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## Depiction of widowhood in select fictions of Rabindranath Tagore: A feminist study

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### Abstract

In my research work, I would like to focus on a point how widows like all other marginalized section of the society underwent the steamroller of both Colonialism and Nationalism and also Tagore's ambivalence regarding this issue. My research methodology would include Gender theorization, Disnarration and a close reading of the texts.

**Keywords:** Widowhood, marginalized, colonialism, gender, ambivalence

### Introduction

In "The East and the West", Rabindranath wrote that Hindu widows are luckier than European spinsters, because Hindu widows find refuge in the extended family. But in Tagore's fictions, we see that the widows, especially those who were childless and property less were marginalized within the family, just like Annapurna in *Chokher Bali* and Harimohini in *Gora*.

Harimohini, Sucharita and Satish's aunt in the novel *Gora* represents someone who is victim turned accomplice. Her desperation evolving out of her life-long deprivation and plights, and her frantic possessiveness of Sucharita form together a very interesting subject of the strange psychosis of a widow in a precarious situation. When she comes to Pares Babu's house, apparently in order to spend the rest of her life with her niece and nephew, she is reduced to a destitute. However, no sooner does Harimohini shift with Sucharita to Sucharita's house, than she is rapidly transformed from a weak and helpless woman into an aggressive and possessive one. Initially, she treats Binay and Gora with affection, but now she becomes alienated from both of them. Binay now appears to her as no true Hindu, almost an atheist. As for Gora, his argumentative and pro-active brand of Hinduism, almost modern despite its vowed orthodoxy, is alien to her. Feminist critic Rajul Sogani writes: "Soon, her (Harimohini's) self-centered nature reveals itself in her desire to control Sucharita's activities, relationships and opinions. All her energy is directed towards guarding Sucharita and pulling her into her own world of Hindu orthodoxy her frantic efforts to cast Sucharita in an orthodox mould and her appeal to Sucharita's friends to help her enterprises makes her a hideous figure, a victim transformed into a tyrant." (Sogani 2002: 154) [9].

A significant point, which needs to be discussed is that it is the socio-economic point which plays a decisive role in the life of a dependent woman as daughter, wife or widow. In *Chokher Bali*, the conditions of Hindu widows in the colonial Bengal forms an integral part. Mahendra, a wealthy but fatherless boy is brought up by two widows - his mother Rajlakshmi and his aunt Annapurna. Rajlakshmi has property of her own and she emerges as a proud mother of a son, who is destined to be the patriarch of the house. Annapurna, although not a destitute, is a child-widow, who hardly remembers her husband and most importantly, she is childless. Rajlakshmi is the mistress of the household, an instrument of patriarchy and the "phallic mother", who bullies Annapurna and in course of time drives her away to take refuge in Benaras.

The condition of young widows was even worse. They were often accused of seducing men and were considered as easy prey to men. They were denied any kind of comfort and even basic right to sexuality. They were forced to observe a life of celibacy and any kind of deviation from that path was considered as sin and so the woman was to face retribution.

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In *Chokher Bali*, we find Binodini as one of the representatives of "Bhodromohila", an Indianized form of the European "New Woman". She is well-educated and well aware of the ongoings of the society. She is also fully aware of her own charm and Mahendra's wife Ashalata seems to appear as a mere symbol of a naive, docile, subjugated Bengali woman in contrast with her. Binodini exercises her charm over both Mahendra and Bihari. She becomes widow immediately after her marriage. A postcolonial filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh wonderfully picturizes her repression and sexuality in his movie "Chokher Bali". In that movie, there is a scene where Binodini burns a wrapper of a chocolate after consuming it secretly. The chocolate wrap becomes the symbol of Binodini's repressed sexuality, which was to be burnt with the premature death of her husband Bipin. Tagore's stance regarding the life of the widows in Bengali household is rather ambiguous. In the novel *Chokher Bali*, Tagore has presented Binodini mostly as a seductress and a jealous woman, whose epiphany can come only by realising the fact that Mahendra's passionate love is nothing but an infatuation and Bihari's love should also be forsaken as marrying a widow would degrade his position in the society. So, after nursing Rajlakshmi in her death-bed, her ultimate destination is 'Benaras, the holy city, the eternal refuge of widows or homeless women.'

In *Ghare Baire*, Mejorani represents another face of the Hindu widows in colonial Bengal. In Tagore's days adult men married child brides, who were more likely to form affectionate relationship with a younger brother-in-law. Such an affinity developed between Mejorani and Nikhilesh. Mejorani is an embittered woman who was neglected by her husband when he was alive and jealous at the privileges enjoyed by Bimala. Bimala reports how Mejorani engages in coy games with Nikhilesh. She *often tries to seduce Nikhilesh by some attractive maids. The abusive languages often used by her* stands for the repression and anguish of a young widow, who has been literally denied of every joy of life and whose mere survival is also dependent on others' choice.

In *Chaturanga*, the female protagonist Damini is a widow, whose husband gifts his house, properties and his wife (whom he considers as his personal property) to his Guru Lilanandaswami. Damini never accepts this person as her Guru. Damini falls in love with Sachish who does not accept her as he is in an eternal quest for something called "truth". Unlike Bindoni, She has not allowed men in her life to shape her destiny. She didn't accept the terms society dictated for widows. She is finally married to Sribilash and overnight becomes a happy wife, successfully running a household. Does her untimely death serve as retribution for widow marriage? The questions remain unanswered.

Another widow character in *Chaturanga* is Nanibala. She is a victim of the atrocities of patriarchal feudal society. Nanibala denies to become a puppet of the patriarchal society. Her suicide serves as an eye-opener of the anguish of a widow in a patriarchal society.

Both Colonizers and the Nationalist Elites were indifferent, even destructive as women were concerned. The women, whom we find in Tagore's novels belong to the higher strata of the society. Still, they were othered. So, the women of the marginalized section were doubly othered and as for the widows, their plights were innumerable. Although widow marriage and levirate marriage had been known in ancient India, for many centuries widow remarriage had been

virtually forbidden in Hindu society. The widows were not only forbidden to marry, but also they were forced to lead a life of intense austerity and inhuman sufferings. In 1856, a law was passed allowing the remarriage of Hindu widows, but not many widows took advantage of it.

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