

The Upanishadic Double Consciousness in Tagore's Widowed Women

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an essay in miniature proposing to study the ambivalence in Tagore's treatment of female sexuality. The essay explores Tagore's portrayal of two very dynamic widows in contemporary Indian genre fiction—Binodini in *Chokher Bali* and Damini in *Chaturanga*—to highlight how Tagore grapples with the dichotomy between their experiential bodies and the discursive construction of widowhood in the context of colonial Bengal. Binodini and Damini are both a rebel against customary widowhood. For Tagore these are two fictional paradigms who are potent enough to challenge the colonial economy of gender. Yet they are made to transform their lovers into their gurus and their own sexual desire to austerity. Thus Tagore symbolized in them radical sexual energy and yet stopped short of becoming iconoclastic, a veiled mechanism to harness radical, disruptive sexuality of women in his creative world—a ghare and baire syndrome referring to the Upanishadic double consciousness of within and without.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Some rigid paths of gender re-erected the Indian nationalist struggle against British colonial disposition. In the backdrop of the British colonial regime in India the nationalist upsurge seeking freedom from foreign subjugation gloried the chastity of a woman's body. The female body represented the nation in various confrontational forms, and women were also placed as victims of male domination and other, societal evils. As the collaborative process between 'hegemonisation and homogenisation'¹ cloistered women within in exilic norms, femininity in all its hue outside the stereotypes of society were completely erased.

It is here that Tagore confronts the act of denial of woman's agency in the poem 'Sabala': *Narikeaponbhagya joy koribar/keno nahidibeadhikar/Hey Bidhata*. [O Lord, why will you not allow woman the right to win over her own destiny?]. The last stanza is even stronger in appeal: *Hey Bidhata, amarerekhonabakyaheena/Raktemorjagerudrabeena* [O Lord, Do not let me be without a voice/ My blood resonates with a tumultuous melody].² Such a powerful portrayal of Indian woman leaves us awe-struck. We naturally tend to explore the idea if Sabala is the same woman who identifies herself, with women in *Chokher Bali*, *Chaturanga* or '*streePatra*' suffering social discrimination and patriarchal economy?

The rebel in Tagore's Sabala denounces social prescriptions and domestic confinement. *JabonabasharKokshebadhubeshe* [I shall not enter the nuptial chamber as a bride; instead she will break all shackles to meet her beloved on the shore of the wrathful ocean: *Dekhabekhubdhasindhuteere*. Tagore portrays her to be symbolising a boundless life-force that is transcendental.

With this premise in mind my essay will explore Tagore's portrayal of two very dynamic widows in Contemporary Indian Genre Fiction—Binodini in *Chokher Bali* and Damini in *Chaturanga*—to illuminate on the idea that how Tagore grapples with the dichotomy between their creative, almost radical feminist disposition and their constructed widowhood in the context of colonial Bengal. Such radical etchings of Binodini and Damini naturally places Tagore in an ambivalent position in identifying sexuality. Tagore's humanistic approach reveals their strength, intelligence and vivacity much in contradiction to his simultaneous discomfort with their sexual charm.

Tagore's Contradictions About Widows in Colonial Bengal

Though the sexual charm of the widow in colonial Bengal matters the least as it is not seen to be a viable entity, yet as a site of subversive possibilities demanding relentless surveillance and regulation, it matters significantly. Be it *satidaha* (bride burning), the legitimacy of widow marriage, or raising the minimum age of cohabitation, there was anxiety in public over woman's sexuality. The Bengali intelligentsia chose the inner recess of the mind above material happiness of the outer world, and projected woman as its sole guardian.

Against this combative tussle between the widow's created, experiential body and that of social construction, we feel it a necessity to address the issue of the widow's body in a new light. The tussle between colonial anxiety and widowhood perceives the widow's body as a dangerous,

'unaccommodable' entity—a wife once, cloistered in domesticity and pure conjugality, suddenly gets displaced from her position only to occupy an ambiguous space.

Such ambivalence is the outcome of recognizing a widow's body with its natural desires as a serious concern in hedonism requiring social prescriptions. As we gaze at the absurdity of the connection between the body and its embodiment, we are reminded of what Foucault terms the 'technology of the self' implying training, practices, modifications, making people transform 'their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being.'³ There were various social prescriptions, rigid religious adherences and life-long privation encircling the life of widows in colonial upper-class Bengali society.

Manu, the ancient authority, prescribed a strict regime of self-agellation and masochism for the widows to discipline their bodies.⁴ Such diktat grossly challenged Tagore's idea of ardhnanariswar (the other half of her husband) as it was felt that widows still posed a danger to social order as they stayed outside the domestic confinement of either their parents or husbands. Child marriage then was a regular affair among all the Hindu castes, leaving a large number of very young women as widows and thus nubile girls as widows experienced puberty and adulthood. Naturally, their unfulfilled sexual desire led to clandestine liaisons between them and other men. Consequences of elopement, accidental pregnancies and abortions were not unknown either.

It is at this crucial juncture that Vidyasagar points to the dangers of imposing celibacy on young widows :

Young girls whom misfortune turns to widows suffer unbearably throughout their lives . How many hundreds of widows turn to the evil of prostitution and commit the sin of abortion, bringing shame on the families of their husbands, fathers, and mothers, all because they are unable to live a life of chastity? Were the customs of widow marriage to be promoted, it would put an end to the suffering of widows, to the evil of prostitution, and to the sin of abortion . As long as this beneficial custom is not promoted, the torrent of prostitution, abortion, and family shame will grow stronger, as will the torment of widows.⁵

Astonishingly, Vidyasagar's observation candidly acknowledges the subject of the widow's sexuality. Vidyasagar strikes hard at social anathema with the alternative of sympathetic consideration and valued judgement.

Unfortunately, the Bengali intelligentsia always viewed love as illicit, unacceptable and beyond the arena of domesticity. Only the affection within conjugality was socially accepted as a legitimate heterosexual behaviour.⁶ The domain of love was left only open to the widow or the whore as in novels such as Bankimchandra's *Bishabriksha* (1872), *Krishnakanta Will* (1875), Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* (1901), Sarat-Chandra's *Baradidi* (1907), *Pallisamaj* (1915). Though the fictional representation of widow's love in these novels was vehemently criticized, Tagore portrayed a number of young widows, both intelligent as well as possessing feminine charm. In his first novel *Karuna* (1877), there was the child widow Mohini, rather a predecessor of Binodini in *Chokher Bali*. Here also her paramour is Mahendra, as it is with Binodini and like Binodini, Mohini also is metamorphosed into an ascetic woman when Mahendra unites with his wife, Rajani. Thus, Tagore leaves the path of radical femininity and conforms to established social practices. Similarly, in *Chokher Bali* (An Irritant), published in the year 1903, despite the novel being unique and avantgarde contextually, Tagore etches out Binodini, a beautiful, educated, westernized widow, subjected unjustly to a cloistered, unenlightened life, facing the consequences of a distressful, and sexually unfulfilling life. Tagore thus succumbs to social prescription of the time dragging Binodini to self-imposed penance in Benaras. Binodini has been made a victim of Hindu hegemonic practices. The novel, however, became historically important as it offered valuable insights into the problematic of locating gender as a national imperative in the backdrop of British imperialism. Not only does Mahendra reject her in marriage but also his dear friend Bihari disappointingly refused to marry her. Binodini finally married another person and started residing with her in-laws in a remote village. Being widowed within a year of marriage, Binodini reaches Mahendra's house to offer company to his mother. It is here that Binodini's repressed sexual desire gets enamed seeing Mahendra's affection towards his uneducated, unemotional wife Ashalata.

Asha badly needed a female friend and a companion. Celebration of love lacks repletion when confined to two partners only... Binodini on her own part avidly drank in the love tales of a young bride. Heart arid and thirsty heart vicariously sought to quench her unsatisfied passion like an inebriate, imbibing strong and heady wine. The drink went into her head and incited her body... Her whole body was feverish and all nerves tingled with desire. Her eyes emitted fiery sparks. This happy home with such a loving husband, all these could have been mine, she contemplated.⁷

Binodini's close scrutiny of Asha as a woman lacking emotion, makes her rejection by Mahendra appear more unjust. Widowed Binodini's sorry plight at the mercy of others, despite her impassioned disposition, could have been easily ignored. But then, a matured Bihari also sees in Binodini's unfulfilled desire, a

re that could ruin Mahendra's home. And yet, he knew well that this woman could not be treated as a plaything, and that she could also not be brushed aside.⁸ Binodini, then, exists as a force to be reckoned with by the other men and women in the novel. Her western training and thus the acquired enlightenment against the simplicity of Ashalata makes it all the more difficult to accept social rejection. She is infuriated by Mahendra's initial lukewarm response to her: 'What was behind this calculated disdain? Was she not a live human being? Why treat her like an inanimate object? She was also a woman, and had he cultivated her he would have appreciated the gulf of difference between herself and his adorable Chuni [Ashalata]!⁹ Tagore actually projects an incessant struggle between her constructed social portrayal and her individuality. Binodini resists social coercion out of envy and vengeance. It became Binodini's personal agenda to avenge rejection and it exposes the contradictions engulfing female subjectivity.

However, Binodini's portrayal is not one of an anti-heroine. Contrarily, it is Ashalata's passivity and lack of individuality in the novel that offered Binodini some space. Ashalata is actually a product of patriarchal hegemony, a construction of colonial Bengali womanhood. Binodini is just the opposite. She is a rebel, intelligent enough to devise her subtle strategies of usurpation. A spoiled son Mahendra is also too immature and tactless against her sensitivity. Binodini naturally realizes that Mahendra is incapable to withstand social pressure: 'I do admit that shamelessly Mahendra may love me, he is so foolishly blind that he does not really know me.'¹⁰ She even retorts Bihari's sermonizations. In the novel Binodini earnestly tries to legitimize her demands as a flesh and blood woman and challenges doctrinal prescriptions.

Only Damini among Tagore's widows from *Chaturanga* is shown married. Damini is an incarnation of rebellion. Deserted at her husband's death, Shibatosh, in the custody of Leelanandaswami, Damini finds rare pleasure much to the embarrassment of her Vaishnava guru. She actually projects an irresistible sexuality: 'Damini is like the lightning which originates from the monsoon clouds. From outside she is full of the vivacity of youth; within her the fire of desire burns relentlessly.'¹¹ Sachish's diary reads: I have seen in Nanibala a new worldview a woman who has taken upon herself the taint of sin. Sacrificing her life for the wrong deeds of another person, she endowed life with a new glory. Damini represented a different philosophy of life: she loves the pleasures of life, and believes not in sacrificial death. Like the burgeoning overgrown grove of spring, she blossoms every moment with life.¹²

Leelanandaswami, the ascetic's sermons prove a failure in harnessing her desires. Damini rather debunks her guru's preachings and authority. She even does not deter to declare that she has participated in theatre seeking profane entertainments. She neither accepts social prescriptions as a widow, nor leads the life of a spiritual discipline representing austerity.

Damini is an embodiment of an unprecedented importance in *Chaturanga*. Damini's character and relationship encompasses a major portion of the novel. Here Leelananda serves merely as a conduit between Damini and two other men. Sachish and Sreebilash's destiny centres round this apparently helpless widow. Like unabashed nature, Damini is reckless and has no inhibition in her desire for a fulfilling life. However, life ultimately escapes in this enigmatic conflict between ideology and rationality. Damini is as real and sentient as Binodini. She shuns the path of theory and dazzles both Sachish and Sreebilash like ashes of lightning. An enigma that Damini is, Sachish idealizes her and is naturally perplexed by Damini's hedonistic attitude. Contrarily, Sreebilash realizes that Damini is invincible and can be an object of renunciation, but cannot be ignored. Despite being in the margins she had remained at the centre of life. For Sachish there is no salvation without her. Damini is also quite intelligent to understand that her enigmatic behaviour has placed him in a state of spiritual dilemma. Though Damini passionately loved Sachish and also recognized him as her mentor, it was never her intention to distract him from the path of spiritual quest. So she left Sachish and reached Calcutta with Sreebilash. For Sreebilash marriage with Damini was just a ceremony and she never belonged to him. Significantly, in order to offer complete freedom to Sachish for his attainment of spiritual goal, insisted him to give her away in marriage to Sreebilash. This is the only widow marriage in Tagore's fiction- a marriage unsullied by the daily chores of domestic life. Tagore avoids here the portrayal of conventional conjugality by ushering in of Damini's sudden death: 'When the full moon of the month of Magh passed onto Phalgun¹³ and the sea surged up with deep sorrow, Damini touched my feet and left the world with these parting words; 'My desire has remained unfulfilled; I wish you as my beloved in the next life.'¹⁴ Tagore is typically Victorian here as in *Chokher Bali* where widowed women, despite their flesh and blood entity, remain unaccommodated, sidelined or forced beyond the frontiers of respectable society or they even die.

II. CONCLUSION

Binodini and Damini are both a rebel against customary widowhood. For Tagore these are two fictional paradigms who are potent enough to challenge the colonial economy of gender. Yet they are made to transform their lovers into their gurus and their own sexual desire to austerity. How do we interpret this iterative mechanism in Tagore's treatment of female sexuality? There is an obvious ambivalence. Though Tagore etched out powerful women characters symbolizing radical sexual energy, he did not become openly iconoclastic. The

sublimation thus became a veiled mechanism of harnessing radical, disruptive sexuality of women in his creative world a ghare and baire syndrome referring to the Upanishadic double consciousness of within and without.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

INTRODUCTION

Notes :

1. See P. Uberoi, 'Feminine Identity and National Ethos in Indian Calendar Art,' Economic and Political Weekly April 28, W.S: 41-8.
2. See Rabindranath Tagore, 'Sabala', Rabindrarachanabali, vol. VIII., (Kolkata: VisvaBharati, 1909).

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3. See Michel Foucault, 'Technologies of the Self', in Paul Rabinow (ed.), Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, (tr.) Robert Hurley et al. (New York : New Press, 1997)
4. See ChandrakalaPadia (ed.), Women in Dharmasastras : A Phenomenological and Critical Analysis (Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2009).
5. See IshvarchandraVidyasagar, Hindu Widow Marriage, (tr.) Brian A. Hatcher (Ranikhet : Permanent Black, 2012).
6. See JatindramohanSingha, SahityeSwasthyaraksha (Kolkata : Bhattacharjya& Sons, 1921).
7. See Rabindranath Tagore, Chokher Bali, (tr.) Sukhendu Ray (New Delhi: Rupa, 2004).
8. Ibid., p. 53.
9. Ibid., p. 58.
10. Ibid., p. 187.
11. See Tagore, 'Chaturanga', Rabindrarachanabali, vol. iv., (Kolkata: VisvaBharati, 1909).
12. Lop. Cit.
13. Ibid., p. 467.
14. Lop. Cit.

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