

Chokherbali - A Grain of Sand: Extra Marital Affair

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ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with the story of an extra-marital affair. But calling it just an extra marital affair would be a grave injustice. This is a story of love and what people can do for it. Lush and slow moving Chokherbali, is a gorgeous piece suffused with sensuality and its denial. I attempt to highlight the intricacies of human emotions and the relations in the light of the novel. This paper endeavors to examine the novel on the parameter of chronology verbal depiction of the raised issue portrayal of characters, conclusion and language and style. Modern literature is not merely about describing the sequence of events, but also about analyzing them and drawing out their inner meaning. It is this scheme that is employed in Chokherbali.

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INTRODUCTION

This novel is 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.[1]

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. Ironically women have been depicted as objects in both the forms of works.

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.

Discussions and Findings

Chokher Bali is a novel of illicit love and forbidden relationships within a family, and almost claustrophobic in its near exclusion of open space and public events. Of the two male characters, Mahendra is the only son of a rich widow, pampered and selfish, the other is his idealistic friend Behari, who, despite being loved and admired by two women, remains unmarried till the end. Mahendra's obsessive involvement with his newly married wife drives his jealous mother to bring a young widow in the house in order to distract her son. Ashalata takes to her completely and treats her like her sister. Binodini is envious of Mahendra's and Ashalata's love and yearns to have a home and a man who is as devoted to her as Mahendra is to Ashalata. This woman, Binodini, with her beauty, wit and explosive sexual energy sets off a chain of desire and misunderstanding in which all the characters gets hopelessly embroiled. The action is as much in the minds as outside and Rabindranath in a retrospective note on the novel, written in 1940, drew attention to this psychological depth which was a novelty in Bangla fiction at that time.[2]

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.

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*. The novel concentrates on all the characters and the relationship between them. Binodini attracts Rajalakshmi, Mahendra's mother towards her, by her hard work and sincerity towards house hold chores which was expected of the women in those days.

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. Binodini shocks Ashalata when she wears a red blouse gifted to her by Mahendra in the pre text of showing her how to wear

it. Innocent Ashalata is not only shocked by her audacity but also mesmerized by her beauty. Annapurna in this novel plays a significant role at this context. The novel portrays Ashalata staying in the proximity of her house taking care of her ailing mother-in-law. Tagore's Binodini is sharp, apt, instinctive, passionate and lovelorn. He shows the plight of a widow who craves of genuine love and unintentionally falls prey to Mahendra and finally seeks her soul mate in Bihari.[3]

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." Similarly, the novel also portrays the character of Mahendravolent. 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.'

Tagore's *Chokher Bali* depicts the 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 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. 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." [4]

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 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. 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.

The novel ends 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 another 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 the novel

Critical Analysis

With *Chokher Bali* (1903) Tagore set up a new literary genre in Bangla, the realistic novel in which story values are based not simply on the mechanical complexities of plot structure but on characterization and psychological content. This was surely the earliest work of its kind in Bangla language and perhaps in any Indian language. The novel *Chokher Bali* was serialized in the Bangla periodical *Bangadarshan* from 1902 to 1903. It was published as a book in 1903. Its story is set somewhere around the second half of the nineteenth century. Although widow remarriage had been legalized by 1856, social taboos were very much against it among the Hindu elite. At the same time, the custom of child marriage coupled with low life expectancies ensured that many women would be widowed at an early age. It is the question of the sexuality of the young widow, officially purged through religiosity and practically lurks inside that forms the staple of the novel.[5]

There was nothing new in depicting an affair with a widow as Bankimchandra Chatterjee had already done it in his 1873 novel *Bishabriksha*. But the newness of *Chokher Bali* lies in its treatment of the subject and in the minute attention to the working of the mind of the characters. It belongs to 'the literature of the new age' Novels of Tagore which seeks 'to

reveal the secrets of the heart' as Tagore claims in his preface to *Chokher Bali*.

In Bankimchandra's *Bishabriksha*, Nagendra's wife Suryamukhi leaves home when he marries Kundanandini, a young widow. When Suryamukhi comes back to the household, Kundanandini consumes poison and dies. Here Bankim Chandra through authorial intrusion reminds the readers of the ill consequences that follow from widow re-marriage. By contrast, Tagore in his *Chokher Bali* unfolds the plot through psychological interplay between the characters. Authorial intrusions are very much limited here.

Mahendra is a doctor circa British rule in India, who lives a comfortable life in a city in Bengal (India). He is friendly with a young man, a bachelor named Behari. Both Mahendra and Behari are of marriage age, and do get a lot of proposals. One day they receive a proposal of a young woman named Binodini along with a photograph. Neither of them shows any interest nor even take a look at the photograph. They get news that Binodini has got married. Shortly thereafter, they receive another proposal without a photograph, for a young woman named Ashalata. Behari is asked to check her out for Mahendra - he ends up consenting to marry her, but subsequently lets Mahendra be the groom.

A few months later Ashalata gets pregnant, and the family gets the news that Binodini has been widowed only after a year's marriage. Then things get complicated when Ashalata befriends Binodini, and both Mahendra and Behari get attracted to her - so much so that Mahendra is considering separating from his bride - and Behari separating from his bachelorhood - but both in quandary over the social taboo of marrying a widow - and of the present agitation aimed against the British to quit India.

Binodini, a passionate young widow, overthrows the social norms of widowhood to make direct appeal to the man she loves. This results in a chain of events that throws into turmoil the internal as well as external world of the characters. However, the emotions of the characters and their psychological turmoil become the central pole of the novel: When Binodini tells Behari, 'I may be bad, or wrong, but do try to see things from my point of view just this once and understand me', it might as well be an appeal that Tagore is making to the readers of his day.

Thus in Tagore's hand we find the shift of emphasis from the external actions to the internal psyche of the characters. The story of the novel is very simple. It centers round the problem of human relationship and shows us the fire of passions that burns inside the well

to do Bengali middle class home of the time, without flame or smoke being visible to the outside eye. The six main characters in the novel are Rajlaxmi, the fond mother devoted and jealous; Mahendra, the pampered, vain and self-centered son; Asha, the simple untutored wife; Annapurna, the pious aunt; Bihari, the virtuous, noble and loyal friend; and Binodini, the full blooded young, beautiful and attractive widow in whose frustrations, sufferings and rebellion the author's response to the orthodox Hindu customs of the society of the time is summed up.

As Krishna Kripalini says that her (Binodini's) tragedy is a lasting shame to the Hindu conscience. Binodini, a beautiful, talented and well educated girl, could not get a husband because her parents had spent the little they had for her education and could not save enough for her dowry. Moreover, an unmarried girl over twelve years was a social disgrace to a respectable Hindu family of the time. So she was married off to a poor, sickly nobody and soon became widow. Conscious of her beauty, youthful glamour, talent and education, Binodini rebelled against orthodox rituals and tried to assert her right to love and live a fulfilling life. On the other hand, Rajlaxmi, being jealous of the excessive emotional attachment of her lifelong pampered son with his newly married wife Asha, brought Binodini to the family. It is this Binodini whose hands in marriage, was rejected by Mahendra and also by his friend Bihari. Binodini, the radiantly beautiful young widow avidly watches the intense amorous life of the newly married couple, and her mounting sexual and mental frustrations explode in seeking revenge for her misfortunes. It leads to a chain of events and conflicts. Mahendra expresses his love for Binodini and elopes with her, thus, throwing into disarray the reputation and peace of the family.

But Binodini does not allow Mahendra to consume her sexually and with her turmoiling inner-self begs the hand of Bihari whom she really loves. Again when Bihari proposes her to marry, she turns down his offer of marriage, gives the money she had to Bihari, renounces her earthly life and goes to *Kashi* with Annapurna to live the pious life of a widow, purged off all desires. She retreats from the contest in the end, not because she is crushed but because she disdains a victory achieved at such sordid cost. Orthodox society in Tagore's time still disapproved of widow remarriage, in spite of the Widow Remarriage Act, which legitimized it.[6]

Some readers feel that *Chokher Bali* should have ended with Binodini's marriage to Bihari. The novel, however, suggests another reason for Binodini's rejection of Bihari: Knowing her reputation to be tainted by her association with Mahendra, she is

unwilling to let the social stigma affect Bihari. The end of the story of *Chokher Bali* appears to some readers of the present day as not being in full accord with the realism of the plot and Tagore himself was not un-ware of it. But it could not have been made otherwise. Any other end to Binodini's career would have given unwarrantedly the rudest shock even to the most advanced readers of the day, and Tagore was no believer in shock tactics and had never attempted to be outrageously original. In *Chokher Bali* Tagore's concern with the problems of human personality and its relationship with forces outside, his interest in detailed psychological analysis of the inner consciousness, did much to determine the future course of Bangla novel.

This clearly shows that Tagore in his novels used different themes thereby showing his interest in the tensions, conflicts, contradictions, frustrations, and embarrassment situations stemming in Indian society from the polarities of tradition and modernity, past and present, orthodoxy and radicalism; and idealism and opportunism. *Binodini*, the most significant novel, created a stir in the Bengali society in general and in the Indian society in particular as the two women characters ushered a change in the social scenario of women in Bengal. It deals with the woeful conditions of Hindu widows and the silent suffering of Indian wives side by side in the tradition bound Indian society.

Tagore de-familiarizes 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. Alison Macdonald in his very critically written research paper "‘Real’ and ‘Imagined’ Women", states that women's bodies have been identified as the markers of boundaries for both the community and the nation and in reference to this Irene Gedalo fuses 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.[2]

This move is inspired by Judith Butler's notion of gender perform-activity, the "stylized repetition of acts" 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 idealized are realized and maintained. In the Indian context, the physicality of the body in expressing gender is documented by Veena Das 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.[6]

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