

Studying the Problematic Interactions Between Gender Emancipation and Nationalist Discourse in Rabindranath Tagore's *Choker Bali*

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Abstract

Indian nationalist discourse mull over the problematic debate of women as nurturing mother where the concept of 'new women' emerges to fit in the nationalistic fervor of independence. The land of India is equated with feminine entity of 'mother' who is famous for nurturing, caring and securing her children from every odds of colonial British power. The absolute love and prosperous nation of India is idealized as an ethically upright mother sacrificing herself for her people. This idea of self demolishing motherhood conceptualizes and seeks to control woman sexuality as well. Women is idealized and essentialized to be a suffering virtuous body forfeiting her for serving her husband's family with her utter chastity, purity, patience, self control and dedication. Rabindranath Tagore's novel, A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali, a translated work by Sreejata Guha, is a novel originally published in 1903 in the backdrops of uprisings for preventing the disastrous and poignant partition of Bengal is primarily defined as a norm defying novel where educated widowed women, like Binodini, are challenging patriarchy by nurturing her sexual desire. This paper intends to read the novel as norm ensuing one which meticulously tries to establish the modernized ways of nationalism influenced by western philosophical thought. Women emancipation is a veil to cloak the new aspects of nationalist construct of patriarchy.

Keywords: Nationalism; Gender; 'New Woman'; Sexuality.

Indian Nationalism is an all encompassing concept which tends to subsume varied and multifaceted discourses and one of them is the problematic space of gender. The purely women space is that of home which is an autonomous sphere of cultural and spiritual essence of the nation and the nationalists have tried to protect the domestic spaces from western impurities. The ideological maneuvers were to save the culture of Indian past and this responsibility was endowed upon women. Through this paper I intend to delve in the problematic of the position and identity of 'new woman' in Rabindranath Tagore's *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, a translated work by Sreejata Guha, who seems to get emancipated in the process of national movement through the process of transmitting education to create a

modern woman who can safeguard the spiritual core of the nation. It is also about how through women education they are perpetuating the new forms of patriarchy and how tactfully sexuality of woman is controlled, oppressed and used.

Judith Butler states that gender is stereotyped by the culturally and socially constructed behaviors and roles that create the differences between the genders. Gender is also based on the division of labor and their roles in the society. Gender is considered to be a social class and race, which can be used to socially categorize and essentialize which generates prejudices and discriminations. Women are thought to be ideally an image of Sita and Indian women are blindly imposed on from the use of religious texts and society so, she is not allowed to be adulterous but a man can be and his adultery would be acceptable in the society and should be forgiven by the women. A woman is stereotyped as an embodiment of piety and sympathy.

Indian Women are constructed through discourse of specified duties and peripheral roles occurred out of multiple social imperatives. As Sangari and Vaid have pointed out that, “womanhood is often part of an asserted or desired, not an actual cultural continuity” (2). Women are represented through two different perspectives—first, as a passive symbol of sacrifice (Sati system) and second, as a ‘new woman’ of modern nationalism with the connotation of progress that is by adopting power of education to control her desires. It is about a contradiction between obedience and self control, tradition and liberation, and Ashalata and Binodini. Shakuntala Ray in her essay, “Woman-As-Symbol: Intersections of Indian Nationalism, Gender, and Identity,” points to this distinction as movement from “a passive to an active representation requires the abandonment of the woman’s body, suggesting a physical absence of the woman from the symbolizing process” (319).

The anti-colonial Nationalist discourse on women as pointed out by Partha Chatterjee in his book, *The Nation and his Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, is divided into two spheres—material and the spiritual. The macrocosmic external domain is the material world of males’ dominated by the colonial power, whereas, the microcosmic spiritual inner world specified as women space was supposed to be unaffected by the profane worldly affairs. Social roles are bifurcated according to gender which is emblematic of “Ghar” and “Bahar”; home and the world. The home was the central site for expressing the spiritual and national culture ‘new women’ subjected to new patriarchy are educated to perpetually protect and nurture the home.

Nationalism claimed to improve the degenerated conditions of women who are mostly considered to be fools and vulgar. The new patriarchy was sharply different from the immediate social and cultural condition of the majority of the people lived and they formed a docile dutiful woman easily maintaining home. Nationalists called women to join various movements to save the motherland. This call connects the notion of Womanhood with Nationalists through which the country was feminized. Partha Chatterjee says, “The material/spiritual dichotomy, to which the term world and home corresponded, had acquired .

. . very special significance in the nationalist mind” (121). Outer world was dominated by European power and they have subjugated and constrained the Indians on the basis of material culture but the inner world, as nationalists claimed, is the independent spiritual identity of Indians. “It is modernity but an attempt to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project” (Chatterjee 121). They were judiciously using modernity and they never allowed western modernity in domestic space.

Geraldine Forbes in her seminal book, *The New Cambridge History of India: Women in Modern India*, argued that historically women were prescribed with certain rules depending on “religion, caste, age, place in the family hierarchy, and an element of serendipity” (19). Diversity in women’s reaction were there and “women found an escape from conventional roles in religion and scholarship, and occasionally through political action” (19). There was The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act passed in 1856 but this failed to change the condition of widow and mind of society towards them. The situation of women was frequently changing and education has both enabled women to think independently and also to serve the modern national discourse of modern women emblematic of sacrifice and spirituality.

A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali by Rabindranath Tagore was first published at the advent of the twentieth century and the modern age where Tagore endeavors to assert in his preface to the second edition of the novel the fact that the literature of the new age search for not a thorough narration of a sequence of events, but to unearth the surreptitious dilemmas of the heart and psychology. Apparently the plot emphasizes on the dialectics of conjugality but in reality it holds a strong undercurrent of multifaceted human desires and vivid representation of different characters and the then upper middleclass family and its complexities respectively.

Tagore, through psychological interventions, has tried to transcend the social norms of the society. The novel exclusively portrays the contrastive lives of de-familiarized iconoclastic widow Binodini and the uneducated naïve Ashalata in the backdrop of renaissance Bengal when after the abolition of sati system and legalization of widow remarriage the state is struggling to prevent Bengal Partition. In the entire gamut of the novel both male and female characters are more a normal human than a reflection of society. Every character is placed in juxtaposition against one another—Anapurna against Rajlaksmi, Bihari against Mahendra, Ashalata against Binodini—where one lot is following tradition and another deviating.

Binodini is introduced as a young widowed educated girl who has learned English and has the aesthetic sense of understanding poetry and literature. But Ashalata is just the opposite of her who is an orphan grown up in her uncle’s house and does not got any education or maturity whatsoever. Tagore’s image of widow is unquestionably seems to be a challenger of patriarchy. Binodini has wanted to consummate her desires to the fullest. She is doubly subjugated as being a woman and then being a widow in a tender age, but she never

restrained her desires. Dipesh Chakrabraty has rightly observed that, “the widow, denied voice and desire, represent the ultimate level of sub-alterneity within the domestic sphere” (60). She seems to be an insignificant part in Mahendra’s house but she intervenes into the life of all members especially Asha’s conjugal life. Binodini continuously yearns to satiate her desires and feelings like a married woman desires. In a letter to Mahendré she writes, “I have no one to love or no one to love me. Hence, I play at games of love and satisfy my craving for it” (163). She is the one who can control the entire household singlehandedly and can also appreciate the aesthetic depths of learning. She is a perfect nationalistic modern ‘new woman.’

Widows are traditionally forbidden for remarriage and they were forced to live a life of celibacy. But the mysterious character of Binodini, who is a widow, neither depicts a “modern” sensibility of western culture, nor corresponds to the typical stereotypes of the traditional Bengali woman, “For Binodini is neither a “Prachina” who worships her husband devotedly, nor a “Nabina” who neglects home and hearth in her pursuit of education and social sophistication, nor a coarse woman of the “common” working class” (Panja 214-18). Her desires and thoughts are nuanced and different from other widows. She reads Bankim’s novel and has mastery in writing poetic passionate letters to Mahendra and Behari. She has the quality of mind. Rajlakshmi describes her as, “I’ve heard she is very beautiful and she’s even had lessons from a British woman—I’m sure she’ll appeal to your modern tastes” (Tagore 1). She is a modern girl.

But problematically this girl was simultaneously denied by both Mahendra, the spoiled ‘bhadralok,’ and Bihari, the ethically upright man. Mahendra, in spite of his modern taste, marries Ashalata, an innocent inept teenager without any knowledge of domestic skills. This incident in the novel can be interpreted as emblematic of the fact that though society was striving to attain modernity, in the domain of home women are sought to be docile and obedient untouched by western philosophy. Asha is a complex character who is victimized by Mahendra-Binodini’s adulterous relationship but she is the one who forced Mahendra to meet her “chokher bali” Binodini. Asha is a girl who does not fit to the domestic periphery and at the same time she also does not relate to the modernized Bengali women version. She only knew that “a husband should be worshipped and served like a god” (Tagore 152).

Despite of every infidelity and deceit from her husband and her friend, the ending of the novel reconciles Asha with Mahendra thereby confirming the notions of Hindu Wife. Psychologically and emotionally she fails to accept and forgive her husband but does not protest against any wrong by speaking her heart out to assert her individual independence. Asha comes back to Mahendré as social norms forced her and she remained passive to all her circumstances. Though Tagore has tried to emancipate her through establishing a self identity, ultimately he failed because Asha was forced to get back to the patriarchal domains where her husband is the lord. Radha Chakravarty says that, “though order is ostensibly restored at the end of the novel and the estranged couple is reunited, the narrative leaves

exposed the inadequacies and contradictions inherent in the patriarchal ideals of conjugal love and feminine virtue” (59).

The first issue which I would like to raise is why Binodini, being such a perfect girl, was denied repeatedly by different male characters for marriage? Why she was left widow even at the end of the novel? Why does she always want to get succumbed to patriarchy that is male security in her life? These are the few questions which can be raised by reading this novel, which is often said to be a norm defying one. Binodini is a modernized ‘new woman’ with all the qualities to preserve the spiritual core of house. Her qualities in actuality confirm to the new clandestine patriarchy. She seems to be rebellious with all her desires but at the end she is left as an ascetic widow devoid of family. Even after all the reformations in Bengal renaissance a widow not accepted by males as their wife. She is denied by Bihari repeatedly though he is a member of swadeshi group. Patriarchy has allowed women to go out but to that extent up to which women can serve the functions of patriarchy. A challenger will always be ousted and denied to get accepted with a proper social identity.

But on the other hand, these questions can be answered by Tagore’s profound views on gender in “Sahityavichar” or “Thoughts on Literature” in the chaitra 1326 issue of the journal *Prabasi*. He argued that he is trying to represent human nature through his writings that are grey in colour that is mixture of some good and bad qualities of human character. Binodini is denied happiness but at one point of time she declares in the letter to Mahendra that, “Thirst for love has parched my heart and soul. You do not have the capacity to quench my thirst—I know that for a fact. . . . Don’t be so shameless as to shame me. . . . I take pity on you and renounces you” (Tagore 163). Though she is presented as a temptress, she has a strong sense of self dignity which makes her a grey shaded character. She does conform to the gendered nationalistic norms but she has her own independent thoughts about her identity and desire. This free thinking gives her a bit of emancipated state because unlike Asha she spoke out her heart in front of Bihari shedding all shame and fear.

She fearlessly declares before Bihari that:

Why shall I stop him? For your Asha’s sake? And I suppose I have no dreams and desires of my own? I am not so pious that I’d wipe out all my wishes from this life, for the sake of your Asha’s well-being, for the sake of Mahendra’s family—I have not studied the holy books so faithfully. If I gave something up, what do I get in return? (Tagore 175)

This daunting voice of Binodini does question the patriarchal impositions of widowhood. Binodini emerges as a mouthpiece of Tagore to explore the consequences of the appalling life and the sexual frustrations of a young Hindu widow. The end of the novel unfortunately narrates compliance to societal norms by transforming the character of Binodini into an

ascetic widow. A widow craving for sensual desires is critiqued by the then society due to which Tagore was bound to give such an ending but he himself was regretful. The character of Binodini has the germs of transcending social norms by expressing her desires. Binodini's articulation of female emotions through Tagore's text emphatically challenges the hypocrisy of patriarchal society with its overt nationalist agenda, and unearths the complex relation established between the patriarch and feminine marginal. Tagore was dissatisfied with the novel's ending and he says ever since *Chokher Bali* was published he has always regretted the ending. We should judge the novel according to its historical context and in the then condition it was impossible for Tagore to end the novel with an emancipation and remarriage of Binodini. However, many reformers were working to improve women's condition but the society was not yet ready to accept a widow.

Thus, the novel's situation and interpretation about gender and nationalism are mixed and problematic where Binodini is seeking and yearning for emancipation by unleashing her desire and thoughts but the ending of the novel denies her freedom from the pangs of widowhood. And also Ashalata who is trying to get a free self identity but was forced to go back to her adulterous husband. She is not the perfect nationalistic woman but she seems to emerge as one by gathering experiences from her life. It is very difficult to conclude that whether the novel is emancipatory or conforming nationalist discourse. It is somewhat in between but it can be revolutionary.

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