

The Subaltern Widow: Revisiting Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Rohini

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Abstract

Widows in India live in a perpetual state of agony and despair. They face physical and mental barriers imposed by the orthodox patriarchal society. The authors who claim to write for their upliftment often misrepresent them, further stigmatising the stereotypical notions around widows, leading to further misunderstandings of their experiences. One such writer was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee; his novel *Krishna Kanta's Will* (1878) was an attempt to rectify people's attitude towards widows through his character Rohini. In reality, the character is a scapegoat for his ideological assertions. This article provides a close reading of the novel along with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of the "Subaltern" to determine how Rohini is disempowered throughout the novel. First, the article will reflect on the layered social ostracism she faces due to her subversion of what Judith Butler terms "Performativity" of the set social codes laid down for widows. Secondly, it will focus on how societal transgressions make her an apt example of Laura Mulvey's 'femme fatale', making her Other among the gender dichotomies. The article concludes by determining the topicality of addressing such archaic misleading narratives that will distort the monolithic stigmas around the marginalised subaltern widows by reflecting on such narratives.

Keywords: Widow, Subaltern, Performativity, Femme Fatale.

Introduction

"Widow. The word consumes itself"- Sylvia Plath.

One of the many facets of Indian women is widowhood. Millions of women in this country are affected by this culturally produced circumstance that has hegemonised and solidified the idea of widows in our culture. In India, a widow 'performs' a specific gender role. She delineates herself as the 'Other' and undergoes cultural implications that consolidate her identity according to the whims of society. She becomes an archetypal figure of a beguiling 'femme fatale', who tries to subvert her designated performative role. Indeed, she is reduced to being an evil or a terrible influence. As a result, she becomes a monolithic entity, exposed to questionable norms and terrible

punishments such as social exclusion and difficulties in basic things like access to food. All this naturalises her archaic existence within the orthodox patriarchal society. The scenario becomes all the grimmer when the writers who claim to write for this vulnerable group end up misrepresenting them in their narratives due to their ideological imbalances. Thus, she becomes an apt example of a ‘subaltern’ woman who becomes the object in the dominant hegemonic discourse of male fiction writers.

The notion of widow remarriage became pertinent in India with the abolition of *sati* in 1829, which had previously encouraged widows to commit suicide on their husband’s funeral pyre. Bengal became the breeding ground for the conflicts between British colonials and existing societal hierarchies, making widows an object of their ideological warfare. The British considered Indian women to be victims whom Indian men inhumanely slaughtered. According to them, Indian women benefitted from British intervention. In contrast, nationalists romanticised *sati* as the symbol of female purity, strength, and the love of self-sacrificing women for their husbands. This rendered a counter-narrative against the British interdiction of *sati*. During this time, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar contributed significantly to the cause of widows. He played an indispensable role in the legal sanction of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Subsequently, many literary works pivoting on the issue of widows began to resurface during the latter part of the nineteenth century; the character of a widow occurred in the writings of many Hindi and vernacular writers such as Rabindranath Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. However, while they tried to weave sensitive and heart-wrenching tales around widows depicting their agony, their stance on the widow’s immolation invited more criticism than appreciation. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak foregrounds in her work *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, these authors overestimate their own understanding of widows. She says, “the two set pieces are Rabindranath Tagore’s paean to the self-renouncing paternal grandmothers of Bengal and Ananda Coomaraswamy’s eulogy of *suttee* as this last proof of the perfect unity of body and soul.”¹

With the codification of the laws, widow remarriage became legal,

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¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial-Theory*, eds Patrick William and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 93-102.

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but people's regressive attitude towards them remained stagnant. This was reflected in the works of writers dealing with such narratives, underscoring their hypocritical stance on widow reformation. Their novels displayed a condemnation of widows as young seductresses or 'femme fatales', desirous of emotional closeness. Often, they are depicted as seducing young married men and destroyed their conjugal lives for monetary gains. Further, the story would conclude by making a widow realise her mistake and breaking her disillusionment with the material world; eventually, she would become a cynic or face a traumatic death. Such misrepresentations emanated because the scenario in Bengal was chaotic; unlike elsewhere in India, a widow could inherit property, and this economic autonomy made her the cash cow for the family. The absence of her spouse expedited her abandonment by her relatives, making her state even more deplorable. As Spivak explains:

The great historian of the *Dharmasastra* has correctly observed: In Bengal, the fact that the Widow of a sonless member even in a joint Hindu family is entitled to practically the same rights over common family property which her deceased husband would have had ... must have frequently induced the surviving members to get rid of the Widow by appealing at a most distressing hour to her devotion to and love for her husband.²

This stigmatised perception of Hindu widows existed as late as the nineteenth century, which hindered their upliftment from a stratified position.

This exemplification could be marked in various ways; the most critical was the manifestation on the emotional plane. Sudhir Chandra writes in this context, "For all its elusiveness, it was as an emotional experience that the operation of diametrical pulls constituted the essence of this tension."³ Widows remained in a disempowered position, deprived of any agency from pre-colonial to colonial. Presently, within the postcolonial paradigm, their issues remain unresolved and stagnated.

Widowhood: A Disempowered Position

With the advent of Subaltern Studies in India, prominent scholars like Ranajit Guha worked to reclaim the unheard history of the masses with new perspectives, breaking away from stereotypical narratives. By the early

² Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', p. 96.

³ Sudhir Chandra, 'Conflicted Beliefs and Men's Consciousness about Women: Widow Marriage in Later Nineteenth Century Indian Literature', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 22, no. 44 (1987), pp. 55-62.

1980s, the term ‘subalterns’ was agreed upon by the earliest scholars, whose arguments pivoted around the masses and their defiance against British rule and the bourgeoisie classes. For Guha, the term existed in contradiction to the ‘elites’ who encapsulated the dominant Indigenous group with access to hegemonic power. Through their wealth and political bearings, they imposed their self-interest on those subalterns of the society; the latter lived under their shadows without socio-political support and were devoid of agency.

By the early 1980s, scholars focused on the discursive nature of subjective discourses by the upper classes, bringing into account the aspect of their nationalistic narratives, which not only diverted the main argument around the histories of the middle classes but also neglected the voices of marginalised populations. Thus, their history became subsumed within the larger nationalistic narratives of resistance. However, by the mid-1980s, Subaltern Studies had established itself as a potent academic force, with a new set of voices in Indian history. Unfortunately, it received a mixed response. Some questioned their downplaying of the heroism of the nationalists, while Marxists pointed out their neglect of class structures in their arguments. This did not deter scholars, who took cue from postcolonial studies in North America, which were inspired by the work of Edward Said and had established a strong presence in the academy. Said himself wrote in immensely laudatory terms about the Subaltern Studies project. Among these, the most influential personality was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose 1988 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” became a foundational text in postcolonial theory. For Spivak, ‘subaltern’ is a position where someone lacks agency and, crucially, a voice. Her argument is drawn from Foucault’s discourse on meaning, which contends that utterances in a society are determined by the accepted power hierarchies within an organisation. As Chris Weedon suggests in his interpretation of Foucault, “a dynamic of control and lack of control between discourses and the subjects, constituted by discourses, who are their agents. Power is exercised within lessons informing and governing individual issues.”⁴

To illustrate, in Indian society, where monogamy and the notion of a respected wife or controlled sexuality of a widow are dominant, widow remarriage becomes inevitable. Therefore, widows are placed in a subaltern position of complete disempowerment and identity crisis. This predicament causes an inability to generate any discourse that could alleviate their

⁴ Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), p. 113.

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situation. Spivak, in this context, writes for the 'sati' wife and positions her as a subaltern who cannot speak and is spoken for by others, demonstrating the Eurocentric pontifications created around *sati*. She alleges that its abolition by the British has been generally understood as a case of "White men saving brown women from brown men."⁵ Such discourses were created to justify their colonial rule under the aegis of a 'civilising mission' and did not provide a solid voice for the women. In contrast, Hindu nationalists opposed the colonial intervention of banning *sati* by constructing an identifiable image of the widow who voluntarily mounts the pyre out of her longing for salvation. They professed that "the women wanted to die."⁶ This further smothered the voices of widows, and any attempt to speak for them eventually fulfilled the whims of this colonising patriarchy.

Spivak played a crucial role in addressing this anomaly by altering the dialogues around the idea of subalterns. However, her pronouncements faced many criticisms due to her highly nuanced arguments. Her critics argued that "she often complained in a convoluted manner, which caused some inattentive readers to accuse her of phallogocentric complicity, of not recognising or even allowing the subaltern to speak."⁷ Often overlooked was the anecdotal evidence that she used to support her arguments. As Sayan Chattopadhyay mentions, "her point was not that the subaltern does not cry out in various ways but that speaking is a transaction between speaker and listener." Despite these criticisms, she provides a logical solution for the subalterns to have an agency. Thus, she calls for an ethical intervention rendering the way out of this dilemma; "she says that to give the subalterns a voice, one should try and learn about subalterns and create a sensitivity about their issues, which will lead to their empowerment and upliftment."⁸

Widowhood: A Performance for Life

Cultural norms in society work to uphold inequalities that benefit the powerful. Therefore, deconstructing fragment that disempower women cannot be a violation of anybody's rights, especially an ostracised widow who lacks agency. In this context, Judith Butler discusses the performative

⁵ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', p. 93.

⁶ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', p. 93.

⁷ Postcolonial Literature, 'Gayatri C. Spivak: Answering the Question Can the Subaltern Speak?', *YouTube*, 13 February (2017). At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nxjtmeoBz0>. Accessed 3/03/2022.

⁸ Postcolonial Literature, 'Gayatri C. Spivak: Answering the Question Can the Subaltern Speak?'.

aspect of one's life, which become naturalised as one develops into an adult. She propounds that 'performativity' describes gender roles as elaborate social performances that one acts in everyday life. Gender is performed and reiterated in a way that establishes social roles, leading to social performance that structures gender identification and naturalises a person's existence. Lindsay Wilson observes in her essay that:

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; instead, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time [...] an identity instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.⁹

For a widow in India, the moment her husband dies, she enters a performance she adheres to for the rest of her life. She must adorn specific clothing, a strict diet, controlled sexuality, and complete isolation from society. All these obligations are due to cultural implications imbued on women. With constant repetition of these gestures, movements, and enactments, the gender of a woman is constituted as a stable, essential identity or the structuring principle for her to survive in an orthodox society. Her role in society is premeditated, and she must abide by these social mores ages. Gender is a performance, and it is governed by society's way of categorising a woman and pushing her toward a set binary. Butler, in this context, argues that "discrete genders are part of what 'humanises' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished."¹⁰ In other words, gender is not something that we voluntarily follow, but is a performance that is constantly regulated by society and becomes internalised within the psyche. These norms are the foundation for a penal system for those who try to subvert their set roles.

This punitive approach to gender is a key experience for the character of Rohini in the novel *Krishna Kanta's Will* (1878),¹¹ who becomes the epitome of unconventionality and opposes the patriarchal structures that are laid by Bankim. He essentialises her identity as a 'femme fatale' through his

⁹ Lindsay Wilson, 'Gender Performativity and Objectification', Oral Presentation, Georgia State University Undergraduate Research Conference, 14 April (2015), p. 9.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1988), p. 522.

¹¹ Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Krishna Kanta's Will*, trans. Marian Madder and S. N. Mukherjee (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1996), pp. 173-300.

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discourse. She becomes a caveat to all those widows who transgress any social code. Because of Rohini's iniquitous characterisation, society 'objectifies' her. As Wilson aptly observes in her essay *Gender Performativity and Objectification*,

Since gender is constituted not from an 'essence' of 'woman-ness' or 'man-ness' but from a series of stylized acts that the actors see as natural and inevitable, objectification codifies this divide. According to this definition, objectification can only happen to someone socially positioned to have less social power because they are the party in a position to be treated as an object- less than human.¹²

Rohini is a child bride who is forced to enact her performance as a widow from a young age. She questions her sordid condition as she lives a destitute life and lacks the agency to uplift her state. For her, marriage was the only way out of her misery. She did not fit into the socio-cultural domain of an orthodox society. Rohini does not follow the acts of a widow ascribed to her. As Butler argues, "gender is located in the acts that constitute it."¹³ When Rohini questions her roles, she is punished and is made to believe she deserves to be treated brutally. She is reduced to being a 'femme fatale' who disrupts the lives of others.

Butler, in her work *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, further writes,

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time and instituted through a stylised repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.¹⁴

For a woman, especially a widow, her mannerisms, clothing, and social seclusion creates an illusion of being accepted in a particular manner gender is identified in society, which is enforced through the repetition of these bracketed gendered acts, making widowhood a 'performance' for the widow as long as she lives.

Rohini: A Beautiful Seductress

Krishna Kanta's Will (1878) tells the story of a couple whose marital life gets distorted by the intervention of a forlorn widow who becomes the 'Other'

¹² Wilson, *Gender Performativity and Objectification*, p. 2.

¹³ Wilson, *Gender Performativity and Objectification*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, p. 519.

part of the dyad. The plot was quite controversial at the time, especially with the character of Rohini. As Laura Mulvey remarks,

woman, then, stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.¹⁵

For Mulvey, a woman acts as a signifier in a masculine discourse. She becomes an object of male fantasy and teases the male audience as an object. This results in her narrative being subdued, neglecting her whims and realities.

Rohini is one such character. Bankim's narration makes her appear discursively seductive. Even in the story's cinematic adaptation, her scenes with Govindalal and her excessively flamboyant picturisation create a visual pleasure for the viewers. Hence, she is seen from a biased male perspective which is problematic as this allows men and society to judge her. She becomes a femme fatale, and the retribution she faces from men is considered to be justified. Therefore, Rohini becomes a 'vamp', a young and beautiful seductress, excluded from patriarchal society due to her defiant attitude.

Contrary to this, Govindalal, who becomes the victim of Rohini, eliminates her from the scenario for his heroic salvation. Rohini meets an unjust ending, which shows Bankim's prejudiced stance towards the elite Govindalal who becomes the subject or the 'absolute essential', whereas Rohini becomes an antithetical inessential 'Other'.¹⁶ Bankim brings into play the conservatism of the society, which also compels him to give an invariable ending to the characters who try to transgress the patriarchal society. Rohini becomes a disempowered subaltern woman, a victim at the hands of the upper class and is used as a caution to the widows who dare to desire. Writers like Bankim fail to provide justice to radical characters like Rohini. Helen Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa* makes apt observations in this context—"your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark; you're afraid. Don't move; you might fall. Most of all, don't go into the forest. And so, we have internalised this horror of the dark."¹⁷

Although widow remarriage became a legal practice in Bengal,

¹⁵ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975), p. 15.

¹⁶ Simone Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Classics, 2015), pp. 235-253.

¹⁷ Helen Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1976), p. 878.

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*bhadralok*¹⁸ society effectively nullified its efficacy by ostracising those men who ventured to marry widows. Bankim and his contemporary literary giants attempted to penetrate such discourses in the wake of social reformation, which exacted a price on a widow's life. As scholar Tanika Sarkar says, "widow's life was circumscribed by Hindu ritual injunctions, which insisted on the self-abnegation of their body and desire."¹⁹ A widow's sexuality and its associated brutality became a concern for these reformers. Her sexual experience makes her dangerously deviant, and her sexual desires are considered insatiable in the absence of her legitimate sexual partner, making her treacherously aberrant. Urvijaya Priyadarshini explains, "Her supposed unbridled sexuality symbolises disorder, and she is assumed to have great destructive potential. This anxiety mirrors the fiction around widowhood in the earlier nineteenth century."²⁰ As Sarah E Lamb, in her work *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes*, observes,

The most common rationale as to why widows were pressed to eat vegetarian diets and rice only once a day, and fast on the eleventh day of the lunar month, wear white, and forsake bodily adornments was that these were defensive measures aimed at controlling a widow's sexuality. The Widow's diet was said to "reduce sexual desire (kām), "decrease blood (rakta)," make the body "cool (thāṇḍā)," make the widow "thin and ugly," to keep her from "wanting any man."²¹

Bankim's Rohini embodies a veiled reference to a nineteenth century widow's dried-up sexuality. "She is young and beautiful and not inferior to anybody in her intelligence. What sins have I committed that I become a child widow? ... for what fault am I to spend my youth like a dried-up log."²² Rohini cooks delicious meals, adorns herself with jewellery, wears unconventional clothes, and excels in needlework. However, she is a lonely widow, so she confides in Govindalal, and they fall in love even though he is already married. However, Bankim Chandra magnifies the gravity of her mistake compared to Govindalal, who commits infidelity to his innocent wife, Bhramar. Anuma further explains, "the women characters once

¹⁸ Bhadrakok was an elitist social class in nineteenth century Bengal that emerged through the processes of social changes brought under the impact of British colonial rule.

¹⁹ Krupa Shandilya, *Intimate Relations: Social Reform and the Late Nineteenth-Century South Asian Novel* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), p. 21.

²⁰ Vidya-mitra, 'Widows in Indi', *YouTube*, 10 December, 2018. At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HL5Z5oOIHj0>. Accessed 3/03/2022.

²¹ Sarah Lamb, *White Saris, and Sweet Mangoes: Ageing, Gender, and Body in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 220.

²² Chatterjee, *Krishna Kanta's Will*, p. 194

deviating from the social code and following their desires meet disaster and death and are rendered with no other alternatives.”²³

Rohini: A Subaltern Widow

Bankim wrote about troubled relationships and was mainly concerned with the oppressed voices of widows. As Mukherjee and Maddern mention, “For his contemporary, *bhadralok* fellows, he was the greatest novelist of his time. Most of his countrymen found that Bankim Chandra was the best exponent of both- his novels created ‘good taste’ and ‘high mortality.’²⁴ Bankim’s views were contrary to the orthodox society of his time. He introduced pre-marital romances in his works and demonstrated a nuanced understanding of nineteenth century women of Bengal. Anuma mentions that “their function was to keep the family together, adoring their husbands, and taking care of their children within the domestic atmosphere.”²⁵ As Uma Chakravarti in her work *Shadow Lives* (2001), aptly points out, “she should be long-suffering until death, self-restrained, and chaste, striving (to fulfil) the unsurpassed duty of women who have one husband.”²⁶

Although eminent theorists like Ranajit Guha mention that subalterns oppose the elites with a political, economic, and social agency, in contrast, the latter becomes the disempowered person who does not belong to this set hegemony and is deprived of agency. Drawing from this idea, Spivak raises some pertinent questions about the agency of the subaltern, those who are unrepresented. Alternatively, someone who is wrongly represented and is unable to generate discourse about their interests and desires could not be situated in any narrative. Krupa Shandilya, in her work 2017 *Intimate Relations*, observes that,

Scholars like Lata Mani, Tanika Sarkar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Ania Loomba argue that Widow was never the subject of these narratives but always their object. In these feminist accounts, the discourse of imperial legal structures and Brahmanical scriptural readings subsumes the Widow’s voice.²⁷

²³ Anuma, ‘Wives and Widows in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Novels’, *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publication*, vol. 3, no. 12 (2013), pp. 1-3.

²⁴ S. N. Mukherjee and Marian Maddern, ‘Introduction’ in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Krishnakanta’s Will* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1996), p. xx.

²⁵ Anuma, *Wives and Widows*, pp. 1-2.

²⁶ Uma Chakravarti and Preeti Gill, *Shadow Lives: Writing on Widowhood* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001), p. 37.

²⁷ Shandilya, *Intimate Relations*, p. 22.

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This argument magnified following the abolition of sati. Thus, the task of reforming women fell onto the Indian elite, who belonged to the two hubs of imperial power. Elite Bengali men took on the job of improving the status of women while claiming the moral superiority of Indian women based on their spirituality. Instead of the well-worn road of legislation, they adopted a novel to produce a wide-ranging change in society, evident in the problematic characterisation of Rohini.

In their translation of the text, Maddern and Mukherjee mention "Rohini, a character who must undergo many changes over five editions of the story. From a greedy village widow to a victim of a cruel social system."²⁸ Although claimed that his writing would become a milestone for the upliftment of widows, it inevitably revealed him as an elite who is writing for the subaltern widow but falls short in articulating her misery or evoking sympathy. Thus, Rohini neither enters the dominant discourse of upper-class *bhadralok* society nor performs the role of a widow; instead, she does everything considered taboo by society. She adorns bangles, wears a black-bordered dhoti, and chews *paan*; she desires to seek male companionship upfront and transgressed the social dogmas. Her unconventional characterisation causes chaos in the lives of other characters. She acts as a warning for the characters, and they eventually faces a traumatic ending. Furthermore, her attracting the 'weak-willed' Govindalal foregrounds Chatterjee's orthodox mindset. He is a *bhadralok*, and his stance on widow reformation remains paradoxical. This becomes evident with Rohini's end in the novel. Bankim's critic observes that "although he represents the conflicts between personal aspirations and cultural practices and emotional and sexual needs of his characters, he has made all these clandestine and transgressive thoughts and feelings invariably ending in death and disaster."²⁹

Though Bankim's novel *Krishna Kanta's Will* (1878) is mainly concerned with the pitiful state of Rohini, who turns out to be a strong-willed woman; the other woman in the marital relationship of Govindalal and Bhramar. Although she is condemned, she does not confine herself according to the mores of society and seeks to utilise the little manoeuvrability she is left with as a widow. A rare occurrence, a widow struggles to stand up and digress from societal rules. However, her suffering at the end of the novel does not come from her desire to be more than what society expects her to be. Rather, it is the novelist's convoluted unease to provide a peaceful ending

²⁸ Mukherjee and Maddern, 'Introduction', p. xlvii.

²⁹ Anuma, 'Wives and Widows', p. 3.

to such a radical character. Anuma points out this ambiguity and comments, “one of the critical points that I have noticed is that Bankim has situated his women in the past and not in the present social milieu because I think that he had a kind of fear in his mind that these women, so inflamed with passion and desires, could not be accepted by the conservative, orthodox society.”³⁰

Conclusion

Rohini’s tragic death positions her as a victim of Bankim’s antipathy. Multiple inconsistencies in Rohini’s character throughout the plot depict that the moralist in Bankim overshadowed the rationalist who wanted to bring out a widow’s plight. As Bankim mentions in his letter to Girijaprasanna Raychaudhari, “there are inconsistencies.”³¹ Thus, the question arises about Rohini’s baffling end and why Bankim did not choose an alternative ending for her. She became a woman of loose character, lusting for men throughout, who dies sordidly under the pretence of adultery.

Bankim, who claims to be the ardent supporter of widow upliftment, does not give Rohini a chance to either redeem or uplift her position. Although he does allow widows to break the rules laid for them, the outcome of their digression would end up being a tragedy. In his essay titled “Confessions of a Young Bengal” (1872), Bankim writes, “No enlightened human being can bring himself to believe in the moral excellency of perpetual widowhood... The necessary minor premises being assumed, sound logic compels us to cry with one voice, Hinduism must be destroyed.”³² Yet, he cannot advocate convincingly for widow remarriage at the end of the essay.

Thus, we can say that Rohini becomes a subaltern character whose voice has been muted and gets spoken by somebody else. She did not perform the role of an ideal widow and became the ‘other’ in the gender dichotomy. Even though the male characters were flawed, their actions went unaccounted for, and the punitive action and death was meted out to the socio-radical widow Rohini. However, her resilience, fierceness, and defiance make her an unconventional and potent symbol that is assertive and firm against all the wrongs. She tries to unhinge herself from the social codes laid out for her and depicts the grim situations a widow gets subjected to.

³⁰ Anuma, ‘Wives and Widows’, p. 2.

³¹ S. N. Mukherjee, in the introduction to *The Poison Tree* p-48, mentions the letter Bankim sent to Girijaprasanna Raychaudhari discussing the inconsistencies in the characters.

³² Shandilya, *Intimate Relations*, p. 22.

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Nevertheless, the representation of Bankim and the treatment meted out to her by the male characters and the society paints a realistic nineteenth century Bengal, which further stereotyped her as a 'femme fatale' and romanticised her. In a way, the novelist justifies Rohini's death as she goes beyond the defined paradigms for the widows. Thus, she becomes a victim of such narratives. As Spivak notes, the narrative "gives a reiterating warning against such romanticising and homogenising the subaltern subject."³³ The topicality of Rohini's character lies in the fact that the nuanced arguments around a widow's remarriage are still relevant in the contemporary scenario as it brings a specific disharmony within the patriarchal society. When fiction or media gives such misrepresentations, they become the subject of someone else's discourse, rendering them disempowered and complicating the existing stigmas around such ideas. From a widow's standpoint, a deconstructed lesson around widows needs to be disseminated within society. There is a need to provide a space where they can rise above their subaltern position and rewrite their histories and prescribed performances.

³³ Postcolonial Literature, 'Gayatri C. Spivak: Answering the Question Can the Subaltern Speak'.