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**'THE VOICE OF NEW WOMEN' IN BINODINI IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S
CHOKERBALI**

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the study is to focus on Rabindranath Tagore's treatment of women and their position in the society from a different perspective. Tagore strongly believed in fighting for women's up-liftment and there is little to disagree that his writings are largely rooted on women predicament seeking support for emancipation, equality, liberation, freedom and justice through a reformative way than through a radical feminist approach. The female character Binodini in the novel *Chokerbali* translated into English as *Grain of Sand* by Sreejata Guha represents the voice of new women. The present paper aims at how the protagonist Binodini in *Grain of Sand* emerges as a voice for emancipation of women amidst myriads of social barriers.

Keywords: emancipation, liberation, upliftment, protagonist

Rabindranath Tagore is one of the greatest writers in modern Indian English literature, a Bengali poet, novelist, educator, and an early advocate of independence for India. He has created such unforgettable characters through his novels and short stories that one is struck by their sheer vividness and strength, especially that of the women characters, which are still very fondly remembered. Tagore advocates for emancipation of women through his novels and he is regarded as a master craftsman in that respect. After Tagore got the Nobel prize for literature in 1913, he went on a tour to western countries on invitations for lecturing where he became aware of the void of women liberation in the society. Naturally, the emerging 'new women' concept in the western society got an impact on his fiction writings. Tagore's varied experience, ever-growing knowledge, travels and the then political linkages continually reshaped and recreated him-the

glimpses of all this is traceable in the character of Binodini.

The treatment of women and their position in society is of serious concern to Rabindranath Tagore. Being a sensitive man and the supreme romantic poet, he understands women in all their joy and sorrow, hope and despair, their yearnings and their dreams. His writings after were based on bold subjects that were far ahead of his time. He strongly believes in fighting for women's upliftment using his pen as a weapon focusing largely on emancipation, his writing campaigned for women's liberation, equality, freedom, justice, power, dignity and rights.

Though primarily a poet, Rabindranath Tagore paved the way for the truly modern novel in India, whether realistic or psychological or concerned with social problems and he began it with *Choker Bali* in 1903. There is much to say, *Choker Bali* could not have been written by anyone other

than Rabindranath Tagore with so vibrant social objective. With this novel, he also presented the first modern woman character in Bengali literature. Binodini marks the emergence of heroines of different tastes in the novels. She is different because she is outspoken, she is educated and mostly she is emancipated. Binodini is the new woman of the 20th century who comes with a mission to show to the world that she too existed in the face of all challenges. The whole novel revolves around the strong personality of Binodini and it is story of her search for an identity which is entirely her own. It has been rightly observed that:

Binodini heralds the emergence of a new class of emancipated woman, who are no longer prepared to be downtrodden by the society but fight to assert their rights, ss(Singh 2002:50).

Tagore as a great lover of freedom raised an issue of widow-remarriage. He also held up "the ideal of self-reliant Indian women fighting not only for their own rights but also for those subjugated nationality and the down trodden humanity (B. Majumdar 1968). Tagore in Binodini emerges as a non-conformist. He explores the redemptive choices of Hinduism offered to widows. V.S Narvane in an Introduction to Rabindranath Tagore (1977) says: "Tagore emerged as a non-conformist, ready to expose social conservatism" (118). Completely understanding the consequences of dispossession, depersonalization and dehumanization, Tagore is of the view that remarriage do not ensure amelioration from their cursed situation. It should create congenial atmosphere where widows realize their personality and selfhood. In the light of this perception, the extraordinary will exhibited by Binodini as the solution to the predicament has to be viewed. Naravane says perhaps Binodini is the first woman character in Indian fiction etched to rebel against the established moral order. She not only declines to adjust in the set rules of society but in her quest for identity she sets out to avenge rejection at the hands of a man(Mahendra) who once refused to marry her. Though in the end, she herself refuses marriage due to social restrictions, she emerges out an emancipated woman.

Choker Bali is the story of a well to do middle class family of Calcutta. The novel revolves around four characters. They are Binodini (the heroine herself), Mahendra (a spoilt brat of his foolish mother), Asha (Mahendra's wife and Bihari (Mahendra's friend). Binodini is not the daughter of a rich person, yet a European missionary woman is engaged to educate her. Her father has spent so much money on her to be tutored by an English lady that he had nothing to offer to her as dowry in marriage. During Binodini time women rarely received higher education. The system of dowry was rampant and mandatory for survival. Binodini is widowed soon after her marriage to Bipin. She was compelled to return to her village and live a secluded life after the death of her husband.

On the otherhand Mahendra is married to Asha who is a very naive and gentle like child and does not reveal his feelings to anyone. After Binodini returns to her village, she is invited by Rajalaxmi(Mahendra's mother) to stay with her . Binodin's entry into Mahendra's household as governess is her invitation into a world of happiness and sensual pleasures of which her untimely widowhood had deprived her. The blissful conjugal relationship between Asha and Mahendra intensifies her frustration and vengeance. It painfully reminds her of her physically, emotionally and intellectually deprived life. She sets out to captivate Mahendra, all the while befriending the innocent Asha, who is increasingly bewildered by the rapidly changing dynamics of relationships around her. She is not ready to hide her burning beauty and desires within the white folds of her widow's attire. She is conceived as a 'new woman' in Bengali fiction, who sets out to burn others and herself with the fire of her passions. An affair of a widow with a married man is the beginning of the 20th century and dealings with issues like adultery, distrust, lies etc, were a bold portrayal by the author. The conflict between social taboo attached to a widow's existence and the demands of the heart and body are portrayed with utmost delicacy. At the end, her fire is doused and she is transformed who sacrifices her life and passion at the feet of her lover.

Binodini is the intelligent, impulsive, passionate, pulsating and throbbing lifeline of the

novel. She is one of the earliest representations of an individualistic, passionate and complex female characters created by Tagore. She is a perfect housekeeper and knows the art to keep the man of the house happy. She has not been depicted as a goddess or a stereotype of a household woman to be idealized. In fact, she has all the qualities and flaws of real human being. She is the woman ocean where different rivers carrying emotions of love, sympathy, jealousy, envy, desire and resentment meet. Though she suffers greatly, she always relies on herself to get back on her feet. Binodini succeeds in winning the hearts of those around her through her strong convictions, after all words are the most powerful weapons of all. It is rightly observed that:

“Binodini also successfully undermined male domination and male ego by making Mahendra grovel before her and then quietly transferring her loyalty to Bihari..... she subverted the social norm as well as the individual norms of the behaviour.....she had the fortitude to take her own decision and stick by it which is the ultimate testimony to the realization of one’s self-identity”. (Mukhia, 69)

Binodini is educated and mentally an independent woman. Her strength is in her ability to keep going, no matter what her life throws at her, she holds herself throughout. Unlike Kunda, a widow in Bankimchandra’s *Bishabriksha* Binodini does not commit suicide but accepts the adversity of life as a challenge. She challenges the conventions of the society that did not allow a widow to lead a happy life, hence, using her charm and intellect she underscores and attacks the anti-feminist traditions of the time. And all these experience leads her on a journey towards an acute self-realization.

Binodini at once leaves Mahendra’s house the moment she realizes that all this love game is destroying her mentally and killing her inner-self. Bihari, whom she loves and who also respectfully loves her, follows her. He proposes marriage to her but the soul-enlightened Binodini at once falls on his feet and hopes to meet him in another life. She is portrayed as,

“the eternal feminine trudging through the ages in quest of her lover, weary with pain,

distracted with longing, bursting the throb of desire trailing through poetry, through song until she stands on the other shore crying ‘Ferry me across O boatman! ’” (Iyenger 1985:318)

Binodini is the epitome of a woman in the patriarchal set up bearing the burden of tradition on her shoulders. She reacts to the changes that were taking place around in her life, she found her own self. She is in many ways an empowered woman because of her rebellion and self-will. Binodini emerge from silent shadowy suffering roles to realize her identity from the flux of the values of tradition and modernism, she emerges with her own vision of life and stand as exemplifying character encompassing the human values of self-respect and individuality. It has been rightly observed that “Binodini heralds the emergency of a new class of emancipated woman, who are no longer prepared to be downtrodden by the society but fight to assert their rights” (Singh 50)

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