

Relocating Tagore's Binodini: New Spaces of Representation in Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali*

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Abstract

The paper explores how the interface between a literary text and its cinematic rendering underscores the possibilities of meaningful exchanges and encounters between different art forms, historical moments, and ideological values. Cinematic adaptation of canonical literary texts of the nineteenth century offers an effective platform for the discussion of the post-Victorian event. Rituparno Ghosh's film *Chokher Bali*, based on Rabindranath Tagore's novel bearing the same title, is a retro-Victorian working of colonial history. Ghosh offers an exploration of the spatiality of woman's selfhood/identity, and its complex interface with the historical and the social. Here, I have used the word 'Victorian' both historically and culturally. Culturally, the resonance of the word "Victorian" extends beyond historical specificities spilling to the postmodern era, and revealing an in-depth engagement with history which enriches the postmodern present considerably. The impact of the 'Victorian' is not only true for those in the West, but also for people who had been under British rule for long two hundred years. Rituparno's adaptation of Tagore is a reminder that our postmodern condition should not blind us to our status as post-Victorian/nineteenth century. The cinematic reworking of Tagore provides a palimpsestuous vision of what is present but not conspicuous enough.

Keywords: Woman, body, spatial-subjectivity, colonial history, retro-Victorian, adaptation, intertextuality.

I

This essay intends to contribute to the theme of “interpretative encounter” by exploring how the interface between a literary text written in the nineteenth century and its postmodern cinematic rendering produces possibilities of meaningful exchanges and encounters between different historical moments, values and art-forms. My paper studies the representations of the disruptive widow Binodini in Rituparno Ghosh’s adaptation of Tagore’s novel *Chokher Bali*. Cinematic adaptation has always occupied an ambiguous position, caught between an original work of art and its subjective reinterpretation by a film director. For long the debates on cinematic adaptations of works of literature centred on the question of fidelity to the source text while the work of adaptation was looked upon as secondary or derivative, and therefore inferior to the original. However, in the last decade a notable shift “from a moralistic discourse of fidelity to a less judgmental discourse of intertextuality” (Stam 2002, pp. 209-210) has taken place. Adaptations are valued today as creative endeavours “caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin” (Stam 2002, pp. 209-210). It is a work of interpretation that offers an original vision of a literary work, a process that embeds the literary text in a complex web of intertextual and interpersonal exchanges. A comparative analysis between the source text and the adapted film version of *Chokher Bali* brings out the value of a dialogical approach to the intersection of literature and film.

As against the simplicity of an individual author creating a narrative, the “complex material infrastructure of cinema” (Stam 2000, p. 56) produces an altered discourse. Moreover, Robert Stam rightly points out that a literary text comprising of a series of verbal signs can generate several meanings: “[t]he literary text is not a closed, but an open structure (or, better, structuration, as the later Barthes would have it) to be reworked by a boundless context. The text feeds on and is fed into an infinitely permutating intertext, which is seen through ever-shifting grids of interpretation” (Stam, 2000, p.57). I posit Rituparno Ghosh’s film *Chokher Bali*, based on Tagore’s novel, as an instance of the altered discourse on Indian womanhood, an exploration of the spatiality of woman’s selfhood/identity, and its complex interface with the historical and the social. A retro-Victorian reworking of colonial history, the film makes potent statements, in its digressions from the source, on the ideological complexities underlining the “gender question” in colonial Bengal. Here I use the word “Victorian” both historically and culturally. Historically it stands for the nineteenth century as “a major warehouse of historical commodities and evidence, and a period still almost within living memory in which culture we feel we have strong roots” (Giddings, cited in Cartmell & Whelehan, 1999, p.12). These words are not only true for those in the West, but also for people who had been under British rule for over two hundred years. Culturally, the resonance of the word “Victorian” extends beyond the historical

specificities spilling to the postmodern era, and reveals an in-depth engagement with history, which enriches the post-modern present considerably.¹

II

Tagore claimed *Chokher Bali* (*Eyesore*), published in the year 1903, to be an unprecedented piece of writing in the context of contemporary Bengal. A daring exploration of the complexities of man-woman relationship on the one hand, and of the homosocial bond developing between the three major women characters on the other,² the novel presented an avant garde theme. Tagore's *Chokher Bali*, set between 1902 and 1905, recounts the story of Binodini, a beautiful, educated woman, trained in Western learning under the tutelage of an English governess and then subjected most unjustly to the cloistered, unenlightened life of the Bengali women of her day. She is selected by Rajlakshmi to be the bride of her son Mahendra. As Mahendra refuses to marry Binodini, the fuming mother approaches Mahendra's closest friend Bihari hoping that Bihari would not let her down. However, much to her consternation, Bihari also refuses to marry Binodini. She is then married off and sent to her husband's place in rural Bengal. Widowed within a year of marriage, Binodini moves into Mahendra's house as a companion to his mother. There she meets Mahendra's wife Ashalata, an uneducated and inexperienced woman. As Binodini watches the doting couple, the intense love between Mahendra and his wife inflames her repressed sexuality. She starts comparing herself with Asha and feels that her rejection by Mahendra has been unjust. Her frustration grows as she realizes that this heaven of marital affection and security could have been all hers, if only Mahendra had been more judicious in his choice of partner. Binodini becomes intimate with Asha in order to get access to Mahendra. The two women become great friends, and start calling each other *chokher bali*, literally meaning "sand in the eye". These are words of endearment

¹ The word "Victorian" is a periodising concept no doubt, but it also refuses to be bound to a chronological range. The word has been diversely interpreted: often it has been associated to a colonial past or seen as a continual colonial presence. Victorianism is a cultural phenomenon that defines our postmodern present. Sadoff and Kucich noted that the Victorian age is "historically central to late-century postmodern consciousness" (2000, p.xi). We need to make a nostalgic return to our past even at the height of our postmodernity in order to understand how we have emerged. The "Victorian" then stands for certain sets of cultural values, practices, beliefs and systems which are deeply embedded in our present. Krueger rightly remarks that "we are in many respects post-Victorians, with a complex relationship to the ethics, politics, psychology, and art of our eminent—and obscure—Victorian precursors" (2002, p.xi). The simultaneous pulls of distance and proximity with the nineteenth century is truer in relation to gender as the past discourses still dominate our perception of heteronormative roles. In India where gender configurations are transnational, formed by the curious intersections between the East and the West, cultural predominance of Victorian values, that impacted our colonial past, continues to overshadow our postcolonial present.

² It needs to be clarified that there is no lesbian subtext in the novel, nor are the women characters aware of it. Here, we have three deprived women—a mother, and two daughter-like figures- thwarted by fate and the man they all love in their individual capacity. The root of deprivation being the same, these women develop a close, often ambivalent bonding.

chosen by Asha in place of *soi* meaning “friend” as she learns that Mahendra was earlier offered Binodini’s hand in marriage. Ironically, the apparently innocent words of endearment suggest rivalry, rather than friendship, between the two women. Binodini then starts seducing Mahendra with Asha’s help. Asha, in her simplicity and innocence, is unable to gauge Binodini’s strategies. When realization dawns, she is incapable of extricating her husband from Binodini’s clutch. Not only Mahendra, but Bihari also becomes Binodini’s target. She starts playing a dangerous game by provoking Mahendra’s jealousy through her frequent indulgences towards Bihari. Strange interplay of human passions make Asha and Binodini struggle for their possession of Mahendra on the one hand, and Mahendra and Bihari contest for Binodini on the other. Binodini finally manages to alienate Mahendra from his wife, mother and friend, and fully captivates him. Mahendra, who has left his ancestral home with Binodini, is brought back by Rajlakshmi’s terminal illness. After Rajlakshmi’s death Binodini shows a sudden transformation of heart. She turns down Bihari’s proposal for marriage, asks for Asha’s forgiveness and departs for Benaras to live an ascetic life.

Through Binodini Tagore explores the consequences of the abysmal life and the sexual frustrations of a young Hindu widow. However, the end of the novel shows a disappointing acquiescence to societal demands in dispensing with the character of Binodini. Tagore himself was thoroughly dissatisfied with the novel’s ending: “[e]ver since *Chokher Bali* was published I have always regretted the ending. I ought to be censured for it” (Tagore, 24 June, 1910).³ The novel evoked various kinds of responses. When it was serialized in *Bangadarshan*, the Hindu Brahmins criticized Tagore for making Binodini crave for life and sexual fulfillment. Being a Brahmo, Tagore decided not to interfere with Hindu sentiment and restored Binodini to the conformist, Hindu life that society demanded. Later, a few months before his death, Tagore claimed to regret banishing Binodini to an ascetic life. Seen in its historical context the novel offers valuable insights into the difficulties of configuring gender as an Indian endeavour under the aegis of British imperialism. The configurations are transnational, produced from the confluence of the East and the West, and engendered by the conditions of colonial rule in India. Although specific dates are not mentioned in the novel, peripheral references help to situate the incidents in late nineteenth-century Bengal. Despite several reformist movements aimed at improving the abject conditions of Indian women, widowhood remained a curse. Although the re-marriage of Hindu widows received legal sanction, Hindu society was yet to shed its inhibitions against widow remarriage. In a colonial setting the portrayal of potentially subversive female sexuality brings out the clash between the ideal and the real. The articulation of feminine consciousness in Tagore’s text explodes the hypocrisy of colonized patriarchal society with its overt nationalist agenda, and brings to surface a dialogised heteroglossia between the hegemonic and marginal voices.

³ The film starts with these words of Tagore.

Made into a film in 2003, one hundred years after the publication of the novel, *Chokher Bali* re-explores the possibilities of the widow's marginality in the colonial context, and represents through Binodini how violations of human rights initiate problematic areas of human agency, particularly the spatial dimension.⁴ In his film Binodini's search for her own space from where she can resist the invisibility forced upon the widow in Hindu society, is also the quest of the postmodern Indian woman. Located at the problematic juncture of the colonial past and the post-colonial present, women in today's India are forced to go through an uneasy negotiation between the values of bygone days and the demands of present society. The parameters, which had shaped the notion of womanhood in India in the nineteenth century, are very much a part of the collective subconscious, so much so that any resistance against sexual/social discrimination has to begin with the negation of past values. That Ghosh was consciously speaking to his postmodern audience, who are made to see and hear what the director intended for them, is undeniable. His re-evaluation of these cultural discourses by entering into a dialogue with the past offers a different perspective. This is testified by the fact that apart from being nominated for the Golden Leopard at the 2003 Locarno International Film Festival, *Chokher Bali* was screened at the Asia Society on April 9, 2005, as part of the Third Annual South Asia Human Rights Film Festival. Although thematically the cinematic text invokes typical Victorian concerns over sexuality, national/cultural identity and morality, the *Chokher Bali* film was largely received as a protest against the oppression of women in society and an appeal for the recognition of human rights.

For Fredric Jameson, the post-modern is a "periodizing concept" which correlates to a new socio-economic order that "is often euphemistically called modernization, post-industrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism" (Jameson 1998, p. 3). Cinema, which Jameson sees as one of the pre-eminent postmodern forms, has a predominant role in structuring cultural experience in this new socio-economic order as "sight" becomes something of supreme value. Cinematic adaptation of canonical literary texts of the nineteenth century offers an effective platform for the discussion of the post-Victorian event.⁵ According to Sanders, adaptation does not efface the source text with

⁴ In *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Edward Soja draws heavily upon Henri Lefebvre and explains the notion of the "Thirdspace": "For Lefebvre, reductionism in all its forms, including Marxist versions, begins with the lure of binarism, the compacting of meaning into a closed either/or opposition between two terms, concepts, or elements. Whenever faced with such binarized categories (subject-object, mental-material, natural-social, bourgeoisie-proletariat, local-global, center-periphery, agency-structure), Lefebvre persistently sought to crack them open by introducing an-Other term, a third possibility or 'moment' that partakes of the original pairing but is not just a simple combination or an 'in between' position along some all-inclusive continuum. This critical thirding-as-Othering is the first and most important step in transforming the categorical and closed logic of either/or to the dialectically open logic of both/and also" (Soja, 1996, p. 60).

⁵ As Kirchknopf has rightly noted, the postmodern engagement with the nineteenth century works "critically with the Victorian age and its narratives" (2008, p. 53). Animated images are never accidental or ideologically neutral.

its own images, but the endurance of the source in our memory enables the “process of juxtaposed readings that are crucial to the cultural operations of adaptation” (Sanders 2006, p. 25). Gender, class and other social differences are inevitably ideologically reconstructed in our own image with reference to values of the past.⁶ Ghosh’s adaptation of Tagore is a reminder that our postmodern condition should not blind us to our status as post-Victorian/nineteenth century.

⁶ Mark Llewellyn’s observation about the benefits of the palimpsest is relevant: “The importance of the palimpsest lies not in its writing of new texts over old ones, but in the simultaneous existence of both narratives on the same page occupying the same space, and speaking in odd, obscure and different ways to one another. For it is important to remember that, as the neo-Victorian text writes back to something in the nineteenth century, it does so in a manner that often aims to re-fresh and re-vitalise the importance of that earlier text to the here and now. The contemporaneous historicism present in text thus becomes the key to its neo-Victorian classification” (Llewellyn 2008, pp. 170-71).

III

In colonial India constructions of gender, fostered by the idiom of reform, emerged as a predominant cultural category. The process involved several factors: the relation of the rising middle class to colonialism; the issue of governance; economic changes; sexual divisions; and the nature and function of the private and the public spheres. Such ideological formulations encapsulated the affinities and differences between the colonial masters and the governed, and determined the nature of anti-colonial and nativist discourses and actions. As the confluence of contradictory values resulted in the re-formation of patriarchy in India, literature, constituted by “the processes of political colonization, the formation of class and the re-formation of patriarchies in the first half of the nineteenth century” (Sangari 1999, p. 97) also acted as a constitutive agent in these histories. The new gender constructs enabled a re-orientation of patriarchal control and provided discursive support in transforming the effeminate, subjugated subjects of colonial rule into the all-powerful patriarch at home. As the home turned into the main site for controlling the disruptive potentials of women, the idea of the female as incarnation of spirituality gained currency and obtained social approval.⁷

Unlike Western patriarchal thoughts in which all modes of control and hegemony were ascribed to the rule of a father, Indian symbolism is dominated by the feminine. The relation of the feminine with power is, nevertheless, problematic for Indian patriarchy, provoking deeply ambivalent responses towards womanhood. In a matri-focal culture, the feminine principle governing the natural world is both benevolent and capricious, in the form of the treacherous, destructive mother. Any human negotiation with such an unpredictable deity is bound to be accompanied by a sense of insecurity. Ashis Nandy rightly observes that this feeling of insecurity in man’s response to woman became a part of the psychic make-up of the Indian male. In everyday life the psychological burden of the traditional image of *shakti* or power forces the Indian male to identify with the passive and distant masculine principle in the cosmos. In the familial front the same psychological ambivalence characterizes man’s relation to woman, whether the relation of the son with his mother, or that of the husband with his wife. An urge to look up to woman for protection, security and nurture is always accompanied by the fear of betrayal.⁸ Whatever the real experience of women might be (as many of them bore twelve-fifteen children) the notion of woman as spirituality incarnate had great appeal for the Bengalis who were familiar with the images of *Durga*, *Kali*, *Lakshmi* and later, the oppressed *Deshmatrka*, the Nation as Mother. Even the evocation of female power or *Shakti* implied the existence of a sacred domain that needed to be protected

⁷ See for a detailed discussion Dipesh Chakravarty’s “The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal.” Subaltern Studies VI. Eds. David Arnold & David Hardiman. New Delhi: OUP, 1996). ; Partha Chatterjee’s “The Nation and Its Women” in Partha Chatterjee Omnibus (New Delhi: OUP, 1999, rpt. 2009).

⁸ See Ashis Nandy’s essay “Woman Versus Womanliness in India: An Essay in Cultural and Political Psychology” in *Exiled at Home* (NY: OUP, 2005): 32-46

with tireless vigilance. Such a larger-than-life representation not only projected a desexualized image of woman but also led to a glorification of the deprivation, sacrifices and abstinences she was forced to undergo in a highly oppressive patriarchal system.⁹

While the dangers of female sexuality were contained by the institution of marriage, the young, attractive widow, unaccommodated and outside the control of a husband or father, remained a serious problem. *Sati*, the custom of burning a widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, raises moral, cultural and ideological issues of gender, religion, and the treatment of the body. Colonial discourses on *Sati* posit the woman's body as the abode of all danger.¹⁰ The discourses on widowhood and *Sati* in colonial Bengal repeatedly emphasized the desexualization and dehumanization of the female body. In both the novel and the film *Chokher Bali* the figure of the widow, Binodini, rehearses the vexed issue of widowhood in multiple ways. In her efforts to carve out a new domain for herself, Binodini corresponds to Gayatri Spivak's positioning of women as subalterns caught between tradition and modernity. In her famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak argues that the most abject version of the colonized cannot represent herself, as she can only be represented by someone with more power. This is the predicament of Tagore's Binodini, who despite all her recalcitrance to societal demands, is eventually robbed of her power to "speak". Ghosh, on the contrary, crowns Binodini's individuality by enabling her to discover her own *desh* without the support of either Mahendra or Bihari. The theme of India's freedom struggle, conveyed in the forms of slogans, banners and Bihari's patriotism, brings to the fore the troubled connection between woman and nation. Although nationalism devalues both women and body as source of desire, variations of struggle for power are played over the feminine space of the nation and actual female bodies. This is all the more true for India where the nation did occupy a feminine space in nationalist iconography: the nation deemed as *deshmata* (*a female deity*) in bondage under the colonial yoke, ravaged and tortured by foreign aggressors. While women are treated as the symbol of the purity of the nation, they are vulnerable to contamination, and remain homeless

⁹ Srimati Mankumari Basu writes to her friend Hem about the virtues of Masterbabu's wife Kamala Devi: "Even a heart of flint melts on seeing the devotion of Masterbabu's wife. You will be surprised to know that she embraces all sorts of dangers and sorrows with this faith: Whatever God gives is good for man. Let His will be fulfilled." [translation mine] (Ray 2002, p. 121).

¹⁰ The "Translation of a Conference between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of, the practice of Burning Widows Alive" presents a debate for and against the issue, which highlights the problematics of accommodating the widow's body within Hindu patriarchy. The advocate for the practice describes the rewards in store for a sati, literally a chaste woman: "That woman who, on the death of her husband, ascends the burning pile with him, is exalted to heaven, as equal to Uroondhooti" (Roy 1999: 114). The debate progresses in an interesting manner as the opponent tries to counter the above arguments by referring to the words of a Puranic authority called Munoo: ' Let her emaciate her body, by living voluntarily on pure flowers, roots, and fruits, but let her not, when her lord is deceased, even pronounce the name of another man. [...] Here Munoo directs, that after the death of her husband, the widow should pass her whole life as an ascetic' (Roy 1999: 115).

themselves. For both Binodini and Asha, *desh* or one's own country/nation remains an intriguing idea. If it means a concrete physical location and also an "imagined community"¹¹ then Asha, though temporarily dislodged, finds her own *desh* in Mahendra's house. Binodini constantly moves from one location to another, of which none belongs to her, nor does she belong to any physical space she comes to inhabit. And yet it is Binodini, not Asha in the film, who discovers *Bharatvarsha* as her own sacred space. This is a position of empowerment: Binodini eventually discovers and occupies the centre of her own space (*desh*) in her own right. Caught in subject/object binarism, Spivak does not take into account the possibility of the third space from which the subaltern can challenge and subvert the hegemonic discourse. Rituparno Ghosh's Binodini exploits the openness and possibilities of the margin as a third space.

Tagore's text surely provides an alternative space where the contradictions within the discourses on gender are exposed. The silences in the text are, therefore, most significant in enabling posterity to look for a dynamic model for differentiating between interpellated subject positions and marginal consciousness. Gillian Rose quotes key passages from Teresa de Lauretis's *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* to describe these silences as "spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions, and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparatus" (1993, p.140). In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks positions herself in the margin to detach purposefully her subjectivity and identity from the hegemonic order, a "site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination [. . .] which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world" (hooks 1990, p.153). The postmodern, postcolonial concept of "third space" has created a cultural politics of difference that has engendered creative and enabling responses, especially from women of colour. Unlike Tagore's Binodini, Ghosh's character discovers her liminal status as a position of power from where she can challenge her interpellated status in social hierarchy. Ghosh explains his change of focus thus:

Today, when you read the novel, you can make out that this *cannot* be the ending. A lot of people wanted Binodini to get married to Behari. I think that would have been a solution 30 years ago when people were propagating widow remarriage, they would have been content if she were given another marital home. But in today's time, I think a woman can live on her own completely. (*Rituparno Ghosh and the "Intellectual Film,"* 2005)

The film highlights the need to reformulate a new existential space for Binodini, who suffered three-fold marginalization: as a colonized subject, as victim of a repressive patriarchy, and finally as the victim of widowhood. The ending of Ghosh's film shows a

¹¹ The word is borrowed from Benedict Anderson

radical departure from that of the novel. He effectively uses the cinematic medium to create a different visual and ideological register.

IV

Unlike in Tagore's novel, Ghosh makes conspicuous Binodini's enticing, disruptive sexuality. Following Henri Lefebvre's argument, the whole social space proceeds from the body, and involves the complex working of power and knowledge. The representation of Binodini's body turns into the most crucial site for witnessing the production and reproduction of power. The representation of the body and of feminine identity is a social space involving the complex workings of power and knowledge.¹² Across this new spatial plane a deconstruction and reconstitution of the old modernist binaries of public/private, outside/inside, margin/centre take place simultaneously. Ghosh uses the marginal space of the widow's body as source of both sexual titillation and threat, and his representation conflates the use of the female body both as material object and as a discursively produced entity. We are not allowed to forget for once that the body of Binodini is a problematic social entity. She is consciously projected as a voluptuous sex symbol, as the site of a counter-hegemonic discourse, and as the location of resistance.

Ghosh generates a complex ambivalence towards Binodini, the seductress, to make the discourse on the Binodini-issue dialogic. An unabashed avowal of her disruptive potential is made through the background music played as Binodini appears on the screen: "*Mora jale sthale kato chhole maya jaal ganthi*" (Land and sea echo with our spells and wiles).¹³ The song was sung by a group of enchantresses called the *Mayakumari* in Tagore's dance drama *Mayar Khela (The Game of Illusion)*. Like the *Mayakumaris*, Binodini casts a spell on Mahendra, Asha and Bihari the moment she enters Mahendra's house. She uses all her intellectual and physical charms to capture Mahendra and Bihari. In fact, Mahendra's mother describes Binodini as *mayabini*, enchantress, on learning how she has ensnared Mahendra. Ghosh's thoughtful use of the song raises the question whether Binodini herself is an illusion or *maya*. After all, she hails like a tempest from nowhere to wreck havoc in the lives of Mahendra, Asha and Bihari, and then disappears without leaving an address behind. While the narrative space of Ghosh's film enables Binodini to play on the voyeuristic fantasy of the spectators, her elusiveness reinforces the impression that she is the denizen of an illusory world. Along with endorsing her enigmatic status in contemporary society, this also points to the fact that Binodini herself is, in a way, a pathetic pursuer of a space that can never belong to her. The opera glasses through which she sees the world voyeuristically is a pointer to her distance from the world she craves to occupy. Just as Binodini remains an enigma for society, her surrounding world is also a *maya* or illusion for her. The film, however, indicates that the unchartered territory of *maya* is also the domain of unpredictable

¹² Hooper's views obtained from her unpublished manuscript "Bodies, Cities, Texts: The Case of Citizen Rodney King" is cited in Soja: 111-119.

¹³ Translation mine.

and indefinable possibilities. The presence of the enigmatic Binodini on the fringes of the ordered domestic space defines its territorial bounds, and threatens to undo the binarism of the centre and the periphery. Binodini is not outside the exclusive logic of the centre/margin but very much a part of it as the margin defines the centre and also invades its apparently fortified precincts. Tagore's *Chokher Bali* never explores the possibilities of self-actualization for Binodini; instead the novel chastises her individuality by banishing her to a life of penance.



Figure 1. Binodini and Asha – two intimate friends

In the film the scopophilic pleasure evoked by Binodini's physical representation is deliberately deployed to highlight her difference from Mahendra's wife Ashalata. Figure 1 offers a visual contrast between Asha and Binodini: the former wears a red sari, the colour associated with the bliss and fulfillment of the married state; the latter wears a white sari, the typical attire of the Indian widow and a mark of the renunciation of worldly pleasures. Yet, Binodini's eyes and body language clearly exude a seductive charm, as does the white sari worn to show off her voluptuous body. She starts teaching Asha how to resist Mahendra's brute force during their love-making. The scene (figure 2) in which she teaches Asha to wear a blouse, is the first indication of Binodini's desire to usurp Ashalata's legitimate social space by literally clothing herself in a wife's attire. As Binodini wistfully looks at Asha's ornaments and vermillion smeared forehead, her passion is ignited. This accomplished widow also becomes an enigma for the inexperienced Asha, for whom Binodini's subtle strategies of usurpation are beyond comprehension.



Figure 2. Binodini teaching Asha to wear a blouse

Although Binodini follows the strict religious observances of widowhood, Ghosh reminds us, through the patch of menstrual blood Binodini leaves behind in front of the prayer room, that no matter how much society tries to see her as a desexualized being, her body refuses to be tamed. Binodini's sexuality and intense passions are in sharp contrast to the traditional image of Indian widowhood as incarnate renunciation (see note 9).¹⁴ It needs to be borne in mind that the entire discursive and legal sanction on widow remarriage in nineteenth century Bengal unleashed unprecedented social anxieties. First, it made sexual desire appear as a female expression and initiative. This brings to the fore the next disturbing question: that of female agency. The widow, without a guardian, that is a husband and/or a son, was autonomous. Her autonomy made her occupy a dangerous marginality which was subversive for the domestic order. A symbolic act of sanitizing the domestic space is undertaken by Mahendra's mother Rajlakshmi when she drives away Binodini from the house for alluring her son. Though chastised bitterly for her disturbing sexuality, Binodini is above gross carnality. Her awareness of the incorrigible double standards by which society treats a widow's body makes her a keen judge of her situation:

¹⁴ The Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856: Act No. XV, July 1856, An Act to Remove All Legal Obstacles to Marriage of Hindoo Widows, cited in Tanika Sarkar 'Wicked Widows', p. 121. For a detailed discussion on widow remarriage see Tanika Sarkar's 'Wicked Widows: Law and Faith in Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere debates' in *Rebels, Wives, Saints*, p. 121-152.

she mildly reprimands Bihari's false sympathy for a chopped tree because his love for the living world excludes any sympathy for the suffering widows.

After being thrown out of Mahendra's house, Binodini reaches Bihari's place. She adorns herself with bridal ornaments hoping that Bihari would be easily drawn to her beauty, but again miscalculates her move. The screen representation, shown in figure 4, is menacingly subversive as Binodini's white sari is incongruously juxtaposed with her gold ornaments. In the days when widow-remarriage was introduced, the scene is a strong comment on the actual state of affairs. Binodini is clearly posited as an unaccommodated being—a widow, who is bedecked in bridal ornaments, and has cravings for marital bliss. Binodini's proposal for marriage seems so outrageous to Bihari that he bursts into laughter and refuses to accept her. She even pleads to serve Bihari as a maid in lieu of shelter. Bihari, who had borne some respect for this woman, is tormented to see that Binodini could degrade herself to this level and points out that they are living at a time when people are talking about freedom and not servility.



Figure 4. Bihari refusing to marry Binodini

However, Bihari's words mean nothing to Binodini who has little exposure to the outer world of political action. Moreover, struggle for freedom on the political front is very different from the personal battle Binodini is fighting within herself. Her insult is manifold this time because apart from the pangs of repeated refusals, she also realizes that she has fallen in the eyes of Bihari, her last and only resort. Binodini has no alternative but to return to her husband's village where she has always been looked upon as an aberration. She

writes an apology to Bihari and prepares for death by drowning herself, a common predicament for errant young widows of her day. The two letters written by Binodini in the film are Ghosh's invention, and these clearly foreground the director's agenda:

[. . .] I have three identities in society—a widow, an anglicized lady and a young woman. My true self was always buried under these because society refuses to accept that a young widow is a human individual of flesh and blood. I can boldly confess that you have given me the courage to discover my fourth identity. You have showered all your pity on Asha because she is naive, simple and a pathetic victim of circumstances. I will never acquire the first two virtues possessed by Asha. [. . .] [So] I am destined to suffer the usual fate of widows in this country. Unfortunately, Jagadish Bose has never shown any concern for these hapless creatures. [translation mine]

Binodini, however, fails to commit suicide. As she prepares to leave her village home Mahendra arrives to live with her for good, a courage he had failed to show when earlier requested. Binodini realizes that after being deserted by his wife and mother, cohabiting with her is now no more but a penal state for Mahendra. She makes him vow celibacy during their stay together, and both reach Benaras to live in a *bajra*¹⁵ on the Ganges. The bajra marks Binodini's new space, built on flowing water, fluid and uncertain -- a symbolic location and a deviation from the novel. This new location is a significant space for Binodini that offers release and leads to a new cognitive growth. The ghats of Kashi, with its myriad activities and people, open up a new world for her and she hungrily devours all the details of this variegated life around with her opera glasses. It is on these ghats that Binodini sees Annapurna, Ashalata's aunt, accompanying the pregnant Asha for a bath in the river. This is a moment of severe defeat and anguish for Binodini. She realizes that she has finally failed as Asha's rival: after all, it is only Asha who can bear Mahendra a legitimate child. While this moment of severe agony brings home the realization that Binodini should never aspire to be a wife and a mother, it also signals the dawn of a new self-awareness. It marks a point of release from the confines of stereotypical roles that women play in society. This moment in the film *Chokher Bali* signals the birth of a woman who recognizes her worth as a human individual and not as an interpellated social being.

In conceptualizing the end of the film, Ghosh had the criticisms of the novel in mind: some demanded the marriage of Bihari and Binodini as a fitting end for the novel. After Mahendra is restored to domesticity, Bihari comes with a marriage proposal to rescue

¹⁵ A vessel, almost like a house boat, floating on the river in which people can stay

Binodini from a life of further humiliation. Unlike the other widows, Binodini has always displayed a forbidden love for life, and flouted social norms; she has repeatedly pleaded for love but suffered rejections. When Bihari finally comes to offer her a home, Binodini has already found a space which is larger than what marriage can offer. She has discovered a new *Bharatvarsha* which is not the country Bihari is fighting to free from the British. It is a *Bharatvarsha* of her mind, an endless space of immense possibilities and self-realization. Finally, Ghosh's Binodini disappears, leaving behind a letter for Asha and her opera glasses. Now that she has discovered a new world within herself, she no longer needs her glasses to see the outside world. Binodini's last letter is epiphanic:

Dear [Chokher] Bali,

[. . .] Do you remember asking me what desh means. [. . .] Is Biharibabu's desh same as ours? After I was estranged from you, these questions haunted me. [. . .] I realized that our cloistered life in Darzipara Street prevented us from seeing the outer world. That is why we tried to fulfill all our desires with the only man we had come across. But our desires remained unfulfilled and our small world (which you can call 'desh') was also shattered. If Lord Curzon succeeds in partitioning Bengal, then you and I will be in two countries. While living in two different countries if we only think about the insults, deprivations and sorrows we had suffered, then it would mean that we have accepted defeat. Actually our desh is in our mind. [. . .] I came to realize what desh means the day I stood on the ghats of Kashi. [translation mine]

A postmodern reworking on the colonial discourse on gender and identity, Ghosh's Binodini is a new creation. She opens up the immense possibilities of a powerfully symbolic space of representation emerging from a cultural politics of difference and identity, from an awakening to the spatial dimension of human subjectivity. This is a new position of empowerment and self-actualization that the Indian woman in the twenty-first century also needs to explore and consolidate. Ghosh enunciates the relevance of *Chokher Bali* as a contribution to the present day discourse on the nature of liberated womanhood in India: "a woman does not have a country of her own, just as she has no surname of her own [. . .] But a woman can have a space [. . .] For an independent woman, therefore, I would wish to define it as space or domain. And that is what Binodini speaks of at the end." (Ghosh 2005, n.p.). It is not possible to discover this new space without a dialogue with the past that looms so large over our consciousness, and shapes our knowledge of who we are.

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