

## THE COMPLEXITY AND FRAGILITY OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN CHOKHER BALI

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### Abstract

Tagore was born in the era of Indian Renaissance where India had to fight not only with British invaders, but her social political and economical issues as well. It was the era when people were ready to leave old ideas and were excited to adopt new thoughts and ideas. Tagore took his art as a weapon to reform the society regarding woman's welfare in our society. Tagore knew very well until women would come and stand in front of the world for themselves, society will not change. He always stood in favour of woman's emancipation. The title of the book can be translated as "a grain of sand", a "constant irritant to the eye", or an "eyesore" Tagore's *Chokher Bali* poignantly projects the status of women and their changing scenario in Bengal in the first decade of the twentieth century. Through this novel, Tagore does not put Binodini on a pedestal and exempt her of any fault, but instead humanises her and shows readers the complexity of human nature which can cause the most rational beings to act irrationally.

**Keywords:-** Renaissance, woman's emancipation, complexity of human nature, psychological inter-play.

Tagore was born in the era of Indian Renaissance where India had to fight not only with British invaders, but her social political and economical issues as well. It was the era when people were ready to leave old ideas and were excited to adopt new thoughts and ideas. Political, religious, social and cultural movements were going on. Our patriarchal society was not so liberal that it would give rights to women, hence Tagore took his art as a weapon to reform the society regarding woman's welfare in our society. Tagore knew very well until women would come and stand in front of the world for themselves, society will not change. He always stood in favour of woman's emancipation. Tagore had a great impact of west. It is not because they honored him, but he met there some of great artists. After visiting England he met was not only an Indian but a world citizen. There he met many great personalities as George

Bernard Shaw, H.G Wells, John Galsworthy, Andrews Bradley, W.B Yeats, Robert Bridges, and many more.

Rabindranath Tagore's 1903 Bengali novel *Chokher Bali* is often referred to as India's first modern novel, where he highlighted the issues of women's education, child marriage and the treatment of widows in 19th and 20th century Bengal. It was first serialised in the Bengali literary magazine, *Bangadarshan* first founded in 1872 by Bankim Chanra Chattopodhay and later resuscitated under the editorship of Tagore in 1901. The title of the book can be translated as "a grain of sand", a "constant irritant to the eye", or an "eyesore". "Eyesore" was used as the title for its first English translation by Surendranath Tagore published in 1914. Tagore had used a working title *Binodini* before its publication. In this play Tagore presents the complexity and fragility of human relationships through psychological inter-play.

*Chokher Bali* traces the story of Binodini – a beautiful, convent educated widow who cannot easily endure society's negligence. Binodini is rejected by Mahin, but he later marries the younger and uneducated Asha. Binodini becomes envious of Asha and Mahin's marital bliss and uses Mahin's mother Rajlaxshmi's dislike of Asha to manipulate her way into their lives. Binodini's increasing mental and sexual frustrations lead her on a path of revenge and manipulation. The novel explores the extramarital affair between Binodini and Mahendra, her friendship with Asha, and her real feelings for Bihari, Mahindra's friend. but most importantly presents. The term 'Chokher Bali' literally means an irritation in the eye or an eyesore, which is what Asha and Binodini become for each other. Binodini is presented in many avatars a hopeless widow, a friend, a temptress, and a remorseful woman. Tagore gives readers an insight into her desires and longings, the feeling that many widows at the time had silently undergone. On the other hand, Asha is presented as naive and innocent, which combined with her illiteracy initially results in her subjugation. The narrative almost becomes an implicit debate on love and morality, urging readers to understand Asha and Binodini outside of the social norms of Bengali society.

In *Chokher Bali*, Tagore draws parallels between the educated and the uneducated through Asha and Binodini. According to Mary Wollstonecraft "*girls that have been... weakly educated are often left by their parents without any provisions*". Binodini is likewise left without any financial provision, but is left with education which allows her the liberty of free thinking. Binodini represents a new female subjectivity whom western education transforms into a woman with her own heart and mind, and is not tied to traditional customs.

Asha is a poor orphaned girl, which in junction with her young age and illiteracy subjects her to subordination at the hands of a woman she considers her friend and her husband who she worships. Asha must depend on the men in her life, first her uncle and then her husband due to being uneducated and an orphan. It is only when this dependence, her husband, the male patriarch in her life leaves her that she gains a sense of her own identity through educating herself and learning to do things on her own. Binodini's education is what helps her survive in a world where widows are looked down upon – this education is apparent throughout the novel and is her primary weapon against exacting revenge from the uneducated Asha and the proud Mahin. Binodini's jealousy of Asha nurtures and magnifies whom despite being "an illiterate and unfinished 'child woman'" gets everything Binodini, a complete woman does not, namely marriage and a dotting husband.

Binodini is very clever woman. She takes Asha in her confidence and makes her friend. They call each other *Chokher Bali* (Eyesore). Asha was sore of Binodini's eye. She thinks that if Mahendra had married her, she would have been the queen of the house and not this uneducated girl. She has the guts to make her house a palace. But

this was her fate that she could not get married to Mahendra. She knows very well the taste of chilli and pepper of love. But she is unable to get that taste of love because she has no companion in her life. Tagore has described her state of mind beautifully:

“Such a comfortable home and such an amorous husband! I could have made a kingdom of this home, a slave of this husband. Would the house have been in such a condition then, or the man of the house been reduced to such a state? And to have this babe in arms, this toy doll in my place!”<sup>1</sup>

Binodini was jealous of Asha and Mahendra’s relation and his love for Asha, hence to take her revenge, Binodini tries to attract Mahendra. She enters in their happy married life.. Binodini knows very well that Asha can not judge her foul game because of her innocence. Initially Mahendra does not pay attention to her. He does not dare to make eye contact with Binodini. He moves away from her too. Binodini herself is sometimes confused. She does not know whether she loves or hates Mahendra, or she wants to punish him or not. Sometimes she questions herself:

“Laughing bitterly to herself, she would wonder: ‘Has any woman ever suffered a condition such as mine? Whether I want to die or to kill, I simply couldn’t say! But whether she wanted to surrender to the fire or to scorch others with it, she needed Mahendra desperately. Where else in the world would she direct her poisoned arrow of fire? ‘Where can he go?’ sighed Binodini. ‘He must return. He belongs to me.’”<sup>2</sup>

Tagore does not put Binodini on a pedestal and exempt her of any fault, but instead humanises her and shows readers the complexity of human nature which can cause the most rational beings to act irrationally. Through, Binodini and Asha, Tagore shows the importance of education. There is an imbalance in power due to an imbalance in education between the educated and uneducated characters. Both Binodini and Mahin hold a certain kind of dominance and power over Asha as they are both educated and able to use literature and poetic language in their interactions, be it covertly or overtly, and Asha is unable to understand.

In Asha’s absence when Binodini looks after Mahendra, she comes closer to him to know him more. He notices her beauty and becomes mad about her and falls in love with her. Binodini knows very well that Asha is very simple and innocent girl. By showing sympathy for Asha, she would conquer Mahendra and Bihari’s heart very easily. Because Bihari too has a soft corner for Asha. Binodini pays her attention to Bihari now. But he moves away from her. Binodini wants to show the difference between Asha and her to Mahendra and Bihari.

“Once, just once, Binodini wanted to drag Mahendra and Bihari down into the dust and show them the difference between Asha and Binodini. What a contrast between the two of them! Prevented by adverse circumstances from conquering any male heart with her brilliance, Binodini assumed the image of the goddess of destruction, her fiery, powerful spear upraised in her hand.”<sup>3</sup>

The novel is full of psychological interplay between the characters, especially Binodini and Mahin. When Binodini dictates letters to Mahin at Asha’s request, although the letters are written in Asha’s handwriting, it is clear to Mahin that the “*letter had to be from Binodini*”. Mahin is fully aware that “*Asha could never have expressed in so eloquent a language the new pathos that surfaced*”, between him and Binodini. The letter “*covert yet uttered*”, could not have been constructed by the ‘unpretentious Asha’, as she has neither the education nor experience to be able to articulate such a “*mark of romance*”. Tagore shows the intellectual interchange

between the characters, possible due to education and the interception of letters. The innocent and illiterate child bride Asha fails to understand the exploitation she faces at the hands of her husband and dear Bali (Binodini) whom she trusted blindly. Tagore does not justify Binodini's actions and actually is sympathetic to Asha, perhaps stressing that Asha would have been able to avoid Binodini's interference in her marital life, if she were educated enough to understand the intentions behind her friendly nature.

Binodini is in love with Bihari. Only for him she moves from one place to another. She is searching him without telling Mahendra. Now she too behaves as stranger to Mahendra. She started following all rules which were followed by the widows. She ate once in a day. She did not laugh aloud. Mahendra was frustrated now. He was realizing now that he has lost everything, his mother, wife and his friend Bihari only for the sake of the woman (Binodini) one who is not paying attention to him and she did not love him ever. He had lost his dignity and respect. He wanted to get rid of Binodini. He wanted to make arrangements for Binodini to live her life and set him free. When Binodini finds Bihari, she expresses her love and gratitude to him. Bihari again proposes her for marriage but she refuses:

“For shame, it is embarrassing to think of such a thing. I am a widow, a woman disgraced. I cannot permit you to be humiliated in the eyes of the society. For shame, don't mention such things.”<sup>4</sup>

Binodini now has realized her mistakes and she feels her real love is only for Bihari. Because it is only Bihari who stands besides her in every up and down in her life. Binodini does not recognize him earlier. Though she loves Bihari, she sets him free. Whatever may happen but she wins in her defeat by keeping away herself from re-marriage. She wants to serve Bihari. “On the strength of that love, I shall commit a single act of daring today. Saying this, Binodini prostrated herself and kissed Bihari's toe.”<sup>5</sup> Here if Tagore has united her in marriage bond with Bihari, she would have been meek, a poor woman. On the contrary Tagore has shown her as a victor.

In this novel Tagore has shown Binodini “the free woman” one who knows to live her life on her own condition and choice. She is independent and courageous woman. She has enough courage to enter in Mahendra's life and run away with him in search of Bihari and to deny Bihari's marriage proposal for the sake of society. She loved Bihari but could not spend her life with him. Tagore succeeded in portraying Asha. He has shown a great difference in Asha's personality, changing with time and situation. As Tagore was a social reformer, he tried to reform the society through his work and to some extent he got success too.

However, one of Tagore's greatest regrets in the novel is the ending. Despite his progressive portrayal of Binodini and Bihar, he does not allow them to marry at the end. Although, today we may see the girl marrying the guy as regressive today in Tagore's time a widowed woman was not permitted to re-marry. Thus, ending the novel with Binodini and Bihari marrying would have been the most revolutionary. Chokher Bali or Binodini is one of the best novels in a new literary style written by Tagore. In this novel story values are based on characterization and psychological values not on entanglement of plots. The novel was serialized in the Bangla periodical 'Bangadarshan' from 1902 to 1903. He has shown familial as well as social problems in it . He has studied woman's psyche in this story and also shown it very beautifully. Whereas Ashalata is a very meek and simple girl Binodini is a strong, beautiful and educated girl . We can say Binodini is beauty with brain. In our Indian society child widows was

a crucial issue because of unmatched marriage between a young girl and a aged man. Binodini is a young widow overthrows the social norms of widowhood to express her feelings to the man she loves and as a result the chain of incident creates the trouble in the story. Tagore has shown Binodin's harsh life and struggle to survive in the society and condition of women in contemporary Bengal through Ashalata. According to Tagore enhancement of widows do not lie in remarriage only but also in creating compatible situations for their self realization. Binodini's character represents as possessing an extra ordinary will of rejecting remarriage as possible solution to her issue and Asha's transition from meek girl to a mature woman who controls her house very wisely is a beginning of a new path for her. He has also shown reaction of society for a new women in Bengal. It belongs to 'the literature of new age' which seeks to reveal the secrets of the heart as Tagore himself claims in his preface to *Chokher Bali*.

A century after *Chokher Bali*, education is still a struggle for many women to access easily globally. Tagore's novel is radical and unconventional presenting a viewpoint that is ahead of the conservative times of 19th and 20th century India. Through the story of Binodini, Tagore questions the societal norms. He condemns all kinds of taboos and unjust customs which deprive women and especially widows of their rightful freedom and autonomy; confined to live a mournful colourless life. As a man from a privileged background, his understanding of the emotions of Indian women and his empathetic attitude towards them is remarkable.

The Indian Renaissance influenced Rabindranath Tagore too. The humanist in him was influenced by Swami Paramhansa, Vivekanand, and Ram mohan Roy. According to Tagore India had to protest against to ape the west for the sake of modernization. But it would have led to the true modernization i.e. freedom of mind. He wanted our countrymen to stand firm for social reformation and not for exploitation and conflict. Edward Thompsan, commenting on Tagore's outlook on woman in Indian society, remarks: “ he would have her remain woman- a center of love and inspiration without which the world is poverty-stricken. But he has never ceased to attack the injustice and cruelty which regard woman as inferior or unfitted for education or arts.”<sup>6</sup>

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