



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Beyond Western Gaze: Indigenous Epistemologies And Feminist Decolonization

¹Dr Anupriya Singh, ²Dr Shipra Malik

¹Associate Professor, ²Associate Professor

¹Department of English

¹Swami Keshvanand Institute of Technology Management & Gramothan, Jaipur, India

Abstract: This paper, *Beyond Western Gaze: Indigenous Epistemologies and Feminist Decolonization*, explores how indigenous knowledge systems intersect with feminist decolonization, challenging the Western perspectives that have long dominated global discourse. By examining Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and Bama's *Karukku*, the study highlights how marginalized voices resist both colonial and patriarchal narratives through alternative ways of knowing.

In *Chokher Bali*, Tagore critiques the rigid social norms and patriarchal constraints of colonial Bengal, portraying female agency within an indigenous cultural framework. The character of Binodini challenges societal expectations placed on widows, illustrating the tension between tradition and modernity. Meanwhile, Bama's *Karukku*, a deeply personal autobiographical work, sheds light on the struggles of Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu, exposing the systemic oppression of caste and colonial religious structures. Through her narrative, Bama reclaims oral traditions and lived experiences as valuable forms of knowledge, making her work a powerful tool for decolonization.

By analyzing these texts through the lens of indigenous epistemologies, the paper emphasizes how non-Western feminist narratives disrupt dominant knowledge structures. It argues that decolonizing feminism requires moving beyond Eurocentric frameworks to include the experiences, oral histories, and cultural expressions of marginalized communities. Ultimately, the study calls for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminism that values indigenous ways of knowing as essential to the broader decolonization movement.

Index Terms - Indigenous epistemologies, feminist decolonization, postcolonial feminism, caste, colonialism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The hegemony of Western epistemologies has historically marginalized indigenous knowledge systems, erasing alternative ways of knowing and being. Feminist decolonization seeks to challenge these dominant frameworks by centering voices and experiences that have been historically silenced. This paper explores the intersection of indigenous epistemologies and feminist decolonization through the analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and Bama's *Karukku*. By engaging with these texts, the study demonstrates how marginalized voices disrupt colonial and patriarchal narratives, offering new paradigms for understanding agency, identity, and resistance.

Indigenous epistemologies refer to knowledge systems rooted in the lived experiences, oral traditions, and cultural practices of indigenous communities. These ways of knowing challenge the universalizing tendencies of Western knowledge production by emphasizing relationality, community, and situated knowledge. Feminist decolonization, in turn, critiques the Eurocentric foundations of mainstream feminist theory and advocates for the inclusion of diverse cultural and social perspectives. By foregrounding indigenous

epistemologies, feminist decolonization challenges both the patriarchal and colonial underpinnings of knowledge production.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that decolonizing methodologies require a commitment to recognizing indigenous knowledge as valid and transformative. Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) critiques the homogenizing gaze of Western feminism, advocating for a more intersectional and culturally nuanced understanding of women's experiences. This paper draws on these theoretical frameworks to analyze how *Chokher Bali* and *Karukku* articulate indigenous knowledge and challenge the colonial-patriarchal gaze.

CHALLENGING PATRIARCHAL NORMS IN TAGORE'S *CHOKHER BALI*

Set in colonial Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* offers a critique of the rigid social norms imposed on women. The novel centers on Binodini, a young widow whose defiance of societal expectations exposes the tensions between tradition and modernity. Within the context of indigenous epistemologies, Binodini's narrative reveals how patriarchal structures are intertwined with colonial ideologies.

Tagore portrays Binodini as an intelligent and self-aware woman who resists the passive role prescribed to widows. Her agency challenges the moral codes that seek to confine women's desires and autonomy. By presenting Binodini's voice and interiority, the novel foregrounds indigenous forms of female agency that disrupt the colonial and patriarchal gaze. Furthermore, the domestic space, often regarded as a site of women's subjugation, becomes a locus of resistance and self-definition.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the homogenizing gaze of Western feminism, which emphasizes a more intersectional and culturally nuanced understanding of women's experiences. By analyzing *Chokher Bali* through Mohanty's lens, we can recognize how the novel challenges a monolithic view of womanhood and underscores the significance of cultural specificity in understanding women's lives. Tagore depicts women with distinct identities and motivations, challenging the notion that all women share a singular experience of subjugation. Binodini, Ashalata, and Rajlakshmi each embody different facets of womanhood, shaped by their socio-economic conditions, personal aspirations, and cultural expectations.

Binodini, the central character, defies the passive victim stereotype often associated with women in colonial literature. As a young widow, she is expected to conform to societal norms of chastity and self-denial. However, Binodini is intelligent, ambitious, and desires agency over her life. Her emotional entanglement with Mahendra reflects both her vulnerability and her rebellion against the rigid structures imposed upon widows. Through Binodini, Tagore illustrates how women's oppression cannot be understood solely through the lens of gender; it is also mediated by social status and cultural prescriptions. Mohanty's framework helps us see Binodini not as a universal symbol of female oppression, but as an individual whose experiences are rooted in the unique socio-cultural milieu of colonial Bengal.

In contrast, Ashalata represents the sheltered, naive woman who has been raised within the confines of domesticity. Her innocence and devotion to her husband reflect the idealized image of womanhood promoted by the patriarchal society. Yet, Asha's passivity is not simply a product of her gender; it is shaped by her upbringing and her limited exposure to the outside world. Through Asha, Tagore demonstrates that women's subordination is not an innate condition but one that is culturally produced and maintained. This aligns with Mohanty's argument that understanding women's experiences requires attention to the specific cultural and historical forces that shape their lives.

Rajlakshmi, Mahendra's mother, represents another dimension of womanhood—one rooted in authority within the domestic sphere. While she wields power over her household, her position is circumscribed by the same patriarchal structures that confine younger women. Her treatment of Binodini reflects internalized patriarchy, illustrating how women can both suffer under and perpetuate systems of oppression. Mohanty's critique of the homogenizing gaze reveals how such figures disrupt simplistic binaries of victim and oppressor. By applying Mohanty's insights to *Chokher Bali*, we can see how Tagore presents a nuanced portrayal of women whose identities are shaped by the intersections of gender, class, and culture. The novel resists the universalizing tendencies of Western feminism, offering instead a culturally specific exploration of women's lives in colonial Bengal. This approach underscores the necessity of recognizing diverse female experiences rather than subsuming them under a singular narrative of oppression.

RECLAIMING ORAL TRADITIONS IN BAMA'S KARUKKU

Bama's *Karukku* is a seminal autobiographical text that articulates the experiences of Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. Through her narrative, Bama foregrounds the lived realities of caste oppression and the intersecting forces of colonialism and religious patriarchy. The text reclaims oral traditions and everyday experiences as valuable epistemological resources, challenging the erasure of Dalit voices within both colonial and postcolonial discourses.

Bama's narrative method reflects the oral storytelling traditions of Dalit communities, privileging collective memory over linear historical accounts. This approach aligns with indigenous epistemologies that value experiential knowledge and communal identity. By centering Dalit women's voices, *Karukku* destabilizes the authority of colonial and patriarchal knowledge systems, advocating for epistemic justice and social transformation.

"Karukku" manifests a paradigm shift from the notion of eternal truth that dalits are untouchable. The name Karukku chosen by Bama itself has a symbolic significance. It has two meanings- first; palmyra leaf, that, has serrated edges on both sides, and second; a felicitous pun which means embryo and seed, indicating freshness, newness (Bama xv). In the preface to the first edition, the author herself draws parallelism between the saw-edged palmyra karukku and her own life: "Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra karukku in the days when I was sent out to gather fire-wood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them, but later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book" (Bama xxii). Besides imparting the subjective meaning to the term "karukku", the author has also tried to universalize the term by calling the "oppressed" as "double-edged" karukku, thus challenging their oppressor (Bama xxiii), and implicitly conveying the meaning that dalits are no longer silent. She has also described God as a two-edged sword, but he is the God of the rich because "it no longer stirs the hardened hearts of the many who have sought their happiness by enslaving and disempowering others (Bama xxii).

In Bama's village, the upper caste communities and the lower caste communities reside in different parts of the village. To the left of the stream live the Nadars who are toddy tappers and shopkeepers, while to the right, one after the other, live the Koravar who sweep streets, the leather working chakkiliyar, the Kusavar who make earthenware pots, the Palla settlement and the paraya settlement to which the author belongs. There were separate streets for the Naickers, the landowning caste. The upper caste people never went to their side or otherwise they would be polluted. The description of an elderly man holding the packet by its string without touching it and extending the packet to the Naicker, bowing low and cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand is one such example of untouchability. The incidence of bus is another instance. On being answered by Bama to a Naicker woman that she is from Cheri caste, the latter at once get up and move off to another seat. In such situations they would always prefer to stand up all the way rather than sit next to a low caste person. Bonded labour is another menace that Bama has highlighted in her work. Through it powerful groups tried to control the lives of less powerful groups by making them economically dependent. People of Paraya community worked for Naickers as bonded labourers.

According to Spivak, "Subaltern is a silent position". Upward class mobility is harder for these people because of long standing patterns of prejudice. This viewpoint is quite evident in both the novels but at the same time it seems to me that this viewpoint has been effectively challenged by both Bama and Maria Campbell. Bama suffered throughout her life. She portrays the oppression she faced as a student and as teacher. Her life took a big turn, when at the age of 26, she took the vows to become a nun. But in the seminary and later in the convent, Bama realized the bitter truth that the condition of dalits will always be same. Thus, seven years later, in 1992, Bama walked out of the convent without any regret that she left all comforts and convenience, rather she was happy because for her that was a counterfeit existence. In 1995 she lost her younger sister and then one year later both her parents died. Despite difficulties, which beset a dalit woman living on her own Bama was quite satisfied because she says, "there are many opportunities for me to spend my life usefully, and especially, to work for the liberation of dalits" (Author's Afterword to the first edition). "The fact is both a consolation and an encouragement to me. It is for this reason that the urge grows greater day by day that I should carry quietly in my heart all the sorrows that followed one upon the other and to live a life that has meaning and dedication". Bama came across several people who helped her to identify her strengths, and made her put them to use for the liberation of dalits. She was also tried to be crushed by repressive measures directed towards dalits but her conviction stands firm that is ready to trample everything that hinders the creation of an egalitarian society.

DISRUPTING DOMINANT KNOWLEDGE STRUCTURES

Both *Chokher Bali* and *Karukku* disrupt dominant knowledge structures by asserting indigenous ways of knowing and resisting the homogenizing tendencies of Western epistemologies. Tagore and Bama articulate alternative epistemologies that prioritize relationality, lived experience, and communal memory over abstract, universalized knowledge.

The narratives emphasize the importance of situating knowledge within specific cultural and historical contexts. For instance, Binodini's defiance in *Chokher Bali* and Bama's reclamation of Dalit identity in *Karukku* illustrate how marginalized subjects negotiate and resist multiple layers of oppression. These acts of resistance challenge the authority of Western feminist frameworks and advocate for a more inclusive, intersectional approach to knowledge production.

TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE FEMINIST DECOLONIZATION

The analysis of *Chokher Bali* and *Karukku* underscores the necessity of incorporating indigenous epistemologies into feminist decolonization. Moving beyond Eurocentric frameworks requires recognizing the validity of diverse knowledge systems and the voices of those historically excluded from mainstream discourse. This entails a commitment to epistemic pluralism and the deconstruction of colonial and patriarchal paradigms.

As scholars like Anibal Quijano (2000) and Sylvia Wynter (2003) argue, decolonizing knowledge involves dismantling the coloniality of power and embracing multiple epistemological perspectives. By centering indigenous ways of knowing, feminist decolonization not only critiques existing power structures but also envisions new possibilities for social justice and collective liberation.

CONCLUSION

Beyond the Western gaze, indigenous epistemologies provide crucial insights for feminist decolonization. Through the analysis of Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and Bama's *Karukku*, this paper highlights how marginalized voices resist colonial and patriarchal narratives by asserting alternative ways of knowing. These texts illustrate the transformative potential of indigenous knowledge in challenging dominant frameworks and advancing a more inclusive feminist praxis.

Ultimately, decolonizing feminism requires an ongoing engagement with the lived experiences, cultural expressions, and epistemologies of marginalized communities. By embracing these diverse perspectives, we move closer to a world where knowledge is not only more inclusive but also more reflective of the rich tapestry of human experience.

REFERENCES

1. Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed., Zed Books, 2012.
2. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review*, no. 30, 1988, pp. 61–88.
3. Narula, Smita. "Untouchability: The Economic Exclusion of the Dalits in India". The International Council on Human Rights Policy Seminar on Economics of Racism. Geneva. January 24- 25.2001.
4. Sekhon, Joti. *Modern India*. Boston. Mc Graw Hill, 2000. Print.
5. Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?: Speculations on Widow Sacrifice". *Wedge* 7/8. Winter/Spring 1985. 125-130.