
Chokher Bali (Binodini) : A Protest of Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore is a versatile genius for his works which consist of poems, short stories, dramas, novels, paintings, music etc. Many contemporary issues like social problem, political restlessness, religious violence, patriotism, psychological conflict, woeful conditions of women and the ultimate emergence of new women were brought to a focus in his writings. Tagore was a social reformer, philosopher, and prophet. His books and essays on philosophy, literature, religion, education, and social topics discussed not only the contemporary issues but also illuminated how to get emancipation from social problems. The social condition of women of his time, their deprivation in every sphere of society touched Tagore. Tagore protested against that social order and wrote for the oppressed women their position in society. In this paper, my attempt is to find out Tagore's feminist point of view and sympathy for women through his female protagonist Binodini in the novel, "Chokher Bali" (1903).

Keywords: Contemporary society, Women, Widow, Protest, Emancipation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Society creates literature. It may be described as the mirror of the society. If literature expresses social sympathies, naturally it is bound to exercise some positive influence on human mind and attitude. Society reacts to literature in a living way. It rouses feelings and enthusiasm for welfare. Tagore's different experiences in western countries, perception, knowledge and political experiences and generosity reshaped and reacted against the oppression of women in the patriarchal society of his time. As a thinker Tagore believed that a country can reach the peak of success with the development of women. So, he gave the priority of women in society and played an important role as a social reformer through his literary works.

2. BACKGROUND

Rabindranath Tagore is one of the world famous literary personalities in the history of literature. The Western culture played a significant role in Tagore's family right from his grandfather Prince Dwarkanath Tagore. From 1877 to 1880 Tagore stayed in London and he became aware of the women enjoying emancipation in London. This impression enabled him to compare the position of the Western women with the Bengali women in the society. Though the women of Tagore's family were all educated and cultured attitude of Tagore towards women in his society could not attract the attention of many of his family members. Tagore won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 and he travelled western countries for educational purposes. There he saw the women's liberation and felt for the wretchedness of the women of his country. The impact of the new woman concept in the western society possessed the heart of Tagore which awakened the spirit of emancipation of women of his society

We may categorize Tagore's writings into three phases. The First phase covers from 1881 to 1892. The main theme of this phase was the social in justice against women. He wanted women's active role in the society. So his women characters in the stage were portrayed through mythological deities with inner strength. The period from 1893 to 1913 is considered as his Second phase of writings. According to William Cenkner, former Associate Professor of History of Religions at the Catholic University of America in Washington D. C., the Second phase was the most imaginative phase. Tagore stated depicting female characters as urban and educated with new vigor in Bengali society. In his Third phase (1914 to 1941) of writings Tagore's women were not passive. They were openly speaking for their own and protesting against the ills and injustice of the society. Tagore highlighted that women should not be passive under the cruel hand of society.

3. ISSUES FOCUSED

The themes and heroines created by Rabindranath Tagore in his selected novels are bold to have a futuristic outlook as depicted by the so-called feminist writers of twentieth century. Tagore took pity on seeing the condition

of women of his time. He protested against the contemporary social system in his novels. If we have close study of his selected novels we can get an oppressive attitude of male-dominated society towards women. But Tagore did not support this injustice and tyranny of his society. He attacked the male-domination and advocated women's education for their emancipation.

R.N Tagore build a new literary genre in Bangali with 'Chokher Bali' (1903), a realistic novel. Literally, the meaning of 'Chokher Bali' is 'Eyesore'. The novel was translated by Krishna Kripalani under the title 'Binodini'. Through its characterization and psychological content Tagore became able to highlight the social taboos among the Hindu elite. The novel was serialized in Bangla periodical 'Bangadarshan' from 1902-1903 and it was published as a book in 1903. The story of the novel was set around the end of the nineteenth century. At that time many woman would be widowed at an early age because of the custom of child marriage. It was the question of the young widows' sexuality. Society forced them to live in discipline and did not allow any sexual diversion. Practically, the young widows would suffer and death pain in every movement. By 1856 widow remarriage had been realized. Yet widow remarriage was treated as a social taboo in the eye of the Hindu society. But the social picture is treated by Tagore in other wise. In 'Chokher Bali' Tagore concentrated the minute attention to mind of the woman characters. The novel belongs to 'the literature of the new age' that finds 'to reveal the secrets of the heart' as Tagore himself claimed in the Preface to 'Chokher Bali'.

In the novel, the hero, Mahendra is the spoilt son of a rich family. His widowed mother Rajlakshmi who loves him very fondly desires Mahendra to marry Binodini, daughter of her friend. When Mahendra refuses to marry, his mother tries for Vihari, friend of Mahendra to marry Binodini. Vihari also refuses. Though the girl is married someone else she soon becomes a widow. By the time Mahendra becomes married with Asha. Mahendra is self-willed. Mahendra loves Asha intensely like a boy attracted by the delight the senses. Rajlakshmi becomes hurt on seeing that his son loves his wife so much and her so little. Asha and Binodini become friends and call each other by the pet name 'Eyesore'. But it was the tragic irony that Mahendra became infatuated with Binodini in her plot. Vihari can understand Binodini's tricks and warns Mahendra. On the other hand Binodini tries to convince Mahendra that Vihari is in love with Asha. Finally Binodini gets the opportunity to be close with Mahendra when Asha is away. Mahendra elopes with Binodini and Binodini achieves Mahendra's love secretly. But as a widow, the relationship between them becomes critical. Binodini prays for Vihari's love and is rejected though he is prepared to accept her. The re-marriage of Binodini with Vihari would have solved the pangs of a young widow in the society but it would have shocked the orthodox public.

Tagore made Binodini the full blooded young, educated, attractive and beautiful. He attacked the orthodox Hindu customs of the society of the time through Binodini's sufferings, frustrations, and rebellion. In this context Krishna Kripalani says, "Her (Binodini's) tragedy is a lasting shame to the Hindu conscience." (Kripalani, 2001: vi) The passionate young widow Binodini as anew woman of Tagore did not care the social customs of widowhood and she made a direct appeal to the man she loved. She threw an open challenge to the existing society which forced the young widows to be restricted in every sphere of life. The outward world of the characters played an important role to cause the internal turmoil. The psychological agitation was the main focus of the novel. According to Swagato Ganguly:

When Binodini tells Behari ..., 'I shall 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 (Ganguly 2003: ix).

Tagore could shake the orthodox society of his time through his heroine Binodini, the beautiful, talented and well-educated girl. Binodini's parents could not save enough for her dowry and had spent the little in her marriage. As a result she could not get a husband she deserved. To a respectable Hindu family of Tagore's time an unmarried girl of over twelve years was a social disgrace. Therefore, she was married to a poor and sickly person and she soon became a widow at an early age. That was very shocking to Tagore who was conscious of her (Binodini) beauty, youthful glamour, talent, and education. Tagore felt that Binodino deserved more than what she got. Binodini was deprived of in the society. SO, Tagore made Binodini as rebellious against orthodox rituals and tries to assert her right to love and live a fulfilling life. In the novel we see that Rajlakshmi, the jealous mother brought Binodini(after being widow) to the as she could not tolerate her lifelong pampered son Mahendra's excessive emotional

attachment with his newly married wife Asha. Binodini whose hands in marriage was rejected by Mahendra and also by his friend Vihari observed the deep romantic life of the newly married couple which tormented her mounting sexual and mental frustrations as a widow. So, she started seeking revenge for misfortunes and deprivations. With the passage of time and a chain of events and conflicts Mahendra expressed his love for Binodini and eloped with her, that disgraced the reputation and disturbed the peace of the respected family. It was Binodini's discretion that compelled her not to be consumed sexually by Mahendra. She with her confused inner self prayed the hand of Vihari whom she really loved. But it was the fact that Binodini refused Vihari's offer of marriage because of the orthodox society of Tagore's time. Instead, she offered money she had to Vihari and gave up her early life and went to Kashi to live the pious life of a widow. Purging off all desires she withdrew herself from the contest in the end. She considered that a victory gained in such an immoral and dishonest way was disdainful. Radha Chakravarty in her "Introduction" in Rabindranath Tagore (2003) mentioned:

Orthodox society in Tagore's time still disapproved of widow remarriage, in spite of the Widow Remarriage Act, which legitimized it. Some readers feel that "Chokher Bali" should have ended with Binodini's marriage to Vihari. The novel, however, suggests another reason for Binodini's rejection of Vihari. Knowing his reputation to be tainted by her association with Mahendra, she is unwilling to let the social stigma affect Vihari. (Chakravarty, 2003: Introduction)

"Chokher Bali", the most significant novel raised a storm in the Bengali society of Tagore's time as the female protagonist ushered a change in the social picture of women in Bengal. The novel shows not only the woeful conditions of Hindu widows through Binodini's wretchedness but also deals with the silent suffering of Indian wives by representing the obedient wife Asha. Tagore's women characters made a strong protest against the tradition bound Indian society where women were passive and neglected. They had played no role in decision making in the society but they were the only things to be exploited and consumed by the male dominated society. These pathetic conditions of women melt Tagore's heart. So, Tagore created an educated rebellious widow as the central female character of the novel who could protest and agitate the contemporary orthodox society. Tagore felt the necessity of women's liberation and education as he foresaw the progress of the future society in the hands of women.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be pointed out that the greatest quality of Tagore is that his issues reflected in his novel touch our heart and bear the power of humanistic appeal. So, Tagore is an author of man and humanity. He always keeps a universal message of peace, love, and joy in his creation. The Indianness of Tagore is an open secret. But he is quite successful in transporting his Indian issues, ideas, sentiments, and philosophy universally. That is why, Tagore's creation of such an emancipated woman through Binodini proves that he is a harbinger of feminism for ahead of his time. And his protest against the contemporary society through the female protagonist is very important and significant.

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