

CHOKHER BALI: A COLLAGE OF DIVERSE PARADIGMS OF LOVE AND SEXUALITY

Anchal Tiwari

Junior Research Fellow, Department of English and MEL, University of Allahabad
Allahabad, India.211002

ABSTRACT: *Chokher Bali* is an outcome of immense sensitivity on the part of the novelist, Rabindranath Tagore, who was interested in documentation of human psychology in his novels. Tagore could no longer take delight in dead metaphors of idealism, at a time when he perceived that the whole world around him was rapidly changing. Written during the phase of cultural transition, the novel presents the confusing state of slippages from moral line, which Tagore has considered more obvious than sinful. It was almost like beating the same line, if the novelists sought to preserve in their novels moral ideals and virtues in traditional style. Tagore, in *Chokher Bali* also, like in his other novels portrays human beings in the light of their idiosyncrasies, peculiarities, experiments and follies.

KEYWORDS: Chokher Bali, Love, Sexuality, Human Psychology, Novels

INTRODUCTION

Choker Bali, when first published in 1905, was quite pristine for the readers who had grown accustomed to the traditional fiction of their time. Tagore declared that the taste of reading public was shifting from mere narration of events, as he said:

Modern literature is not merely about describing the sequence of events, but also about analysing them and drawing out their inner meaning. (Author's note. *Chokher Bali* Trans. Sreejata Guha P.viii)

Narrating the story of a traditional wealthy Bengali family deep rooted in principles of the society which formed the background, Tagore has remarkably shifted in the style, both of storytelling and of perception. Tagore had seen a world of dogma and superstitions, where certain beliefs formed the core of society or more preferably to say they controlled whole system of behaviour and thinking. At such a time when Tagore presupposed such characters as Binodini and Mahendra, who did not believe and behave according to customs, it was rather a visionary and radical side of Tagore's thinking. Tagore has created lively personae, who walk around us in our day to day lives, talking, living, committing mistakes, repenting and resolving, then again committing. *Chokher Bali* is a novel of immense sensitivity and awareness of human emotions, weaknesses and wisdom coming in via the way of mistakes. At the same time, the novel offers a colourful examination of perceptions that we have formed in our minds regarding relationships, sexuality and love.

At Tagore's time society had not progressed in practical terms in the context of customs and rules which formed the basic structure of Indian society, though various amendments were passed to ensure that social evils were eradicated. Child marriage, age differences in marriages,

superstitions related to widowhood and subversive condition of women were common in Bengal and whole of the India. Tagore, however was progressive in his approach towards eliminating age- old practices and superstitions of the society which stood in front of the progress of the half- population, i.e. women. As a matter of fact what is most interesting about *Chokher Bali* is that Tagore envisioned such a strong and potent character like Binodini at his time when it might not have been thought even in the wildest of dreams that a woman can be this much upright and confident. The way Tagore has presented kaleidoscopic vision of human relationships which are intricately woven inside the chambers of a common household is a bigger achievement than anything else.

Chokher Bali narrates the story of a wealthy zamindar family of Kolkata. The house is maintained by Rajlakshmi, the widowed wife of a well- established zamindar. Mahendra, the male protagonist of the novel is Rajlakshmi's only issue, thus is an apple of her eye. Mahendra has lived a life of comfort with nothing to worry about, from responsibilities of house to that of the world because he is a much pampered and much cared for son of his mother. Mahendra, is the sole inheritor of property as well as of his mother's love. In the beginning of the novel Mahendra is shown as a true child of his mother, showing plenty of affection and dedication towards his mother. He does not agree to get married because he thinks this would create a gap between him and his mother. Rajlakshmi though pretends to be worried about her son's dismissal of marriage proposals, but she remains inwardly happy to see that her son is so concerned for her. After turning down so many proposals, Mahendra gets ready to see a girl, even that for his friend Behari and not for himself, and eventually falls in love with the girl. Mahendra, ironically decides to get married against the wish of his mother. It is truly conflicting to see that Mahendra, the mum's boy, goes against the will of his mother, for whom he once refused to get married, in order to marry the girl of his own choice. Mahendra's dedication for his mother vanishes as soon as he feels romantic about Ashalata, thus his defiant nature is revealed, much to the astonishment of the readers, as soon as the novel begins. Ashalata enters Mahendra's household as a bride, a coy and hesitant orphan girl who had been brought up by her uncle. Absence of mother's guidance, love and care and lack of authority into other's household had turned her into an inept and timid person, unsure about everything around her. After getting married to Mahendra, she again suffers that loss of maternal love and guidance because Rajlakshmi didn't like her as she thought that Annapurna, her widowed and issueless sister-in-law cunningly brought Asha in the house as a bride so that she could take complete hold over Mahendra and Asha both, because Asha was Annapurna's niece.

As soon as Mahendra marries Asha, he gets completely engrossed in thinking about Asha all the times, and their romance starts blooming up to the fullest. The new found attraction of a recently engendered love takes complete hold of Mahendra's senses and he forgets everything and everyone around him instead of Asha. Need of physical proximity almost maddened him as he could not tolerate that his mother engaged Asha into household works all the times. He craved for Asha's presence and thus he plotted a scheme that Asha should learn reading. It was, however, only an excuse to keep Asha near him. Mahendra's authoritative decision regarding Asha's studies and her removal from household chores deeply offended his mother who could not tolerate that her son stood in front of her for his wife's sake. Asha felt delighted to see that her husband did not spare any chance of being with her, and cared for her so much. Tagore writes:

But after she came into this unfamiliar house, suddenly an intimate relationship, involving total trust was hers for the asking; when her husband crowned the hitherto neglected orphan with his own hands, she didn't hesitate to rise to the occasion and take what was offered. (19)

Being a novice, Asha could not understand the turn of events, which would eventually lead towards her own miseries. Mahendra started feeling offended at Behari's intervention too into their romance, who was once the bosom friend of his, and a regular sight into the household. Mahendra's dismissal of anyone's entry into his romance with Asha was totally epicurean. He was unaware of the world around him, in fact of himself too. Thus, Mahendra never truly understood that love can only give constant happiness to a person if it is not set aloof from the society and reality, otherwise romance and attraction fades away as soon as it becomes a regular practise, instead of a desired and craved for thing. Early days of Asha and Mahendra's marriage passed in true bliss of togetherness. Their connoisseur romance was offensive in the social context. Especially in the Indian context, where overt manifestation of conjugal affections in unacceptable, as it violates the texture of family pattern, where the groom and bride have to respect elders and shy away from display of their affections to each other. Rajalashmi, on seeing the violation of moral rules of household by Mahendra and his bride decides to leave house for some time so that Mahendra and Asha could recognise true worth of their mother, as well as they get aware of household duties. Rajalakshmi's departure to her birth- place brings most crucial turn to the novel, as Rajalakshmi, on her return to Kolkata brings along a relative widow, named Binodini which proves to be fatal for her in the course of novel.

Very first stance of relationship of love is presented in the novel in Asha- Mahendra bond, which possess social sanction. Their affection is an outcome of newly emerged conjugal attraction. Mahendra who was unaware of the world of privacy in such terms previously, gets suffused with intoxication of female- company provided by his wife. Mahendra starts enjoying his relationship with Asha beyond limits. Ironically their relationship, which was embedded in social system and was openly accepted, becomes unacceptable to his own mother due to over-elaboration of romance. Their love has not seen the world and was content to have each other with all the absurdities and ineptness so far as there was no one else to be compared. Asha who did not have parents to teach her actuality of the world around her, never noticed that Binodini, whom she had gladly introduced to her husband and whom she had started considering a very close and reliable friend, now provided her husband to think that there are other, better options available, which he may consider. Mahendra, at first seemed that he was not a bit interested in Binodini, since he had not seen her or met her. He was, rather, infuriated to notice that Asha had started spending more time with her "chokher bali" meaning an irritant that falls in the eye or a grain of sand. Ironically, later in the novel Binodini actually becomes a grain of sand in the eyes of Asha. As soon as Binodini's beauty, humour, wit and aptness in household works is exposed in front of Mahendra, he starts taking interest in her as Binodini seems to be a complete woman who can easily meet needs of household, his intellectual demands as well as his emotional and physical demands too. In comparison there stood Asha, meek and immature, who was neither fit for an intellectual company nor for the household management in Mahendra's perception. Consequently the company of Asha which was once enthralling to Mahendra, now became a dull routine work It is the weakness of human heart, which Tagore has put forth in the persona of Mahendra, which finds provided things dull and monotonous, and those things more attractive which are unattainable or far from grasp. Binodini seemed to Mahendra an ideal of perfection, a perfect companion.

Binodini is, however, the most complex character of the novel. She is introduced at first in the novel when Rajalakshmi visits her village, and she soon takes hold of her affections with her devoted care and finery at every work. Inwardly, Rajalakshmi felt sad that her son refused to marry such a gem of her and brought instead a childish girl. Binodini was, although, a perfect home-maker and a devoted server, yet inside her burnt the desires of unfulfilled feelings. Her husband died when she was very young. She craved for fulfilment of her unquenched sexual desires and emotions. Though, she followed customs of widowhood, yet she was not austere in her practise of them.

It was the time when widow remarriage was considered a serious profanity, even though the woman who has been widowed is too young. Binodini knew the fact yet her desires had not exhausted. She herself admits in the novel that she plays with men's hearts and leaves them because there is no possibility of conclusion. With Mahendra too, Binodini starts playing dubious games of attraction and romance. She feels joy in tempting men's heart for wanting her. She has a secret desire that every man must appreciate her beauty, her wit and has a desire for her. Binodini is not an abstraction, an embodiment of morality and correctness, rather she takes delight in sinning. She does not want to sacrifice herself for the sake of dead inscriptions written in sacred texts. Binodini was aware of her state of widowhood, but strikingly she was not content in acknowledging that it is the wish of God for her, rather she was angry over the injustice of Almighty, who decided such an unbecoming fortune for her. She was angry over Rajalakshmi and Mahendra, who did not bring her home as a bride. Binodini is aware of her sexual and emotional needs which crave to be fulfilled. She does not bother for self-renunciation and austere methods of repressing sexual needs, rather enjoys attracting male-attention towards her, which somehow fulfils her incomplete desires. It cannot be denied that Binodini was at first reluctant to show up in front of Mahendra just because she wanted to increase his curiosity even more for herself. It would be, however, very difficult to be decisive about Binodini's character, but this much is clear that she wanted to prove herself a perfect woman to every man who came in her life and wanted to seek their attention completely. Binodini was envious of Asha just because she was dear to both men- Mahendra and Behari, and inwardly she wanted to make Asha suffer because both men cared for her. Behari's feelings towards Asha were of genuine care and affection. Behari could not marry Asha, still he could not bear if Asha suffered a little, probably because when he first met her there developed a secret sense of belonging which was later snatched away by the intrusion of Mahendra. Mahendra, however interpreted his pure feelings for Asha in derogatory manner.

Binodini and Mahendra were engaged in an affair as soon as they get close and familiar to each other. On Mahendra's side it was Binodini's competence to make a good companion in every way he wanted was the reason of his attraction towards her. Mahendra was much more interested in physicality of relationships. To him every relation existed only if it was to be enjoyed up to completion. For him romance existed in the world of fiction and poetry, far from the simplicities of the world, it was the same again when he started romancing Binodini:

He wanted to turn this day into something out of the *Arabian Nights*, full of sumptuousness and beauty, unconnected to life and the mundane. It would be real and yet a dream, it would be devoid of material realism, duties, rules and norms of everyday living. (137)

He wanted consummation and complete surrender, thus he soon craved to get complete hold over Binodini. Binodini, on the other hand, was happy to see that she could snatch away Mahendra's attention from Asha, which she wanted to happen for two reasons- one, that she could not bear Mahendra and Behari being so concerned for Asha instead of her own presence,

in a way she was jealous that instead of her ravishing beauty, attraction and intelligence both men did not pay much attention to her which she took as an insult; another reason was that she wanted to satisfy her incomplete desire of becoming the mistress of a wealthy household by taking hold over the master of the house, but in both cases she did not want complete surrender as she was aware of its sacrilege and outcome. It was not she felt afraid of being exposed because when Mahendra asked her to come with him, instead of refusing she gets ready to leave the house with. If she had refused and took Rajalakshmi into confidence she would have saved the house from ruin. Binodini and Mahendra shared an angle of relationship which took more delight in show- casing the achievement of having possession over each other. It was less an affair of sensitivity and emotions, and more an ideological affair of how should things have been.

En route her romance with Mahendra, Binodini gets to know about Behari, whom she also called “thakurpo”, meaning younger brother of husband, as to Mahendra. Behari is presented as a self- renouncing idealistic human being, who sacrificed his feelings for Asha because his best friend wanted to marry her, and later in the novel again he mars his own wishes for the welfare of Mahendra. Binodini, at the beginning was not so much interested in Behari, but gradually was conscious of the fact that Behari also cared too much for Asha, which was again humiliating to her, as she thought all men should pay attention to her only. Binodini’s incompleteness which she felt with life, inculcated in her a tendency of playfulness and trifling, which wanted to make men an object for amusement. But as soon she comes into contact with Behari, she notices that Behari is a very tough man to deal with, since he was not prone to her temptations. As invincible Behari seemed to Binodini, so near she drew towards him, out of curiosity and passion for victory over male- mind. It was until Behari expressed his pure feelings for Binodini, that Binodini did not realise his true self. Behari said:

Bouthan, I misjudged you at first; please forgive me for that. Just like the narrow- minded, common man on the street, I did you injustice when I first met you. Once, I even felt that you envied Asha her happiness, that- anyway, it’s a sin even to speak such thoughts aloud. Since then I have glimpsed your divine soul and because I have a deep respect for you, I felt I had to confess all my sins today. (99)

Behari, however was still thinking about Asha and pleaded Binodini to take care of her, yet he was probably the first man in her life, who observed her out of the context of that image which she had created for herself. Behari did not fit her in the frame of a fatal beauty but a divine soul. It’s here that Binodini felt conscious about herself, and she might have introspected that the fake world of hide and seek in which she was hiding her true personality would lead her towards nothing. Tagore convinces the audience that no matter how much errant a woman seems, she always lingers upon purest feelings. An equivalent thought Tagore documented in one of his essays, titled “Woman and Home”, where he writes:

The powers of muscle and money have opportunities of immediate satisfaction, but the power of the ideal must have infinite patience... What I have felt in the woman of India is the consciousness of this ideal- their simple faith in the sanctity of devotion lighted by love which is held to be divine. True womanliness is regarded in our country as the saintliness of love. (qtd. in. Malashri Lal. P.311)

When Binodini achieves her true devotion in the form of Behari, then she discards every other sensual pleasure of her life. Even though Behari did not accept her at first, but later in the novel when Behari wishes to marry Binodini, she herself rejects the proposal, both because she didn’t

want to bring infamy to Behari and because she didn't want that the pure devotion is brought to the level of mundane consumption.

The conclusion of the novel is characterised with resolving of complexity, and attaining the balance once again for every character. Mahendra returns home after so much wandering, and finally gets to know that peace lies in simplicity of life, not in fictional romanticism. His clandestine romance with Binodini and its fettering in the hands of the object of desire herself led him to realise that chaste affections of Asha and her unadulterated devotion, which had naturally come in his way, and which he rejected on behalf of being unromantic and monotonous, was truest and purest. Tagore himself wrote in one of his letters a similar statement:

The more one lives alone on the river or in the open country, the clearer it becomes that nothing is more beautiful or great than to perform the ordinary duties of one's daily life simply and naturally. (Tagore, *Glimpses* 72)

Binodini too finds ultimate satisfaction and Behari's restless soul attains peace. Asha gains maturity. Thus, the anagnorisis of novel results in fastening the knots of confusions. The novel is a brilliant counter-reading of dogmas and beliefs in which we believe. It is not that earlier no other novelist tried to show a rebel or progressive character, who desired to break away the norms and restrictions and went ahead in making radical decisions. In this novel also, there are references of Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Bishabriksha*, translated as *The Poison Tree* where the protagonist marries a widow, but here too, the novelist is intent on legitimization of relationships. Tagore, it seems, also ended his novel on a traditional note, where all the characters get their due and ultimately follow the right path. But, the fact cannot be neglected that Tagore focused on maturity and satisfaction, which was the result of emotional upheaval in the lives of the characters of the novel, unlike *The Poison Tree*, where novelist focuses on the fatal outcome of improper relations. Tagore's perception is different in his handling of human psychology. *Chokher Bali* is not a mouthpiece of an ethical preacher who wants to convey to the reader which sort of disaster human follies may bring, but showcases that the bigger the folly the deeper the wisdom gained through it.

REFERENCES

- Tagore, Rabindranath. *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*. Trans. Sreejata Guha. Haryana, India: Penguin Books India, 2003. Print.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. "Woman and Home", *Tagore and the Feminine: A Journey in Translations*. Ed. Malashri Lal. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2015. Print. 309- 13.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. "From Shelidah", 16 June 1892. *Glimpses of Bengal: Selected From the Letters of Sir Rabindranath Tagore, 1885 to 1895*. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1921. Print. 72.