

Shireen Modi (Ghosh's novel Flood of Fire) Resilient

Character Shireen Modi enters the story as a conventional, even conservative, Indian woman, meek person, dutiful wife and pious Parsi living in Bombay. She lives in her in-laws' house, with her husband always away, and is almost invisible. She is not consulted about anything important, although she runs the kitchen. Then she is brought the news of her husband's financial ruin and suicide in Canton, and she embarks on a transformation of character. Her emotional loss is one thing (we don't really know if she loved her husband because he spent so much of his time in Canton), but her financial loss is even worse. She has been left nothing of the fabulous wealth he had (apparently) amassed through his opium trade, not even a single ship. When she also finds out that her deceased husband had a Chinese wife and has a son by her, she appears more concerned with a loss of face than with the loss of her husband. As she says, 'money is only one small part of the problem. I have to consider my family's reputation.' Despite these concerns, she agrees to undertake a long journey to Canton, against the wishes of her relatives, and in the company of the mysterious half-Armenian, half-Egyptian Zadig, who has brought her this news, which also scandalises her in their eyes. She is determined to complete the story of her life, to locate the place where it has been cut short, and the voyage to Canton proves liberating. As a sign of her transformation, she abandons traditional Parsi mourning dress and adopts European-style clothing. Once in Canton, she shows another side of her character, empathy, in her new friendship with Mrs Burnham. And she begins what promises to be a different kind of friendship with Zadig. Having come through a storm of misfortune, Shireen is a resilient person.

Activities In the life prior to her husband's death, Shireen was a typical Parsi wife. Although she had little authority over most domestic affairs, she spent days fussing over food and recipes, and she often went to visit her daughters and granddaughters. Once in Canton, she makes friends with Mrs Burnham and spends days in her company, two women with failed marriages and common problems.

Illustrative moments

Traditional Shireen Modi lived as a traditional member of an extended Parsi family in Bombay, until news of her husband's death is brought to her from Canton. At first, she cannot believe it, but when it sinks in, her reaction is instinctual. 'Remembering what widows do, she struck her wrists together, almost mechanically, breaking her glass bangles. They fell away, leaving tiny pinpricks of blood on her skin.' She immediately takes to wearing the clothes prescribed for a Parsi widow.

Decisive Although the grieving widow first appears to be meek and passive, she soon reveals a resolute quality lying beneath the culturally shaped exterior. That decisiveness is clearly demonstrated a few weeks after she learned of her husband's death. Then, in the face of stern disapproval from her relatives and wider Parsi community in Bombay, she decides to go to Canton and give up 'the peculiar kind of loneliness that comes of living in a house where the servants far outnumber their employers.' Now, nothing will deter her from her decision, not even the rumours that begin to circulate when she announces that she will go to Canton with the mixed-race Zadig.

Transformed The transformation of her character from passive wife with an absentee husband to an independent-minded woman is dramatised, as so often in Ghosh's fiction, with clothing. In preparation for her voyage to Canton, Shireen goes to a tailor. She plans to take some new shawls and saris. While she is there, however, her maid suggests she also buy some dresses. 'Dresses! Shireen clamped a hand over her mouth. After hearing of Bahram's [her husband's] death, she had adhered strictly to the rules of widowhood, which prescribed...only white saris.' Later, at home, she proudly paraded herself around in the new clothes, showing off her new image to her daughters.