

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Women and Emotional Variabilities: Reading of the Delicate Complexes 'Subjecting Asha-Binodini' in Tagore's Chokher Bali

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Abstract

Women have often been deployed from many social representational practices for their absently marked subject positions; they have been made to function as the 'subjects' of absent political representations. Feminism as such had no pinpointed strategy of commencing in Indian geography, except for personalities protesting against social rules to demand equal spaces for the women. In the field of Indian English Literature that can be considered as feminist writings, we indeed have remarkable contributing personalities like Mahasweta Devi, Jhumpa Lahiri, and many more. In this regard Judith Butler beautifully stated that "Women are the sex which is not "one". Within... a phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable*... women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity" (Butler, 13). Rabindranath Tagore's literary pieces has often been called feminist works for they constructively deconstructed the intricate cultural stigmas. Tagore's presentation of women was both subversive and culturally vibrant, few dominated; while few were dominated, which my paper would try discerning by following the methodology of literary review which will involve an overview of previous works and my subjective interpretation and through the application of queer-post-structuralist feminist theory.

Keywords: Women; emotions; desires; gender; queer

Introduction

Culture functions as a foundationalist fable in shaping identities and sustaining them, and such Bengali culture has also created women as a separate entity definable by few 'fixed' characteristics of linguistic absence. Tensional forces often produces beautiful network of critical discourses that further frames anatomical representations powerfully. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a literary book that was offered to Bengali Literature. He shaped and reshaped the literary domain with contextual and cultural modernism. Being the 'bard of Bengal' he has framed the characters of women as products of oppositional power-play. Each of them survived through deep anguish and narrated through desires forbidden. Tracing from here, and using Tagore's lens to describe the Bengali culture, we can see how the cultural strength has been commandingly created. We cannot ignore the fact that ach culture has its flaw, and within the phallogocentric social construction culture functions as a "natural" excuse of continuing the phallus dominated representational strategies. Presentation of women in Bengali culture often stands in association to desires and relations to men, friendship between women, but no love between them. But these re-presentational discourses of women in Bengali culture also had some loopholes, some heteronormative structurization(s) which allows queer lens to dislocate the accepted definitions of

women. Women therefore as subjects to political interrelations in literature have a different point of entrance and the position of placement and displacement of women within any cultural set-up (Bengali in this case) is therefore distinctively phallus-defined and separated. As we know 'history' has mainstreamed and obliterated many contributions of women to highlight men; however, women personalities like Kadambini Ganguly, Savitri Bai Phule and few others were noticeable challengers to the social customs braking rules to move ahead. Historical framing has modulated many operative and discursive fables and tales of women to present the image that the phallogocentric culture considers appropriate. Within such functional operations of literary and historical modifications Tagore's women were challenging and path-breaking; yet ordinarily conventional.

It is true nothing can be outside patriarchy for patriarchy rules and dominates as the omnipotent universal stature of veiling definitions and modifications, and literature as such also is a product of the same, but tries to resist the same with its powerful and expressive discourse. Desire as a term must be opaque to respected cultural discussions. Desire as a product of patriarchal empowerment has often functioned as a device to rule bodies according to the binarized structurization of this or that. Desire has been channelized, shaped, framed, and organized as acceptable, open, good, clean one hand

and unacceptable, hidden. Bad, polluted on the other hand. Desire is an important theme in all three of the selected narratives; they rule desire and allow bodies to flow. Tagore's women in these three works is therefore a boisterous displacement of patriarchal definition of what a woman is yet has slight patriarchal tints too, but also resisting the same. Intersectionality of emotional toiling is clearly an impulsive nature of portraying the characters and their lives. The issue of desire has been strictly scrutinized under the panoptical circulative frames of our culture. Desire is forbidden for some, while relinquishing for few. Rules, borders, definitions kept regulating the thirsts between centre and peripheries. Complexities, strategies, Brahminical elements, familial ties, and Bengali culture structures and produce these selected narratives. Feminism and women as a concepts and 'apparent' subjects of representational discourses often depicted many issues they were forced with. Each stage and each form of lives has a separate room of male-dominance and marginalization. Women as subject of pity and objects of eyes have dominated popular cultures including Bengali literature too. Hence when 'women' has been presented with the issue of desire questionable strategies indeed caused hindrance. Another true fact was Education and Bengal Renaissance during the 90s that drew many perceptions on Educating women and the impacts and demerits of the same; popular 'ill' believes started spreading that education destroys the 'femininity' of women, huge educations results in keeping women unmarried, or is the reason for the death of the husband; money should be saved for dowry not for education, etceteras. Such social issues were amalgamated with personal narratives of households and private affairs of desires to depict the exploitation and marginalization of women as human beings. Tagore has indeed presented many works of feminist hearings, which were ahead of its time, but few depictions were also shaded with the popular patriarchal cultures. Hence, while moving through the selected narratives an interrelation and integration of revisiting will be applied to relish the stories and their fluidity, for until we place ourselves as the 'mock-readers' to these characters we cannot entangle the mist of feminism these stories have narrated at that time.

Methodology

The method involved follows a literary review or a literature review which focuses on providing the searchers and audience with an overall idea of existing works on the question of the topic. Literature review can be both article and a book. This literature review is an article that along with empirical knowledge and subjective perception presents current knowledge and substantive findings along with theoretical contributions.

Chokher Bali- Binodini and Asha

The social tomb of Bengal during the 1900s was much under the construction of British culture and when modernization was eventually touching the thresholds of Bengali households. The men were becoming the 'English Babus', education and western culture was shaping the minds of new Bengalis; thereby, personal and private selves were changing their paradigms constantly. Ideas were getting fluid yet recognized by institutional patterns. The social position of women particularly during this time was gaining quite importance and attention; even was also getting spatially, literally and ethnographically scrutinized to bring out the layers of sufferings and subjugation; to evaluate their tears with ink and trying to provide them justice under pity and dominance. Few social oppressions popular on women during then included-

- Widows were not allowed to marriage, and struggle, protests for Widow-remarriage was growling high.
- The Education of women under many evils of the society was getting submerged yet was thriving too. But, not every woman was allowed to receive Education under many superstitious beliefs and women generally were ingrained with such beliefs that further created hindrance for their liberty, and thus exploited them emotionally and physically. Education, even if it was made accessible to women it was for securing their place to a respectable position in the marriage market, but hardly few received that too.
- Women were eventually protesting, and coming forward to claim their rights amidst the political upheaval of Independence. Swadeshi Movement (1905) was a strong impact on the awakening of women, for they eventually started involving in the worldly affairs outside of their 'homes'. The struggle for Independence was also creating spaces for liberating the women to some extent.

Amidst such socio-political scenario, Tagore carefully published *Chokher Bali* (1903); a simplifyingly unconventional household narrative. The title of the novel was initially coined as *Binodini*, but later it was shifted to *Chokher Bali*, which is significantly symbolic and crucial to analyze the characters of the text, for each turns each others 'Chokher Bali', somehow! The title means something that sores the eyes of everyone, and is the reason f eye sores- "Asha- what name would you like?/ Binodini- Chokher Bali, A constant irritant like a grain of sand in the eye' laughed Binodini" (Chakraborty, 56). The novel has liberated and freed many shackles by pointing out the social injustices committed upon a widow, and how the 'witch-widow' is the creation of society only. The novel also highlights the importance of education and its need in every woman's life to safeguard their own selves against any form of exploitation and just not blame their fate for the same. The novel also strongly

webbed the complex dynamics of relational spaces and horizons, including desires and emotions as dominating cards. The circuitous network of family has been beautifully curved and a regular household was turned to the exotic stage-play of few characters that were capable of creating a world within a world, and also destroying them to create a new universe; eventually and tactfully. But as we all know, Literature is just not the imaginary horizon of a human biography; rather it reflects the socio-cultural and political dimension of the time and situation in which it is placed. If we place *Chokher Bali* within the multifarious and variegated intricate designs of that social structure of 1903 Bengal, we will see the novel is a 'voice' for all widows like and unlike Binodini; for all uneducated, simple, tender girls like Asha; for many Bihari out there, and many Mahendra who were getting created as the powerful patriarchal products capable of so much. Placing the novel with the social structure of ten, we see how Tagore beautifully curved a real depiction through imaginary fable; that is too strong in its discourse of representational bodies and objective womanhood. The novel has webbed tales of desire for widows that was forbidden, and tales of abandonment for a woman which was very common; tale of a mother and son fractioning as a plate inconsequentially consequent to the narration of the remaining story. Therefore the title *Chokher Bali*; an irritant was the novel itself to the then Bengal culture, to the social eyes and lips of the social-cultural vicinity. The novel centered to demanding rights of widows and education for women, yet unleashed how patriarchal space has restricted the 'body of women' to tender spaces to create and re-create femininity as the required way and demand along with everything. The two female characters around whom the thread of the novel is constructed are Binodini and Asha. Two opposite and deviant characters in relation to each other fabricated with beautiful abjections and quality. The relationship between them was a platform of commencing the 'error-play'. Binodini's desire arose with letters but her entrance was opened with Asha's friendship for her. Here a homo-social space was created but in an underrated manner, as the concerned person was Binodini and her position within the webs surrounding her. Asha's guiltless sharing of emotion and space with Binodini showed how desperately she demanded a friend; a *shokhi* of her own. To Asha, Mahendra was not a friend, but a god whom she has to satisfy by obeying and serving, but Binodini to her was that hopes and figure, whom she admired and caressed. For Binodini, Asha on the other hand was a card to be used, a space to be encroached, a right to be taken, a figure to be destroyed, a calm wind to create storm. With these emotional variations Asha grabbed Binodini's hand and opened those doors which allowed shades to turn darker, and created a tale of Binodini where Asha only remained the catalyst, that social girl without education to protect herself, for whom 'silence' and 'acceptance' was the only protest.

Sexuality and Feminism

Before moving to Sexuality, we must talk about feminism a bit. It is indeed difficult to trace Feminism and its definition in Indian terms. Feminism in West began with the white middle-class women's struggle to reclaim their space in terms political rights. Eventual struggles were making Feminism as an inclusive parameter of freedom, where personalities like Carol Hanisch, Rebecca Walker, Maggie Humm, Betty Friedan, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and their post-structuralist queer theories were drawing more spaces to experiences. But if we are to draw comparison of the same timeline in India, popularly the term Feminism never copped up, rather rights and voices for and of women were eventually commencing. Be it from literary texts to social movements, women were demanding their spaces within the public and private sphere, and that was also a little impact that 'westernization' brought into the cultural heritage of India. Along with the same voice(s) for Independence, religious communalism also merged and evoked a strong deliverable platform of protests. Eventually since then, voices for the rights of women started shaping, branching into various shades. Personalities like Savitri Bai Phule, Kdambini Ganguli, Rassundari Devi, Gayatri Devi, and many more started and prioritized education as an essential factor to liberate women. With time these protests started recognizing itself with Feminism and eventually race, caste, class, and many factors were getting included. Personalities like Bhanwari Devi and her contribution to Vishakaha Guidelines was a huge effort towards recognizing the multiple layers of subjugation against women. It was Nivedita Menon who in her work *Seeing Like A Feminist* (2013) stated that- "Feminism is thus not about individual men and women, but about understanding the ways in which 'men' and 'women' are produced and inserted into patriarchies that differ according to time and place" (Menon, 77). Therefore, if I amalgamate the timelines and place the novel into the definition that Menon said, then we can see how Tagore constructed the threads to show how patriarchy has 'produced' Binodini and Asha, and how Feminism shows us multiple ways to decipher them.

Sexuality is the sexual desire that one has for someone or maybe for many or maybe just for two or few, it varies with time and place and situations, but appropriately it is our sexual attraction to body or bodies. This Sexuality is culturally channelized into moral and immoral. Sexuality as a term is moving and walking till now in the peripheral zone of discourses. But Tagore in his work has made sexuality as that stream and line which is not only the main but very central dice that was the reason for Binodini to become Binodini and the Chokher Bali. The fluidity of sexuality and desire; the difference between obsession and devotion; the thin line between love and power to control, were all strongly narrated through Binodini's narration. Binodini has been presented as

widow leaving in the maternal house of Mahendra's mother. After she came along with Mahendra's mother to her in-laws home, where Asha and Mahendra lived, the lives started changing. Binodini has been comparing herself ever since then with Asha and thought "Mahendra's amorous attention towards Asha had constantly troubled Binodini's frustrated heart; the anguish had kept her lovelorn imagination in a state of painful arousal, full of acute excitement...ignoring a jewel like herself to embrace a feeble-minded, poor-spirited girl like Asha" (Chakraborty, 108). Binodini's desire was Mahendra and devotion was Bihari; she wanted to win Mahendra and love Bihari. Tagore has delicately presented how desire and love is different, how they are poles apart yet so closely connected that when they survive together it is acceptable for some, and when they do not co-exist they are brutally the scaring objects that can ever exist for everyone. Binodini's desire was fitting to the later one; it was devoting Bihari, for she never received a peaceful listener to herself which Bihari provided, a calm guidance that Bihari sheltered, and a strong loyalty that Bihari exhibited. It began when Bihari urged knowing about Binodini's life, her native place –

Binodini had never found a listener to whom she could say all these things in this fashion; she has never spoken to any man in this un-self-conscious, natural way. Today, as she spoke in her fluent, sweet voice of the simplest thoughts in her heart, her very nature seemed to become gentle and contented, as if bathed in afresh shower of rain (Chakraborty, 97).

Binodini to Mahendra was that fire which jolted up within veins and wanted to erupt; that thirst which was trying to quench hard for long. Binodini's desire wimble listening to Asha's narration of her and Mahendra's twitched strokes of love all over her body. Binodini's apparent affection and forlorn body intermingled with the absence of desire and presence of self-awareness heightened to such an extent that it finally led breaking of the 'created-timid' Asha's world when Mahendra obsessed and immersed in Binodini's seductive environment mates with her- "after the outrage that you have committed last night, are you still not satisfied?" (Chakraborty, 217). This line from the letter Asha found in her husband's Mahendra's pocket was deliberately evoking and sexually enchanting and emotionally forbidden with pain and obsession. Binodini has won Mahendra but couldn't love him, for her thirst lied in Bihari; Asha without even knowing what her desire(s) could ever proclaim lost everything that particular moment. Binodini's desire that arose while listening to Asha's love-play with Mahendra which made her "her ears turn red, and her breathing would go rapid...She wanted the same things repeated over and over again, and when the tale was finished, she would resort to fantasy" (Chakraborty, 58), was finally achieved but not quenched when Mahendra had shared his body with her that he shared with Asha. Binodini then realized

that her thirst was not Mahendra; desire had already turned to disaster. But Binodini is not the villain here rather the society's victim. Women during then and still now are so much dehumanized that they were considered insignificant enough to associate with any worldly needs of human emotions. Moreover, when you turn into a widow you are further reduced as burden of flesh that must survive without any dreams or wish, remain as others will make her remain without obstruction, and questions. Binodini's character refused to play this subservient role to show that Women are humans and they can also desire; marrying them off at an early age, getting widowed at a younger age that psychologist would still term childhood; growing with human libido desires and attraction will "naturally" come. Tagore through Binodini questioned all those "unnatural rules" imposed on widows that resulted in creation of so many victimized Binodinis, perhaps. Thus, Tagore presented Sexuality and women as concepts that provided some humanized tints on the social structure although with rage!

Patriarchal and Women's Exploitation

The character portrayal of Mahendra was distinctively the centre and the one who is full of pride and self-devotion. The patriarchal process of using others as an excuse to keep the self-satisfied was truly depicted through Mahendra when in his conversation with Bihari he monologued his thoughts- "those precious ones, coveted by others in vain, have voluntarily surrendered themselves to me forever.' The thought made Mahendra's breast swell with pride" (Chakraborty, 122). Mahendra's sexuality was full of pity, amour, self-love, and patriarchal privilege. His selfish love for himself moved him to carry on both with Binodini under the pretext of "pure love" and Asha under the pretext of "conjugal duty". The situational position of Mahendra clearly depicts how benevolent patriarchy may appear, it is nothing beyond selfishly self-centric. Putting love as the defining frame we can visualize Mahendra never loved anyone but himself; he failed love numerous times. Tagore exhilaratingly showcased how patriarchy modifies love with control and pity through the character of Mahendra; how lives and love(s) fall prey to such figures even today. Asha was his youth-play, and a doll of sexual beauty. Asha's position never crossed the fleshy paradigm of conjugal life; she was only restricted as the pitiful puppet worthy of Mahendra's sexual attention. Mahendra used Asha for his self-pleasure, for his playfulness, for his releasing area, for his claiming of control, and for satisfying his phallus-power. From the very beginning Asha is portrayed as the 'object of pity'- "Mahendra took his opportunity to inspect the pitiful face of this shivering young girl" (Chakraborty, 11); hence pitifully he taught her; pitifully he had sex with her; pitifully he owned her.

For Binodini, it was quite the opposite, he felt himself drawn towards Binodini's rhetorical intelligence with sharp looks of plenty desire. Binodini for Mahendra was that desired object whose subjective control was more than him, be it in home or in his private life. The Binodini was now becoming that space encroaching whom would be a self-victory for Mahendra. Their play-time approached each door with questions of complex anguished emotions that Tagore answered at the end of this work. The entirety of falsehood was visible to the witty Binodini, for she knew that Mahendra could never love someone beyond himself. He is gravely occupied to provide himself the justified place of affection that others, particularly the women- Asha, Binodini only became the medium of making this successful- "Once you thought you love Asha, but that was false; now you think you love me, but this, too, is a falsehood. You love yourself" (Chakraborty, 2017). Mahendra's self-love was so deep that he pitied Asha his love and desired Binodini's wholeness- "Mahendra then convinced himself that very few wives were fortunate enough to receive the amount of love he still felt for Asha...His heart was large enough to accommodate both Binodini and Asha..." (Chakraborty, 212). Evaluating, we can find how patriarchy bestowed enormous power to the phallus, so that, they can utilize the same on themselves and the bodies of women. Power that will operate in and with silence, things which will not be spoken, will create Mahendra at many households even today and Binodini-Asha as objects to them.

Need of Education

During 1900s, education for women in Bengal was critically and strictly modulated according to patriarchal patterns. The situation of Education during the early 1900s for Bengal women was critical just like all other cultures. This issue was addressed but was also lagging behind the massive strides of that time like Bengal Renaissance. With the mired prejudices and superstitions that encompassed the then Bengal society, education for women was subjected to repressive mind-sets and policies. Even with further developments education of women were limited to sewing, home-science, etcetera; hardly did the women had any access to appropriate knowledge and studies. They were trained and educated to become good daughters, wives and mothers; therefore, their 'after marriage sufferings' were blamed on fate and the minimum of education received. Setting examples for the society along with the Brahma Samaj's liberal ideologies (to some extent) many women like Chandramukhi Bose, Kadambini Ganguly broke barriers and emerged as minds with educative principles and fought for women's emancipation. Later on Anandi Gopal Joshi, Mataji Gangabai encroachingly contributed to the field of Education trying to create and reclaim the space for women. Amidst such a social background *Chokher Bali* proved tremendously fruitful in depicting

the exploitation of women due to lack of education. The ingrained belief that education ruins the lives of women was critically subverted showing how the 'lack' of same is responsible for ruining their lives at the hands of the educated ones. The character of Asha was seemingly constricted to this similar position. The homo-social space between Binodini and Asha was a plot and technique that enforced how Asha's exploitation began with sharply erotic and witty exchanges between Binodini and Mahendra; how her lack of worldly knowledge and rational thinking was making her the victimized criminal of the destruction. Mahendra's awareness was large enough to engulf the uneducated Binodini, where despite Mahendra's repeated confessions; she hardly realized what he meant- "'Chuni!' His voice choked with tenderness...I have wronged you, please forgive me," (Chakraborty, 105). When Mahendra was away to his college for few days regarding some work of his own, the letters that was written as a medium of communication between Asha and Mahendra was subsequently separated by the words, feelings, and desire of Binodini. Binodini functioned as that fluid emotion and knowledge which could strongly express her at the cost of Asha and her pitied position. The letters Binodini composed penetrated Asha's mind and soul and became her own words with feelings she never explored. The letters repeatedly hinted a love which was both "indirect yet explicit, forbidden yet intimate, poisonous yet sweet, given yet withheld" (Chakraborty, 117) that Mahendra felt, that aroused him, but depleted and derogated the Asha again and again. Pitying Asha is what Tagore restricted; rather he tried implying why was Asha pitied-for having no parents, no love? No, rather for having 'no power' of her own, that Education could have provided to every woman. Through Asha Tagore presented situations, shed light on bodies and minds that were crumbled under the super-position of decrees, rules, beliefs, and powers regularly. The novel was both literary revolt with an unconventional frame and a subverted plea to recognize and revisit the 'spaces' of women, both physically and psychologically.

Conclusion

Each character in this web of emotional variabilities stands victimized yet powerful. Looking at Mahendra, his emotion was a mixture of pity and amour for Asha; desire and conquer for Binodini, but Mahendra was not the victim of emotional challenges rather a victim of patriarchal privilege that gives him the power to pity and conquer Asha and Binodini simultaneously. Moving our focus on Binodini, we find she is powerful for she chooses to play with her feelings and desire. Her education provides a rational sensibility to Binodini for controlling bodies, and emotions. It was her victimized position of widowhood that imposed the power of subverted pities, which in turn permitted her to grasp and rule the spaces she always wished to! It is Asha therefore

who stands powerless in all forms. Her lack of educative upbringing makes the victim of emotions, society and beliefs that binds her broken life horribly. Asha's 'innocent' nature was what Patriarchy modeled for women, and Tagore presented how such an "ideal" nature destroys the woman only. Asha's emotional variabilities are ruined, for her love to Binodini faded in dry spells; while, her trust on Mahendra was brokenly and forcibly restored again. Thus, both Asha and Binodini stands as larger social victims who were depleted of everything as they were the 'marked presence and a linguistically representational absence'. Thus, *Chokher Bali* stands an astounding literary irritation that hampers the intricate patriarchal constructions of the social structure; initiating the queerness of emotions and desires of women, trying to establish a voice through few *un-voiced* horizons.

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