

# CHOKHER BALI: A STUDY OF THE FORBIDDEN DESIRES OF A WIDOW IN SOCIETY

Dr. Smita Mishra

Assistant Professor III

Amity Institute of English Studies & Research

Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

## ABSTRACT:

According to our ancient civilization, widows in Indian society are treated like an untouchable creature. Our history facilitates an idea about a widow and draws a picture of a woman who is colored in white forever. She has absolutely no desire and independence of her choice. My paper will analyse the study of the forbidden desires of a widow in society as portrayed in Tagore's very renowned work *Chokher Bali*. The novel describes the condition of a widow in Indian culture. When we talk about particularly *Chokher Bali*, we receive an idea about the soul of the book being Binodini. She is a widow and it's all about her desires and passion. Tagore's imagination created the character of Binodini but he again painted her white. Tagore was although a writer and free in his thoughts but still his thoughts were in the grip of the rigid, orthodox rituals of past and again he defamiliarize the picture of a widow who is always forced to submit herself to the oppressing patriarchal society. *Chokher Bali* brings to the reader the socially forbidden rules for a woman as being a widow. Tagore's writing was very much influenced from the era of Indian society which was under British rule. His characters portraying the struggle with their desire and a dream of seeing India as an independent nation reflected the mind state of Tagore.

**Keywords:** Forbidden desires, patriarchal society, widow, education, widow remarriage, sexuality

Rabindra Nath Tagore in his famous work *Chokher Bali* pictures women who desperately want to meet their desires. Binodini's character could be witty and tempting but she was actually as helpless as equal to Asha. She lost her husband after a few days of her marriage. A newly married woman's dream remains a dream after her husband's death. Tagore created three widow characters in the text. Each one of them had their different roles to play but one thing that Tagore kept common in each of them was that their fate betrayed them at a very early age. Being a widow is practically a curse which showcases the rigidity of a society. Although Binodini is the major character of the story but Tagore describes all three women's forbidden position and desires. Rajlaxmi, the first widow character clings to her son after her husband's death. She wanted her son to remain close and expected the same after Asha came into their life but it became really difficult when her son started ignoring her. A mother after her husband relies on her child (son). A widow has to rely on several people in her family because in a patriarchal society she is not allowed to work or live on her terms. She is bound to follow rules and regulation of a life which does not allow her to wear colorful clothes. In ancient times women were asked to shave their heads after their husband's death, but after certain years of struggle this ritual came to an end.

Tagore has shown a different story of a widow where she has to suffer at different phases of her life, being a mother, being a passionate woman or being a well-wisher. Society curses the existence of a widow. Tagore describes Rajlaxmi as a self-centered woman but just because she was lonely and dependent on his son, she always thought of clinging to her son. Rajlaxmi had a fear of losing her son and during her days of sickness she always felt like seeing her son and feeling the same care and love under his shadow. Tagore showed another factor in a human relationship in *Chokher Bali* which is guilt. Rajlaxmi always wanted her son to be close to her but during her last days she wished to see Bihari near her. Earlier, she never liked to get even a glimpse of Bihari. All she cared about was her son but during her last days she realized who was actually close to her and who all bore genuine love and respect for her in their hearts.

Another character placed as a widow by Tagore is Annapurna Kaki maa (Aunt). Her character is equivalent to a calm lady cursed with misfortune. Rajlaxmi was never cordial with Annapurna but she always remained committed to her duties. Rajlaxmi showered her with taunts and abuses thinking her to be the root cause of her son ignoring her mother after her wife. According to Rajlaxmi, Annapurna was menace and she did everything to keep her away from her son. "Tell me, Chunni, what am I supposed to do? By your conduct you make my life difficult to live in peace here and at the same time neither will you allow me to go away. Do I not deserve some consideration for me to live in peace?" (*Chokher Bali*, pg 30). Annapurna was forced to scold Asha so that Rajlaxmi stops blaming her for her miseries. Annapurna's life after her husband was much more difficult. She did not bear any child on whom she could rely; this resulted in Rajlaxmi believing that Annapurna was jealous of her. A widow is ill-treated and blamed for her misfortune. She is even blamed for her husband's death that is how a society treats a widow. Annapurna was one such character who faced such kind of treatment but was always respected by Mahendra and Bihari because she was not a selfish human being.

Tagore's main highlight in the story is Binodini. Binodini is that creation of Tagore who desperately wanted her desires to come true. She opposed the idea of being a widow at an early age and hence wanted to fulfill her desires. Tagore through the character of Binodini describes the need of education essentially because Binodini was a convent educated girl and knew her rights. When Mahendra and Bihari refused to marry her, she was forced to marry one of their cousins who died at a very early age. After her husband's death she had to live in a wilderness and compromise with her existence. She suppressed her desires of being a married woman. In the earlier times, widow remarriage was not allowed but after certain struggle Raja Ram Mohan Roy enabled the act of widow remarriage in 1856 but still in early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the hypocrites in society faced difficulty in accepting this act and hence, *Chokher Bali* brings out the same social situation of that period. But widow remarriage is mostly considered as a means to control the sexuality of a widow. A widow is considered equivalent to a prostitute in an Indian society. A single mother has to bear the same consequence as a widow has to. A widow becomes an object of suspect in the absence of a controlling husband. Binodini's sexual desires, her craving for love made her jealous of Asha. Her illicit relationship began when she saw Asha happy and thought that it could have been her piece of happiness if Mahendra had not denied marrying her. Binodini was living a difficult life in a village amongst several other widows. She saw a ray of hope when Rajlaxmi asked her to come along with her to her place. Binodini is not a very admirable typical Indian woman character but her personality shows a different kind of appeal in her. She is a young widow and is majestically rebellious. She refuses to be like other widows, helpless. Although she refuses to follow the norms of society to live like a widow, she wears a white sari, lives on a diet that a widow is asked to live. She even refuses to marry Bihari at the end when he asks her to marry him. She says, "Do not get me wrong. You will not be happy if you marry me, on the other hand, you will lose your stature, and with you, I will lose the glory with which you have invested me. You have always remained detached and uninvolved, yet contented. Keep that way. I will keep away from you..." (*Chokher Bali*, pg 278). Binodini was much concerned about Bihari. According to her Bihari was a more genuine and gentle man than Mahendra. Binodini knew the fact that Bihari had a soft corner for Asha but Mahendra never valued Asha for a longer period of time.

She was much more attracted to Bihari than Mahendra. She wrote many letters to Bihari to convey her feelings to him but Bihari's impression about Binodini changed when he came to know that she left the house with Mahendra deserting Asha, her best friend behind. Binodini's character just wanted her piece of happiness. She knew her limits therefore after leaving home with Mahendra she never thought of getting intimate with him. Tagore describes a situation through this fact that although a woman knows her rights and her desires, she still has a fear of not crossing her limits. She was abused by Rajlaxmi several times for tempting her son and distracting him from his duties as a husband. When Rajlaxmi says, "Wretched woman, how can you accuse a mother scheming against her son? Your tongue will shrivel for such blasphemy" (*Chokher Bali*, pg 180). Binodini's reply to such harsh words was something through which Tagore showed a reality about widows and is purely the mindset of our society, "Pishimaa, let us not forget that we are the tribe of witches. Neither of us knows what spells we are capable of casting, but both of us set our traps, partly deliberately and partly without realizing the consequences. We both acted according to our nature and that was that" (*Chokher Bali*, pg 180). Through Binodini's vision we see a real face of our society. In ancient times, widows were tortured brutally and were named as witches who could cast spell or basically could seduce men and destroy their happy married homes. Binodini is considered one such widow in *Chokher Bali*. Tagore through Binodini shows a contempt for widows which still prevails in Indian society. Binodini being a convent educated girl expected a life better than what she got after being a widow. When tried getting along with Mahendra, she got nothing but hatred from everyone. Though later she even realized that Bihari is more respectful than Mahendra and he (Mahendra) could never stand beside her to support and protect her from the cruel society. There is one instance from the story when Mahendra comes to visit Binodini and the whole village where Binodini lived started abusing her for such a disrespectful deed of Binodini of entering into an illicit relationship with a married man and destroying his family life, "The entire village now rose in protest. The elderly brigade decided that the situation had gone out of control. They were not concerned about what happened in Calcutta, but how could she be so shameless as to write to Mahendra, asking him to come to the village?" (*Chokher Bali*, pg 204). This shows the agony of the villagers and the terrible fortune of Binodini.

Tagore at the end conveys a simple fact that widows like Binodini suffer misfortune and are forbidden to follow their desires. They follow a life style dependent either on their children or on living alone because the act of widow remarriage still is not thought of in many backward areas and a sexuality of a woman makes her a prostitute or the reason for seducing several men and destroying homes. *Chokher Bali* is one such work by Tagore which disrobes the desires of a widow and her rights to live like any normal woman, unlike wearing colorless clothes, eating not so delicious or fancy food, shaving their heads and sleeping on the floor. With Binodini as a protagonist of the story, Tagore successfully reverses the sexually desirable gaze as it is showcased in most of the literary writings. Tagore in *Chokher Bali* successfully replaced the gender gaze from Mahendra and Bihari to Binodini showing the side of a helpless widow but witty enough to ask for her rights and boldly defend herself. Generally, fiction show sexual desire of men for women and gratification of their sexual urge, but here, Tagore replaces it with that of women through the character of Binodini.

Tagore's heroines are a specific attraction in his works apart from his expertise on human relationship and hence, this transforms the entire plot of the story of *Chokher Bali*. Here, the protagonist, Binodini gives a new look to a character of widow by wearing the same white sari. Tagore kept his writing confined to the limits of Indian society by the attire of a widow but he changed the mindset, the outlook and the personality of a widow. He changed Binodini's behavior; he gave his creation a different outlook. Tagore in the story shows three widows but only Binodini remains different due to the fact that she received education in her childhood. *Chokher Bali* is altogether a package of emotions and certain basic concepts and rituals of an Indian society. The concept of widowhood, a widow's

desire and her need to live a normal life is portrayed through the creation of Binodini and hence, the novel brings to us a story explaining the real essence of human relations and the truly reverential acknowledgement of the rights of a widow in every era.

References:

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