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## A Critical Insight into the Representation of Widows in the Novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee

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### **Abstract:**

The paper analyses the representation of widows in the select writings of Bankimchandra Chatterjee. Set against the backdrop of Bengali Renaissance, the works examine the issues of child marriage, widow remarriage and female education. The nineteenth century was an important era that marked the beginning of debates on the institution of marriage and the role of women in society. The figure of widow became an important site for introspection of the Indian society. As the struggles for independence gained momentum women acquired an allegorical significance and symbolized the motherland. In light of the political context of the Indian independence movement, Chatterjee examines the role of widows in a traditional caste Hindu society with particular reference to Bishabriksha (1873) and Krishkanta's Will (1878).

**Keywords:** modernity, bhadrlok, nationalism, colonial discourse widow-remarriage, bhadramahila, satitva

The nineteenth century was an era marked by various socio-political and cultural events. The feudal political structure of India was gradually replaced by colonial administration and the educational apparatus underwent significant developments. As the Indian society was exposed to Western ideals of modernity and liberation, a spirit of nationalistic fervour prompted a desire for self expression in literature. The Indian literary tradition gradually escaped from the shackles of British hegemony and paved way for important social, cultural and religious developments.

Bengal, in particular underwent a period of transition. The educated section of the landed gentry emerged as the Bengali bhadraloks who were mostly Hindus but a multi caste elite group. The Indian Renaissance opened up an avenue for the development of spiritual forces behind the nationalistic agenda that was instrumental in forging a national identity under the colonial rule and produced a favourable atmosphere for the growth of the new social class of the bhadraloks who developed modern Bengali as a corollary to the new system of education. Bankimchandra Chatterjee was a prominent figure of the literary Renaissance in Bengal and a pioneer of the novelistic form in the nineteenth century. An influential political thinker of his time, Bankim was an important factor in the creation of a nationalist imagination and an ardent proponent of social reforms in the Indian society. The educated middle class Hindus initiated social and religious reform movements that aimed to

educate women, abolish the practice of child marriage and polygamy and improve the state of widows.

The nineteenth century Bengal witnessed debates on women's issues such as child marriage, early maternity, widow immolation, widow remarriage and female education. The traditional Hindu social structure was based on the Varnashram dharma that classified caste hierarchies and prescribed specific rules for each group. Ascetics and widows, however, were excluded from this system and the emphasis on caste purity led to the isolation and oppression of women. Early marriage, sexual violation, difficulty of divorce and remarriage made the women totally dependent on their male family members.

According to Partha Chatterjee the Bengali middle classes considered the Indian society to be divided into two sections- the 'material outer' world was occupied by the bhadralok men and was open to western influences while the 'inner spiritual' domain was inhabited by the bhadramahila. These upper caste and middle class Bengali women were the preservers of national culture and the inner sphere was to be uncontaminated by colonial influence. The division of the inner and outer sphere enabled the Bengali elite to exercise supreme authority in the domestic realm which was denied under the colonial rule. They addressed the issue of women according to their own ideological parameters that resisted any kind of political negotiations with the colonial rule. The female body, therefore, became a site of a deep political struggle.

Colonial discourses through their emphasis on gender difference aimed to depict the outmoded traditions that suppressed the rights of women in the Indian society and in the process propagate the magnanimity of their noble aspirations to liberate the colonised female subject. The debate over female violation brought to light the atrocious condition of upper caste widows in Indian society. The traditional nationalistic discourses tended to project widows as asexual beings whereas the colonial discourses saw them as hapless victims of the patriarchal order. Influenced by the western ideas of liberation, reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar waged war against the oppression of women in society and strove to promote their welfare. For the Bengali intelligentsia, the vision of a new woman was shaped by the notion of a national identity and cultural refinement.

The domestic novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century emerged as a critical site for examining the institution of marriage and the role of women within and outside it. The interrogation of the figure of the widow was a key aspect of a number of writings that sought to redefine the nature of gender relations in society. This initiative continued into the twentieth century where it merged with the larger cause of nationalism. The nationalist movement of independence led by Mahatma Gandhi imparted an important role to women who symbolised the docile and long-suffering motherland. They occupied an important position within nationalist politics and represented India in its pristine and chaste origins. The figure of widow was considered to be an icon of nationalism whose sufferings became a metaphor for the oppressed nation suffering silently under colonial exploitation. 'The sati's ascetic figure was purged of all traces of sexuality and became the ideal representation of the traditional

Hindu woman' (Sarkar). This self-imposed chastity symbolised the spirituality of each home within the Hindu community.

The question of widowhood was closely examined by a number of western educated middle class Bengali writers who held different ideological views on the question of widows. Bankim was primarily concerned with the way widows were reconstructing the structures of traditional Hindu society. Others like Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee were fiercely critical of the oppressive societal codes that perpetrated injustices upon them and were sympathetic to the sexuality of widows while at the same time recognising it as a natural instinct.

*Bisha Briksha (The Poison Tree)* (1873) was one of the first works in Bengali literature to analyse the position of widows in society. It revolves around a young widow Kundanandini who falls in love with an affluent zamindar, Nagendra. Suryamukhi, Nagendra's wife symbolises the ideal bhadramahila who is the epitome of wifely virtues. The novel traces the journey of Kunda as she is ruined by her love for Nagendra and ultimately commits suicide. In *Bisha Briksha*, Bankim mocks the reformatory spirit of Taracharan and Debendra who are part of a progressive group. Taracharan, the school master is presented a champion of women's rights while Debendra is projected as lecherous and immoral. Suryamukhi, in a letter to her sister-in-law Kamalmani writes about some local pundits who encourage Nagendra to marry Kunda by quoting specific scriptural arguments that support widow remarriage. She says "Tell me, if Vidyasagar who advocates widow-remarriage is a scholar, then who is a fool?". The utterance reveals Bankim's disapproval of widow remarriage and exposes its danger in the absence of any norm against polygamy in Hindu society. Although he sees the purity of Kunda's love for Nagendra, yet he considers it to be unlawful since it destroys the serenity of the domestic sphere. The novel strongly condemns polygamy which is revealed in the story when Suryamukhi abandons Nagendra and he in turn deserts Kundanandini. In the novel, Kunda emerges as a submissive woman who is unable to voice her opinions. The majority of the decisions related to her life are taken by others, including that of her remarriage. She accepts Nagendra's betrayal without any signs of protest and commits suicide as a final act of resignation.

*Krishnakanta's Will* (1878) is another novel that deals with domesticity and personal conflicts. It presents the widow Rohini, who, unlike Kundanandini, is wilful and assertive. She falls in love with Krishnakant's nephew Govindlal who abandons his wife and elopes with Rohini. However the story ends tragically as she is murdered by Govindlal on suspicions of adultery and his wife Bhramar also dies. Overcome with immense guilt, he gives up his life as a householder and becomes an ascetic.

In the novel, Rohini desires to embrace satitva which is revealed in her sorrowful utterance: "what sins had I committed that I became a child widow? For what fault am I to spend my youth like a dried up log"(194). The narrative highlights Rohini's desire to assume the role of a kulalakshmi and her longing to become a part of the bhadrakalok society, thereby gaining rights of conjugality. Although the author is sympathetic to her plight initially, he disclaims any knowledge of her desires as they exceed the limits of society: "What was

passing through Rohini's mind, I cannot tell, but it might have been something like this: For what fault was I destined to become a widow while still a child? Am I a greater sinner than other people that I should be deprived of all joys of this world" (29). The narrator's detachment from Rohini reveals a conflict between expressing sympathy for her and castigating her desires. Her deliberate transgression problematizes and questions the codes prescribed by the scriptures regarding women.

Tanika Sarkar in her work *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* argues that the widow's austere adherence to rituals situates her "body in ancient India, thus miraculously enabling her to escape foreign domination. The cloth she wears is necessarily indigenous, the nation needs ascetic widowhood" (42). Her emphasis on the widow's austerity neglects her sexuality and strengthens the dichotomy between the inner spiritual and outer corrupt world. Sarkar suggests that the nationalists identified the figure of the widow with the spiritual essence of India thereby eliminating any possibility of her bodily and material desires.

The reforms focussing on widows arose as a reaction to the Christian missionaries' reproval of the Hindu traditions and were also propelled by the efforts of the educated classes to relieve the miserable state of widows who were subjected to forced celibacy. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, I.C. Vidyasagar, noted Bengali reformer and scholar, in his crusade for widow remarriage, referred to the Hindu shastras to support the legitimacy of his arguments and suggested that Indian traditions sanctioned reform. His work *The Marriage of Hindu Widows* (1855) throws light on the miserable condition of widows who are deprived of economic security and often subjected to sexual exploitation. Eventually the British government passed the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act (1856) which was opposed by a majority of the upper-caste Hindu society as they saw it as a threat to family honour and property rights.

The financial and economic position of widows in the Hindu society had a significant impact upon their lives. There were two primary divisions that governed the laws of inheritance- the Dayabhaga and the Mitakshara. The first was prevalent in Bengal and was more favourable for the widows. It allowed an individual to have autonomous control over the ancestral property and even sanctioned the widow to inherit her husband's property in the absence of a male heir. Many novels highlight this trend of inheritance in their works. For instance, in *Krishnakanta's Will*, the patriarch Krishnakanta decides to pass on all his wealth not to any of his sons but his daughter-in-law Bhramar.

In Saratchandra Chatterjee's *Palli Samaj*, the widow Rama gets an equal share in the family property. Therefore, the Dayabhaga system of inheritance enabled the widows, particularly those belonging to the upper class, to have some amount of independence. The Mitakshara sect held a more conservative approach and had authority in northern parts of India. It allowed inheritance on the basis of birth and denied any rights to the female members. Widows, in such cases, were left to fend for themselves or depend on the mercy of their joint family for survival.

Susie Tharu in her work *The Impossible Subject: Caste and the Gendered Body* posits that writers dealing with the portrayal of widow protagonists consciously get involved in

debates centred on this figure. She perceives the legislation of the of the Widow's Remarriage Act as a means of masculine control over the social behaviour and sexuality of women. It is in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that widows became the subject of the progressive male novelists to advance their critique of the orthodox Hindu society. Their characterisation in Bengali fiction may be seen as the bhadrakok mediation between the private realm of Bengali bourgeoisie social and moral codes and the public sphere of colonial rule.

The bhadrakok society associated the married woman with prosperity and revered her as the 'kulalakshmi' or goddess of the household. They occupied an important position due to their role as mothers and nurturers. There was a particular notion of devotion or 'satitva' that reflected the chastity of a woman in the traditional society. The wife was supposed to be devoted to her husband and ensure conjugal prosperity. The widow on the other hand was considered to be a symbol of misfortune and was to be kept away from all worldly pleasures. She was forbidden to practice any signs of bhadrakok femininity and follow 'asexual satitva'. The widow's ultimate act of 'satitva' was her self-immolation on her husband's funeral pyre. Her very existence, however, seemed to be in defiance of the traditional conventions. With the demise of her husband, her usefulness practically ended and more so if she had no children. Although Sati was legally abolished, yet it was considered to be the highest form of virtuosity.

Uma Chakravarty in her work *Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?* suggests that the oppression of the widows by the patriarchal order betrayed a deep-seated fear of voracious sexual appetite that was unrestrained by marriage. Yet this norm was specifically imposed on the upper caste Hindus and did not apply across the other social groups and castes.

A widow's illegitimate love for a man other than her deceased husband has been a theme for concern in the literary imagination of the Bengali culture and was elaborately addressed in later works like Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Charitraheen*. The subject of transgression in relation to widows was first explored in Vaishnava poetry that applauded Radha's illicit love. Bengal, in particular, was concerned with preservation of the traditional structure that seemed to be threatened by the rapidly changing scenario. The relative economic freedom of widows as well as the agitation for reforms raised issues regarding the security of traditional Hindu family. The widow came to be associated with the vulnerable aspect of human nature requiring strict control over her temptations. The chaste woman was thus, confined to the inner sphere or 'antahpur' which was separated from the outside world. In *Bisha Briksha*, the private sphere is violated when Nagendra enters Kunda's house where her father is dying. In *Krishnakanta's Will*, Haralal enters Rohini's kitchen, thereby violating the sanctity of the inner domain. Also Rohini's encounter with Gobindlal in his private garden foreshadows the subsequent destruction of Bhramar's conjugal happiness. The transgression of the norms of private sphere inevitably leads to destruction.

Both the novels provide a glimpse into the minds of widows as they struggle within the confines of the patriarchal order and carry the burden of traditions that impose extraordinary constraints on their sexuality and desires. They reflect on the anxiety about the sexuality of the dangerous non-wife, who lies outside the influence of a male guidance. In *Bisha Briksha*, Hira is described as a sensuous widow who desires forbidden pleasures and Rohini in *Krishnakanta's Will* is in the full bloom of youth with her beauty 'brimming over like the full moon in autumn' In both the works, Bankim is sensitive to the agonies and despair of widows, yet he ultimately punishes them for their weaknesses and upholds the norms of traditional morality. The author aims to highlight the nature of human frailty, punishment and the possibility of redemption while at the same time emphasising on the need to restore order within society. Bankim was sympathetic to the condition of widows but was reluctant to disturb the existing Hindu social structure. He expressed his views in *Bangadarshan* (1870): "If it is a cruelty not to relieve the miseries of a handful of widows, then it must be a barbarous inhumanity to cause mischief to thousands of individuals of society by inaugurating widow-remarriage."

The portrayal of widows in Bankim's novels highlights the idea of femininity and conjugal love as embodied in the Hindu ideology. The widows are recognised for their strength of character and assertiveness, yet they are eventually destroyed by the perceived moral flaw in their nature. Their rebellion, desire for power and transgression of social conventions threatens the harmony of the domestic realm. The wife and the widow are juxtaposed as binary oppositions within the patriarchal framework. The wife has to lead a life devoted to the well-being of her family and submit to the authority of her husband. The widow, on the other hand, is a social outcast subjugated by the orthodox society and forced to live a life of abstinence. Marriage became a powerful tool for the rigid Hindu society that stifled the rights and freedom of women by enforcing stringent laws. Bankimchandra Chatterjee, therefore, emerges as a political thinker and writer who held a conservative view of women's role in society and believed that patriarchal control over women was necessary for the larger welfare of society.

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