

**An Attempt to Decode the Eccentricity and Women Emancipation in
Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and *Aparijitha***

*Project submitted to the University of Calicut in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of*

Bachelor of Arts

In

English and History

by

Sruthi

CCASADER37



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**Department of B.A English & History
Christ College (Autonomous), Irinjalakuda**

Kerala-680125

Declaration

I, **Sruthi**, hereby declare that this project entitled **An Attempt to Decode the Eccentricity and Women Emancipation in Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and *Aparijitha***, submitted to the University of Calicut in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English and History, is a research work done by me under the supervision and guidance of, **Miss. Nahna Kamarudheen V** Assistant Professor, Department of English & History, Christ College (Autonomous), Irinjalakuda.

Irinjalakuda

March 2021

Sruthi

Department of B.A. English & History

Christ College (Autonomous)

Irinjalakuda-680125

Certificate

This is to certify that this project entitled **An Attempt to Decode the Eccentricity and Women Emancipation in Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and *Aparijitha***, a record of research work carried out by **Miss. Sruthi** under my supervision and guidance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English and History submitted to the University of Calicut.

Dr. George Alex

Coordinator, Dept. of English & History

Christ College (Autonomous)

Irinjalakuda

Miss. Nahna Kamarudheen V

Dept. of English & History

Assistant Professor

(Supervising Teacher)

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Introduction

Literature has always been a reflection of the social set ups and the reactions to the actions of the society. Literature of no age has been spared from the shackles of influences from the society. The writers provided the room for the laymen to comprehend the puzzles of the society through their writings. Their role in influencing and transforming the lives of the people is integral. Tagore is such an unparalleled persona in the Indian literature, whose writings are valuable documents of societal changes and reactions to the larger circle including gender, nation and politics. This Bengali polymath reshaped the Bengali literature, arts and music with his farsighted and eccentric ideas in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The 19th and 20th centuries were an active ground for social reformation. Amidst the colonial domination the turbulence of the age and people's effort to lessen the Whiteman's burden was addressed by many eminent writers of the age. Unfortunately centuries apart their vision is yet to be accomplished completely. They realized the potential of women as the most significant transformative factor within the social dimensions. Historically, the statuses of women were inferior and subdued by the male domination. With religion and traditions as facade women were confined to the four walls of the house. Any deviation from this practice was considered delinquent. Men always escaped from the social repudiation while women suffer from a lasting damage to their reputation. Intellectuals of the age fought against this gross inequality. The intellectuals realized that to free themselves from the chains colonial domination social reformation is inevitable. They also advocated that no country could ever make significant progress in civilization whose females were sunk in ignorance.

The contribution of the Tagore family to achieve this goal is incomparable. The influences from the family in Tagore's career are commendable. The Tagore family was always in the forefront of the Bengali Renaissance. Tagore became a pioneering figure in the Indian literature with his unprecedented realistic approaches in his works. He was intrepid in breaking the conventional norms of the society. He actively advocated in favor of widow remarriage, women education, which were considered as taboo those times. In retrospect, it is obvious that his contribution in reshaping the orthodox society into one with a liberal outlook is integral. It has been said that there is hardly any Bengali who is not influenced by Tagore and his works. Though Tagore is famous for his poetry, the social relevance of his plays and novels cannot be ignored. The major theme of his plays and novels are focused on women emancipation.

Tagore has an appreciable command in the portrayal of the complexity of relationships and of human characters. The works are just as powerful and thought provoking in today's time as it was a century ago. From Charulatha, the protagonist in Tagore's *The Broken Nest* to Binodini in *Sand in the Eye*, Tagore's women are still relevant. Long before feminism became a catchphrase, Tagore stood for women by portraying them as liberated through his writings. Despite India progressing in leaps and bounds in various sectors, gender bias still prevails in a form or another and even the apex of the hierarchy is not spared. Though written in the 1900s his stories surpassed the boundaries of time. His women questioned the society, its rules and the roots of their restrictions. They were fearless in their journey of liberation. His women questioned patriarchy and broke the shackles of the orthodox society. Centuries apart the women in

India face discrimination in almost all spheres of the society. Thus, Tagore and his women are still relevant.

This project is an attempt to decode the eccentricity and women emancipation in Tagore's *Chokher Bali* or *Sand in the Eye* and *Aparijitha* or *Women Unknown*. This project aims to closely examine the force bringing changes in the perspective of the society. This also studies Tagore's upbringing, his times, influences from his family and friends and role of the liberal education he received. *Chokher Bali* is an avant-garde work quadrangular in approach and deals with the lives of Binodini, Bihari, Mahindra and Ashalatha. It also tells the plight of three widows including Binodini, Mahindra's mother and Ashalatha's aunt. The work was denounced as it talks of the repressed sexual desires of a young widow. The content also highlights issues of women illiteracy, child marriage and patriarchy within the family. It also explores the extra-marital affair between Binodini and Mahindra, her friendship with Ashalatha and her real feelings for Bihari. However, Tagore's greatest regret was the ending of the novel. This angle of the story will also be discussed with respect to the age this was written.

The second work of Tagore discussed is *Aparijitha*. This story is a strong voice against the dowry system and colonial exploitation in the 19th century Bengal. The main characters are Kalyani and Anupam. Their marriage broke as a result of non-fulfillment of dowry commitment. Tagore's portrayal of Kalyani and her father Sambunath is iconoclastic. Also through Anupam, Tagore deconstructed the conservative description of masculine characterization. This project explores Kalyani's blooming persona as the reflection of Tagore about the emerging modern women in India.

Since the original texts are in Bengali translated version of *Chokher Bali* by Sukhendhu Roy and *Aparijita* translated by Sreejata Guha are used. In gist, the project explores the eccentric ideas and role of women as the most significant transformation factor within the social dimensions through its three chapters. The first chapter deals with the early life of Tagore and society titled ‘Tagore and His Times’. The second chapter decodes Binodini as the empowered widow and discusses the *Chokher Bali* in detail and the third chapter decodes Kalyani as the reflection of Tagore’s vision of modern women in India and analyzes *Aparijita* as a work much ahead of Tagore’s time.

Chapter 1

Revisiting Tagore and His Times

Rabindranath Tagore has been widely read for his emphasis on social reformation including upholding the values of gender equality. The eccentricity in his writing and the relevance of the Tagorean novels cannot be appreciated and understood in its full essence without knowing about his times. The society of the late nineteenth century had shown much influence in Tagore and in his works too. Since his works revolves in the vicinity of the society and its reflections, it becomes important to explore his era. This chapter explores the multiple layers of Tagore's life - a revisit to the saga he created.

Rabindranath Tagore was born in colonial Calcutta in 1861 as the son of the renowned social reformer Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi. He was the youngest of the thirteen surviving children of Debendranath Tagore. Among one of the most influential families in Calcutta, the environment in the family played a prominent role in development of its members. Dwijendranath, Rabindranath's oldest brother was a philosopher and poet. Satyendranath, his other brother was the first Indian to be appointed to the coveted Indian Civil Services.

Another brother, Jyothindranath was a musician, composer and playwright. Tagore has always been vocal about the guidance of his brother Jyothidranath in his life. His autobiographical accounts *Chelebela* and *Jibansmriti* mention the same. Tagore reminisces about his childhood in these accounts. Jyothindranath, with his experimentations in theater, literature and especially musical composition was a great

influence on him. The exceptional journey of Tagore to become the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for *Gitanjali* was indeed a long-winded and arduous one. He started writing at the age of eight with poems. He released his first substantial poems under the pseudonym 'Bhanusimha'.

Tagore with his superhuman output in every genre wrote over one thousand poems, two thousand songs, eight volumes of short stories, two dozen plays and eight novels, many books and essays on philosophy, religion, education and other social topics. However the journey to achieve this landmark was not so smooth. He always hated classroom studies. Even the fear of being the only dunce in the family if he failed to study was not sufficient to make him engaged with the studies. At the age of eleven his father took him to tour India for several months. At the Himalayan hill station of Dalhousie he read biographies, studied history, astronomy, modern science and Sanskrit. Debendranath wanted his son to be a barrister and he sent Tagore to England in 1878. Nevertheless Tagore was more interested in Shakespearean plays and literature. His exposure to western culture had shown much alteration in him. In 1880 he returned to Calcutta degreeless. Then he came with a new vision of reconciling European novelty with Brahma tradition, taking the best from both. After returning to Bengal he published poems, stories and novels. These had a profound impact on the Bengali population but received little national attention. His stories were set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal prior to the partition.

The late nineteenth century Bengal was in the process of awakening from the age old orthodox practices. When Tagore was born, his father was one of the prominent figures of the Bengali Renaissance movement and he was in charge of Brahma Samaj.

Rabindranath's mother Sarada Devi died when he was barely thirteen years old and his father was always on the move. As a result he was raised mostly by servants. Tagore mentions in his *Chelebela* that he grew up in the company of servants in an aristocratic household and recounts how one of them would draw a chalk boundary around him and warn him there was danger if he stepped outside. He says those early experiences of confinement certainly played their part in making him fight against this plight of women through his writings. In particular all these experiences helped Tagore empathize with the world of women that was confined to the andarmahal or secluded inner chambers of the aristocratic households. In his book *Chelebela* he recounts that;

Women used to go about in the stifling darkness of closed palanquins; they shrank from the idea of riding in carriages and even to use an umbrella in the sun or rain was considered unwomanly. If any women unexpectedly encountered a strange man, one outside her family circle, her veil would promptly descend to the very tip of her nose and she would at once turn her back on him. (2)

He drew inspiration from the women of his family itself. His sister-in-law Jnanandhini attended the governor's party alone. She was also the first woman in their household to step out of the joint family establishing her own home, her husband lived elsewhere but their marriage was rock steady. Rabindranath was fascinated by this. The Calcutta in which he was born into was an altogether an old place. The heinous age old practices like sati, child marriage and dowry system was much prevalent. Women were always considered subordinate to men. The female community appeared as an object and

a sight of contestation. Her shoulder bore all the responsibilities and she was even denied social, financial and emotional security in terms of marital relations.

Tagore has shown a remarkable understanding of female minds and gave enough space to women and their lives in his work. Just like Ram Mohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Tagore advocated the emancipation of women through his novels, essays and poems. In order to study their problems closely he made them the protagonist of his works.

Unconventionally, he portrayed his women as iconoclasts who defiantly resisted social and familial norms laid down by the conservative society. His women were progressive and provided a fresh perspective to the minds already filled with the traditional Indian values. Though written about a century ago today's reader would connect with them as his works are timeless. His critical and creative texts engage extensively with the question of space and subjectivity of woman in the nascent emerging nation. In his essay 'Nationalism' he pointed out that the dominance over women by men was the cause of many injustices and exploitations.

The contribution of women to the progress of men has always been disregarded. Women live under an obscure existence for centuries and confined inside the four walls of the household. Tagore brought to the attention of the society some of the issues concerning women including the plight of widows in the joint families who are economically exploited and prevented from remarrying, the struggle of the modern educated young women for equality and freedom in the male dominated conservative

society and the complications that arise in the family setup when the modern women participate in the freedom struggle.

From his *Bhikarini* published in 1877 to *Laboratory* published in 1940 he wrote for the cause of women and their upliftment. His progressive and empowered women became the face of 'New Woman'. He took a dig at the oppressive patriarchal society fearlessly. His portrayal of women can be categorized into three broad sections. The first one is from 1881 to 1897: when he first spoke about the social injustices against women. The second and third sections from 1893 to 1913: where he portrayed the educated and urban Indian woman who fought for human rights and equality and from 1914-1941: where Tagore's heroines were openly challenging social evils like widow remarriage, untouchability, the rigid caste system and patriarchy at large respectively.

Some of the progressive women in Tagore stories are Binodini from *Chokher Bali*, Charulata from *Nastanirh*, Giribala from *Maanbhanjan*, Mrinmayi from *Samapti*, Mrinal from *Stir patra*, Kalyani from *Aparijitha*, Mrignoyonee by *Kankal* and Bimal from *Ghaire Baire*. Tagore explores the concept of women taking the reins of their desires and ambitions and making a choice out of their own without thinking about the societal reactions. He portrays Giribala as the woman who does not depend on her husband in her life and she is capable of achieving her success. Mrinmayi questions the lack of choice for women in society while Mrinal fought for her freedom from the oppressive patriarchal household. Through Mrignoyonee he addresses the underlying reality of the life of widows in a narcissistic and satirical way. Though they appear different from each other all of them have one thing in common which is their rejection of the subordinate status of women in Bengali society.

He presented his women as multilayered and presented a more nuanced personality rather than portray them as a damsel in distress, the angel of the house or as an evil temptress. They questioned the society its archaic and unfair rules and became the voice of a generation of women who were raised to abide the norms and conventions laid down by the society. His portrayals of women were unprecedented and realistic and were able to leave his mark through these stories in the Bengali households. In his native Bengal he became immortal.

Tagore wore many hats over his life. He was a poet, novelist, short -story writer, playwright, writer of dance-drama, songwriter and composer, artist, nationalist, internationalist, educator and moreover a social thinker who revolutionized the Indian cult especially the Bengalis. He has understood women psyche in depth and it is rewarding to revisit the myriad-minded Tagore who is no less than a miracle to the literary history in the light of the women in his novels. He dreamt of an egalitarian society free of discrimination. One hundred years apart his dream is yet to be fulfilled and the subjugation of women even in the twenty first century makes him and his works still relevant.

Chapter 2

Decoding *Chokher Bali*; Binodini-The New Woman

Chokher Bali is an avant-garde work by Tagore and was first published serially in *Bangadarshan*, a Bengali literary magazine in 1903. Tagore in a note written subsequent to the original publication claimed it to be an unprecedented piece of writing in the context of Bengali literature exploring the complexities of human psyche. Also *Chokher Bali* appears to be his first full length novel. The lifestyle depicted and the other instances in the novel are peculiar to the end of the nineteenth century. Despite the reformist movements and rigorous efforts by nationalists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar the plight of widows remained appalling and awful. Although remarriage of widows were legally accepted the social acceptance was yet to be achieved. *Chokher Bali* is often referred to as India's first modern novel. Tagore explores the physical and mental deprivations of young widows through Binodini.

The story works at two levels. One is the mother's resentment of new daughter-in-law, wife of her only son and on another level it is a tragic tale of a young widow who was earlier rejected by the son. *Chokher Bali* narrates the story of a wealthy Zamindari family. Rajalakshmi is in charge of the mansion and she is the widowed wife of a well established Zamindar. Her son, Mahendra is the male protagonist and he is her only concern, the apple of her eye. The affinity between Mahendra and Rajalakshmi is much deeper than the normal mother and son kinship. Mahendra had an easy life devoid of any difficulties and his world revolved around his mother. He even disagreed to marry as he feels it would create gap between them. Though she pretends to get worried about the

dismissal of marriage proposals, inwardly she feels much contented with the love of her son. However she had to think about the marriage of her son. She fixed his marriage with her friend Harimati's daughter Binodini. Binodini is well educated and a foreign tutor tutored her. This was very rare those times. Mahendra hated to be controlled and at the last moment he rebelled against the marriage and the marriage was called off. Though Rajalakshmi forced Bihari, the devoted friend of Mahendra to marry Binodini he too rejected the proposal. A harried Rajalakshmi finally located a distant nephew of hers and Binodini was married off to him. This marriage did not last as her husband died of enlarged spleen. After rejecting many proposals he agreed to meet his aunt Annapurna's niece. They went to see the girl for Bihari but Mahendra liked her in the first sight itself. He asked Bihari to back off and he wanted to marry her. This caused intense resentment from his mother. Ironically he was least bothered by her resentment and got married to Ashalatha.

The equation between Mahindra and his mother worsens as he was besotted with his wife. Rajalakshmi vented her frustration on Annapurna and engaged Asha in household chores as a way to distance her son from his wife. Asha entered the household as an inept and timid orphan who was unsure of everything happening around her. Mahindra was very much offended with the actions of his mother and decided to get Asha educated. The blooming love between the newly married couple imbalanced the peace in the household. Feeling alienated Rajalakshmi heads towards her village accompanied by Bihari. They were taken care after by Binodini. Rajalakshmi comes back to Calcutta with Binodini. Binodini was very envious of Asha. She befriended and started playing dubious games of attraction and romance. Mahindra, at first seemed that he was

not interested in Binodini, since he had not seen her or met her. However, Binodini became an enigma for him. As soon as her beauty, humour, wit, and aptness in household works are exposed in front of Mahendra, he started taking interest in her. Binodini seemed to be a complete woman who could easily meet needs of household, his intellectual demands as well as his emotional and physical demands too. In comparison to Asha, Binodini seemed to be an ideal companion for Mahendra. Binodini was envious of Asha as she was dear to both men- Mahendra and Bihari. She wanted to make Asha suffer for this. However, Bihari's feelings for Asha were of genuine care and affection.

Mahindra started behaving indifferently and started an affair with Binodini. Asha was left heartbroken. Realizing the self obsession of Mahindra, Binodini decided to leave him and proposes Bihari for marriage. He rejects her initially and later agrees to marry her. She noticed that Bihari is very tough man to deal with and he was not prone to her temptations. Realizing his folly Mahindra returns home and asks for forgiveness from his wife and mother. The novel ends by Binodini's decline to Bihari's proposal to marry her.

The title of the novel literally means sand in the eye which is very symbolic. As the title conveys Binodini becomes the eyesore of Asha. The dealing of the story at two levels explores the complexities of human psyche in a different light. Each character woven in the novel is realistic and relatable with different layers of vulnerabilities in them. The first layer is the quadrangular story of Asha, Mahindra, Bihari and Binodini. The other layer deals with relationships of the other two widows- Rajalakshmi and Annapurna with the four major characters in the novel. Through each of them Tagore unveils the weakness of the human mind. "It is the weakness of the human heart which Tagore has put forth in the persons of Mahindra which finds provided things dull and

monotonous and those things more attractive which are unattainable or far from grasp. (52)”

Mahindra represents the typical spoilt Indian male along with a little bit of modern touch. He is quite modern in outlook who values education and questions traditions rather than blindly following them. He is not bothered about the outlook of the society and is not willing to go off any of his desires for the sake of pleasing the social standards. The affinity between him and his mother was beyond the normal scope. “All your life you have been thoroughly spoilt by your mother and now you are ruined by your wife. (44)”

These words of Bihari describe Mahindra’s character in a nutshell. These words speak much louder about his personality. He always had an easygoing and convenient life. He was always pampered by the woman around him. Firstly, it was by his mother, then his wife and later by Binodini. He tends to get out of control if he is denied what he wants. He went berserk when his mother objected to his marriage with Asha and left his home. Finally his mother had to give in her approval to get him back. He is that typical male who needs somebody by his side always to fulfill all his whims and fancies. He took his wife’s love for granted and left her for his obsession of Binodini. He was too much into the poetic romance with Binodini that he forgot about the reality of the life. The brunt to bear the responsibility was on the shoulders of Asha. It can’t be said that he did not love Asha. The fact is that he loved himself more than everyone else. His happiness mattered to him the most. The fact that he was forgiven very easily for his adultery is because of the freedom and dominance men enjoyed. Amidst all the shortcomings Tagore points out Mahindra’s outspoken nature of not abiding to the boundaries set by the society. He is forward in nature who procured books, writing materials, slates and pencils for his wife.

He tried to adorn her with education. Though it was for own convenience no husband would ever do that even in their dreams those times. In this aspect Mahindra resembles Nikhil of Tagore's *Ghaire Baire*.

The other male character of significance is Bihari. He is a devoted friend to Mahendra and a well wisher of his loved ones. He is a man of virtue. He was someone who was genuinely concerned about the people around him. However, he was always taken for granted by everyone. Be it Rajalakshmi, Mahindra or Annapurna, he was always taken for granted and he was an alternate option for them. Rajalakshmi wanted him to marry Binodini because Mahindra rejected her. Though he liked Asha, he had to back off as Mahindra wanted to marry her. He is the only balanced character in the novel. He represents the man born out of the renaissance movement. Much forward in thinking and educated who was ready to marry a widow because he loved her. This was something unthinkable then. He earlier rejected her unaware of his feelings and to avoid tensions between him and Mahendra. He didn't reject her because of her widowhood. Unlike Mahendra when Binodini turned down his proposal he respected her decision instead of forcing her to accept it. This was something so rare about the men of the century who always wanted women to accept their decisions. Asha is another relevant character in the novel. Tagore describes her as the naive child woman.

“Raised as an orphan since she was a child, Asha grew into an introvert.

By nature she was always too nervous of being scorned by others. When Binodini with her impeccable good looks and flaming youth, appeared in their home, Asha was too diffident to get to know her.” (46)

This hesitance of Asha had affected her badly. She couldn't recognize the plotting and advances of Binodini towards her husband. Through the character of Asha, Tagore depicts the stereotyped female subjectivity. Her type of naïve and all forgiving saint like women are preferred by men more than women who question them. Brought up as an orphan, she was unaware of many realities of life. Being married to Mahendra and his love was like a realized dream for her. However it was short lived. She was groomed to be the perfect daughter-in-law after her marriage. Even after the adultery of her husband she forgave as that was what the society demanded. It didn't consider the adultery of her husband as a sin. Though it looks unconvincing it was the reality of women of her age. They were forced to accept their husbands no matter what they did and were forced to stay in the marriage.

The mother like figures in the novel, Annapurna and Rajalakshmi plays an indispensable role in drawing the picture of the society in the nineteenth century. Their characters are very different from each other. Rajalakshmi is the mother who is blinded by the love for her son and failed to recognize the gem like daughter-in-law she got. She turned a blind eye towards her son's mistakes and fulfilled all his whims and fancies irrespective of how wrong he was. This was so typical of mother's of all times. She is the typical Indian mother who forgives her son for the crimes he committed. "In her times husbands were not so attached to the apron strings of the wives, nor they so devoid of modesty." (16).

She was not able to cope with the fact that her son is besotted with his wife. She is the product of patriarchy whose life revolved around the men in the family. Firstly her husband and after his untimely demise her life revolved around her son. Like the

archetypal mother-in-law she holds Asha responsible for distancing her son from her. She even draws comparison between Binodini and Asha. Her aloofness towards Asha is a contributing factor in the establishment of the extra marital affair between Binodini and her son. After finding out about the affair without any second thoughts she only holds Binodini responsible for it and readily forgives her son. On the other hand, Annapurna is a childless widow. She is a mother like figure to all the four main characters. She is that mother who makes her children to own up their mistakes and rectify them. However she has her own limits because of her widowhood. Though she wanted to raise Asha she was refrained from doing so in fear of future marriage prospects for her. The superstitions relating to widowhood was very much common in those times. Her departure to Kashi with Binodini tells a lot about the plight of widows in the nineteenth century Bengal.

The central character in the novel is Binodini. Tagore's presentation of Binodini breaks the stereotypical portrayal of women. Unlike the familiar female protagonists in literature she is not an idealized Indian woman. She is a flawed human being with shades of grey. She is presented in many avatars – a hopeless widow, a friend, a temptress and a remorseful woman. Instead of cornering her, Tagore sympathizes with her. She represents a 'new female subjectivity' or the New Woman whom western education transforms into a woman with her own heart and mind. "I believe she is a very pretty girl as well as educated. A foreign lady teacher had tutored her." (1). "Binodini was adept in every sort of housework, leadership was instinctive to her, she had no qualms ordering the servants about, setting their tasks, and disciplining them when necessary." (47)

Tagore portrays Binodini as a desirable woman who is helpless because of the misfortune fell on her. She is enraged about her misfortunes and envies Asha because of

her marital bliss. Asha she got all happiness and Binodini is doomed into live the life of a widow. Her life took a turn after the untimely death of her father. She was rejected by both Bihari and Mahindra. Again misfortune fell on her when her husband Bipin died. Her father gave her education and brought her up as a woman with heart and mind. Her education makes her different from the other women in the novel. Had Asha been educated their lives would be different. Her repressed sexual emotions ignited after reading Mahendra's letter to Bihari. "Her arid and thirsty heart vicariously sought to quench her unsatisfied passion like an inebriate, imbibing strong and heady wine. The drink went into her head and incited her body." (48)

Tagore portrays her latent sexuality as natural and slammed the conservatives with intrepid depiction of Binodini's sexuality. He states that like men women also had similar feelings and he considered it as injustice to refrain one from them because of her gender. "I have no problem with what you did. What others think do not bother me, neither do I care for them. Who are they to me, who push me away and hurt me?" (147)

Binodini is brave enough to own her feelings. She is least concerned about what others thought about her. She was outspoken about her feelings. Even during her exile with Mahindra she didn't want to be much dependent on Mahindra. She proposed Bihari and he rejected her. This was something that no would want to happen even in their wildest dreams. A widow proposing an unmarried man!

Tagore envisioned a headstrong and potent character who questioned the societal norms and who didn't blindly followed the standards set up by the society. She didn't love Mahindra she just wanted revenge. Realizing the same she owned up to her real

feelings towards Bihari. When she turned down Bihari's proposal she took a stand for herself. Her departure to Kashi with Annapurna shows her helplessness as a widow. Before going he handed over two thousand rupees in notes to Bihari and asks him to use it for good work. This shows strength of her character as socially responsible. She is one of the revolutionary women Tagore created.

Tagore highlighted the issues of women education, child marriage, treatment of widows and superstitions related to widowhood and orphan-hood. Rajalakshmi resents the marriage of Mahindra with Asha because she was an orphan. On the other hand this resentment seemed immaterial to Mahindra as she liked the girl. "She is an orphaned child with no social standing. To me it is not a suitable connection." (13) "What a lucky escape! Good thing I did not marry her, or how would I have survived her widowhood." (4).

Though Mahindra said these mockingly, this was exactly how people perceived widows. They saw young widows as unappeased sexual prowess who seduced good looking men. Widows were sign of misfortune and that's the reason why Annapurna couldn't keep Asha with her.

Throughout the novel Tagore advocates about the importance of women education and what lack of education does to people like Asha. "If education is tool for human development and if education is the birth right of a human being I do not understand how we can deprive the women from education." (European diaries 1881)

He was well aware of the role of education in the journey of emancipation of women. He portrayed Binodini as the new woman who is fearless and empowered.

Despite the revolutionary portrayal of the latent sexuality of a young widow the novel didn't end up in her remarriage. Tagore always regretted its ending and said he would like to end it by marrying off Binodini to Bihari. Such an ending was quite impossible to happen in the nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal. Thus *Chokher Bali* is a compelling tale of myriad emotions and entangled story of human minds and a norm breaking tale that can be categorized as the first modern Bengali novel that gave birth to an empowered woman- Binodini and a father who gave much importance to her studies than marriage. This was unlikely to happen in the rural Bengal in the nineteenth century.

Chapter 3

Kalyani; Tagore's Vision of a Modern Women

Woman Unknown or *Aparijitha* is a short story written by Rabindranath Tagore in 1916 to expose the evil practices of dowry system in the Indian household. The central theme of the story is of relevance even in the 21st century. He presents Kalyani as the blooming persona of a modern woman. With this a shift from 'New Woman' to 'Modern Woman' happens in the portrayal of his female protagonists. This chapter attempts to study the rise of an empowered Kalyani, an unknown woman to the age she lived. Kalyani's boldness and courage were not common among the girls during Tagore's time. Her personality was unfamiliar to the society of the 19th century India.

The story is set in the Bengal of 1930s. The male protagonist Anupam is a 27 year old post graduate, an obedient son and an eligible bachelor. However, he lacks the reasoning skills as he has been trained to follow the orders from the women quarters. On the contrary, Kalyani is an educated and free-spirited woman who is unafraid to voice her opinions hailing from a rich household. In order to satisfy his maternal uncle's greed for money they had asked for a huge amount of dowry from Kalyani's father, Sambunath Sen. He abided to the demands of the groom's family because he felt that he had already spent much time in finding who meets up to his expectations. Moreover, he found Anupam as a good choice for his daughter because of his reputation in the society. The celebration for the marriage was grand and pompous. However things didn't turn out as expected.

Anupam's uncle had brought their family goldsmith with him to check the purity of the gold before the wedding. He forced Sambunath to put up with his demand and threatened that he would cancel the marriage. Sambunath felt humiliated and approached Anupam to know about his stand. As usual Anupam couldn't defy his uncle's commands. The purity of the gold was tested and Sambunath had given his daughter the best quality gold. However the earrings gifted to Kalyani by Anupam's family was proved to be of inferior quality. Sambunath asked the guests to have the food first and then he refused to marry off his daughter to a man who couldn't stand up for his daughter. He refused to send his daughter to a family who thought her father would steal her gold. Humiliated by this act that too from a father of a daughter, Anupam's uncle promised to make things difficult for Sambunath and his daughter.

Many days passed and Anupam was informed by his friend Harish that Kalyani turned down proposals. He dreamt of how Kalyani's gloominess would bring Sambunath to his doors requesting him to marry his daughter. He spent many hours thinking of how Kalyani keeps his photograph with her. From this it is revealed that he wanted to marry Kalyani. Due to an inconvenience his uncle asked him to escort his mother on a pilgrimage. It was during this journey that he met Kalyani in person. He didn't recognize her as he never saw her, not even her photograph. Circumstances arose such that Anupam and his mother had to share the compartment with Kalyani. She was a very confident and fearless girl of seventeen. She was not tied by any of the restraints imposed upon her by the society. She raised her voice against the unjust behavior of the railway officials. Even Anupam couldn't dare to do such an act but she was brave enough to bear the consequences. He was awed by her personality and paid attention to her actions. On

reaching Kanpur while she was planning to get down, his mother asked her name. They realized her true identity and sat on the seats in shock.

The short story ends with an epilogue that seeking inspiration from Kalyani's outspokenness and bravery Anupam overcame his inhibitions. He defied his uncle's orders and his mother's requests to go to Kanpur. He asked for forgiveness of Sambunath and confessed that he wished to marry his daughter. Though he agreed to the proposal Kalyani refused as she had far more greater things to do in her life. After the marriage fiasco she had dedicated her life to the education of younger girls. Anupam didn't lose hope and he hopes for her approval the day she finds him worthy. Kalyani was able to make Anupam a better human being. Their story do not have proper ending. Tagore stops the story at a point where Anupam is optimistic about their union.

The inspiring story of Kalyani made its impact on millions of readers all around the globe. She was indeed an unknown woman for them. She possessed something that they have not dared to do even in their dreams. Kalyani set an example for the woman and taught them the biggest lesson that there are far more important things in their lives than marriage. Her characterization boosts those women believed their life was doomed after the cancellation of their wedding. Many such cases were common in the 19th and 20th Bengal. In this short story, Kalyani is the empowered woman who fought against all the odds and spent the rest of her life encouraging and educating young girls.

“She must have been sixteen or seventeen, but her newly awakened youth did not seem to have burdened her either physically or mentally. Her movements were unselfconscious, her gestures most spontaneous and the innocence of her

beauty was incomparable.” (36 Mukherjee). This is how Anupam describes Kalyani oblivious of the fact that she is Kalyani. Though mentioned several times she makes her appearance in front of other characters when she is trying to board the train. Her voice fascinates Anupam and he is unknowingly drawn towards her. She was not among those women who feel intimidated by the presence of a male. She eats chana with the children in the presence of Anupam in the compartment. Though Anupam’s mother had shown her displeasure, she is least concerned. Such a thing in today’s world is nothing of significance but for the women who lived during that age this is an act of sheer bravery.

From being not allowed to go out of the four walls without veil, a woman is eating freely in front of a man. Her education has played a crucial role in transforming and taming her thoughts. Nobody could ever assume that her marriage was once called off because of the positivity that she radiates. Calling off of marriages were much prevalent during those times especially due to the dowry fiasco. The girl’s families were worst affected. Such girls were labeled with unfortunate names. There were instances when the family abandoned such girls to keep up the so called dignity of the family. Kalyani’s journey to overcome all the hindrances in her way would have been very difficult though Tagore doesn’t mention much about this. The age and society in which the story was framed is equally important. “Her eyes blazed as she looked at me “No you will not move”.”(37 Mukherjee)

Kalyani’s command to Anupam not to leave the compartment is another instance where the strength of her character is revealed. She is not a damsel in distress. Contrary

to the stereotypes, the damsel in distress here is Anupam. Kalyani spoke fearlessly and slammed the English railway officers with her words. Tagore inspires young women to be like Kalyani. Her blooming persona is his vision for modern women of India.

The courageous decision that she ever took was to reject Anupam's proposal and dedicate her life to educate the young girls. It is her outspokenness that helped Anupam to overcome his inhibitions. Anupam overcame his shortcomings so that he can marry her. He genuinely loved her and even helped her in educating the girls. Undoubtedly, Kalyani remains as one of the most powerful characters that Tagore has ever curated with his pen.

While talking about Kalyani it is impossible not to mention her father, Sambunath sen and his influences in her life. He had given his daughter good education and upbringing. He is the most progressive male in the story. He is very different from the stereotypical fathers in the Indian household. He didn't make any compromises in choosing the best groom for his daughter. Due to his confidence on Harish he accepted Anupam's proposal for his daughter. When he found out Anupam doesn't deserve his daughter he called off the wedding

. "It was difficult to tell because he was a man of few words. Even when he spoke he did so without too much emphasis."(31 Mukherjee). This is how Anupam describes Sambunath. He was a man of few words who doesn't boast about himself. He abided to pay the dowry as it was an indispensable part of the marriages during those times. Though he was provoked by Anupam's uncle several times he didn't lose his cool. The nail in the coffin was the demand to check the purity of the gold and Anupam quietly

abiding to his uncle's orders. He called off the wedding as he couldn't take the risk of sending his daughter to a household who valued her dowry more than her respect. "I cannot give my daughter to a family which considers me capable of stealing her gold."
(34)

He is the father who put his daughter ahead of all other socially constructed ideas of honor. His honor lies in the happiness of his daughter. He was sure about the fact that Anupam can't even stand up for himself thus cannot stand up for his daughter if she is assaulted in the family. Such a strong father has influenced Kalyani to a greater degree. Though he forgives Anupam in the end he didn't force his daughter to accept his decision. He respected her decision and that is the beauty of his character. Unlike the stereotypical father he considered his daughter as an individual and not as a scapegoat to satisfy his ego. Sambunath Sen stands out as one of the amazing fathers of Tagorean fictions. Through the character of Sambunath Tagore asserts that it is from the side of the bride the first step to end the evil of dowry system should initiate.

The exact opposite of the character of Sambunath is Anupam's uncle. He is the epitome of the deeply rooted patriarchy inherent to the Indian society. "He was against daughters of rich fathers. He preferred a bride to enter our house with head bowed down in humility." (31)

The uncle wanted the bride's family to be humble and subdued. He even stooped so low that he brought a goldsmith to check the purity of the gold. This shows his obsession of lucre. He represents the mentality of majority of population that lived during the age of Tagore. Unfortunately there are still people with such this outdated mentality.

They cast their dark shadows on the dreams of millions of girls all around the globe. He represents the typical patriarchal Indian male.

Anupam's mother is the other character who supports patriarchy unknowingly. She is the victim of the restraints that imposed on her by the society. It is quite obvious that her husband had been a dominating one. The myth that men should run the family and take decisions resulted in her brother taking up the charge of managing the household. "My mother was torn between fascination and disapproval." (36)

She was smitten by the charm of Kalyani and at the same time she was in denial. She couldn't accept Kalyani eating freely in the presence of Anupam. Her loyalty to her traditions and customs makes her disapprove of Kalyani. However, she wonders if she could ever have the courage to stand up as Kalyani did. However she was very much impressed by the girl's bravery. This becomes evident when she keenly asks Kalyani about her whereabouts.

With the character of Anupam, Tagore deconstructed the constructive description of masculine characterization. Traditionally it is the women who dreams of fanciful situations. But here he is the one who dreams of marrying Kalyani and waits for her all his life. His character is not only marked by his indecisiveness but also by excessive imagination. It was Kalyani's strength of identity that gave him the power to overcome his repressed and inactive self defying his uncle's orders.

"I find it easy to be good because it calls for least resistance. I am an obedient son, because I lack the ability to disobey." (31). "This time he did not think necessary to speak to me. It had already been demonstrated that it did not matter." (34)."I must be the

only male in all of the Bengal to be thrown out of a marriage assembly by bride's father.”

(34).Anupam acknowledges his inability to stand up for what he thinks right. He is ashamed of himself when he is unable to go against the commands of the English officer in the train and Kalyani effortlessly silenced them. Eventually the realization of his pushed him to give up his reclusiveness. With this, Tagore brings into light the fact that patriarchal dominance not only affects women but also men. They feel overburdened by the baggage they carry on their heads and often become meek and it affects their personality adversely. Kalyani and Anupam in *Woman Unknown* or *Aparijita* deconstructed the conservative definition of masculinity and femininity.

Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore was one of the most prominent litterateurs of 19th century Bengal who rose to international fame with his *Gitanjali*, a collection poems which won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Though famous for his poetry, he wrote numerous short stories, few novels and essays that questioned the orthodox beliefs and practices of the society. Tagore has created many revolutionary characters that became the inspiration for reformation in the society. The most striking feature of his writings was that it often discussed bold subjects that were much ahead of the time. Even before feminism became a catchphrase he created powerful women who questioned the archaic and unfair practices in the society. His women were unconventional and through them he brought the attention of people about the plight of women in their society. Since his family was an active participant in the reformation movement helped them with his intriguing writings.

Tagore strongly believed in the might of pen as a weapon in uplifting the status of women in the society. Focusing more on emancipation, his writings advocated for women liberation their equality, freedom, justice and power. *Nashtanirh*, *Chokher Bali*, *Aparijitha* and *Ghare Bhaire* are some of the fine examples. This project attempted to decode the eccentricity and women emancipation in Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and *Aparijitha*. Before evaluating his works, it is important to have accurate understanding of the society of 19th century Bengal. The orthodox beliefs and superstitions made men ignorant. They considered women subordinate to men. Tagore argued that a country is called civilized only if it treats their women with dignity.

Tagore talks about the taboo related to widowhood in his novel *Chokher Bali*. It is the story of the deprived life of a widow – Binodini- and her sexual emancipation in a love quadrangle tale. It is a compelling story of distrust, adultery and fragility of relationships. The novel also highlights the dictatorship of patriarchal society. He brought into the forefront the sexual desires of a woman, which even today is considered a taboo. The character of Binodini rewrote many conventional characteristics adorned to women. She was smart and educated and strived to be more than an inauspicious widow.

The short story *Aparijitha* narrated the inspiring tale of Kalyani's emancipation. She is the victim of the evil practices of the dowry system. Sambunath Sen, her father is such a beautiful character in Tagorean writings. Mr Sen is a powerful father who prioritized his daughter's happiness over the society. He breaks off his daughter's marriage on the wedding day due to the unfair dowry demands of the Anupam's (groom) uncle. Kalyani is portrayed as a fearless and independent woman who devoted the rest of her life to educate girls. Witnessing her bravery, Anupam is able to forego his reclusiveness and seeks forgiveness from her father. Though he proposes her for marriage, she rejects the proposal as she realized the real goal in her life is to educate young girls. With the characterization of Kalyani and Anupam, Tagore deconstructed the unconventional depiction of femininity and masculinity.

There are many common themes in these two works. Binodini was the new woman while Kalyani, the reflection of the modern one. Eventually, Binodini had to leave for Kasi like other widows just because the society wanted. Had she married Bihari, the novel would have been more revolutionary. Kalyani defied all the constrictions upon her to shape the future of many girls. The role of education in the lives of these two

empowered women is vital. Tagore's women rejected their subordinate status in their society. Their stories hold much significance even in the 21st century where majority of women are fighting against many abusive practices.

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