

TAGORE’S BINODINI AND BIMALA: THE EMANCIPATED INDIAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore was one of the key figures of the Bengal Renaissance. Groups of social reformers had emerged by the latter half of the nineteenth century who placed the spotlight on women’s issues such as lack of education, confinement to home’s inner chamber, the condition of widows and the marrying off of child brides to adult men. But Tagore through his literary works fought for the upliftment of Indian women. This is very much evident in the novels *Grain of Sand* and *The Home and the World*. Present paper aims at how the protagonists – Binodini and Bimala of Tagore’s *Grain of Sand* and *The Home and the World* respectively emerge as emancipated women, though there are several social barriers.

Grain of Sand has been called the first modern novel written in India. It’s Bengali original **Chokher Bali** was first published in 1903. The novel centres on “the problematic figure of the upper caste Hindu widow, whose re-marriage was traditionally forbidden and who was enjoined to mortify the flesh and lead a Spartan existence” (Introduction, *A Grain of Sand*).

Binodini is the only child of her parents. Though she is beautiful, accomplished and tutored by an English governess, her marriage has become a problem for her mother as her father died without leaving enough money for her dowry. Her hand is offered to Mahendra, the son of the wealthy Rajlakshmi, an old friend of her mother’s, who after initial acceptance, backs out due to his aversion for an arranged marriage and fear of the new bride’s ousting his mother. Rajlakshmi could help her friend only by getting Binodini married to a distant cousin of hers “whose only claim to distinction was his excessively enlarged liver” (30). So she soon is widowed and condemned if full-blooded youth to a life of privation, denial and misery in a remote village. Three years later, on an impulse and against the wishes of his mother, Mahendra marries the unschooled, plain looking Asha, the niece of his aunt Annapurna. Very soon an estrangement develops between the possessive mother and the wife-infatuated son. Rajlakshmi

unable to bear the sight of her's uxoriousness goes away to her native village, accompanied by Bihari, Mahendra's close friend. There she is looked after with devotion and hospitality by Binodini and is very pleased by her treatment. Rajlakshmi sympathises her pitiful plight of loneliness. She is so charmed by Binodini's accomplishments that she brings her along with her to Calcutta.

Binodini with her beauty, grace, dignity and intelligence wins the admiration of all including the 'high-souled' Bihari and 'simple-minded' Asha. Binodini's art of looking, demeanour and speech easily charms the old fashioned Rajlakshmi. She regrets not making Binodini her daughter-in-law and tells her about it. Similarly, Mahendra, too admires her skill in household duties which he notices when Asha is away at Kashi.

Binodini is also an embodiment of tender lure and sympathy for other fellow beings. In the beginning she is not jealous of Asha and loves her as a true friend and helps her in domestic works. She expresses deep concern for Asha to Bihari when Binodini thinks of leaving Mahendra's house. She has great regards for Bihari. She is deeply hurt when Mahendra unjustly accuses Bihari as being secretly in love with Asha. Moved by this allegation she consoles Bihari like a mother. Binodini has love and respect for Rajlakshmi. She joins Mahendra and Asha in their revelry, only after attending to the sick Rajlakshmi and discharging the household chores. She nurses the servants also when they are sick, with sympathy and care.

Binodini has the capacity to study the psychology and minds of the people around her. She correctly assesses Rajlakshmi that she is responsible for her son's moral ruin and accuses her. She also makes a correct estimate of Mahendra's character and realizes his infidelity and meanness. Bihari's understanding of a clean devoted woman in Binodini and his image of hers is shattered when he sees Mahendra, clasping Binodini's feet in his room, where she was about to sweep out of the room in a fury. In spite of Binodini's taunts, Mahendra pursues her with repeated declaration of love.

The wound inflicted by Bihari when he flung her away, violently, in a gesture of contempt, appears very sacred to her. She does not allow Mahendra even to touch the wound and she does not apply anything to heal it. Her love for Bihari turns into devotion. Obeying Bihari's orders with devotion Binodini retires to her village where she finds her life unbearable as she is branded a harlot. To escape from this she agrees to elope with Mahendra who follows her even to the village. She agrees only when he promises he would not do anything against her wishes. Binodini goes to Calcutta with Mahendra in order to find Bihari herself. After a long struggle, Binodini is able to locate the villa in Allahabad where Bihari lived for a short time. Bihari believes every word Binodini utters and offers to marry her. But Binodini, with a spirit of self-abnegation does not accept him.

Tagore's another novel **The Home and the World** (1916) is set against the backdrop of freedom struggle and Swadeshi movement in Bengal. Besides, it presents the role of women at home and outside, and the gender equality. The novel portrays the life of a woman in *purdah* in the 1920s in Bengal upper class society and considers her plight as that of 'a caged bird'. Bimala being married into a Rajah's house, aspires to be a traditional Hindu wife on the model of her mother. During the first nine years of her married life Bimala's existence is similar to that of the traditional class of women. She begins her day by consecrating the dust of her husband, Nikhil's feet. Everything connected with the husband is sacred. She keeps all her husband's letters in a sandalwood box and puts flowers over it. She has no interest in the world other than her husband. She is of the firm belief that devotion will never stand in the way of true equality. Also,

according to her, surrendering one's pride in devotion is woman's only salvation. She is more interested in giving than in receiving love. But Nikhil says "...that man and wife are equal in love because of their equal claim of each other." (Tagore, 14)

Bimala leads a contended life, discharging the duties of a traditional housewife. To outsiders the women of Rajah's (Nikhil) house appear like caged birds. But Bimala does not agree with that assessment since "...I had so much in this cage of mine that there was not room for it in the universe." (19) Bimala knows how to please the elderly women related to her husband. She keeps their company and engages them in her own way. She maintains the dignity of the house and adjusts easily without creating unpleasant scenes. She wins the favour of Nikhil's grandmother by reading out to her stories from English books. But her husband, Nikhil is quite contrary to Bimala.

Nikhil is sensitized over the curtailment of the freedom of the womenfolk of the family. He appoints an English governess, Miss Gilby to educate his wife. He believes that woman should come out of *pardah*. He asks Bimala to "come out into the heart of the outer world and meet reality....If we meet, and recognise each other, in the real world, then only will our love be true." (18) He thinks that "the pressures of society" and household conventions cramp the woman's individuality. Her love for the husband who is the only man she has come across, is incomplete. Nikhil believes in educating and enlightening his wife, Bimala because it is only an enlightened woman who can keep the home in the most satisfactory manner. He is perceptive enough to recognize the full affective powers of womanhood in Bimala and tries to prepare her a new role as a 'modern' woman who will know how to construct a meaningful 'home' only after she knows the outer 'world'. Nikhil longs to find Bimala blossoming fully in all her truth and power.

Even the old grandmother in this big *zamindari* family accepts Nikhil's programme for training up his wife as part of man's whims. As far as Bimala is concerned it is quite clear that the home provides the permissible limit within which the world is allowed to operate. Bimala, the affective symbol of womanhood has to bow to the order of a traditional household. She has no desire to come out.

Bimala is always status conscious and never parts with her rights as the head of the family. In order to appear civilized and refined, she develops a fastidious taste and dresses according to the current fashion, ignoring the remarks of her sister-in-law, Bara Rani and she also displays her European goods before her guests.

Anyhow, Bimala simply has to cross the threshold to leave the enclosed space of home and arrive at the man's world of the drawing room and the library but it is not easy for her even to make this transition. Her outlook on life and society also undergoes a change with the advent of the *Swadeshi* Movement. Her home which is her only world, is now broken and she is exposed to a bigger world. Eager to do some personal sacrifice for the country, she wants to get rid of her English teacher, and also decides to burn her foreign clothes but is dissuaded by her husband who tells her: "...why this bonfire business?....Why not try to build up something?" (24) Bimala feels unhappy that though her husband supports *Swadeshi*, he has not whole-heartedly adopted the spirit of *Bande Mataram*.

Through Sandip, the new found friend of Nikhil, the novelist presents the temptations of life. On the one hand Bimala is given full freedom to mingle with people outside the inner sanctum of home, on the other hand, Sandip lures her by his oratory and tall talks about the work he is doing for the country.

The fiery eloquence of Sandip holds Bimala spellbound. Sitting behind a screen at his meeting, she impatiently pushes it away – the action is symbolical that now she is face-to-face with the world – and fixes her gaze on Sandip.

Though Nikhil is perturbed and pained by Bimala's growing infatuation for Sandip chooses not to intervene but to wait patiently for her to realize the truth of circumstance. Under the pretext of promoting *Swadeshi*, Sandip stays on with Nikhil and pursues his strategy of seduction extolling Bimala as the "Queen Bee" of the *Swadeshi* workers. She feels exalted when told that all the country is in the need of her. Sandip calls Bimala "a living flame" (56) to guide the patriots in the struggle for freedom. From the golden letters of wifehood, he leads her into the golden fetters of goddesshood. He lures her to believe that she is someone else, a superior being, and she does not realize that he is interested in her as a woman and nothing more. Finally, Sandip makes Bimala steal sovereigns of gold from her own home. The indignity of it sets her on the path of self-introspection:

The burden of the theft crushed my heart to the dust...I could not think of my house as separate from my country: I had robbed my house, I had robbed my country. For this sin my house had ceased to be mine, my country also was estranged from me. (192-93)

Sandip tries to embrace Bimala when he sees all that gold sovereigns, but she thrusts him away from her – a symbolical release from him. She recounts:

The moment I had stolen my husband's money and paid it to Sandip, the music that was in our relations stopped. Not only did I destroy all my own value by making myself cheap, but Sandip's powers, too, lost scope for their full play...Sandip has lost his aspect of the hero. (211)

Sandip betrays his covetousness and jealousy when Bimala hands over her jewels to Amulya, the young revolutionary to be sold to replace the stolen amount. She now sees him in his true colours, realizes that all his eloquence is mere bluster and all his songs of praise false. She exclaims:

Sandip, the wielder of magic spells, is reduced to utter powerlessness, whenever his spell refuses to work....His snaky coils, with which he used to snare me, are exhausted, - I am free. I am saved, saved. (239-240)

The novel is a great and significant one. For the first time in the history of the Indian novel, Tagore portrays the tensions and problems caused in the life of a woman. Through Bimala, the novelist records the transition of women from their secluded life in the *zenana* to the national politics. Bimala is ready to sacrifice her life for her country:

I would be angry for my country's sake. If necessary, I would smite and slay to avenge her insults. I have my desire to be fascinated, and fascination must be supplied to me in bodily shape by my country. She must have some visible symbol casting its spell upon my mind. I would make my country a Person, and call her Mother, Goddess, Durga, - for whom I would redden the earth with sacrificial offerings. (39)

Nikhil tries to empower his wife by persuading her to interact with the outside world, concretely taking her to Calcutta, and his arrangement of English for her, for the purpose and entreating her 'to be present when he had particular friends to dinner' (30) are all symptomatic of a desire to promote 'individualism' in his wife. Bimala is also conscious of the strength that resided in her:

I was *Shakti*, also an embodiment of Universal joy. Nothing could fetter me, nothing was impossible for me; whatever I touched would gain new life. The world around me was a fresh creation of mine; for behold, before my heart's response had touched it, there had not been this wealth of gold in the Autumn sky! (126)

Though her modern-minded husband introduces her to modern ways of life, and encourages her to step out of the *zenana* into the world outside, does nothing to help his wife to come out of her predicament. Anyhow, Bimala does not seek the assistance of her husband or Chandranath Babu, the teacher of Nikhil. Nikhil believes his wife “has got rid of all her fears by dint of the English woman's teaching.” (221) Hence, the education that Bimala has received helps for the awakening in her and the judicious savouring of her freedom has called for a balancing between the home and the world.

Bimala, who, at the outset of the novel is a devoted Hindu wife known for her humility and dedication and true to the nature of a loving and dedicated wife in the ‘home’, emerges out, at the end, as an empowered woman after being exposed to all the temptations of the ‘world’. In Bimala, we find woman who asserts herself. She takes liberty only to realize soon that a line should be drawn as to how far one should go. Tagore makes Bimala both sustain and question the patriarchal pressures. She asserts herself declaring that wives are not to endure the world, the worst form of slavery and bondage.

Women are particularly vulnerable to inequality and exploitation because they are too timid and submissive, lay greater emphasis on compromise rather than confrontation, adapt themselves according to men and follow them. (Goel, 178)

Bimala never wants to be vulnerable to exploitation nor does she want to be a victim of fate or frivolity. Some of the decisions that she takes prove to be wrong and ultimately she emerges victorious.

Groups of social reformers had emerged by the latter half of the nineteenth century who placed the spotlight on women's issues such as lack of education, confinement to home's inner chamber, the condition of widows and the marrying off of child brides to adult men. But Tagore through his literary works fought for the upliftment of Indian women. This is very much evident in the novels **Grain of Sand** and **The Home and the World**. In **The Home and the World** Tagore depicts the patriarchal *zamindari* set-up where the women folk have to honour the practice of living in the *zenana* and not to come out in the presence of outsiders, especially male beyond the *pardah*. It's a mode of living in 1920s under the socio-familial value system of the *zamindari* or the upper middle class families of Bengal which restricted women mobility and freedom, except in few cases. Through the portrayal of the life of Bimala, who records “I was no longer the lady of the Rajah's house, but the sole representative of Bengal's womanhood” (28), and Nikhil's attempt for empowering his wife, Tagore projects his belief on the emancipation of woman. In **Grain of Sand** Binodini is the most convincing female character. She rebels against the harshness of orthodoxy. She fights alone the battle for her happiness. She refuses marriage and opts in the pilgrimage centre at Benares. Binodini heralds the emergence of a new class of emancipated Indian women, who are no longer prepared to be downtrodden by society but fight to assert their rights. What Tagore initiated in 1920s by ascribing a special place to women in his educational programme of regeneration for their upliftment has led a number of women to be empowered. And this can be seen now-a-days, in this technological world, the women are

reaching the stars. Tagore aspired that the women must come out of the *pardah* and now the women are not just serving their own country in different arenas, they are even exploring the universe.

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