

KRISHNAKANTA'S WILL

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (Chatterjee)

(1878)

Story The plot in this short novel is not particularly original. It involves forged wills and disgruntled heirs, but it also has convincing characters who suffer in dramatic ways. The story begins with two brothers, Krishnakanta and Ramkanta, who are joint owners of a valuable property. Each brother has a son. The problem is that the deed to the land is only in the name of Krishnakanta. Krishnakanta meant to draw up papers that would ensure that his nephew (Ramkanta's son, Govindalal) would inherit his half of the land, but he failed to do so while his brother was alive. Finally, he does draw up a will and leaves half of the property to Govindalal and the rest to Govindalal's wife, Bhramar. In other words, he disinherits his own son, Haralal. Haralal attempts to persuade his father to change the will (even threatening to ruin the family's name by marrying a widow), but his father remains adamant. In the end, Haralal resorts to forging a new will and substituting it for the real one. He is assisted (unwittingly) in this crime by Rohini, who is young and beautiful and also a widow. When Rohini realises what she has done, she is full of remorse and tries to put the genuine will back in place but is caught red-handed by Govindalal. Now the story gets darker. Govindalal, who is married to Bhramar, falls in love with Rohini, and Rohini returns his affection. She finds him gentle and kind, and she wants to atone for her collusion with Haralal in attempting to destroy the will that favoured Govindalal. Govindalal is torn with anxiety: he wants to remain loyal to his wife, who is naïve and innocent, but he can't resist Rohini, who is experienced and sensual. This is the familiar contrast between the woman of purity and the woman of lust. Govindalal loses his struggle, abandons his wife and elopes with Rohini. Rohini attempts suicide, but Govindalal rescues her from a river. Later, however, he murders her when he becomes insanely jealous and then finds that his wife, Bhramar, has died of an illness. In the end, the inheritance is allocated as it should be—both Govindalal and Haralal get their fair share, but Govindalal renounces material goods and wanders off as an ascetic.

Themes

Patriarchy The theme of patriarchy in a feudal society is introduced in the opening sentences of the novel, where Chatterjee writes: 'There was a rich Zamindar family [landed aristocracy]; in Haridragram. The head of the family was Krishnakanta Roy. He was a very rich man; the annual income of his estate was nearly two lakhs of rupees. The estate was acquired jointly by him and his brother Ramkanta.' Each one of these phrases ('zamindar family'; 'head of the family'; 'annual income'; 'acquired jointly') serves to build up a picture of a traditional patriarch running an estate in a rural society. The most important aspect of patriarchy is inheritance, the acquisition and transfer of money, property and status. This is why the novel focuses on Krishnakanta's will. And not just one will, but a second, forged will. As head of the family, Krishnakanta makes the major decisions. He is in control, as is shown when he responds to a query as to whether he has sent Rohini to the police (in connection with the forged will). Instead of replying, he says, 'What have I to do with the police? I am the police, magistrate and judge in this estate. Will it help my manliness if I were to send this unimportant woman to prison?'

Widowhood The power and the beauty of this novel, according to many critics, lies not in its complicated plot about a will but rather in its depiction of widowhood. By the time *Krishnakanta's Will* was written (1878), the issue of a widow's place in Indian society had been debated in the colonial metropolitan centres like Calcutta and Madras for almost a century. Widows were not only not allowed to remarry, they were also ostracised from society and expected to live in seclusion. In addition, the issue of widowhood was inextricably tied up with other controversial practices, such as *sati* (when a widow dies on her husband's funeral pyre) and child marriage (which meant that some widows were very young). Chatterjee is courageous in his characterisation of the widow, Rohini, who is the main female character. He makes her a young and beautiful widow, thus raising the stakes to their most explosive level. Unsurprisingly, she is filled with unfulfilled sexual desire, which was the

chief fear that underpinned traditional social restrictions on widows. Also, the author deftly invokes the issue of *sati* when he has Rohini say, 'This village is my heaven, it is the temple of Govindalal [her married lover]. It is my cremation ground, here I shall burn to death.' But the novel is melodrama, and no matter how far it challenges social conventions, it cannot overturn them. The widow is rebellious, but she dies in the end, murdered, in fact, by her jealous lover.

Characters

Krishnakanta Krishnakanta is the patriarch of the family. He is a proud and powerful man, and, although not cruel, he takes pleasure in asserting his authority in the family and on the estate.

Ramkanta Ramkanta is Krishnakanta's younger brother. He is a minor figure, whose only contribution to the story is to trust his older brother not to cheat his son out of his fair share of the estate. He then promptly dies on the first page.

Govindalal Govindalal is Ramkanta's son. He is kind and empathetic, although also weak. Although he reacts with consideration toward most people, he cannot resist the sexual attraction of Rohini and leaves his wife for her. He later murders Rohini, and although his crime is undiscovered, he renounces worldly pleasures and becomes a wandering ascetic.

Haralal Haralal is Krishnakanta's son. He is shallow, greedy and devious. He not only attempts to destroy the will and put another in its place, he also lies to Rohini in order to enlist her assistance in the crime.

Rohini Rohini is the young widow, who is cast in the role of a femme fatale. She (unwittingly) aids Haralal in forging a new will and seduces Govindalal, and in the end she is shot dead by Govindalal. However, she also represents the 'new' woman, who rebels against oppressive social norms.

Bhramar Bhramar is the young and naive wife of Govindalal. Although she is a symbol of undeserved suffering, she is not a saint. When she hears that Rohini has fallen in love with her husband, she curses her, saying that 'she can go kill herself', which is what Rohini attempts to do and fails. At the end, Bhramar herself dies from a mysterious illness.

Krishnakanta (Decisive)

Character As the head of a wealthy feudal family, Krishnakanta is both powerful and proud. He is rich but also generous, particularly in giving to the poor and to the pundits. 'A mountain peak has fallen,' says one man in the novel after the patriarch's death. We understand that Krishnakanta is a decisive man, that he acts on principle and without sentiment, and always without much internal debate. This quality comes from the near-dictatorial status he holds in the family and on the estate. Nevertheless, despite his immunity from any kind of opposition, Krishnakanta acts fairly toward most people. This is especially true in the all-important issue of his will, by which he transfers his ancestral assets to the younger generation. Indeed, it is in the key moments when Krishnakanta makes a decision about his will that his significant character traits are revealed.

Activities As the zamindar [feudal lord] of a large, rural estate, Krishnakanta is not only a landowner, with all those responsibilities, he is also a local magistrate. Although he is already advanced in years when the story begins, he is active in both capacities. He spends the morning supervising a variety of activities on the estate and the afternoons with paper work. At times, he sits in court as a judge and dispenses justice for minor offences. And sometimes, he is called out in his role as magistrate to help quell a riot or investigate a crime.

Illustrative moments

Fair-minded Krishnakanta is an honest and considerate patriarch, intending to treat everyone fairly. It is not his fault that he has been born into the authoritarian position of patriarch and that others are his dependents. This kind spirit is illustrated in the opening scene of the novel, when Krishnakanta makes out his will. Although he holds the vast estate jointly with his brother, Ramkanta, the legal

papers are in his name only. Ramkanta has no fears that his brother will deceive him, but he does wonder what will happen after his brother dies and the estate passes into the hands of Krishnakanta's sons. For this reason, Ramkanta had wanted to have his brother draw up a will that would guarantee that his son, Govindalal, would inherit his portion of the property even after his brother's death. However, Ramkanta dies before he could arrange such a will. Now, Krishnakanta is in a perfect position to cheat his brother's family: in legal terms, as far as the paperwork is concerned, he is the sole owner of the estate and could, therefore, pass it on to whomever he chose. He, however, has no such intention. Nor does he even entertain such a plan. Instead, he draws up a will that allocates the property in a fair manner. Half of the estate is bequeathed to Govindalal, his dead brother's son. The remaining half is divided with mathematical precision: each of his two sons gets three-sixteenths, while his daughter and his brother's widow each gets one-sixteenth. Nothing could be fairer (given the gender bias of the time).

Proud This equitable division of the assets, however, does not please Krishnakanta's eldest son, Haralal. And when that son complains, we see another one of Krishnakanta's prominent traits—his pride. When the details of the will are revealed, Haralal storms into his father's study and berates him, screaming, 'Why are giving away my inheritance to them? You are an old man who has lost his mind. Why give them anything? Just say you will feed and clothe them.' At this challenge to his authority, Krishnakanta takes great offence and tells his son to stay in his place. The son then threatens to marry a widow (and thereby sully the reputation of the family), but Krishnakanta plays his trump card and disowns him as a son. 'I will not be spoken to like this by you, a mere child.' When the younger brother begs his father to change his mind, and not to completely disinherit his own son, Krishnakanta deigns to shift his calculation, but only a miniscule amount. Now, the recalcitrant son, Haralal, will receive a sixty-fourth share of the estate.

Censorious A third important element of Krishnakanta's character is later revealed in the third episode involving his ever-changing will. Govindalal, his nephew, and son of his dead brother, is scheduled to receive a full half of the considerable assets of the estate. Then, Krishnakanta comes to know of Govindalal's infatuation with the widow Rohini. This scandalous behaviour by his nephew infuriates him. He has never been cruel to Rohini, never insulted her or demeaned her, but she is, in his mind, a social outcaste and any association with his nephew is outrageous. Krishnakanta is now an old man, but he still retains his capacity, but the author assures us that 'his intellect was not obscured, and he was not deluded.' The still-sharp Krishnakanta orders his lawyers to draw up another will, which will disinherit Govindalal and transfer his share to Govindalal's wife.

Govindalal (Weak)

Character Govindalal is the son of Ramkanta and the nephew of Krishnakanta, the patriarch of a large and wealthy family estate in the Bengali countryside. Govindalal is a kind and generally virtuous person, who is preferred by Krishnakanta as the person to inherit the estate, thereby cutting out his own son, Haralal. Govindalal marries Bhramar, and they live a happy married life for a year or two, during which time he is devoted to her. Govindalal is a naturally empathetic man, and he takes pity on the widow Rohini, especially after she is caught in an attempt to change Krishnakanta's will. But he is also a weak person, and, without a lot of encouragement from Rohini, he falls in love with her. Now, he is beset by inner turmoil. He loves his wife, but he is in love with Rohini. He feels guilt for his disloyalty to his wife, but he cannot fight his desire for the beautiful and sensual widow. He is a man without inner strength.

Activities Govindalal is active around the estate and family house. He helps his uncle with the accounts and sometimes supervises building works. He also has an interest in Bengali poetry, and in the evening he likes to read and write verse. He is not much of an outdoor man, but he does like to walk in the estate gardens, admiring the flowers and trees. He also sings religious songs (*bhajans*), and later, when he elopes with Rohini, she accompanies him on the *tabla* (a type of drum).

Illustrative moments

Weak Although Govindalal has all the attributes of a hero—he is handsome, he is kind and he is rich—he sinks to a pitiable level because he lacks inner strength. This tragic failing is best illustrated at the moment when he admits to himself that he is in love with Rohini, and that she is in love with him. They have just had an intimate conversation, in the garden of the family house, where no one

will see or hear them. She walks away, and he is left with his conscience. He feels himself being literally torn away from his wife, who knows nothing of his true feelings. In a moment of surrender, he falls on his knees and prays, 'Oh Lord, save me from this danger. I shall not be able to save myself unless you give me strength. I shall die, Bhramar [his wife] too will die. Abide in my heart—with you I can conquer my weakness.' One knows as soon as he utters this plea, that he is doomed. The very fact that he recognises his weakness but can only call in supernatural help to overcome is itself an admission of defeat.

Remorseful Govindalal is defeated in his struggle against his sexual urge, but he is a sincere man, nonetheless, and feels genuine regret. Indeed, for much of the novel he tosses and turns with guilt for his thoughts of betrayal and later his act of betrayal. As the novelist describes it, he listens first to his kumati [bad counsel] and then his sumati [good counsel], who offer him the two pieces of opposing advice, like two angels perched on his shoulders. A poignant illustration of his inner struggle comes toward the end of the story, when Krishnakanta disinherits Govindalal after he has found out that Govindalal has fallen in love with Rohini. Now, Govindalal is penniless and will have to leave his ancestral home. He walks slowly around the house, seeing what he will lose and then he begins to cry. As Chatterjee explains, 'He remembered how happy Bhramar [his wife] had made him with her simple, sincere, childlike love, how it had inspired her every word and flowed incessantly like a stream. He knew that he would never get back what he was now giving up. But he also said to himself that he could not undo what he had done.' This scene demonstrates that the weak man at least has a conscience.

Passionate However genuine his remorse may be, Govindalal is in love with Rohini. That powerful passion is what drives him and most of the story to the very end. The dangerous potential of such a forceful love is illustrated in the conclusion, when Govindalal murders Rohini. This is all the more dramatic because just days earlier he had rescued her from a suicide attempt by pulling her out of a river. However, when he wrongly thinks that she is having an affair with another man (on another estate where they have gone to live, having assumed pseudonyms), he cannot control himself. To lose her would be to die himself, he thinks, and he goes into a frenzy of wild jealousy. She denies his accusations, and we as readers know she is telling the truth, as she always has in the novel. But Govindalal is blinded with rage. Out of his senses, he takes the pistol that has been left in the room by someone else. Before he knows what he is doing, he shoots her and she falls dead. It is a melodramatic scene, clichéd even, and yet the novelist has convinced us that such a sincere man is capable of such passion.

Rohini (Bold)

Character Rohini is not just a widow; she is a young and beautiful widow. And those three elements determine her character. Rohini is the object of much commiseration, but she is more complex than just a victim. She is capable of cruelty, anger and petty jealousy. The author explains at one point that her 'wrath can be attributed partly to her unrequited desire for a complete life with a husband and partly for being jilted by Haralal.' She is bold and defiant, refusing to accept the role that society has set out for her. She does not restrain her sexual desires or her desire to marry again and have children. She is able to fulfil at least her bodily desires because she is beautiful, vibrant and articulate. However, she is also the cause of her own downfall. Because of her defiant nature, she sometimes makes rash decisions, is intemperate in her speech and unrepentant after her mistakes. Mixed in with these potentially dangerous characteristics, is her honesty and openness. At times, the novelist lets us glimpse a soft and innocent person beneath the rebellious behaviour.

Activities Rohini lives by herself, although she spends time in the large house of Krishnakanta, where she comes in contact with young men (Haralal, Krishnakanta's son, and Govindalal, his nephew). She performs some domestic chores for the household, but she also spends time reading when she is alone. She visits her uncle and aunt, who live in another town.

Illustrative moments

Honest Rohini is the most complex and intriguing character in this story. She suffers as a widow, she is capable of cruelty, she is ruthless and she ruins a happy marriage. But, at the crucial point in the story, in the episode of the forged will, she tells the truth. Manipulated and deceived by Haralal, Rohini contrives to get her uncle to make up a new, forged will. Then she slips into Krishnakanta's

bedroom, while he is sleeping, and takes the real will from a drawer, ready to replace it with the forged one. Then the old man wakes and sees her. Rohini could still lie, say she was looking for something and escape, but instead she admits what she was doing, that she is a thief and a forger. When Krishnakanta suspects (correctly) that his son, Haralal, has put her up to this trick, she refuses to incriminate him, even though she despises him. Krishnakanta does not believe her, but she says that she will be punished, have her head shaved and humiliated in public. Rohini still keeps silent, accepting this undeserved punishment rather than placing the blame where it actually belongs, on Haralal. She is a woman of passion and strength, who strikes out at those who stand in the way of her own gratification, but she also a woman of principle who tells the truth.

Courageous Rohini may be a young widow and a suffering woman, but she shows tremendous courage. She has the lowest status possible in the village, and yet she summons up the strength to challenge people and conventions. A dramatic illustration of her lack of fear to speak out occurs when she confronts Haralal after their plan to plant a forged will is exposed. Now, she realises that she has been deceived: Haralal had told her he would marry her if she could replace the real will with a forged one that would allow him to inherit the property. But when she discovers that he has no intention of marrying her, she turns on him. 'She suddenly stood up and, threw back her sari from over her head [women should not be unveiled in front of men] and looked at Haralal full in the face. I am a thief? And you are a saint! Who told me to steal? Who tempted me?...You are a cheat and a liar...If you were a woman, I would beat you with a broom. Since you are a man, leave now, before I tell you what I really think of you.' One has to understand that she is speaking to the son of a rich and powerful man, and that she is poor and vulnerable. We sometimes use the phrase 'speaking truth to power,' thinking it is a new coinage, but Chatterjee knew all about that more than a century ago.

Defiant Rohini was one of earliest representatives of the 'new' woman in Indian fiction. On our first encounter with the widow, we see a woman who 'was then in the full bloom of youth and overflowed with beauty like the harvest moon in autumn.' This is not the dried out and hidden widow that she should be. Her rebelliousness is evident throughout the story, but it is symbolised powerfully in a scene where she wears her bangles in public. Any kind of ornament, or beautification, is considered inappropriate for the secluded life of a widow, but Rohini has other ideas. She is described walking to the river to draw water, like any other woman in the village. Her golden bangles, given to her at her marriage, gleam in the sun, and she walks with a carefree ease, swinging her hips. There can be no more powerful act of resistance than this, to display herself as if she were an ordinary woman in the eyes of all the villagers.