

CHOKHER BALI: FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

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Abstract

The relation between literature and cinema has, over the last few decades, become the object of increased attention among practitioners of both the art forms, critics and various scholars. While the cinema and literature both aim to express concrete situations involving the development of a plot and the exposition of character and environment, the medium through which they seek to accomplish these ends are entirely different. The proposed paper aims to explore with a comparative perspective Tagore's novel "Chokher Bali" and Rituparno Ghosh's film with the same name. "Chokher Bali" or A Grain of Sand is a story of an extra-marital affair. But calling it just an extra marital affair story would be grave injustice. This is a story of love and what people can do for it. Lush and slow-moving, Chokher Bali, subtitled "a passion play", is a gorgeous chamber piece suffused with sensuality and its denial.

This paper makes an attempt to highlight the intricacies of human emotions and relations in the light of both; the novel and the film. This paper endeavours to examine the film and the novel on the parameters like chronology, verbal and visuals, depiction of the raised issue, portrayal of characters, conclusion, and language and style.

INTRODUCTION

Directed by one of the most celebrated directors of Bengali cinema Rituparno Ghosh and written by the Nobel Prize winner writer Rabindranath Tagore *Chokher Bali* is a tale about the physical and mental deprivations of young widows and their sexual frustrations.

Choker Bali or *A Grain of Sand* is a story of love and longings and what people can do for it. The story revolves around four central characters Mahendra, Asha, Binodini and Bihari. Mahendra gets married to Asha, a shy and timid girl who is an orphan and unaware of how the world works. She is happy to be his wife and to finally have a home to call her own. She is extremely devoted to her husband. She was a naive woman, a girl child who didn't know disaster until it was right in front of her. Mahendra is spoilt by his mother and is used to have everything placed before him at his command. The story undergoes many twists and turns before it finally ends. It explores wider anthropological issues concerning gender, culture and the body, and its theoretical implications. The theme of the story showcases the conditions of women in Indian

society who are expected to be dutiful, respectful and submissive wives. The honour of a family and preservation of one's caste lies on women's behavior and control over their sexual urges. The vedic texts state a "good" woman "pleases her husband to give birth to male children." (Bhattacharji 1990:51). Ironically women have been depicted as objects in both the forms of works.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written about the acclaimed book *Choker Bali* and its Bollywood adaptation of the same name. Kaustav Bakshi in his research paper "'Chokher Bali': Unleashing Forbidden Passions" talks about various aspects of the story. He specifically points out that Tagore defamiliarizes the image of a widow who is traditionally supposed to submit herself unquestioningly to the dictates of a patriarchal society, one which has also feared female sexuality and felt the need to control it by every possible means. He also opines that the Western Feminism as academics understands it today was yet to take shape when Tagore was writing, so his ideas on the subject are unique to him. But Ghosh's film, located within modern feminist discourses, is much more iconoclastic.

Alison Macdonald in his very critically written research paper "'Real' and 'Imagined' Women: A Feminist Reading of Rituparno Ghosh's Films" states that women's bodies have been identified as the markers of boundaries for both the community and the nation (Gedalof 1999, Niranjana 1999) and in reference to this Irene Gedalof uses the term 'body-work' to refer to this ideological paradigm that is considered in which women and their bodies are expected to 'work' to uphold social, communal and national identities. Alison has appropriated this term 'body work' to also include and describe how these discourses become materially manifest for women. This move is inspired by Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity (1993), the "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 2003: 392) that must be performed in order for gender to be achieved. Specific corporeal acts, which are socially constructed and continuously performed, conform to a morphological ideal that pertains to regulatory cultural models of sex and gender. Through the inculcation of these norms via 'body-work' hegemonic gender and cultural conceptions of womanhood as highly idealised are realised and maintained. In the Indian context, the physicality of the body in expressing gender is documented by Veena Das (1988) who describes how a woman's experience of her gendered identity is massively informed by her body, both as an object- in terms of body image and as a subject, in regards to her experience of her embodiment in relation to those around her in everyday life.

METHODOLOGY USED

The research plan consists of critically analyzing the primary and secondary data with reference to perceptions of women in patriarchal society. A critical analysis of *Chokher Bali*, both the novel and the movie has been done with special emphasis on womanhood experiences, internal conflicts, feelings of alienation and also external factors which affected the lives of protagonists in several possible ways.

Also discussion with thinkers, writers, poets and educators leaves a clear trail of investigation and gathering of information. Library work, both real and online, forms the base of this research. A series of literary investigation pertaining to special critical appreciation and literary criticism of selected works is the method of research. Moreover, analysis is done from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources for this study are novel and movie by Rabindranath Tagore and Rituparno Ghosh respectively. The analysis

and interpretation of both the works focus on finding the emotional characteristics in relating to feelings of alienation, love, longing, physical needs, and condition of women especially a widow in the Indian society. A vivid and detailed study of literary devices has been adopted for further exploration of woman and her identity crisis.

Further the secondary resources are research papers written by Macdonald and Bakshi. The critical analysis done by other writers and research scholars is also referred to, for an easy comprehension and interpretation of the works. The electronic references have played an important role ranging from web articles to blogs.

The analysis of the works is done step by step:

- Critical reading of the novel followed by watching of the movie
- Interpretation of the works
- Appreciation of the literary devices and the figurative speech used
- Personal analysis and responses addressing the topic

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Women across the globe are compared to flowers, butterflies and doves for their love, beauty, and purity. Many writers have penned down several lines admiring the heart, soul, and even the body of women. But in the real scenario, especially in India, woman is always bound with the chains of orthodox social norms. The reformers have done much towards the empowerment of the woman in terms of education, widow remarriage, equal job opportunities and many more but social acceptance of women who dare to differ, who define her role, choose her life and rule her heart is very slim.

The main objective of this study is to understand the impediments that the society lay in front of the woman restricting her from self-realization. This study is highly relevant to evaluate the conditions and situations that provoke a woman to shed all her inhibitions in the patriarchal male dominated society and lead her life as per her wishes. This also tries to evaluate the progression from the ancient to the modern in the form of a timeline.

DISCUSSIONS & FINDINGS

The two central characters of the story, Mahendra and Asha are enjoying their life and are totally consumed by each other as newly wedded usually are. Into this bliss enters Binodini, a young orphan woman who was widowed just one year after her marriage. Asha takes to her completely and treats her like her sister. Binodini is envious of Mahendra's and Asha's love and yearns to have a home and a man who is as devoted to her as Mahendra is to Asha.

Driven by this jealousy and her own desire to be loved, she sets upon seducing Mahendra. Into this cast of characters is Mahendra's mother Rajalaxmi who is responsible for spoiling Mahendra and Bihari, Mahendra's best friend, an overall awesome guy who is content to stay in Mahendra's shadow.

Chokher Bali is not all black and white though. In spite of Binodini being the enchantress, she was actually the victim of cruelty inflicted on widows in those times. Her doing cannot be justified but considering she was an orphan and a widow, her need for love and affection was something that endears her to the readers as well as viewers. In those days, widows had a lot of restrictions. They had to wear colourless garments and they could not enjoy the worldly pleasures like other woman could. Pitiful conditions of widows, entangled love stories, illicit longing for one another, form the very base of the novel "*Chokher Bali: A Grain of Sand*"

and the movie “*Chokher Bali: A Passion Play*” but still there are noticeable differences in both the genres in regard to story, portrayal of characters, and also ending. It was surprising to see how different the movie is from the book. While the book concentrates on all the characters and the relationship between them, the movie concentrates on Binodini, probably due to association of a great actress Aishwarya Rai to the character. The movie is more of a “Passion Play” as the tag line suggests. The movie shows Binodini to be cunning whereas in the book she is simply a widow who is looking for affection. Directed by Rituparno Ghosh in 2003 it casts Prasenjit Mahendra, Raima Sen as Ashalata and Tota Raychoudhary as Bihari.

Binodini in the novel attracts Rajalakshmi, Mahendra’s mother towards her, by her hard work and sincerity towards household chores which was expected of the women in those days. However, Rituparno’s Binodini manages to lure Rajalakshmi by smuggling a cup of tea every evening in her room, as tea was a forbidden drink for widows. Similarly the first three chapters of the novel that include rejection of Binodini by Mahendra, proposal of Ashalata’s marriage for Bihari and finally Ashalata’s wedding to Mahendra have been hastened in the movie and have been shown through narration along with some clips.

In a scene in the film, Binodini shocks Ashalata when she wears a red blouse gifted to her by Mahendra in pretext of showing her how to wear it. Innocent Ashalata is not only shocked by her audacity but also mesmerized by her beauty. This scene however finds no place in the novel. Also the role of Aunt Annapurna is sidelined and Binodini rules the movie whereas in the novel Annapurna plays a significant role.

In Rituparno’s interpretation of *Chokher Bali* Bihari eventually accepts marriage proposal proposed by Binodini at one point of time in the movie whereas in Tagore’s world this never happens. There are also some major changes made in the film like the novel portrays Ashalata staying in the proximity of her house taking care of her ailing mother-in-law whereas in the movie she leaves the home on learning Mahendra’s infidelity and returns only after announcement of Rajalakshmi’s death. Also towards the end of the movie Ashalata is shown carrying Mahendra’s child but the novel never shows her pregnant.

The characters especially the main leads Mahendra and Binodini are portrayed differently than in the book. Tagore’s Binodini is sharp, apt, instinctive, passionate and lovelorn. He shows the plight of a widow who craves for genuine love and unintentionally falls prey to Mahendra and finally seeks her soul mate in Bihari. Tagore defines Binodini as:

“Binodini was adept in every sort of housework, leadership was instinctive to her, she had no qualms ordering the servants about, setting their tasks, and disciplining them when necessary.”

Rituparno’s Binodini is an enchantress who tries to win the hearts of Rajalakshmi, Mahendra and Bihari all at the same time leaving poor Ashalata in state of chaos. Similarly, the novel portrays the character of Mahendra violent. Unable to bear the agony of Binodini’s betrayal he gets furious. What is even more painful to him is her association with Bihari.

“Provoked by rejection by the same Binodini he almost turned violent. He screamed at her, ‘I will excise Bihari’s image from your heart with a knife.’ (267)

The movie shows more mature Mahendra who although is irritated with Binodini’s attraction towards Bihari but never gets violent. At a later stage, he helps her find Bihari.

Tagore's *Chokher Bali* depicts some social incidents like Bihari's plan to establish a hospital for the poor and Binodini's contribution of rupees two thousand for the same. The film however, concentrates only on the love story ignoring such aspects.

The relationship of Binodini and Rajalakshmi are cordial throughout the novel and irrespective of the fact that the former establishes an illegal relationship with the latter's son, the relationship does not stain. But the movie has different version of this liaison. As soon as Rajalakshmi discovers about Mahendra's illicit affair with Binodini, her love and admiration for Binodini vanishes at once and she hurls verbal abuses at her blaming her to take advantage of her son and trying a shortcut from one-room-house to a three storeyed building. She tersely asks Mahendra to send her back immediately.

At several instances in the novel Bihari's admiration towards Ashalata has been highlighted.

"Asha's restless mind kept churning trying to get to the root of Mahendra's indifference to her. Suddenly, it occurred to her that the source of Mahendra's resentment could probably be the unexpected visit of Bihari to Kashi..... did Mahendra suspect any collusion between them? Oh, how awful, if he did so! Bihari's name being linked with her was bad enough..."

"if your friendship was transparent and uncomplicated, I am sure you would have confessed your feelings to me much earlier. You did not. Allow me to be outspoken. I accuse you of being in love with Asha."

The movie however shows no such allegations on Bihari and only once passing reference has been made in the movie. At one place elaborate efforts have been made in the novel by Ashalata to arrange Mahendra's meeting with Binodini.

"On a tranquil autumn afternoon, in Asha's room, Binodini was teaching her how to knit carpet slippers. Asha, distracted by her constant watchful glances towards the door, kept dropping stitches soon thereafter, in walked Mahendra, on tiptoe, through a door behind Binodini. Asha who was expecting him, broke into a grin without lifting her face."

The movie, on the other hand, shows that Mahendra accidentally bumps into Binodini one afternoon, while closing the door of his room.

The novel depicts Asha's slipshod ways, her imperfections and her inability to perform household chores. She could never find place in the heart of her mother-in-law due to her unskilled ways of doing things. The movie on the other hand shows Asha as a simple and naïve girl and an average skilled lady and her clumsiness is not emphasized.

Asha's marriage was first proposed to Bihari but later finalized with Mahendra. This event had left an everlasting impact on Mahendra's mind accusing Asha and Bihari every now and then of having inclination towards each other. Hence throughout the novel Asha and Bihari share a very awkward relation. But the movie portrays these two characters to be in normal relationship.

The book ends with Mahendra returning home a changed man though still immature in many ways. He returns home to find a wife who would treat him like an equal instead of an idol and a mother on her death bed who still loves him but is no longer blinded to his faults. Binodini reconciles with her widowhood and realizes that despite Bihari's reciprocation of affection she couldn't marry him due to the social stigma attached to widow re-marriage. She decides that the best alternative would be for her to be the mistress of her own fate and asks Bihari to let her run

one of his charities so as to have a purpose in life. Tagore has said about the novel, "I have always regretted the ending". May be he later felt that although he could expose the custom of perpetual mourning on the part of widows, who were not allowed to remarry and were condemned to a life of seclusion and loneliness, he could not set an example of widow remarriage in his novel.

CONCLUSION

The climax of film is slightly different from that of the novel; however, it too, does not show a widow's remarriage, which could have sent a positive message to the society for acceptance not only of a widow remarriage but also of widows as human beings with emotions and feelings. The movie concludes with Mahendra returning home after helping Binodini find Bihari in Kashi. He returns home only after death of his mother and hearing the news of his wife's pregnancy. Binodini vanishes into nowhere when proposed by Bihari, leaving a letter for Ashalata. Bihari hands over the letter to Ashalata that reads Binodini's apologies and reminiscences of their friendship. Although, *Chokher Bali*, the film, met with positive critical and box office reception and also won National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Bengali, it could not retain the charm of the novel.

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