



# The Conflict between Widowhood and Sexuality in Tagore's *Chokher Bali*

Farzana Nasrin

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jashore University of Science and Technology, Bangladesh

Received: 07 Dec 2021; Received in revised form: 19 Jan 2022; Accepted: 28 Jan 2022; Available online: 05 Feb 2022  
©2022 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— Rabindranath Tagore epitomizes the dilemmas of the young widows who are the victims of the orthodox society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Widow Remarriage Act could not change the mentality of the people; through the contribution of social reformers such as Tagore critically analyses Binodini's psychology, tension, inner agony as a beautiful widow with western education. She has desires, passion and intelligence to fulfil her incomplete desire with Mahendra. She enjoys the game of love with Mahendra, but at the same time, she wants to captivate Behari, who is most virtuous in character. This paper attempts to explore the critical condition of Binodini, who fulfils her sexual desires with Mahendra and later rejects his marriage proposal. She realizes that the conservative society will not allow widow-remarriage.

**Keywords**— Love, desire, identity, sexuality, marriage, mutual understanding, emotion.

Binodini is a young educated widow who follows orthodox rituals, but unfortunately, she cannot overcome her sexual desires for Mahendra. Tagore portrays Binodini's gender stereotypes which remain active still now. Binodini's character is a combination of uncertainty of emotions and social morality. She is a young widow with contradictory passions. Binodini is the Tagore's agent of independence. Binodini engages in passionate love with Mahendra and enjoys their happy moments in an isolated house. She later develops her passion for Behari and removes her sexual pleasure of life. It is the heavenly love that wins. Binodini realizes her actual identity in the conservative society and rejects Behari's marriage proposal.

Binodini is the central character of the novel. She represents the women of Renaissance classical Bengali literature. Iyengar says that 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 the song until she stands on the other shore crying 'Ferry me across

O boatman!'"<sup>1</sup> She plays different roles in the novel and is the outstanding creation of Tagore's among all the characters of his novels. She is a convincing and full-blooded creation of Tagore. Her father appoints an English lady teacher and spends money on her education. Binodini's father fails to find a suitable husband for his daughter and dies without giving her any money. In contemporary times, this was rare because dowry in marriage was very common, but her father does not offer it. Women rarely received higher education at that time. However, the dowry system in marriage was a matter of prestige and obligatory for survival. Mahendra refuses to marry Binodini, and coincidentally she becomes a widow within a year of her marriage to Bipin.

Binodini becomes jealous, frustrated and vengeful when she enters Mahendra's house and observes his happy conjugal relationship with the immature Asha. Binodini plays the role of a governess, and her widowhood has deprived her of happiness and sensual pleasure. She plans to capture Mahendra, and makes friends with the innocent

<sup>1</sup> K. R. S. Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*. (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., rpt. 1985). P.318.

Asha to fulfil her desire. She tactfully changes the relationship around her, which destroy any existing relationships. She cannot accept the restriction of widowhood because and she expresses her boldness. She is the creation of Tagore's 'New Woman' in Bengali fiction which he portrays her as a model of modern colonial Bengal. She can fire her passions and transform into a repented and conforming woman, and she sacrifices the rest of her life. Her misfortune transforms her from a timid young girl to a challenging woman. She avoids her destiny, the moral world and religious beliefs of the contemporary time. She transforms into a blatantly sexual woman who has nothing to lose. Tagore imagines her inner agony and realizes the woman character's transgression. Binodini appears with her ruthless motive which is generally projected in a negative light. A young woman becomes a widow, and society is cruel to her. Tagore can analyze her psyche and inner agony.

Mahendra and Asha were happy in their conjugal life before Binodini came to their house. Rajlakshmi loves Binodini a lot because the latter is intelligent, an expert in managing the household works and taking care of all the family members. Binodini follows the rituals of Hindu orthodoxy. Binodini meets Asha, and their friendship starts with humour and enjoyment. Binodini's envies Asha her marriage with Mahendra. She becomes a widow at a tender age, and she thinks in her burning embers: "Such a happy household, such a loving husband-I could have made it a home fit for royalty and turned him into my devoted slave state, and this man would have turned heads. But in my place rules this child of a girl, this infantile doll!"<sup>2</sup> Mahendra finds her a responsible woman who would be a perfect match for him. Unfortunately, this opportunity is gone, and Mahendra feels Binodini emotionally and physically. However, Binodini attempts to draw the attention of Mahendra and instigates him physically and emotionally. On the other hand, Mahendra becomes bored of his conjugal life with Asha. Here, Tagore portrays the human psyche that is impossible to achieve or not legitimate appear lucrative. Rajlakshmi praises Binodini's smartness in household works to Mahendra. Later, Mahendra observes her caring nature, which is similar to his mother's.

The title *Chokher Bali* has significance in meaning. In the plot construction of the novel, Binodini and Asha choose their loving nickname *Chokher Bali*. The mean of 'eyesore' is a general address between Asha and Binodini that characterizes the friendship between the two women. The title of this novel has been translated from an

<sup>2</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*. Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.94.

idiomatic expression, which is called 'sand in the eye'. It is similar to the phrases "throwing a spanner" and "a destabilizing factor". It also means the third person entry in an intimate relationship between a happy couple. Mahendra says to Binodini,

'What you call your friend, Chokher Bali.

Binodini didn't give a mocking reply as she usually did—she continued silently with her sewing.

Mahendra said, 'Has that become our true relationship now, and so it cannot be played at any more?'"<sup>3</sup>

Shirwadkar also says about the role of the women characters: "The three women Binodini, Asha and Rajlakshmi represent the evolving social and moral climate at the turn of the 20th century."<sup>4</sup> Behari and Binodini's conversation is poignant and Asha becomes the matter of their discussion. Binodini says, 'I don't know, Thakurpo, it doesn't look good to me. I just feel terribly concerned for my Chokher Bali.'<sup>5</sup> In the situation of Mahendra returning home and observes Binodini's ignorance towards him. Mahendra says to Asha, 'It looks like I have now become the *grain of sand* in your friend's eye. She is nowhere to be seen these days'.<sup>6</sup>

She leads a miserable and lonely life as a widow in society. Tagore portrays the sufferings of women in the male-dominated society. However, Annapurna and Rajlakshmi have each other's company. Annapurna is childless, but she takes care of Mahendra and Bihari. Binodini is an educated modern woman who desires love and satisfaction.

Rajlakshmi goes to her father house and brings Binodini with her to Calcutta. Tagore metaphorically represents that like a single garden vine planted in a jungle, Binodini, since her husband's demise, has led a listless existence in the dreary environment of the village. Binodini shows care and hospitality towards Rajlakshmi and Bihari in the village home itself. Binodini is a village lady who is not like the typical Bengali woman. She is the new woman subjectivity in Tagore's portrayal. She has gained British education with its Midas touch has

<sup>3</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*. Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.94.

<sup>4</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.93.

<sup>5</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.93.

<sup>6</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.93.

transformed everything artistically. She has a spirituality that society could not allow to offer. She wants to fulfil her desire, happiness and satisfaction.

Binodini symbolizes a new area of emancipated women. They struggle for their rights in the patriarchal materialistic dominated society. Binodini, as a Hindu widow, fights against the injustice of mortifying existence. Showalter says, 'She is not a woman whose sphere was defined and maintained by men'. Binodini as a widow has confined her life. She asserts her freedom to love and be happy. She wants love which is only an illusion and a figment of her thinking as society does not permit it. Therefore, Binodini desires love though she is conscious of this social taboo. She also rejects the marriage proposal of Bihari. Tagore artistically portrays that Binodini does not remarry in the end. She says, "I shall pray that I have you in my next birth—in this lifetime I hope for no more, I deserve no more. I have inflicted much misery, received much sorrow, I have learnt a lot. If I had forgotten those lessons, I would have sunk lower by dragging you with me. But since you remain on your pedestal, I am able to hold my head high today—I shall not raze this monument to the ground."<sup>7</sup>

Binodini wants to fulfil her physical desires and tries to attract Mahendra. She wants love emotionally and biologically. She feels interested in hearing from Asha about the enjoyment of conjugal love. Binodini's love for Mahendra is not carnal and mundane. Tagore says,

'Binodini herself didn't matter in the least! She seemed to be born to protect Asha, to free Asha, to free Asha's path of thorns, to fulfill every wish she ever had! Since Mahendrababu wished to wed Asha, Binodini had to be exiled to the wilderness of Barasat and married off to an uncouth ape. Since his Highness Beharibabu couldn't bear to see tears in dear Asha's eyes, Binodini must keep her shoulders ready at all times for her to weep on. Just once, Binodini wanted to smite this Mahendra, this Behari down to the dust at her feet and make them understand the difference between Asha and Binodini! Her helplessness at the injustice of fate, that had prevented her from planting a victory-flag in any man's heart, burned like wildfire inside

Binodini and her very soul became combative."<sup>8</sup>

Binodini seeks true spiritual love. She looks for true love to fulfil her physical need, and then she becomes a transgressor. She fights for freedom, emancipation and rights as a human in society. She plays a significant role in Mahendra's house with love and dedication. The artistic plot construction of the novel does not draft Binodini as a villainous woman. She becomes a victim of fate, coincidence and domination of patriarchal culture. She shows 'motherly' instincts in taking care of Rajlakshmi. Rajlakshmi is on her death bed. She says,

'Don't weep, Mahin; the queen of grace is still in your home. Give the household keys to Bou-ma. I have kept everything in order—you two wouldn't lack for anything in the house. One other thing, Mahin, don't tell anyone before I die—there are two thousand rupees in my box that I bequeath to Binodini. She is a widow, all alone in this world—the interest from this money would suffice for her. But Mahin, my request to you is don't keep her within the walls of your own home.'<sup>9</sup>

Binodini is the most dominating character and she dominates Asha in education, sexuality, maturity, household chores and sexual appeal. She makes friends with Asha but always feels jealous and wants to attract Mahendra. She convinces Rajlakshmi to dominate all the members of the family. She takes care of Rajlakshmi and wants to praise her all the time. Annapurna focuses on the traditional religious widow who abides by the rules of the rituals and restraints. Tagore represents the customs in his contemporary society that widows followed and these are still prevalent now-a-days. Binodini is a bold widow and she rebelliously avoids her fate, rituals. She only approaches the humanitarian grounds. Binodini does not follow the path of Bankimchandra's kunda in *Bishabriksha* who is a widow and commits suicide. Binodini asserts her identity and Tagore portrays Binodini as a modern woman who becomes a social rebel and rejects the conventional codes. Kabir says, "as a woman of great beauty and charm with country feelings and wishes and torn by rival passions that pull in different directions."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003). p.169.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.p.283.

<sup>10</sup> Humayan Kabir, *The Bengali Novel* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1968). P.37.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.269.

Tagore draws a time of the contemporary when women need identity and position. Here, he presents his central character with beauty, knowledge of English, intelligence. She takes challenges of the orthodox society. Binodini tells the story of a widow's revolt against the conservative society. Amaresh Das explains, 'the household which could have honoured Binodini as Mahendra's wife receives her like a refuge. This increases both her prudence and her tact in handling issues concerning the intricacy of human relationships.'<sup>11</sup> However, Binodini has to pay a high price. She creates a wedge between Mahendra and Behari to catch them. She uses the passion of both Mahendra and Behari. It is the result of neither her fickleness nor the nature of frivolousness. She is considered a toy of pity, incognizance and destitution in society and it instigates her to attract him of this attitudes. Binodini later makes it clear to Behari,

'I do not have the right to leave you. You are involved in beneficial activities for others—give me some duties in one of your missions. I shall perform them all my life and consider myself at your service. But for pity's sake—you cannot marry a widow. Your generosity may have room for anything, but if I do this and ruin your name in society, I shall not be able to hold up my head for the rest of my life.'<sup>12</sup>

Binodini abides by the rules of the orthodox Indian society as a widow. She has irrational values, and her life is like imprisonment in this world. She expects self-identity and respect in a patriarchal society with her versatile knowledge. Behari gives her proper honour, and Behari says to Mahendra 'But it won't take long for her to come right back. I suggest you marry off this widow—that'll take care of her for good.'<sup>13</sup> Binodini technically targets Behari and tries to convince him in marriage through the social reformation movement of widow remarriage. She reads Bengali literature, and novels especially inspire her for that. Binodini decides that the following the flow of widow remarriage cheer up Behari or Mahendra proposes her to marriage. She must utilize such opportunity to remove her solitary unhappy life. She is progressive in thinking and activities.

<sup>11</sup> Amaresh Das, *Rabindranather Upanyas: Nabamulyayan* (Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 2002). P.52-53.

<sup>12</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.269.

<sup>13</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p 45.

There are triangle love, emotions and sexuality in *A Grain of Sand*. It is a sensitive novel which was first published in 1905. The colonial Bengal is based on customs, religious dogmatism, morality, rules and rituals of contemporary society. There are child marriage, age differences in marriages, sufferings of women, superstitions of the society about widowhood and education. In this novel, Mahendra marries Asha against his mother's will. After marriage, he engages with Asha in making love and amusement. He revolts against his mother for occupying Asha in the household works all the time. However, Mahendra keeps Asha to his near for teaching and learning lessons. Asha feels so happy for the caring attitude of Mahendra. Mahendra's conversation with Asha:

Mahendra would sound forlorn. 'Ooh, that much? Want to see how I have read?' He would point to the chapter heading in his medical text. Asha would widen her eyes. 'So what were you doing all this while?' Mahendra would caress her chin and say, 'I was lost in somebody's thoughts—a heartless person who was in turn lost in the life and times of the bumblebee.' Asha could have responded to this unfair accusation. But alas, modesty compelled her to accept this iniquitous defeat in the battle of love.

This will be proof enough that Mahendra's little school did not follow any private or public schooling methods.<sup>14</sup>

Mahendra tries to avoid Behari in their new conjugal life's romance and Asha cannot realize her responsibilities after marriage for the family. Mahendra is very immature and does not realize the value of love must have to cope up with family, responsibility, social norms-behaviours and reality. Asha and Mahendra pass their honeymoon period peacefully and enjoyably. Their bonding becomes strong until Binodini comes to their relationship. Asha makes friendship with Binodini and always praise her to Mahendra. It makes Mahendra explore the beauty, aptness, wit of Binodini. Binodini gives the name of the friendship 'Chokher Bali' which ironically in the last part of the novel happens truly. Asha and Binodini's conversations is:

Asha suggested many pretty names like flower and bee, Ganga and Yamuna. But

<sup>14</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.21.

Binodini said, 'All those are outdated; an affectionate name is no longer worthy of love.'

Asha said, 'What would you like us to be?'

Binodini laughed and said, 'A grain of sand in the eye. Chokher Bali.'

Asha was more inclined towards the sweeter names, but she took Binodini's advice and settled for the affectionate invective of Chokher Bali—a grain of sand in the eye that drew pearly tears. She hugged Binodini and said, 'Chokher Bali,' and rolled to the floor, giggling.<sup>15</sup>

Binodini becomes a grain of sand to Asha's eyes. Asha seems cheap and available to Mahendra and he feels curious about Binodini. Mahendra considers Binodini perfect to fulfill his incestuous desires. Here, Tagore focuses on the peculiar human psychology of the impossible relations attracting men, and already the achieved things are considered cheap. Binodini is intelligent enough who convinces Rajlakshmi with her taking care. Though she is a young widow, she has unquenched sexual desires and emotions. She also abides by the rules for widows. The widow marriage is a serious issue of that time and Binodini wants to play a game with Mahendra and Behari. She acquires mental peace by hypnotizing men with her attraction. She has the conflict of her beauty, intelligence and desires. She has no interest in the sacrifice of a widow according to the Hindu religion. She considers her widowhood as the injustice of Almighty. She knows very well how to increase a person's curiosity; that is why she wants to fulfil her incomplete desires. She has the quality to catch every men attraction and respect. Binodini feels jealous of Asha and her self-talking is

Actually, only Binodini knew the taste of this spice, but in her life the vegetables were missing from the curry. The blood flamed in her veins; wherever she glanced, her eyes showered sparks of burning embers: 'Such a happy household, such a loving husband—I could have made it a home fit for royalty and turned him into my devoted slave. This home then wouldn't be in this sorry state, and this man would have turned heads. But in my place rules this child of a girl, this infantile doll!' She hugged Asha and said, 'Dear Bali, please tell me

what happened last night, won't you? Did you say all that I taught you to say? When I hear of your love, I lose both sleep and hunger.'<sup>16</sup>

Women try to break the hindrance and become free in the society. Mukhia tells 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 behavior ... 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.<sup>17</sup> Binodini firstly targets Mahendra and becomes so intimate with him but their perfect love making destroyed because of social honour. It turns tragedy because Mahendra genuinely love Asha and at the same he considers Binodini to fulfill his desire. Mahendra says, 'Am I the only surplus object here, Binod? If that is so, why did you drag me here? What is the point of hunting that prey which you do not like to devour? Tell me honestly—have I surrendered to you of my own free will or have you hunted me down at your will? Why should I endure you playing such games with me? Yet, I shall keep my word—I will go back and stay in that house where I have crushed my own place underfoot so callously.'<sup>18</sup>

The Widow remarriage became valid in Colonial Bengal. Binodini is educated and she knows the fact to fulfil her desires. She targets Mahendra and attempts to draw his attraction. She makes friends with Asha and finds good terms with Mahendra and Asha. It is very difficult to find even a few minutes to steal away to Mahendra. Tagore focuses on Binodini's mentality-

'Binodini laughed a cruel, jagged smile to herself when she thought of Asha's husband sitting in a corner of that lonely

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.p. 40.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.43.

<sup>17</sup> Banani Mukhia, *Women's Images Men's Imagination: Female Characters in Bengali Fiction in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002).p.69.

<sup>18</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003). p.204.

room on the terrace, bursting with impatience and thwarted passion.<sup>19</sup>

Here, Binodini wants to create barrier in Mahendra and Asha's relationship. She also mentions to Asha the importance of love and says-'oh dear, and I suppose that would be so terrible? There is no fun in romance if there isn't a bit of provocation sprinkled on the love-it's like the spice in the curry, it brings the flavor out.'<sup>20</sup>

Binodini plays with men's hearts and she starts playing games with Mahendra. She enjoys tempting men's hearts for wanting her, admiring her beauty, wit and aptness of works. She has no interest in sacrificing her desires for the dead traditional inscriptions which are written in religious books. She knows very well the duties of a widow but she does not want to acknowledge God's wish. She becomes angry about her widowhood which she considers the injustice of Almighty. She is very concerned about her sexual needs which she wants to fulfil. She does not follow the renunciation and austere methods of enjoys attracting men's attraction towards her. However, Binodini avoids meeting to instigate Mahendra's desire and curiosity for herself. On the other hand, Mahendra uses tricks to show his indifference and reluctance to Binodini. Binodini's conscious mind says:

'I've been in this house for so long and Mahendra has never once tried to catch a glimpse of me. When I am in his mother's room he never ever cooks up an excuse to come and speak to his mother. Why all the indifference? I am not a piece of furniture, I am a person, I'm a woman! If he ever got to know me well, he'd know the difference between me and his cherished Chuni!'<sup>21</sup>

Binodini attempts to provoke at first Mahendra and then Behari to come into her life and she wants to draw their attention. Binodini is envious of Asha because both Mahendra and Behari love and respect Asha. Binodini wants to make Asha sufferer Behari takes care of Asha who has genuinely done a lot for Asha's happiness. On the contrary, Mahendra elopes with Binodini and throws Asha in great regret. Behari could not marry Asha because of

Mahendra but Behari developed a sense of belonging, affection and care for Asha which remains till the end of his life. At the end of the novel, Mahendra regains his true feelings for Asha in a derogatory manner.<sup>22</sup> Binodini's conspiracy makes Asha a sufferer. Rajlakshmi is full of maternal pride and there is a misunderstanding between Mahendra and Rajlakshmi because of the intimacy of Asha and Mahendra after their marriage. Mahendra has no knowledge about the world of privacy of newly emerged conjugal attraction. Mahendra enjoys the company of Asha in a limitless way. Their relationship with Asha is a limitless way. Their relationship is the cause of the anger of Rajlakshmi. Binodini stimulates her anger by saying- 'I was wondering about that myself. But then your son has been so busy with his wife ever since he got married-why would friends come round anymore?'<sup>23</sup> Rajlakshmi feeds the criticism is justified and Mahendra has distanced from his near and dear ones for the sake of his wife.

Binodini and Mahendra are engaged in an affair, and Mahendra is much more interested in physically in this relationship. He wants to enjoy his sensuous pleasure like the kings of ancient times. He starts making a romance with Binodini, and he completely surrenders, craves to get held over Binodini. Binodini is happy to see that she can steal away Asha's love. Binodini conscious mind says, 'where can he go? He will be back. He is mine.' Binodini expects to be the mistress of a wealthy household by taking the love of the master of the house. She does not surrender entirely to Mahendra. The relationship between Binodini and Mahendra is shown-up of the achievement of possessing over each other. Binodini ignores Mahendra and forces him to go to his house, which penetrates his heart with sorrow for the sake of Binodini, he leaves everything in his life. Mahendra says to Binodini,

'Am I the only surplus object here, Binod? If that is so, why did you drag me here? What is the point of hunting that prey which you do not like to devour? Tell me honestly-have I surrendered to you of my own free will or have you hunted me down at your will? Why should I endure you playing such games with me? Yet, I shall keep my word-I will go back and stay in that

<sup>19</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.43.

<sup>20</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.43

<sup>21</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003). p.43

<sup>22</sup> Anchal Tiwari, "Chokher Bali: A Collage of Diverse Paradigms of Love and Sexuality", *European Journal of English Language and Literature Study*. Vol.4. No.2, February 2016, p.53.

<sup>23</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.44.

house where I have crushed my own place underfoot so callously.<sup>24</sup>

Mahendra becomes annoyed by Binodini's continuous mood swings and misbehaviour with Mahendra. Mahendra thinks, 'I have sunk myself so low in this ordinary woman's esteem that she has acquired the right to dismiss me at any time, in any manner! This is not her rightful privilege. It is I who gave it to her and made her think too much of herself.' This rebuff makes Mahendra resolute to establish his superiority to himself. Binodini gradually becomes interested in Behari whom she calls "thakurpo" which means the younger brother of the husband. She develops a passionate love for Behari. She notices that Behari gives more importance to Asha which makes Binodini envious. Binodini tries to tempt Behari, which is a difficult task for her. Binodini tells Behari, 'why shall I stop him? For your Asha's sake? And I suppose I have no dreams and desires of my own? I am not so pious that I'd wipe out all my wishes from this life, for the sake of your Asha's well-being, for the sake of Mahendra's family- I have not studied the holy books so faithfully. If I give something up, what do I give something up, what do I get in return?'<sup>25</sup>

Behari proposes to Binodini for marriage which she considers as sympathy, not empathy for her. Binodini observes her identity as a widow in society. She has destined to remain alone in her life, and she realizes her faults. Binodini says to Behari, 'I do not have the right to leave you, you are involved in beneficial activities for others-give me some duties in one of your missions. I shall perform them all my life and consider myself at your service. But for pity's sake-you cannot marry a widow. Your generosity may have room for anything, but if I do this and ruin your name in society, I shall not be able to hold up my head for the rest of my life.'<sup>26</sup>

She prays for her re-birth in the world. She knows that Behari will treat wrongly by society if he marries her. Binodini pleads Behari with folded hands, 'Don't misunderstand me-you will not be happy marrying me. I, too will lose my self-esteem. You have always been detached and contented with your lot. Stay the way -I shall serve you from a far. I hope you will be happy and fulfilled.'<sup>27</sup> The triangle of love is formed between

Binodini, Behari and Mahendra. Shormishtha Panja says- "It's a generous chamber suffused with sensibility and its denial."<sup>28</sup> Binodini has sexual desires and passionate feelings.

She is the widow of typical middle class of Colonial Bengal. Binodini has conflict between the social taboo as a widow and her desire of the heart and body. She is the modern woman who can create distinctive features in the society. Binodini is break up the traditional widowhood and attempts to carry her own identity. C. V. Raj says- "Although, Tagore is dealing with a predominantly social theme in revealing his concern for the problems of a young widow subjected to humiliation by society, the novel has a twentieth century psychological interest in it."<sup>29</sup>

The psychological exploration of Binodini has focused on the contemporary social context. Tagore focuses on the sensual modernity of Binodini in two ways traditional and modern outlook. It is the reality in that contemporary era, and Tagore emphasizes this uncommon. The Bengali Renaissance has awakened the consciousness of the people and the Brahma Samaj, the young generation of modern Bengal work for the emancipation and education of women. Tagore narrates the conflict between widowhood and sexuality. Chakravarty says, "She [Binodini] has lent colour and vitality to its story from one end to the other, her radiant youth is the life-blood of the whole novel."<sup>30</sup>

The contradiction of widowhood and sexuality is dealt with by Bankimchandra Chatterjee also, but in his novels, there is no psychoanalytical analysis that Tagore has observed in *Chokher Bali*. G.V. Raj says about *Chokher Bali*, "the first psychological novel in India." *Chokher Bali* focuses on the psychological exploration of progressive mind of Renaissance Bengal and twentieth century. E. M. Forster says in his book, "The hidden life that appears in external signs is hidden no longer, has entered the realm of action. And it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source."<sup>31</sup> Tagore

<sup>24</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.204.

<sup>25</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.175.

<sup>26</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.269.

<sup>27</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.269.

<sup>28</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.35.

<sup>29</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003). p. 24.

<sup>30</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, Trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.169.

<sup>31</sup> Anchal Tiwari, "Chokher Bali: A Collage of Diverse Paradigms of Love and Sexuality", *European Journal of English*

sets the plot of the novel in a dynamic way. At one level, the novel mirrors the Tagore's humanism in the plight of widows. He expresses the society's attitudes towards widow inhuman way. Dipesh Chakrabarty says, "the widow, denied voice and desire represents the ultimate level of subalternity within the domestic sphere."<sup>32</sup> Binodini is a confident, intelligent widow who can take challenges from society. She has that kind of stigma, and her transgression makes her a new woman.

Binodini has an ideological paradigm, but she can't deny his biological fact. She finds dilemmas of being a widow who has sex, but the fear of society gives autonomy over her body. The patriarchal society dominates women sexuality and imposes restrictions on them. Bakshi says about *Chokher Bali*, "Tagore seems to portray the natural yet society forbidden desire of a widow ironically called Binodini-which is a name that often recurs in Vaishnavkirtan connoting sensuousness and pleasure loving."<sup>33</sup>

She is spontaneous and extroverted enough to manage the household works. She convinces Rajlakshmi of her expertness in household works. Like other traditional women, Binodini has the art of managing the chores of the household smartly, but the exceptionality is her educated conscious mind, selfless devotion and sacrificing spirit. Consequently, she realizes her real identity in society. Her fate binds her to be a widow in a poor living position, and the patriarchy restricts her lifestyle. She has a positive attitude of accepting her remarriage, like Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *The Poison Tree*, but Tagore shows the reality of life in the light of modernism. Binodini believes from her heart that Mahendra is solely responsible for her widowhood in her tender age. Mahendra had refused to marry without seeing her, which she considers a great offence. She attempts to take revenge by trapping Mahendra in her love. Later on, both Mahendra and Binodini are in love, but the societal barriers do not give them the chance to become united.

Binodini's infatuation with Mahendra becomes faded away from his selfishness and immaturity, which she has found in Behari. Mahendra does not respect her, and he loves neither Asha nor Binodini truly. Mahendra thinks, 'I have sunk myself so low in this ordinary woman's esteem that she has acquired the right to dismiss me at any time, in

any manner! This is not her rightful privilege. It is I who gave it to her and made her think too much of herself.' This rebuff makes Mahendra resolute to establish his own superiority to himself. He says, 'I shall win- I'll break her hold over me and I'll go away.' When Asha read the letter she understands the actual character of Mahendra and she becomes shocked. Asha carries at the end of the novel the mirror image of Binodini in terms of assertion and willpower. Tagore portrays the transgressed and submissive nature in Asha's character. Binodini maintains a positive attitude towards Behari from the very beginning of the novel but their relationship has changed during the time. Rahha Chakravarty asserts: 'In the first part of the novel, Binodini is a transgressive figure, a widow who deliberately seduces a married man. But, in the second half of the text, her love for Behari transforms her personality and she gradually turns to a life of austerity. She thus combines the dual stereotypes of the transgressive woman and the widow in love.'<sup>34</sup>

Binodini loves Behari truly but she rejects his marriage proposal for the society's attitudes towards widow. She says to Behari, 'I do not have the right to leave you. You are involved in beneficial activities for others-give me some duties in one of your missions. I shall perform them all my life and consider myself at your service. But for pity's sake-you cannot marry a widow. Your generosity may have room for anything, but if I do this and ruin your name in society, I shall not be able to hold up my head for the rest of my life.'<sup>35</sup>

Tagore portrays Binodini's character in an artistic way of gender stereotypes which remains true to date. Binodini's character is a combination of ambivalent emotions and social morality. She is the perfect example of a young widow, who has in contradiction of passion and psychological conflicts. Binodini is the forerunner in Tagore's persuasive manner.

### Critical Review

The three women characters Asha, Rajlakshmi and Annapurna are live in a joint family, which exposes their trauma. Binodini and Asha belong to the young generation. Rajlakshmi and Annapurna belong to the older generation. Binodini is capable enough to break the conjugal happiness of Asha and Mahendra, but lastly, she willingly rejects the house forever. This is the rebellious attitude of Binodini, which gives her more popularity in the

*Language and Literature Study*. Vol.4. No.2, February 2016, p.45.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 66.

<sup>33</sup> Anchal Tiwari, "Chokher Bali: A Collage of Diverse Paradigms of Love and Sexuality", *European Journal of English Language and Literature Study*. Vol.4. No.2, February 2016, p.58.

<sup>34</sup> Anchal Tiwari, "Chokher Bali: A Collage of Diverse Paradigms of Love and Sexuality", *European Journal of English Language and Literature Study*. Vol.4. No.2, February 2016, p.66.

<sup>35</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.169.

contemporary societal perspective of the twentieth century. Asha almost fails to attract Mahendra because of the relation between Binodini and Mahendra. Asha creates her own identity for the management of the household chores, which she achieves from the bitter experiences of her life and she becomes experienced from innocence like William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. However, Mahendra comes back to Asha because he is rejected by Binodini.

Tagore wrote *Chokher Bali* at the controversial and transitional time when widow remarriage was acceptable according to law but socially unacceptable. Binodini's real and powerful identity is expressed when she says to Behari with folded hands, 'Don't misunderstand me-you will not be happy marrying me. I, too, will lose my self-esteem. You have always been detached and contexted with your lot. Stay that way – I shall serve you from a far. I hope you will be happy and fulfilled.'<sup>36</sup> This makes her identity strong as an emancipated woman in the context of Colonial Bengal. She is considered as a 'new woman' who has a rebellious spirit and self-will.

To recapitulate, Binodini has read Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Bishabriksha*, translated as *The Poison Tree*, and she is inspired by the widow remarriage in that novel. Binodini is the progressive woman of her time, and Tagore portrays her in his hand who can take challenges and revolts against the orthodox society. Binodini rejects Mahendra because she realizes this is not the perfect relationship which ruins Asha's life and forwards Rajlakshmi's death. Binodini always remains confused about her sexual desire and religious duties as a widow. She gets heavenly love from Behari's magical touch. She goes religious place forever for the sake of her purgation of soul. Rabindranath Tagore portrays women like Binodini and Labanya with challenging personalities. They refuse to the scope of marry their lovers. Tagore, through his women characters, represents the importance of the emancipation of the women of contemporary society. He is ahead of his time and has the vision of the future. Tagore's novels speak against the contemporary social and religious malice towards women and women get importance in literature.

## REFERENCES

[1] Bakshi, Kaustav. "Chokher Bali: Unleashing Forbidden Passions". *Silhouette Magazine. Literary and Art Magazine*, 2011.

- [2] Chakrabarty, Dpesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- [3] C.V. Raj, *Tagore: The Novelist*. Sterling Publishers, 1983.
- [4] Das, Amaresh. Rabindranather Upanyas: Nabamulyayan. Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 2002. P.52-53.
- [5] Deena David and Anjaly Chacko, "Self-Actualisation of Binodini in Rabindranath Tagore's Chokher Bali", *VEAA's Journal of English Language and Literature*. Vol.6. Issue 1. 2019.
- [6] Foster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1927.
- [7] Mukhia, Banani. *Women's Images Men's Imagination: Female Characters in Bengali Fiction in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2002.p.69.
- [8] Kabir, Humayan. *The Bengali Novel*. Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1968. P.37.
- [9] Iyengar. K. R. S., *Indian Writing in English*. (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1973). New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., rpt. 1985. P.318.
- [10] Tagore, Rabindranath. *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*. Translated by Sreejata Guha. Penguin, 2003. P. 21-269.
- [11] Tiwari, Anchal. "Chokher Bali: A Collage of Diverse Paradigms of Love and Sexuality", *European Journal of English Language and Literature Study*. Vol.4. No.2, February 2016, p.53.

<sup>36</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Grain of Sand: Chokher Bali*, trans. Sreejata Guha (India: Penguin, 2003).p.169.