

BEYOND THE VEIL: RE-CONCEPTUALISING THE REPRESENTATIONS OF ‘NEW WOMAN’ OF INDIA IN TAGORE’S CHOKHER BALI AND THE BROKEN NEST

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Abstract

This paper provides an in-depth discernment on the conception of ‘New Woman’ in India, the one deviating from the indigenous culture. Tagore, during the time of Bengal Renaissance, gives us insight of stronger feministic beliefs. According to him, women thrive for knowledge, liberty and freedom in the social, political and economic sphere. Rabindranath Tagore, in his works, portrayed women as heroines who fought against the social injustice and evils of Indian society. According to Tagore, women are considered as rational beings who don’t stand behind the doors merely because of the problems and obstacles they face in their lives. They accept the challenges of life and proceed further. Since this research paper illumines the issues based on two particular novels i.e. *Chokher Bali* and *The Broken Nest*, an attempt has been made to provide comprehensive critical analyses of the plots under the lens of gender and modernity. The fact, the texts under study were written in the earlier times yet they have many images, thoughts and ideas similar to the modern times, made Tagore the most influential writer ahead of his times.

Keywords: Subversion, Discrimination, Patriarchy, Marriage, Inequality, Feminism.

It was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who fought for the abolishment of ‘Sati Pratha’ and Child Marriage. It was Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar who campaigned for ‘Hindu Widow Remarriage Act’. So, in India, early feminist were men who thought that the condition of women in India needed to be improved. Since then, Indian women became enlightened about their rights and emerged as ‘New Woman’. Today, if women thrive for anything, they can achieve it. No boundary of society can stop them.

Simon De Beauvoir, a French writer in her book *The Second Sex* in 1949, talked about existentialism that give insight that a person is represented by its action, by its thinking and not by the biological sex. She formulated that rather than being born as a woman, one becomes a woman by the society. Women are forced into immanence by the male dominated society. The theory of essentialism which states that the motherhood, emotional, caring, soft, weak and the feminine are the key attributes of women. These qualities are inherited in their genes. However, Simon De Beauvoir opposed it. She gave Sex-gender distinction in which she mentioned how society and its various stereotypes determines the role

of women in the society. Simon perceived that women are seen as ‘others’, i.e. the second sex, but males are seen as the centre of the life.

Mary Wollstonecraft, a feminist philosopher, in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* argues that education and opportunity should be equally provided to both men and women. Women shouldn’t be considered inferior to men. Sarojini Naidu, an Indian activist, led a campaign to abolish ‘Pardah’ system in which women weren’t allowed to roam freely in the society. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 describe the trapped situation of housewives. She asserted that women were equally efficient as men in their work and career. She described that women face a number uncountable and indescribable problems which she called ‘a problem with no name’ in her book *The Feminine Mystique*.

From the earlier time, the conditions of women have changed. They have rights, but they aren’t completely independent. Still, they aren’t given equal freedom as men. Even though they are modern now, the tradition and the religion still hold them back. Even in *Manusamriti*, a Hindu religious text, women are considered submissive to men. There are given certain sets of rules and duties prescribed for married woman in this text. In nutshell, they must do everything for the male folk and can never go against them.

Besides *Manusmriti*; other literary pieces e.g. Vedic Culture, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Kamasutra* etc. are to be taken into account to enlighten the issues of womanhood. These texts describe how to become a good moral woman, but who had provided these duties to the woman? Is it female herself? No, even the *Manusmriti* is written by Manu, that is, a male himself. Woman needs to please her husband, her in-laws and leave her own health and life behind. Don’t women have their own right to opt for their lives, for their choices and careers? Why do women need to dream through males? From the early childhood, a girl is told that she will have to marry a man. A prince of her dreams will come and take her away. Even her dreams are directed towards males. All these questions and criticism show that they aren’t given the equal opportunities.

National patriarchy has given the role to women as ‘Sakhi’, ‘Sumita’ and ‘Sugrehni.’ It means the women are given a typical stereotypical role of friend, daughter, mother and daughter-in-law. Other than these roles, a woman doesn’t have any other identity of her own. It is a symbolic representation of bar that the patriarchal society has placed against women. Women are confined to these bars. Maharishi Lal in his *Publication of Law of Threshold* have stated three thresholds that have divided the women in three categories:

1. The women who are inside the threshold.
2. The women who are on the threshold.
3. Women who are outside the threshold.

The first category involves the women who are confined to home only. They have only household and maiden duties. They aren’t allowed to form any distinct identity other than the identity of mother, daughter and wife. The second category involves women who while performing household duties are also creating their

own identity. They take the roles of men and they transgress the threshold. The third category represents women who accept the challenges of life that men face and become stronger. Various Indian women like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant and many more went outside the threshold and took part in freedom struggle despite the opposition against women.

So, the culture and traditions of India want woman to be a faithful companion. Once she steps out from her boundary, she isn't allowed to enter the house like the great Sita in *Ramayana*. The message that Indian culture gives that women need to bear all these rules without any single complaint. This is the discourse of patriarchal society. These rules are so dominating that the women now have interpolated these rules into themselves and if any woman violates these rules or steps out of the boundary, she is being suppressed by the other women. So, sometimes traditions and culture stands for hegemonic male stream values. However, Tagore's oeuvre act as a new era where women discover their own self.

Rabindranath Tagore, the strong feminist of his times, influenced people about the equality specially the equality for the women. People often forget that women are also considered as human beings who are in need of freedom both physically and mentally. Tagore, through his works, reminds people about the strong character of women. He focuses on the fact that women in India suffer through various social injustices in the patriarchal society. Despite this, they are brave and courageous. Rabindranath always portrayed women as heroines who don't need to be bound by the barriers and boundaries put forth by the male dominated society. Among his major works were *Gora*, *Chokher Bali*, *GhareBhare*, *Raktakarabi*, *Chandalika*, *Chitrangada* and many others. Through his writings, Tagore gives voice to women, and they celebrate their liberation. They took the reign for their desire to create own identity and place in the society; by taking control of their lives, they become the stronger heroines of his novels. Tagore's women break out the traditional norms set by the society.

Rabindranath Tagore in *Stir Patra* translated as *A Wife's Letter* depicts the life story and struggles of a beautiful married woman who went in the dilemma of searching her identity and in that process she leaves her house as she realizes that there is no freedom for women in this patriarchal society. She began to write poetry and finds solace in that. Even in *Sheshar Kobita*, Tagore questions the ultimate goal of woman's life as marriage and sacrifice for the family leaving her own health and life behind. Finding inspiration from Tagore's work, Satyajit Ray, a film maker adapted many of his novels for his movies.

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* is written in the narrative mode with perfect plot and action but more significance is given to psychological state of the female figures used by Tagore. *Chokher Bali* is an attempt to disclose the desires and secrets of the women's heart that are continuously suppressed by the patriarchal society. The whole story revolves around the character of Binodini, the protagonist who was a widow. In spite of the prevailing orthodox society (which didn't allow woman to get remarried even when the 'Widow Remarriage Act' was

legalized), the restrictions posed by the social framework of the Hindu traditions and stereotypes were much stronger. However, Binodini was a strong protagonist as she fought back with the notions of the society by starting an extramarital affair with Mahendra who was already married to Asha. Binodini was educated but Asha was somewhat illiterate. Asha lacked the support and sympathy of the family because she was inefficient in completing the household tasks. Binodini, who was a visitor in their house, managed the household duties perfectly. She also took care of Mahendra's mother Rajalakshmi. She is an ideal woman because she reaches the expectation of the society which wants women to sacrifice herself for the sake of family and perform the stereotypical role perfectly. But as she was a young widow whose freedom was restricted and desires were suppressed, she wanted to fulfill all her wishes. As a result, she violated the boundaries set by the society. To curb her loneliness, Binodini started reading books like *Bishbriksha* (English: *The Poison Tree*), a Bengali novel written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Asha became Binodini's friend. The blissful life of Asha made Binodini somewhat upset as she also desired to have such a blissful life. She started calling Asha 'Chokher Bali' and lured her to disclose her conjugal life. In this way, she wanted to forget her dreadful life experiences. Mahendra, who was earlier in love with his wife, gets annoyed when he saw Asha not attending to her household duties as a wife. Now, Mahendra criticizes his own wife for not maintaining the marital life. He started getting closer to Binodini and they got involved in an illicit relationship. Even when the affair was exposed to the family, Binodini was criticized rather the fact that they both were accomplices in the crime. The truth of the patriarchal society is that only women are criticized and tormented for the mistakes and errors. Men are always considered noble in spite of the fact that they were also wrong in some ways. Even the other women in the house like Asha and Mahendra's mother Rajalakshmi judge the character of Binodini. Rajalakshmi comments sarcastically by telling her that she was the only to blame and she must have done some witchcraft to control her son. They all accept Mahendra's mistakes, even Mahendra's wife is ready to forgive her husband. She thought to herself and speaks in her mind that she now doesn't know how to get her husband's love again. She finds faults in herself as she believed that she was the reason behind her husband's infidelity. It is interpolated in women that they are always at fault if something goes wrong. Rajalakshmi even thought that now when Mahendra has come to house leaving Binodini behind, his wife is pushing him away by showing pride and anger. She blames Asha and accuses her that she was the reason that her son went to Binodini. She thinks that it is natural for Men to go to the wrong way, but it is the responsibility of women to keep men on the right path by all tricks, courage and force they can gather. Therefore, it is solely a wife's responsibility to maintain the marriage not the effort of the two. Despite all this, Binodini stood strong. Her psychological frame of mind stays intact. She is a woman who crosses the threshold, so she is being hated by all. Binodini then gets infatuated with Bihari, who was the adopted son of Rajalakshmi

because she believed that happiness can't be obtained by ruining others' home. Bihari would listen to Binodini like a friend. After leaving Mahendra's home, she goes to Bihari and pleads him to accept her, despite her ugly side. She seduces and begs for his love promising to remember him till her last breath. However, Bihari remains silent. But after her departure, he felt her love. May be Bihari was restrained because of the restrictions posed by the orthodox society. After being criticized by everyone, Binodini leaves the house. Annapurna, the widowed sister-in-law of Rajalakshmi also leaves the house prior to the visit of Binodini as Rajalakshmi envied her that her son listens to her more. Annapurna herself knew that she was the reason behind all the tensions occurring between the mother and the son. So, in order to find peace and solace, she went on her journey to the holy land. After creating so much chaos in the harmonious life of married couple and related people, Binodini ultimately realizes her mistake. She redeems her sin and went on fasting and worship. At last, she went to Rajalakshmi and asks for forgiveness. She knew that Asha wouldn't be able to forgive her, so she asks Asha not to think of forgiving her. Even when Bihari responds to her love, she rejects him firmly as her psyche doesn't allow herself to go forward. Being a widow, she doesn't want to ruin the reputation of Bihari by marrying her. Nilanjana Roy of *Business Standard* praises the character of Binodini as sharp and intelligent woman who never fears to speak her mind and her actions. Binodini, moving out of the threshold (how a widow should remain) placed by the society, crosses all the boundaries to fulfil her own desires. She begins to dream again to have a family and a partner to spend her life with. She didn't chain herself because she was a widow. She finally realizes her dream. All of her actions represent her suppressed unconscious desires which she held for a long time. When this desire becomes too intense, it exploded and she became conscious of her unconscious mind. At last, in order to find solace, she went to repent and loses all her interest in the worldly things.

Bengali novella *Nastanirh*, known as *The Broken Nest* in English, is Tagore's most creative work published in 1901. Here, Tagore describes a lonely housewife who creates her own world and befriends with her brother-in-law, Amal. Charulata, the main character of the story is a neglected wife of the Bhupathi. She had created her own dreamy world of literature with her college going brother-in-law, Amal. Her bonhomie with Amal represents her intellect and desire to write. She was fond of reading and writing. Because of this habit, her day seems to be easy and lighter than before. She doesn't have the feeling of inferiority as she isn't afraid to ask for help in her studies from her younger brother-in-law. In return, Amal had various tasks get prepared from Charulata as 'Gurudakshina'. However, these little tasks filled the incompleteness were prevailing in her heart. They both once dreamt of renovating the garden but their dream shattered because of lack of finances. As Amal wasn't that great of a writer to begin with, but Charu's continuous encouragement boosted Amal to attain perfection. She wanted to keep their friendship between him and her without

anyone's interference. When Amal's writings got published, he got huge approvals. Charu was upset at the beginning. She didn't understand why, but she gradually understands it. She knew that earlier it was only him and her and now with his publication, her value became less. Later, Amal made Charu's writings published and she got huge appraisal. This made Charu joyful as she got to know the fact that she also can be a good writer. Charu's sister-in-law, Mandakini, started interfering with their discussion on seeing Amal's progress. Charu didn't want to disturb their friendship, so she tolerated her. However, with the passage of time, she gradually understands that it was all because of jealousy. To hide this fact, she even told Amal to get married and even complained about her sister-in-law to her husband. When Amal agreed to marry, Charulata taunted Amal for being a loyal brother who agrees to everything dictated by his brother. She got angry with her husband because he accused her of having jealous attitude towards her sister-in-law. She demanded excuse from her husband for wrongly accusing her sister-in-law. However, she couldn't let go of the fact that Amal will go to London after his marriage. Her affection for Amal is guaranteed by the fact that she eagerly waited for his letter and looked worried about him in his absence. In her longing for Amal, she forgets to look after her husband whose business got dumped. This reveals the fact that a wall has come in between them. Charu became upset because of Amal's absence. However Bhupathi wanted to comfort her but he found no way to please her because the connection between a husband and wife was already lost between them. Charu knew that she wouldn't be able to forget Amal at any cost. So, she decided to keep the memories of Amal with her as a keep sake and started searching for him. Bhupathi, her husband, came to know about the fact that in her attempt to know the whereabouts of Amal and send him a Telegram, Charu pawned her own jewelry. This added more and more of loneliness in Charu's surroundings. When Bhupathi realized that it was his own mistake that had ruined their relationship, he decided to leave Charu. But when he saw her pale face, he repented and decided to take Charu with him. This time Charu refused him and stood constantly near the verandah with her teary and lonely eyes. Rabindranath Tagore uses Charu as a character through which he showed how her innermost desires and unconscious thoughts created her behavior. Her repressed wishes lead her to bonhomie with her brother-in-law and the habit of writing and reviewing the literary pieces. Her loss of affection from her husband leads to create her own dreamy world. Tagore had created Charu with an aura of a strong woman who leaves a deeper mark on the prevailing social norms of the patriarchal society. In her mind, she desires for freedom - the freedom of mind and action. She wanted affection but her busy husband was unable to give her. So, she made her own castle of dreams and friendship. She didn't even care how the society would think of her. Now she wanted to live her life in her own way.

So, in nutshell, women are always controlled by the men either by their father, husband, brother or son. Without women, no society or nation could

develop because women form the half of the men's world. So rather than circumscribing them, let them remove the chains put forth by the patriarchal society so that the whole nation or whole world could develop and prosper.

Through these two texts, Rabindranath Tagore provides us insights that equal opportunity and freedom must be given to women. These texts reveal Tagore's exploration of feministic beliefs in his era. By following and examining the character of the women depicted by Tagore, it is concluded that he empowered them with no barriers and boundaries. Women thrive for their own stories beyond the stereotypical roles provided by the patriarchal society where they can find their own identity, their own place in the society. The women depicted by Tagore in both novels are strong, open minded and have a powerful aura. These heroines don't feel that they are inferior to men. They are the free birds roaming in the sky independently. Society should accept women as human beings not some weak sex and let them live their lives as normal human beings. So, Women need to create a way to construct their own personality and identity. Even though this patriarchal society shows women weak and dependent on men, but they shouldn't constrain themselves in the norms and ideas provided by male dominated society.

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