

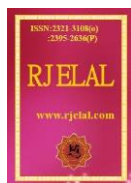


RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND THE EMERGENCE OF 'NEW WOMAN' IN HIS WORKS

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Article info

Article Received:11/4/2023

Article Accepted:02/05/2023

Published online:05/05/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.2.37](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.2.37)

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore was well versed in the mannerisms that women in colonial India were expected to follow. During the colonial period when many women in India were playing an active role in the freedom movement, Tagore championed himself as a feminist writer elucidating the courage and bravery of the women through his character portrayals. At that crucial period when women confronted the questions of chastity, sexuality, private domains of home and the public sphere of the outside world, Tagore recognized the women's agency of choice. This paper seeks to explore the various nuances of Rabindranath Tagore's articulation of modern sensibilities on female discourse and sexuality through the reading of his select texts.

Keywords: Female, Colonization, sexuality, freedom

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore said, "She is not in the world of the fairy tale where the fair woman sleeps for ages until she is touched by the magic wand.... At last, the time has arrived when women must step in and impart her life rhythm to this reckless movement of power." (Tagore, Selected Essays 226)

After Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, he was invited for delivering lecture in different countries. During his tour, he became aware of the women's liberation. Naturally, the emerging *New Women* concept in the Western Society had its impact on his fictional writings also. Tagore's different experiences, ever-growing knowledge, travels, and political experiences continually reshaped and recreated his ideas about women. The social reformer in Tagore gave priority to women. They took the centre stage in his prose works. Tagore's portrayal of women characters in his novels changed and consequently became reflective of the changes in the contemporary society. The onset of English Education and the influence of

Western Culture also assured that women characters were no longer submissive sufferers of patriarchy. This paper explores Rabindranath Tagore's portrayal of the women characters in their raw glory in selected texts—challenging the social evils like child marriage, untouchability, the rigid caste system, and patriarchy.

The Broken Nest

The story takes place in the late 19th century India and tells the tale of a lonely housewife Charu (short for Charulata). Charu and her rather detached, older husband Bhupati live a quiet, well-to-do life. She is a very beautiful woman, with tons of money and all the time in the world to enjoy her passions – the arts, literature, and poetry. Yet her workaholic husband seems to be more concerned with his job than his marriage.

However, the sun shines a bit brighter for our heroine when Bhupati's young, handsome cousin Amal arrives for a visit. Bhupati, who is far from a heartless man and feels sympathy for his wife's

cheerless plight, encourages his cousin to befriend his wife as they both have so much in common (he loves poetry and the arts as well). Finally, we see Charulata happy, singing, playful, and tending to Amol, mending his clothes, and inspiring him to continue writing. Her innocent flirtations catch her off-guard as she becomes deeply attached to Amol. Amol also realizes that his emotions are leading him astray. After Bhupati is ruined when his brother-in-law, whom he trusted and loved, makes off with the newspaper's money, Amol decides to leave, not wanting to take away from Bhupati his "other" wife. Charulata is crushed by Amol's departure and inadvertently betrays her emotions to Bhupati. Bhupati is completely disillusioned by these reversals of trust and love. Their marriage is severed.

This story instantly takes us back to 1879 Calcutta to explore the seeds of India's early movement for independence from England and to examine the restrictions placed on educated Indian women. It is like Victorian England but instead it's Victorian India in which a neglected wife, on the point of breaking through to self-awareness, begins to perceive male dominion as a hollow façade of beards, braces and boredom.

The unadulterated love and longing of an intelligent woman, Charulata, for her younger brother-in-law, while the husband is pursuing his intellectual hobby of running a radical English newspaper in Calcutta, Charulata is left to confide her creative passions with her artistic and poetic brother-in-law, it is difficult to define where this crosses the line from admiration to love.... but the emotion evolves naturally to blossom into something more than matronly affiliation, whether there is an element of lust is left for us readers to decide with small trivial domestic details, but the relationship is a satire on the security of the Indian marriage where any such thought, much less act can become a blasphemy.

Chokher Bali

Chokher Bali was first serialized in the periodical *Bangadarshan* from 1902 to 1903 and later appeared as a separate book in 1903. Broadly, the plot centers upon the protagonist Binodini, a beautiful young widow who enters the house of

Mahendra and Asha, newly married and living in total conjugal bliss. The couple's harmonious relationship takes an unexpected turn when Mahendra falls passionately in love with Binodini and unleashes forbidden emotions in the entire family. His closest friend Bihari is also smitten with her and we watch as Asha helplessly witnesses the changes taking place within the home. Her mother-in-law initially accuses her of not holding on to her son but later becomes her closest ally. Binodini in her insecurity and emotional fallibility first succumbs to Mahendra's love then devotes herself to win over Bihari. Tagore brings out the intensity of her feelings and her state of mind at different times in the story.

Tagore wrote *Chokher Bali* during a period when the forces of tradition and modernity, Hindu orthodoxy and British liberalism created a contradictory social milieu. "Within a very short span, the advent of colonial modernity had made a radical split in the belief-systems and life-styles of even women, living inside the closely-guarded precincts of 'the inner house'" (Ananthaxmi, 2012).

"Rabindranath relied upon the detailed psychological method in which incidents and intentions are marshalled in a close array and every step in the evolution of the story (*Chokher Bali*) and the character is subjected to a process of a minute analysis" (Majumdar, 1969). Thus, the narrative content of *Chokher Bali* may be very limited, but Tagore succeeds in elevating a small story to epic heights by projecting the yearnings, frustrations, and misery of Binodini with sympathy and solitude.

The text addresses issues of women education, child marriage, gendered power relation within the family and the plight of the three widows (Chakravarty, 2013). The women characters in the novel are upper caste women and most of them are widows. These three widows have distinct characteristics. Rajlakshmi plays the role of 'the good mother' to Mahendra whom, during his early youth even, she psychologically thinks no more grown-up than a suckling child (Kakar, 1978). The Oedipal nature of the relationship between Rajlakshmi and Mahendra not only influences Mahendra's 'self' and his subsequent course of

actions in the novel but also is a clear indication of Rajlakshmi's assuming the role of a mother, over and above everything, thereby, attaining a position of undisputed superiority and power amidst the female quarters. The two sisters-in-laws had been on intimate terms with each other since childhood as they married young. Living in the same house they shared each other's joys and sorrows. Though both these women are widows yet, one is more acknowledged socially. This is the role that the 'traditional' patriarchal society used to ascribe to a woman and subsequently acknowledge her position of power in the family. Due to this issue of motherhood the other elderly widow of the family Annapurna never assumes any significant role in the family affairs, resides in the margin, although her love for Mahendra is no less than his biological mother, and quite early in the novel, voluntarily retires herself to the widow-quarters of Benaras.

Where on one side we have these two widowed women, Rajlakshmi and Annapurna of the 'by-gone' era, *se kaal*, on the other side we see that Asha, Mahendra's adolescent wife and Binodini, the young 'western educated' widow are products of *e kaal*. The two eras are separated by only one or two decades. Within a very short span, the advent of colonial modernity has made a radical split in the belief-systems and life-styles of every woman, living inside the closely-guarded precincts of *antahpur* ('the inner house') (Roy, 2013). Binodini, the widow is the product of this 'modern' Bengal.

Binodini, the only child of her parents, becomes a widow at a very young age and is doomed to a life of misery in a society which looks down upon widows. Since she is widowed at an early age, she feels a great sense of bereavement. Unlike, Annapurna and Rajlakshmi who have each other's company and a child to look after; Binodini pines for love and human ties.

When Rajlakshmi visits her ancestral village and picks Binodini up who, according to Tagore, "Like a single garden vine planted in a jungle, Binodini, since her husband's demise, had led a listless existence in the dreary environment of the village" (*Chokher Bali*, 39) The kind of hospitality she shows to Rajlakshmi and Bihari in the village home

itself, with deft touches of fine taste and dedication that none can match, sets her apart, from the very beginning, from the common village-women. She, although hailing from a village, is not the 'residual' type of consciousness-center that belongs to the by-gone era. She is the 'emergent' kind of new female subjectivity whom western education, with its kind of Midas touch, has transformed into a woman with a mind and 'heart' of her own. She distances herself away from the blanket of spirituality that the society would have to offer; instead, she wants to have her share of recognition and happiness from the society.

Binodini is the symbol of a new class of emancipated women, who are no longer prepared to be crushed and burnt out by society but fight to assert their rights in a patriarchal materialistic society. Her rebellion is a Hindu woman's protest against the unjust privations of a grimly mortifying existence. She is not a woman whose "sphere was defined and maintained by men" (Showalter, 1988). As a widow she is condemned for life but she emerges triumphantly out of this quagmire of a lacerated life by asserting her freedom to love and happiness (Swain, 2004). Also, the love she yearns for is only an illusion, a figment of her imagination as the society does not permit it, thus a widow's feelings of love are crushed. Binodini too is aware this social taboo, thus she refuses the marriage proposal by Bihari. Tagore too was conscious of this fact and hence, Binodini does not remarry in the end.

We see the evolution in Binodini's character in two phases, through the psychological depiction by Tagore. At first, she becomes aware of her physical desires and actively attempts to gain Mahendra's attention. She is emotionally and biologically starved- self longing for fulfilment in love, thus she compensates this by listening to Asha's narratives about her conjugal love. Eventually she develops a liking for Mahendra. Her love for Mahendra is no carnal and mundane love. It is devotion. When Mahendra professes love to her, she says, "At one time you thought you were in love with Asha. It was false. Now you imagine you are in love with me. It, too, is false. You love only yourself" (*Chokher Bali*). But with course of time, she over comes these inner desires and is enlightened with

the fact that spiritual love is the true love that she seeks. Binodini defies the societal norms in fulfilling her desire of true love and becomes a transgressor. It may be said that Binodini heralds the emergence of a new class of emancipated Indian women, who are no longer prepared to be downtrodden by the society but fight to assert their rights.

As a woman, she plays the role of a caretaker in the house, not with any mercenary motive but with a spirit of sacrifice and devotion, with love and dedication. The artistic design of the text does not allow us to see Binodini as a villainous woman. We see that she possesses 'motherly' instincts like any other woman. This becomes even more clearer by the way she interacts with Basanta. Also, in the end when Rajlakshmi is on her death bed, she remarks that, "everybody has strengths and weaknesses, but she was fond of me. No one could feign such devoted service" (*Chokher Bali*, 365).

The Home and The World

Here Tagore brings two spheres in order to merge - national and domestic. It is, however not the motive to pose female protagonist in between two choices, rather the woman herself becomes a site of contending ideologies of freedom, both for women as well as for nation. Bimla is perceived by Sandeep, the revolutionary, as *shakti*, the goddess of power, the symbolic mother India of the radical swadeshi movement. Nikhil, her liberal *zamindar* husband also treats her as a companion in social cause, believing the western model of freedom. Nikhilesh also employs a white governess to teach Bimla. *The Home and the World* tips the scales in favour of recognition of women's roles within the private sphere. Initially, as Bimla emerges out of the *zenana* (living area of women), she realizes her worth and her role as a friend, a fellow to her husband and an educated woman in the outer world. Bimla has been enclosed within the boundary walls of her *haveli* (the palace) for nine long years in *pardah* complying with the societal norms which did not give a woman right to be conscious of herself. Her husband is enthusiastic enough to bring her out in the open world, outside the confinement of home. He says:

"I would have you come into the heart of the outer world and meet reality. Merely going on

with your household duties, living all your life in the world of household conventions and the drudgery of household tasks, - you were not made for that! If we meet and recognize each other in the real world, then only our love will be true." (P.8)

The freedom of having experience of the outer world was something like a dream of distant world for women at that time, but Bimla was lucky enough to have got a husband of radical ideas. Of all the debates and agitation about the social reforms of the nineteenth century, majority of them centered on those that dealt with women's utter helplessness and position in society. *Sati pratha*, prohibition of widow marriage, child marriage, polygamy and lack of education were chief evils of the society. Issues of female education and emancipation remained in the agenda of nationalists at that time but never quite achieved their supreme stature.

Tagore in the novel is presenting the idea with the help of Nikhilesh. Nikhilesh is the mouth piece of Tagore's liberal ideas. His understanding and support also extend to even those people whom he does not politically agree with. Nikhil befriends and funds a popular activist of swadeshi, Sandeep. Thousands of people are attracted with his charismatic personality, whom he easily sways with himself. Sandeep gradually becomes a frequent visitor at the drawing room of Nikhilesh, and gets chance to converse with Bimla as well. Bimla, too is attracted towards him. She finds views of Sandeep to be very energetic and forceful. Sandeep, being fully aware of her devotion, makes opportunist use of her. Despite all congenial support provided by Nikhilesh, Sandeep persuades Bimla against her own husband. He even persuades Bimla to steal gold from Nikhil's case. Sandeep suffers from excessive hubris and narcissist attitude to make use of other people for his own cause. Even Bimla becomes a victim of his self-interest. He says at a place that Bimla is a ripe fruit, whom he must pluck. His lustful desires do not spare a bosom-friend's wife. The contrasting views of two men - Nikhil and Sandeep, provide two different attitudes for woman, for one she is an individual who recognizes her potential and promotes, and for the other she is an object of pleasure. Bimla's character undergoes development

in which she gradually moves towards realization. Her wavering consciousness, awakened by her husband Nikhil, now allows her to think in more liberated terms. Bimla, thus gradually starts thinking about herself, that she is the *shakti*, the she-power. Bimla starts to think that even her husband is not quite worthy as a swadeshi activist for he did not prohibit importation of foreign goods in his estates. At the beginning she is angry that God did not make her beautiful, for beauty is one of the most precious possessions of a woman. When Bimla was a traditional woman with little contact with the outside world, she misunderstood that a woman's physicality is her power, that her sexual charm is most important. Early in the novel she relates how Nikhil's grandmother had chosen Bimla for mostly as she did not fit the archetype of a beautiful young woman. Bimla has a dark complexion and she gladdens when she meets Nikhil, on finding him similar in appearance. Bimla's logic understood that whilst all other wives were beautiful, their physical superiority prevented their husbands from falling prey to vices of the world. She failed to understand that if a husband is moved towards other things, it is not simply the lack of beauty in a wife rather it is more a lack of companionship and understanding. Nikhil too, is more attracted towards goodness of her character, and loves her as much as a beautiful woman would be loved.

Conclusion

During a speech, he delivered while he was on his second visit to America (September 1916 to January 1917), Rabindranath Tagore said that a daughter finds herself in the centre of her own true world, the world of human relationship from the moment she is in her mother's arms after birth. In Tagore's fiction, Women are depicted in a variety of ways. They function in the society of their times and evolve through relationship within ordinary Bengali family life. He condemns the prevailing social injustices in his portrayal of the oppressed women who become aware of their roles in society as well as the resources latent in their own personalities.

The woman in Tagore's fiction does not hesitate to voice her feelings openly against the ills of society like untouchability, the caste system,

religious hypocrisy while she advocates higher education and a professional career for those like her. She "emerges as a catalytic figure in the dynamics of society, the nation and even the world. Tagore finally images woman with a global consciousness," writes William Cenkner.

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