with a rich repository of legends, myths

and life so complacently settled with death is what is the essence of this city. At the outset, Banaras's antiquity leaves an indelible relic on the mind, with its sepia-toned 'present' of an ageless past. (Verma 45)

Banaras is not only an ancient city but also mysterious. The mystery will take us back to the ancestors' headstone. Nirmal Ashram is the place where widows were sent by their own family members. There were so many young widows living, but their voices remain unheard by society.

They reached a dilapidated, white, coarse-looking building with high-rise walls. Its plaster was peeling off at most places. A tin board, pockmarked with rust stains and dirt smudged over it, had hung loose from one end. The nails had come undone from the crumbling walls. Of whatever was left of the faded paint that had long outlived its use, he could make out that this was Nirmal Ashram.

The front door hid from the world another hopeless planet, dry, dreamless and cloudy. (Verma 48-49)

The Nirmal Ashram was run by Vasanti, who was 70 years old. She is well known for her kindness and wisdom. She guided the widows using verses from the Bhagavad Gita. She often defends the widows when they are angry with society. She used to guide the abandoned souls to the path of God. She considers forgiveness the greatest virtue. That can be seen in the following lines: "One should forgive, under any injury. Forgiveness is holiness; by forgiving the Universe is held together" (Verma 50). From these lines, it is clear that Vasanti considers forgiveness the greatest virtue.

Debi was one of the widows of the ashram, the youngest until the protagonist arrived there. She was the one who always chided society, saying that being a widow is not her fault but society's. She tried to escape from the ashram twice but was unfortunately brought back by the rickshaw puller Keshav. Debi was the one who looked after Brinda in the ashram. She used to teach her the reality of their fate. When Brinda was taken to the ashram by her father-in-law, Bibhuti, Debi felt pity for her, but she was not surprised. She expressed her anger toward her husband by saying, "How can you forgive someone for reminding you every day that you are a living dead?" (Verma 50).

Though widows were not allowed to enter temples as untouchables, the cord they weave will be used in the temples. The irony is that the widows were not allowed into the temples, yet the cord they prepared will be used to light the temple lamps, whereas their lives are dark. "The widows, some no more than children themselves, sat in a circle rolling cotton into long, cylindrical wicks for the temples that, ironically, they weren't permitted to enter" (Verma 49).

They faced threats from the landlords for their sexual needs. The Zamindar was often sending his messenger to the ashram to convey the landlord's message to Vasanti. That can be seen in the following lines: "The local priest, Deviprasad, had stated the Zamindar's request to Vasanti and in return had promised a life of

comfort, putting an end to their miseries. Vasanti had retorted with her indomitable stance of virtue backed by the wisdom of the Bhagawat Gita” (Verma 53). The Zamindar was expecting a girl from the ashram to fulfill his sexual need. He promises that he will satisfy all the needs of the widows who were in the ashram. But as a faithful follower of Lord Krishna and his words, Vasanti refuses to send a girl and rejects the offer as well.

Sia was a twenty-seven-year-old lady. She returned to Banaras from Delhi to sell the home in which she lived with her parents. She was working as a resident doctor in Lifeline Hospital in Delhi. Sia’s father worked as a professor at Banaras Hindu University. Her mother worked with an NGO that promised to help child widows in Banaras. That can be found in the following lines: “My father was a professor at the BHU, and my mother worked with an NGO that had vowed to find a livelihood for the child widows that were rampant in Banaras” (Verma 75). Uday was a photojournalist in The Explorer magazine. His full name was Uday Kanwaljeet Singh. His father’s photography skills inspired him. He had half-Cuban and half-Indian origins. He completed his BTECH in photography at Brighton and Hove College. He also worked as an apprentice under an Italian professional photographer in Manchester. The purpose of his arrival was to capture the child widows and the whole idea of salvation in and around Banaras. Though he had half-Indian origins, he was afraid of water and hesitated to undertake the assignment given to him by his boss, Rebecca McWorth.

These child widows had a good connectivity with Sia. “I think our neighbor is coming back for Diwali!’ Debi winked mischievously as Brinda looked at her questioningly. It wasn’t long before the girls were back to their giggling selves and broke into laughter that bespoke of their little secret” (67). Both girls used to enjoy watching television at Sia’s house. That can be seen in the following lines: “Aah, Bindhu and Debi, come in. I will switch on the television for you” (132). The secret of their happiness is revealed in the above-mentioned line: Sia and Debi were allowed inside Sia’s house, and they enjoy watching television.

Uday and Sia were the prominent characters in the second half of the story, where the child widows’ enlightenment occurs. Sia and Uday became familiar with each other when Sunny brought Uday to Sia’s house to capture the river without going near it. After that incident, Sia and Uday became close friends. As Sia’s mother worked with an NGO that Vasanti was familiar with. She introduced the Ashram to Uday, which will be helpful to him in accomplishing his mission. One such incident is their effort to get Debi to Sunny, the son of a local *pandit*.

His name is Sunny. He is a guide. He would get foreigners and pilgrims to the ashram when he first saw me.’ Debi told Sia how their familiarity had paved the way to acknowledgement and shy smiles. Love, as Sunny had claimed, was not far behind. He wanted to marry her. All hell broke loose. He had a younger sister to marry off. Sunny’s father, a staunch *pandit* who worked for the *Bara*

Makaan, would die before taking in a child widow as a daughter-in-law. (Verma 180)

Then Uday, the lost husband of Brinda, is the one who brings the sufferings of widows to the attention of society through his pictures. When Brinda came to know about Uday, and the link between them was revealed, Brinda reacted with maturity. Her level of maturity can be found in the following lines: “If you want to see the brave, look at those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look at those who can love in return for hatred” (211).

Sia helped the widows start an industry in their homes with the help of some non-governmental agencies, and she handed over her house to the ashram. As Brinda was mature enough to handle things, she ran the ashram after Vasanti's death. Nirmal Ashram is named Vasanti Ashram. The Vasanti Ashram now became the place for abandoned women. They wove and stitched to earn their living so they could lead an easy life. The widows in Vasanti Ashram no longer shave their heads, and they are allowed to dress as they wish.

Though Vasanti was not a widow but a young girl who was driven out of her husband's house and joined the ashram as a helper, she later became its head. She lived her entire life for the widows. Likewise, Brinda also contributed her life to the Ashram after Vasanti's death, though she was not a widow but was considered so by society.

From the novel's setting, we can see that at that time, during 1962 and before, there was no awareness of education or of superstitious beliefs, even after the government enacted an act to prevent child marriages practiced in vast areas of India, because people lacked proper education. But today the situation is completely changed because of education. Thus, through education, one can live a life of their own, without the influence of a society that erodes identity and childhood.

Though Vasanti was bold and mature enough, she could only safeguard the widows from being misused. But enlightenment was brought by people who were educated and came from educated backgrounds. Uday brought the suffering of widows to light, which was unknown to society. Sia was the one who gave widows a better life by helping them run a weaving and stitching industry. Also, the change Sia brought to Debi's life can only be achieved by educated people. Thus, education is what brings change to society.

Works Cited

Barman, Rashmirekha, and The Assam Royal Global University. “Widowhood: Reflection On Oppression And Societal Dilemma As Illustrated In Indira Goswami'S Text.” *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, vol. 9, no. 6, journal-article, June 2021, pp. c142-44. www.ijcrt.org.

Early and Child Marriage in India: A Landscape Analysis. Edited by D. Lobenstine, Nirantar Trust, 2015.

Konar, Ankur. "Banaras as a Text: Representation of Widows in Mona Verma's *The White Shadow*." *Research Gate*, 15 June 2017,

www.researchgate.net/publication/318391337_Banaras_as_Text_Representation_of_Widows_in_Mona_Verma's_The_White_Shadow.

Nour NM. Child marriage: a silent health and human rights issue. *Rev Obstet Gynecol*. 2009 Winter;2(1):51-6. PMID: 19399295; PMCID: PMC2672998.

Roy, Sutanuka, et al. "Impact of British Colonial Gender Legal Reforms: Evidence from Child Marriage Abolition Act, 1929." *American Economic Association*, www.aeaweb.org/conference/2021/preliminary/paper/GT3z8zsR.

Verma, Mona. *Lost and Found in Banaras*. Delhi, Readomania, 2018. Print.

Watson, Mohinder. "Millions of child widows forgotten,

Invisible and vulnerable report by action on child, Early and forced marriage.", 9 July 2018,

www.soroptimistinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ChildWidowsReport_2018_CB.pdf