



THE PERFORMATIVITY OF WIDOWHOOD AND REBELLION FOR EMANCIPATION : A STUDY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S *CHATURANGA*

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Article Received:16/12/2020

Article Accepted: 12/01/2021

Published online:20/01/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.1.24](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.1.24)

Abstract

A poet, philosopher, novelist, painter, musician, educationist and dramatist, Rabindranath Tagore was one of the brightest gems of the nineteenth century Bengal which was influenced by the social reform movement known as the 'Bengal Renaissance'. The advent of the Brahmo Samaj, the banning of Satidaha, the introduction of widow-remarriage and the scope for women education move towards emancipation of women in a male chauvinist society. Besides, the impact of Western culture and ideology cannot be underestimated. As a result, literature during the 19th century Bengal began to give importance on women. Rabindranath Tagore was not an exceptional. The literary works of Tagore are cantered on female characters and women possess leading space in his works. *Chaturanga* is one such novel of Tagore that shows the condition of widow in the 19th century Bengal, questions the performativity of widowhood and finally celebrates the emancipation of the female (widow) characters.

Keywords: Nineteenth century, Bengal Renaissance, Male chauvinism, Ranbindranath Tagore, widowhood.

Rabindranath Tagore was the bright son of the 19th century Bengal, that was influenced by the social reform movement known as the 'Bengal Renaissance'. The conquest of Bengal by the English was not only a political revolution, but ushered in a greater revolution in thoughts and ideas, in religion and society (Dutt 287). Bengal Renaissance in literature came along with the changes in the socio-political and religious outlook of the Bengal elite. The advent of the Brahmo Samaj, the banning of Satidaha, the introduction of widow-remarriage and the education for women create a space for women in a male chauvinist society. The impact of Western Feminism was strongly felt in the heart of Bengal. As a matter of fact, in literary texts, women attained a new and great importance due to this new wave in Bengali literature. Tagore was also influenced by the new wave of socio-political and

religious changes and it is truly reflected in his works of art. The Bengal Renaissance can be said to have started with Raja Ram Mohan Roy(1775-1833) and ended with Rabindranath Tagore(1861-1941), although there have been many stalwarts thereafter embodying particular aspects of the unique intellectual and creative output (Bandopadhyay 141).

Like his predecessors and contemporary authors, Rabindranath Tagore's novels also revolve around the female characters. *Chaturanga* (1916) is one of the most important novels by Tagore which address the condition of the widow in the 19th century Bengal. The problem of widow, introduced in India Literature in 1857 by Baba Padmanji continued to receive serious attention in the Bangla Literature too (Chandhok 80). At that time, widows

were supposed to perform certain practices; they were excluded and remained confined within a space, created for them. Tagore's *Chaturanga* is a novel that shows how the performativity of widowhood and its dangerous impact on the minds of the novel's two female characters instigate them to resist and how their rebellion ultimately offers their emancipation.

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chaturanga*(1976) having four chapters were originally published separately in consecutive issues of *Sabujpatra* and the four chapters integrate to the quartet in the form of a novel as it exists (Nag 1). At the beginning of the novel, Tagore presents Damini as the wife of Shibtosha who is a firm disciple of Lilananda Swami. At his deathbed, Shibtosha dedicates his wife, Damini and all his property to his Guru, Lilananda Swami. Tagore beautifully has described the incident-"With his property he handed over his wife to his Guru" (54). But Damini never obeys Shibtosha's Guru. People from far-flung places visit the ashram of Lilananda Swami and take shelter there. It is a very well-known fact that from time immemorial the importance of Guru in the life of Hindu people is priceless. It is believed that one can achieve peace and happiness by the grace of Guru. But Damini as a widow does not care a hang; rather she revolts against the age-old belief as she desires to enjoy the rest of her life according to her wish.

Among the four principal characters, Jagmohan, Sachis, Damini and Sribilas, identified in that order with the four parts- the *Chaturanga* of the novel- the protagonist, Sachis manifests an intense concern with the self, a concern which leads to a dissociation from worldly bonds and a search for the meaning of life within himself. Lilananda Swami establishes his camp along with his prize- disciples, Sachis and Sribilas, in Calcutta in the house of Damini, whose name signifies the lightning in the heart of the sravana rain clouds, heaving with youthfulness to outward view but flickering with restless fires within (Singh 65). Sometimes later, stranded in a cave for the night along with other disciples, Sachis has the harrowing experience of an attempt at seduction by Damini. He records the scene in his diary in moving imagery: "..... then something which I imagined to

be a wild beast grabbed my feet" (112). Tagore here makes it clear that Damini is a lover of life; she does not find any perfection in her life as a widow.

Rabindranath Tagore by virtue of making Damini a widow scores a point keeping the social status of widows at that time. The widows institutionalized marginality, a liminal state between being physically alive and being socially dead, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the deprivation of her sexuality as well as of her personhood (Chakravarti 5). A close fictional sibling of Damini can be Binodini of *Chokher Bali*. But whereas Binodini had left a lot at the hands of her male counterparts in shaping up her future, Damini had steadfastly been stubborn-her sexual freedom and her spiritual one as well. Damini never dresses up as a widow; she never wants to spend the rest of her life by dedicating it to the preceptor, Lilananda Swami. Finally, she rebels; she voices her unfulfilled desire. Damini's longing for love revolts against the sentiment of devotion. Damini's revolt is actually against the patriarchy that makes Damini imprisoned within the circle of widowhood and its practices. She is a representative of the widows of the 19th century Bengal. In Damini's death due to an unknown pain in her chest (which she was carrying since the night in the cave- a heart broken?) Tagore transcended Damini through tragedy. Tagore's Damini has conquered life through death; she says- "My longings are still with me. I go with the prayer that I may find you again in my next life"(214).

There is another widow character in *Chaturanga*- Nanibala. She is also a victim of feudal society's exploitation. Being a widow, Nanibala does not want to be a puppet at the hands of the society's norms; she never offers her desires as oblation. Rather Nanibala's suicide is a silent remonstrance against the performativity of widowhood. It is needless to say that Tagore sharply attacks the rotten, hollow and ruthless society's practices and customs for the widow.

Chaturanga is a work of art without blemish. Here Tagore asserts the importance of man above all pseudo- religious traditions and narrow- minded secretarianism. *Chaturanga's* two rebellious widow

deny to perform the politics of widowhood which appears to them as self-destroying. In this way, Tagore's widows satirize the paltry society's profound darkness that never pays respect to women. Therefore, Damini and Nanibala in *Chaturanga* expose the hypocrisies of 19th century Hindu society and resist the performativity of widowhood and finally find their emancipation in death.

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