

# 'Satitva' and Femininity: Prominent Contraries in the Widow Characters in Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Bengali Fiction

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## Abstract

Position of widows in the context of feminine identity at the intersections of the contested space in a colonial situation of domination and subordination from mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century to mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal is my prime focus in this study of a few novels consisting powerful young widow characters belonging to the specified period. Their female - ness and sexuality were elements that were debated and constructed by men, both colonizers and colonized, to fit their varied needs. I will try to dwell, though in a more limited way on a concern related to such work, namely that widows were regarded as objects and portrayed either as victims or passive beings in processes of male agency. The conventional focus on the legacies of colonialism and nationalism, particularly on their constructions of women with respect to tradition, as well as female sexuality can be demonstrated by the creation of an idyllic "golden age" for the portrayal of women in the Vedic era (c. 1500 - 600 BC) was a response by Indian men to the colonial critique of the subordinate status of Indian women, ironically derived from the Orientalist works of Europeans of the late 18th century. The women's question had been the focal point of very controversial reform debates for most of the nineteenth century in Bengal and it includes the debate concerning Hindu Widow Remarriage Act' 1856. A number of social reformers tried to address this issue. The middle – class Bengali 'Bhadra Lok' community fuelled and fanned these debates to accept dichotomized lifestyle distinctions, i.e., home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine, 'satitva'/ 'asatitva', kulalakshmi/ alakshmi. While these opposites afforded recognition for difference with equality, in reality they worked to strengthen traditional gender divisions to the disadvantage of the widows almost by wiping out the question of their feminine identity

**Keywords:** Widowhood, Satitva, Femininity, Bishabriksha, Chokher Bali, Charitraheen.

## Introduction

The women's question had been the focal point of very controversial reform debates for most of the nineteenth century in Bengal and it includes the debate concerning Hindu Widow Remarriage Act' 1856. A number of social reformers tried to address this issue. Rammohan Roy initiated this movement in the 1820s, as did Derozio and the Young Bengal group in the 1830s. The Indian Law Commission (1837) considered the issue seriously and concluded that infanticide could be curbed only if Widow Remarriage was legalized. However, the government took the position that, even though such a law was socially desirable, passing it would involve going against Hindu strictures and laws of inheritance and hence infeasible. There were scattered attempts to legalize Widow Remarriage in the 1840s as well. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar took up the issue in the 1850s and led it to an apparent success. While these opposites afforded recognition for difference with equality, in reality they worked to strengthen traditional gender divisions by raising the concept, 'Satitva' to the disadvantage of the widows.

The articulations of widow characters in the specified time and space always tended to reinforce patriarchal traditions, as was all too apparent for example, in the social reform movement in Bengal in the nineteenth century. The tendencies here illustrated quite clearly how for male reformers, femaleness emanated from the fulfilment of traditional roles of wife and mother within social

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systems under male control. Unsurprisingly, all the major players in these constructions of women were male. Women were debated, discussed, acted on and constructed by men with very little input from women themselves. The women's question had been the focal point of very controversial reform debates for most of the nineteenth century in Bengal. However, it disappeared as a result of a "resolution" of sorts when the middle - classes were busy in distinguishing between a 'Kulalakshmi' and an 'Alakshmi'. Thus, in essence what occurred was the promotion and preservation of separate spheres.

Despite much opposition from conservative sections, the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed on 26th July 1856, permitting Widow Remarriage to be performed in the same way as a first marriage. It was a permission law: modalities such as the registration procedure were left quite unaddressed. The Act had two main provisions. First, Widow Remarriage would be legally valid and the offspring would be legal. Second, the widow would forfeit all claims to wealth and financial support inherited through earlier marriages. The first Widow Remarriage took place on 7th December 1856 in Calcutta. Quite a few Widow Remarriages occurred in 1857. However, overall, the movement was a failure. The Bengal Census of 1881 reported about 50,000 Hindu widows in the 0-14 age bracket, about 93,000 in the 15-19 group, and about 3,76,000 in the 20-29 category. Only about 80 widows were remarried in Bengal over a span of 20 years (between the years 1856 and 1876, published in the newspapers of that time), and only about 500 remarriages had taken place by 1889.

Contrary to current articulations of feminist theory, in which agency is synonymous with resistance, the upper caste, middle class Bengali widow characters in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Bengali fiction exercises agency, by which I mean self-realization, through a performance of devotion or 'satitva' to a man other than her deceased husband. This act of devotion is replete with her unfulfilled sexual desires, and is also modelled sacred practices of devotion drawn from Hindu devotional practices. I would like to attempt to open up feminist modes of inquiry to include the sacred as a system of knowledge that can productively inform our understanding of gendered agency, through a close reading of late nineteenth-century Bengali fiction.

*Bhadralok* society revered the married woman as the kulalakshmi or goddess Lakshmi of the household or clan, and rejected the widow because she had lost her husband and was thus alakshmi or unlucky. While the conjugal bond tied the widow to her marital home, she lost all her rights within it the moment her husband ceased to exist. Due to the practice of marrying young girls to older men, a large number of widows were young women in their reproductive prime, who lived in their deceased husband's home, often within an extended family, where they looked upon conjugal relationships, but could not enter into any themselves. Although the *Widow Remarriage Act XV* of 1856 allowed a widow to remarry, this was taboo in *bhadralok* society, and thus a large number of widows were either burnt on the funeral pyre or left to live an impoverished life in their marital homes.

The figure of the nineteenth-century *bhadralok* Bengali wife and her counterpart the *bhadralok* *bidhoba*, has been the subject of much scholarly debate. In his book, *The Nation and its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee argues that *bhadralok* women were the repositories of an asexual spirituality; a woman who defied this norm was considered Westernized and 'would invite the ascription of all that the 'normal' woman (mother/sister/wife/daughter) is not—brazen, avaricious, irreligious, sexually promiscuous'. (Chatterjee, 1993) In equating "good" Indian femininity with an asexual spirituality, Chatterjee occludes the possibility of a sexual femininity that is a part of Hindu *bhadralok* society, rather than a Westernized otherness. Feminists have hotly contested Chatterjee's theorization of the *bhadralok* wife as a mere, asexual token of nationalist discourse, and suggested that the *bhadralok* woman was capable of autonomy and interiority. The nationalist and colonialist emphasis on upper-caste, middle-class women occluded lower-caste, poor, Muslim women: "This image foregrounded the Aryan woman (the progenitor of the upper-caste women) as the only object of historical concern. [Meanwhile] the Vedic Dasi (the woman in servitude), captured, subjugated, and enslaved by the conquering Aryans, but who also represents one aspect of Indian womanhood, disappeared without leaving any trace of herself in nineteenth century

history...[The] Aryan woman came to occupy the centre of the stage in the recounting of the wonder that was India" (Chakravarti, 2000).

Similarly, other feminist work has also emphasized the way in which the figure of the widow was co-opted by imperialist and nationalist discourse. Lata Mani's groundbreaking work on the colonial discourse of sati or widow immolation brings to the fore the production of the widow as an object of colonial strategies for power, while Tanika Sarkar's *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* suggests that the figure of the widow was used similarly by nationalists as a symbol of the pristine, spiritual essence of India. Building upon the work of these feminist theorists, in this paper, I suggest that the widow becomes the subject of the narrative of her life only in late-nineteenth-early twentieth century Bengali domestic fiction, written by male bhadrakalok writers who used the novel form to put forward their social critique of orthodox Hindu society. In her chapter, "Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal," Sarkar focuses on the figure of the Hindu widow, who remains unaccounted for in Chatterjee's theorization of the nation. She argues that the widow enables the construction of a pure spiritual sphere because "[S]trict ritual observances root [her] body in ancient India, thus miraculously enabling her to escape foreign domination. The cloth she wears is necessarily indigenous, the water she drinks is to be carried from the sacred river and not through foreign water pipes...Ergo, the nation needs ascetic widowhood". Sarkar's theorization of the nation, then, foregrounds the widow's spirituality, thus separating her further from the outer sphere of materiality, which Sarkar signifies as "foreign domination." Her insistence on the widow's "asceticism" excludes the possibility of her sexuality, the desires of her body, its materiality. Once again, the widow is relegated to the "ancient," and the traditional; she is outside modernity, even as she lives within it.

The first novel to deal exclusively with this issue was Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Bisha Briksha* [The Poison Tree] (1873), which was soon followed by *Krishnakanter Uil* [Krishnakanta's Will] (1878); in both novels, widow protagonists fall in love with married men and eventually destroy the men and their households. The widow's illicit love for a man other than her deceased husband was a concern that persisted in the Bengali literary imagination because a few years later, Rabindranath Tagore reworked Bankimchandra's plot in his novel *Chokher Bali* [A Grain of Sand in the Eye] (1902), and Saratchandra Chatterjee reworked both novels in *Charitraheen* [The Characterless One] (1913) and *Srikanta* (1917-1934). All three novelists were involved in varying degrees with the nationalist struggle, and thus they were all concerned with the "women's question" in different ways. As a staunch Hindu, Bankimchandra was primarily concerned with the way that the widow was reconfiguring the traditional structure of Hindu society. On the other hand, as a reformer deeply invested in women's right, Saratchandra suggested that Hindu, caste society was to blame for the injustices perpetrated on the widow.

These debates occurred in local journals and newspapers, as well as in fiction. The serial publication of novels in reputed literary journals such as *Jamuna*, *Bharatbarsha* and *Prabashi*, edited by famous luminaries such as Rabindranath Tagore and Dwijendranath Roy, made them the subject of serious consideration for the bhadrakalok reading public, who voiced their concerns and often compelled the author to reconsider the plot of his story. For instance, Sarat Chandra's *Charitraheen*, a novel that dealt with a widowed maid-servant's love for her master, provoked moral outrage in the reading public who could not stomach the thought of a maid-servant much less a widowed maid-servant falling in love with her master.

In a letter to his friend and editor Pramatha, Sarat Chandra writes: 'I'm not bothered about my name, people may think whatever they about me...and whether it [*Charitraheen*] is immoral or moral people will read it eagerly...Phoni [the editor of *Jamuna*] has written that people await my stories eagerly. Let it be! "Time" alone will judge me for people make good decisions and bad decisions. To worry about their opinions is a mistake' (Chatterjee, 2004). Despite his disavowal of public opinion, Saratchandra was compelled to change the unseemly conclusion of *Charitraheen* because of societal pressure. Thus, it is evident that fiction was an important medium for the dissemination of ideas and an agent of social change.

In this context of an evolving nationalist discourse centred on the figure of the widow, fiction provided an alternative means through which writers could explore the figure of the widow. In what follows, I read the aforementioned novels as offering alternate trajectories for the widow's life. Through a close reading of these novels, I argue that the widow character of late-nineteenth century bhadrakok fiction performs 'satitva' or devotion in an attempt to gain conjugality, domesticity and in some cases salvation for herself. Nineteenth-century bhadrakok society privileged a particular Hindu notion of devotion or 'satitva', which variously means chastity/devotion, and was a term used specifically for the good wife's undying devotion to her husband.

Within the context of bhadrakok society, the wife embodied 'satitva' or wifely devotion to gain god through service to her god-like husband. Once the wife became a widow she was supposed to renounce all the bhadrakok signs of femininity, such as coloured saris, jewellery and long hair. Perhaps the most significant sign of the wife's adherence to bhadrakok norms of femininity is her asexual 'satitva', her devotion to her husband, which will be her salvation and for which she is revered as a kulalakshmi. Therefore, the wife's ultimate act of 'satitva' is her self-immolation on her husband's funeral pyre; thus, the widow's very existence suggests that she has failed in her 'satitva' to her husband.

Within this socio-historical context, the widow character's embodiment of 'satitva' is a contradiction in terms: it cannot exist because the object of her 'satitva' has passed away, yet it exists. I argue that in an attempt to resolve the question of the widow's place within bhadrakok society, the novelists created the widow as the double of the wife. Thus, while the wife represented an asexual 'satitva', the widow was her sexually aware counterpart. However, because the widow is not the kulalakshmi, her inhabitation of 'satitva' is necessarily different from the kulalakshmi's asexual 'satitva'. I argue that widow replaces the kulalakshmi's asexual 'satitva' with a 'satitva' that is sexual and spiritual at the same time. In making this argument, I come up against Dipesh Chakrabarty's theorization of the widow character of bhadrakok fiction as embodying primarily an asexual 'satitva'. (Chakrabarty, 2002)

Dipesh Chakrabarty sees the spiritual and the sexual as binary oppositions. Therefore for Chakrabarty, the widow's 'satitva' is characterized by pabitrata purity and not sexuality. He argues that while the post-Enlightenment European subject possesses interiority and autonomy, the widow, as a product of an indigenous modernity, is characterized by pabitrata rather than sexuality. However, I argue that what differentiates these widow characters from the European post-Enlightenment subject is not their inhabitation of a Westernized modernity, but their performance of sexual desire which is intertwined with a longing-- not for autonomy (like the European subject)-- but for sexual *and* spiritual subjugation by the lord.

In making this argument, I build upon the theoretical framework of agency articulated by Saba Mahmood in her anthropological work on women's participation in the Mosque movement in Cairo. (Mahmood, 2004) Mahmood argues that in the context of Islamic Egypt, women realize themselves by acquiescing to the norms of Islam which necessitate submission to patriarchal authority, and thus, 'what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment'. The word Islam means submission, and thus the "discourses and structures of subordination" are intrinsic to leading a virtuous Islamic life.

Drawing upon Mahmood's work, I suggest that a similar system of submission underlies Hindu practices of devotion, especially as they were articulated in Bengal. Bengali Hinduism was largely characterized by the particular strand of Vaishnavism promulgated by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a sixteenth-century saint, who believed that Lord Krishna could be achieved through intense loving devotion, which entailed a complete submission of the self to Krishna's will. This form of worship was known as *bhakti* or devotion and became a central feature of Bengali Hinduism. Within the context of late-nineteenth century Bengal, this Hindu system of devotion had been formalized into the exclusive worship of Lord Krishna, over and above other Hindu gods.

In her essay on the itinerant saint Mirabai, Kumkum Sangari suggests that bhakti was an inherently feminized form of worship, and was especially apparent in its Bengali manifestation "The 'feminisation' of worship is more pronounced in Vaishnava texts. This tendency was later foregrounded by Bengal Vaishnavism wherein "The essential nature of all men is that of a gopi [cowgirl] in the Bhagwat Purana, one of the relations it is possible to have with Krishna, among others, is that of a lover as the gopis do". (Sangari, 1989).

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's vision of bhakti was popularized in the late-nineteenth century by Bijoy Krishna Goswami. He was an ardent worshipper of Krishna, who became associated with Rammohun Roy's Brahma Samaj, but eventually withdrew from it to revive Krishna worship in the tradition of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu: "Bijoy's [Krishna Goswami] partial disillusionment with the [Brahma] Samaj led him to study the *Chaitanya Caritamrita*, a biography of the great bhakti saint, under the guidance of Harimohun Pramanil. Bijoy visited various Vaishnava gurus but did not break with the Samaj. Instead in 1869 he returned to his work as a Brahma missionary, yet Bijoy increasingly blended devotional Vaishnavism as taught by Chaitanya with his own concept of Brahmoism...in 1899 he finally broke completely with the Brahma movement and began his career as a spokesman of revived Vaishnavism". (Bannerji, 2001) Devotion had been subsumed by the overly ritualistic practices of Brahmanic Hinduism, in which men were the rightful worshippers of god, while women could hope only to reach god by worshipping their godlike husbands.

The widow's desire for subjugation, then, stems from a larger discourse of devotion as subjugation. More specifically, I suggest that the widow's devotion is modelled on that of another widow, Mirabai, a fifteenth-century itinerant saint, who repudiated her lawful husband and considered Krishna her lord. The figure of Mirabai was popularized by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Bengal and Mira's ecstatic worship of Krishna was taken to be paradigmatic of the true bhakta's (devotee's) worship of god. This form of Krishna bhakti popularized by Mirabai gained currency in Bengal and at the turn of the nineteenth century it was customary for Bengali women who had been abandoned by society, such as widows, to follow Mirabai's example and become Vaishnavis or devotees of Krishna. However, the priests of the temple, upon whose goodwill these destitute women depended, often misused their power and compelled them to become prostitutes. Therefore, the term Vaishnavi came to be synonymous with a "loose woman" and consequently, the term for prostitute in Bengali and Hindustani was baishya or vaishya, a modification of Vaishnavi.

The Bengali intelligentsia was very concerned with the liminal status of these women, who were once respectable kulalakshmis but had now been driven to prostitution. Bankimchandra condemned the sect of Vaishnavis because it was separated "by a very slight line from the utter negation of female morality which constitutes prostitution" (Sen, 2003). Saratchandra on the other hand drew sympathetic portraits of these unfortunate women in his fiction. In *Srikanta*, Kamal Lata, a minor character, is a widow who has become a Vaishnavi, and is the epitome of selfless devotion, but is charged with immorality because of her association with the sect of Vaishnavas. It is evident then, that the widow characters of these Bengali novels are drawn from the larger cultural context in which widows became Vaishnavis, and thus their devotion has the same sexual-spiritual tenor as Mirabai's devotion:

"Though Mira appears in some ways to choose and advocate an ascetic way of life, her *bhajans* [devotional songs] are filled with sensuous yearning....In a sense it is the female, voice-with its material basis in patriarchal subjugation which provides the emotional force of self abasement and willed servitude....The sensuous symbolism and performative mode transgress the austere conventions of upper caste widowhood, but what occurs at the sametime is that her songs re-evolve a new relation of bondage which is now replete with desire" (Sangari, 1989).

The term '*sativa*' comes from *Sati*, the mythological goddess who was married to the Lord Siva. Legend has it that *Sati*'s father, Lord Daksha invited all his daughters and their husbands to a great holy sacrifice, but neglected to invite his daughter *Sati* and her husband Siva because he was embarrassed of his son-in-law's hermetic appearance and unpredictable behaviour. When *Sati* learnt of the sacrifice she went to her father's palace and threw herself into the

holy sacrificial fire because her father had insulted her husband. The term 'sati' then, came to be synonymous with the good woman, and by extension the good woman was the one who would fulfill her duty by her husband by willingly immolating herself on his funeral pyre, and thus the term 'satitva' came to connote devotion both conjugal and spiritual to one's husband whether alive or deceased.

It is tempting to read the widow's desire for 'satitva' as an act of rebellion, and therefore of feminist agency, in keeping with the discourse of liberal humanism, in which agency is synonymous with rebellion. However, this is a peculiar rebellion, if it indeed is a rebellion because through this "rebellion," the widow defies one set of norms (of ascetic widowhood) in favour of another set of norms (of sexual and spiritual subjugation) in the hope of limiting her freedom.

Freud defines the unhomely as that 'which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' (Freud, 1955). He discusses the unhomely in the context of a psychoanalytic reading of Hoffman's 'The Sand-man,' where he suggests that Nathaniel's childhood castration complex reveals itself in adulthood as the fear of having his eyes plucked out, and the manifestation of this fear is the unhomely. While Freud used his understanding of the unhomely for the purpose of psychoanalysis, Homi Bhabha adopts the notion of the unhomely in the colonial context. Bhabha suggests that the colonized subject's condition of unhomeliness arises from the "deep historical displacement" (Bhabha, 1997) caused by colonial categories of differentiation (such as race), which alienate her from herself, and cause her to experience the "insider's outsideness." I contend that this displacement from the self, this experience of the 'insider's outsideness' arises not from the racist ideology of the colonial state, but from the patriarchal norms of bhadrak society, which decree asexual asceticism for the widow.

In other words, the widow's 'satitva' is illegitimate because she is a widow. Therefore, in the novels, the widow's performance of 'satitva' is at odds with the bhadrak home because in these novels the home is metonymic for the nation. In her analysis of the construction of women in imperialist and nationalist discourse, Inderpal Grewal extends Chatterjee's argument to suggest that "Indian women's location in the women's part of the house becomes the symbol of what is sacred and private for Indian nationalist culture" (Grewal, 1996). If the home is the repository of nationalist culture, and nationalist culture makes no space for the sexual-spiritual 'satitva' of the widow, then similarly, there is no space for the widow's 'satitva' within the bhadrak home. In the novels, both the widow and her lover are compelled to leave the bhadrak home and set up a home elsewhere. The second home, then, becomes an externalization of the widow's interiority, of her sexual-spiritual 'satitva', and thus another site of the unhomely. The second, illegitimate home cannot be housed within nationalist discourse or its extension, the bhadrak novel, and hence the narrative usually ends with the destruction of both manifestations of the unhomely: the second home and the widow. Bhadrak society's refusal to make space for the widow or the second home ultimately leads to its own destruction as the widow's enactment of her sexual-spiritual satitva destabilizes its very foundations.

Both the widows Savitri and Kiranmayi are deprived of sexual pleasures throughout their lives. However, Savitri remains chaste and prizes her sexual purity more than the unalloyed love of Satish. She is not prepared to encounter the consequent social condemnation if she gives way to her fervour. In contrast, Kiranmayi gives way to her passions at every opportunity but outshines all other women in terms of her unique personality and individuality. Binodini is a contrast through her autonomy and her refusal to be bent and subjugated by daunting patriarchal customs for widows. She understands very clearly that being a widow she would have to strive for her own survival and self-dependence.

In *Charitrahin* and *Srikanta*, Sarat Chandra projects several widows as 'fallen women', yet depicts their room as a patch of purity amidst an abject atmosphere of general squalor. It might be read as the purity of their virtue and integrity despite the adversity which they encounter. In *Charitraheen*, Satish respectfully removes his shoes before entering Savitri's room in the servant's

tenement, which is otherwise inhabited by women of dubious reputation. The presence of books neatly arranged and the paraphernalia of worship reveals to Satish her high caste and refined tastes. Similarly Rajlakshmi's room in her mansion in Patna is simple, tidy and contains minimum furniture in contrast to the lavish style of the rest of the house. Kamallata's room is cosy, austere and inviting although the remaining akhra is mean and wretched.

Binodini (*Chokher Bali*) had been educated by an English tutor. Tagore visualised that the impact of western education, if used judiciously, would immensely assist the progress of the nation. Sarojini in Sarat's *Charitraheen* also adheres to western culture. She holds her English education in high esteem. Tagore's Binodini reads Bankim's novel *Bishabriksha*, a story of a widow who ruins a household and thereby reads what she should not do as a widow. It shows how Indian women became the consumers of the new identity for women. These are the seeds of the new woman cast through the characters studied in this paper. Keeping in mind these feminist reflections it may be derived that a 'Novum Femme' was being evolved by Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra and Tagore combining eclectically the positive aspects of the women characters in their fiction. It is the contemporary perception of woman's status that gives these women their uniqueness. They boldly exhibit their firm resistance to the tyranny that patriarchy inflicts on them. Confidence, determination, candour, creativity self-dependence and sincerity are some of the positive traits that may be distilled from these characters to create a kind of a woman who may not exist as a character in the works discussed so far, but may aid in building-up the image of a new woman who could become the role-model of the present-day society and the generations to come.

Tanika Sarkar's *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* suggests that the figure of the widow was used similarly by nationalists as a symbol of the pristine, spiritual essence of India. In her chapter, "Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal," Sarkar focuses on the figure of the Hindu widow, who remains unaccounted for in Chatterjee's theorization of the nation. In his book, *The Nation and its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee argues that *bhadralok* women were the repositories of an asexual spirituality; a woman who defied this norm was considered Westernized and 'would invite the ascription of all that the 'normal' woman (mother/sister/wife/daughter) is not—brazen, avaricious, irreligious, sexually promiscuous'. Sarkar argues that the widow enables the construction of a pure spiritual sphere because "[S]trict ritual observances root [her] body in ancient India, thus miraculously enabling her to escape foreign domination. The cloth she wears is necessarily indigenous, the water she drinks is to be carried from the sacred river and not through foreign water pipes...Ergo, the nation needs ascetic widowhood". (Sarkar,2001) Sarkar's theorization of the nation, then, foregrounds the widow's spirituality, thus separating her further from the outer sphere of materiality, which Sarkar signifies as "foreign domination." Her insistence on the widow's "asceticism" excludes the possibility of her sexuality, the desires of her body, its materiality. Once again, the widow is relegated to the "ancient," and the traditional; she is outside modernity, even as she lives within it. All three novelists were involved in varying degrees with the nationalist struggle, and thus they were all concerned with the "women's question" in different ways. As a staunch Hindu, Bankimchandra was primarily concerned with the way that the widow was reconfiguring the traditional structure of Hindu society. On the other hand, as a reformer deeply invested in women's right, Sarat Chandra suggested that Hindu, caste society was to blame for the injustices perpetrated on the widow.

#### **Objective of the Study**

The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act being passed on 26th July 1856 and the first such remarriage taking sixteen long years to make its fictional debut in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Bishabriksha*, which started to be serialized in *Bangadarshan* in April 1872. Depiction of Kunda Nandini initiated a series of powerful young widow characters in the works of the three masters of Bengali novels of the period, specified for my study, namely Rabindranath and Sarat Chandra to follow Bankim. All these characters address the debate between 'Satitva' and 'Femininity' in their own ways. The aim of this study is to look into various social nuances of widowhood related to the concept of 'Satitva' as a contrary to 'Femininity' in the so called 'Bhadralok Society' from mid 19th to mid

20th Century.

### Conclusion

In her study of the widow character, Susie Tharu writes "It could be argued, and I am going to do so, that when a writer features a widow as protagonist he or she is, consciously or unconsciously, making an intervention in a debate centred on this figure....Widow stories therefore are invariably also subtly modulated historical engagements with questions of governmentality and citizenship". (Bannerji, 2001) Following this, I too suggest that the widow characters of Bengali fiction of late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century must be read as the bhadrakalok mediation between the private sphere of bhadrakalok social and moral codes, especially that of 'Satitva' and the public sphere of colonial law at the face of the gradual development of the budding notions of 'Femininity' as a specific social construct.

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**Anthology : The Research**

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