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## The Dynamics of Binodini's Character in Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali*

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### Abstract

*Chokher Bali* is considered as one of the best-known works of Rabindranath Tagore. The novel is a character-based work which is completely progressive in its essence. Binodini, the protagonist, is personification of intellect, grace, femininity, commitment and skills. She is a woman of desire in spite of being a widow. She is dreamer but at the same time deeply attached with her roots and reality. The dynamics of her character, the subtle nuances which she depicts are the epitome of aesthetic development in a character for the need of the plot. She rebels and out rightly rejects the paradigm of widowhood set by the patriarchy. The way Tagore portrays her character even the negatives, the flaws, the shortcomings in Binodini, appear to be very natural and spontaneous. Widowhood is all about seclusion and loneliness and the character of Binodini is all about debunking and shattering the myths related to widowhood. This paper is an attempt to focus on the artistic character of Binodini and realism attached with her aspirations.

**Keywords:** Progressive, Modernity, Realism, Psychological, Aesthetic, Widowhood, Self-Affirmation, Rebel, Dowry-System, Non-Conformist

*Chokher Bali*, published in 1905, demonstrates the lives of educated, upper-class and progressive characters. The story is set second half of the ninetieth century in atypical Bengali house-hold set-up. *Chokher Bali* is considered by many as first modern Bengali novel. The protagonist, Binodini is modern in her conception and demonstration. But understanding the concept of modernity by Tagore is as important as knowing that the text and its protagonist being modern. According to Tagore, modernity is all about considering the world around oneself without biases and favoritism. Modernity has to be eternal as well as chaste. The spectrum has to be the same for all be it for widows or women with husbands. Tagore attaches lot of aesthetic nuances to his concept of modernity. *Chokher Bali* represents the category of New Literature in India which supposedly is the epitome of realism and somehow talks about the latent desires in one's heart. It is in this sense that it can be called a modern text.

It is a psychological novel in the sense that it gives expression and articulation to the desires of the characters which are latent or forbidden in many cases. Tagore's aim is to explore individual personalities through this novel. He gives psychological insights which help in interpretation of characters' position, circumstance and personality's fabrication which become a catalyst in the process of plot development. The novel is full of dialogues that is why M. V. Iyengar remarks that it is "...more like a play than like a novel" (92). According to Krishnan Kripalini, it appears to be that the novelist "watched the human drama with such a gentle and calm irony, without the intrusion of poetic rhapsodies or intellectual dissertations" (188). This novel is synonymous with realism and naturalism.

The novel is significant not only for its use of psychological realism but also for its handling of the pain and ordeal of young widows in Hindu Society. In the name of religion and tradition, widows are penalized in an inhuman way. They are treated as criminals by the society and restrictions are imposed upon them for no logical reason. Widows are expected to live an austere life and in the description of the same, Tagore "emerges as a non-conformist, ready to expose social conservatism" (Naravane 117). The novel carries a suggestion, "The amelioration of the lot of widows, i.e., dispossession, depersonalization and dehumanization, does not merely lie in remarriage but also creating conditions for the harmonious realization of their personality and self-hood" (Singh 40).

Binodini, the protagonist of the novel, a widow, is somehow shown as a rebel as she rejects remarriage as a solution to her predicament. Rather than consenting to a socially unacceptable marriage, she pursues, through her belief in self-affirmation, a more significant role of her conscious personality, embracing "a grandeur even in her defeat" (Narvane, 118).

Binodini is manifestation of the creative instinct of Tagore as she is a young widow with desires, smothered and repressed by society's protocols. She gives expression to the torment and mental distress of a victim of circumstances and rigidity of Patriarchal System. She is also a victim of the social evil – dowry. Insidious and baneful, dowry system prevents

a beautiful and educated woman like Binodini from getting a suitable match. Thus, dowry system of India is also one of the reasons for the tragic life lead by Binodini.

Binodini is not ready to accept her brutal destiny but wants to carve a niche through her individuality in a male-dominated world. She is a victim of circumstances but never lets victimization overpower her. She has a strong personality and knows how to deal with situations rationally.

She has lived with her husband for a short while but she never cares to remember him. Probably this is because she has no attachment with him, no love, no submersion. This attitude is denounced and attacked by many and her Christian Missionary education is considered responsible for it by the critics. She has various shades in her personality and the responsibility of the development of plot appears to be on her shoulders. She as a character is very dynamic and efficient and undoubtedly in this case “plot depends on character and not vice-versa” (Kabir 34).

Binodini, the name in Bengali means sensuous and pleasure loving. She is a complex character as she has many layers attached to her personality. She is an amalgamation of contrary traits. Her actions, at times, are enigmatic and not in alignment with the situation and its demands. She is generous yet disposed to seek revenge. She displays warmth yet painfully desirous of other's advantages. She is spiritual, at the same time takes delight in beauty and attractions. She is a widow by destiny but does not accept it mutely. She is a non-conformist under acute pressure of conforming with the existing patriarchal norm which are against her desirous self. She refuses to marry Bihari but she prays that “I may have you for my own in my next life” (Tagore 278).

The two male protagonists of the novel, Mahendra and Bihari have refused to marry Binodini without even seeing her. Bihari gets engaged to Ashalata but eventually Mahendra marries her due to certain circumstances. Bihari warns Mahendra and Ashalata, who are not only in love overtly but also display the same uncontrollably as well as neglect their social and familial obligations, “Prerequisite to proper digestion is to chew your food slowly, not gulp it down... Your happiness is in your hand, so enjoy it without frittering it away by exercising no restraint” (Tagore, 26).

Aware of her beauty and talent, Binodini wants a happy life and dignified position in society. Mahendra's rejection and her marriage with a person who- “was congenitally afflicted with an enlarged spleen, and it was this enlarged spleen that precipitated his untimely exit from this world, almost immediately after the marriage” (Tagore, 33), hurts her pride. In Indian society widowhood is greatest bane and scourge. Thus, for no fault of hers, she is targeted by the society and torture and suffering is assigned to her by the society. A widow is inauspicious for the society, her presence is considered as ominous, is indicative of premonition, everybody looks down upon her and ignores her approach. Forbidden desires of widows described in the novel are having tea, inhaling the aroma of fried fish as they can't eat fish, donning ornaments, having conjugal desires – all of these are condemnable acts.

Binodini renegades such unjust social system. She is assertive about her rights, wants people not to judge her and treat her as an equal. Her desire to get her rights recognized

grows more and more, especially after seeing Ashalata, who she thinks is much inferior to her. She believes that Ashalata has usurped her position as the wife of Mahendra. This growing desire to establish her rights gives her an unconquerable personality which can neither be trifled with nor ignored.

When she arrives at Mahendra's house to become a companion to his autocratic mother, she meets Mahendra, Asha and Bihari. She becomes friends with Asha and feels sad about the loss of the lifestyle which Asha enjoys. It is denied to her because of Mahendra's rejection— "this room, this bed, which now belonged to Asha, could have been rightfully hers, and Binodini never allowed herself to forget the loss" (Tagore, 49).

She is an uncommon merger of good-looks, amiability, brightness and intelligence. She is the only child of her parents. Despite limited resources, she has given her English education which many belonging to even affluent classes, have been denied. Although she is qualified, her marriage has become a problem for the mother as her father has died without leaving much for dowry apparently. Binodini has been an avid reader and has read a lot of books which adds to her witty and dignified persona. Her personality has been depicted as very attractive one. Any and every man dream to be with a woman like her.

"It is significant that the protagonist in Tagore's novel is shown as fashioning herself initially on the heroines of Bankim Chandra's novels, of which she is an avid reader. She is, in fact, alluded to as "a second poison tree" – the potentially destructive seductress (Raj 22).

Binodini is a complex character. Thus, it is a shift from "rhetorical to psychological characterization, which is in keeping with the dictum announced by him in the introduction to the novel" (Raj 22). By delving deep into the psychology of Binodini's desires and passions, Tagore attains a realistic persuasion which is not accessible to romantic approach of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee or any other writer of those times. Tagore describes Binodini's burning desire for love and conjugal ties which gives a very real dimension to the entire plot.

In Mahendra's house, Binodini wins every one's heart and appreciation. There comes a point when Ashalata herself accepts superiority of Binodini in certain fields. She considers "herself despicably insignificant in contrast to Binodini" (Tagore 47). Binodini's simplicity, natural self, candid humility and vigilance compel admiration and leaves the reader in awe and wonder. Both Mahendra and Bihari are awestruck after seeing her taste for delicate, aesthetic, neat and tidy surroundings.

While Binodini is smart and confident, Asha is subversive and has low self-esteem. Binodini is effortlessly a leader and organizer with a flair for household work; while Asha is hopelessly inefficient and clumsy. Binodini is "never idle for a moment, supremely efficient in everything she did, an excellent cook, and above all, a girl of engaging temperament" (Tagore 34). Her intellect and her taste in literature attracts Mahendra towards her. He is exhilarated and feels elevated when he accepts his love for Binodini – "however ill the others might think of me, the truth is that I am in love. Binodini's image had, at that moment, dislodged everything from his heart– the whole world, the starry sky, his life, his obligations – Binodini had obliterated them all!" (Tagore 148). Mahendra is head over heels in love with

Binodini and his wife Ashalata, starts acknowledging that her husband is no more in love with her. Srikumar Banerjee observes that this kind of characterization is “that of a woman denied her right to love, afire with jealousy, bent upon bringing Mahendra to his knees by all means. An arch plotter, torn with mental conflict and repression” (Bannerjee, in Chaudhuri 73).

The complexity of her character is further perpetuated when Binodini says, “I have no right to love or be loved in this world. That is why I play at love to lighten my sorrow... I have no desire to play the game any longer” (Tagore, 164-165). The plot develops in such a way that she is no more interested in Mahendra and increases her admiration for Bihari.

Bihari and Binodini have not come close to each other in a spur of the moment. They have come to understand each other since Dum-Dum picnic and come closer slowly, as a result of “Mahendra’s act of omission and commission” (Sarada 24). With passage of time Binodini and Bihari realize that they are in love with each other. Bihari wants to get married to her but she with a spirit of self-abnegation, does not want to get married to him and says, “This is reward enough for me, my ultimate desire... I do not ask for anything more... I am a widow, deemed an accursed creature in our society. You will lose your face in your community if you marry me” (Tagore, 277).

Binodini sacrifices her personal happiness to protect the image of Bihari. She does not want any stain on Bihari’s reputation thus, she prefers to lead the rest of life in Kashi, away from the worldly attachments. Her renunciation puzzles the readers as marriage could have been a solution to her quandary. This further adds to her enigmatic and dynamic personality. It may be said that Binodini heralds the emergence of a new class of emancipated Indian women – who are not embracing the mal-treatment done to them on any pretext and they are assertive of their rights. The character of Binodini is the portrayal of the love of a young widow with pity, sympathy and warmth. “Tagore’s humanism blossoming to the full form keeping human value and human problem at the core of discussion” (Singh, 50). Binodini’s sacrifice invests her as “the symbol of the stricken conscience of the contemporary middle-class Hindu Society” (Ray 186).

*Chokher Bali* is “the fusion of inner world of the mind and the outer world of nature” (Roy 89). There is a perfect correspondence “between the working of the human mind and the atmosphere surrounding it” (Roy 89). Krishna Kriplani articulates that of all the women characters created by Rabindranath Tagore, Binodini is “the most convincing, vital and full blooded” (187). Niharranjan Ray too acclaims, “she has lent color and vitality to the story from one end to the other end, her radiant youth is the life-blood of the whole novel” (169).

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