



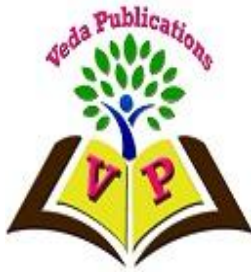
SELF-ACTUALISATION OF BINODINI IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S *CHOKER BALI*

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ABSTRACT



Choker Bali or *A Grain of Sand* is Rabindranath Tagore's first major full-fledged novel that depicts the growing need of the heroine Binodini, to emerge out of the traditional image of a widow and establish her identity in society. In the novel, Tagore represents the typical middle class specimens of Bengal in the portrayal of the possessive widowed mother Rajlakshmi, her son Mahendra and the submissive wife Ashalatha. The theme of the novel showcases the concept of Indian woman who were expected to be dutiful, respectful and submissive wives. As an artistic genius, Tagore sensibly depicts the clash between social taboo attached to a widow and their desire of the heart and body. This paper focuses on the self-actualisation of Binodini in Rabindranath Tagore's *Choker Bali*. It portrays Binodini as an emerging new woman in the modern sensibility.

Keywords: *Self-Actualisation, Modern Sensibility, New Woman.*



Choker Bali or *A Grain of Sand* is Rabindranath Tagore's first major full-fledged novel that depicts the growing need of the heroine Binodini, to emerge out of the traditional image of a widow and establish her identity in society. C. V. Raj asserts, "Although, Tagore is dealing with a predominantly social theme in revealing his concern for the problems of a young widow subjected to humiliation by society, the novel has a twentieth century psychological interest in it" (24). It's the psychological exploration of Binodini that is highlighted by the contemporary social context in which she is placed. It focuses on the lives of Mahendra, Asha, Binodini and Behari; and the love triangles formed between them. In *Shormishtha* Panja's words, "It's a generous chamber suffused with sensuality and its denial" (35). In the novel, Tagore represents the typical middle class specimens of Bengal in the portrayal of the possessive widowed mother Rajlakshmi, her son Mahendra and the submissive wife Ashalatha. Contrarily, Binodini who is a young widow refuses to be a 'type' as she is characterised as possessing sexual desires and passionate feelings. Tagore's approach in projecting his idea of women especially a young widow and her need for assertion of self-hood has been emphasised as being dualistic. This dual stance refers to the syncretisation of the traditional and modern outlook. This syncretisation is found in the character of Binodini. His artistic genius has facilitated him to explore uncommon themes in Bengali literature. This paper focuses on the self-actualisation of Binodini in Rabindranath Tagore's *Choker Bali*. It portrays Binodini as an emerging new woman in the modern sensibility.

The BrahmoSamaj, the AryaSamaj and the National Social Conference, during the Bengal renaissance, worked towards emancipation and educating women. Tagore was the first spectacular novelist of Bengal who conveyed the sexual desires of a widow and channelized her youthful cravings into a spiritual realm. In *Choker Bali*, Tagore sensibly depicts the clash between social taboo attached to a widow and their desire of the heart and body. The narrative includes two illicit relationships – Mahendra's infatuation for Binodini; and Binodini's love for Behari. "She [Binodini] has lent

colour and vitality to its story from one end to the other, her radiant youth is the life-blood of the whole novel" (Chakravarty169).

The theme of the young widow oppressed by society was not new in Bengali literature as Tagore's precursor, Bakim Chander Chatterjee too had dealt with parallel theme in *Vishavriksha* and *Krishnakata's Vill*. The only difference was that Chatterjee's novels was devoid of the psychological exploration that is found in the characters of *Choker Bali*. G. V. Raj calls it as, "the first psychological novel in India" (6). *Choker Bali* has a twentieth century psychological interest in it. E. M Forster states in *Aspects of the Novel*, "The hidden life that appears in external signs is hidden no longer, has entered the realm of action. And it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source" (45). It is this that Tagore sets out to do in *Choker Bali*. At one level, the novel mirrors Tagore's humane concern for the plight of widows and at another level, he emphasises the need to assert selfhood as a reaction to the inhumane societal attitudes. As Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Witness to Suffering: Domestic Cruelty and the Birth of the Modern Subject in Bengal* points out, "the widow, denied voice and desire, represents the ultimate level of subalternity within the domestic sphere" (66). Through Binodini's self-exploration and self-assertion, Tagore's novel can be truly interpreted as "the ordeal of consciousness" as affirmed by G. V. Raj (25). Her transgression is the subject of Tagore's emerging new woman. Through this novel, Tagore has laid the foundation of the modern novel in Indian literature.

In John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, the young Duchess was called as 'lustful widow' and throughout the play, her brothers Ferdinand and the Cardinal have been seen to control her sexuality and remind her of the vulnerable position of widows in the society. Across cultures and nations, the honour of a family relied in women's behaviour and control over their sexual urges. Alison Macdonald in "Real and Imagined Women" puts forth the argument that women's body have been identified as the markers of boundaries for both community and nation. In reference to this, Irene Gedafol uses the term 'body-work' to refer to the ideological paradigm in which women and their bodies are expected to work to



uphold social, communal and national identities. Binodini too finds herself in the same dilemma being a widow whose sexuality the society fears due to her autonomy over her body. However, Tagore sets the stereotypical image of the 'lustful widow' predominant in the English society in contrast with the Bengal of the nineteenth century when Kolkata aided as a link to the western world.

Kaustav Bakshi remarks in *Choker Bali: Unleashing Forbidden Passions* that "Tagore defamiliarises the image of a widow who is traditionally supposed to submit herself unquestioningly to the dictates of a patriarchal society, one which has also feared female sexuality and felt the need to control it by every possible means" (57). She is depicted as sharp, instinctive and passionate. Through the novel, "Tagore seems to portray the natural yet socially forbidden desire of a widow ironically called Binodini – which is a name that often recurs in VaishnavKirtan connoting sensuousness and pleasure loving" (Bakshi 58). She is a rare combination of beauty, grace and intelligence. There is a certain ease and spontaneity with which she carries herself and caters to the need of the people in Rajlakshmi's household. She is a traditional woman in the sense that she is well accomplished in household arts and has the attributes associated with womanhood such as selfless devotion and sacrificial spirit. The process of self realisation in Binodini follows a sequential pattern. She moves from a traditional acceptance of her fate as a widow to a realisation of her need to arise out of this blind acceptance and reaffirm her identity in society. Being an educated woman, her feelings and her outlook to life are characterised by a spirit of modernism. Binodini believes that the only person responsible for her plight as being a young widow was Mahendra who rejected her as his bride even without seeing her. She determines to hit back her humiliation by trapping Mahendra in her web of seduction. It is her consuming passion that lends a remarkable human touch to her personality and makes her self-effacement, more significant.

The next stage in Binodini's progression is when her insight and intellect come into play. She realises that she is not truly in love with Mahendra. She does not reciprocate the love shown to her by

Mahendra as she believes that he is a selfish man who loves neither his wife nor her but only himself. She replies contemptuously to a letter written by the Mahendra:

I have no right to love or be loved in this world. That is why I play at love to lighten my sorrow....I implore you again and again, please give me up, do not pester me, do not put me to shame with your shamelessness...You may shout and cry, but from me you will get no response whatsoever. (147)

This letter also reveals Binodini's innocence in the eyes of Ashalatha. She understands the true nature of her husband Mahendra. This empowers her to reject Mahendra and assert her identity by syncretizing the traditional and modern aspects in her as found in the protagonist Binodini. Thus, Ashalatha towards the end can be seen as a mirror image of Binodini in terms of assertion and will power. Through the portrayal of Binodini, Tagore has shown the transgressive nature in Ashalatha too.

The final stage in Binodini's actualization of selfhood can be interpreted in terms of her relationship with Bihari. Radha Chakravarty asserts:

In the first part of the novel, Binodini is a transgressive figure, a widow who deliberately seduces a married man. But, in the second half of the text, her love for Bihari transforms her personality and she gradually turns to a life of austerity. She thus combines the dual stereotypes of the transgressive woman and the widow in love. (66)

Binodini, who is truly in love with Bihari, rejects Bihari's proposal as she is well aware of the social restrictions for widow remarriage. In addition, she neither wants to distort Bihari's name nor gain his sympathetic love. The novel was written in the controversial times when widow remarriage was legally acceptable but socially unacceptable. Thus, she is depicted 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). But her powerful identity is



revealed when she tells Bihari, “Don’t misunderstand me – you will not be happy marrying me. I, too will lose my self-esteem” (202). This assertion claims her strong as well as powerful identity and she can be perceived as an emancipated woman in this context. Singh rightly claims, “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” (50). She can be regarded as an empowered woman because of her rebellious spirit and self-will and she rises as an ‘emerging new woman’ in the Indian modern context. Tagore characterizes Binodini as a representative of the transition between the old and the new.

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