Second Chapter

Widows in the Epics and in Tagore
2.1. Widows in the Epics

Possibly widows in India are most noticeable because in Indian society they are discriminated and neglected. They are taken as part of their late husbands and are hardly allowed to get remarried. In the epics, it was the case. In Tagoran times, such case was a little improved. All the widows, either in the epic age or Tagore age, were miserable. They experienced hardship not only in daily life but also more in their hearts. The epics took this phenomenon as being normal while Tagore in his works was very sympathetic to the widows and hoped to change this and help widows out of miseries.

In the epics, the most unfortunate women were those who became widows. A Chinese adage says, “When husband dies, wife half dies”. And the death of the husband is said to be the first death of the wife.

In the epics, any of the three fates was waiting for widows when their husbands died: to commit suttee, to get remarried to brothers or relatives of only their childless late husbands or live lonely until death. None of the three fates was good for widows. It seemed that re-marriage, in a real sense, was not a remarriage at all, because this was only for the progeny of the late husbands’ families.

2.1.1. Madri—The first suttee

Sati in Sanskrit means a faithful or virtuous wife. In Hindu mythology, Sati, the daughter of king Daksha and the spouse of Lord Shiva, died consequently upon her husband being disgraced by her father. The word Sati later was transformed into “Suttee” which refers to the custom of the caste Hindu widows’ self-immolation on the funeral pyres of their husbands, a practice, compulsive or voluntary, having once an extensive social sanction and prevalence in India. Suttee was the most inhuman practice in this part of the world. In the epics, many widows sacrificed themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands, and they were complimented for this. Madri was the second wife of Pandu. Once Bhisma went to the country of Madra. The king of Madra received Bhisma with respect and Bhisma took Madri, daughter of Madra as a bride for Pandu. He brought her to Hastinpur and married her to Pandu. Pandu lived with his two wives Kunti and Madri happily and ruled the country well. In consultation with his brother Dhrtarastra, Pandu gave all the wealth he got by his might to his grand-mother Satyavati and his uncle Bhisma. And Madri followed Pandu and Kunti into a forest in the Himalayas foothills.
and stayed there. While Madri was walking with Pandu and Kunti in the forest, they saw a couple of deer playfully running about. Pandu’s hunting nature made him shoot an arrow against one of them. The deer was none other than the sage Kindama who in the guise of a deer was having sport with his mate. While falling dead Kindama cursed Pandu thus, “Oh, wretched king, you will fall dead the moment you touch your wife in an amorous sport”. From that day onwards Pandu could not touch his wives. But, with the permission of Pandu, Kunti got three sons: Yudhisthira, Bhismasena and Arjuna with her secret mantras in her possession, and, Madri, getting a chance from Kunti, got two sons named Nakula and Sahadeva. Madri was living happily with Pandu, Kunti and their children in Satasranga when the springtime arrived in the forest with all its blossoming brilliance and fragrance conducive to amorous thoughts in all living beings. Pandu one day walked alone with Madri enjoying the sight of the flowering plants and trees. Bees and beetles hummed around the followers and on the branches sat cuckoos singing. There was a seductive fragrance all around and Pandu was excited beyond controllable limits. Pandu’s resolution broke down under the exhilarating influence of the season and despite repeated protests from Madri, Pandu caught hold of her and embraced her. The curse of the sage took effect instantaneously and Pandu fell dead. When the dead body of Pandu was cremated according to religious rites, both the wives came forward to end their lives in the funeral pyre. But Kunti was asked to live to take care of the children while Madri leaving her children to the care of Kunti jumped into the funeral pyre and ended her life. And Vyasa advised the other widows to plunge into the water of the Ganges.

2.1.2. Urmila— A victim of suttee

Urmila was the only woman in the epic who was kept away from the company of her husband from the beginning to the end; yet she was calm, patient and all enduring. She was the daughter of king Janaka and the sister of Sita. When Laksmana went to the forest with Rama and Sita, she remained in Ayodhya. As a young wife, she stayed at home alone for 14 years, she suffered much mentally. When the incarnation of Rama was over, god of death in the garb of a sage approached Rama for a private talk, Rama and the sage were closeted in a room and Laksmana was asked to keep watch over the door with instructions not to allow anybody inside. After some time sage Durvasas came there and Laksmana entered the room to give his brother the information of his arrival. Rama was
angry and abandoned Laksmana and, feeling repentant later, Rama jumped into the river Sarayu and drowned himself before a huge crowed of weeping subjects. Laksmana immediately ended his life by drowning himself at the same place where his brother died. After that Urmila jumped into the funeral pyre and reached the world of Visnu.

2.1.3. Other suttees

In the epics, there were more such suttees. When Krishna died, his anointed queens like Rukmini and Jambavati and some other wives mounted the funeral pyre along with the dead body of their husband and ended their lives. Not long after Krishna and his elder brother Balarama died, their father Vasudeva died, and four of his wives also followed him on his funeral pyre. Again the wives of Ravana bravely sacrificed themselves on the funeral pyre of their husband.

It was a blessing that most of the widows after the Lanka War and Kuruksetra battle did not mount the funeral pyres of their husbands, but very few of them could get remarried no matter how young they were when their husbands died. None of the widows of the dead sons of Dhrtrarāstra and those of many warriors who lost their lives in the war got remarried. When husbands died without any children, the widows could cohabit with the brothers or other relatives of their late husbands so that they could perpetuate the line of the husbands.

In the Mahabharata, when Vicitravirya, the son of king Santanu died childless, his mother Satyavati asked his brother Bhima to make the two widows pregnant but Bhima refused in view of his oath. So Satyavati turned to her son Vyasa who was born to her with a sage before she was married to king Santanu. Then Pandu and Dhrtrarāstra were given birth by the two widows in the name of Vicitravirya. And except in such cases, none of the widows could get remarried at all. Remarriage in real sense was never mentioned in the epics with only one exception: in the Mahabharata, Arjuna married widow Ulupi and a child was born, but this marriage took place, as Arjuna was thoroughly ignorant of the fact. Ulupi cheated him. And this was condemned in the epics.

2.1.4. Satyavati and Kunti — Lone widows

In the epics, there are many widows, but their lives were not described except that of Satyavati and Kunti. Satyavati helped the widows, Ambika and Abalika of his late son,
Victravirya, to bear Pandu and Dhritarastra and Vidura with her pre-marriage born sonVyasa so that the progeny of the family continued. Towards the end of her life and after the death of Pandu, she gave up worldly affairs and retired to the forest with Ambika and Ambalika. Kunti was the widow of Pandu. Before the war, she made her efforts to persuade her pre-marriage born son, Karna, to come to the side of the Pandavas but he refused her proposal. She could only obtain a promise from him that he would not attempt to kill any of the Pandavas except Arjuna. Thus she was satisfied that with the four Pandavas and either Karna or Arjuna she would still have five sons alive. After the war, she could have well afforded to live out her life in luxury and splendor in the royal palace. But she chose to go away to the forest with Dhritarastra, Gandhari and Vidura. In the end after leading a full life she chose death calmly with them when a forest fire raged all around them. They had a luxurious life in the palace after death of their husbands. But a luxurious life could not replace the absence of husbands. They were lonely. That was why they chose to retire to the forests.

In the epics, the widows were only wives of late kings, princes or warriors and when their husbands died, they had luxurious life with maids around and they were not worried about any subsidy. In the epics, widows from other different social strata are not mentioned.

2.2. Widows in Tagore

Widows play a significant role in the short stories and novels of Tagore. The status of the widows was the most wretched in the Hindu society. They were neglected, ostracized and exploited. Widows were condemned by society because of the common belief that being fated to be widows these girls were somehow responsible for the death of their husbands. Many of these widows were very young, some were children. Social and religious customs dictated that daughters should be married even before they reached puberty. If they were not married off before they were 11 or 12, the society brought tremendous pressures on their families by threatening to outcaste them and severed all their social interactions. This, together with the pressures of impossible dowry demands and the stringent caste system, often drove the parents to get their daughters
married to the sick, the old and even the dying as long as the caste purity was preserved. Due to poverty, environmental and social conditions, life expectancy was much lower than it is today. So, with an enormous age difference between the girls and the men to whom they were married, these girls often ended up being widows at a very young age barely knowing their husbands. Their in-laws, depriving them of the rights to their husbands’ properties, drove them out of the houses and these helpless girls returned to their parental homes as unwanted burdens with the stigma of widowhood thereby segregating themselves from the natural flow of life around them. Neglected, young, lonely and unfulfilled, they sometimes became the victims of men’s lust and then all hell would break loose bringing the wrath of the society on the poor girls’ heads while the men involved got away with it. From such a cruel life, some escaped into death, some into madness, many into religion—the three legitimate escape routes allowed to them by society.

In the works of Tagore, there were widows whose widowhood was even more miserable. Tagore portrayed different widow characters who faced their fates in different ways.

2.2.1. Widows—Miserable, insulted, persecuted and society rejected

2.2.1.1. Mashi—Helpless widow

In the short story Mashi (Shersher Ratri, The Night of Parting) written in 1914 and the drama The House-Warming (Grihaprabesh) adopted by the author from the short story in 1935, Mashi, the aunt of Jotin lost her husband at the age of 18 and soon lost her daughter. She had no way but to live with her nephew Jotin and his sister Himi. And later Jotin died of fatal illness. She had to support the sister with her own savings. She could not have any love.

2.2.1.2. Widows who were rejected by the society.

In Jivita O Mriti (Living or Dead) written in 1892, Kadambini, was a widow of a zamindar family. She was thrown onto the funeral pyre but she was saved as a storm came. She went to see her friends but she was mistaken to be dead while really alive. She came home and went to other relatives but they all drove her out as a ghost. She had to commit suicide in order to prove that she had not died earlier. In Ramkanai’s Folly written in 1891, Shrimati Baradasundari was the second wife of Gurucharan who bequeathed all
his immovable and movable goods and property to her before he died. But her husband’s nephew Nabadwip coveted the property. He sent his aunt to the court with a forged will and some false witnesses. In Folly written in 1900, Harinath’s widowed daughter died suddenly in the night. Some people wrote anonymously to the Inspector, alleging that the death was caused by an abortion. And her body was seized by the police.

2.2.2. Child-widows—Who knew nothing of married life when they became widows

Their misfortunes began even before they knew what love or what married life was. Kshiroda in Vicharaka (Judge) written in 1894, began to live a widow’s life even before she was 15 years old. It is highly interesting to note that Tagore’s first short story, River Stairs (Chater Katha) written in 1884, was centered round the life of a widow. It reveals the psychological struggles of Kusum, a Brahmin girl, who spent only the wedding night with her husband before he went out and never came back. She became a widow when she was only eight years old. Shalabala in the Prajapatir Nirbandha became a widow within one month of her marriage. Sonanan in Atithi (Runaway) became a widow at five.

In the short story Mashi (Sheshr Ratri; or The Night of Parting) written in 1914, and the drama House-Warming, adopted by the author from the short story in 1925, Mani was the young wife of Jotin. She was even younger than her younger sister-in-law, a student. She was too young to realize the deep love and the seriousness of the illness of her husband. She was so ignorant that she was afraid to see her dying husband. Defying Mashi, Jotin’s widowed aunt, Mani went to her father’s house on the occasion of the Annaprashan ceremony of her younger sister whom she had never seen. Jotin whose death was approaching felt that it was Mani who was coming to him in death’s guise. Mani’s father must have explained to her how improper was her conduct. Leaving aside the ceremonial function at his house the father came to Jotin’s place with Mani. On seeing the condition of Jotin Mani at last realized that her husband was about to expire. She flung herself on his feet. The aunt who appeared to have been highly critical of her behaviors now requested Jotin to put his hand on Mani’s head and bless her. But Jotin was now unconscious, unable to recognize his wife. Soon her husband died and Mani became a widow.

2.2.3. Widows in Novels:

Annapurna (Chokher Bali, Eyesore), Radasundari (Ramkanai’s Foolishness), Bara
Rani, (The Home and the World) are widow characters in the novels by Tagore

2.2.3.1. Annapurna— A self-effacing, selfless and kindhearted widow who had to leave all her property and escort her soul to God

Annapurna in the Chokher Bali written in 1903 was widowed at the tender age of 11 and had only shadowy memory of her husband. After the death of her husband, she lived in the house of her sister-in-law, Rajyalakshmi. Being a childless widow, she was subjected to much humiliation and misery. She bore her suffering with good grace, had faith in God and became detached in her outlook. Mahendra, the son of Rajyalakshmi, and her late brother was very fond of her and took solace in her company whenever he quarreled with his mother. Annapurna’s position became unenviable when Mahendra married her niece, Asha, much against the wishes of his mother Annapurna herself was not in favor of the marriage as she felt that Bihari, the childhood friend of Mahendra, would be a more suitable match for Asha. In this connection she expressed her feelings to Bihari: “No, my boy, Mahendra could not marry her under any circumstances. To tell you the truth, I would be most relieved if you were to marry her. I am averse to the idea of her marrying Mahin.” As she already apprehended, her position in the house became more miserable after Asha’s marriage than it was before. Asha, who, by her inability to manage the household, ruffled the feelings of her mother-in-law, further aggravated the situation. Annapurna tried to relegate herself to the background in all matters concerning Asha, Mahendra and Rajyalakshmi. She sincerely expressed to her: “She is your daughter-in-law. You may guide her, punish her, as you like, why bring me in?” But Rajyalakshmi who was afraid to confront her son openly, gave vent to her anger on Annapurna. She aptly described her position in the house when she told Asha, “Chuni, will you neither let me remain at home, nor leave me alone if I go away? Is there no peace for me anywhere?” Unable to adjust to the strained atmosphere of the house, Annapurna left for Kashi to spend her life on the sacred banks of the river Ganges. She made it plain: “May all of you live happily; my absence will make no difference.”

Before leaving for Kashi she gave her property to Mahendra and a pair of gold bangles

196 Tagore, Eyesore, tr. Radha Chakravarty, Srishti Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 2003, p.19
197 Ibid. p.34.
198 Ibid. p.37.
199 Ibid. p.47.
to Bihari as a present for his future bride. These incidents revealed the noble traits of her character, such as her ability to detach herself from the affairs of the young couple and her genuine love for both Mahendra and Bihari. Annapurna was very unfortunate throughout her life. Her love and service brought unhappiness instead of happiness. She was conscious of this fact and confessed to Asha that rebuff awaited her at every step and finally she came to the desperate conclusion that her whole life had been a waste and a futility. And she realized that their commerce was not with each other but with Him who was the supreme giver and the supreme taker. She thus advised Asha to accept stoically all the rebuffs from Mahendra. Annapurna’s love for Bihari was genuine unlike that of Rajyalakshmi. It reminded us of the love of Anadamoyi for Benoy in Gora. She loved Bihari like her own son. She felt guilty about Bihari not marrying. His unwedded and uncared for image always haunted her. Annapurna showed her anger only once when Bihari visited her at Kashi. She got carried away by Asha’s mistaken fear that Bihari had followed her to Kashi with an evil intention, and did not welcome him when he called on her. However, she was quick to make amends when she learned the truth about Bihari’s visit. On her return to Calcutta, on the request of Rajyalakshmi and Asha, she visited Bihari and brought him to the house of Mahendra to attend on the ailing Rajyalakshmi. These incidents highlighted the fact that Annapurna was not a woman who stood on false prestige. She accepted bygones as bygones, and attended on the ailing Rajyalakshmi to bring solace and comfort to her sister-in-law who had been undergoing great mental turmoil due to her son’s elopement with Binodini. She played, unobtrusively, her small part in the final reconciliation of Asha and Mahendra. Above all, Annapurna was a self-effacing, selfless and kind-hearted woman who lived for the service of others.

2.2.3.2. Radasundari—A widow whose bequeathed properties were seized

In the Ramkanai’s Foolishness (Ramkanier’s Nirbudhita) written in 1891, Radasundari was the second wife of Gurucharan who was bequeathed all the properties by her husband. But the son and the wife of the younger brother of her husband wanted to seize the properties from her by false witnesses.

2.2.3.3. Bara Rani—Observing and humorous widow who also went to the Ganges

Among the widows depicted by Tagore in his novel, Bara Rani, the sister-in-law of Bimala, in The Home and the World written in 1915 was an impressive character. She
was in a class by herself, being neither crafty like Harimohini in the *Gora* termagent like Rajyalakshmi in the *Binodini*, nor cultured nor dignified like Yogamaya in the *Farewell, My Friend*. In one respect, she resembled Annapurna of *Binodini*. Just as Annapurna was concerned about the welfare of her nice, Asha, Bara Rani was also concerned about the well being of her brother-in-law, Nikhil. In her powers of observation and sense of humor, Bara Rani was far superior to other widows. Bara Rani entered the Rajah’s household as the nine-year-old bride of Nikhil’s elder brother. Nikhil was three years younger than she. Both spent their childhood playing together. Nikhil used to help her in her doll’s play. She in turn, would provide him with his favorite dishes, which were denied to him on doctor’s orders. Their childhood friendship helped them to maintain a harmonious relationship, of which Bimala was jealous. Bara Rani had a number of peculiar habits, which were not common to widows. Being the daughter-in-law of a Rajah’s family, she led a luxurious life. She had the habits of chewing betel nuts and gossiping with women of all sorts. Even when she went to live on the banks of the holy Ganges, she took with her a pack of playing cards. Being a shrewd observer, Bara Rani was the first to notice Bimala’s infatuation for Sandip. She even noticed Bimla’s overdressing on the day she first invited Sandip for dinner. She also sensed Nikhil’s agony and loneliness after Bimala’s entanglement with Sandip. She consoled Nikhil when he was struggling to sleep at midnight. She pleaded with him: “for pity’s sake, go to bed and stop worrying so. I cannot bear to look on that awful shadow of pain on your face.”

Her humor was not only healthy but also well timed. She made an apt comment, in a word or two that was appropriate in the context. The day Bimala dressed up quickly to receive Sandip, Bara Rani quipped: “whither away Chota Rani?...So early! A matinee...” Similarly when Nikhil received threatening letters from the followers of Sandip that they would loot the treasury, she mocked at Bimala, “I was advising brother Nikhil to seek your protection, call off your minions, Robber Queen! We will offer sacrifices to your *Bande Mataram* if you will but save us.” Bara Rani rightly judged Bimala’s character and censured her hospitality and sarcastically remarked that Nikhil should come as a guest to win her favor. The sarcasm in her words “What a wonderfully

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200 Tagore, The Home and the World, p.82.
201 Ibid. p.88.
hospitable Chota Rani we have! The guest absolutely will not budge. In our time there used to be guest, too, but they had not such lavish looking after... Poor brother Nikhil is paying the penalty of being born too modern." was so pungent that Bimala recollected them later. Bara Rani cautioned Nikhil that Bimala was his dissipation and would be his ruin also. She made the pertinent observation that till then, the woman of that family used to weep for the immortality of their husbands and wondered whether it was now men's turn. She branded Bimala as an 'artless little Chota Rani'. Bara Rani had such a keen insight into the working of other women's minds that she called Bimala 'Robber Queen' much before Bimala stole her money to pay Sandip. Her pungent remarks were without malice as she was truly concerned about Nikhil's happiness. She was so sensitive that she could not bear to see Nikhil's gloomy face any longer. She told Bimala the reason for her concern for Nikhil, as "we have grown up together in this house, since he was a boy. I simply cannot bear, as you can, the sight of the smile leaving his face." She could not bear to think of living alone in the house when Nikhil decided to shift his family to Calcutta. She decided to follow them to Calcutta and assured Nikhil that she would not quarrel with Chota Rani at the new place. Bara Rani appeared to be money-minded by constantly reminding Nikhil to deposit her share of money in the bank. But Nikhil knew that her concern for the money did not proceed from any sordid worldliness. She was such a well-informed person that she knew the danger of having heavy amount of money at home in those politically troubled days. Again she was well aware of the proclivities of Bimala's political mentors. After the burglary at the treasury and the threatening letters received by Nikhil, Bara Rani was more concerned not about her money but about Nikhil's life, whose affection for her was like that of Laksmana for Rama. The few faults that Bimala noticed in Rara Rani were her low taste and the low company she kept. She was not a termagant and dangerous woman. Her remarks and asides about Bimala were no doubt sarcastic, but not vindictive.

Through the characters of Rara Rani, Binidini, Annapurna and Rajyalakshmi, Tagore depicted the problem of the widows in joint families and the jealousies and petty quarrels between sisters-in-law. The clashes between Bimala and Bara Rani were due to the

202 Ibid. p.195.
203 Ibid. p.84-85.
generation gap. Nikhil understood the peculiar predicament in which Bara Rani was placed. He told Bimala that Bara Rani “had been hurt at every turn and yet had not the right to complain.”\textsuperscript{205} He blamed the social set-up for the indicative and cantankerous nature of the widows. He posed the question: “Has not the pressure of the society cramped them into pettiness and crookedness?” He felt that “They are but pawns of the fate which gambles with them.”\textsuperscript{206} These words of Nikhil revealed Tagore’s concern and sympathy for widows.

2.2.4 Widows who did not yield to their own adversities

But quite different from the widows in the epics, most of the widows in Tagore didn’t yield to their own adversities. Instead they yearned for new life, for love, they struggled for their freedom and happiness, they rather died for love than lived miserably. They were brave enough to use any device for their own freedom and love.

2.2.4.1 Mahamaya who defied the adversities and struggled for a better fate, for love, freedom and happiness.

Mahamaya in the \textit{Mahamaya} written in 1893, was the sister of Bhavani, a kulin Brahmana. She had a playmate, Rajib, who was brought up by her aunt and worked in a factory of a sahib after death of his father. His blood was not equal to Mahamaya. She grew up to 24 because there was no bridegroom of an equal grade of blue blood except for an impossible dowry. She steadily grew up in maidenhood. One night Mahamaya and Rajib met secretly in a dilapidated temple near a river. Rajib was asking her to elope with him immediately and Mahamaya was hesitating when her brother found their secret meeting. That very night, the brother took her to a dying Brahmin and forced her to marry him. The next morning Mahamaya became widow and she was forced to be burnt together with the dead Brahmin on his funeral pyre. A sudden storm saved Mahamaya from being burnt. With burnt but covered face she went to see Rajib and agreed to go with him only with a condition that at any time he could not disclose her veil. And they eloped. The life was not as happy as they imagined before she was burnt. This veiled figure ever sitting by his side silently prevented him from enshrining in his life the sweet memory of her as she was in her childhood. At a moon night Rajib entered Mahamaya’s

\textsuperscript{204} Ibid. p.124.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid.
bedroom when she was asleep. He stood by her side and stooped down to gaze on her. The moon beams had fallen on her face. But, oh, horror! The flame of the funeral pyre, with its ruthless greedy tongue, had utterly licked away a part of the beauty from the left cheek of Mahamaya and left there only the ravages of its hunger. Mahamaya woke up with a start. At once she replaced her veil and stood in front of him and soon left her bed. Rajib knew that the thunderbolt was uplifted—he clasped her feet, crying “forgive me!” She answered not a word; she did not look back for a moment as she walked out of the room and never return. No trace of her was found anywhere.

2.2.4.2. Ama Bai who defied orthodoxies for real love

Ama Bai in the drama Sati (The Faithful Wife) written in 1897, was an apostate. Ama Bai, the daughter of a Brahmin Maratha Chieftain, Vinayaka Rao, was abducted by a “Mussulman noble of the Vijapur Court” on the night she was to be married to Jivaji, to whom she had been “sacredly affianced”. She married this Mussulman noble against the wishes of her parents. Outraged at her conduct, Vinayaka Rao and Jivaji swore “bloody death” to defend their honor and later met their common enemy in a fight where both Jivaji and the Mussulman husband of Ama Bai were killed. The action of the short drama gathered its force from the grim irony of the blind adherence to the customs. The father softened by the unfortunate lot of his daughter wanted to reclaim her and induce his windowed daughter to wash away the stain of an unsanctified marriage with a Muslim man. But Vinayaka’s orthodox Hindu ritual prescriptions for expiating past sins did not move his daughter who felt that she had committed no sin. Boldly refuting the charge of a forced marriage, she upheld that she yielded only when she found her Muslim conqueror a worthy and honorable man and loved him and bore him a son, in defiance of her parents’ secret message either to kill her kidnapper or even kill her. Her defense was that she had acted only against the narrow “man-made” laws and not against the “eternal heaven’s ordinance”, though by her action, which did not have the social sanction, she had brought upon herself the wrath of the enraged community whose laws she had violated. At this point, Rama Rai, Ama’s mother, with all the intensity of her orthodoxy, burst upon the scene like a midnight meteor. She insisted upon her daughter being burnt on the funeral pyre with Jivaji, her true husband, whose spirit, she thought, claimed Ama.

Ibid.
According to the mother's morality, Ama was a fallen woman, who on the other hand emphatically maintained that she be morally a pure woman, a true sati, literally a chaste wife, ever true to her husband. Ama Bai, though fallen in her mother's eyes, was convinced that she was cast, and provoked by her mother's affront, she retorted: "I am as pure as yourself." But the mother, rigidly holding on to the time-honored social convention. The daughter, firm in her faith that she was a sati, countercharged: "Mother, if by force you unite me in death with one who was not my husband, then will you bring a curse upon yourself for desecrating the shrine of the eternal lord of death?" When the mother, in spite of her daughter's defiance, ordered the soldiers to tie her and throw her onto the pyre of Jivaji, Ama declared: "I defy you, mother,--you, soldiers, I defy! --For through oath and love I win to the freedom" This exemplified the invincibility of her spirit. The tension rose up to the very last words uttered. The climax was a moment depicting blind violence of orthodoxy: "Awake, awake, awake, O Dharmaraji (Lord of Justice)! The master of this cremation ground, awake now! Behold, your domain is being profaned by petty enemies. O Lords of Lords, to strike them with your thunderbolt. Make your eternal religion victorious over narrow creed." 2.2.4.3 Widows who, to attain happiness, used certain devices.

Kusum, a Kayastra widow in the Tyaga (Renunciation) written in 1892 was married to Hemanta, a Brahmin without disclosing her caste or widowhood. Her father-in-law asked his son to renounce her. Fortunately, the son refused to do so. Shyama, in Yogayoga written in 1927, was a widow of Madhusudan's elder brother. She allured him and became his concubine. Shyama was a widow who sacrificed her chastity. She was the wife of the elder brother of Madhusudan. She was a plump dark-complexioned woman who had already passed the heyday of her youth. In contrast to Nikhelesh's tender regards for his widowed sister-in-law, Madhusudan entertained nothing but an ill-disguised feeling of contempt for Shyama. This was because Shyama was not willing to miss any opportunity of attracting Madhusudan to her. It was not love, that prompted her to do so, but the vulgar desire of setting up her ascendancy over the whole family by dominating

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207 Tagore, The Faithful Wife, p.87.
208 Ibid. p.88.
209 Ibid. p.89.
the heart of the self-made commercial magnate. But Madhusudan was too busy with acquiring wealth to pay any heed to any woman. His attitude, however, was changed when after his marriage Kumudini only whetted his sex appetite. Taking advantage of Kumudini’s absence in her brother’s residence Shyama approached Madhusudan in his room after he had retired to bed and expressed pity for his loneliness. Tagore with his usual discretion drew a veil over what transpired between them subsequently. But at least once in his life he proved so uncharitable to this woman as to say that she made no secret of her triumph over Madhusudan. She expected that the retinue of the family would pay great respect to her if they came to know of her new relation to the master. But just the contrary happened. Madhusudan was mean and vulgar enough to ask her through a servant to come to his bedroom at the dead of night and she was lowly enough to respond to such a call. But it could not be denied that Shyama seduced Madhusudan not only from greed for wealth, but also for sexual desire and even somewhat love. She was a human being and enjoyed little love and physical pleasure before she became a widow. And she was not too old or too ugly. It was natural that such a woman was thirsty for both love and physical enjoyment. Her behavior to Madhusudan was natural, understandable and sympathetic.

2.2.5. Widows who loved and longed to be loved

Some widows loved and longed to be loved and when they lost love, they lost all hope of life. Kusum, a young widow in River Stairs (Khater Katha) written in 1884 was centered round the life of a widow. It revealed the psychological struggles of a Brahmin girl, Kusum who could spend only the wedding night with her husband before she lost him. She became a widow when she was only 8 years old. Then a letter brought to her the news of her husband’s death at a far-off place where he used to work. After ten years Kusum became a young lady. The author compared her with the Ganges in the rainy season. “But her faded clothes, her pensive face, and quiet nature cast so shadowy a veil over her youth that this flowering beauty was not evident to everyone’s eyes.”210 The River Stairs related how Kusum met on a full moon night in April the Sannyasi who had

210 Tagore, Selected Short Stories, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000, p.34.
been living in the Siva temple close by since September and drawing a crowd to hear his talk on the Gita and the Bhagavata. From that evening she used to come every day to hear his exposition of the holy books and to bow at his feet. In the morning too he used to call her and speak on religion. Thus passed almost a year. One day as the winter was retreating, he found her absent from the river stairs. The Sannyasi then sent to enquire about her the cause of her absence. As he insisted on knowing about her inner most thought, she told him that she had lost her mental equilibrium since she had seen in dream the lord of her heart clasping her right hand in his left and whispering to her words of love. The Sannyasi insisted on knowing who that person was. Kusum at last confessed that it was Sannyasi himself, and she fell on her face on the stony stair and sobbed. The sannyasi told her, “I am leaving this place tonight that you may not see me again, now that I am a Sannyasi, not belonging to this world. You must forget me.”

Kusum agreed and at the time of his departure, she took the dust of his feet and put it on her head. The only way she could manage to forget him was to drown herself in the Ganges. Tagore described here the love of a widow. She loved and longed to be loved. But she failed. She defied her fate with death. In Kankal (Skeleton) written in 1892, the Skeleton, a very charming widow, was married at such an early age that could not but consider her husband as her great enemy. She compared herself to a fish caught with a hook. “For it was”, she thought, “as if a stranger had snatched me away with the sharpest of hooks from the peaceful calm of my childhood’s home---and from him I had no means of escape.”

Her husband died two months after her marriage and she felt nothing but joy in getting the opportunity to come back to her home. She grew up as an extraordinarily beautiful girl. Despite her widowhood she dressed herself secretly on certain evenings in a canary-colored sari and twined about the braided knot of her hair a garland of white jasmines. The reference to her plait showed that her hairs were not cropped short, as was the custom in orthodox society. She decked herself in this fashion because she fell in love with a physician who was a friend of her elder brother. One day she heard that the doctor was going to marry a rich heiress. She administered poison to him and then committed suicide by taking the same poison under the tree where they used to meet peacefully.

211 Ibid. p.85-86.
212 Ibid. p.85-86.
earlier. The skeleton, love and murder and suicide, which appeared to be so momentous in the ordinary perspective, looked like ripples of the river of life when a skeleton was relating the events. The vivid contrast between the dry bones and the former self of the beautiful widow left an indelible and incomparable impression on the mind of the readers.

2.2.6 Exceptional widows who were lucky enough to be loved by two gentlemen

We have an exception of a widow who was loved by two young gentlemen and got married with one of them. In *My Fair Neighbor* written in 1901, the neighboring young widow was like a dew-drenched *sephali*-blossom. My friend and “I” (the first person in the story) Nabi both fell in love with her. But “I” was too shy to express my affection while Nabi expressed his feelings by publishing poems, which moved her. They began to contact through poems via her brother. They discussed about the poems. Nabin mustered courage to propose marriage to the widow. At first he could not gain her consent. But by his sincere pleading the fair one capitulated unconditionally. And they got united. This was a brave challenge to the Indian conventions. Maybe this was only the ideal of Tagore, since such thing was almost impossible in his time.

2.2.7 Sohini and Nila--- the widows with modern ideas against traditions

Fortunately, we see two modern widows, Sohini and her daughter Nila in Tagore’s last short story-- *The Laboratory* written in 1940. Sohini was one of the most remarkable heroines of Tagore. She was a Punjab girl, who was beautiful, charming, intelligent, scheming and a little dissolute disregarding caste and proprieties. She audaciously wooed Nandarkishore, an engineer from the London University, who got well-off from railway construction and now ran some prosperous factories and a well-equipped laboratory to which he was devoted. She did not, according to Indian conventions, offer any dowry, but otherwise, she quested Nandarkishore to pay off Rs. 7,000 debts her grandmother owed. As she said, “Pay them off…then I will never leave your side.” This is a brave challenge to traditional Indian marital customs. Nandarkishore died during a daring scientific experiment leaving a big fortune, the laboratory and a beautiful daughter, Nila. To protect the inheritance left by her husband, she started learning up the finer points of law herself. On top of that, she spread her womanly charms in the right quarters of the legal community. Her skills were well developed in that department, and she had no
concern for propriety. She won all the cases, one after another. She sent a distant cousin-in-law to the prison for having forged a document. She permitted her daughter to marry a Marwari who died of typhoid soon after marriage, under civil law, beyond the social pale. To succeed to her husband’s uncompleted scientific cause, she asked Professor Choudhuri to persuade his student Rebati, a young successful and inflexible scientist to host the laboratory. She very willingly and gladly spent a big amount of money in equipping it and in financing 250 students. “I have heaps of money gathering moths. Widows of my age lavish it on the brokers of various gods and goddesses to ensure their entry to heaven, but I don’t believe in such things. We women need a visible, tangible object to worship; so this laboratory is now my god.” With an astonishingly keen intellect matching her physical beauty and iron determination to achieve her purpose by any means, fair or foul, she ignored all the social values. She did not lose her charms even when her hairs began to turn gray. She was able to fascinate the old Professor Choudhuri, for three times she put an arm around his neck and kissed his cheek. She frankly confessed that she was an impure woman and knew that the heart was greedy. “It hides its fire under flesh and blood, but it flares up with a little prodding…” She also confessed that women are not lifelong ascetics and they plunged into bad ways easily. She could flout all the structures of society for her physical pleasure. Even in this day, we can hardly see such widows and hear such audacious words! She had no faith in the traditional religion or conventional morality, but she dreamt of creating a new nation and a new humanity. Tagore was highly pleased with his new creation. He did not express directly or indirectly the least disapprobation of her conduct. The episode of her bodily affairs was secondary.

Nila, Sohini’s daughter, was also a modern widow. She was more beautiful than her mother and was extremely fair. Her skin glowed like the white lotus of Kashmir, her eyes were like blue lotus, and her hair was a glossy golden-brown. When she loved Marwari, following her natural female instincts, she encouraged him by waiting at the gate anticipating his coming. Many other young men also began to pay attention to her. But the Marwari boy fell very deeply in love with her. When it came to getting her married,

213 Tagore, The Laboratory, p.34.
214 Ibid.
there was no question of going by caste or pedigree. They were married under civil law, beyond the social pale unfortunately, shortly after their marriage, he contracted typhoid and died. Sohini tried to keep her daughter engaged in studies. She got her admitted in the Diocesan College and also employed a highly educated lady to coach her. But Nila’s youth and passion were potent enough to distract the mind of even the lady tutor. With unusual frankness Tagore showed how Nila used to read books, which could not have been approved not by the textbook committee and collected pictures secretly on the false plea of learning the mode of drawing up the nude. Her mother Sohini found it increasingly difficult to restrain her from young men who hovered round her like moth around fire. Anila appeared to have forgotten her deceased husband. Her mother tried to arrange a suitable match for her and hit upon Rebati, a young scientist who had already made a name in the world of scientists. Liberal ideas had spread so much by 1940 that Tagore did not pause even for a moment to explain how a widow, whose mother claimed to be a Khati of the Punjab, could be married to a Brahmin of Bengal. Sohini thought of putting Rebati in charge of her husband’s laboratory. When Sohini took her to see Rebati, she made herself charming, letting the soft morning light and shadow play on her for quite a while. Her delicate fingers played rhythmically among the flowers of many colors. A chain of rubies, pearls, and emeralds, clipped to her hair like a rainbow, framed it on one side; the red piping of her yellow choli peeping out on the other. But their love begot no fruits. Her mother apprehended that her daughter would distract him so much that it would be impossible for him to concentrate on the research work. She, therefore, gave up the idea. Meanwhile, Nila reached the age of majority and claimed her share of her deceased husband’s property. She became an active member of The Awakeners Club and made Rebati its president. When her mother went out to see her sick grandmother, she tried to win over Rebati so that she might control through him the funds set aside for the improvement of the laboratory and at the same time secure a husband who would be pliable enough to overlook her affairs with persons endowed with greater virility. She took recourse to inflame the passion of Rebati by appearing before him at two o’clock at night in her transparent nightgown and sat in his lap, and wrapping him in her arms. She left a deep red handkerchief with ‘Nila’ embroidered in one corner. She loved freely in spite of her widowhood, caste and any conventions. It showed that when the love of
woman, freed of the confines and conventions, touched the impersonal world of science with human life and warmth, the entire universe would then be infused with humanity. Heroines of Tagore had never been described as trespassing the bounds of decency and decorum. One of the admirers of Nila, however, bodily lifted her up in his arms and she, too, disregarding the presence of Rebati placed her arms round his neck. To make the matter worse she openly declared that ravishment was a bigger fun than marriage. She and her women friends had no scruple in smoking and drinking. Tagore was not merely drawing upon his imaginations when he wrote of such female Bohemians.

2.2.8. Yogamaya-- A new type of widow, more modern, liberal and sophisticated

Yogamaya represented the new type of widow who did not care to spend a secluded life inside the precincts of the Zenana or at a holy place. Yogamaya in Farewell, My Friend written in 1928, the last of the widow drawn by Tagore was more modern, liberal minded and sophisticated than the other widows. She presented the new type of widow. The forty-year-old Yogamaya was the wife of Varada Sangara who died at the age of 27, leaving behind him a son and a daughter in charge of his wife. Her father was a liberal-minded aristocrat and her husband turned a reactionary Hindu, who could afford to maintain a court Pandit to explain the scriptures and philosophical works of Hinduism to her. She came from an educated, modern family. Age had given her dignity and not flabbiness. She appointed Labanya as a tutoress for her daughter, Surama. Amit was drawn towards her, due to her motherly affection, in their first meeting itself. No one failed to notice her gentle and calm smile. She took on the role of a match-maker and perceived that Amit was a suitable bridegroom for Labanya. At the same time, she apprehended that Amit was not mature enough to marry and the whole thing might turn out in the end, a mere child wedding. With the same sympathy and motherly affection, Yogamaya understood the conflict in the mind of Labanya when she decided not to marry Amit. Yogamaya, though a minor character and not fully developed, played a significant role in fostering friendship between Labanya and Amit. Her personality could not but elicit the respectful homage from all with whom she came in contact with.

2.2.9. Maminí-- A self-willed and dominant rebel widow against religion, society, a symbol of social change and advancement of women

Tagore depicted a different widow character who was a great rebel against religion,
society and who was self-willed and dominant. Mamini in *Chaturanga* written in 1916 was not the type of woman to lead the humdrum life of a widow or that of a vegetable disciple of a guru. She was the daughter of a prosperous jute merchant who gave Sivatosh, Damini’s husband much property. But Sivatosh bequeathed all his property to Linananda, his Vaishnavist *guru* with his wife Damini under care before his death. Damini was not a traditional, orthodox woman. She had an unyielding temperament and strong convictions. While her husband was alive she never accepted his religious eccentricities. She refused to take instructions from the guru. She protested when her husband gave away her jewelery to the guru and said that he had no right over it as it was a present from her father. Damini was a great rebel against the society. In the matters of dress, hair and style and behavior, she neither followed the tradition of the other widows nor observed the religious practice and austerities. Though she played hostess to Linananda Swami and his disciples she had no belief in his religion and teachings and did not respect him. A large number of devotees sat around the guru’s feet regarding it as a rare privilege, but Damini did not bother to attend his sermons. Instead, she went to the theatre which was looked as sinful by the society, because public women used to play the female roles in it or help the neighbors. Damini was an epicurean in her attitude and was anxious to miss nothing in life. She was vibrant, filled with grace and fragrance like the flowers in spring. Restless fires flickered within her. Neither the death of her husband nor the religious influence of Linananda changed her mind. There was nothing forbidden and unattainable in her moral code. She procured pornographic novels through Sribilas and read them. When the guru objected, she defiantly replied that there was nothing in it since he himself once read them. She questioned him: “You are free to indulge your needs while I am supposed to need nothing at all—is that it?” 215 Linananda gravely replied that his case was different, he was a *sannyasi* and had no desire. She at once retorted: “You forget that I am not a *sannyasin*. I have a desire to read these books.” 216 Damini was a stubborn woman who never yielded to anyone, whether it was guru or God. The only person before whom she humbled herself and for whom she sacrificed everything, was Sachis. She overcame the guru’s objection when he dissuaded her from accompanying his

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disciples to the inaccessible place. She dared to love and did fall in love with Sachis, who while noticing her grace, did not reciprocate her love. To attract his attention she adopted different strategies. She entered his room during his absence and played a prank by breaking his glass tumbler and photo frame. When her prank and tantrum failed to achieve the desired result, she felt so dejected that she knocked her head on the floor and mutters: “Stone, O you stone, have pity on me, have pity on me, have pity. Kill me.” It is needless to comment that she was referring to the stony heart of Sachis. Sachis was like a stone image indeed. Having seen Damini thus wailing, he was seized with a nameless fear. He fled from the room unobserved. After the failure of this direct attack, Damini changed her tactics and adopted the strategy of an indirect approach. To remain in Sachis presence she decided to accompany the guru and his disciples to the caves. When the guru chanted the following verse:

I shall not grieve
Even if we meet no more
Stay a while
Let me cover your feet with my flowing hair.

On hearing this song she prostrated herself at his feet, her loose tresses slipped off her shoulders and were scattered over the ground on either side. She paid obeisance to him, but it was intended as proxy for Sachis. When this new strategy too failed to achieve her objective, she, on a dark night, stealthily entered the cave where Sachis slept. She threw herself at his feet on which her disheveled hair fell and she moaned. The ascetic Sachis who was bent upon securing spiritual realization believed that at that time that a primordial beast was licking him with its slimy saliva with a view to devouring him slowly and silently and kicked her a number of times, till she left him but a sound of sobbing was heard at the time of departure. After these failures, she adopted a new strategy, of arousing jealousy in Sachis by pretending to be intimate with Sribilas. By this device, at last, she succeeded in attracting the attention of Sachis. He realized that he could not avoid reality while treading on the spiritual path. After his return from the trip

216 Ibid.
217 Ibid. P. 49.
218 Ibid. p.51.
to the seaside, he relented towards Damini and asked her to excuse him for having asked her earlier to quit the place. He requested her now to stay there and follow the guru. She, in return, promised to obey him and never transgress. She joined the disciples and the guru out of respect for Sachis. He considered Sachis more saintly and wiser than Linananda. Her love for Sachis was of this rare type. She was kicked, repulsed and then denied even the privilege of waiting upon him. She obeyed his orders, though in doing so she suffered excruciating pain. She found the limitations of Vaishnavism through the episode of the suicide of Nabin's wife whose sister was intimate with her husband and they married with her insistence. She told him that Vaishnavism was the religion of emotion that tried to replace earthly passion with passion for the Lord. She openly confessed: "Your guru has given me nothing at all. He has not been able to give even a moment's calm to my troubled soul....Look at the girl who died, waylaid by the demon of love as it drew her down its path and sucked her blood. Haven't you seen the demon's horrid face? I beg you, please don't throw me to that demon. Save me. You alone can deliver me if anyone can."219 So she begged Sachis to be her guru. She played a vital role in Sachis' quest for truth and took on the role of a true devotee who closely attended on and served him and, thereby, facilitated his quest for truth. Her feminine instinct was not prepared to see Sachis suffer while she was alive. She was faithful to Sachis for saving her soul from the passion of the flesh and the imminent moral ruin thereby. She narrated to Sribilas indirectly, the incident at the cave and how she regarded the injury she received from Sachis as sacred. When Sribila uttered harsh words against Sachis in some other pretext, she cut him shortly, saying, "Please don't talk to me about him like that. What do you know of what he has saved me from? You merely think of my suffering but do you ever realize how he has suffered that I should be spared? The ogre strove to kill beauty and got kicked in the chest. Just as well, all to the good, all to the good!"220 She married Sibyls not out of a desire for sensuous pleasures but to clear way for Sachis in his quest for truth. Sachis, who believed that human love was a trap, tried to avoid her but could not help being aware of her. Sribilas married Damini only to give her shelter since she had no place in an orthodox society. He was fully aware that Damini had surrendered

219 Ibid, p. 73.
220 Ibid, p. 91.
her mind and soul to Sachis. Damini also made her position clear to Sribilas stating that “you know all there is to know about me.” In the same way, Sribilas asked her whether she knew about him. From the beginning he had adjured all hopes of conjugal happiness by marrying Damini. He was fully aware of the consequences of marrying a widow, and that too, a widow outside his caste. He confided in Damini that he would not be worse off by marrying her. Thus, both Damini and Sribilas had the identical interests of helping Sachis in his quest for truth. Damini was quick to notice the true worth of Sribilas who was to her not an ordinary man. Though Damini married Sribilas, it was not a marriage of love. In spite of their failure in love, they succeeded in transforming their beloved ones.

So we can say that Damini was the symbol of the social change and advancement of women that had started taking place in the early decades of the 20th century. She was different from Binodini in Binodini written in 1902 who refused to marry Bihari lest he should lower down his social prestige. Damini was bold enough to accept the offer of marriage from Sribilas. The difference between Binodini and Damini measured the degree of liberationism and Universalism to which Tagore moved between 1901 and 1915.

2.2.10. Binodini—A widow surpassing Damini

Binodini in Binodini(Eye Sore) written in 1903, was a precursor of Damani, another widow heroine of Tagore in his later novel Chaturanga written in 1916. But in depth of the character, complex of nature and in the seesaw of conflicting emotions, Binodini surpassed Damani. Tagore depicted the yearnings, frustrations and misery of Binodini with sympathy and solicitude. Binodini was very fortunate to receive modern education. Further, Binodini was a charming, graceful, dignified and intelligent girl with many accomplishments. In spite of these qualifications, Binodini’s marriage had become a problem for her mother as her father died without saving enough money for her dowry. So the widowed mother tried to get her married to Mahendra, the only son of Rajyalakshimi who was her playmate in her village. Even after much persuasion by his mother, Mahendra refused to marry Binodini due to his aversion for marriage and the fear that the new bride might oust his mother. Binodini married her distant cousin in a remote village who was suffering from liver trouble. Soon she became a widow. Meanwhile, on an impulse and against the wishes of his mother Mahendra married illiterate orphan Asha,
the niece of his aunt, Annapurna. Mahendra every day was accompanied by his close friend Bihari. Rajyalakshimi was so charmed by Binodini's hospitable treatment that she brought Binodini along with her to Calcutta when she returned home. Binidini, won the admiration of all including the 'high-souled' Bihari. The simple-minded Asha too was overwhelmed by her beauty and grace and piercing intelligence of her eyes. The more Asha saw Binidini, the more she felt inferior to her. The old fashioned Rajyalakshimi also was highly pleased with Binidini for her cooking, demeanor and speech. She regretted not making her daughter-in-law and told her about it. Bihari too, regretted declining the offer to marry Binodini and said, "We were deceived. But better to be deceived without being awed; being deceived after marriage can cause a problem". Binodini was skilled in all the household arts like cooking, knitting and interior decoration. The ease and spontaneity of her movement and alertness in attending to the needs of the inmates of the house, compelled admiration of both Mahendra and Bihari. After Binidini had taken charge of Mahendra's house everything was well regulated and "the new décor, wrought by a different hand, had completely obscured all traces of past history in the room." Besides her accomplishments, Binodini possessed tender feelings of love and sympathy. She had great regard for Bihari. She was deeply hurt when Mahendra unjustly accused Bihari as being secretly in love with Asha. She was so moved by the allegation that she felt like consoling Bihari like a mother who "like the mother who paces up and down, rocking the sick child she holds close to her breast, Binodini began to handle that anguished image in her heart." She had love and respect for Rajyalakshimi. She joined Mahendra and Asha in their revelry, only after attending to the sick Rajyalakshimi and discharging the household chores. She nursed the servants also when they were sick, with sympathy and care. She had the perspicacity to study the minds and psychology of the people around her. In the beginning of the story she made a fair assessment of Bihari, that he was all set to ruin her game and prepared to meet his challenge. Besides, she too, like Mahendra, suspected that Bihari was secretly in love with Asha. Similarly, she as able to make a correct estimate of Rajyalakshimi. She bodily told Rajyalakshimi that she was

221 Tagore, Binodini, tr. Radha Chakravarty, Sri Shiti Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2003, p. 43.
222 Ibid. p.180.
223 Ibid. p.163.
responsible for her son’s moral ruin and accused her. With regard to Mahendra also, she formed a right estimation of his character and realized his infidelity and meanness. As a result of this finding, she was drawn more and more towards Bihari. She was definite that Mahendra had neither the guts to love nor the guts to do his duty. These general qualities of Binidini on the one hand and the various stages of her love entanglement on the other, had to be studied to explore her multifaceted personality and to correctly evaluate her character. The entry of Binodini in the life of Mahendra began the love-triangle to which Bihari added the fourth dimension. Her arrival marked the beginning of disaster in the lives of Mahendra, Asha and Bihari. The first stage of the love entanglement of Binodini with Mahendra began with her reading the letter Mahendra had written to Bihari. In that letter Mahendra went into raptures describing the romantic thrills of his conjugal life. This letter led Binodini, the voracious reader of romantic novels, to imagine the physical and emotional pleasures of married life which were denied to her. The letter further created curiosity in her mind regarding Mahendra and Asha and the nature and form of their love. It was a stage of curiosity which was satisfied when she visited their house in Culcutta. She came close to Asha and they became good friends. Binodini, further, satisfied her yearning for conjugal love by listening to Asha’s narrative of her marital bliss. The intimacy between them was so advanced that Asha addressed Binodini by the pet name ‘Eye-sore’. Very soon this stage of curiosity was followed by jealousy in the mind of Binodini, who felt that she had been cheated of all the good things in life by Asha, “Such a comfortable home and such an amorous husband! I could have made a kingdom of this home, a bond-slave of this husband. Would the house have been in such a condition, or the man of the house been reduced to such a state?”

Binodini’s ego was hurt when Mahendra pretended to be indifferent about making her acquaintance even though she had been in his house for a long time. Binodini made no secret of her feelings in this regard: “Why such indifference? Am I an inanimate object? Am I not human? Am I not a woman? If he got to know me, he would realize the difference between Chuni and myself.”

Binodini decided to avenge her humiliation by ensnaring Mahendra. At this point she had no deliberate plan to wreck the married life of Asha and Mahendra:

224 Tagore, *Binodini*, p.64.
225 Ibid. p.75.
“Whether I love her or hate him, whether I want to punish him harshly or to surrender my heart to him is something I don’t understand clearly. Whether the fire that Mahendra had ignited in my heart is the fire of envy or passion, or a mixture of both, I can not tell. Has any woman suffered a condition such as mine? Whether I want to die or to kill, I simply couldn’t say.”226 She needed him desperately. This seesaw of the conflicting sentiments and emotions of Binodini clearly proved that she was not a heartless and scheming seductress. Her attitude was one of tempting him while retaining her own self-control. The second stage in the evolution of Binodini’s personality began when a rift occurred between Bihari and Mahendra. This stage revealed the gradual change of feelings and impressions of Binodini and Bihari for each other. Early in the story Bihari realized that Binodini was not a girl to be either trifled with or ignored. Similarly, Binodini also understood that Bihari was not a person to be fooled easily. Bihari told Binodini, in the very presence of Mahendra that Mahendra was petted and spoiled by his mother and by his friends. And Asha was continuing the process. He advised Binodini to turn her attention elsewhere instead of aiding and abetting his downfall. Similarly, he warned Mahendra that Binodini was deliberately trying to seduce him, and Mahendra, like a fool was playing into her hands. Bihari’s impression that Binodini was a seductress underwent a transition subsequently. The picnic to the Dum-dum Gardens with the Mahendra family, along with Binodini, was a turning point in this regard. The picnic helped Bihari to learn about Binodini’s past. He realized for the first time that “though outwardly frivolous, Binodini is inwardly a pious woman with austere habit.”227 He felt that he looked at an altogether different person. The growing sympathetic understanding between Bihari and Binodini made Mahendra jealous. He planned to get rid of Bihari. He grumbled against Bihari’s visit to his house and did not hesitate to accuse Bihari that he was secretly in love with Asha. Binodini’s eyes were opened to the baser side of Mahendra’s character and this increased her admiration for Bihari. The third stage of Binodini’s love began with the reversal of her opinion about her and her increased admiration for him. During Asha’s absence from Calcutta, Binodini attended on Mahendra, on the request of Asha and Rajyalakshimi. This provided an opportunity to Binodini to study the character of

226 Ibid
227 Ibid. p.105.
Mahendra more thoroughly. Her contempt and hatred for Mahendra was increased when Mahendra said that she might be reading a letter from Bihari keeping it in the novel. She retorted: "Who are you jesting about? If you had been worthy of his friendship, I would have tolerated your mockery of him. You have a narrow mind, not strength to sustain a friendship and yet you indulge in mockery!" At this very moment Bihari entered the room and witnessed the sight of Mahendra clasping the feet of Binodini when she was about to sweep out of the room in a fury. Bihari entered the room to apologize to Mahendra about his visit to Kashi, not knowing Asha was there. Mahendra, his pride wounded, once again insulted Bihari. With this, the rift between them was complete. Bihari's image of Binodini was shattered by this scene. But strangely enough, the very same incident increased her regard and love for Bihari. And for this reason, the wound inflicted by Bihari when he flung her away, violently, in a gesture of contempt, appeared every sacred to her. She did not allow Mahendra even to touch the wound and she did not apply anything to heal it. After this, her love for Bihari turned into devotion. So, when Mahendra professed love to Binodini, she knew that he loved only himself. Bihari failed to understand the irksome position in which Binodini was placed. He felt that the behavior was melodramatic, theatrical and asked her to return to her village. He denied her request for a kiss to keep as a moment's memory, to cherish till death. The last and fourth stage of her love consisted of her penance for the fulfillment of her love for Bihari. She obeyed Bihari's orders with devotion and returned to live in her village. Her life there was made miserable by the neighbors. Mahendra followed her even to the village. To escape from the unbearable conditions she agreed to go with Mahendra on the promise that he would not do anything against her wishes. She did not even allow him to go to the railway station with her in the carriage, but asked him to go on foot. After a long struggle, Binodini was able to locate the villa in Allahabad where Bihari lived for a short time. Towards the end when Bihari came to Allahabad in search of Mahendra to take him to attend on his ailing mother, he found Binodini in a room in the villa bedecked with flowers. Binodini told him about all the events since elopement with Mahendra and proclaimed that she did not defile herself but, "I could remain chaste. Like the hardness

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228 Ibid. p.194.
of gold, or of a jewel, the hard self you revealed to me the day you spurned me is inside my heart, refining my life and rendering it valuable. My lord, I touch your feet and declare, that value has not been destroyed."229 Bihari believed every word she uttered and offered to marry her. But Binodini, with a spirit of self-abnegation did not accept him, "I am a widow, a woman disgraced. I cannot permit you to be humiliated in the eyes of society."230 It was not religious superstition, nor fear of social opprobrium that made her refuse the offer of marriage from Bihari, but rather it was her love for Bihari. "This is my last reward. I want nothing more than what you have just admitted. Even if I receive more than this, it will not last; religion will not tolerate it."231 It may be said that Binodini reheralded the emergence of a new class of emancipated women who were no longer prepared to be down trodden by the society but fight to assert their rights. Tagore seemed to suggest that the amelioration of widows' lot did not lie merely in remarriage but in creating conditions for the harmonious realization of their personality or selfhood. It was in this light that Binodini's extraordinary act of will in rejecting remarriage as a possible solution to her predicament had to be viewed. It was only through a tragic ending that Tagore could have registered his protest against the contemporary society's prejudice against widows, which constituted a lasting shame to the Hindu conscience. Binodini was depicted by Tagore as a lady of rare courage. At night she went alone to Bihari's house and offered her love to him. He did not accept it, but his refusal did not diminish her love and respect for him.

2.2.11. Widows who challenged conventions and prejudices

In Tagore's works, we have some widows who were challenging the conventions and social prejudices. The aunt in The Rejected Story (Namanjur Galpa), was such a widow. She had a girl called Amiya who was her husband's daughter, but not her own. The girl's mother was a young, low-caste maidservant of her's. After her husband died, she brought the girl into the house and raised her. Amiya did not know that she was not her mother. Her intention was that after a good education, Amiya would marry into the sort of family

229 Tagore, Binodini, p.387.
230 Ibid. p.389.
231 Ibid. p.388.
where strict orthodoxy was not observed and gods and Brahmmins alike went unreversed and unrewarded. Hence she had never tried to stop Amiya from sailing gently towards the shores of unconventionality.

In the *Bachelor's Club*, Shailabala was the first sister-in-law of Akshoy. She became a widow only one month after her marriage. She was taking examinations for her bachelor’s degree. Tagore described her as a widow much ahead of her time. She tried to forget her sorrows in her studies and in her efforts to promote the happiness of her sisters. She was averse to talking much, but did not hesitate to take up on herself the tremendous task of breaking up the Bachelor’s Club with the help of Akshoy, her brother-in-law and Rasik, a humorous old bachelor with a wonderful command over the Sanskrit literature. Shaila and Rasik enrolled themselves as members of the club. Their plan was to make an assault from inside. They persuaded the three young members and the old president with his enthusiastic niece, Nirmala to transfer the location of the club from the president’s house to the house of Shaila’s mother. The members appeared to have been tired of their vow of bachelorship. The very sight of the handwriting on handkerchief of young ladies was enough to make them fall in love. Shaila had to do practically nothing except serving some refreshment to them. The only part she played in furthering the development of the plot was to make Nirmala fall in love with her when she disguised herself as a young man in the club. Nirmala who dedicated her life to the cause of the country under the inspiration of her maternal uncle, the president of the club, became as much eager to break her vow as the male members of the club. A few words and smiles of Shaila were enough to bewitch Nirmala. Shaila had to give up her guise and dress herself as a woman in order to extricate her self from this new entanglement. Shaila’s boldness of her resolution elicited admiration. We can see from the novel that Shaila was open-minded and brave. She was not only different from the traditional women who were self-closed and secluded, but was above female emancipation at that time. A far as love and marriage was concerned, she was also ahead of the time. She was not like a traditional widow but like a widow of the West.

### 2.2.12. Rajyalakshimi—Self-centered and pompous widow

Rajyalakshimi, the mother of Mahendra in *Binodini* written in 1903, was a self-centered and pompous lady. Being a widow, she bestowed all her love and affection on
her only son, Mahendra. She pampered him to such an extent that he became obstinate and impetuous. She resembled Harimohini, of the *Gora* in her cunningness and jealousy. Like Bara-Rani of *The Home and the World*, she had a caustic tongue, minus her sense of humor. Being an embodiment of jealousy and ill-feeling, she differed from Annapurna, her sister-in-law, who was a paragon of virtue and kindness. The two sisters-in-law had been on intimate terms with each other since childhood and living in the same house and shared each other’s joys and sorrows. It was only after Mahendra attained adolescence that misunderstandings between the two developed, as Mahendra valued the judgment of Annapurna more than his mother. His love and concern for Annapurna rankled in her heart. As a result, her attitude towards her widowed sister-in-law became more and more bitter. This became more pronounced after Mahendra married Asha, the niece of Annapurna.

Rajyalakshimi’s dislike of Annapurna increased as she became fully conscious that she could not prevent her son, Mahendra from marrying Asha, in spite of her open disapproval of the match. Rajyalakshimi liked the traditional Hindu mother-in-law, regarded her daughter-in-law, Asha, as an unwelcome intruder into her house. She forced on Asha the household drudgery, besides making her massage her feet, read out books, kept her company and slept beside her. Mahendra resented the exploitation of his wife. He bemoaned to Annapurna that the way her mother was working his wife to death was scandalous and intolerable and resolved that he would not allow his wife to be treated like a servant. Unable to confront her son, Rajyalakshimi gave vent of her ire on Annapurna. The lady had lost her influence on Mahendra after he married Asha and so was unable to make him behave as per her dictates. She was a fix between the mother and son and felt suffocated in the strained atmosphere of the house. She was unable to bear with the gibes and taunts of Rajyalakshimi and left the house for Kashi. Due to her lack of sympathy and understanding Rajyalakshimi lost not only Annapurna but also the affection of Mahendra and Asha. Rajyalakshimi was instrumental in bringing about the love entanglement of Mahendra with Binodini. It was she who brought Binodini to Calcutta as she was pleased by her services when she visited her native village. She expressed her repentance to Binodini: “My girl, why did you not become my daughter-
in-law. For then I could have kept you close to my heart.” 232 Such confessions naturally emboldened Binodini to command every one in the house, from the master to the servant with impunity. Rajyalakshmi even encouraged Binodini to seduce Mahendra, asking her to attend on him always when Asha was away at Kashi to visit her aunt. Binodini saw through the game of Rajyalakshmi. Rajyalakshmi’s attitude towards Behari was a pointer to her distorted view of the people around her. She regarded Bihari, the friend of Mahendra, as a free, unpaid ever-willing, ever-hand adjunct to her household. She never bestowed motherly affection on him. She did not even noticed his absence from the house after his misunderstanding with Mahendra. It was only when she received the gift of honey sent by Bihari that she remembered him and realized his unselfish and steadfast devotion for her. However, in the hour of crisis, when Mahendra eloped with Binodini, the dormant qualities of her character were revealed. She was smitten with guilt for making Asha’s life miserable and so tried, in her own way, to undo the wrong and reunite Mahendra and Asha. For the first time, she did not mince words, to abuse Mahendra thus: “Mahin, remember my words: you will never find such an angel anywhere.” 233 In her changed attitude towards Asha and in her anxiety to bring about a reconciliation between Mahendra and Asha, she forced Asha to dress smartly and attend on Mahendra during those rare occasions when he visited his home after his elopement with Binodini. Her behavior towards Bihari also took a turn for the better. When Bihari attended on her during her illness she expressed her true sentiments towards him by saying: “I didn’t bear you in my womb, but in this world, who is more my own than you?” 234 Finally, her reconciliation with her sister-in-law, Annapurna showed that basically she was not devoid of good human qualities. When Annapurna returned home to call on the ailing Rajyalakshmi, she was quick to notice the changed behavior and outlook of her sister-in-law. Rajyalakshmi welcomed Annapurna sincerely and was repentant about her past shabby behavior towards her. On seeing Annapurna she felt as though she had recovered her lost treasure. Rajyalakshmi was a typical example of a dowager in a big family. The joint family system, however, had begun to disintegrate. And for this reason, The Home

232 Tagore, Binodini, Srishti Publishers & distributors, New Dehli, 2003, p.44.
233 Ibid. p.395.
234 Ibid. p.359.
and the World, written in 1915, did not have a character like Rajyalakshmi, though the joint family was taken as the scene of action in the novel. In the character of Rajyalakshmi, Tagore pointed out how mothers like her, due to lack of education, wisdom and being ignorant of the ways of the world, spoiled their children by pampering them and thus bring misery to every one around them.

2.2.13. Unawakened Widow—Narrow-minded Harimohini.

More saddening were the widows who did not realize their real widowhood and showed their weak points in nature. Harimohini in Gora was a typical example of the oppressed widows who lay low at times of misfortune but were prone to take sadistic pleasure in harassing others, once they became economically independent. At the age of eight, Harimohini was married to a rich Pulsha family of the Roy Chaudaries. As she could not bring enough dowry befitting the status of her husband’s family, she was ill-treated, both by the in-laws and her husband. Her misery reached its climax when she gave birth to a daughter. When daughter came of age, she was married to a rich and handsome man. She inherited her mother’s misfortunes and led an unhappy married life. Her husband beat her up often and one day she died in suspicious circumstances. Meanwhile, Harimohini’s young son and husband died of cholera, one after the other. After he lost her husband and children, her brother-in-law deprived her of her rights to the property. She was so tortured that she gave up her interest in her husband’s property and took refuge in a temple at Banaras. Having come to know of Poresh Babu’s family through some acquaints, she took shelter in his house, claiming her relationship with Sucharita. The moment Harimohini moved into Sucharita’s house she displayed her true colors. She was always on tenterhooks as she suspected that everyone who met Sucharita might snatch away her property. Hence, she tried to keep Sucharita under her control. The fear of losing her comfortable shelter and living made her selfish and wicked. She struggled hard to solve the problem of her livelihood permanently by getting Sucharita married to Kailash, her widower brother-in-law. She even took Gora to task for his friendship with Sucharita: “You are not a relation of hers, so what have you got to talk with her about so much?...and in what scriptures do you find sanction for such conduct?”

235 Tagore, Gora, p. 331.
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232 Tagore, Binodini, Srishti Publishers & distributors, New Dehli, 2003, p.44.
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235 Tagore, Gora, p. 331.
Underwent a change. She sneered at him for being neither a Hindu nor a Brahmo. She questioned him: "Is it good to be neither one thing nor the other? Man after all is a religious being." Further, she accused him of not following his ancestors and observing religious rituals. Harimohini did not like any visitors, except Poresh Babu to call on her as she was afraid that they might turn Sucharita against her. She looked down upon the intimacy between Binoy and Lolita and regarded it as a Christian kind of behavior and called it shameless intimacy. She did not like Lolita's frequent visits to Sucharita. She did not even spare the much respected Anandamoyi from her taunts. She accused her for taking Sucharita's help for the wedding preparations of Lolita and Binoy and so asked her: "If you had a daughter of your own, could you have sent her to take part in this wedding?" Besides, she found fault with her for having no scruples about her caste. Thus the shy and wicked Harimohini was in reality a tigress in the guise of a lamb. Everyone was astonished at her transformation and exclaimed as Anadamoyi did: "Where now was that Harimohini who, in Poresh Babu's house, had always being as timid as though she were a criminal, and who on noticing the least sign of approval on anyone's part would hold on to him with all her might? Today she stood like a tigress, defending her own rights."

2.2.14. Degenerated Widows

Some widows, when losing hope of life, became degenerated. Rukmini in The Queen Consort Fair (Bauthakuranir Hat) written in 1883 used to be concubine of Udayaditya, the prince of Mesore kingdom. When the prince married Surama, he deserted her. Rukmini lost all hopes of life. She hated the society and became the indulgent. She had flesh relations with many men from the palace. To revenge the prince, she supplied poison to the queen who was extremely envious of Surama and Surama became victim of envy.

2.2.15. Kalyani—the only widow from the royal court

Interestingly, Tagore depicted only one widow who was from the royal court—Kalyani. In the drama Trial (Lakshimir Pariksha) written in 1897, Kalyani was a widowed queen. She lived a solitary life in the palace. But she was very kind and

236 Ibid. p.78.
237 Tagore, Gora, p.363.
generous. She kept open her house and her neighbors, indigent or not, drawn either by her wealth or by amiability, flocked to her and departed loud in her praise. Khiri, her female servant, wanted to get money from her on any excuses. She saw her tricks and laid her bare, but still she fulfilled her wishes. As she said, "The poor cheat because wealth is often meaner than poverty."

In Tagore’s works, it is important to notice that the widows were from different strata of society and most of them were childless. In the epics, all the widows were of royal families and they actively or passively accepted either of their three fates as widows. Madri and Urmila actively jumped on to the funeral pyres of their husbands. Ambika and Amblika passively united with Vyasa for the progeny of their late husband. Kunti and Satyavati livedlonely until they exiled themselves into the forests and ended their lives there. In the epics, the widows of other social classes were not mentioned at all. So we can not see the entire prospect of widows of that age. If they had been mentioned, we could have known more tragedies of widows of the epic age. While in Tagore, only one widow, Kalyani was from royal court, the other widows were from all other social classes and other backgrounds. What is more impressive is that many widows in Tagore did not yield to their adversities. Tagore portrayed widow characters who had unique characteristics. Of course, they were miserable, insulted, rejected, neglected, ostracized, exploited and even persecuted by the society. We have such widows as Kshiroda, Kusum, Shalabala, Sonanan, Mani and Mashi. Like Satyavati and Kunti, Annapura and Radasundari escorted their souls to God. But most widows did not succumbed to their fates. Mahamaya, having jumped out of the pyre, eloped with her lover. Amba Bai loved his abductor and defied her mother who ordered soldiers to throw her onto the pyre of her engaged "husband". Kusum, Shyama, Rukumini even used some devices to attain their love. Some widows like Kusum, and the skeleton, when losing love, committed suicide to rebel against the social injustice imposed upon them. Sohini, Nila and Shailabala had modern ideas against traditions and challenged conventions and prejudice. Yogamaya was modern, liberal and sophisticated. Damini even rebelled against religion. Also Tagore pointed out their own shortcomings as

Ibid. p. 363.
widows. These shortcomings made themselves more miserable. Hanmohini was narrow-minded and Rukmini was degenerated. Under the pen of Tagore, the widow characters were more vivid, more moving and more believable. From them we can see the entire prospect of the widows of his times.