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Literary Theories

Desire, Discipline, and Defiance: Sexual Politics of Widowhood in Chokher Bali

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Abstract: This paper examines the politics of widowhood and female desire in Chokher Bali by Rabindranath Tagore through the theoretical framework of Kate Millett's concept of sexual politics. Situating the novel within the socio-cultural context of colonial Bengal, it argues that widowhood functions as a disciplinary institution designed to regulate and suppress female sexuality. At the same time, Binodini emerges as a disruptive figure whose assertion of desire challenges these patriarchal structures. Through close textual analysis, the paper explores how Binodini negotiates agency within oppressive conditions, exposing contradictions within patriarchal ideology. However, the narrative ultimately reinscribes control through her symbolic containment. By analysing this tension between resistance and repression, the paper demonstrates how Tagore's text simultaneously critiques and participates in the politics of gender and sexuality.

Keywords: Widowhood, Sexual Politics, Patriarchy, Desire, Agency, Tagore.



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International Journal of English Literature and
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Introduction

The condition of widowhood in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian society was marked by severe restrictions that extended beyond social marginalization into the regulation of women's bodies and desires. Widows were subjected to rigid codes of austerity, celibacy, and invisibility, transforming them into figures of both moral anxiety and social control. Chokher Bali offers a compelling literary engagement with this condition through its portrayal of Binodini, a young widow whose intelligence, desire, and agency destabilise the norms imposed upon her.

Critics such as Uma Chakravarti have argued that widowhood functioned as a mechanism for maintaining caste and patriarchal order by regulating female sexuality and reproductive potential (Chakravarti 62). Within this context, Binodini's refusal to conform to the expectations of widowhood renders her a transgressive figure. Her presence in the domestic sphere disrupts the fragile equilibrium of patriarchal relationships, revealing the tensions underlying normative structures of gender and power.

This paper employs Kate Millett's concept of sexual politics to analyze the dynamics of power in the novel. Millett contends that sexual relations are inherently political, structured by systems of domination that privilege men and subordinate women (Millett 23). By applying this framework, the paper argues that Chokher Bali presents widowhood as a site of patriarchal discipline while simultaneously exposing the instability of such control through Binodini's assertion of desire. Although the narrative ultimately reinscribes social norms by containing her, it cannot fully erase the disruptive potential of her agency.

Widowhood as a Disciplinary Institution

Widowhood in colonial Bengal was not merely a personal tragedy but a socially constructed condition that served to regulate women's bodies and maintain patriarchal order. The prohibition of remarriage, the enforcement of celibacy, and the denial of adornment collectively functioned to desexualize widows, rendering them socially invisible. As Tanika Sarkar observes, the ideal Hindu widow was constructed as a figure of sacrifice and self-denial, embodying the moral values of the community while simultaneously being excluded from its pleasures (Sarkar 114).

In Chokher Bali, Binodini's widowhood situates her within this framework of discipline. However, her characterization complicates the notion of passive victimhood. She is educated, articulate, and emotionally perceptive, qualities that distinguish her from the stereotypical representation of the submissive widow. This divergence creates a sense of unease within the narrative, as her presence challenges the ideological foundations of widowhood itself.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, one can argue that widowhood operates as a form of surveillance that internalizes control within the subject. Although Foucault does not specifically address gender, his analysis of power as diffuse and pervasive provides a useful lens for understanding how social norms regulate behavior (Foucault 136). Binodini's awareness of her marginal position reflects this internalization, yet her actions demonstrate a refusal to fully submit to it.

Moreover, the figure of the widow in Indian social discourse has historically been associated with both danger and vulnerability. As Lata Mani notes, debates surrounding widow remarriage often positioned widows as objects of reform rather than subjects with agency (Mani 89). Tagore's portrayal of Binodini disrupts this discourse by foregrounding her subjectivity, allowing her to articulate her desires and frustrations.

Desire as Agency: Reclaiming the Self

Binodini's assertion of desire constitutes one of the most significant challenges to patriarchal norms in the novel. Within a system that demands the suppression of female sexuality, her emotional and physical engagements with Mahendra and Behari represent acts of resistance. However, this resistance is neither straightforward nor unproblematic; it is shaped by the constraints of her social position and the complexities of her relationships.

Millett's theory of sexual politics emphasizes the role of sexuality as a site of power struggle, where dominance and subordination are negotiated (Millett 35). In this context,

Binodini's desire can be understood as an attempt to reclaim agency within a system that denies her autonomy. Her interactions with Mahendra, for instance, are marked by a combination of attraction and manipulation. While she seeks emotional fulfillment, she also exploits his weakness, thereby reversing the traditional dynamics of power.

At the same time, her relationship with Behari reveals a different dimension of her character. Unlike Mahendra, Behari represents moral restraint and intellectual compatibility. Binodini's attraction to him suggests a desire for recognition beyond physical intimacy, highlighting her complexity as a character. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita argue, representations of women in Indian literature often oscillate between idealization and demonization, leaving little room for nuanced subjectivity (Tharu and Lalita 212). Binodini, however, resists such categorization.

Importantly, her desire is not depicted as inherently immoral. Instead, it is framed as a natural and legitimate aspect of her humanity. This challenges the moral framework that underpins the institution of widowhood, exposing its reliance on the suppression of female agency. By asserting her desires, Binodini disrupts the binary opposition between virtue and vice, suggesting that such distinctions are themselves products of patriarchal ideology.

Male Anxiety and the Fragility of Patriarchy

The responses of male characters to Binodini further illuminate the dynamics of sexual politics within the novel. Mahendra's fascination with her is characterized by ambivalence, oscillating between desire and guilt. His inability to reconcile his attraction with societal expectations reflects the instability of patriarchal authority, which relies on the repression of female sexuality to maintain control.

Behari's reaction, though more restrained, is equally revealing. While he recognizes Binodini's intelligence and emotional depth, he ultimately refuses to fully accept her. This hesitation underscores the limitations of male empathy within a patriarchal framework. As

Millett argues, patriarchy sustains itself not only through overt domination but also through the internalization of norms that shape individual behavior (Millett 58).

International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories

The anxiety surrounding Binodini's presence can also be understood in terms of what Simone de Beauvoir describes as the construction of woman as the "Other" (de Beauvoir 16). In this framework, women are defined in relation to men, their identities shaped by male perspectives and desires. Binodini's refusal to conform to this role disrupts the established order, provoking a sense of unease among the male characters.

Furthermore, the domestic space in the novel becomes a site of contestation, where power relations are negotiated and challenged. The interactions between Binodini, Mahendra, Asha, and Behari reveal the fragility of the structures that sustain patriarchal authority. As Partha Chatterjee notes, the nationalist discourse of the period often idealized the domestic sphere as a site of cultural purity, yet this idealization masked underlying tensions and contradictions (Chatterjee 127). Chokher Bali exposes these tensions, revealing the instability of the very norms it appears to uphold.

Containment, Exile, and Narrative Resolution

Despite Binodini's resistance, the novel ultimately reinscribes patriarchal control through her symbolic containment. Her withdrawal from the social sphere at the end of the narrative can be interpreted as a form of narrative closure that restores order. This resolution aligns with what feminist critics have identified as a common pattern in literature, where transgressive female characters are punished or marginalized to reaffirm social norms.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" provides a useful framework for understanding this dynamic. Spivak argues that marginalized subjects are often denied the ability to fully articulate their agency within dominant discourses (Spivak 271). In the case of Binodini, her voice, though powerful, is ultimately contained within the limits of the narrative, preventing her from achieving complete autonomy.

However, this containment is not entirely successful. The emotional and moral ambiguities surrounding her character persist, resisting closure. As readers, we are left with a sense of unresolved tension, suggesting that the structures of patriarchy are neither as stable nor as absolute as they appear.

Moreover, Tagore's portrayal of Binodini can be read as a critique of the very norms that the narrative seems to reinforce. By allowing her to articulate her desires and challenge societal expectations, the novel exposes the contradictions inherent in the institution of widowhood. Even as it reinscribes control, it simultaneously undermines the legitimacy of that control.

Conclusion

Chokher Bali offers a complex and nuanced exploration of widowhood, desire, and power within a patriarchal society. Through the character of Binodini, Tagore reveals both the oppressive mechanisms that regulate female sexuality and the possibilities for resistance within those constraints.

By applying the framework of sexual politics, this paper has demonstrated how the novel represents widowhood as a site of discipline while simultaneously exposing its instability. Binodini's assertion of desire challenges the assumptions underlying patriarchal authority, revealing its reliance on repression and control. Although the narrative ultimately contains her, it cannot fully negate the significance of her defiance. The enduring relevance of Chokher Bali lies in its ability to capture the tensions between discipline and desire, control and resistance. In doing so, it contributes to broader feminist debates on the politics of gender and sexuality, offering insights that remain pertinent in contemporary contexts.

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