died at the age of twenty-nine. Why is it that we see a clear diversion from Rabindranath Tagore's otherwise liberal humanist attitude when it comes to dealing with the social and cultural positioning of women in his life?

In order for us to attempt to understand this question it would be helpful to comprehend the idea of "individualism" that was created for Bengali middle class women of the 19th and 20th century. When interrogated against the back-drop of colonial political economy, the overall double standards of Bengali nationalism in creating the women's individuality will become clear.

Women were situated by 19th century Bengali nationalist imagination in the ahistorical, traditional, and spiritual domain of the home. The rules and logic that governed the public domain were questioned, altered, and reconstituted in the private arena of the home. I would like to illustrate this home-world, public-private, Western-Bengali dichotomy by analyzing Tagore's depiction of female characters in his literary work.

It is worthwhile examining whether or not individualism was banned for 19th century Bengali women through the newly constructed patriarchy that carried out the project of female emancipation against the backdrop of colonial political economy. Partha Chatterjee has spelled out the home/world, spiritual/material, private/public, East/West, and female/male dichotomy to locate the ahistorical, *shastric*, and self-sacrificing positioning of women by 19th century Bengali nationalism.

This nationalist project sought its unique, and superior, feature in the spiritual domain that was represented by the home, the private, and the woman, and identified it as the "inner domain of sovereignty." It is within this arena of nationalist imagination that the Western modernism was challenged and altered. This alternation was done through flipping the meaning of the word "freedom" for women with the intention of restricting them from fully exploring their individualistic wills and desires, thus sustaining the mechanisms of an extended joint family that demanded total subjugation, selfless sacrifice, and endless service from women.

The word was assimilated into the nationalist need to construct cultural boundaries that supposedly separated the "European" from the "Indian." The 19th century "Indian" interpretation of the word "freedom" differed from the one understood in the West: it was argued that in the West, "freedom" meant *jathecchachar*, to do as one wished, and the agency to self-indulge; in India, however, "freedom" meant being free from one's ego, and the capability to sacrifice and serve willingly.[1] It is in the context of this selfless so-called "free" female individual that Tagore's interpretation of Binodini's character in *Chokher Bali* (1903) unfolds.

It is interesting to scrutinize the Binodini of Rabindranath Tagore's most celebrated novel, *Chokher Bali*, because this novel is hailed by critics as the foundation of the modern Bengali novel that "relied upon the detailed psychological method in which incidents and intentions are marshaled in a close array."[2] Even though *Chokher Bali* goes furthest into interrogating the widow's interiority, and offers social solution to the widow problem from the point of view of a male author who came closest to constructing the widow as an active agent of her will and action, at the end, the novel returns to an ahistorical and transcendental understanding of the widow's sexuality as a strategy of aesthetic rebellion against the Western construction of modernity.

Sympathy, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, derives from the application of reason to the human mind, and it creates a transcendental modern subject who "from the position of a generalized and necessarily disembodied observer" is capable of "self-recognition on the part of an abstract, general human being." It was this sympathy that enabled Tagore to assume the pains and complications of widowhood, and made it possible for him to seek the psychoanalysis of a widow's mind. *Chokher Bali* offers a special social space to an unfortunate widow, and follows the course of her agency in manipulating relationships in order to negotiate a respectable position within a patriarchal society.

The primary loop-hole in Tagore's construction of the widow's individuality is its ultimate limitation in comprehending the widow's individuality



Rabindranath and his wife Mrinalini Devi, soon after their Marriage, c.1883