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## **Binodini ‘The New Woman’ in Rabindranath Tagore’s Novel “Chokher Bali” (or Binodini/A Grain of Sand)**

**Hanny Gandhi**

Research Scholar, IGNOU, New Delhi, India

**Abstract:**

*My paper will delve into the quest for identity of ‘Binodini’ from the famous novel Chokher Bali, 1903, by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. With this novel wherein the novelist laid down the foundation of psychological novel in Indian literature, he also created the first representative of the modern Bengali woman. It was the emergence of a new heroine in the world of novels in India. ‘Binodini’ is a widow who refuses to be condemned to the unjust, inequitable and humiliated existence inflicted by the orthodox Hindu society of the time on widows. Widowhood in the late 19th and early 20th century was considered the supreme curse; and a widow was considered inauspicious, hence looked down upon. Even her presence was supposed to fill one with trepidation. However, Binodini rebels against such a social system and wants to assert her rights and privileges on equal footing with others. She is depicted as an educated and talented young girl but at the same time, she is also aware of the social implications of widow-remarriage. She declines to marry Bihari in a very decisive tone:*

*...let these words be my final reward. I want nothing more than what you have just affirmed. If I took more it would not last. Religion and society would never tolerate it. (Chokher Bali, 2003:218).*

*Tagore who is celebrated as a great lover of freedom was an enlightened soul and therefore as early as the beginning of the 20th century, he raised an issue of the widow-remarriage and gave us a character like Binodini who not only declines to adjust in the set rules of society but in her quest for identity she sets out to avenge her rejection at the hands of Mahendra who once refused to marry her without ever meeting her. Though in the end, she refuses marriage due to social restrictions, she emerges out an emancipated woman.*

**Reference:** Tagore, Rabindranath. (2003). *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali* tr. Sreejata Guha, New Delhi: Penguin.

### **1. Introduction**

Rabindranath Tagore was an explorer of the individual personality. He has created such unforgettable characters through his novels and short stories that one is struck by their sheer vividness and strength, especially that of the women characters, which are still very fondly remembered. Many of these women characters were models, instrumental in heralding the progressive age in which we live today. Tagore advocated the emancipation of women through his novels and was a master craftsman. He was able to express complex human emotions effortlessly. In fact Chokher Bali could not have been written by anyone but the Renaissance man himself: Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. In 1903 he laid down the foundation of the Indian psychological novel with Chokher Bali. Not only this, with this novel, he also presented the first modern woman in Bengali literature, Binodini, and she marked the emergence of a different heroine in the novels. She was different because she was outspoken. She was different because she was educated. And most importantly, she was different because she was emancipated. Binodini was the new woman of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who had come with a mission and it was to show to the world that she too existed. The whole novel revolves around the strong personality of Binodini and it is the story of her search for an identity which is entirely her own. It has been rightly observed that:

*Binodini heralds the emergence of a new class of emancipated woman, who are no longer prepared to be downtrodden by the society but fight to assert their rights.” (Singh 2002:50)*

Tagore who is celebrated as a great lover of freedom was an enlightened soul and therefore as early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he raised an issue of the widow-remarriage and gave us a character like Binodini who not only declines to adjust in the set rules of society but in her quest for identity she sets out to avenge her rejection at the hands of a man (Mahendra) who once refused to marry her. Though in the end, she herself refuses marriage due to social restrictions, she emerges out an emancipated woman. Tagore gave “the ideal of self-reliant Indian women, fighting not only for their own rights but also for those subjugated nationalities and the down-trodden humanity”. (Majumdar, 1968:1). Binodini is a widow with intricate ties who tries to find her place in the then orthodox Hindu society. According to Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyaya (1970), the eminent biographer of Tagore, “it is acknowledged on all hands that Chokher Bali has ushered in a new trend in the history of Bengali literature.” (Chakravarty, 1970: 42).

Chokher Bali is the study of the human mind through four different characters. They are Binodini (the heroine herself), Mahendra (who refused to marry Binodini without even meeting her), Asha (Mahendra's wife) and Bihari (Mahendra's friend). In the novel, Binodini is a convent educated young widow with exquisite beauty and intellect but who is compelled to return to her village and live a secluded life after the death of her husband. Widowhood in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was considered the supreme curse. A widow was considered inauspicious and hence looked down upon in the society. Even her presence was supposed to fill one with trepidation.

On the other hand Mahendra is married to Asha who is a very naïve and gentle rather childlike girl. Bihari is Mahendra's childhood friend and it was he who was to marry Asha but when Mahendra takes a liking to her, he withdraws and does not reveal his feelings to anyone. After Binodini returns to her village, she is invited by her distant relative Rajalakshmi (Mahendra's mother) to stay with her. Binodini immediately accepts the invitation and accompanies Rajalakshmi to stay with her and look after the aged lady. But as soon as she enters the household, many feelings hitherto dormant in her mind, suddenly shake her to the core. She observes that Mahendra who refused to marry her without ever meeting her was happily married and it was because of his refusal that she was married to an ailing man who died leaving her a widow to suffer for the rest of her life. Hence she concludes that the only person responsible for her deplorable condition in the society is Mahendra and decides to avenge her insult. At the same time, she is filled with a mixed feeling of hatred and jealousy, which she takes for Asha who is not as beautiful and educated as her and yet was enjoying a life of complete marital bliss which could have been Binodini's own life had she been married to Mahendra. This creates an upheaval not only in the mind of Binodini but also the whole household as the story progresses. She says to herself:

*This happiness, this passionate ardour of the husband was my due and should have been mine. I could have ruled this house like a queen, could have made the husband into a slave and transformed both the household and the husband into something wonderful from the present shabby, silly state. What I was denied and deprived of now belongs to this slip of a girl, this little playdoll. (Chokher Bali, 2003: 89).*

Initially Binodini is unaware of her real mental state. She thinks that as she loves Mahendra, she is jealous of his wife but very soon she realizes that it was the lack of love in her life that makes her hate Asha. She is quite fond of listening to the exchange of love letters between the husband and the wife and imagines herself to be a married woman. Consigned to a life of chastity and loneliness, her only pleasure comes from meddling and manipulating the love between Mahendra and Asha. She starts playing with the mind of Mahendra with her beauty and sensuality and sees that it is very easy to seduce a married man like him and consequently she begins to dislike his weak character and hollow personality. An affair of a widow with a married man in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and dealing with issues like adultery, distrust, lies, etc. were a bold portrayal by the author. The conflict between social taboo attached to a widow's existence and the demands of the heart and body are portrayed with utmost delicacy. The narrative includes a sensational account of two illicit relationships. These are:

- Mahendra's blind infatuation for Binodini; and
- Binodini's secret love for Bihari

*Simultaneously Bihari too takes a sympathetic liking for Binodini and is very happy to see that she is not made to spend her days of widowhood in wilderness; but at the same time he also knew that she is not a girl either to be "trifled with or ignored." (Chokher Bali, 2003: 129).*

Binodini is one of the earliest representations of an individualistic, passionate and complex female characters created by Tagore. She is a strong female protagonist with shades of gray that appear very real to the reader. She is a perfect housekeeper and knows the art to keep the man of the house happy. She has not been depicted as a Goddess or a stereotype of a household woman to be idealized. In fact she has all the qualities and flaws of a real human being. She is the woman-ocean where different rivers carrying emotions of love, sympathy, jealousy, envy, desire and resentment meet. Though she suffers greatly, she always relies on herself to get back on her feet. She is a self-willed, strong-headed and intelligent female character for the time period in which the novel was written. An educated girl she holds her own opinion about the politics of the day. A thorough conversationalist, she stood firmly for her views unlike Asha. Binodini succeeds in winning the hearts of those around her through her strong convictions; after all, words are the most powerful weapons of all. It has been rightly observed that:

*Binodini...successfully undermined male domination and male ego by making Mahendra grovel before her and then quietly transferring her loyalty to Bihari...she subverted the social norm as well as the individual norms of behaviour...she had the fortitude to take her own decision and stick by it which is the ultimate testimony to the realization of one's self-identity. (Mukhia, 2003:69).*

Binodini is a representation of the transition between the old and the new, a subject Tagore is quite fascinated with. She is educated and mentally an independent woman. Her strength is in her ability to keep going, no matter what her life throws at her, she holds herself throughout. She challenges the conventions of the society that did not allow a widow to lead a happy life, hence, using her charm and intellect she underscores and attacks the anti-feminist traditions of the time. Choosing to change the social view of how a widow must behave, leads to defining the identity of the brave Binodini. Each person is justified in leading a life of her/his liking and this is exactly what Binodini did by declining to lead a pathetic life of a widow who was not even considered a living being. And this experience leads her on a journey towards an acute self-realization. She considers Mahendra's love from all

angles and discovers that he is a selfish man who loves neither his wife nor her but only himself. Replying scornfully to a letter written by the love-smitten Mahendra, she writes:

*I have no right to love or be loved in this world. That is why I play at love to lighten my sorrow... A burning thirst for love has parched my mind and I know it too well. I implore you again and again, please give me up, do not pester me, do not put me to shame with your shamelessness. I have no desire to play the game any longer. You may shout and cry, but from me you will get no response whatsoever. (Chokher Bali, 2003: 147).*

Binodini at once leaves Mahendra's house the moment she realizes that all this love game is destroying her mentally and killing her inner-self. Bihari, whom she loves and who also respectfully loves her, follows her. He proposes marriage to her but the soul-enlightened Binodini at once falls on his feet and hopes to meet him in another life. Whereas on the one hand she knows that there are social restrictions to a widow-remarriage, she also does not want to put Bihari's name into disrepute or take his love as sympathy. She is portrayed as, "the eternal feminine trudging through the ages in quest of her lover, weary with pain, distracted with longing, bursting the throb of desire, trailing through poetry, through song until she stands on the other shore crying 'Ferry me across O boatman!'" (Iyengar, 1985: 318).

Tagore has very skillfully moulded Binodini's character. Where on the one hand, she is shown to be a manipulative and shrewd lady in the Mahendra household, she crossed all the boundaries of selflessness as well when truly in love with Bihari. With both pain and dignity, she refuses the proposal and resolves to withdraw from the life of Asha and Mahendra. Leaving her own desires aside, she thinks about Bihari's reputation in the then orthodox society and says that if marrying her tarnishes his name, she too will not be able to hold her head high. She says:

*Don't misunderstand me – you will not be happy marrying me. I, too will lose my self-esteem. (Chokher Bali 2003: 202).*

In the ambivalent emotions of Binodini, Tagore questions the gender stereotypes that are the conflict between social morality and the need for emotional freedom. The novel portrays the struggle of a young and beautiful widow for self-actualization and selfhood in a social system that denies all scopes for such attempts. Binodini transgressed the social norms of the time initially for worldly pleasures and emotions but in the end it turned out to be a quest for the implementation of human values through unconditional love. Widows like Binodini suffered thorough condemnation at the hands of the society and still their moral superiority made them live a life of dignity and self-respect because after all a lotus flower blooms in the mud. Binodini is the epitome of a woman in the patriarchal setup bearing the burden of tradition on her shoulders. She reacts to the changes that were taking place around her to usher in modernity but in the end succumbs to the religious and societal pressure. This however does not mean that she lost herself in this whirlpool. In fact in the quest to find order in her life, she found her own self. Binodini revolts against an outmoded morality that did not allow a widow to lead a life of dignity. She is in many ways an empowered woman because of her rebellion and self-will. She rebelled against the set rules framed for widows and flouted them at will; and she also adhered to those rules only when she wanted to, as Krishna Kriplani (1968) writes "Her tragedy is a lasting shame to the Hindu conscience." (Kriplani, 1968: IV).

## 2. References

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