



Revolutionary Widows: Secret Resistance in Colonial Bengali Literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper reexamines the portrayal of widows in colonial Bengali literature, challenging their traditional representation as mere symbols of suffering. Through analysis of works by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, and Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, it reveals widows as covert revolutionary agents in India's independence struggle.

Research Questions:

1. How did Bengali authors portray widows' clandestine resistance activities?
2. What specific strategies enabled widowed women to subvert both colonial power and patriarchal constraints?

Methodology:

This study employs close textual analysis of key literary works, contextualizing fictional narratives within historical accounts of women's participation in revolutionary movements.

Key Arguments:

The research demonstrates how widows' marginal social position paradoxically facilitated revolutionary action through invisibility. Their literary representation reveals a dual resistance—against colonial rule and patriarchal oppression—establishing them as complex political actors who transformed personal tragedy into revolutionary potential, ultimately reclaiming agency in spaces of apparent powerlessness.

Keywords: Widows, Revolution, Bengali Literature, Resistance, Colonialism



I. Introduction:

The figure of the widow in the social imagination of colonial Bengal was an absence. Wearing white, deprived of decoration, relegated to the shadows of the house, she was a life that, so to speak, had no death and preceded the real death of the body. The conventional literary criticism has a tendency of accepting this connotation at face values, where the Bengali widow is a passive instrument of tragedy, a connotation of that sense of repressive load of tradition. But behind the stillness of the white saree, was a powerful, half-neglected sound. In this paper, one would argue that it is the same marginalization that made the widow invisible to the society that gave her the ideal camouflage on how to subvert the political system.

My counter-narrative is discovered by going back to the canon of colonial Bengali literature, namely, the writings of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, and Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay. In this case, the widow is more than a victim of patriarchy and she is actually a spy of fighting colonialism. The fact that she was excluded in the regular social life enabled her to navigate in areas that were unavailable to respectable married women. She turned into a carrier of secrets, parent of revolutionists, and in other cases, became the direct participants in the violence of liberation. This study will attempt to address two main questions as follows: How did Bengali writers depict these underground resistance movements? And which particular tactics did the widowed women use to circumvent the colonial authority, as well as patriarchy? This paper will assume the widow through contextual textual analysis in the context of the historical passion of the Swadeshi and revolutionary movements that the widow turned her own tragedy into revolutionary promise, reasserting agency in those areas where it seemed she had no power over.

II. The Architecture of Invisibility: Historical and Literary Context

In order to interpret the literary image of the revolutionary widow, it is important to comprehend the texture of her reality first. Widowhood in 19th and early 20th century Bengal was an impurity of the ritual. Widow was considered very bad omen and could not participate in festivities and was supposed to lead an ascetic lifestyle. The colonial period was however a period of great political turmoil. The emergence of the Anushilan Samiti and the Jugantar party needed a network of support, which could be able to function beneath the notice of the British intelligence apparatus. We know that such women as Pritilata Waddadar and Kalpana Dutt took up arms, but the support system was largely domestic. It is in this breach of historical silence and literary articulation that writers such as Bankim, Sarat and Bibhutibhushan worked. They did not only record the facts; they fantasized. They did not employ a reportage methodology but cultural coding. They used the invisibility of the widow as a narrative since they incorporated revolutionary acts into the domestic sphere. The fieldwork strategy used in this case is to unravel these levels of coding and then read the domestic not as an avoidance of politics, but as a mask of the same.

III. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay: The Genesis of Female Agency

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay can be considered the father of Bengali nationalism and though his women are not necessarily widows in the strict definition of the term he provided the building blocks upon which women entered the political arena. The character of Shanti masquerades as a male ascetic to battle in Anandamath. Although Shanti is not dead, the process by which she opposes it is foreshadowed by the widow taking on a warrior identity (instead of retaining her domestic identity, though).

But in his novel Rajani we have a closer approach to the situation of the widow. Rajani as a blind widow is not a warrior in literal sense, but has a moral and intellectual agency of defining the patriarchal order. Bankim takes her vulnerability to bring out her strength. The antagonists fail to notice her due to the disability and the fact that she is a widow, but she carries the key of solving the story. Bankim is the pioneer in his contribution to the archetype of the revolutionary widow; he gave the notion that a woman, deprived of social rank, could see better than the mighty men about her. He set the standard of the margins of society as vantage points and not merely prisons. It was an essential move in the literature; it was preparing the Bengali audience and letting them embrace the concept of women being not only lamenters of the nation, but of its protectors.



IV. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay: The Subversion of the Domestic

Provided that Bankim has been the architect of the foundation, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay constructed the house of resistance. Writing during the early 20th century, in the midst of the swell of Swadeshi movement, women in Sarat are more psychologically complex and socially rebellious. In *Grihadaha* (The House Fire), Mrinal is another character who does not want to be devoured by demands of her position.

The opposition of Mrinal is gentle but crushing. She is not necessarily a person who is carrying a bomb, but carries a truth, which endangers the social order. She goes against the patriarchal authority that tries to Australia to build her life by refusing to get remarried and opting to abandon the stifling home she lives in. Within the frames of the research question concerning approaches to subversion, Mrinal employs her position as a widow to choose not to participate in the domestic economy at all. A woman who is married is under obligation to her husband and her in-laws; a widow theoretically has no master. This is the loophole that Sarat uses. The letter that Mrinal writes towards the end of the novel is a revolutionary manifesto, but in disguise as a personal explanation. She recovers her voice and her body.

Moreover, during the *Shesh Prashna*, the character of Kumudini is not a widow, but still, she is at the field where the range of widowhood and freedom is indistinct in the field of national service. The rest of Sarat implies that the emotional strength it takes to endure widowhood in Bengal was the same strength it took to support the secret revolutionary organizations. The home of the widow was a pretty safe haven. She nurtured her grief rituals daily which gave her movement of messages and people a veil. Sarat does not depict it as a big show, but rather a silent everyday protest. The principle is here, normative camouflage, making use of the strict principles of widowhood to conceal acts that would otherwise be prohibited to a *sadhava* (married woman).

V. Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay: Survival as Resistance

At the move to the 1940s, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay gives a more sordid and materialistic view of resistance. The main character of *Ashani Sanket* (Distant Thunder), *Danga Bou* (Ananga), is not a widow, yet the book is filled with the ruin of the Bengal Famine, a colonial tragedy committed by humans. But the widows in the short stories of Bibhutibhushan tend to walk in this mineshafted terrain.

Bibhutibhushan uses the struggle of the widow to survive to depict the resistance against political dominance in a revolutionary fight. The colonial state anticipated the demise of the marginalized during the famine and the Quit India movement. A widow is subverting the colonial discourse on order when she can feed her family, harbor a fugitive or find her way across the black market to survive. This forces the woman who must act beyond the shelter of a man to acquire a tough street-wise smartness, in tales such as *Chandranath* or a range of tales in *Chander Pahar* (although the latter is of the adventure type, his social tales are more topical here).

Bibhutibhushan provides the answer to how the authors depicted these activities by basing them on the necessity. The widow is not a revolutionary due to the abstract ideology, but she is so as the colonial reality has not left her another option. Her approach is flexibility. She pits the compassion of the oppressor on them. A British officer or a local partner could ignore a widow of a bereaved woman walking past a check point, thinking that she was innocent. This incident of lapses is the crack in the imperial armor as Bibhutibhushan points out. Her weapon is the powerlessness of the widow. She becomes a space of resistance and she achieves this by merely continuing her existence against the odds that are being piled against her by the Raj, with the village, the market and the home.

VI. Strategies of Subversion: Analyzing the Dual Resistance

Coming to the second research question which is specific strategies, a pattern of dual resistance is constant across the texts. The widow was waging a war on two fronts; against the British colonizer and against the patriarchy of the indigenous people that wanted to possess her.



The first approach that was found by all three authors is invisibility by ritual. The white saree was a non-threat uniform. A widow was also in the background in a crowded market or a busy railway station. Writers portray characters with the use of this to smuggle subversive materials or conceal escaped slaves. The patriarchal limitation according to which she was not supposed to be seen enabled her to observe all the things without being noticed.

The second one is linguistic subversion. Mrinal speaks in a quiet manner in Grihadaha. The prayers of a widow in works by Bankim are coded messages. The females in these stories tend to talk in enigmas or even cover their political organization with religious piety. A prayer meeting might easily be an assembly of the Jugantar. The authors do not describe it as a form of deception, instead, it is a natural development of language under repression.

Lastly, there is the emotional-detachment strategy. Already having experienced the death of her social self, the widow is depicted as fearless. She has nothing left to lose. Both Sarat and Bibhutibhushan refer to this psychological condition. A married woman is in danger of her husband and the future of her children, whereas a widow is not. This is the freedom of being unpunished and as a result it enables a boldness which is linked by the texts to revolutionary potential. They have turned the curse of bad luck into a cloak of immunity.

VII. Conclusion:

The representation of widows in the colonial Bengali literature is much more than a document on the sorrow of the society; it is a document of subterranean warfare. We can observe that the role of the widow was reevaluated in the works of Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra and Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay as the passive suffering of the women became an active agent of change. These were the authors who realized that the very forms of oppression against women could be used against women to fight the liberation cause.

The peripheral role of the widow was not silencing because it gave her the right opportunity to resist. The very fact that she was invisible was her power; her social death was her transformation back into a political player. This study shows that the fight to achieve the India independence was not fought in a battlefield or a courtroom, but even in the backyard of the antahpur (inner quarters) enabled by women who had been told that they had no place in the world. They had to take that place not by permission but by taking the shadows. By so doing, they left a legacy of two-sided resistance, opposing both overlapping hegemonies of Empire and Patriarchy. It is to hear those whispers now which were formerly lost in the din of history, to distinguish that even the white saree was not a shroud only, but a flag of some other sort.

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