

ISSN:0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 7, Issue-I February 2016

7 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

www.the-criterion.com

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Women Protagonists of Tagore: A Study of *Binodini*

Dr. Sanjay Kumar Dutta
Orissa Engineering College

In Tagore's fiction, women are depicted in a variety of ways. With the exception of *Gora*, the central theme of all novels of Tagore revolves around a woman. Other women in his works also play significant roles. They function in the society of their times and evolve through relationship within ordinary Bengali family life. Of over 100 short stories written by Tagore, about 70 are stories of women; of 5 novelettes, the main characters are all women; of 8 novels, main characters are women in 5, of about 40 dramas, 34 have their heroines as main characters. If women characters are excluded, little remains of his work.

Tagore began his endeavours in fiction with a historical novel, *Bau Thakuranir Hat* or *The Queen Consort's Fair* (1883) and achieved his recognition as a novelist with *Chokher Bali* (1902—which will be referred to hereafter as *Binodini*) which was adapted later on in to the screen play of a film on the same name. Besides being recognized as the first psychological novel, *Chokher Bali* has aroused admiration of many critics. For instance, Sukumar Sen comments:

Here for the first time in Indian Literature the actions and reactions arising out of the impact of the minds of individuals and not so much the external happenings propel the plot. The psychosis of the characters is followed realistically and this is unique for Indian literature. (233)

In each of his novels he has mirrored the sore points of contemporary social life, particularly the innumerable instances of social injustice, especially to women. He also held up “the ideal of self-reliant Indian women fighting not only for their own rights but also for those subjugated nationality and the down-trodden humanity”. (B. Majumdar 1) Many of these women characters were models, instrumental in heralding the so-called progressive age in which we live. Featuring some of the major issues of contemporary society Tagore attacks the orthodox customs of Hindu tradition which included child marriage, the dowry system and so on.

Binodini tells the story of a well to do middle class family of Calcutta. Apart from telling the story of the family, the novel resolves around two main characters or rather say protagonists-

Binodini, a young, talented, beautiful widow; and Mahendra- a spoilt brat of his foolish mother. Binodini in *Chokher Bali* is not the daughter of a rich person, yet a European Missionary woman is engaged to educate her. It dramatizes the struggle of a young, beautiful widow for self-actualization and selfhood in a social system that denies all scope for such attempts.

Binodini is the central character in this fascinating social drama that was a radical departure for women in classical Bengali literature. She is portrayed as, “the eternal feminine trudging through the ages in quest of her lover, weary with pain, distracted with longing, bursting the throb of desire, trailing through poetry, through song until she stands on the other shore crying ‘Ferry me across O boatman!’” (Iyengar 318) She evolves in many different ways throughout the story. Of all women characters in Tagore’s novels, Binodini is the most real, “convincing and full-blooded.” (Kripalani 2001, iv)

The opening of the novel itself mentions how her father had spent so much money on her to be tutored by an English lady that he had nothing to offer to her as dowry in marriage. He had failed to find a suitable match for her and dies without giving her much money or a husband to depend on. This speaks volumes about the society in Binodini’s time. Women rarely received higher education. Moreover, the system of dowry was rampant and mandatory for survival and respect in the society. Soon after Mahendra refuses to marry her, Binodini is widowed after her marriage to Bipin, an undeserving “barbaric monkey of Barasat” or “*Barasater barbar bandor*” (*Chokher Bali*: 1902, 2: 415). Binodini’s entry into Mahendra’s household as a governess is her initiation into a world of happiness and sensual pleasures of which her untimely widowhood had deprived her. The blissful conjugal relationship between Asha and Mahendra intensifies her frustration and vengeance. It painfully reminds her of her physically, emotionally and intellectually deprived life. She sets out to captivate Mahendra, all the while befriending the innocent Asha, who is increasingly bewildered by the rapidly changing dynamics of relationships around her. Binodini assumes the *femme fatale*, thereby unleashing the forces into motion that could destroy existing relationships. She is not ready to hide her burning beauty and desires within the white folds of her widow's attire. She, conceived as a ‘new woman’ in Bengali fiction, sets out to burn others and herself with the fire of her passions. However, as the story proceeds one gets the feeling that perhaps Tagore was sure of how to handle and shape this fiery seductress and so at the end her fire is doused and she is transformed into a repenting and a conforming woman who sacrifices her life and passion at the feet of her beloved and her

redeemer. Binodini is the intelligent, impulsive, passionate, pulsating and throbbing lifeline of the novel. She shrewdly blends within herself, the polarities of the virgin and the whore, the seductress who also befriends the wife. She matures from a timid young girl who does not question the destiny of her marriage; she transforms into a blatantly sexual woman who draws courage from the fact that she has nothing to lose but bound to conform ultimately to the dictates of the moral world by a male author who also conforms to such existing moral codes. Tagore's voyeurism as a male author is visible here: he offers space to his protagonist and then chastises them for their transgression. Binodini's advances with her ruthless motives generally project her in a negative light as a vamp but her angelic regression from the object of her own yearnings presents a sudden contrast. The societal evil transforms a young woman to a widow. Tagore claims to be able to reflect her psyche and yet denounces her.

Binodini inspires diverse emotions in various members of the household. Rajlakshmi relies completely on Binodini for running the household smoothly. Bihari, the inveterate bachelor regards Binodini as a poison tree who could ruin the family. Binodini is indeed found to be reading Bankimchandra's novel, *The Poison Tree* wherein a widow brings doom upon the family. Mahendra complains that Binodini has become his wife's latest obsession while Asha regards Binodini as a dear friend. Once Asha gets Binodini to meet Mahendra, Binodini enchants him with her beauty and repartee to such a degree that he is impelled to see her frequently, pretending to click photographs of her. Binodini also restores order and punctuality to the household. Teasing Asha for her incompetence, she takes upon herself the task of looking after Mahendra, his wardrobe, his food and sends him to college regularly. Binodini's solicitude can be recognized by Mahendra in everything in the house and even in Asha, whom Binodini dresses up every evening to receive him. According to Rajlakshmi, since Binodini did most of the work she gave Rajlakshmi respite from drudgery. Thus, Binodini carves a niche for herself in Mahendra's family within a short period of time. She has sufficient aptitude to exercise her superiority over everybody and make herself indispensable in the house. Here Mahendra's house can be viewed as an epitome of the social order. Given the opportunity, she would have proved herself worthy to be respected in any human society.

The way Binodini performs the numerous chores, she grows larger than life, like a super-woman. All these talents and energy are expended ultimately to please the man she supposes to love. Although she devises many schemes while staying in Mahendra's household, she could

neither get rid of her baneful widowhood nor helps any woman (except Annapurna who has formerly undertaken all the household responsibilities because of Asha's incompetence) nor brings happiness into Asha's household. On the contrary she fakes romantic advances towards Mahendra and Bihari, gains their displeasure and ruins Asha's conjugal happiness. Yet, Meena Shirwadkar remarks that the novel, "projects Indian fatalism fully operative clouding Binodini's life with perverse events." (17) Unfortunately this Indian fatalism does not affect men, but it victimizes women.

Binodini's character can be considered as a foil to the other three women in the novel. She surpasses Asha in education, maturity, sexual appeal and flair in managing the household chores. She befriends Asha but cannot overcome her coveted rivalry in winning Mahendra's affection. She excels Rajlakshmi in undertaking the smooth running of the house. She refuses to pamper Mahendra unlike Rajlakshmi but at the same time he matures under her care. Annapurna represents the typical widow of Tagore's contemporary society who conformed to all the rituals and restraints which the society dictated a widow to follow and which are still prevalent today. Binodini is a bold and rebellious widow who refuses to conform to her cultural forms and her ultimate fate and questioned the rationale of these codes on humanitarian grounds. Binodini had several causes for her crusade against the misery and destitution to which she is entitled as a widow. However, she projects much finesse compared to the other widows portrayed in popular novels of the day. Unlike Kunda, a widow in Bankimchandra's *Bishabriksha* Binodini does not commit suicide but accepts the adversity of life as a challenge. She asserts her identity in life—but that identity remains that of a widow. It finally leads her to her acceptance of the patriarchy. Tagore strangely draws her as a social rebel and a modern woman but makes her withdraw to the codes of convention. She decides to detach and disengage herself and does it with much dignity, on her own terms, without surrendering herself. The rebellion in her heart is not condemned nor faced with retribution by Tagore, as is meted out to Shaibalini in Bankim's novel *Chandreshekhar*. Binodini thus comes across, "as a woman of great beauty and charm with contrary feelings and wishes and torn by rival passions that pull in different directions." (Kabir 37)

According to Amaresh Das, the household which could have honoured Binodini as Mahendra's wife receives her like a refugee. This increases both her prudence and her tact in handling issues concerning the intricacy of human relationships. (52- 53) Through the novel,

Tagore had anticipated a time when women would demand their own individual position in the society. Hence, he casts the central character with beauty, intelligence and education suited to such a revolutionary age for women. *Binodini* narrates the story of a widow's revolt and her steadfast refusal to conform to a decadent society's moth-eaten morality at a time when widows willingly accepted the position of unpaid labourers in the society. However, she pays a huge price. The doomed Binodini's attraction to the two men creates an unspoken wedge between the two friends. Her spirit caves in, but she never loses her spiritedness, teasing and taunting the men in turns. The way she oscillates and shuttles between the passion of Mahendra and that of Bihari is the result of neither her fickle nor frivolous nature. It is because she has been treated continually as an object of pity, neglect and deprivation in the society that provokes her to do so. Binodini further clarifies her stance in a letter to Bihari, that she had been married to "an obscure unworthy man who died soon after the marriage and got erased out of her memory". (Idem.) Ever since then she has served the sentence of a widow in an orthodox Indian society infested with irrational values and her life was no different from life-imprisonment. She argues in the letter about crusading for individuality and self-respect in the social order. Hence when she rises in Bihari's esteem, she experiences immense satisfaction of winning the respect of at least a single human being. In all the above-mentioned instances, she clearly projects her self-willed vivacious and attractive traits. Her imagination, stimulated by her voracious reading of romantic novels, is prompted by her imagination about the character and form of physical love. Her pitious plight of loneliness inspires sympathy in the reader as it did in *Rajlakshmi*. Binodini always believes that if Mahendra or Bihari had agreed to marry her then she would never have had to encounter such misfortune. The seed of rancour and resent takes root with this rejected proposal of marriage and makes her act the way she does in the novel.

The second stage of evolution of Binodini's character involves the rift between Bihari and Mahendra. Through the subversion of male authority women have often tried to assert themselves and thus, widen their own space. It may be granted that,

Binodini also successfully undermined male domination and male ego by making Mahendra grovel before her and then quietly transferring her loyalty to Bihari...she subverted the social norm as well as the individual norms of behaviour...she had the fortitude to

take her own decision and stick by it which is the ultimate testimony to the realization of one's self-identity. (Mukhia 69)

The third stage of Binodini's love consists of her fall from Bihari's high esteem for her. Her tragedy stems from her oscillating between two men who lack the courage to procure for her a place of social honour for which she pines. But, being moved by Bihari's instinctive integrity and strength of character, she begins to nurse a futile passion for him, earning in return only his contempt because he sees her only as a widow but "offers to marry her more out of his desire to protect Asha from unhappy developments than out of love for her." (Kabir 37) She resists his marriage proposal as this would have led to the latter's defamation and social ostracism. She says, "*Chhi chhi, e katha mone korite lajja hoy. Ami vidhava, ami nindita, samasta samajer kachhe ami tomake lanchhito koribo, e kokhono hoitei parena...*" (*Chokher Bali*, 2: 508) "The very thought of it is shameful. I am a widow and, besides a woman in disgrace. I can never allow you to lose caste on my account...." (*Binodini* 243) Her profound love for him forbids her to accept his sympathy. If she fails to win his affection, then it is better that she should remain free. With both pain and dignity, she refuses the proposal and resolves to withdraw from the life of Asha and Mahendra. She chooses to aid Bihari in rendering his selfless medical services to the poor. Moreover, she possibly starts believing what she had once told Asha in jest: "*Maran chhara to sohager lok amar ar kehoi nai.*" (*Chokher Bali*, 2: 435) "Death is the only bridegroom I can ever have." (*Binodini* 109)

Binodini, however, shows a multitude of noble traits in her. Her love and sympathy is extended not only to the members of Mahendra's family like Asha and Bihari, but she also nurses the servants when they are ill. She loves and respects Rajlakshmi. She partakes of revelry only after attending to the sick Rajlakshmi and discharging the household chores. She can also trace the psychology of people around her. It has been rightly observed that "Binodini heralds the emergence of a new class of emancipated woman, who are no longer prepared to be downtrodden by the society but fight to assert their rights." (Singh 50)

Works Cited:

- Das, Amaresh. *Rabindranther Upanyas: Nabamulyayan*. Kolkata: Pustak Bipani, 2002.
- Das, Sisir Kumar. *A History of India Literature 1911-1956. Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1995.

Kabir, Humayun. *The Bengali Novel*. Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1968.

Iyengar, K. R. S. *Indian Writing in English*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1973. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., rpt. 1985.

Mukhia, Banani. *Women's Images Men's Imagination: Female Characters in Bengali Fiction in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2002.

Sarada, M. *Rabindranath Tagore: A Study of Women Characters in His Novels*. Khurja: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., 1988.

Sen, Sukumar. *A History of Bengali Literature*. Calcutta: Sahitya Akademi, 1960.

Singh, Kh. Kunjo. *Humanism and Nationalism in Tagore's Novels*. Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Binodini*. trans. Krishna Kripalani. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1968.