

Status of Young Widows in Tagore Novels 'Chokher Bali' And 'Chaturanga' – A Study

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Abstract

“Chokher Bali” and “Chaturanga” are the two great novels penned by Vishwakavi Rabindranath Tagore. He had shown the vulnerable and miserable conditions of young widows in society during nineteenth century Bengal. In “Chokher Bali”, Rabindranath created the character of Binodini, an young widow who suffered a lot and was torn in between taking a strong decision for her own happiness and to abide by the unwritten rules of the society where remarriage of a widow was not being looked upon wisely. Binodini became the prey for lust of the character Mahendra. She loved Mahendra's friend Bihari. When Bihari proposed to marry her, she politely declined the proposal to keep the traditional norms of the society. She could not gather the courage and opted for going to Benaras with her aunt.

On the other way, the character Damini, a widow from the Tagore novel “Chaturanga” was shown quite opposite. She was deprived of property, money, house by her late husband who had made a deed in favour of a religious Guru before his death. Damini started fighting. at last defying all the social norms, she got married to Sribilas who loved her. Unfortunately her happiness did not last long as she took her last breath after a very short period of her marriage to Sribilas due to some deadly disease.

Keywords: Binodini, Mahendra, Bihari, Damini, Sachish, Sribilas

Objective of the Study :

The clear pictures of prevailing society are being reflected through the activities of the characters created by a novelist. Main objective of the study are :

- (1) To analyze the character of Binodini, an young widow from the novel “Chokher Bali” written by Rabindranath Tagore
- (2) To analyze the character of Damini an young widow from the novel “Chaturanga” written by Rabindranath Tagore

Methodology :

- (1) For the proposed study, two kind of sources Primary Sources and Secondary Sources are chosen. The novels “Chokher Bali” and “Chaturanga” both written by Rabindranath Tagore are considered as Primary Source.
- (2) In the proposed study, both analytical and descriptive ways have been adopted.
- (3) Helps were taken to make the study from some related Books.

Introduction :

World famous poet and writer Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian and non white to win the Nobel Prize, had been a great contributor in all spheres of literatures . Apart from writing poems and songs Tagore had written many short stories, novels and dramas. He was also a composer, philosopher, social reformer, educationist and painter.

The status of widows in families and in the society during 19th and early 20th Century Bengal as depicted by Tagore in two of his novels ‘Çhokher Bali’ & ‘Çhaturanga’ will be discussed in this topic.

About Rabindranath Tagore :

Rabindranath was born in Jorasanko , Kolkata on 7th May 1861 to Marashi Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi . He was the 13th and youngest child of his parents. Tagore family had been very rich . Rabindranath’s grandfather Prince Dwarakanath Tagore had been a big entrepreneur and a businessman of the early nineteenth century. Rabindranath’s father Devendranath Tagore had been a prominent leader of the Brahmo Samaj , the Hindu reformist group founded by Raja Rammohan Roy. One of Rabindranath’s elder brothers Satyendranath Tagore had been the first Indian ICS Officer.

Tagore did not have much academic education , but he was taught at home by some prominent teachers of that era. His father Debendranath established an Ashram and a school named Brahmo Vidyalaya at Shantiniketan , Bolpur in Birbhum district of Bengal in the year 1901 which was eventually developed into a college by Tagore in due course of time and later it was transformed into a Central University in the year 1951 , called Vishwabharati .

Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian and non white to win the Nobel Prize in the year 1913 for his collection of verses titled as “Geetanjali”. He is always referred as Kaviguru or Vishwakavi or Gurudev. Apart from writing thousands of poems and songs , many short stories and dramas , Tagore wrote 12 novels . He took his last breath on 7th August 1941 in his ancestral home at Jorasanko, Kolkata

Character Binodini from the novel Chokher Bali :

Rabindranath had shown the helplessness of women in this male dominated society in his many novels. If the woman is an young widow, her position used to become more miserable in that era. The best example is the character Binodini from the novel Chokher Bali. The novel Chokher Bali was written by Tagore in the year 1901. The plot of the story was set during the period of last part of nineteenth century Bengal.

At the starting of the novel “Chokher Bali” there was talks about the proposed marriage of Mahendra with the beautiful attractive young Binodini. Initially as per wish of his mother Rajlakshmi , Mahendra agreed to marry Binodini. Mahendra was an educated person, passed M.A successfully and was preparing to study Medical Science. On the other side Binodini is also educated and she was trained by a Mem Sahib to learn the western etiquette . But just prior to the marriage, without even seeing Binodini for once , Mahendra became reluctant to marry her. Then Rajlakshmi requested Mahendra’s friend Bihari to marry Binodini. Bihari,, studying in medical science was staying in Mahendra’s house. He too rejected the proposal . Then Rajlakshmi arranged the marriage of Binodini with one of her village related nephews from Barasat named Bipin. According to Binodini herself she was married to an ‘old monkey of the jungle’ of Barasat . At that time Barasat had been a rural backward place. After sometime , Binodini’s husband expired and she became an widow at a very young age.

In the mean time three years passed . Mahaendra married his aunt (Kakima) Annapurna’s sister’s daughter Ashalata. Mahendra wanted to make his wife educationally qualified. But his mother Rajlakshmi emphasized more on becoming an ideal wife who would be an expert in doing all the domestic works. Rajlakshmi tried to make Annapurna responsible for such development. She became jealous for Annapurna.

Her dominancy and full control over the family had started to loosen day by day. Conflicts developed to such a level that Rajlakshmi decided to go to her paternal home at Barasat . Mahendra's friend Bihari took her to Barasat. On the other way , Annapurna , herself a middle aged widow decided to go to Benaras and live there

At the paternal home of Rajlakshmi none of her relatives resided there accept a few old widows. The house had been kept carelessly and the arena was filled up with growing herbs and plants. On learning the arrival of Rajlakshmi, the young widow Binodini arrived and she started to stay with her. With her wholehearted service she won the heart of Rajlakshmi.

After sometime the anger of Rajlakshmi calmed down and she along with Binodini returned back to Kolkata. Binodini developed a very good relation with Mahendra's wife Ashalata and they became close friends. Mahendra was slowly attracted by Binodini . But Binodini started to feel attraction for Bihari . When Bihari gave her proposal to marry him, she instantly rejected the proposal and said , (translated from Bengali) , "I am widow, I am abused, I will let you down in the whole society. This marriage will not be possible . Please do not talk about for such proposal." Not only this she also said to Bihari –(translated from Bengali) –"You give me some of your tasks . I will carry out the assigned job and consider myself as your maid, helping hand. It will be a shame for you to marry a widow. Everything may be possible due to your greatness , but if I do this , I will spoil you in the eyes of the society . I will no longer be able to keep my head high in the society".

Mahendra's attraction for Binodini grew to such extent that he became much obsessed with her that he left the home and took Binodini to a rented house.

According to a critic, "Annapurna making herself responsible for the indecent act of Mahendra and thus she left home and opted to stay away in a distant place , but her this decision has paved the way for Mahendra to make more serious illicit relationship."

We observe that three men were there in Binodini's life. First one was Bipin, the sick person with whom she was married and became widow within a very short period. Second person was Mahendra whose lust for her pushed her to a very dangerous position. And the third man was Bihari whom she liked, loved and respected from the core of her heart. It was felt by Binodini that Bihari had covered up all the insults she had to receive in the male dominated society.

But what we observe at last part of the novel that Binodini accepted all these as her fate and could not gather the courage to marry Bihari. She went to Benaras with her aunt Annapurna.

The Character Damini from the novel 'Chaturanga':

In the novel 'Chaturanga' , we find that Damini was the wife of businessman Shibatosh who had been a dedicated disciple of religious Guru Lilananda Swami. Shibatosh got huge property, money and a house in Kolkata from his father in law Annadaprasad who had jute business. Shibatosh was very inefficient and irresponsible . He was not interested to make earning by his own effort. He was not at all careful about his wife. At one time the business of Annadaprasad started to fall and he was facing tremendous financial problems. Damini had to suffer a lot due to irresponsibility of her husband. As per writer's language (translated from Bengali) – "When Damini's father and younger brothers were starving , at that time Damini had to cook foods by her own hands on everyday for sixty seventy disciples of Swami Lilananda." Guru Lilananda Swami used to come to Shibatosh's house with huge numbers of his disciples and used to stay there for some period.

Before his death, Shibatosh made a deed giving the rights on his property, house inclusive of looking after his wife Damini to his Guru Lilananda Swami . Damini became widow due to untimely death of her husband Shibatosh. It seems that Shibatosh had punished his wife Damini by not giving his property and money as she was not an admirer of her husband's Guru.

Two main characters of the novel are Sachish and his friend and companion Sribilas. Sachish was brought up by his elder paternal uncle (Jyathamoshai) Jagmohan who was an atheist. Sachish was greatly influenced by him. Sachish and Sribilash were highly educated and both were very prolific in English language. But after the death of his uncle Sachish's thinking had been changed and he along with his friend Sribilas became disciples of religious Guru Lilananda Swami and they used to accompany their Guru along with other disciples to different places where ever the Guruji used to travel.

As Lilananda Swami became the owner of the house of late Shibatosh, so used to stay there with many of his disciples for long periods. Shibatosh not only gave all his property, practically he gave the responsibility of his widow Damini to his Guruji. Damini revolted against the Guru and all his activities like doing Kirtans etc. She did not follow or obey any advice of the Guru, rather started to do what ever her mind wanted. It was described in the novel (translated from Bengali) –“Her dresses and outfits are not like that should be of a widow, she does not care to abide by the advice of the Guru. There is no sign of sanctity in spite of staying very near to a great man.”

While Sachish staying in Kolkata with his Guru in the house donated by late Shibatosh to the Guru, there developed a great attraction for him in the mind of Damini. During the winter season Damini joined the team of the Guru with Sachish and Sribilas who were making an annual trip to a place nearby the sea. There was a big cave at the nearby hill. Damini, along with Sachish and Sribilas spent one night there. After coming from the cave, Damini started to revolt more aggressively and tried to avoid both, the Guru and Sachish. She became close to Sribilas. Her mind became so much disturbed that can be understood with her reaction while making conversation with Sachish. When Sachish asked her why she was among the Bhaktos (disciples) without any purpose, the reaction was as per the description in the novel, translated from Bengali – “ Her eyes are on fire. She said – why I am here? Am I staying here as per my wish? You the Bhaktas (disciples) have caged me and chained the feet of a non disciple like me! Have you kept any way open for me?”

Sachish told her that they had decided to bear the responsibility of all of her expenditure if she would wish to stay with any one of her relatives. She replied sharply, (translated from Bengali) – “ Any Bhakta (disciple) may make arrangement for some of his own interest, another may do the same with some other interest. Am I a game piece for you?”

In one way, Damini's strong personality can be observed with her dislike to be used by anybody, but on the other way the situation depicts the reality of the status of a young widow in the society in that era. She was found to be very outspoken and the insecurity in her mind is observed while she was telling the Guru, (translated from Bengali) – “ I have understood very well, I have no father, mother, brother, no house and money, I have nothing! The responsibility you have taken willingly, so you can not get away by sending my responsibility on some other person's shoulder.”

It is to be noticed here that Damini had not uttered the reference of her late husband for once even. But her social identity was that of a widow. Her late husband did not love her, did not keep any security for her, deprived her from property, money, ornaments, house. Instead he gave away all to his Guruji and left her quite unsafe by giving her responsibility on his Guru.

The story advances. Sachish, Damini and Sribilas left the Guru's party and took shelter in an abandoned house. Returning from there, Damini was taken to her maternal aunt's (Masi) house, but she could not stay there because it was easier to give bad name to a young woman without a male partner. The Puja numbers of different magazines published some fabricated scandalous stories involving Damini.

At last Sribilas wanted to marry Damini because he loved her. They got married by registration. Damini was a widow and remarriage of a widow was considered a revolutionary step in that era. Sribilas and Damini got married in the Bengali Hindu forbidden month of Chaitra. They became happy but their

happiness could not last long as Damini was attacked by some deadly disease and within a short period she took her last breath .

Conclusion :

The novel “Chokher Bali” was set on the last part of nineteenth century and the novel Chaturanga was set on the early part of twentieth century . Tagore did not want to impose anything extra ordinary, abnormal or larger than life in both of his novels. For example he could have created the character of young widow Binodini as a strong minded woman who could have defied the rules of society . Rather the writer had chosen to high light hard reality of the society which was prevailing at that era where widow Binodini could not come out from the bindings of the society .

Where as in Chauranga we observe that the young widow is a very strong minded lady who was able to defy the unwritten prevailing inhuman rules of the society of early twentieth century urban Bengal. We can observe that how the urban life of the society was slowly changing. Here lies the success of the great writer who had given a clear pictures of the societies of two different eras .

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