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AN EXPERIENTIAL STUDY OF 'CONDITIONAL AGENCY' OF BENGALI WIDOWS WITH REFERENCE TO THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF SARADASUNDARI DEVI AND RASSUNDARI DEVI

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Abstract:

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal emerged a new batch of educated widows who were distinguishable from the traditional Bengali Hindu widows because of their remarkable self-consciousness about their peripherality within the social order. The intention of my article is that of disputing the prevalent assumption of the homogeneity of the widowed experience in Bengal society by drawing attention to the heterogeneous individualities resulting from stratifications within these emergent widow populations, owing to different lifestyles, varying degree of access to education, diverse social standings, and various forms of suppression. Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jibon* (1876) and Saradasundari Devi's *Atmakatha* (1913) are accounts of the experience of widows who were marginalized by society, handed the bare minimum necessities for their existence, and deprived of the pleasures of the traditional experiences of motherhood. I propose the term 'New Widows' to highlight how the effects of education modified their individuality in unconventional directions, as reflected in the fictional narratives by Rabindranath Tagore and others. Close attention to the texts shows that the disparity between the aspirations of the New Widow, and her limited reach and frustration results in an acute self-awareness.

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1.0 Introduction:

The inclusion of the women of Bengal within educational institutions was initiated quite early on under the influence of the British colonizers with the opening of the London Missionary Society (LMS) by Robert May in 1818 (Basu 2005, p. 185). The subsequent pedagogic advancements in this direction—the establishment of the Hindu Female School by John Drinkwater Bethune in 1849 (ibid. p. 188), the first secular school for women by Kalikrishna Mitra in 1847, and, the emergence of the first two graduate Bengali women, Kadambini Devi and Chandramukhi Basu, in 1888—ensured that by the end of the nineteenth century there was a considerable number of literate females in Bengal, many of them educated through the medium of English. The collision of the orthodox values and the new perspectives provided by literacy ruptured the pre-existing feudal set-up to generate a wide range of feminine individualities with varying degrees of self-awareness. The developments become evident in autobiographical accounts that some of these literate

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women, like Rassundari Devi and Saradasundari Devi, started to write, and the conflict of values became particularly prominent because the women recorded their transition into widowhood. Widowhood in traditional Hindu societies incurs an additional deal of mores that are meant to restrict the women's individual freedom, and the injustice of these social and religious regulations was evident to the literate widows.

The anecdotal evidence of such realities faced by real-life women, especially the widows, appear in the autobiographies like Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban (My Life)* (1876) and Saradasundari Devi's *Atmakatha* (1913). Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* was a historic event since it is the first woman's autobiography published in Bengali. The first part of *Amar Jiban* was written in 1868, and she was eighty-eight years old when she wrote the second part of her autobiography which was published in 1906. The anecdotes through which Rassundari Devi shows how she learned to read and write would seem strange in today's world. She recalls the times when she learned the art of reading and writing:

I used to be impatient to listen to the Ramayana recitation, but those were different times. Women had no freedom. They could not take any decision on their own. Just like any caged bird, women were imprisoned too.

I could read (religious books) a little bit. But I did not have free time and more importantly the fear of getting caught and punished was always looming over me. Later on, I decided that I would read "Chetna Bhagat" (a religious book) in the morning when all three of my sister-in-laws (sic.) were busy in religious rituals. Still, I had to read while I hid in some nook and corner of the house as one of my maidservants kept the vigil. (Devi 1999, p. 56)

After becoming a widow, she turns to her literary abilities to carve an identity from the vacuum in which the alienating effects of widowhood lands her.

2.0 The Widow Questions and the Transformation of Bengali Literature:

Widow remarriage had been legalized by 1856 in India, but the social taboos against it had been very much prevalent among the Hindu elite. Simultaneously, the custom of child marriage, as well as a low life expectancy left a possibility that too many women would be widowed at an early age. There are multiple strata to experience that constitute a woman's lived reality, and, as Dineshchandra Sen opines in the introduction of Rassundari Devi's autobiography, her work happens to capture in vivid detail each dimension of a woman's experience:

Usually the poets drew a women's character focusing on love, however, the household of a Hindu is not a married couple's own; the one who is the maintainer of the house is also the daughter, the sister, the sister-in-law, the daughter-in-law, as well as the mistress ruler of the household[...]. Yet, the poets try to separate her from these boundaries and imagine her in an (sic.) unique locale of love which does not allow us to witness the overall picture of a woman's life in poems or novels. Due to her obvious bashfulness Rassundari has omitted this act of love from her biography, which resulted in doubly highlighting the several other aspects of her life. (Devi 1876, p. i)

These innovations enforced in the generic approach to accommodate the changing dynamics of a widow's reality in Bengal was not restricted to non-fictional works of literature. When Rabindranath Tagore had begun writing *Chokher Bali*, he had been subtly setting up a new literary genre in the Bengali language. This genre can roughly be categorized as the 'realistic' novel (Hussain 2008, p. 38), in which the values reflected within the plot are not simply based on the mechanical, banal complexities of the plot structure. Rather, these values are based on characterization and psychological content that reflect a modern person's conflicts and realities. (From such an angle, this novel most probably is the earliest work of its kind in Bengali, if not in

any Indian language.) This same turn away from the romanticizing that appears in these widows' autobiographies of individual reality also gave birth to the realistic novels of Tagore.

In this article, however, I would go a step farther than Sen, and bring to light the fact that although the roles of the daughter, the wife or the homemaker do constitute the composite experience reflected in the work, Rassundari Devi's identity on the final count remains extraneous to all these labels through which she may be perceived in the course of her work. Upon becoming a widow, she has to relinquish all these ties of relation in order to occupy a new abject position within the household. The abjectness, however, does not define her during the widowed phase of her life since she is not a widow in the traditional sense. Given her education, she becomes what I do term a New Widow, one who, through a self-reflexivity allowed by her literary, carves an identity that is unprecedented in the canons of Bengali literature. This makes Rassundari Devi and Saradasundari Devi precursors to the enlightened age of Bengali literature.

The conflicts and angst suffered by the Bengali widows are presented in not only the autobiographical works but also in novels like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Bishabriksha* (1873), and later in Rabindranath Tagore's *A Grain of Sand (Chokher Bali)* (1903) and *Quartet (Chaturanga)* (1916). We see various aspects of the lives of these widows who belong to different age groups and different cultural backgrounds, with their diverse individualities put in the mix. The presence of intertextual references to Chattopadhyay's *Bishabriksha* within Tagore's *Chokher Bali* further denotes continuity in the attention given to the Bengali widows. What is particularly interesting among the different portrayals is the emergence of a new set of Bengali widows portrayed by Tagore who, in spite of being a part of the patriarchal society, are relatively empowered owing to the fact that they have had access to education, sometimes through the medium of English. The current reading and analysis of these texts would suggest that these Bengali widows of the pre-independence period constituted anything but a homogeneous lot. One might then suggest a trope like 'New Widows' to concentrate critical attention on this heterogeneous lot of the emerging educated widows, of whom Binodini and Damini serve as fictional representatives.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay has already devoted attention to the case of extramarital affairs as well as the story of marriage with widows. In novels like *Bishabriksha*, he has explored the sexual tension and frustration of widows. The novelty of Tagore's novels like *Grain of Sand (Chokher Bali)* and *Quartet (Chaturanga)*, however, lies in their highly modern treatment of these subjects and in the psychological realism in the depiction of characters in these conditions. In his own words, Tagore aims at revealing "the secrets of the heart" (Chakravarty 2013, p. 48). Authorial intrusions within the narrative play a crucial part in Chattopadhyay's *Bishabriksha*, for only through that can he properly flesh out the impact of the ill consequences that may follow from widow re-marriage. By contrast, in novels *A Grain of Sand (Chokher Bali)* and *Quartet (Chaturanga)*, the impact is produced through the act of showing and not telling, since the readers can see inside the characters of their own. Authorial intrusions are therefore kept to a minimum. Binodini, a young widow with English education, decides to work her way to the men she desires, and the consequence is a chain of events that bring the internal worlds of the characters into clear view. We can hear Tagore's appeal for a psychological understanding on the part of the reader in Binodini's plea to Behari: "I may be bad, or wrong, but do try to see things from my point of view just this once and understand me" (Tagore 2013, p. 59). Thus, through Tagore's works, we witness a radical shift in Bengali literature from the emphasis on external reality to the internal psyche of the characters.

3.0 Questioning Emancipation:

The conclusion of Tagore's *Chokher Bali* sees the character chastised for her indolent disregard of domestic hierarchies of power as she renounces the household and commits herself to obscurity.

While a contemporary approach may read in this a re-assertion of the patriarchal order through the ousting of the problematic factor, Md. Mortuja Hussain identifies that

any other end to Binodini's career would have given unwarrantedly the rudest shock even to the most advanced readers of the day, and Tagore was no believer in shock tactics and had never attempted to be outrageously original. (Hussain 2008, 39).

In *Chokher Bali*, the outcome did not matter as much as the overall effect of the plot as a process since Tagore's primary concern has been "the problems of human personality and its relationship with forces outside" (ibid., p. 39). This "interest in detailed psychological analysis of the inner consciousness", which "did much to determine the future course of Bangla novel" (ibid., p. 39), means that the thrust-point of the novel lies on the social and psychological condition of the 'New Widows' —on how they had been pushed to the periphery because they had received an education, unlike the traditional, docile ones, who were tolerated by the society, but handed a bare minimum for their existence. The entire subject of motherhood and all its related issues remains quite challenging for Tagore. The readers witness Rajlakshmi in *Chokher Bali* being blinded by her affection for her son, and the barely-present Nanibala in *Quartet*, giving birth to a stillborn under great emotional trauma, the widows in Tagore's fiction are deprived of motherhood in the traditional sense, which makes us interrogate where this absence of the bond of motherhood leads them to. These fictitious accounts find their factual validations in the autobiographical accounts of Saradasunadri Devi and Rassundari Devi.

Binodini's dominating nature, combined with her enlightened status allows her to manipulate the entire household of Rajlakshmi. However, she is unable to participate in any of the progressive movements going on outside the narrow circle of domesticity, for instance, the Nationalist movement. Consequently, we find her retreating quietly to the margins. Damini, in *Quartet*, is another literate widow who, despite the authoritarian Gurudeb, Leelananda Swami censoring her reading materials, becomes autonomous enough to marry once again. But, we find her dying at the end of the narrative, just like Nanibala. And we are reminded of *Bishabriksha* where the widow Kundanandini's story ends in a similar vein. Thus, by tracing the evolution of the portrayal of widowhood in Bengali literature in translation, one comes to realize how the varying individual standpoints in relation to the forces in a dominantly patriarchal society have created a heterogeneous set of Bengali widows, and that the cultural study of this heterogeneous set requires the application of specialized critical approach such as the use of the term 'New Widow' that specifically signifies an enlightened Bengali Hindu widow.

An attention to language and diction reveals the functions of the hegemonic trope of power, dominance, and submission within society. These uses and abuses of language in the novel result from a society with a strictly hierarchical organization: males of all ages at the top, women of age and marital status in between, and the young widows resting at the very bottom of this hierarchy. Rajlakshmi takes advantage of her superior position in this hierarchy when she insults Binodini and calls her a "temptress". However, a different form of superiority is also meanwhile coming into existence through the spread of literacy amongst women, and thanks to that Binodini can retort back, but only do so with a certain deal of constraint. We see both the hesitation and antagonism in Binodini when

Binodini opened her mouth to say something and then closed it again. She said, 'That's true, Aunty-no one really knows anyone. One doesn't even know oneself. Wasn't it you who once wanted to tempt your son with this temptress, simply to avenge yourself on your daughter-in-law? Think about that and then answer me.'

Rajlakshmi flared up like a forest-fire, 'You wretched woman, shame on you for making such allegations about a mother where her son is concerned. May your tongue drop off for sinning so blatantly.'

Binodini replied calmly, 'Aunty, you know better than me whether I am a seductress or not and what enchantment I possess. Just so, I know the spell that you tried to cast, though you might deny it. But it must've been there or this wouldn't have happened. Both you and I lay the trap with some willfulness and some ignorance. That's the way our breed goes - we are enchantresses. (Tagore 2013, p. 93)

Binodini tends to express herself by the language of power, English, which she has learned before her marriage. This is exactly why Behari tells Binodini

...the words you speak now, are all derived from the literature you are so fond of reading. Three-fourths of it is the language of dramas and novels...mere echoes of the printing press. (ibid., p. 60)

On the contrary, we see a more amicable relationship between Ashalata and Annapurna that is based upon mutual understanding of each other's plight, rather than the conflict of egos. For instance, Ashalata can freely ask Annapurna about the loss of her husband, in a reply to which,

Annapurna smiled. 'I think of Him who is now the keeper of my husband-of God.'

Asha asked, 'Does that bring you joy?'

Annapurna stroked her head lovingly and said, 'Child, what would you know of the matters of my mind? It IS known only to me and to Him on whom my heart is fixed.'

Asha mulled over this as she thought, 'Does he know my heart-the one I think of day and night? Just because I cannot write well, why has he given up writing to me?'

It was a while since Asha had got a letter from Mahendra. She sighed and thought, 'If only Chokher Bali were with me, she'd have been able to pen down my thoughts faithfully.'

Asha couldn't ever bring herself to write to her husband for fear that her badly written prose would not be appreciated by him. The harder she tried, the more her scrawls went awry. The more she tried to express herself concisely, the further her thoughts scattered themselves. If only she could write the first 'Dearest' and then sign her name, such that an omniscient Mahendra would read between the lines all that she meant to write, Asha would have completed her letters with great success. Fate had gifted her with a great capacity to love but with little verbal skills. (ibid., p. 85)

The above quote brings to the fore certain interesting aspects of conjugal life. Whereas the custom for married women was to be entirely loyal to their husbands, the faiths and beliefs of these widows were often overlooked completely. During an investigation of these polemical texts, the dreams and loyalties of the New Widows come to question. Did their hopes and dreams lead to an unreachable traditional vengeful deity and religiosity, or towards conscious, active, and engaging hopes of enlightenment?

In her essay on widow memory in modern literature, Sandra Gilbert reminds us that widowhood is a social institution. Tanika Sarkar, in her introduction to her book *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, poses the question that informs the rest of the book – how is it that the Bengali intelligentsia turned away so firmly from liberal reformism to Hindu revivalism later in the century (Sarkar 2001, p. 125)? During this period, the Hindu middle classes moved quite decisively towards a Hindu indigenous nationalism, from a more socially reformative and self-critical earlier era. Both material and ideological changes in Indian society influenced this shift. After 1870, middle-class

landholders found themselves squeezed by British colonial policies that limited their access to markets and reified patriarchal tenet-landlord relationships. Sarkar understands the insecure status of the Bengali middle classes during this period as playing a crucial role in making a self-critical and self-changing liberal intelligentsia change into a closed, status-quo, chauvinistic one that retreated into authoritarian Hindu revivalism (ibid. 2001, p. 125). Studies by writers like Gayatri Spivak have highlighted a similar change in public attitude regarding such specific social practices as sati and its abolition (Spivak 2010, p. 3).

In the study of these texts, the several characters of the widows are seen to be struggling in the periphery of the umbrella society of women, who were already considered 'the weaker sex'. Taking into consideration the modes of behaviour, the variations in diction, and the performances in emulation that happen in the process of character development, we feel the necessity of departing from those prevalent studies of Bengali widowhood in which the widows are seen as a homogenous lot on the margins of a patriarchal society.

4.0 Conclusion:

Instead of picturing education as liberating, one ought to make a critical assessment of the conditional agency of the 'New Widow' in her world. Agency is defined as the ability of a specific individual to make choices, as well as the ability to act upon their choices. When conditions are being imposed upon one's ability to make those choices, making the term 'agency' relative in nature, it can be termed as 'conditional agency'. Bankim Chandra's *Kundanandini* remains a helpless victim of the situation, whereas the two widows in *Quartet* indulge themselves with their relatively limited means in terms of social liberty. The subject we discuss is no doubt complicated and gives rise to several other difficult questions. Should one consider the effects of education as purely liberatory? The equation of empowerment with patriarchy itself needs to be critically analyzed to see the alternate demands education makes on the widows, turning 'empowerment' itself into a suspicious term. Rassundari Devi's account of her acquisition of literacy is an important testimony of the ambiguous role of education in configuring individuality. At the age of eight, she and the male students were instructed by a "Memsahib". Even though belonging to the same organization, her status within it was second-grade, and this had the adverse effect of in fact curtailing her speech: "I did not talk to anybody. I could not form words clearly. Whatever little I spoke were a lilting babble which made everyone laugh." (Devi 1876, p. 6). Even while in their company, she has to acquire literacy in secrecy. Although eventually, she profited from her acquisition, the process through which her literary potential resulted in the autobiographical narrative makes it evident that education does not provide automatic access to empowerment.

Can the process through which the individual converts the resources of education into the tools of identity-building be called an act of rebellion? If so, the 'New Widows', far from being simply the marginal associates of a patriarchal society, are arguably the most radical elements within colonial Bengali society. The heterogeneity in the section of these widows, in fact, becomes the factor that renders the existence of the widows even more radical, as their stance can never be located through the traditional labels associated with the women-experience; their position in society is always exterior to the mainstream. The discourses of resistance set up by the New Widows in whatever little means or agency they possess has been a landmark in the process of their empowerment. One might, on the other hand, point out their relative lack of agency, or what can be referred to as their 'conditional agency', and their inability to bring actual change. Thereby it can be claimed that the New Widows cannot be called effectively rebellious. In that case, we have to admit that the New Widows still cleared the possibility of future changes in the Bengali society – although not actively radical beyond the private sphere, these widows introduced a radical element in the society whose result is the present revisions of the patriarchal order in modern Bengal. Further,

the works of Rassundari Devi and Saradasundari Devi, and the novels of Chattopadhyay and Tagore bringing out the radical possibilities conceived by the New Widows by mobilizing these women's visions. They thus bring the New Widow's spirit out of the private confines. Enlightenment and empowerment come hand in hand. Although the fictional women and their real-life counterparts are lost to us, the spirit of their informed choices, while indicating initial defeat, shall usher in more positive social changes in the future.

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