Bodhi International Journal of
Research in Humanities, Arts and Science

Vol. 10 Special Issue 1 December 2025
E-ISSN: 2456-5571

Biopower on a Plate: Widowhood, Food and the Control of the Female Body

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Open Access

Manuscript ID:
BIJ-SPL1-DEC25-ML-017

Subject: English

Received : 26.08.2025
Accepted : 06.09.2025
Published : 31.12.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si1.25.Dec017

Abstract

India, despite being a rapidly growing economy and a diverse cultural hub, continues to uphold traditions rooted in patriarchy and caste-based oppression. Among these, widowhood remains a striking example of gendered marginalization, particularly in Bengali society. Widows are denied remarriage, isolated in ashrams, stripped of colourful attire, subjected to head shaving and placed on austere diets excluding garlic, onion and meat. These practices, often masked as tradition, function as instruments of discipline that regulate women's bodies and desires. This paper examines Rabindranath Tagore's Chokher Bali and Deepa Mehta's Water to analyze widowhood as more than personal bereavement as a socially constructed identity enforced through ritual and surveillance. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concepts of biopower and panopticism, it argues that food restrictions operate as technologies of control, desexualizing and moralizing the widow. Ultimately, widowhood emerges as a site where cultural ritual intersects with systemic oppression and patriarchal power.

Keywords: panopticism, widowhood, biopower, culinary restrictions, Gender opression

Introduction

India is often depicted as a diverse and ethically rich nation, celebrated for its reverence towards female deities such as Durga and Parvati, who embody various forms and are associated with prosperity and wealth. The country boasts a greater number of female goddesses than many others. However, the treatment of women in India raises significant concerns, as it appears to be marked by indifference. Since the post-colonial era, women have faced dual forms of oppression. This is evident in various aspects of life, including marriage, education, domestic labor, and personal freedom. The subjugation is particularly pronounced when women become widows, facing severe mistreatment in society.

Historically, the practice of sati, a cruel custom in which widows were compelled to self-immolate on their husbands' funeral pyres, was prevalent in India. The abolition of sati, largely attributed to the efforts of prominent reformers such as Raja Ram Mohon Roy, marked a significant turning point. However, this reform did not eliminate the societal mistreatment of widows, which persists in various forms to this day

Marriage has long held immense significance in Indian society, particularly for women, impacting various aspects of their lives, such as social standing, economic opportunities, and overall well-being. In contrast, widowhood – the civil status following the death of a spouse – has traditionally been viewed as

challenging and especially detrimental for women in this country (Chakravarti 1998).

Widowhood in India represents more than the aftermath of personal loss; it signifies a social transformation laden with disciplinary expectations, ritualistic mandates, and deep-rooted cultural codes. For women, the transition from wife to widow frequently initiates a journey into societal invisibility marked by austerity, isolation, and purification. This process is particularly intense in Hindu upper-caste communities, where widowhood is not simply endured but meticulously curated through ritual and habit. The widow, once a vibrant figure of domestic and emotional significance, becomes a symbol of moral asceticism, her desires repressed and her body subjected to regulation.Within widowhood, this domination is executed subtly, through prescribed culinary abstentions and aesthetic erasures. Widows are often forbidden from wearing colorful clothing or jewelry and are restricted to bland, satvik diets that exclude onions, garlic, and meat.

This study comprehensively deals with cultural analysis of *Chokher Bali*, Manjari Johri illustrates how widowhood, even in progressive literary contexts, remains tethered to these archaic norms. Binodini, the widow-protagonist of Tagore's novel, defies patriarchal expectations through her intelligence and autonomy, yet ultimately chooses renunciation over remarriage, citing societal stigma (Johri 26). Similarly, in Deepa Mehta's *Water*, widows are portrayed as ascetic figures forced into deprivation, their bland meals of rice and lentils serving as visual metaphors for their erasure.This paper interrogates the institutional regulation of widowed women through the theoretical lens of Michel Foucault's concepts of biopower and panopticism, applied within the framework of feminist cultural studies. Biopower, as articulated by Foucault, refers to the administration of bodies through subtle mechanisms that produce normalization rather than coercionIn the context of Indian widowhood, biopower operates through ritual food restrictions, aesthetic mandates, and societal expectations that encourage women to self-police internalizing norms and disciplining themselves. Panopticism, another key Foucauldian concept, reflects a system of surveillance where individuals behave as though they are always being watched, thus reinforcing conformity through the illusion of constant visibility (Foucault 205).

Together, biopower and panopticism offer critical insights into how widowhood is culturally engineered. Widows are not simply grieving partners—they become moral subjects regulated through food, tradition, and social positioning. The culinary abstentions imposed on them function as everyday acts of discipline, removing pleasure and reinforcing their marginality. These restrictions are socially sanctioned and symbolically charged; they suggest that a widow must purge herself of earthly desires to maintain familial and religious honor. In this regime, food is more than sustenance it is a ritual, a symbol, and a tool of control.

Drawing from both historical legislation and literary representation, the paper will explore the intersection of widowhood, food regulation, and biopolitical control. Literature and film offer particularly potent sites of analysis. In *Chokher Bali*, Binodini's experiences dramatize the tension between desire and discipline, autonomy and obligation. Her refusal to conform entirely to widowhood norms reflects a subtle resistance, yet the narrative ensures she remains bound by social codes. These texts do not merely depict widowhood—they critique its construction and enforcement.

The paper situates itself at the confluence of gender studies, food sociology, and postcolonial cultural theory, aiming to reframe widowhood as a biopolitical identity rather than a mere social role. By analyzing food rituals, body politics, and caste hierarchies, it reveals how the widow's body is simultaneously mourned and monitored. The rituals that surround her are not just about grief; they are about regulation, ensuring that she does not transgress the boundaries of acceptable femininity. This regulation is intensified through caste logic, which demands purity and associates widowhood with pollution, reinforcing exclusion through spiritual dogma.

Widowhood: A Socio-Cultural Identity

In India, women have traditionally been perceived as embodiments of power and dominance; however, their daily experiences can be fraught with difficulties. Widowhood is often regarded as a taboo, leading to the marginalization of widows, who are frequently treated as untouchables. This societal perception casts them as impure, and the notion of remarriage is commonly viewed as a sin.

In traditional Indian society, widowhood is not merely a result of personal loss but a profound transformation into a socio-cultural identity. The transition from wife to widow, especially for women, carries far more than emotional consequences; it repositions the individual within a framework of gendered expectations, religious discipline, and societal stigma. While grief is natural and individual, widowhood is publicly codified and institutionally reinforced, often resulting in lifelong marginalization.

Throughout history, Indian women have been compelled to live under the authority of male family members. They have often been denied social recognition for their independent lives and livelihoods. Historical interpretations of Hindu texts, such as the Laws of Manu, established a set of structured gender relations, particularly within the Brahmin caste, which dictated the conduct of widows Manu states, “In childhood, a woman is protected by her father, in youth by her husband, and in old age by her sons; she is never deemed capable of independence.” In the eighteenth century, women were burdened with extensive domestic responsibilities, including cleaning, cooking, washing, husking, and grinding grains, as well as fetching water and caring for children. They were expected to assist male family members with all household tasks. Seeking work outside the home was viewed as dishonorable. Consequently, poor and vulnerable widows faced significant hardships due to poverty, exacerbated by the discouragement of women's independent economic activities beyond the household.

In Bengali society, there was a deep prejudice against girls’ education. It was believed that an educated woman would inevitably become a widow. The parents of the girls would arrange the marriage of their daughters in their early ages, and very few parents would think about the necessity of education for their daughters. Marriage was considered an essential, irrevocable, and religious sacrament among the Hindus. Giving daughters away for marriage at a young age is an ancient Indian custom. In most cases, and for several reasons, the husband would die before his wife, resulting in a large number of young widows in society.The death of a husband often resulted in a painful existence for women. During their period of widowhood, they frequently faced harsh treatment from their in-laws and indifference from their own family members. In orthodox Hindu society, the notion of widow remarriage was unthinkable and such unions were strictly prohibited. Fei Hsin, a Chinese official who visited Bengal in the fifteenth century, noted that widows in Bengal were not permitted to remarry after the death of their husbands.

Widow remarriage was similarly prohibited among other orthodox Hindus. Following the death of her husband, a widow's status within the family drastically deteriorated. George Forster noted the plight of widows in the household, stating, In all circumstances, after the husband's death, the widow is regarded within the home as a slave or a menial servant.”

A widow was prohibited from using perfume or wearing jewelry and was required to abandon the consumption of fish, meat, or butter, subsisting instead on plain barley or wheat bread. She was allowed to eat only once a day. The designation of "widow" was conferred upon a woman several days after her husband's death through a specific ceremony. During this ritual, her female relatives would cut the thread of an ornament that symbolized her marriage. Following this, the widow was expected to shave her head, thereby joining the marginalized class of widows. An upper-caste Hindu widow could be easily recognized by her attire and shaved head. She was also required to undertake pilgrimages to sacred Hindu sites such as Benares, Prayag, and Gaya, where she would dedicate her

property to charitable causes and offer a sacrifice of her hair in memory of her deceased husband.Upon becoming a widow, she was typically sent back to her parents' home or compelled to live with her brothers, enduring extreme penance and hardship, often akin to servitude. The burdens placed on upper-caste Hindu widows were so severe that many strong-willed women chose to self-immolate on their husbands' funeral pyres. Additionally, some widows renounced their caste and sought refuge in brothels as a means of escaping these oppressive regulations.

In Hindu tradition, widows are traditionally prohibited from remarrying and are subjected to stringent societal norms that dictate their conduct. They are often required to remain confined to their homes, remove their jewelry, and wear garments associated with mourning. This cultural expectation not only renders them a source of shame for their families but also deprives them of their rights to engage in religious practices, resulting in profound social isolation.

Widows often face numerous restrictions that compel them to withdraw from social gatherings and family events, resulting in considerable social isolation. Additionally, many are prohibited from participating in religious ceremonies and rituals, further exacerbating their alienation from their communities. In certain instances, widows are expected to remain predominantly confined to their homes, which significantly limits their freedom and mobility. Despite grappling with their own emotional and social challenges, widows may also be tasked with caretaking responsibilities within the household, particularly for children or elderly family members.Consequently, many widows experience abandonment by their in-laws, which compels them to seek refuge in urban centers. Unfortunately, this migration frequently leads to their disappearance from societal view. Some widows gravitate towards the sacred city of Varanasi, while others travel to Vrindavan, a locale intimately associated with Lord Krishna, the Hindu deity venerated by numerous widows. In these cities, they often seek a sense of community and spiritual solace; however, they frequently encounter additional challenges and continued marginalization within society.These regulations are not arbitrary; they reflect the synergy between caste ideology and patriarchy two structures that operate in tandem to control women's bodies and choices. Patriarchy, according to Sylvia Walby, is "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (Walby 214).

Literary and Cinematic Representations of Widowhood: A Study of *Chokher Bali* and *Water*

The condition of widows in India has been a persistent site of social debate, reformist discourse, and cultural representation. Both literature and cinema have addressed this marginalization, often depicting how traditional customs, social ostracism, and religious interpretations regulate and suppress women's agency. Two significant texts that interrogate this social reality are Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Chokher Bali* (1903) and Deepa Mehta's film *Water* (2005). While the two works are separated by a century and medium, their shared concern with patriarchal oppression and institutionalized gender control connects them within a continuum of feminist critique.

In *Chokher Bali*, Tagore presents the life of Binodini, a young, intelligent, and passionate widow who is denied both personal fulfillment and social mobility because of rigid societal norms (Tagore 112–14). Her desires for companionship, education, and dignity are consistently subordinated to the codes of purity and widowhood enforced by her community. The text explores how widowhood becomes an instrument of confinement, not merely in physical terms but also through internalized moral guilt and social policing. Binodini's attempts to seek emotional connection are branded as transgressive, revealing the deep entrenchment of patriarchal structures that equate widowhood with moral death.

Deepa Mehta's *Water*, set in 1938 colonial India, extends this discourse into the visual medium by showing the lived realities of widows confined to an ashram (Mehta 00:15:34–00:17:02). Through cinematography, symbolism, and narrative progression, the film captures the ritualized violence

of compulsory austerity, celibacy, and poverty imposed on widows. The character of Kalyani, whose beauty is exploited for financial survival of the ashram, exposes the hypocrisy of a system that simultaneously venerates and commodifies widowhood. Chuyia's innocence, in contrast, highlights how even a child, widowed before understanding marriage, is subjected to the same oppressive structure. The stark imagery of the Ganges, at once sacred and polluted, serves as a metaphor for the contradiction between religious ideals and exploitative realities (Mehta 20).

Both texts utilize narrative as a mode of resistance. In Tagore's novel, the interior monologues of Binodini and her intellectual aspirations challenge the silence typically imposed on widows, asserting the right to individuality and education (Tagore 186). Likewise, Mehta's film uses the gradual awakening of Narayan, a reformist character, to foreground the possibilities of social change through questioning oppressive traditions. What connects both works is the exposure of widowhood as not merely a personal tragedy but a collective injustice perpetuated by religious and cultural institutions.

From an intersectional lens, these narratives also engage with class and caste dynamics. Binodini's relatively higher status offers her occasional opportunities for interaction, whereas the widows in *Water* largely belong to marginalized economic backgrounds, making them dependent on the ashram for survival. This layered oppression reflects how gender-based exclusion intersects with class hierarchies, leaving little room for autonomy. Furthermore, these works contribute to a broader feminist literary and cinematic tradition that challenges the normalization of widowhood as sacrifice and sanctity. By centering widows' voices, Tagore and Mehta destabilize the structures that silence them, urging audiences to critically examine how tradition can become a tool of systemic control.

In conclusion, *Chokher Bali* and *Water* exemplify how literature and cinema can act as agents of social critique. By portraying widowhood as an enforced condition rather than a natural fate, they compel readers and viewers to confront the moral contradictions of a culture that sanctifies suffering while denying justice. These texts do not merely narrate individual struggles; they expose a collective system that requires reformation, making their narratives as relevant today as when they were first created.

Food as a tool of Patriarchal Control: Ritual and dietary Regulation

Food acts as a crucial instrument of patriarchal control, shaping the lives of individuals, particularly women, through a range of cultural, societal, and economic mechanisms. This influence is apparent in diet culture, the allocation of food resources, and the gendered division of labor in activities related to food.Widows are perpetually subjected to subjugation, facing restrictions on their attire and behavior. They are prohibited from wearing colorful clothing or ornaments and are often excluded from joyful gatherings, such as weddings and celebrations. One of the most stringent regulations pertains to their diet; widows are expected to abstain from consuming garlic, ginger, onions, and any salted, meaty or buttery foods.

This analysis reveals the deep-rooted societal norms that govern the lives of widows, reflecting a broader cultural attitude that views them as symbols of mourning and loss.The dietary restrictions further illustrate the extent of their subjugation, as food is not only a basic necessity but also a significant aspect of cultural identity and social interaction. The implications of these regulations extend beyond mere dietary choices; they signify a denial of agency and autonomy. By enforcing such strict rules, society perpetuates the notion that widows must live in a state of perpetual mourning, stripping them of their individuality and reinforcing their role as dependents rather than independent individuals. This analysis highlights the urgent need for societal change, advocating for the recognition of widows as individuals deserving of dignity, respect, and the freedom to participate fully in life, including the right to choose their attire, engage in social celebrations, and enjoy a varied diet.

Widows, particularly within certain cultural contexts, are subjected to specific dietary regulations and restrictions as a means of patriarchal control. This physio-social exercise of restraint positions widows as social and sexual non-entities. The ancient Hindu text, the Laws of Manu, delineated rules for widows, mandating practices such as fasting, consuming limited meals each day, and abstaining from hot foods. Cultural norms legitimize the minimal food allocation for widows, who are often expected to fast frequently. These stringent dietary practices serve to reinforce the notions of purity and sacrifice associated with widowhood, effectively denying them an independent identity.

In Bengal, widows were historically confined and compelled to adhere to a strict vegetarian (niramish) diet, accompanied by regular fasting rituals, which were believed to "cool their ardor" and preserve their chastity. The Bengali kitchen, traditionally a space where women held authority, saw their power diminished upon becoming widows, including the prohibition against consuming non-vegetarian dishes. Such dietary restrictions contribute to the nutritional vulnerability of widows. Research indicates that widows often experience a decline in nutritional status following the loss of their spouse. Studies have shown that recent widowhood can significantly impact nutritional behaviors, leading to increased instances of solitary meals, meal skipping, reduced food preparation, reliance on pre-prepared foods, and diminished dietary variety.In specific settings, such as ashrams in Varanasi, many widows adopted vegetarianism after their husbands' death, as non-vegetarian food was labeled "tamasik" and associated with the incitement of sexual desires, which were considered immoral. The transition to a vegetarian diet was nearly universal among residents of government ashrams, particularly among those in the oldest facilities following widowhood. Furthermore, restrictions were imposed on the frequency of meals, with many widows consuming only two meals a day, typically consisting of simple fare such as rice, roti, dal, and vegetables, and at times, merely salt and roti.\

Mehta's *Water*, set in 1938 colonial India, portrays an even harsher reality for widows, many of whom are cast out of their homes and confined to ashrams under the guise of spiritual purity. The film's characters Kalyani, Shakuntala, Chuyia represent different dimensions of widowhood. Kalyani is young and beautiful, yet she is prostituted by the ashram's head to sustain the institution financially. Chuyia, a child widow, embodies the innocence stolen by such cultural practices. Shakuntala, torn between faith and reason, undergoes a personal awakening as she witnesses the cruelty meted out in the name of religion (Mehta 00:43:10–00:44:35). The visual narrative of *Water* starkly highlights how widowhood is ritualized into a lifelong sentence stripped of color, food, affection, and social participation.

The film features a poignant scene in which an elderly woman, lying on her deathbed, requests a laddoo, a type of besan sweet, from Chuyia, a young girl. In the context of the narrative, widows are prohibited from consuming such delicacies. Chuyia, who struggles for survival by begging at a temple in Varanasi, takes it upon herself to procure a laddoo from a sweet vendor for the dying woman, discreetly feeding it to her without anyone's knowledge. This act is particularly significant as it evokes memories of the last time the elderly woman enjoyed a laddoo—during her wedding at the age of eight. The film also explores the grim reality faced by widows, who are often exploited as prostitutes by affluent landlords. Chuyia, too, finds herself ensnared in this cycle of exploitation, lured by the promise of sweets. This portrayal underscores the commodification of food in the lives of widows, highlighting their vulnerability and the harsh societal conditions they endure.In exploring the rationale behind culinary restrictions, two primary reasons emerge. First, food serves as a source of vitality and enjoyment, enhancing the quality of life. The enjoyment of taste can provide widows with a renewed sense of purpose and a desire to engage with life, which is deemed inappropriate for them. Second, there is a biological perspective to consider. While some traditional medicinal systems propose that ingredients such as

garlic, onions, and ginger possess aphrodisiac properties, there is no definitive scientific evidence to support the notion that these foods can directly stimulate sexual activity in women. Although these ingredients are often linked to improved blood circulation, which may indirectly benefit sexual health, they do not have a direct effect on sexual arousal or desire. Thus, the restrictions on these foods reflect both a cultural and a biological rationale, reinforcing the societal norms surrounding widowhood

The culinary restrictions imposed on widows can be understood through the lens of gender biopower, as articulated in Foucault's framework. These restrictions serve to regulate both the physical and psychological well-being of women, reinforcing societal norms that dictate their behavior and identity. By limiting their access to certain foods, these practices not only control their bodily autonomy but also perpetuate a sense of deprivation and marginalization. Ultimately, such restrictions highlight the intersection of power, gender, and health, illustrating how societal structures can profoundly impact individual lives and reinforce systemic inequalities. This analysis underscores the need for a critical examination of cultural practices that contribute to the oppression of vulnerable populations.

Anatomo-politics of the Human Body

Michel Foucault was a French philosopher and social theorist whose work has had a profound impact on various fields, including philosophy, sociology, history, and cultural studies. In the late 1970s, Foucault introduced the concepts of "biopower" and "biopolitics" to elucidate the development of population control mechanisms that emerged during the 17th and 18th centuries. Michel Foucault was a French philosopher and social theorist whose work has had a profound impact on various fields, including philosophy, sociology, history, and cultural studies. In the late 1970s, Foucault introduced the concepts of "biopower" and "biopolitics" to elucidate the development of population control mechanisms that emerged during the 17th and 18th centuries. This form of power is concerned with the regulation of life processes within the social body, addressing aspects such as birth, death, illness, and health. It stands in contrast to earlier forms of sovereign power, which primarily centered on the authority to take life. Biopower functions through two principal dimensions: the anatomo-politics of the individual body and the biopolitics of the population.

This paper specifically examines the issue of widowhood, with particular emphasis on the culinary restrictions imposed on widows and their impact on both the physical and mental health of these women. By employing the concepts of *anatomo-politics* of the human body and biopolitics of the population, the analysis elucidates how these restrictions regulate the treatment of widows' bodies. This framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which societal norms and power relations shape the experiences and well-being of widows. This modality of biopower is focused on the individual body as an object to be disciplined and trained to optimize and produce effects, and to be useful and docile. The technologies of the disciplines, such as the constant exam, surveillance, and regulation of behaviour, originated in closed institutions (prisons, military, hospitals, factories, schools) and were then applied more broadly as a means of regulation and social control. The goal is to produce " docile bodies" through calculated manipulation of gestures and behaviour.

Food has historically been a form of social control, with those in power influencing those who are marginalized through either restrained access to or the particular exploitation of cultural food practices. The idea of social control is relevant in the case of widowhood, as customary or societal conventions may impose dietary restraints, and restrictions on certain food items represent forms of social control, in this case in terms of regulating women in terms of their bodies and their lives

The struggle over food can also reflect broader economic and political power dynamics. Food security interventions, for example, need to account for political economic dynamics. The power dynamics in food systems can undermine people's

agency, and restrictions on food can be a mechanism to maintain control over populations. This aligns with Foucault's perspective that biopower, particularly in modern societies, involves managing life for economic and political security Even if biopower is ubiquitous, it is also important to remember that power relations have always involved resistance. If food restrictions represent a form of biopower, the preparation, production, and consumption of food is also a site of resistance and struggle. For example, people within controlled environments may push back against polices related to food simply to claim their dignity and humanity. For widows of patriarchal control, any challenge to measured or imposed restrictions on food may represent resistance to forms of control and domination.

Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and Deepa Mehta's *Water* together illuminate how widowhood is transformed into a social identity structured by surveillance, deprivation, and ritualized control. These works reveal that widowhood in India has historically been less about individual grief and more about institutionalized governance of the female body. The widow is not simply a bereaved spouse; she is a body stripped of color, taste and companionship an embodiment of patriarchal discipline.

Through the lens of Foucault's theory, this study underscores that widowhood represents a site of biopower, where society regulates women by dictating their diet, appearance, mobility and emotional life. The imposition of satvik diets, exclusion from social celebrations and prohibition of remarriage function as technologies of discipline that transform women into "docile bodies." The panoptic nature of these restrictions ensures that widows internalize the surveillance of society and regulate themselves, believing that their very survival and dignity depend upon compliance. In this way, widowhood is not merely personal misfortune it is a biopolitical condition, systematically engineered to uphold patriarchal and caste hierarchies.

The role of food within this regulatory regime is particularly significant. Food, usually associated with nurturing and pleasure, becomes an instrument of denial and erasure. The prohibition of garlic, onion and meat ingredients symbolically linked with vitality and desire marks a deliberate attempt to desexualize widows and align their bodies with ideals of purity. As *Water* poignantly illustrates through scenes of bland meals and the longing for sweets, dietary austerity is more than a culinary habit: it is a daily reminder of loss, an embodied ritual of suppression, and a cultural script that disciplines women into submission. The control of food thus intersects with both physical health and symbolic identity, reducing widows to figures of lack and deprivation.

Tagore and Mehta, however, resist the totalizing silence imposed upon widows by amplifying their voices and desires. Binodini, though constrained, asserts her intellectual vitality and emotional depth, challenging the narrative that widows should remain invisible. In *Water*, Shakuntala's quiet rebellion and Chuyia's eventual escape expose the cracks in the system, suggesting that even within oppressive structures, acts of dissent can reimagine possibilities of freedom. These moments remind us that widowhood, while constructed as a symbol of sacrifice, can also be reclaimed as a space of resistance and transformation.

This study argues that dismantling these structures requires more than legal reform; it demands a cultural and ideological transformation. Widowhood must be reframed not as perpetual atonement but as an identity deserving of dignity, autonomy, and social inclusion. Food, rituals, and mourning practices must be disentangled from control mechanisms and reimagined as spaces of healing rather than oppression. Literature and cinema play a crucial role in this process by portraying widows not merely as passive sufferers but as subjects with desires, intelligence and resilience, they disrupt the silence imposed by tradition and ignite conversations about reform.

In conclusion, widowhood in India embodies the nexus of gender, caste and power, where food

becomes both a tool of subjugation and a potential site of resistance. By bringing together Foucauldian theory and feminist critique with literary and cinematic representation, this study exposes the ways in which patriarchal societies discipline female bodies under the guise of piety. At the same time, it affirms that resistance whether through small acts of defiance or larger cultural reimaginings is both possible and necessary. Widowhood, as reflected in *Chokher Bali* and *Water*, thus becomes not only a narrative of loss but also a call for justice, empathy, and transformation.

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