

THE COMPLEXITIES OF HUMAN EMOTIONS AND WOMEN'S ROLES IN CHOKHER BALI

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore, one of the most renowned authors and poets wrote the novel "Chokher Bali." The novel explores the intricate nuances of interpersonal relationships, cultural standards, and the place of women in traditional Bengali culture. It is set in early 20th-century Bengal. "Chokher Bali" provides insight into a number of facets of Bengali culture of that era. explores the highly sensitive topic of widowhood, which at the time was a vital part of Bengali culture. The work draws attention to the suffering of widows, who were frequently marginalised and limited by traditional conventions. The topic of widow remarriage is also covered, which was once taboo but is now slowly gaining support as a social reform movement. My paper will analyse the study of forbidden wishes and sacrifices of women especially with reference of the character of Binodini- a widow. Although Tagore was a man of liberty and a writer, he was nonetheless constrained by the rigid, orthodox customs of the past. Over and over again, he distorted the image of a widow who is constantly compelled to adhere to the oppressive patriarchal society. Chokher Bali explains to the reader the taboos associated with being a widow for a woman. The period of Indian society while it was ruled by the British had a significant impact on Tagore's literature. His characters' depictions of the conflict between their thirst for independence and a wish to see India as an independent country echoed Tagore's mental condition.

Keywords: Patriarchal society, emotions, complexities, forbidden wishes, widow, sentiments, education, sexuality

Choker Bali (also known as "Choker Bali" or "A Grain of Sand") was published in 1905, readers who were acquainted with the classic literature of the period thought it was pretty pure. According to Tagore, society's preference for literature was evolving from the simple narrating of instances, as he said, "Modern literature is not merely about describing the sequence of events, but also about analysing them and drawing out their inner meaning." (Rabindranath Tagore)

Women have essential and intricate roles in the novel. In the setting of a strict culture, the novel, which is set in late 19th-century Bengal, examines the existences, ambitions, and wishes of women. Tagore drastically transformed his storytelling and observation styles as he tells the tale of a conventional, affluent Bengali family deeply grounded in the values of the society that served as the backdrop. In a world of orthodoxy and paganism, where certain ideas served as the foundation of society or, more accurately, as the primary source of authority for the entire system of both actions and cognition. It was more of a futuristic and progressive part of Tagore's thought at the time when he presumed characters like Binodini and Mahendra who did not adhere to conventions and beliefs. Tagore has crafted dynamic characters who interact with us in our daily lives by talking, acting, and making mistakes before confessing and making amends. The novel Chokher Bali exhibits great sensitivity to and insight into human emotions, frailties, and wisdom that emerges from mistakes. The book also provides a vivid exploration of the ideas about relationships, sexuality, and love that have been ingrained in our minds.

Although several modifications were approved to guarantee that social ills were eliminated, society during Tagore's time had not advanced practically in terms of the norms and laws that comprised the fundamental framework of Indian society. In Bengal and throughout India, rebellious behaviour among women, child marriage, marriages between people of different ages, superstitions surrounding widowhood, and other issues were widespread. However, Tagore was forward-thinking in his strategy for eradicating long-standing social customs and beliefs that hindered the advancement of the female half of the population.

In actuality, what makes Chokher Bali so fascinating is how powerful and robust Binodini is portrayed by Tagore at a period when it may not have even occurred to him to imagine that a woman could be that forthright and self-assured. The glimpses of the character portrayal of women are as under:

1. Binodini: The story's protagonist and one of the most notable female characters is Binodini. She is a young and attractive widow who makes good friends with Mahendra, the main character, and Ashalata, his wife. Binodini symbolises a widow's hardship in an environment where widows were frequently marginalised and had few options. As Binodini navigates the intricacies of love, desire, and norms of society, her character develops throughout the book.

2. Ashalata: Mahendra's wife Ashalata, popularly known as Asha, is a pivotal figure in the story. She is presented as a conventional and obedient wife who makes an effort to keep her husband's affection and attention despite the difficulties their marriage undergoes. The traditional role of women in that culture, where they were meant to be submissive and selfless, is represented by Ashalata.

3. Rajlakshmi: Rajlakshmi is Mahendra's mother and has a significant impact on his choices. She retains conventional notions about social standards like widowhood and marriage and exemplifies the typical attitude of the time.

The work explores topics including love, resentment, betrayal, and the constraints put on women by society. It analyses the decisions women make, many of which have huge repercussions, and depicts the hardships they face in a patriarchal culture. Through the experiences of these ladies, Tagore illuminates the difficulties and limitations that women in that time faced as they considered their goals and ambitions within the confines of what society expected of them.

A greater accomplishment than anything else is the way Tagore has depicted the kaleidoscope picture of human interactions that are tightly entwined inside the rooms of a normal family. The narrative of a prosperous zamindar family from Kolkata is described through Chokher Bali. Rajlakshmi, the widowed wife of a respected zamindar, looks after the house. Rajlakshmi's obsession with Mahendra, the protagonist of the book who is a man, makes him the centre of her attention. Because he is a well-spoiled and well-cared-for son of his mother, Mahendra has lived a life of ease without having to worry about anything, including personal or world duties. Mahendra is the only one to inherit his mother's affection and her possessions. Mahendra is shown in the very beginning of the book as a genuine child of his mother, displaying a lot of love and devotion for her. Because he believes that getting married will distance him from his mother, he declines to accept the proposal. Even though Rajlakshmi puts up a front of concern about her son's rejection of marriage prospects, she is secretly delighted to know that he cares so much for her. After declining so many advances, Mahendra decides to go out with a girl—even if it's for his buddy Behari and not for himself—and ends up falling in love with her.

Ironically, Mahendra decides to tie the knot over his mother's objections. In order to marry the lady of his dreams, Mahendra, the mother's boy, defies the wishes of his mother, for whom he once denied to be married. It is incredibly upsetting to witness Mahendra, the mother's child, disobey her wishes and wed the woman of his choosing instead of his mother, for whom he was not willing to get married. As soon as he develops sentiments for Ashalata, Mahendra's devotion to his mother disappears, stunning the readers with his rebellious personality from the outset of the book. Ashalata, an orphan girl who had been raised by her uncle, joins Mahendra's home as a bride. She is timid and apprehensive. Her mother's lacking supervision, affection, and care, as well as her lack of power in other people's homes, had made her a hesitant incompetent person who was unsure of everything around her. She again experiences this loss of her mother's affection and support after she marries Mahendra because Rajlakshmi didn't like her and believed that Asha, her sister-in-law Annapurna's niece, had been tricked into moving into the house as a bride so that she could have complete control over Mahendra and Asha.

As soon as Mahendra marries Asha, he becomes entirely preoccupied with thinking about her constantly, and their relationship begins to blossom to its utmost potential. Mahendra loses all awareness of everything and everyone around him except Asha as the newly discovered attraction of a lately engendered love completely takes grip of his senses. Due to his inability to tolerate his mother always involving Asha in domestic responsibilities, his need for physical interaction almost drove him crazy. He wanted Asha around, so he came up with a plan to get her to start reading. But that was only a pretence to keep Asha close by. Asha felt overwhelmed to see how much her husband loved her and would take any opportunity to be with her. Tagore penned:

“But after she came into this unfamiliar house, suddenly an intimate relationship, involving total trust was hers for the asking; when her husband crowned the hitherto neglected orphan with his own hands, she didn't hesitate to rise to the occasion and take what was offered.” (19)

Being a newcomer, Asha was unable to comprehend the course of events that would ultimately result in her own misery. Mahendra began to feel betrayed by Bihari's interference in their affair; Behari was previously his close friend and a familiar face in the home.

Mahendra was completely epicurean in his rejection of anyone's involvement in his affair with Asha. He had no awareness of his surroundings or, for that matter, of himself. Mahendra never really grasped the fact that love can only bring about a person's continual bliss if it is not kept separate from his or her surroundings and actuality; otherwise, passion and connection vanish as soon as it becomes a routine habit rather than a wanted and desired thing. Early on in their relationship, Asha and Mahendra were truly happy. Their sophisticated relationship was inappropriate in the social setting. Particularly in the Indian context, where the groom and bride must respect elders and refrain from showing their fondness for one another, explicit manifestations of marital affection are inappropriate since they undermine the structure of family pattern. Rajalakshmi chooses to leave the house for a while after observing Mahendra and his wife breaking the moral standards of the home in order for Mahendra and Asha to understand the actual value of their mother and to become conscious of household responsibilities. The most important turn in the narrative occurs when Rajalakshmi returns to Kolkata after visiting her birthplace because she comes along with a relative widow named Binodini with her. This decision becomes catastrophic for Rajalakshmi later on in the story.

Asha and Mahendra's relationship, which has social approval, is the novel's very first viewpoint on romantic relationships. Their devotion is the result of recently developed romantic attraction. Mahendra, who was before oblivious of the realm of seclusion in such terms, becomes engulfed intoxicated by his wife's companionship.

Mahendra begins to thoroughly enjoy his friendship with Asha. Ironically, because of the overelaboration of their passion, his mother finds their connection repulsive even though it was publicly recognised and ingrained in society. Since there was no one else to compare them to, their love was satisfied to have one other despite all of the anomalies and incompetence in the world. Asha, who lacked parents to teach her the realities of the world, did not recognise that Binodini, whom she initially introduced to her husband with enthusiasm and whom she had begun to regard as her most dear and trustworthy friend, had given him cause to wonder about other, superior options. Since Mahendra hadn't previously met or encountered Binodini, it first appeared that he had no interest in her. When he saw that Asha had begun spending more time with her "Chokher Bali," which is Bengali for an irritation that lands in the eye or a particle of sand, that has made him really furious.

Ironically, Binodini truly turns into a grain of sand in Asha's perception later on in the book. Mahendra becomes interested in Binodini as soon as she demonstrates to him her attractiveness, cleverness, lightheartedness, and aptitude for household tasks. Binodini appears to be a complete woman who can easily satisfy all of his needs, including his cognitive requirements as well as his emotional and physical needs. In contrast, Mahendra saw Asha, a shy and naive woman who was neither suited for an intellectual group nor for domestic administration. However, Binodini is the novel's most nuanced character. She initially appears in the book when Rajalakshmi visited her village, and she quickly wins Rajalakshmi over with her dedicated care and elegance in every task. Rajalakshmi was disappointed that her son had selected a naive girl to marry compared to such a precious woman. Even though Binodini was an idealistic housewife and a trustworthy server, she nonetheless carried unsatisfied emotional needs.

She was too young when her spouse passed away. She yearned for the satisfaction of her unfulfilled sexual feelings and aspirations. She adhered to widowhood conventions, although she didn't adopt them in a rigorous manner. Even if a widowed woman is too young, at the time, widow remarriage was viewed as a major sin. Binodini was aware of the reality, yet her needs were still unfulfilled. She acknowledges this in the book, leaving men after playing with their hearts because there is no chance of a happy ending. Binodini begins playing shady games of intrigue and passion with Mahendra as well. She takes pleasure in luring guys into desiring her. She secretly wants every man to be attracted to her because of her intelligence and attractiveness. Binodini is not an idealised representation of morality and accuracy; rather, she enjoys committing sins. She is unwilling to make self-denial of herself in order to honour ancient religious texts that contain dead inscriptions. Although Binodini was known of her widowhood, it is noteworthy that she did not just accept it as God's will for her; rather, she was enraged at the Almighty for his unfairness in choosing such an unjust fate for her. Rajalakshmi and Mahendra did not bring her home as a wife, which infuriated her. Binodini is conscious of her need to be satisfied on a sexual and emotional level. She prefers to draw male attention to herself, which satisfies her cravings, rather than attempting self-renunciation and harsh means of suppressing her sexual needs.

It is undeniable that Binodini was initially hesitant to appear before Mahendra only because she wanted to stimulate his interest in her even more. It would be quite difficult to make a judgment on Binodini's personality, but it is evident that she desired to capture every man's undivided focus. She wanted to show them that she was a flawless lady. Binodini was jealous of Asha since she was loved by Mahendra and Behari, and she secretly desired to torment Asha because of their shared affection. As soon as they were acquainted and close, Binodini and Mahendra started having an affair. On Mahendra's end, his fondness for Binodini was motivated by her ability to be a nice companion in any situation. Mahendra was considerably more drawn to partnerships that involved physical contact. Every relationship only had meaning to him if it could be fully experienced. It was the same again when he began romancing Binodini: For him, romance resided in the world of poetry and fiction, distant from the world's simplicities.

"He wanted to turn this day into something out of the Arabian Nights, full of sumptuousness and beauty, unconnected to life and the mundane. It would be real and yet a dream, it would be devoid of material realism, duties, rules and norms of everyday living." (137)

In the course of her relationship with Mahendra, Binodini learns about Behari, whom she also referred to as Mahendra's "thakurpo" (younger brother of the spouse). Behari is shown as a self-denying idealistic person who surrendered his affection for Asha so that his best friend might marry her. Later in the narrative, Behari again sacrifices his personal desires for Mahendra's well-being. Beginning to be less interested in Behari than she should have been—she believed that all men should be drawn to her alone—Binodini eventually came to see that Behari also cared excessively for Asha. Because of her sense of life's incompleteness, Binodini developed a whimsical, frivolous streak that made men her focus of entertainment. But as soon as she meets Behari, she realises that he is an extremely challenging man to work with since he was not easily tempted by her. As unbeatable as Behari appeared to Binodini, she came closer to him out of wonder and a desire to triumph over the masculine mentality. Binodini did not become aware of his genuine personality till Behari declared his sincere affection for him.

Binodini gives up all other desires after she has attained her real devotion in the shape of Behari. Even though Behari first rejected her, later in the book, when Behari wants to marry Binodini, she refuses the marriage on her own account because she doesn't want to bring shame upon Behari and because she doesn't want the intensity of Behari's devotion to be reduced to mere materialism. The novel's climax is marked by the variety of issues being resolved and by each character regaining their equilibrium. After so much travelling, Mahendra returns

home and learns that true serenity comes from living simply rather than relying on romantic fantasy. He came to understand that Asha's innocent affections and her genuine devotion, which had naturally come in his way and which he refused on the grounds that it was unromantic and dull, was honest and the purest after his covert romance with Binodini and its restraint at the hands of the object of his desire herself. In one of his letters, Tagore himself made a similar assertion:

“The more one lives alone on the river or in the open country, the clearer it becomes that nothing is more beautiful or great than to perform the ordinary duties of one's daily life simply and naturally.” (Tagore, Glimpses 72)

In addition to Binodini, Behari's restless spirit also achieves absolute fulfillment. Asha develops maturity. As a result, the novel's analysis fastens the confusion's tangles. The book is a masterful refutation of the creeds and ideas we hold close to. It's not that other novelists hadn't attempted to depict a progressive or rebellious character before who wanted to defy expectations and limits and pushed forward with bold choices. There are connections to Bankimchandra Chatterjee's 'Bishabrikska', also known as 'The Poison Tree', in which the protagonist marries a widow, but the author of this book likewise wants to legitimise relationships.

It appears that Tagore too concluded his book in the conventional way, with each character receiving what is due and eventually choosing the right path to follow. However, it cannot be denied that, in contrast to The Poison Tree, where the author emphasises on the tragic results of unsuitable relationships, Tagore concentrated on wisdom and fulfilment, which came about as a result of emotional turmoil in the lives of the novel's protagonists. In how he approaches the psychology of individuals, Tagore has a different perspective. Chokher Bali doesn't serve as a spokesperson for a righteous preacher who intends to explain to the reader what kind of devastation human mistakes may cause; rather, Chokher Bali demonstrates that the more recklessness, the greater the wisdom it may provide.

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