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Reimagining Tagore: Directorial Liberty and Feminist Iconography in *Chokher Bali*

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ABSTRACT:

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* (1902), originally published in Bengali, holds a distinguished place in his body of work. This research examines two prominent adaptations of the novel: Rituparno Ghosh's 2003 film and Anurag Basu's 2015 television series with the same title. Both adaptations offer a modern feminist reinterpretation of Tagore's narrative, particularly through their reimagined endings. This paper argues that, although the adaptations diverge from the novel's original conclusion, they succeed in addressing the novel's limitations; specifically, the ending Tagore himself publicly expressed his regret over. By contextualizing *Chokher Bali* for a twenty-first-century audience, these directors adapt the text to align with contemporary feminist discourses. This study also engages with broader debates about fidelity in adaptation, challenging traditional notions of *faithfulness* by proposing that these adaptations enhance the novel's thematic concerns with gender and agency. The research applies Theo Van Leeuwen's visual discourse analysis to examine how visual storytelling in both adaptations highlights aspects of womanhood that are less accessible through the written text. Key scenes are analyzed to show how visual strategies expand the feminist potential of Tagore's narrative, thereby illustrating the transformative power of adaptation as an interpretive act.

Key Words: Chokher Bali; Tagore; adaptation; womanhood; iconography; van Leeuwen

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1. Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a towering figure of the Bengali and Indian Renaissance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Tagore's literary, artistic, and social contributions have made him an enduring cultural icon, particularly for the people of Bengal. Beyond his literary achievements, Tagore managed his family's estates, an experience that intimately acquainted him with the lives and struggles of the common people—insights that profoundly shaped works like *Chokher Bali* (1903). Initially serialized in a magazine, *Chokher Bali* traces the complex emotional and social journey of a young widow. Through his masterful characterization, Tagore introduces Binodini, a young widow who defies all expectations. Unconventional and fiercely independent, Binodini was a strikingly modern figure even within the late nineteenth-century setting of the novel. Sukhendu Ray, in his translation of *Chokher Bali* (2004), observes, "Rabindranath Tagore claims that *Chokher Bali* was an unprecedented piece of writing in the context of contemporary Bengali literature" (Ray, 2004). Ray also notes that, despite the reforms recognizing widow remarriage in India, widows had yet to gain the social standing they deserved. Tagore, therefore, ventured boldly into uncharted territory by presenting a narrative that candidly addresses the suppressed sexuality of a young widow, exploring "the physical and mental deprivations of young widows, and their sexual frustrations" (Ray, 2004). In an era when widows were expected to lead lives of isolation and restraint, Tagore envisioned a character who was rebellious, vocal, and unflinchingly determined.

Chokher Bali has been adapted multiple times for the screen, and this research focuses on two significant adaptations: Rituparno Ghosh's 2003 film and Anurag Basu's 2015 television series. Both directors, themselves of Bengali origin, bring an intimate understanding of Bengali culture and language, which lends authenticity to their adaptations. However, there is an intriguing contrast between the two. Ghosh's adaptation is a feature film, while Basu's interpretation unfolds as a television series in three parts, each approximately 42-43 minutes long.

Adaptation studies has become a pivotal field in the exploration of how literary texts are reimagined on screen, with enduring debates about the relative merits of the original works and their cinematic adaptations. This research engages with these debates by focusing on two key questions: first, it examines how the directors of both adaptations deviate from Tagore's original narrative to engage with the feminist discourses of twenty-first-century India; second, it investigates how the visual language of cinema allows for a feminist reinterpretation that transcends the textual limitations of the original. Accordingly, the following research questions guide this study:

1. To what extent have the directors exercised creative liberty in adapting *Chokher Bali* to align with the feminist sensibilities of contemporary India?
2. How has the art of cinematography in these adaptations produced a visual feminist discourse, potentially making one adaptation superior to the other—or even both superior to the source text?

This research uniquely explores the ways in which directorial choices, informed by modern feminist perspectives, intersect with cinematic semiotics to celebrate womanhood. The concept of directorial liberty, as applied here, refers to the deliberate deviation from the source text to achieve a broader interpretive goal. Both Ghosh (2003) and Basu (2015) take such liberties in their

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cinematic reworkings of *Chokher Bali*, transforming Tagore's narrative into a visual discourse that speaks to contemporary feminist concerns such as the autonomy of women over their bodies, the critique of patriarchal norms governing widowhood, and the reclamation of female desire and agency in a socially restrictive environment.

2. Review of Literature

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* (1903) has captivated readers and scholars for over a century, particularly through the complex character of Binodini, one of Tagore's strongest female protagonists. Existing scholarship tends to focus on the literary dimensions of Binodini's character, often emphasizing her journey towards self-realization and resistance against societal norms. However, most studies are confined to Ghosh's film adaptation, overlooking the broader cinematic landscape.

Chandrava Chakravarty (2013) offers a postmodern reading of *Chokher Bali*, viewing it as a critique of colonial discourse on gender and identity. Chakravarty traces Binodini's progression from humiliation to self-actualization but does not explore the technicalities of cinematography. Instead, she emphasizes Ghosh's adaptation as a timely postmodern feminist intervention in contemporary India. Ghosh himself, in an interview, encapsulates this feminist shift: "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" (as cited in Chakravarty, 2013, p. 107).

Dr. Ankita Khanna (2014) focuses on a comparative analysis of Tagore's novel and Ghosh's cinematic adaptation, highlighting the societal barriers to women's self-realization. Khanna critiques Ghosh's decision to omit Binodini's remarriage in the film, which she argues could have conveyed a stronger feminist message. Khanna's analysis points to the missed opportunities in adaptation to challenge societal norms regarding widowhood.

Alison Macdonald, in her essay "Real and Imagined Women" (2009) brings Rituparno Ghosh's films into focus through a feminist lens, drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Macdonald explores the concept of *body work* emphasizing how Indian cinema portrays women as idealized, *imaginary* figures, while *real* women remain marginal or invisible. She notes that Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* subverts these portrayals by challenging hegemonic norms of gender and identity; yet she, too, stops short of fully interrogating the role of cinematography in this subversion.

Dr. Sanjay Kumar Dutta's essay "Women Protagonists of Tagore" (2016) provides a broad overview of the prominence of female characters in Tagore's works, noting that of Tagore's numerous narratives, the majority feature women as central figures. Dr. Dutta dedicates significant attention to Binodini, stressing upon her emotional and psychological maturation throughout the novel. This essay, however, remains largely confined to the textual analysis of Tagore's novel, and does not attempt to evaluate its various adaptations/interpretations.

Bhattacharjee Jhimli (2014) addresses widowhood in Bengali literature and cinema, positioning Binodini as a symbol of resistance against societal limitations enforced on widows. Jhimli contrasts the portrayal of widows in Eastern and Western contexts but does not offer a

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balanced analysis of the cinematic techniques used in Ghosh's or Basu's adaptations. While Jhimli suggests that films like *Chokher Bali* contribute to public discourse on widowhood, her analysis overlooks the visual and semiotic strategies employed to convey these themes.

2.1 Twenty-First Century Feminism in India and Its Evolving Needs

Feminism in India has undergone significant transformations, from advocating for basic human rights to addressing more complex issues such as gender equity. Rekha Pande (2014), in her article "Challenges to Feminism in the 21st Century: A South Asian Perspective", observes that while feminism in India has gained momentum, it still grapples with deep-rooted cultural and societal expectations. Nevertheless, India has also matured in terms of its general acceptance towards the needs and rights of women, over a period of time. Feminism is a generally misunderstood term and Rebecca West very aptly expresses it, "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat" (1913, quoted in Faludi, Backlash). Attitudes toward women in South Asia continue to require a profound transformation. When a working woman, whether in a high-ranking executive role at a multinational corporation or a prominent actress, announces her pregnancy, societal reactions often center on the perceived threat to her career. This reflects entrenched stereotypes that define motherhood in terms of selflessness and sacrifice (Pande, p. 4). She also observes that "in the absence of a state support structure, the family plays a major role in this culture", underscoring the significant impact of familial expectations on women's professional and personal lives (p. 5). Rekha Pande documents that in the pre-independence India, feminism was largely introduced somewhere in the 19th century after a contact with the Western education system: "At this time, the western idea of liberty, equality and fraternity was being imbibed by our educated elite through the study of English and the contact with West" (p. 5). This social reform movement, ironically, was not independent in its ideology, and did not in reality, challenge the existing patriarchal norms. Even the women's rights organizations led by women themselves did not possess their own separate agendas and ideologies, and heavily relied on their men to dictate them instead (Pande, p. 6). In the post-independence India, however, women won the right to vote according to the Article 15(3), which allowed the state to construct certain facilities for women (Pande, p. 8). In the 21st century India, however, women have managed to bring three issues in the limelight, which Pande terms as the *three Gs*, "[…] the attitude towards Girl child, Gender violence and Globalization" (p. 9). These *three Gs* represent the evolving nature of feminist discourse in India, as contemporary feminists demand greater autonomy and representation for women in all spheres of life.

What lacks in the 21st century version of Indian feminism, however, is its inability to deliver gender 'equity' than equality. It is the need of the hour, as Pande (2014) concludes, to acknowledge and re-contextualize the global phenomenon of feminism and localize the concept to suit the needs of South Asian women in general and Indian women in particular. However, Pande argues that Indian feminism still struggles to achieve gender *equity* rather than mere equality. This distinction is crucial, particularly in the context of *Chokher Bali*'s adaptations, where the directors not only critique patriarchal norms but also reframe the narrative to align with the shifting feminist demands of the 21st century. In both Ghosh's and Basu's adaptations, the focus shifts towards reinterpreting Binodini's agency, body, and desires within the contemporary feminist framework.

3. Method and Theoretical Frame

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This paper is a qualitative research study in the domain of adaptation studies. The primary sources are Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Chokher Bali* and its two distinct screen adaptations directed by Rituparno Ghosh and Anurag Basu. The research includes a visual discourse analysis of these adaptations through the lens of contemporary Indian feminism to identify and explore how the directors have employed their cinematographic techniques and directorial artistry to celebrate womanhood, an aspect that would otherwise remain unarticulated through the narrative alone.

Theo Van Leeuwen in his edited book *Handbook of Visual Analysis* (2001) explains in his own scholarly article "Semiotics and Iconography" as the method of reading and interpreting signs (p. 92). Referring to Ronald Barthes's visual semiotics, van Leeuwen attempts to differentiate with the notion of iconography. He proposes that where Barthes's semiotics deals with the image in isolation and treats the cultural connotation as something "which is shared by everyone who is at all acculturated to contemporary popular culture"; iconography, he states, keeps a closer eye on the attached contexts which come along the images themselves (p. 92). It also deals with the basic questions of how and why certain cultural interpretations are attached to the images and signs and their visual expression (van Leeuwen, p. 92). He further asserts, however, that these two approaches address the same basic question of representation.

3.1 Iconography

Van Leeuwen (2001) identifies three essential layers for approaching iconography in visual analysis (p. 100):

1. Representational Meaning
2. Iconographical Symbolism
3. Iconological Symbolism

In discussing Representational Meaning, van Leeuwen poses a vital question: "How does iconography establish that a particular image represents a particular (kind of) person (or object or place)?" (p. 102). He proceeds to enumerate methods for itemizing a specific image, including researching identity, engaging with prior research, and conducting verbal descriptions. The next layer, Iconographical Symbolism, comprises major subtypes, namely abstract and figurative symbolism. Abstract symbolism involves certain symbolic shapes and connotations, whereas figurative symbols encompass representations of people, objects, or places. Furthermore, he differentiates between open and disguised symbolism, providing a deeper understanding of the layers involved.

In discussing Iconological Symbolism, van Leeuwen notes: "Iconological analysis, then, draws together the iconographical symbols and stylistic features of an image or a representational tradition into a coherent interpretation which provides the 'why' behind the representations analyzed" (p. 116). This perspective underscores that iconography is broader in its approach, allowing for archival and intertextual comparisons, contrasting with Barthes's semiotics, which confines itself to textual interpretation. In this study, Van Leeuwen's framework of iconography will be employed for a comprehensive analysis of the adaptations of *Chokher Bali*.

4. Discussion and Analysis

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This research focuses on three primary sources for analysis. The foremost source is Tagore's *Chokher Bali*, originally published in 1903, with the English translation utilized for this study published in 2004, as the original text is in Bengali. The other two sources are screen adaptations of *Chokher Bali*: the film of the same title directed by Rituparno Ghosh, and the television adaptation directed by Anurag Basu, which aired as part of the series *Stories by Rabindranath Tagore* and is currently available on Netflix. Employing a broader theoretical approach of Van Leeuwen's (2001) Iconography, this research attempts to provide a visual feminist discourse analysis of both adaptations.

4.1 Rituparno Ghosh's Film Adaptation: *Chokher Bali* (2003)

The first popular adaptation of Tagore's *Chokher Bali* is Rituparno Ghosh's film with the same title. Released in 2003, featuring Aishwarya Rai as *Binodini* who serves as a feminist spokeswoman of nineteenth century widows, Ghosh amplifies the feminist undertones of Tagore's original narrative, adding a layer of artistic complexity to it. His Binodini provides a profound understanding of the psychological, sexual, and social constraints of these women. Ghosh, as the director-auteur of this narrative, finds a unique opportunity to employ subtle signs and symbols in the film to elevate the existing themes and motifs, which were either absent from Tagore's novel, or suggested only in passing. It is also interesting to see how Ghosh's own defiance as a queer person in a conservative India, finds an outlet in Binodini's resistance against patriarchy.

Figure-1

Taken from the opening of the film, Figure-1 illustrates Binodini's rejection of the constraints placed upon widows, who were considered cursed and not allowed any worldly pleasures. They were expected to lead a life of restraint full of prohibitions such as eating fish and sweets. These

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restrictions symbolize the social expectation that pushed widows into a life of perpetual mourning and isolation. In this scene, Binodini hastily consumes chocolates presented to her by her Christian teacher. The mere act of accepting a prohibited delicacy becomes a significant moment of defiance against the oppressive social standards that define her existance as a widow.

Borrowing from Theo van Leeuwen's three layers of Iconography, the *Representational Meaning* addresses how an image describes a particular person or an object. In this scene, the chocolates do not merely suggest a delicacy or a confectionery, but they signify the forbidden pleasures that the nineteenth century widows were expected to renounce. Binodini's initial reluctance to accept the chocolates signify the inner struggle between her mind and heart—the former wanting to adhere to societal norms, and the latter yearning for freedom. The second layer of meaning, *Iconographical Symbolism*, identifies the types of symbols present in a particular scene. Unpacking the scene in this context, the chocolates become a symbol of indulgence and agency. By consuming them, Binodini seeks to assert her individual agency and desire. Chocolates, or any sweets for that matter, are normally associated with joy and celebration. Binodini's act of eating them in secrecy, are in direct contrast with her expected self-denial as a widow.

In the third layer of meaning, *Iconological Symbolism*, van Leeuwen suggests an analysis of the broader implications of a visual/scene within the film's larger narrative structure. In Figure-1, Binodini's act of eating chocolates serves as a broader critique of nineteenth century patriarchy depriving women of their autonomy. This act alone becomes a strong visual discourse of empowerment, suggesting that the desire for happiness can exist even in the most oppressive structures.

Figure-2

Next is another powerful image taken from the film, where Mahendra's widowed mother looks at her son's wedding reception from a distance, as widows were not allowed to be a part of

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the celebrations, especially weddings. This is a moving illustration of the restrictions imposed on widows at the time. The camera is strategically positioned to include both the staircase and the entrance of the house, creating a visual contrast between the wedding festivities and the isolated life of the widowed mother, Rajlakhshami.

The visual framing in this scene accentuate the *Representational Meaning*, as the staircase serves as a metaphoric boundary between the widows and the rest of the household. They are positioned out of sight from the wedding festivities, suggesting their exclusion from from any kind of celebration due to societal superstitions which considered widows a bad omen at weddings. This spatial arrangement highlights the larger cultural behaviour that pushed widows to the margins of the society, affirming their status as an outsider. In terms of its *Iconographical Symbolism*, this divide (the staircase) become a symbol of restriction and longing. Rajlakhshami's eagerness to watch her son's reception rituals, which are now performed by other relatives instead of the mother, depict a deep maternal affection juxtaposed with her forced detachment. The camera captures her excitement, reflecting her desire to participate in the ceremony, even if only as a silent spectator.

The third layer of van Leeuwen's visual semiotics is *Iconological Symbolism*, which allows us to question the implications of this scene in the broader context of the narrative. The act of Mahendra's widowed mother and aunt sneaking glimpses of the wedding reception signifies a quiet rebellion against the oppressive norms that dictate their lives. Their shared experience of widowhood and the subsequent exclusion from society, creates a sense of solidarity between them. By introducing this scene, Ghosh highlights the plight of widows in India, adds into the narrative complexity of the film, and evokes a sense of empathy in the audience.

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Figure-3

In this scene, the caged cuckoo bird emerges as a strong symbol of suffering and entrapment, which deeply resonates with the viewers who are familiar with the cultural and historical context of widowhood in India. The cuckoo bird has been a subject of various myths and proverbs in the Indian tradition and carries a significant symbolic value. Legends suggest that only those who have suffered profoundly can truly understand the song of the cuckoo. In this scene, the caged bird and the widow feeding it, share a common desire for liberation. Feeding the bird becomes symbolic of the widow's own need for emotional nourishment, who seeks compassion in a world that controls her agency.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.
(Angelou, 1983, lines 31-38)

Decoding the first layer of this scene, the *Representational Meaning*, the cuckoo bird symbolizes the silenced and trapped voices of the widows of nineteenth century Bengal. The physical confinement of the bird mirrors the social, emotional, and psychological confinement of widows. The visual imagery in this scene quietly captures the heavy weight of grief and loneliness, and a shared sense of emotional dependence between the bird and the widow. In the *Iconographical Symbolism*, the bird symbolizes the loss of identity, freedom, and agency, experienced by the widows. Just like the cuckoo's song is muffled within the confines of the cage, the widow's voice and emotions are also muted by the society. Employing *Iconological Symbolism* and contextualizing this scene within the larger framework of widowhood and societal norms, feeding the cuckoo becomes a moment of resistance for the widow, as she expresses her nurturing spirit despite her circumstances. This scene transcends mere visual representation and implies that even within the boundaries of her role, the widow retains her capacity for care and compassion.

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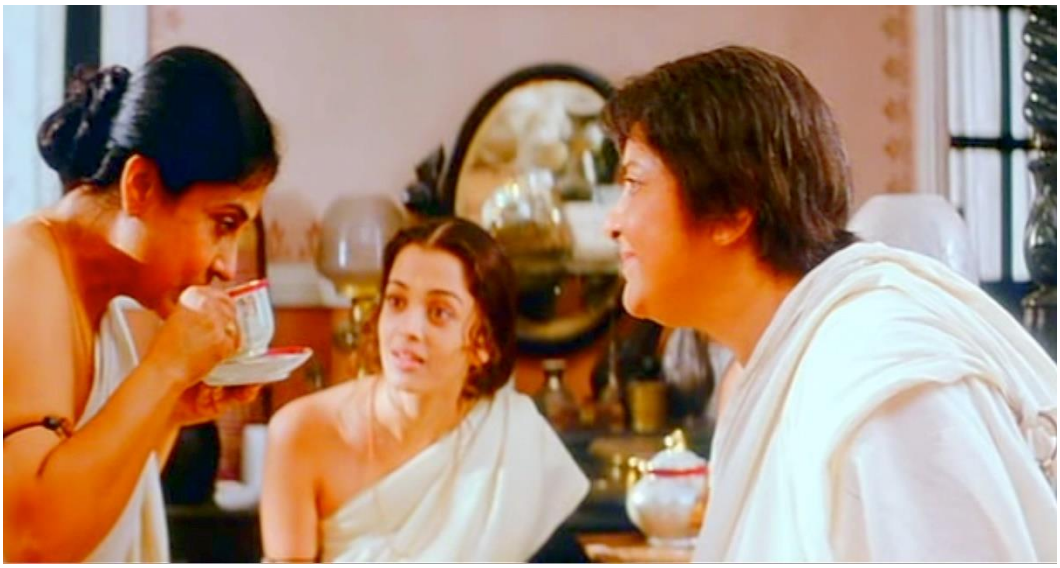

Figure-4

This scene presents a suggestive moment where three widows in the same household are shown surreptitiously sipping tea behind closed doors, depicting the cultural restrictions involving widows who were denied the simplest of worldly pleasures. By employing van Leeuwen's framework, this scene can be analyzed as an example of *Representational Meaning*, where the act of drinking tea represents not only a desire for normalcy but also a quiet insolence towards societal limitations. Its *Iconographical Symbolism* is reflected in the broader social context of drinking tea as a communal experience, which like many other instances discussed earlier, becomes an act of rebellion against society. Although Tagore does not indulge into these minute details, Ghosh intensifies these moments by allocating multiple scenes to such experiences, enriching the multi-layered meanings of the film, and providing a social commentary at the same time.

In this scene, Biondini emerges as a reformative figure who encourages her fellow widows at the residence to challenge social taboos and exercise their agency. She argues that drinking tea is not a sinful act, and that it is permissible for widows to indulge in these simple joys. Her declaration not only signifies her maturing courage, but also symbolizes the gradual shift in the perception of widowhood. The *Iconological Symbolism* in this scene emerges in the form of a larger discourse on women's autonomy and the right to pleasure, which widows were historically denied.

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Figure-5

In Ghosh's adaptation of *Chokher Bali*, Binodini's bold attempt to wear the colour red, which has traditionally been associated with married women, and prohibited for widows, serves as a strong symbol of her dissent against the rigid social barriers. The colour red has also often symbolized love, sexuality, femininity, and vitality in the Indian literary and cultural context. Figure-5 depicts Binodini's unconscious competition with Mahendra's bride Ashalata; where by donning her red clothes, she reveals her hidden desire to replace her and claim her position in the household and in Mahendra's life. Binodini's motive is not to seek Mahendra's affection in particluar, as shown in the narrative, but an attempt to assert her womanhood and sexuality, challenging the cultural stigma of widowhood. Ghosh's portrayal of Binodini's cultural disobedience through a deliberate choice of colour adds depth to her character. By integrating Leeuwen's *Iconographical Symbolism*, it becomes evident that Binodini's decision of wearing red is not only reflective of her inner turmoil, but is also a social critique of this restrictive framework in which widows were forced to exist. The visual interplay between Binodini and Ashalata highlight the issues of fidelty, sexuality, womanhood, and the social privilege of married women.

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Figure-6

This is a critical scene from Ghosh's adaptation, when in a desperate attempt to seek acceptance and validation, Binodini adorns herself in heavy jewelry and goes to Bihari to seduce him. This is significant in several different ways—it is not just a blatant display of her vulnerability and longing, but also her desire for affection and warmth. Her desperate plea is rejected by Bihari, which becomes a moment of profound epiphany for Binodini. Through the lens of Leeuwen's *Representational Meaning*, this scene becomes a manifestation of her traditional role as a woman seeking recognition, as society imposes restrictions on her identity. The next layer of meaning, the *Iconographical Symbolism*, reveals the complicated dynamics between desire and femininity; between Bihari and herself; her effort to fit in the patriarchal structure and her natural sense of defiance. By covering herself in heavy jewels, Binodini tries to reclaim her identity as a woman, and not be defined by her marital status for once. However, her adornment serves as a double metaphor that signifies both her feminine agency and her submission to male approval. Bihari's subsequent rejection serves as a moment of overwhelming sense of enlightenment for Binodini, forcing her to face a painful self-confrontation. This scene also carries a significant *Iconological Symbolism* that is manifested through her struggle to explore her identity as a woman—an identity that if often defined by her relationship with a man.

There are several other key scenes and images that define Binodini's womanhood, one of them displaying her menstrual blood on the floor when she sits with other widows in the *Rasoi*, the kitchen—a place that is conventionally revered in the Hindu culture. This scene is a product of Ghosh's artistic imagination and accentuates the idea of Binodini's sexuality, and she being deprived of everything a woman of her age requires and deserves, because of her widowhood. This visual representation of menstrual blood is a strong declaration of Binodini's bodily autonomy which the society could not take away from her. The image further asserts that she is a healthy young woman with intrinsic biological needs, despite her status as a widow. The rainwater tries to wipe the blood off the kitchen floor, symbolizing the society's attempt to cleanse and erase the physical evidence of her femininity, yet the blood stubbornly remains in its place. This imagery

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resonates with van Leeuwen's *Iconographical Symbolism*, as it challenges the societal attitudes towards menstruation. By foregrounding Binodini's femininity, Ghosh seems to emphasize on the tension between restrictions placed upon women and their natural bodily functions, demonstrating women's struggle for self-determination within a coercive structure.

Another related scene from Ghosh's adaptation explores the theme of sexuality through the motif of nudity. In this image, Binodini stands next to portraits of women, with one prominently featuring a nude woman sitting at the feet of a man. While the nature of their relationship is ambiguous, Binodini's proximity to these portraits invites a discourse of sexuality and objectification, adding to the *Representational Meaning* of the scene. These images also serve as a visual metaphor for the complexity and repression of desires that define Binodini's existence. Using this contrast, Ghosh communicates to the audience that Binodini is an attractive young woman grappling with her own suppressed sexual needs, living a life of renunciation. By engaging with Leeuwen's *Iconological Symbolism,* the visual narrative reinforces the broader implications of female sexuality in a strictly patriarchal context, where the commodification of women's bodies is juxtaposed with their yearning for autonomy and self-expression.

Figure-7

Figure-7 marks the conclusion of the film with a powerful symbol, representing Binodini's journey towards self-awareness and independence. Throughout the narrative, Binodini is shown using binoculars to sometimes spy on Mahendra in his bedroom, and later to gaze at a distant ferry on the river Ganges. This serves as her metaphoric longing to secure and attract people and situations in her life. In the end, however, she deliberately leaves her binoculars on the table along with a letter to Bihari and Ashalata, signifying a crucial transformation in her character. Through van Leeuwen's framework of *Iconographical Symbolism*, the binoculars seem to suggest an evolution of Binodini's matured vision. They also embody her independence from an external gaze through which she has always viewed the world. Hence, the act of abandoning bonoculars symbolize her liberation from the constraints of her old life, where her worth was constantly tied to the validation of men. This decision also invites a deep *Iconological Interpretation*, where one

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can argue that Binodini is no longer confined to the societal expectations that shaped her previous existence, and is ready to step into a future that is free from the burdens of her past.

4.1.1 The Ending

Ghosh's film adaptation opens with Tagore's confession: "Ever since *Chokher Bali* was published, I have always regretted the ending. I ought to be censured for it" (Rabindranath Tagore, 24th June 1940; referenced in Ghosh's film *Chokher Bali*). This honest admission sets the stage for a reinterpretation that challenges the original narrative, where Ghosh exercises his directorial liberty and adds various new dimensions, especially with his focus on Binodini's sexuality. While Ghosh retains the core of Tagore's novel, he diverges significantly in the portrayal of Binodini's fate. In Tagore's novel, Binodini is condemned to a life of devotion, without a marriage proposal from Bihari; whereas, Ghosh introduces a vital moment where Bihari extends a formal proposal to Binodini which she ultimately rejects. This alteration is not just a plot twist for Ghosh, but a serious statement about female autonomy; where by refusing the marriage proposal, Binodini asserts her control over her own life, reflecting the emotional growth of her character. This adaptation can be viewed through the lens of contemporary feminist discourse, as it reframes Binodini's journey from passive acceptance to active self-determination. By allowing her to have a formal proposal of marriage, and then letting her reject the offer, Ghosh positions Binodini as an icon of female empowerment.

4.2 Anurag Basu's Television Adaptation of *Chokher Bali* (2015)

Another refreshing interpretation of Tagore's *Chokher Bali* (1902) is Anurag Basu's television adaptation, featured in *Stories by Rabindranath Tagore* (2015) on Netflix. This particular adaptation stands out not only for its innovative narrative technique but also for its musical excellence. It is not just Tagore's novel that has been adapted, but also his songs and compositions, which act as the playback tracks throughout the series. Anurag Basu's rendition makes Binodini the narrator of the story, a directorial choice that empowers her character and gives her agency to tell her own story. Basu diverges from both the source text as well as from Ghosh's earlier adaptation in portraying an early affection from Bihari towards Binodini, which fundamentally subverts the dynamics of their relationship. This decision also gives Binodini the respect and acknowledgment her character so rightly deserves; and makes her the orbit of someone's attention from the beginning. The story opens with a scene at a railway station where Bihari incidentally reunites with Binodini after a six-year search for her. Although, he expresses his desire for her to accompany him, she ultimately chooses to move on without him, and not rely on anyone for social strength.

A common strand in both Basu and Ghosh's adaptations is Binodini's intellectual and sexual agency; and her being fully aware of her power, leveraging it according to her circumstances. This portrayal sharply contrasts with the source text, where Binodini is mostly controlled by the events surrounding her, especially in her relationship with Mahendra. By allowing Binodini to be the narrator of her own story, Basu not only modernizes the narrative, but aligns it better with the contemporary discourses on female empowerment and self-determination.

4.2.1 Powerful Cinematography & Iconography in Anurag Basu's Adaptation

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Figure-1 (a)

Figure-1 (b)

Basu's adaptation opens with a striking imagery of Binodini's brief wedded life, contrasted immediately with a visual of her widowhood foregrounded in the image of her marital chamber, which is now barren, and all draped in white. Employing van Leeuwen's first stage of *Representational Meaning*, Figure-1 (a) symbolizes the promise of a new life for Binodini, sitting in her wedding attire. The second image in Figure-1 (b) immediately subverts the previous hope and joy; and represents a life of barrenness and mourning. This visual shift marks a clear transition

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in her life and her status from married to widowed, suggesting altered new realities. Moving to the *Iconographical Symbolism*, the colour imagery employed in both these scenes carries a significant cultural burden, where red symbolizes abundance, love, passion, and vitality; and the white garment represents loss of joy, and restriction. This shift from 'red' to 'white' powerfully illustrates Binodini's journey from fulfillment to desolation. On the third stage of meaning, the *Iconological Symbolism*, Basu's visual techniques seem to criticize the traditional perceptions of widowhood, by demonstrating the profound loss of identity experienced by women like Binodini. Her empty marital chamber in the second image becomes an intense metaphor for the death of her womanhood, and not just her husband. Her tilted head towards the now-empty marriage bed is a very powerful image of her facing the new and altered realities of life.

Figure-2

Another important image from Basu's adaptation is the depiction of social isolation that was imposed on the widows. Here, Basu's imagination aligns with Ghosh's, as they both recognize this as a key moment in the life of Mahendra's widowed mother. In Figure-2, the mother stands at the corner of the street, looking at her son's wedding procession from the periphery. This is a gloomy contrast between the celebrations of the wedding, and the lonely existence of his mother. Leeuwen's framework is particularly helpful in analyzing scenes with heavy symbolic value. In the *Representational Meaning*, this scene conveys the emotional dichotomy between joy and melancholy. Through the lens of *Iconographical Symbolism*, the mother's solitary figure against the lively wedding procession highlights the cruel superstitions that regarded widows as the harbingers of bad luck. Her inability to participate in her son's wedding signifies the loss of value and dignity which she once possessed as a married woman. Moving to the next layer of meaning, the *Iconological Symbolism*, Basu's depiction of these miseries invites viewers to reflect on the greater implications of such cultural norms. The mother's symbolic distance from the celebrations

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not only accentuates her personal grief, but also serves as a critique of the social and cultural marginalization of widows in the nineteenth century India.

5. Conclusion

Tagore's *Chokher Bali* (Eyesore, or a constant irritant) has traveled across centuries to take diverse forms on screen, notably in the adaptations of Rituparno Ghosh and Anurag Basu. Each adaptation has breathed new life into the original narrative, and has given it a fresh perspective; where Binodini emerges as an independent, fierce, and multidimensional protagonist. While Tagore original story is a potent social and cultural commentary of contemporary Bengal, Ghosh and Basu have significantly contributed to the narrative by amplifying Binodini's character, transforming her into a vibrant and complex figure. By Tagore's own admission, *Chokher Bali* deserved a different ending—an issue that has been addressed through the slightly reimagined adaptations by Ghosh and Basu. They reconstructed Binodini's relationship and equation with Bihari, subsequently attemting to rectify what Tagore considered a flaw in his narrative. Both the directors found it important to recontextualize the narrative and situate it within modern feminist discourses, revealing how the notions of female desire, autonomy, and agency remain relevant even today.

This research highlights the significance of adaptability in literature and visual arts, demonstrating that the fidelity to the source text can take many shapes and forms. It has demonstrated that while Ghosh's adaptation retains a close alignment with Tagore's original narrative, it has provided a new outlook to Binodini's character, emphasizing her agency and choice. Basu's rendition has also enriched the narrative with a fresh and contemporary take on issues that sadly still resonate with the modern audiences. This idea also aligns with André Bazin's assertion that adaptations can and should evoke new interpretations (Bazin, 1967). Through a detailed exploration of visual imagery and symbols in both works, this research has highlighted how adaptations have a unique opportunity to explore the emotional and intellectual issues that the original narrative may have overlooked. Finally, this research has underscored the timeless relevance of Tagore's writings, and the creative potential of their adaptations. The discourses that emerge through adaptations not only revive a classic literary work, but also encourage us to reflect on the evolving representation of women in literature and film.

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