

## ***Chokher Bali* : Preponderance upon Women Education**

**Dr. Ashish Gupta**  
Professor English  
Govt. Girls College  
Betul (M.P.)

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### **Abstract:**

Tagore was always in favor of women's education and their liberation. In *Chokher Bali*, Tagore draws parallels between the educated and the uneducated through Asha and Binodini. Binodini's character, despite its shades of grey, is refreshing as she does not accept her fate, and attempts to seek what she feels she deserves. Binodini is reluctant to fit into the role of a lonely widow and is unwilling to forego her sexual and emotional desires. She is smart and educated and strives to be more than just an inauspicious widow. Towards the end of the story, Binodini retreats to living in women's shelters and bringing about as much change as she can to improve the condition of women. Binodini highlights the importance of education when she says, "... if I had been uneducated, like other widows, I would have been able to easily endure the society's negligence." Binodini represents a new female subjectivity whom western education transforms into a woman with her own heart and mind, and is not tied to traditional customs. Through, Binodini and Asha, Tagore shows the importance of education. There is an imbalance in power due to an imbalance in education between the educated and uneducated characters.

**Keywords:** women's education, liberation, female subjectivity, transform, traditional customs, imbalance in power.

To introduce Tagore is like to show flickering flame to the light of the Sun. There were a number of great writers from Bengal in later 19<sup>th</sup> century and Rabindranath Tagore was one of them. He has his own ideas, his own vision and own ways of life by which he stood in the front of the world with his head held high. He has given significant contribution to Indian English literature and enhanced its position in the map of literary world. He was not only a versatile writer but also a fabulous artist. He has described nature's beauty in his songs

and peeped into human's mind in his novels. Tagore was born in the era of Indian Renaissance where India had to fight not only with British invaders, but her social political and economic issues as well. It was the era when people were ready to leave old ideas and were excited to adopt new thoughts and ideas. Political, religious, social and cultural movements were going on. Our patriarchal society was not so liberal that it would give rights to women, hence Tagore took his art as a weapon to reform the society regarding woman's welfare in our society. Tagore's stories and the show were set in late 19th and early 20th century pre-partitioned Bengal, in a politically volatile period in Kolkata, where the characters pour in from their diverse cultural, rural, and social backgrounds to encourage the new upcoming world. His literary work focused on the intricate and complex nature of human relationships. Unconventionally, Tagore portrayed his women as chance-takers who defiantly resisted social and familial norms in a conservative Indian society. Tagore's women were progressive and provided a fresh perspective to the minds already filled with traditional Indian values. Tagore knew very well until women would come and stand in front of the world for themselves, society will not change. He always stood in favour of woman's emancipation.

*Chokher Bali* is one of the best novels in a new literary style written by Tagore. In this novel story values are based on characterization and psychological values not on entanglement of plots. The novel was serialized in the Bangla periodical 'Bangadarshan' from 1902 to 1903. He has shown familial as well as social problems in it. He has studied woman's psyche in this story and also shown it very beautifully. In the novel *ChokherBali*, Rabindranath Tagore depicts the life of the central character, Binodini, and her relationships with three individuals. The content of the novel mainly preponderates the issue of women literacy and the fates of three widows. The story begins with Rajlaxmi urging her son Mahendra to marry Binodini. But without seeing, he refuses to marry her. Binodini is a beautiful, intelligent and educated woman. Her father exhausted all his wealth on Binodini's upbringing and education. He died very young. She could not get a suitable match for herself. So, her mother married her off to an old and sick man who died soon after their marriage. Hence, she was known as Bipin's widow. She was thrown out of the society with its repressive laws but she was not ready to live a miserable life in a remote village. Hence, she reacted against this social injustice and laws which were imposed upon her by society.

The novel *Chokher Bali* is the best example of preponderance upon women education. Love making was a taboo at that time. But Tagore has dealt with the theme of love in his novels without hurting anyone. He has showed pure love and devotion. Binodini in *Chokher Bali* is a beautiful, convent educated widow who cannot easily endure society's negligence. Though she is a representative of a suffering Indian woman but on the contrary she is an active and bold woman who knows her rights and duties. And how to fight for unjust. Kriplani asserts:

“Of all women characters created by Tagore in his many novels, Binodini is the most convincing, because vital and full blooded. In her frustration and suffering is summed up the author's ironic acceptance of the orthodox Hindu society of the day.” (Kriplani 171-72)

In comparison to Binodini, Asha is a little, meek and uneducated girl who is an orphan and lived with her uncle. Annapurna, her *mashima* is her well-wisher and she wanted Bihari to marry Asha. It is her simplicity that makes Bihari to fall in love with her at first sight. But at last moment Mahendra snatches Asha's hand from Bihari and marries her. She is too young to perform her daughter-in-law's duty, hence household chores were a great task for Asha and prove herself a good home-maker in her mother-in-law Rajlaxmi's eye. Mahendra showers his love and affection on Asha. Seeing Mahendra's over indulgence with Asha, Rajlaxmi could not bear it and she leaves for her village with Bihari.

After leaving the home by Rajlaxmi, Asha could not manage the house. Rajlaxmi takes Binodini with her to her home. She is a perfect home-maker and does all household chores very neatly and responsibly hence becomes the star of Rajlaxmi's eye. Rajlaxmi deliberately praises her each and every time so that Asha would listen and can improve herself. Binodini's acts towards Asha was not deliberate but impulsive. Earlier she is rejected by Mahendra hence she has come his place to take revenge from him. She takes command over Mahendra's house and shows herself as a perfect home-maker to him. As Binodini is expert in her work so does not hesitate to do any work and give order to servants. She is perfect in cooking, nursing and managing the home. With her beauty and intelligence, she wins admiration of all the people in the house including Asha. She leaves no room for her.

“Asha saw that Binodini was well versed in all kinds of domestic skills Mastery came naturally and easily to her; she had no qualms about setting the domestic staff to work, rebuking them or ordering them about. Observing all this, Asha felt that she was utterly inferior to Binodini.” (*Chokher Bali* 55)

Binodini is very clever woman. She takes Asha in her confidence and makes her friend. They call each other *Chokher Bali* (Eyesore). Asha was sore of Binodini’s eye. She thinks that if Mahendra had married her, she would have been the queen of the house and not this uneducated girl. She has the guts to make her house a palace. But this was her fate that she could not get married to Mahendra. She knows very well the taste of chilly and pepper of love. But she is unable to get that taste of love because she has no companion in her life. Tagore has described her state of mind beautifully:

“Such a comfortable home and such an amorous husband! I could have made a kingdom of this home, a slave of this husband. Would the house have been in such a condition then, or the man of the house been reduced to such a state? And to have this babe in arms, this toy doll in my place!” (*Chokher Bali* 60)

Binodini was jealous of Asha and Mahendra’s relation and his love for Asha, hence to take her revenge, Binodini tries to attract Mahendra. She enters in their happy married life. Binodini knows very well that Asha cannot judge her foul game because of her innocence. Initially Mahendra does not pay attention to her. He does not dare to make eye contact with Binodini. He moves away from her too. Binodini herself is sometimes confused. She does not know whether she loves or hates Mahendra, or she wants to punish him or not. Sometimes she questions herself:

“Laughing bitterly to herself, she would wonder: ‘Has any woman ever suffered a condition such as mine? Whether I want to die or to kill, I simply couldn’t say! But whether she wanted to surrender to the fire or to scorch others with it, she needed Mahendra desperately. Where else in the world would she direct her poisoned arrow of fire? ‘Where can he go?’ Sighed Binodini. ‘He must return. He belongs to me.’” (*Chokher Bali* 109)

In Asha's absence when Binodini looks after Mahendra, she comes closer to him to know him more. He notices her beauty and becomes mad about her and falls in love with her. Binodini knows very well that Asha is very simple and innocent girl. By showing sympathy for Asha, she would conquer Mahendra and Bihari's heart very easily. Because Bihari too has a soft corner for Asha. Binodini pays her attention to Bihari now. But he moves away from her. Binodini wants to show the difference between Asha and her to Mahendra and Bihari.

“Once, just once, Binodini wanted to drag Mahendra and Bihari down into the dust and show them the difference between Asha and Binodini. What a contrast between the two of them! Prevented by adverse circumstances from conquering any male heart with her brilliance, Binodini assumed the image of the goddess of destruction, her fiery, powerful spear upraised in her hand.” (*Chokher Bali* 112)

Through Bihari, Tagore has shown his feelings in this story. Here, in fact we cannot look down upon Binodini, as she tries to attract Mahendra and Bihari. She only wants to show herself superior to Asha. Bihari is somewhere angry with Binodini, because of her behavior with Mahendra and does not want anyone between Mahendra and Asha's relation. But he has also sympathy for her because he learns about her past. Now he sees a gracious woman behind the clever Binodini. Bihari proposes Binodini for marriage. At that time widow re-marriage was a taboo. As a reformer Tagore wanted to give a new direction to the society through widow-remarriage. When Mahendra ignores Asha for Binodini, in spite of that she serves him. She cannot imagine her life without Mahendra. Her love for Mahendra is pure. Her mashi has taught her to learn from experience of pain and hardships in life, to be firm to faith and devotion and have faith in Almighty. Tagore has dived deep into Asha's heart to show how innocent she was. Even if her husband is deceiving her in spite of that she is serving him, offering her prayers to him.

“She bent in a posture of obeisance towards the deity who reigned supreme above all worldly things, according to her mashi. ‘I am a young girl,’ she prayed. ‘I do not know You, I only know my husband, but please do not blame me on that account. O Lord, please ask my husband to accept the prayers that I offer him. If he spurns them, I shall die.’” (*Chokher Bali* 203)

Binodini is an ambitious girl. She does not want to compromise with her life and her happiness. Mahendra is mad after Binodini. Now, he has decided to leave his home and elope with her. Even he does not care for his wife and mother. Binodini tells Bihari about their elopement. He is astonished and tells her to stop Mahendra to run away. The so-called society's rituals and Mahendra's rejection of marriage has made her a rebellious woman.

“After a short silence, Binodini fixed her gaze on Bihari. ‘Stop him for whose sake?’ ‘For your Asha? Have I no joys and sorrows of my own? Must I give up all claims to life in this world for Asha's benefit, for the benefit of Mahendra's household? I am not so virtuous, nor am I so well versed in what the religious scriptures say. What will I get in return for what I am to relinquish?’”(Chokher Bali 232)

Binodini is very well known to Mahendra now. She knows that until Mahendra is not bounded, he would love Binodini. As soon as she depends on him, he would run away. He is king of his kingdom. Only Bihari is a reliable man for Binodini. Hence she loves him so much and prays him as God. He is the only man one who can support her and can give shelter to her.

“Day and night, her heart declared, with fierce insistence, ‘Bihari must accept my offering of devotion’”. (Chokher Bali 266)

While chasing Binodini, Mahendra too reached village and started living there. But villagers do not like it, so they forbid Binodini to live there. Now she has no other option except Mahendra, to go with him to any other place. Hence she moves with Mahendra to Kolkata. Mahendra makes arrangements for her staying and he does not live with her but occasionally visits her to ask for any of help. Meanwhile he visits his home at night. His mother Rajlaxmi is not well, only because of him. Asha is also sitting with her mother-in-law, she is busy in serving her. Asha has made a place in Rajlaxmi's heart. Now she has become Rajlaxmi's loving child. She scolds Mahendra for misbehaving with Asha.

“Rajlakshami continued, ‘It is my misfortune that I failed to perceive the angelic nature of my daughter-in-law.’ As she spoke, her voice choked with emotion. ‘But having known

her so long, loved her so much, how could you ultimately inflict such suffering upon her?" (*Chokher Bali* 259)

Mahendra sometimes lives in his home and sometimes rented house. But whenever he comes, Rajlaxmi tries to remove the distance between Asha and Mahendra. She deliberately sends Asha to Mahendra but they hesitate to make eye contact. They were not able to talk with each other as they do earlier and behave like strangers. Once Mahendra was studying in his kaki's room. Rajlaxmi fell ill and Asha was taking care of her. But Rajlaxmi sent her to Mahendra late night. At this time Asha goes to Mahendra without any hesitation and informs him about Rajlaxmi's ill health, Mahendra is astonished to see Asha. He has never seen her before like this. He saw a mature and responsible woman in Asha instead of weak and ignorant girl. Now Asha is intelligent enough to understand that wife is not only to move behind her husband but she is his strength and guide too.

"Tonight, he had seen a new side to Asha. This Asha had no shyness, no meekness; she was confident, fully aware of her rights. She did not come to Mahendra as a beggar craving his bounty. Mahendra may have neglected her as his own wife, but he felt a sense of deference towards her as the daughter-in-law of the house." (*Chokher Bali* 293)

The dejection of Mahendra and hard situations have made Asha a strong woman. Earlier she hesitates to talk anyone or to make eye – contact, but now she commands over Mahendra. She has guts to take decisions for her home. She has raised up above her suffering and humiliation. Binodini is in love with Bihari. Only for him she moves from one place to another. She is searching him without telling Mahendra. Now she too behaves as stranger to Mahendra. She started following all rules which were followed by the widows. She ate once in a day. She did not laugh aloud. Mahendra was frustrated now. He was realizing now that he has lost everything, his mother, wife and his friend Bihari only for the sake of the woman (Binodini) one who is not paying attention to him and she did not love him ever. He had lost his dignity and respect. He wanted to get rid of Binodini. He wanted to make arrangements for Binodini to live her life and set him free. When Binodini finds Bihari, she expresses her love and gratitude to him. Bihari again proposes her for marriage but she refuses:

“For shame, it is embarrassing to think of such a thing. I am a widow, a woman disgraced. I cannot permit you to be humiliated in the eyes of the society. For shame, don’t mention such things.” (*Chokher Bali* 355-56)

Binodini does not recognize him earlier. Though she loves Bihari, she sets him free. Whatever may happen but she wins in her defeat by keeping away herself from re-marriage. Binodini now has realized her mistakes and she feels her real love is only for Bihari. Because it is only Bihari who stands besides her in every up and down in her life. She wants to serve Bihari. “On the strength of that love, I shall commit a single act of daring today. Saying this, Binodini prostrated herself and kissed Bihari’s toe.”<sup>13</sup> Here if Tagore has united her in marriage bond with Bihari, she would have been meek, a poor woman. On the contrary Tagore has shown her as a victor.

In this novel Tagore has shown Binodini “the free woman” one who knows to live her life on her own condition and choice. She is independent and courageous woman. She has enough courage to enter in Mahendra’s life and run away with him in search of Bihari and to deny Bihari’s marriage proposal for the sake of society. She loved Bihari but could not spend her life with him. The central character Binodini is not an idealized Indian woman but a woman with shades of grey and very human flaws. Binodini cannot come to terms with her life as a widow, as she is still young and has wants and desires. She feels wronged as she believes she is superior to Asha in all respect and deserves the life she is living. Tagore’s depiction of Binodini is impressive as she subverts the expectation of society for widows to forgo all worldly desires. Tagore succeeded in portraying Asha. He has shown a great difference in Asha’s personality, changing with time and situation. As Tagore was a social reformer, he tried to reform the society through his work and to some extent he got success too. Asha's self-confidence and determination makes her able to win the respect and admiration from everyone. She also gets her husband back. She forgives her husband, not because of fear of society, but it is her true love for him. Now she is enough mature that she would not trust anybody blindly. Tagore has shown one more aspect of woman that shows modernity to her character.



According to Tagore enhancement of widows do not lie in remarriage only but also in creating compatible situations for their self realization. Binodini's character represents as possessing an extra ordinary will of rejecting remarriage as possible solution to her issue and Asha's transition from meek girl to a mature woman who controls her house very wisely is a beginning of a new path for her. He has also shown reaction of society for a new women in Bengal. It belongs to 'the literature of new age' which seeks to reveal the secrets of the heart. We can say Binodini is beauty with brain. In our Indian society child widows was a crucial issue because of unmatched marriage between a young girl and a aged man. Binodini is a young widow overthrows the social norms of widowhood to express her feelings to the man she loves and as a result the chain of incident creates the trouble in the story. Tagore has shown Binodin's harsh life and struggle to survive in the society and condition of women in contemporary Bengal through Ashalata. Tagore's novels are mirror to the society which reflects the crisis of our Indian society. He endeavored to find a combination of the Eastern and the Western thoughts and ideas. Tagore has written psychological novels based on social facts to bring out change in our society. He worked as a reformer to remove old age menace from the society, hence his all portrayal of emergence of modern sensibility were accepted by the people. His female protagonists show emotional and psychological strength. He has depicted their quest for identity and self-realization within their social and traditional boundaries.

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### **Review-**

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<https://feminisminindia.com/2019/02/15/chokher-bali-rabindranath-tagore-review/15/10/2020>