



Subalternity, Agency, and Abjectivity: Unpacking the Liminal Lives of Widows in Colonial Bengal

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Abstract

This chapter interrogates the intersectional dynamics of subalternity, agency, and abjectivity that configured the lives of widows in Colonial Bengal. Through a critical examination of literary and historical archives, this chapter unravels the complex web of power relations that situated widows as liminal subjects, suspended between the normative structures of patriarchy and the disruptions of colonial modernity. This inquiry foregrounds the ways in which widows negotiated their subjectivities amidst the abject conditions of social exile, economic marginalization, and cultural erasure. The research draws on the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Julia Kristeva, and Tanika Sarkar to theorize the ways in which widows' agency was simultaneously enabled and constrained by the colonial discourse. The representation of widows in Bengali literature, particularly in the works of Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, illustrate the tension between their symbolic construction as abject subjects and their material struggles for survival. Furthermore, the chapter indicates the presence of the historical records of colonial policies and social reforms aimed at 'rescuing' widows, revealing the intricate power dynamics that underpinned these initiatives. This research argues that widows in Colonial Bengal occupied a peculiar locus of subalternity, marked by both silence and speech, marginality and centrality, discrimination and the emergence of agency. The agency of the New Widows was exercised through subtle acts of resistance, subversion, and negotiation, which challenged the dominant narratives of patriarchy and colonialism. So, his study contends that the lives of widows in Colonial Bengal constitute a critical site for examining the intersections of gender, caste, class, and colonialism, and for theorizing the complex and contradictory nature of subaltern agency.

Keywords: *Subalternity, abjectivity, widowhood, colonialism, agency*

Introduction

Widows, cast aside by society and relegated to the fringes of existence, constituted a significant yet invisible demographic throughout Bengal. Their stories, struggles, and strategies for survival remained obscured, hidden beneath the dominant narratives of patriarchy and colonialism. This article seeks to uncover the complex and multifaceted



experiences of widows in Colonial Bengal, excavating the intersections of subalternity and abjectivity that defined their lives.

The colonial era, marked by the influx of Western values and the disruption of traditional social structures, created a unique context for the emergence of new social categories and power dynamics. The widows who were so far vulnerable due to their gender and marital status, found their existence affected by the inculcation of colonial modernity. The patriarchal norms of Hindu society, which dictated their social roles and expectations, had to either accommodate or resist colonial policies that sought to 'reform' and 'modernize' Indian society. Admittedly, this drive towards modernization did not reach and affect all Bengali households uniformly. It was the upper-caste Hindu households from urban Bengal who were in the immediate proximity of the European influences that were entering Bengal in the nineteenth, and it was a gradual trickle-down mode through which the transformative effects of colonial influences reached other households of Bengal. Although this transformation was remarkably slow and diverse, it cannot be denied that this very context also enabled widows to negotiate their subjectivities, exercising agency in subtle yet significant ways. Through acts of resistance, subversion, and negotiation, they challenged the dominant narratives that sought to erase their existence. This article argues that the lives of widows in Colonial Bengal constitute a critical site for examining the intersections of gender, caste, class, religion and colonialism.

By drawing on postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks, this chapter foregrounds the voices and experiences of widows, previously silenced or marginalized in historical and literary accounts. The works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010), Tanika Sarkar (2001) and Maroona Murmu (2020) provide critical foundations for understanding the complex power dynamics that configured the lives of widows. Through a critical examination of literary and historical archives, these authors have unravelled the intricate web of power relations that situated widows as liminal subjects. The representation of widows in the works of Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay illustrate the tension between their symbolic construction as abject subjects and their material struggles for survival. By uncovering the hidden histories and experiences of widows in Colonial Bengal, their texts have challenged the dominant narratives that have erased their existence and to reclaim their voices as critical sites of resistance and subversion.

In the following sections, this chapter explores the theoretical frameworks that inform this research, examines the representation of widows in Bengali literature, and analyzes the historical records of colonial policies and social reforms aimed at 'rescuing' the widows. Through this critical examination, we uncover the complex and multifaceted



lives of widows in Colonial Bengal, revealing the intricate dynamics of agency and abject.

The Liminal Lives of Widows: Unpacking Agency and Abjectivity in Colonial Bengal

Widows in Colonial Bengal occupied a peculiar locus of subalternity, suspended between the normative structures of patriarchy and the disruptions of colonial modernity. Their lives were marked by social exile, economic marginalization, and cultural erasure, rendering them invisible within the dominant narratives of Hindu society. However, this invisibility did not at all own to a silence on the issue of widowhood. On the contrary, this subaltern invisibility of the widows is what was most vocally maintained and codified by social and religious discourses. The precise customs through which the widows would lead a de-sexualized and domestic life had been carefully formulated by a society that considered its own sanctity threatened if the *satitva* or ascetic life of the widow was not maintained. While in the early nineteenth century, this concern made the practice of *sati* rampant as apparently the definitive preventive measure, later, following the legal prohibition of the act and the general ire of the reformists who objected to such inhuman a custom, the society became more instant upon other customs of widowhood – like the shaving of the head and the wearing of white clothes – which spared her life but did condemn the widow to a social suicide. And these regulatory customs were exclusively meant for the female widow, while a widower, in the same position, had no customs to abide by whatsoever. Moreover, in the case of a widower the patriarchal orientation of this society becomes quite evident, as he was socially even encouraged to enter into a second marriage whereas the idea of widow remarriage is one of the most castigated ideas for this orthodox society. The struggle to attain the right to remarriage for the widows, which has its own arduous history, hence runs parallel to the widow's move outside of the realm of abjection and towards attaining a degree of agency in this society.

Kristeva (1982) bases the term abject and abjectivity in the discipline of psychoanalysis to speak about the reaction of disgust with which the human mind rejects whatever is gross or horrific. She further extends the use of the term abject to the social context in which the abject are those marginalized individuals who have been evicted from the accepted boundaries of mainstream society. Bengali literature of the colonial era often represented widows as abject subjects, embodying the stigma and shame associated with widowhood. Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali (A Grain of Sand)* (2013) and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Shrikanta* (2009) exemplify this trend, portraying widows as tragic figures, doomed to a life of loneliness and social isolation. The two unconventional widow characters in the two novels – Binodini and Rajlakshmi, respectively – do in their

lives work through the tension between the symbolic construction of widowhood and the material struggles of widows.

Despite the societal stigma, widows developed strategies for survival, exercising agency in subtle yet significant ways. Many widows became involved in informal economies, engaging in petty trade or domestic work to support themselves and their families. Others sought education and employment, challenging the patriarchal norms that restricted their social mobility. For instance, Kadambini Ganguly, the first female doctor of Bengali, continued her medical practice much after the death of her husband. The remarkable thing in this regard is that the earliest of the widows who defined the restrictions like Ganguly almost always belonged to Brahmo families, which conveys that female education and progressive attitudes were, to being with confined to only particular sections of the society which were relatively more receptive towards the progressive ideas. It would take some time before the emancipatory drive would affect other families in Bengal.

Colonial policies aimed at ‘rescuing’ widows, such as the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, further complicated their lives. While intended to promote social reform, these policies often sparked up the reactionary patriarchal mind that were apprehensive of the undermining of Hindu social structures by the colonial power. The issue of the emancipation of widows thus becomes a stake in the struggle towards controlling the cultural norms of the society. As Partha Chatterjee (1993) has noted, while politically the nation became an entity controlled by the colonial powers, there simultaneously existed a cultural, spiritual and more domestic sense of the nation that was the possession of the native patriarchal powers. It was a compromise through which the British colonizers strategically maintained their political power while allowing a degree of cultural and spiritual autonomy to the native authorities. This also explains why, despite the disapproval towards the practices of sati and prohibition of widow remarriage, the colonizers were initially reluctant to effect any change in this condition through legal means. It was only following the insistence of the progressive native intellectuals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar that the colonial government was moved towards framing laws that banned sati and sanctioned widow remarriage. However, these acts made the native authorities apprehensive since they signified an intervention into the cultural sphere of the nation which the colonial power so far chose to steer clear of. Thus, they immediately brought in reactionary backlashes which were often more powerful than even the effect of the laws themselves. Such persistent resistance meant that the empowerment of widows was anything but an easy matter. However, some widows still leveraged these policies to negotiate their own agency, seeking education and employment opportunities that facilitated their social mobility.



Intersectionality and Subalternity

The experiences of widows in Colonial Bengal were shaped by intersecting axes of oppression, including gender, caste, class, and colonialism. Dalit widows, for example, faced additional layers of marginalization, excluded from social and economic opportunities due to their caste status. This intersectionality underscores the importance of considering the diverse experiences of widows, moving beyond simplistic representations of widowhood. Widows' agency was exercised through subtle acts of subversion and resistance, challenging the dominant narratives that sought to erase their existence. Some widows engaged in quiet acts of defiance, such as secretly pursuing education (as is most notably the case with Rassundari Devi) or employment. Others formed support networks, providing mutual aid and solidarity in the face of societal stigma.

The lives of widows in Colonial Bengal constitute a critical site for examining the intersections of subalternity, agency, and abjectivity. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of widows, the works of the noted novelists seek to challenge the dominant narratives that have erased their existence. The agency of widows in Colonial Bengal serves as a testament to the resilience and creativity of subaltern subjects, negotiating their subjectivities within dominant power structures. Future research should continue to explore the intersectional experiences of widows, examining the diverse ways in which they exercised agency and subverted dominant narratives. In uncovering the hidden histories of widows in Colonial Bengal, we uncover new perspectives on subalternity, agency, and resistance.

The representation of widowhood in Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Shrikanta* reflects the societal stigma and patriarchal norms that marginalized widows in Colonial Bengal. While these texts critique the oppressive structures that confined widows, they also perpetuate problematic stereotypes. Tagore's novel reinforces the notion that widows are inherently tragic figures, doomed to a life of loneliness and social isolation. The protagonist, Binodini, embodies the abject subjectivity of widowhood, her agency constrained by societal expectations. However, Tagore also subverts this narrative, portraying Binodini's quiet acts of defiance and resistance.

Chattopadhyay's novel presents a nuanced portrayal of widowhood, highlighting the economic and social vulnerabilities faced by widows. The character of Rajlakshmi, a widow who becomes a symbol of resilience and determination, challenges the dominant narratives of widowhood. However, both the novels ultimately reinforce the patriarchal norms that restrict women's agency. Either death or some other form of exit by the



widows is the means by which the problematic presence of the emancipated widows is resolved in these novels. Both texts perpetuate the notion that widowhood is a state of abject subjectivity, marked by shame, stigma, and social exile. This representation reinforces the patriarchal norms that marginalize widows, erasing their agency and experiences.

Intersectionality is a term coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw “to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics “intersect” with one another and overlap” (Coaston 2019). A critical intersectional analysis reveals that both texts overlook the diverse experiences of widows, particularly those from lower caste and class backgrounds. The texts fail to address the compounded marginalization faced by Dalit widows, for example. Postcolonial critiques often highlight the ways in which colonialism reinforced patriarchal norms and marginalized widows. In this case, the texts referred to reflect the tensions between traditional social structures and colonial modernity, which created new power dynamics that affected widows. So, the progressive Western ethos that colonialism introduces actually counteracts the orthodox patriarchy by extending humanitarian aid towards the widows. But, at the same time, we do so see that a set a conservative discourses were also finding their reinforcement in the Victorian mores that were dear to the colonizers, since the idea of virgin sanctity would be echoed by the notion of *satitva*(Sarkar 2001). This explains how the overall effect of Western modernity was complex by nature.

Tagore and Chattopadhyay alike critiqued the problems of both the indigenous and Western modes of patriotism. A feminist critique emphasizes the need to foreground the agency and experiences of widows, challenging the dominant narratives that erase their existence. The texts demonstrate the importance of considering the intersectional experiences of widows, moving beyond simplistic representations of widowhood. Tagore’s *Chokher Bali* and Chattopadhyay’s *Shrikanta* highlight the complex and multifaceted representation of widowhood in Colonial Bengal. A critical intersectional, postcolonial, and feminist analysis reveals the need to foreground the agency and experiences of widows, challenging dominant narratives and promoting a more nuanced understanding of widowhood.

Conclusion: Unveiling the Invisible - Agency and Abjectivity of Widows in Colonial Bengal

This article uncovers the complex and multifaceted experiences of widows in Colonial Bengal, examining the intersections of subalternity, agency, and abjectivity that defined their lives. Through a critical analysis of literary and historical archives, we have foregrounded the voices and experiences of widows, challenging the dominant narratives

that have erased their existence. Widows in Colonial Bengal exercised agency in subtle yet significant ways, negotiating their subjectivities within dominant power structures. Despite societal stigma and patriarchal norms, widows developed strategies for survival, engaging in informal economies, seeking education and employment, and forming support networks.

However, this agency was continually constrained by the abject conditions of widowhood, marked by social exile, economic marginalization, and cultural erasure. The representation of widowhood in Bengali literature, particularly in Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and Chattopadhyay's *Shrikanta*, reflects this tension between agency and abjectivity. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways in which subaltern subjects negotiate their agency within dominant power structures. Furthermore, the importance of intersectional analysis should be considered in this regard as it highlights the compounded marginalization faced by such groups. The article emphasizes the need for critical postcolonial and feminist perspectives to foreground the agency and experiences of subaltern subjects. Future research should continue to explore the intersectional experiences of widows, examining the diverse ways in which they exercised agency and subverted dominant narratives.

We do need a critical engagement with literary and historical archives, challenging dominant narratives and promoting a more nuanced understanding of subaltern experiences. The theorization of subaltern agency would involve emphasizing the importance of considering the complex and multifaceted experiences of marginalized groups. By foregrounding the agency and experiences of widows in Colonial Bengal, we can challenge dominant narratives and promote a more nuanced understanding of subalternity. For this reason, the author has elsewhere proposed the use of the term "New Widows" (Chatterjee 2020; Chatterjee 2022) to account for the relative or conditional agency that was possessed by the educated widows of Bengal who often rebelled against the dominant patriarchy, whether in print or through other actions. Binodini and Rajlaxmi are fictional counterparts to real-life New Widows during the late-colonial period, such as Kadambini Ganguly, Kailashbasini Devi, Saradasundari Devi and Haimabati Sen. Upon unveiling the invisible lives of widows during the Colonial era in Bengal, we can see how the complex intersections of subalternity, agency, and abjectivity defined their experiences, and how those experiences come to feed the literary imaginations of the time.

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BIO NOTE

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