



ABSENCES THAT MATTER: REDEMPTION OF WIDOWHOOD IN LITERATURE

Prof. Kamaldeep Kaur

GDC, Neeli Nallah

University of Jammu

Email Id: kamaldeep2009pme03@gmail.com**Abstracts**

Historically, women have been portrayed as marginalized identities defined within the domain of patriarchal socio-cultural frameworks, struggling to break free from the shackles of ideological stereotypes which denied their self-hood and identity. They were forced to remain dependent either on their husbands, relatives or social and charitable institutions or within the quagmires of private or the domestic sphere. In accordance with the binaries that existed between the two realms of the society, that is, the private and the public sphere, *New Woman* as a feminist ideal emerged in the late 19th Century and was used to describe those women who were pushing the limits that were imposed by the patriarchal society upon them.

In accordance with the aforesaid, the present study embarks upon analyzing Tagore's *Choker Bali* as an alternate given by Tagore to the deprived, celibate widows. Tagore's revolutionary widow flaunts all customs and duties which society imposes upon her. In this paper, Tagore's sense of emergence of 'new woman' in Indian context is traced with reference to the textual representation of the character of Binodini.

Key Words: Identity; Patriarchy; Ideology; New Woman; Widows.

Copyright © 2022 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial Use Provided the Original Author and Source Are Credited.

Introduction

Historically, women have been portrayed as marginalized identities defined within the domain of patriarchal socio-cultural frameworks, struggling to break free from the shackles of ideological stereotypes which denied their self-hood and identity. They were forced to remain dependent either on their husbands, relatives or social and charitable institutions or within the quagmires of private or the domestic sphere. In accordance to the binaries that existed between the two realms of the society, i.e., private and the public sphere, *New Woman* as a feminist ideal emerged in the late 19th century and were used to describe those women who were pushing the limits that were imposed by the patriarchal society upon them. The catch-phrase 'New Woman' was initially coined by Sarah Grand in 1874 wherein she highlighted "what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's- Sphere, and prescribed the remedy" (271). Further, the notion was developed by Henry James who used it in context with American emigrants living in Europe. Discourses on the conception regarding 'New Woman' believed in self-fulfillment and independence rather than the feminine ideal of self sacrifice.

Deviating from the stereotypical connotations associated with woman, the term ‘New Woman’ focused upon a woman who was “intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting” (Ledger 8). Revisiting gender roles, women’s rights, and overcoming the oppression due to masculine supremacy, New Woman encompassed the social reformers, popular novelists, suffragists, female students and professional women. She was the one who entered the new arena of freedom and choice in regards to marital and sexual partners and this was possible because of the emergence of education and various career opportunities as well as new legal rights to property for women in the late nineteenth century in the Victorian England.

One can suggest that the new women was the one who confronted unjust norms and conventions, demanding her human rights. She shattered the earlier ideal image of woman as subservient, submissive or passive and was now self-assertive, emancipated individual. Her image as secondary to man, as subservient reflected her as an emblem of tolerance, sacrifice and purity. This image was somewhere dismantled but not concealed properly if looked in the context of India.

In Indian Literature, the conception of ‘New Woman’ was quite different from the English tradition. She was viewed as the one deviating from the indigenous culture and tradition. The underlying belief was that unrestricted freedom enjoyed by a woman unbound her by traditions and responsibilities. Historically, the question of being woman was debated parallel to the nationalist struggle in the nineteenth century; for the colonizers considered women’s status in the Indian society to be one of the reasons for the inferiority of the colonized culture. The existing practices like female infanticide, *sati*, *pardah*, child marriage and lack of female education reinforced the cultural stereotypes of natives as barbaric, primitive and uncivilized. For centuries the Indian society has been bogged down by many social evils pertaining to woman. A striking feature of Indian social life in ancient period was that, it accorded a very high status to women and the social evils like Sati, Child-Marriage, Purdah system etc. were unknown to them. The Vedic age is regarded as the “Golden Age of Women in India” but subsequently, the position of women declined and after the arrival of Muslims, “The Dark Age” of women started. Much later the arrival of the European Christian Missionaries marked an improvement in the position of women all over India. The practice of Sati or self-immolation by the widow was associated with a kind of virtue. The ‘virtue’ of this practice was defined by a religious logic that it was inauspicious for widow to live after the death of her husband. A widow who agreed to self-immolate herself at the funeral pyre of her husband was considered to be very virtuous and attained the status of Goddess Sati. The root of this inhuman practice lies in the patriarchal traditions of society where women are always considered as subservient and inferior to men. The purdah is not only limited to family life; rather, these practices involve restrictions on female activity and access to power and the control of vital resources in a male-dominated society. Restriction and restraint for women in every aspect of her life are the basic essentials of purdah. For women, free association with the opposite sex is limited, and dating in the Western sense is essentially limited to the members of the educated urban elite class. Even then, in all corners of the country, illicit relationships do occur. Although the men may escape social repudiation if such connections become known, the women suffer a lasting damage to her reputation and are considered to bring dishonor to her family.

However, during the Bengal renaissance, the native reform groups such as Brahma samaj, the Arya Samaj and the National Social Conference worked actively towards ‘modernizing’ and ‘westernizing’ the women. This was

necessitated by the inculcation of Western education by the native elite. Reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chander Vidyasagar worked towards the progressive ideals of widow remarriage and women's education and the abolition of regressive practices such as polygamy and *sati*. Jyotibha Phule, Savitri Phule and Pandita Ramabai were radical and iconoclastic in their analysis and exploration of gender-caste discriminatory axis.

The emancipation of women in nineteenth and twentieth century India has been seen in regards to the conflicting agendas of the 'revivalists' (tending towards tradition and conventions vis-à-vis women's role and function in society and family) and the 'modernist' (inclined towards models inculcated by the western influence of education). Partha Chatterjee in 'The Nationalist Resolution of Woman's Question' refers to this home-world dichotomy as "In the main, this resolution was built around a separation of the domain of culture into two spheres: the material and the spiritual" (239).

In accordance to the aforesaid, women were assigned responsibilities of retaining and sustaining the spiritual essence of the national life along with acquiring literacy and techniques of modern housekeeping, while men were expected to learn the ways of the 'world', the superior intellectual ability to fight the imperial domination. Chatterjee, however, points out that "The new patriarchy which nationalist discourse set up as hegemonic construct ... has generalized itself among the new middle class... but is irrelevant to the large mass of subordinate class" (251).

Writers of women writings had to limit themselves to the cultural boundaries in order to appeal to their readers, to show authenticity and realism in their text. Women in their narratives were caught in the dilemma. She was the one who projected her dissatisfaction with just being a mother or a wife. Novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Nayantara Sahgal portray new woman identity as the one who never conformed to the traditional roles assigned to her. Women characters in their works shattered the myth of weak, dependent or submissive females, presenting themselves as against men and family life. These writers protested against the andocentric society which restricted women and denied their autonomous identity. Woman in their narratives were no longer weak, fragile or meek characters but were the ones shorn of all mystery, poetry and romance. Crossing the four walls of domestic realm, they no more projected themselves as Sita, Savitri or Shakuntla; revered on the zenith of idealism and worshipped as Goddess. They deviated from those representations and were colorful, intense and wonderfully interesting. The reason behind such representations is women's perspective which paints their viewpoint, depicting their desires, choices, victory, defeat; their way of leading life. It can be suggested that these writers in their creative venture have brought out a radical change in woman's position in the society. In the echo of this, Patricia Meyer Specks remarks, "There seems to be something that we call a women's point of view on outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable through the countries" (48).

During the nineteenth century, India faced wide-ranging debates related to education reforms and modernity. There was a prominent departure from the earlier existing traditions in which the male child had all the rights to attain education and for women the ethical literature took the central position in their education. Female appeared only as an object, as a sight of contestation and improvement. Questions regarding her life, her choices, woman as agency largely disappeared. The role of family and community were specifically pertinent to issues related to

women, the conflict between ‘confrontation’ and ‘compromise’ held prominent position. Madhu Kishwar, female activist and founder of *Manushi*, underscores this anomaly as:

In India, most of us find it difficult to tune in to the extreme individualism that comes to us through feminism. For instance, most women here are willing to assert their rights in a way that estranges them not just from their family, but also from their larger kinship group and community (272).

The major colonial and reformist texts of the 1860s and after, presented a set of fixed, stable and static female figures defined within tracks of respectable domesticity which were accorded a pivotal position in the debate on social reform. Inevitably, therefore, what has to be negotiated in historical writings is the problem of the subjugated woman confined to the space of household, duty-bound with familial obligations. In spite of the limitations in the historical writings, literature engaged itself in an innovative and sustained investigation of the debates revolving around the women question as it was played in the nineteenth century, producing a very powerful critique of the varieties of the sites of reform as well as the meaning of respectability and education. “New woman” in India as the concept of womanhood is different from the Western concept. This new woman was the amalgamation of western conception and the native tradition. She was a hybrid of all kinds of upheaval and also reflected equilibrium among different aspects of life. With regards to this trend, novelists depicted a “new woman” in their narratives who was the product of modern mercantile society and who revolted against the traditional social set up.

Probing the emerging ‘new woman’ in India, it can be observed that women in literature reflected their identity as financially independent, breaking the traditions, specifically in sexual relations. They opposed marriage as a compulsory institution in the life of women and as sexually liberated, they felt no qualms of conscience in having extra marital relations as well. Confrontation to the ethical values associated with sex, the image of new women denied the traditional approach towards marriage. One of the reasons can be the exploitation of women in marital relation where in males exploited them to satisfy their sexual desire. In that case, women were seen as objects to appeal the male gaze and satisfy their desire. Further, she was sexually exploited and financially robbed. Her shoulders accepted all the responsibilities under the attire of modernity and even denied social, financial and emotional security in terms of married relation.

The portrayal of women in Indian novel in English also went through a radical transition. The traditional ideal woman who was meek and tolerated every form of oppression be it domestic or sexual and whose mouth was ventriloquized, movements confined by patriarchal norms and control, was replaced by the ‘new woman’ who started resisting traditions, orthodox concepts and values. Tracing the history of India from the medieval to modern times, writers like R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, etc paved the route for other writers. Women writers entered the realm later and portrayed the psychic mind of Indian women. Toru Dutt, Cornelia Sorabji, Anita Desai, Kamla Das; all have focused upon the physical and mental torture that women were facing in the patriarchal society and brought to limelight the psychological and emotional imbalances of the frustrated homemakers.

Shashi Deshpande in her works focuses on the psyche of her female characters that reflect their resistance against authority and asserts their individuality. Sensitive to the changing times and situations, they revolt against the traditions. She portrays females with subjective experiences with a geocentric vision. Reflecting the problematic

and miserable plight of the middle class Indian women, her writings are enrooted in the traditional lifestyle of India. Sensitive to the everyday events and experiences, Despande's works project an artistic expression. Coming out on the predicament of the Indian women, her writings are specifically in essence wherein women have contradictory identities. From the perspective of conventions and traditions, they balance family with profession, thereby, maintaining the visions and virtues of Indian culture. Fury and destiny are the significant themes of her works as she herself highlights, "I thought of Puradars's line, the hour strikes and I was terrified. I stopped believing in the life I was leading suddenly it seemed unreal to me and I know I could not go on" (Prasad 129).

Further, Namita Gokhale in her novel represents the resistance of women against the patriarchal norms that try to stifle her identity. Besides her, another significant writer is Manju Kapoor who in her narratives highlights her concern with regard to patriarchy; inter-religious marriage; family bond, male-female bond, etc. Raising her voice against women protagonists as an oppressed section of the society, she urged that:

A woman should be aware of self-controlled, strong willed, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense. (Kumar 90)

These writers were influenced by the psycho-analytical theories of self, devaluation of self, neurosis, sexual repression and nausea given by Dr Karen Horney in *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950) and Freud in *Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (1953-1957). They reflected how women underwent difficulties in tribal and rural areas. Further, their works reflect a concern for women, an awareness regarding their plight and a sense of consciousness which may assist in overcoming this situation.

The emerging 'new woman' as a concept was in growing trend in the west during the early decades of twentieth century but the visionary Tagore had already understood the problem of women in India and he did not remain passive for the betterment of the position of women in India. Travel experiences and wide knowledge recreated his identity as a social reformer who portrayed women in accordance with the transition in his contemporary society. Women in his writings were no more the meek sufferers of patriarchy. From a futuristic outlook, the visionary Tagore portrayed emancipated and empowered women, breaking the age-old shackles of conventional norms. This is well reflected in his narrative:

She is not in the world of the fairy tale where the fair woman sleeps for ages until she is touched by the magic wand. . . At last, the time has arrived when woman must step in and impart her life rhythm to this reckless movement of power.

(Tagore *Selected Essays* 226)

His women protagonists were not the victims or oppressors but a potent medium to attack male-domination and advocate women empowerment. Being unconventional, they are not the passive sufferers but emancipated women characters who follow the route of what Naomi Woolf in *Fire with Fire* asserts, "Women must give up what she styles 'victim' feminism, stop complaining, and embrace 'power' feminism" (Walters 139). The strong revolutionary stance of Tagore could be traced in his poems and short stories which exhibit the devastating traditional Indian life and women's place in it. Further, his novels also reflect his unorthodox dealing of the women that are not indecisive and voice their desires and feelings against the evil perpetuated in the society. His vision of

woman traces the journey from exploitation to emancipation in the evolution of Indian womanhood. His characters are self-assertive, autonomous, empowered and liberated.

Deviating from the traditional and stereotypical connotations associated with women, Tagore's narratives break the binaries between man and woman as these roles of being active and passive are assigned by the patriarchy itself. Further, Radical feminism which evolved three decades after Tagore, exemplified his visionary ideals of women in India. For Radical Feminist marriage was one of the major cause of women's oppression- "Since marriage is primary formalization of the persecution of women, they consider the rejection of this institution of marriage, both in theory and in practice" (Tandon 45).

Chokher Bali is the study of the human mind through four different characters. They are Binodini (the heroine herself), Mahendra (who refused to marry Binodini without even meeting her), Asha (Mahendra's wife) and Bihari (Mahendra's friend). In the novel, Binodini is a young widow, educated by an English governess, blessed with exquisite beauty and intellect. As a widow, she is compelled to honour the *Dharamshastras* by returning to her village and living an austere life after the death of her husband. Widowhood in the early twentieth century was considered the ill-fated event in a woman's life which she has to face in her life before her death. A widow was seen as inauspicious and hence looked down upon in the society. Even her presence was supposed to bring some bad omen thus filling the atmosphere with trepidation.

Mahendre, on the other hand, is married to Ashalata who is a very naïve and gentle rather childlike innocent girl. Bihari is Mahendre's bosom

Friend and it is he who initially was to marry Ashalata. But when Mahendre exhibits his liking for Asha, Bihari withdraws and does not reveal his feelings to anyone. The entry of Binodini in the household is indirectly granted by the couple themselves. When Mahendre starts spending maximum time with his wife in the name of educating her; he started to neglect his possessive mother Rajlakshmi. Out of negligent attitude of Mahendre towards Rajlakshmi, she plans to visit her native village and after the visit when she comes back with Binodini, who is invited by Rajlakshmi herself to the household. Binodini unhesitatingly accepts the invitation and accompanies Rajlakshmi to Kolkata to stay with her. But as soon as she enters the household, many feelings hitherto dormant in her mind, suddenly shudder her to the foundation. She observes that Mahendra who had once refused to marry her without ever meeting her is now happily married and it was because of his refusal that she was married to an ailing man. After the death of her husband Bipin, Binodini becomes widow to suffer for the rest of her life. Hence, she surmises that the only person responsible for her pathetic condition in the world is Mahendre and resolute to avenge her insult:

... Was there no way to erase those few lines from the past and the present, to nullify all of it? The irate bee stings whoever crosses its path; a thwarted Binodini was now ready to set fire to everything around her. Was she to lose everything that she never desired? Could success never be hers? Since happiness was not to be hers, she'd rest in peace only when she had dragged to the ground all the people who had hindered her happiness, posed an obstacle to her success and had deprived her of all possible joy (65).

Simultaneously, she is also filled with a mixed feeling of hatred and jealousy, towards Asha who is not as beautiful and educated as her and yet enjoys a life filled with complete marital bliss which could have been Binodini's own

life if she had been married to Mahendre. This creates an upheaval not only in the mind of Binodini but also the whole household as the story progresses. She says to Behari, while referring Mahendre:

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 Mahendre's family – I have not studied the holy books so faithfully. If I give something up, what do I get in return? (98).

Initially Binodini is oblivion to her real mental state. She thinks that she loves Mahendra, and it is natural that she is jealous of his wife but very soon she realizes that it was the paucity of love in her life that made her hate Asha. In the novel, she is quite fond of listening to the exchange of love letters between the husband and the wife. As Asha is a self taught woman, she knows very little about writing letters. So, she gets easily convinced by Binodini who convinces her to write letters on her behalf. While writing, Binodini imagines her to be a married woman and confessed her feeling to Mahendre in the name of naïve Asha. Consigned to a life of chastity and loneliness, she derives pleasure from meddling and manipulating the love between Mahendra and Asha. She starts playing with the mind of Mahendre; with her beauty, sensuality, wit and observes that it is not difficult to seduce a married man like him. As a result, she eventually starts disliking his weak character and void personality. Pertinent to mention, an affair of a widow with a married man in the beginning of the twentieth century and dealing with issues like adultery, distrust, lies, etc. was an unprecedented and bold portrayal by the author. It can be asserted that with the character of Binodini, Tagore is trying to portray a parallel woman character, which is first a woman and then a widow and is ingrained with obvious human emotions. The conflict between social taboo attached to a widow's existence and the desires of the heart and body are portrayed with utmost delicacy. The narrative includes a sensational account of two illicit relationships. These are: Mahendre's blind infatuation for Binodini; and Binodini's secret love for Bihari.

Behari tried to cast Binodini far away by hurling abuse at her, with the photograph on his lap. But those loving, youthful arms of hers still held on to his knees, strong as ever. Behari said, 'you went and destroyed such a loving, happy relationship!' But Binodini's face, raised for his kiss, silently told him, 'I have loved you. From all the men in this whole wide world I have chosen you (102).

Mahendre's widowed aunt Annapurna is the other vital character who gives the coherent structure to the storyline of the novel. All these characters behave accordingly in the novel to create the havoc in the lives of all the characters and the order is restored at the end. The estranged couple is reunited, but the reader is left with the feeling that the experiences narrated in the text leaves no character intact.

The reception of the novel was neither good nor bad. In short, it drew mixed responses from the literary giants of the time. Apropos of its mixed reception, at the times of publication, *Chokher Bali* had a modernist appeal. As in *Rabindranath: Kathasahtiya*, Buddhadev Basu lists many flaws that he perceives in Tagore's novels, but acknowledges its modern appeal, conceding that it is precisely in the imperfections of the characters that Tagore's realism may be discerned (129-30). He also points out when *Chokher Bali* was first published, it required great audacity to write such a book (ibid: 129). According to him, the book remains significant for the modern readers as the first Bengali novel that is primarily psychological (ibid: 14).

But *Chokher Bali*'s psychological angel cannot be read and analyzed according to the Western literary paradigms. Tagore's representation of the character Binodini has nothing in relation to the Freudian psychological tenets. Binodini's transgressive sexuality cannot be calculated through any of the mind complexes laid down by Freud. Rather, if, the character of Binodini is probed meticulously; it can be said she is subject as well as the object of desire and her desire of sexuality is fanned by the repressive social practices that existed in the nineteenth century Bengal for women and more importantly for widows. This version of sexuality does not compliment Freudian narrative of sexuality which focuses on the triangular relationship of father, mother and child. Santanu Biswas in his article 'Rabindranath Tagore and Freudian thought' with reference to *Chokher Bali* and *Naukadubi* declares "In spite of Tagore's description of these novels as "analytical" and psychological respectively, Freudian thought could not have influenced their composition at all" (729).

The notion of widowhood was materialized in the society where she was left to do menial jobs without any recognition. With this they were also economically deprived, that is they were reduced to a household chore, deprived of the inheritance of the husband's share of property, and barred with the equitable share of resources including clothes and wholesome food. The society was schooled by the Brahmanical classes to that extent where the widows themselves started to think that they were inferior and unfortunate creatures of the society. This led them to live out a life of self-abnegation. Their labour, too, thus came very cheap with minimum maintenance and maximum exploitation. As Charu Gupta in *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community* notes, the widow was a "cook and a servant, a nurse and a housekeeper" (302). Similarly, in the novel when Binodini was taking care of Rajlakshmi in the barasat house, the latter cautioned the former that she will fall ill. On this Binodini showed least concern for her health and said "Unfortunate souls like us don't fall ill, Aunty. You have come to your home after so many years – I have nothing here with which to care for you properly" (18).

In Indian context, Orthodox Brahmanical Hindu cultures do not allow the Widow's to remarry. Radha Chakravarty in *Novelist Tagore: Gender and Modernity in Selected Texts* informs "From time to time, there had been attempts in different parts of India to improve the situation of widows, but it was only in the nineteenth century that the reformist movement made a concerted move to promote this cause. In Bengal, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) used scriptural examples in his essay 'The Marriage of Hindu Widows' (1855) to argue in favor of widow remarriage. His efforts played a major role in generating a new awareness about the plight of widows and the need to liberalize social attitudes towards them. The widow Remarriage act was passed in 1856" (53). Inspired by Vidyasagar many social reformers such as Babu Sasipada Banuiji, Veeresalingam of Andhra Pradesh performed widow remarriages in their relatives. Many of the social reformers tried to sanctify widow remarriage within the argument that widow remarriage is even a sanction of the religion. The social reformers did not take pain and faced denigration from society to glorify and emulate their names rather they acted for the widow remarriage in order to find an easy solution in overcoming the problems of widowhood. But widow remarriage was just a legal victory during those times. In spite of many proofs given by the social reformers, it had failed to change the mindset of the people. Due to the primary moralization of Hindu sentiments, widow remarriage, irrationally, is considered as immoral and is looked down upon in the society. These were the times when Tagore tried to convey a rational message through the character of Binodini and promoted a humanistic view of Hindu widows. It has brought out

the emotional pains of young Hindu Widow with a logical and potent social message of enforcing the recognition of human failure in binding the emotional urges with the preconceived moral conscience.

In the second half of the novel, the desirous widow is turned into a loving widow who first tries to win the faith of Behari and confessed her love to him, "...if you did understand me, respect me, why did you stop there? Why couldn't you love me? I have abandoned shame and come to you, and so I say this to you – why didn't you love me too" (97).

Afterwards Binodini informs Behari that Mahendre had openly announced that he will go with her leaving his family and household. On this Behari asks her to stop him but Binodini reprimands him and expresses her bodily desires where she confesses that she is not a pious woman rather she is a human being who craves for love.

Binodini reveals her true self and declares that she is not a traditional woman and an ostracized widow who are the symbols of self effacement. She is assertive, bold and has desires. Behari demands to restore everything by leaving the city immediately but Binodini demands love from Behari in return, "Thakurpo, don't wipe out that tiny bit of weakness that you have! Don't be purer than the driven snow. Love the vile and be a little vile yourself" (98). She kisses his feet and raised herself on her both knees and wound her arms around Behari and said, "My dearest life, I know you are not mine forever; but do love me even if it's for this moment. After that I shall vanish into the forest where you cast me, I won't ask anyone for anything again. Give me something that can last me till my death" (99). She closed her eyes and offered her lips to Behari but Behari after much fight with himself unwound her arms and informs her about a passenger train.

Afterwards, Binodini leaves for her village where she is followed by Mahendre. After many jibes of the village women, she decided to accompany Mahendre to Calcutta. They started to stay in Mahendre's flat in Patoldanga. When Mahendre noticed that Binodini is longing for Behari then he decides to stay at home. Rajlakshmi wants Asha to make peace with her husband but all in vain. Rajlakshmi blames Asha and said "A man by nature is bound to go astray, it is the wife' duty to keep him on the straight and narrow path, by fair means or foul" (119). Tagore again ironically exposed the legalization of man's adultery through society. As Nemai Sadhan Bose also in *The Indian Awakening and Bengal* avers "... Rich Hindus in Bengal were mostly polygamous and left their wives confined in the house. These people were generally licentious. They used to boast of their debauchery in public and considered it to be an act of pride and courage" (8).

The story progressed with the Asthma attack of Rajlakshmi. Asha informed Mahendre about his mother's health of which Mahendre took proper care. But soon Mahendrealised that Binodini had not sent a single letter to him for the last six days, he felt offended and a suspicion came into his mind that may be Behari would have reached there. On that very moment he wended away to the Patoldanga flat. Meanwhile, Binodini also came to know that Behari has gone to roam west of India. Binodini out of her longing for Behari asks Mahendre to go to the same place where Behari had gone. In the household, on the other hand, Rajlakshmi started to Miss Behari too and she informed Asha about her longing for Behari and at that very moment she asks Mahendre for the same. The next morning, he landed at Behari's house, where he was informed by the bearers that Behari had owned a farmhouse by the river Ganga in Bally. From there Mahendre did not come back to his house rather he moved with Binodini to roam west. Mahendre is here again shown as a selfish creature who left his ailing mother on the whims of some

other doctor. Asha could not handle this and she wrote a letter to her aunty Annapurna. On receiving the letter from Asha, she came back to household where she is made aware of Rajlakshmi's illness and her longing for Behari. Annapurna on that very moment sends a bearer to know about Behari's whereabouts and she came to know that he is in Bally. Annapurna reached there and makes Behari to come back to household. After reaching the home Behari and Annapurna realized that the health of Rajlakshmi is worsened. She will not live for longer in the world of mortals. So, Annapurna convinces Behari to fetch Mahendre from wherever he is.

On the other hand Binodini's loving eyes were scanning the west in order to find her beloved Behari and Mahendre like a spell bounded creature was following her. Plenty of times during the journey Mahendre is humiliated by Binodini on many pretexts. Eventually, they settled down in a farmhouse at Ahmadabad where once Behari had lived. This thing is not digested by Mahendre and they had an argument about Behari. The spell bounded Mahendre gradually realizes that Binodini do not love him anymore and revelation came to him that he belongs to his household. He decided, "I'll go home today – let Binodini stay wherever she wants to stay. I'll make the arrangements and then I'll be free" (145).

Tagore's sense of new woman in Binodini is completed when he shows her first as temptress who trapped Mahendre in her love and then she is the one who breaks the spell from his mind. Binodini is the only woman character in the novel who does not submit herself in front of Mahendre. Mahendre in the novel is created as a character that is the apple of everyone's eye. He was born with a silver spoon and nobody in the household dared to go against his will. Even Behari had not that potency to stop Mahendre from his wrongdoings. Rajlakshmi always pampered her son and Annapurna never dared to speak him anything instructive due to her respect and love for Rajlakshmi and the naïve Asha who from the beginning is instructed by her aunty that whatever her husband will do she is suppose to follow and respect that. It is only Tagore's iconoclastic Binodini who makes Mahendre her object of desire and afterwards she made him to follow her like a madman on her tunes leaving all his comforts and love. But at the same time she is the one who enlightened him of his real worth in the household. Binodini is created as the lifeline of the novel where Tagore wanted to float a message of a woman's potency. As Niharranjan Ray in 'Three Novels of Tagore' avers "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" (169).

The denouement of the novel is not very happy. Although everything is restored at the end like after bringing Binodini and Mahendre to the household, the dying Rajlakshmi wished to see his house as it used to happen before the arrival of Binodini in the house. She herself arranges a meal for both of her sons by supervising from her bed. She made Mahendre to take responsibility of his wife Asha "Mahin, I leave this child of mine in your care – mark my words Mahin, you won't find a finer woman anywhere" (151). she also asks Behari to forgive Mahendre. Binodini also seeks her apology from the dying lady which is granted to her. The last episode of the novel informs about the last rites of Rajlakshmi and everyone moved in their lives.

Tagore in *Chokher Bali* emerges as a non conformist. He explores and chooses the redemptive choices of Hinduism offered to widows. V.S. Narvane in *An Introduction to Rabindranath Tagore* (1977) says: "Tagore emerges 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 self hood. 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 women character in Indian fiction etched to rebel against the established moral order. Krishna Kripalani in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (1962) observes: “Tagore has laid out the foundation of the modern novel in Indian literature” (186). The observation of Kripalani finds concurrence in Niharranjan Ray’s critical observation in *Three of Novels of Tagore* (1961): “Tagore struck out a new path for the further / development of the Bengali novel on still refreshing lines” (165).

All these critical insights are true of Tagore but after considering Tagore’s iconoclastic stance regarding the marginalized women, the chapter inquires into the question, if Tagore was the only literary figure who had the sense of ‘emerging new woman’ in the Indian Context or did such a discourse prevail in other forms during his times. There were various women writers at the time who had raised their voice regarding the issues of marginalized women in Bengal but their writings were either suppressed or were not translated into English. The present chapter attempts to articulate those writers in relation to Tagore. *Shaping the Discourse: Women’s Writings in Bengali Periodicals 1865-1947* edited by Ipshita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi are a compendium of women writers who were voicing for the marginalized women as Tagore did, are used to strengthen or negate Tagore’s arguments.

There is an author who had written an essay ‘On Whether Or Not the Hindu Widow Should Marry again’ (1885). Shyamasundari Devi is the author who raised her voice in the context of Widow’s remarriage. The essay is originally written in Bengali and is translated by Ipshita Chanda. In the essay, Shyamasundari questions the religious texts which dictate widow to live an ascetic life in order to fulfill the Dharma. She questions the Dharma which Dharma should they follow either they practice Dharma or follow ‘practical Dharma’. The practical Dharma is narrated and dictated to common masses through Brahminical classes. They never teach anyone to practice Dharma because according to the writer:

...Dharma is not illusive, nor is it something like a mirage that tempts the onlooker and draws him towards it or recedes from him, arousing false hopes and then suddenly throws him into the stark darkness of despair. Dharma is a real substance; it remains eternally bright, calm, unmoving and radiant. The closer you move towards Dharma the more you are becalmed, hopeful and restful; he who has moved even an inch towards dharma will never be deprived of hope or cast away... (159)

The dharma which society demands to follow by a widow is not the real dharma. She gives a new term to the existing dharma and that is ‘scientific dharma’. According to her the dharma is modified according the Brahminical interpretation of it. She simply question that if dharma does not allow a widow remarriage then where it is written that she should follow brahmacharya and observe ascetic lifestyle.

She also raises voice for the desires and emotions of a young widow. She takes the case of those widows who become widows during her childhood. She asserts that society enforces the widowhood to the girl child without understanding and sympathizing with them. They do not understand the longings and desires of a young widow, they just enforce the widowhood upon her and which is inhumane. She emerges as woman who championed the cause of widowhood. She asserts that:

We do not wish to go into the details of the pros and cons of widow remarriage. In the course of the argument, I may have reiterated all the points substantiate the position against widow remarriage but let me summarize these in sequence. I shall not refer, for many reasons, to the difficulties of observing brahmacharya, the misuse and profligacy, resulting from it the obstruction to extending the generation, the ease with which the problem of unmarried men may be solved. To those who wish to accuse me of such an oversight, I say that I accept this accusation. (170)

Shayamsundari Devi seems to flout every rules and regulation for widows by asserting herself for equality and comes out as a voice against the widow suppression. She is also ready to be ostracized, if society demands it but she will speak up for the cause of righteousness.

Tagore presented Binodini as an educated, smart and knowledgeable woman but there is again a woman named Bibi Taherannesa who long before Binodini was conceived wrote ‘A Letter to Editor of *Banabodhini Patrikain* 1865 where she talks about the education of woman. The letter again is written in Bengali and is translated by Ipshita Chanda. She appeals to the editor that the women of India lack the iota of education. If they are not to be educated they will wreak indiscipline in this world. She asserts:

There is a saying that women are of mean intelligence and excitable; yet they are mainstay of all practices that maintain the lineages. If their blind lack of knowledge cannot be removed through education, they will fall prey to wrong practices... women’s mind enlightened by knowledge, thereby facilitating the nurturing of their families with discipline and propriety could be a cause of their own and their family’s happiness... O civilized men of this land do not remain neglectful of educating women. If you really want to see the earth a happy place, then make the effort to adorn your women with the ornament of education. (2-3)

Swarna Kumari Devi sister of Rabindranath Tagore also talks about the education of widows so that they may earn some respect which they lose because of their ordained fate to become widow. She wrote ‘Another Proposal’ in 1886 which is translated by Ipshita Chanda. She also set up a society along with her friends known as Sakhi Samiti. The objective of this society is to educate the widows. Whatever Tagore had conceived in Binodini, that kind of widow had already been visualized by her. Binodini is a widow who is educated, smart, intelligent and expert in household chores. Swarnakumari also visualized the same kind of widow and she declared:

... the Samiti proposes that younger Hindu widows must be educated in the ordinary way and become teachers of the women of the inner house and of their children... we do not wish to prevent those widows who desire to get married from doing so. Our request directed to those who wish to follow customs of widowhood outlined in the Hindu Shastras. (87)

There are many other women writers during those times who were writing ahead of their times but the tragedy with them was they were writing in Bengali and their intelligentsia was confined only to the Bengali circle. Tagore although created a revolutionary figure of Binodini, which was also a construction ahead of those times but the idea of ‘new woman’ was not new to Bengal the only difference was that Tagore’s new woman – Binodini was hailed with harsh criticism and she becomes famous because of its English translation. *Chokher Bali* was circulated to all over the world in its English translation that was the reason that Tagore is credited with the construction of ‘emerging new woman’ but various women writers also wrote to give the idea of emerging new woman. As a

matter of fact, there were various examples of emerging new woman in the Bengal. One is the sister of Rabindranath Tagore Swarnakumari Devi who was in herself a new woman. It can thus be said that Tagore in his novel reflected not only the qualities of ‘new women’ which emerged later in India but even projected his female characters as emblem of post-feminism.

References

1. Biswas, Santanu. “Rabindranath Tagore and Freudian Thought.” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol.84,no.3,2003,pp.717-32.
<http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/650868/8135028/1281841953633/TagoreFreud.pdf%3Ftoken%3D4WBQ5ZxSuG5zwORVbsuhKZyVIhA%253D>.
2. Bose, Nemai Sadhan. *The Indian Awakening and Bengal*. Sri Gouranga Press Private Ltd., 1969.
3. Chatterjee, Partha. “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question”. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, Edited by Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid, Kali for Women, 1989, pp. 233-53.
4. Devi, Shyamasundari. “On Whether or Not the Hindu Widow Should Marry Again (1885)”. *Shaping The Discourse: Women’s Writings in Bengali Periodicals 1865-1947*. Edited by Ipshita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi. Stree Publications, 2014, pp. 155-178.S
5. Devi, Swarnakumari. “Another Proposal (1886)”. *Shaping The Discourse: Women’s Writings in Bengali Periodicals 1865-1947*. Edited by Ipshita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi. Stree Publications, 2014, pp. 86-89.
6. Grand, Sarah. “The New Aspect of the Woman Question”, *North American Review*, vol. 158, no.448, University of Northern Iowa, Mar. 1894, pp. 270-276, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25103291.pdf?refreqid=excelsior:bfca884449700479570dd649deaf99c4>.
7. Gupta, Charu. *Sexuality, Obscenity and Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*. Orient Blackswan, 2005.
8. Ledger, Sally. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siecle*. Manchester UP. 1997.
9. Kishwar, Madhu. *Off the Beaten Track: Rethinking Gender Justice for Indian Women*. Oxford UP, 1999.
10. Kumar, Ashok. “Portrayal of New Women: A Study of Manju Kapur’s *A Married Women*.” *Indian Writing In English: Critical Ruminations (part-2)*, Volume 2 Edited by Amar Nath Prasad and S. John Peter Joseph. Sarup & Sons, 2006, pp. 193-202.
11. Panja, Shormishtha. “Rabinranath Tagore’s *Chokher Bali*: The New Woman, Conjuality and the Heterogeneity of Home.” *Signifying the Self: Women and Literature*. Edited by Malashri Lal, Shormishtha Panja and Sumanyu Satpathy. Macmillan, 2004, pp. 211-25.
12. Radhakrishnan, S. *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. Macmillan and Co. Ltd. London, 1919.
13. Chakravarty, Radha. *Novelist Tagore Gender and Modernity in Selected Texts*. Routledge Taylor and Francis group, 2012.

Cite This Article:

Prof. Kamaldeep Kaur, (2022). Absences that Matter: Redemption of Widowhood in Literature, *Electronic International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, XI (III) May-June, 196-208.