
The Gender Question In Tagore: A Study Of *The Home And The World* And *Chokher Bali*

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Abstract:

Debates of gender have often highlighted the 'socially constructed' nature of gender but within a dichotomous view of masculinity and femininity taken as homogenous and well defined categories. However, a writer like Tagore with his comprehensive soul and a holistic vision could not be blind to life and understood well that there are no well-defined characteristics that go with being a man or a woman. One of the ways, often missed by critics speaking of Tagore as an advocate of feminist concerns, is the fact that Tagore championed the cause of gender also by breaking down the dichotomous view that was held by the contemporary society to establish that men and women are ultimately human beings who do not act according to the social expectations of a particular gender but by the psychological compulsions of their being.

*We have chosen to study the two novels (*Chokher Bali* and *The Home and the World*) of Tagore as they present a reversal*

*of situations. In the *Home and the World* it is a woman (Bimala) that is in an extra marital relationship and it is the husband (Nikhilesh) who is passive, an attribute usually associated with women whereas in *Choker Bali* it is a man (Mahendre) that is having an extramarital affair and it is the wife, the woman who is the passive spectator. The present study attempts a comparison of the two novels with reference to the roles assigned to the men and women of 19th century Bengali society and Tagore's own ideology to establish that Tagore dilutes the gender distinction and implied connotations by simply making it a human concern.*

Keywords – Masculinity; Femininity; Rooted Cosmopolitan; Swadeshi Movement; Ardnarishwar; 'Image of Sita'; Adulterous; Passive; Nationalist.

Rabindranath Tagore was a Poet, a dramatist, a short story writer, a novelist, an

actor, producer, a musician and a painter; he was an educationist, a reformer, a philosopher, a prophet and a critic of life and literature. Indeed, he was a multi-faceted genius. He started travelling at the age of seventeen and remained a frequent traveller, journeying across the world. In the course of his travels, he developed a cosmopolitan outlook that was to make him an international figure. Ramachandra Guha calls him a 'Rooted Cosmopolitan' and includes him among his selected list of 'makers' of modern India. Guha observes, 'Tagore was a patriot without quite being a nationalist. He was no apologist for colonial rule; He thought that India had much to learn from other cultures, including (but not restricted to) the west' (171).

In the present times, Tagore as an international figure has been so firmly canonized in the world literature that it is easy to forget that he was once a controversial, even iconoclastic figure, who was constantly stirring up the established thoughts and appealing with his debates. His iconoclastic ways can be easily seen in his novels. Although his novels never attract much enthusiasm, but if we look towards his short stories, they have often been praised. The reason behind this is that his novels are

novels of ideas that can be appreciated only by a patient reader. As P.K. Dutta in the introduction of the book *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and The World: A critical companion* asserts that 'Rabindranath Tagore's novels have the quality of intense, looming depth that are the feature of his paintings especially his portraits, even as they detail nuances of feeling and feature intellectual deliberations' (9).

Rabindranath Tagore's novelistic oeuvre, although, remained in periphery but the issues which the author had dealt in his novels are in vogue even today, be it, gender, modernity, conjugality, Nationalism etc. These issues of Tagore's world contribute significantly to international discourses. Radha Chakravarty remarks, 'In every phase of Tagore's endeavor to redefine the modern, gender forms a crucial constitutive agency' (1). Speaking of the variety of themes figuring in his novels, it can be said that he seems to take interest in the tensions, conflicts, contradictions, frustrations and embarrassments stemming from the polarities of tradition and modernity, past and present, orthodoxy and radicalism, and idealism and opportunism. His novels span half a century – his first

novel, *Bou Thakurnair Hat* (The young Queen's Market) published in 1883 and the last novel, *Char Adhyay* (Four Chapters) appearing in 1934, covers an epoch making era of Indian history i.e. late nineteenth and early twentieth century. His novels deal with concrete human situation in Indian society.

To Tagore, issue of gender perception was an essential part of progress of New India. The changing position of women in society formed an integral part in his novels. Tagore wrote about the predicament of the contemporary women. '... his women characters struggling against their dehumanization in the name of tradition. He assigns a central place to woman in his novels' (Kunjo 20). He was equally concerned with the masculine gender. He was perturbed with the questions of changing definitions of masculinity in a society that found itself in a state of flux. His concern is well manifested in the male characters of his novels.

Contemporary bedlam and war of words on the topic of gender is, if unearthing the history, due to the women's position as the 'Other' in the society. The inception of feminism as a main course is the retaliation against patriarchal biased setup against the women. It has passed

through a number of different stages. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century liberal feminism and socialist feminism allied feminism with the hegemonic political theories of the day to bestow equal political and legal status and economic independence to the contemporary women. Dawned in the 1960's, however, feminists evolved approaches that did not depend on male – expounded theories. Radical feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, the feminisms of women of color, and postmodern feminism are endeavors to develop analyses of women's role in society from a women's way of looking. All these approaches analyze how gender is constructed and maintained as one of the central meaning structures of the society.

...when Simone de Beauvoir claims, "one is not born, but rather, becomes woman" she is appropriating and reinterpreting this doctrine of constituting acts from the phenomenological tradition Further, of gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence must be understood as the mundane way in which

bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler, "Performative" 1)

To understand the notion of gender construction, it is mandatory to focus on gender as a concept more precisely. The biological featuring of an individual's reproductive anatomy and his/her secondary sex characteristics defines the sex of the subject and the gender conformed behaviors in a culture defines the gender of that individual. There are two mainstream genders Masculine and Feminine which are socially constructed and are monolithic in nature which connotes that there is no definite empirical base from which one can define that particular gender refers to the particular sex. Judith Butler in her article "Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory" states 'gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity, instituted through a stylized repetition of acts'(1). Conventionally gender is defined on the basis of acts and performances as the

gender feminine is attributed to women and the gender 'woman' is defined as someone who is irrational, closer to nature, more emotional and dependent. That is, these characteristics can only be acquired by 'Woman' and if any of these characteristics is acquired by a man then that case can be considered as effeminate. So the gender construction is mere a product of gender discourse as the identity of being 'Man' and 'Woman' is also a product of the latter discourse. There is no essential subject, 'Man' or 'Woman' but rather these subjects are created and maintained by the actions that are dictated by the monolithic social discourses defining these genders. 'Woman' exists because women act in accordance with this identity; there is no essence of 'Woman' beyond the acts that constitute gender identity.

Judith Butler in the introduction of her cardinal work *Gender Trouble* argues that gender is performative: no identity exists behind the acts that ostensibly express gender, and these acts constitute- rather than express- the fantasy of the stable gender identity. Besides, the façade of 'Being' a gender is thus the outcome of the culturally constructed behaviors. On the basis of performance, the gender 'woman' as well as

gender 'man' is open to interpretation and 'resignification'.

... as a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature: gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'pre-discursive', prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. (Butler, *GENDER TROUBLE* 7)

The social construction of gender to Rabindranath Tagore is also questionable and his views regarding gender compliments Butler's, with some differences. Tagore after shedding the gender dichotomy comes up with the idea of 'human'. For him, every gender is first a human and his version of humanism is not Eurocentric ideal of reason, instead it is based on recognition and tolerance of differences in between the sexes and by knowing the different versions of subjectivity, based on quality of heart. Radha Chakravarty asserts 'Tagore's writings on gender reveal a mixture of radical and conservative attitudes, some of

which do not dovetail neatly into a coherent theory' (18).

To make more explicit the idea of gender that Tagore held, a comparison of the characters and their roles in the novels *Chokher Bali* and *The Home and the World* juxtaposed against the role assigned to both the genders by the society is attempted. Both these novels got mixed responses by the critics. If talking about *Ghaire-Bhaire* (Bengali), it was serialized in the journal *Sabuj Patra* from May 1915 to February 1916. It appeared as a book in 1916. Its English translation was by Surendranath Tagore and also was serialized in the *The Modern Reviews* from December 1918 as *At Home and Outside*; it appeared in the book form in 1919 entitled *The Home and The World* (R. Chakravarty 92-93). This novel reflects two issues, first, Tagore's growing concern about the hazards of extreme nationalism and second, his concern about the changing position of woman in society.

His novel *The Home and the World* consists of two plots, one is the love triangle, and the other is the nationalism, which takes a monstrous form. Under the canvas of these two themes, Tagore has organized the novel in which, with love

triangle, he is drafting the distortions of change in the psychology of Bimala, the customary wife of an open-minded zamindar Nikhilesh. After this, Sandip a flamboyant activist enters their home. The ideological conflicts of nationalism and liberal idealism is outlined in the debates between Nikhilesh and Sandip, which covers the major chunk of the reason of malcontent in Bimala's consciousness and present her with life-transforming choice. In the subsequent stages of the narrative the world beyond the elite home invades on this private emotional tangle, in the shape of figures from the margins of society such as Panchu and Mrijan. The clash between these two realms unleashes a chain of disastrous events leading upto the novel's apocalyptic denouement. The other character like Bimala's two sister-in-laws; Chandernath Babu - Nikhil's mentor who is the voice of wisdom in the text; and Amulya, the young activist who falls under Bimala's spell, are organic for the thematic development of the novel.

The Home and the World is Tagore's most controversial novel. It remained in controversy in home as well as in the world. 'Critics were outraged at what seemed like

unpatriotic stance and also at the boldness with which the novel challenged prevailing myths about women, particularly the legend of Sita, the epitome of the 'pure Hindu woman' (R. Chakravarty 93). In the west the novel had mixed responses. The reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* (29 may 1919) calls Sandip a 'Hindu Nietzschean' who worships the passions because he is afraid of them. But he recognizes the wider theme of freedom in the novel:

[H]e makes us understand that there can be freedom nowhere until mankind are consciously on their guard against their own idolatries. That is really the theme of the book, and it is more interesting because in the main it is worked out in character, not in prepositions. (Kundu 110-111)

Not all the reactions from west were in the favor of Tagore. George Lukcas, for instance, was one of the harsher critics of the novel. In his review of the novel he complained that Tagore had failed to create even a 'counterrevolutionary novel', accusing him of serving British police and

being unaware of the anachronism. He described Sandip as a 'contemptible caricature of Gandhi' (qtd. In F. Alam and R. Chakravarty 654). Equally uncomplimentary was E.M. Forster's description of the 'Home' in the novel as the location for 'a boarding house flirtation' (365-67).

Regardless of mixed responses, '*The Home and the World* remains Tagore's best known novel internationally and later generations of critics acknowledge its importance in the history of the modern novel in India. As P.K. Dutta argues, '*The Home and the World* is self-reflexively concerned about the crisis that afflict creation of new national subjectivities and inter-subjectivities and this is what makes it a story about modernity' (11).

Chokher Bali was published during the inception of the twentieth century and the modern age. Tagore asserts in his preface of to the second edition of the novel, the literature of the new age seeks not to narrate a sequence of events, but to reveal the secrets of the heart. Such is the narrative of *Chokher Bali*' (Tagore VI). This novel is epistolary, serialized in the periodical *Bangadarshan* from 1902 to 1903 and

appeared as a book in 1903. Earlier the name of the novel decided by Tagore was *Binodini* but later he changed it to *Chokher Bali*. Nowadays, it is known as both *Binodini* as well as *Chokher Bali*. The plot is mainly based on the theme of Conjugality. The complications in the novel start with the entering of the attractive young widow Binodini into the lives of happily married couple, Mahendre and Ashalata. Also entangled in the undercurrents of forbidden desire that develop between the key characters is Mahendre's bachelor friend Bihari. Rajlakshmi, Mahendre's possessive mother and his widowed aunt Anapurna are the rest of the key players. All these characters behave accordingly to create the havoc in the lives of all the characters. Order is restored at the end and estranged couple is reunited, but the reader is left with the feeling that the experiences narrated in the text left 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. For example, in the 10 Jyestha 1310 BE issue of the journal *Rangalya*, Panchkori Bandyopadhyay says: '*Chokher Bali* has many flaws; for it also has many merits.

Rabi babu has demonstrated his true genius indeed; but it has not proved worthy of our taste. An English novel has been composed in Bengali.’ He then concedes, in English, ‘but it is a masterpiece’ (Bhattacharya 133).

Apropos of its mixed reception, at the times of publication, *Chokher Bali* has 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).

According to Sujit Mukherjee, this interest in psychology is not Tagore’s individual achievement, but a reflection of the prevailing trends of the time: ‘the tireless scrutiny of the motives which Tagore turns upon the characters of his earlier novels... is as true of the spirit of the times as is it is in accordance with the dictum announced by Tagore in his introduction to the novel

Chokher Bali (1903)’ (175). Although, the figure of Binodini does not represent a ‘modern’ sensibility explicable through western theory, nor it represent the stereotypes of the 19th century Bengali woman created by Bankim, ‘For Binodini is neither a ‘Prachina’ who worships her husband devotedly, nor a ‘Nabina’ who neglects home and hearth in her pursuit of education and social sophistication, nor a coarse woman of the ‘common’ working class.’ (Panja 214-18).

Having created a revolutionary figure like Binodini, Tagore seemed at loss to find an appropriate resolution to her predicament (R. Chakravarty 60). Tagore had changed twice the end of the novel. The original ending first relinquished and then restored (in the 1941 edition of *Rabindranath Rachnavali*) with Tagore’s approval carried the narrative beyond the scene of forgiveness between Rajlakshmi and the estranged couple, Mahendre and Asha. Tagore’s dissatisfaction with the denouement led him to change the end of the novel twice and the readers also remain dissatisfied with ending of the novel. For instance, Buddhadev Basu declares that the ending of the novel is weak and negligible:

‘the denouement is nothing but a lifeless, patchwork job, and it seems hard to believe that this novel, created in “the factory of the mind” should end at this point’ (190-91).

After an introduction to the novels, a reading of their protagonists juxtaposed against each other and against the contemporary social constructions of gender would explicate the premise of this paper that Tagore was essentially a humanist in his perception any issue relating to nationalism, conjugality, universalism, etc. and with this he tried to transcend the social constructions of gender by viewing ‘men’ and ‘women’ as first and foremost and essentially ‘human’.

If we look into the novel *The Home and The World*, there is the simple story of a husband and a wife; Nikhilesh and Bimala respectively. Nikhilesh is a wealthy, modern and highly educated man and his wife Bimala from her pre-marriage background is not so wealthy, not so beautiful and not so educated. It is Nikhilesh who wanted his wife to be an educated and modern woman. In the process of her modernization Nikhilesh introduces her with a social activist Sandip with whom she later developed adulterous infatuation. With the character of Bimala, Tagore draws a

powerful character through which Tagore transcended the conventional gender stereotype of woman of being an embodiment of piety though in the beginning of the novel, Bimala reinforces the female stereotype of being a prototype of piety. As in the conventional society a woman is venerated as the embodiment of Goddess and the mark of civilization, ‘... woman figure is embedded within certain ‘mythic’ structures which have defined the Indian civilization’ (Lal 228). She thought her life is devoted to her husband, in the beginning of the novel she is proud of her chastity and the sacredness of her thoughts. Once she remarks, ‘I would be blessed with the gift of chastity’ (Tagore 669). And about her devotion of husband she asserts, ‘I remember, when I wake up at dawn and very cautiously, touched my husband’s feet... it was the woman’s heart where love itself seeks to worship’ (ibid:670). Bimala who learned from her mother that woman is the makeup of virtues only and knows that a wife’s life is dedicated to her husband, Breaks all these shackles of conventionality and develops an adulterous infatuation towards Sandip. She herself asserts in the novel, ‘... this Veena of mine made of flesh and blood, thoughts and ideas began to play

in the Sandip's hands only' (ibid:709). So Tagore with his rationalistic approach does not carry the conventional stereotype and challenged it in his character of Bimala and tries to convey that to generalize the traits to particular sex is vague. All the traits are actually are the manifestations of the innate human feelings and emotions.

Nikhilesh husband of Bimala, believes in compatriot marriage. Seeking for companionship he acquaints Bimala with his friend Sandip who is a social activist, to bring her out of the home and wants her to know about the world. But during her meetings with Sandip, Bimala develops an adulterous infatuation towards him. Knowing all about his wife Bimala's attraction towards Sandip, Nikhilesh remains passive; rather blames himself for all that is happening. In this context, he asserts 'I wonder how I look through Bimala's eyes. Too stern perhaps; I have the bad habit of taking everything too seriously' (Tagore 706). Here in the character of Nikhilesh, Tagore shows a sense of his resentment to the prevalent myths of masculinity. During those times remaining passive inside the home was considered an effeminate character. So, Tagore

deliberately made a socially constructed effeminate character; and gives a new perspective to the question of masculinity. The way Nikhilesh acts in the novel does not compliment the prevalent notion of masculinity. As in a conventional social setup, if a wife is unfaithful to her husband and the husband knows about his wife's infidelity, the normal reaction of the husband would be either he will beat his wife and divorce her and to become adulterous too. The character of Sandip in the novel clearly represents the conventional concept of masculinity. He also gets into adulterous relationship with Bimala and never remains passive and introspective. Rather, he feels proud of his masculinity. Tagore presents Nikhilesh as more valiant and more masculine version by detracting him from the conventional notion of masculinity. Nikhilesh is more introspective, careful of his behavior towards other, always prepared for criticisms and knows how to face them, have the valor to accept the negative and to make them positive. All these traits cannot be acquired by a normal man of the contemporary society as these are much difficult to follow. It is easy to run away from the situation but Nikhilesh is the character who faces all the phases in the life

of his and his wife in the novel and never loses his temper rather probed himself closely and waited till the end. Tagore, in the character of Nikhilesh presents an alternate concept of masculinity which is more humanistic. Sumit Sarkar argues, 'Nikhil's inner conflicts constitute Tagore's attempt to explore an alternative conception of masculinity, moving through self-examination and auto critique towards a non-instrumentalized recognition of others' (148).

The third integral character of the novel is Sandip, who is professionally an activist in the Swadeshi movement of India in the novel. He represents the existing prototype of masculinity of the contemporary India. Moreover, he belongs to that strata of society, where a man wants to fulfill his desires by any means; either by conning or genuinely. Sandip is a character in the novel who worships passions and desires. As he remarks 'but I am not entirely just what I desire, what I think or what I decide. I am also which I don't like, which I don't desire. I was created even before I was born; I haven't been able to select myself' (Tagore 717). Sandip gets whatever he desires in the novel. He desires to be an

integral part in the life of Bimala, he desire for money, popularity among masses and he fulfills all his desires. After fulfilling all his desires he still shows discontentedness with his life. He desires for more. Tagore, here draws the character of Sandip in contrast to the character of Nikhilesh to show the dark reality in the 'Bhadralok' of the contemporary Bengali society. Men like Sandip went into the Swadeshi agitation not for the political cause but for themselves. They went on the agitation but worked for themselves in order to fulfill their desires. Sandip wants to become national figure without doing anything vital for the nation. He reaped money from Bimala in the name of political cause for his personal comforts. He involved Bimala with himself to fulfill his bodily desires in the guise of Swadeshi movement and by projecting her in her eyes as the reincarnation of the deity of India, as Shakti, the motherland as powerful Goddess. According to Tanika Sarkar, 'Sandip effects a change of figuration in the conception of nationhood, recasting the nation not as mother, but as beloved' (34). Tagore presents Sandip as a clear embodiment of desires and passions.

The second novel *Chokher Bali* is the earliest novel of Tagore published in the beginning of the twentieth century. During the time of its publication, the social condition of Bengal was in the process of modernization, rather it was the time when conventional ideology was on its zenith. It is a story revolves around three characters- Mahendre and Asha; a married couple and a widow Binodini. Mahendere marries Asha out of the possessiveness which is caused by his bosom friend Biharilal. Earlier the match was made between Asha and Bihari but when Mahendre see Asha, he renews the proposal to Asha which he had refused earlier. After the marriage, the couple spent their love life happily. Mahendre's mother Rajlakshmi gradually relegated into the shadows and felt grossly neglected. This is the reason that paved the way for the entry of the widow Binodini into their household who was brought by Rajlakshmi for her upkeep. Asha and Binodini befriend each other and Asha wants to introduce Binodini to her husband Mahendre. She, however, cannot foresee the consequences. Mahendre becomes the object of desire of the widow Binodini. Mahendre in the middle of novel enters into an adulterous relationship with Binodini. Here Tagore sketches the

character of Mahendre, according to the social conventions. Mahendre is a normal Bengali Bhadrak, who gets into the adultery because society implicitly gives him consent for it. In the novel, if this act would have been committed by Asha, then she will be ostracized by the society. But in case of Mahendre, when everybody knows about his adultery everyone including his wife is reconciled. This is not because Asha is some enlightened figure in the novel rather she is someone who is not supposed to question her husband. Rather, Mahendre also knew somewhere that this immoral act of his will be forgiven. As Sen in her book *Memsahib's Writings: colonial Narratives on Indian women* quotes *Manusmriti* as-

... She is taught to love, serve, obey her husband in all things; to her he is to be as a God. And here comes in the general principle spoken of above; his faults do not excuse any failure in her duty; she is taught to be the ideal wife, whether or not he be the ideal husband, and though both continually fail, the ideal is still taught and

recognized... but she must remain faithful however dutiless he may be. (211)

So, if one probes it carefully then one can say that Tagore is actually questioning the patriarchal setup within the character of Mahendre. Radha Chakravarty asserts, 'though order is ostensibly restored at the end of the novel and the estranged couple is reunited, the narrative leaves exposed the inadequacies and contradictions inherent in the patriarchal ideals of conjugal love and feminine virtue' (59).

The character of Asha is full of complexities. If we look at her in one way she is the victim in Mahendre-Binodini adulterous relationship and on the other she is the one who implicitly provokes Mahendre to get attracted towards Binodini. As in the beginning, if we notice Asha is a character that cannot be fitted into the domestic image of woman as she doesn't know about the domestic chores and at the same time she cannot be fitted into the modernized Bengali woman version. She is innocent and inept, and her ignorance of domestic skills at first disarms Mahendre, but later annoys him. This is because there is no other young woman before Binodini in

the household whom he has closely noticed. On gazing the expertise of Binodini in every domain in the household Mahendre is dumbfounded. Binodini is much more smart, intelligent and beautiful compared to Ashalata. And the fatal part played by Asha is her stubborn insistence to Mahendre to meet her Bali i.e. Binodini.

Asha reconciled in the end because she is a Hindu Wife but she cannot suppress her human self and as a woman she is unable to accept her husband Mahendre's adulterous relationship with Binodini. She does not voice any protest, but in her heart of hearts she develops contempt for Mahendre and asserts her individual independence. This phase of Asha is noticed by Bihari in the novel when he muses, 'This young woman had bathed in the holy waters of sorrow and acquired a divine status like the goddesses of ancient times- she was no longer an ordinary mortal; terrible grief seemed to have made her as old as the ascetic women that the puranas described' (Tagore 138). Though, Asha forgives Mahendre in the end, as social norms made her to do so because of her objectified trait of remaining passive in such circumstances. But, Tagore also tries to empower her by

showing the act of Asha's forgiveness emerging from a new sense of her own identity and her power to choose.

Binodini is the character in the novel on which Tagore had worked a lot. The character of Binodini is the version of modern woman created by Tagore. She is an educated woman as her father ensures that she has been taught by a Mem. If we compare her with the rest of the female characters in the novel; Asha's education is left to the whims of Mahendre; and Rajlakshmi and Annapurna are not so educated. So Tagore with the backup of modern education creates an iconoclastic character of Binodini. She exhibits her modernity in the novel very boldly. Introduced as Widow, she did not spend her life as widows were supposed to. She entered into the household of Rajlakshmi with the help of latter. After becoming doubly suppressed i.e. being a woman and then being a widow in an early age, she never suppressed her desires. Being an insignificant part in the household, she transforms and disturbs the life of the member of household. Binodini fulfills all her desires in the household by feeling all what a married woman desires. When she

helped Asha in getting ready for the night tryst with her husband Mahendre, Binodini felt that same feeling in the guise of Asha which the latter is supposed to feel. Later, she fulfills her desire by making an adulterous love with Mahendre. She asserts her needs, 'Am I am animate object? Am I not human? Am I not a woman?' (Tagore 69). In a letter to Mahendre she writes, 'I have no right to love or to be loved. So, I play games to compensate for my lack of love' (ibid: 238). And on the other hand she has all the qualities deemed necessary for a bride of the house and easily takes the place of Asha in the household affairs. All these desires which she fulfills are because of the character created by Tagore that of a woman who is an expertise in domestic chores and educated as well. And on the other side, the character alternate to Binodini is that of Ashalata who is sketched as uneducated and novice by Tagore. Although, there were attempts to uplift the position of widow in those times (i.e. like Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856), the position of the widow did not improve much. She was still supposed to lead a life of severe discipline and celibacy. As Dharamshastra decreed that widows-

Should give up adorning her hair, chewing betel-nuts, wearing perfumes, flowers, ornaments and dyed clothes, taking food from a vessel of bronze, taking two meals a day, applying collyrium to her eyes; she should wear a white garment, should curb her senses and anger,... should be pure and of good conduct, should always worship God.(Kane 584)

And Binodini was still supposed to live that life of celibacy.

Judith Butler argues that gender is the outcome of the culturally constructed behaviors and the differences between the genders is based on the division of labor and their roles in the society. On the basis of this gender difference society gives birth to the stereotyping of the genders. Gender is also like a social class and race, which can be used to socially categorize people and even lead to prejudices and discrimination. Like if we take an instance of adultery, the image of 'Sita' is blindly imposed on the Indian women from the religious texts by society so, she cannot be adulterous but a man can be and his adultery would be acceptable in

the society. Thus, a woman is stereotyped as an embodiment of piety.

As discussed above, through his characters, Tagore challenges the social constructions of gender. Bimala is one of the more powerful characters drawn by Tagore through which he shows that a trait is not something which a society can construct. Rather these traits and their manifestations are the act of innate human feelings and emotions. Bimala has developed an adulterous infatuation towards Sandip which is the result of her attraction for him. Knowing that adultery is sin for her and her life is meant to be devoted to her husband and knowing all the Indian women stereotypes, she is in an extra-marital affair. On the parallel lines in *Chokher Bali* Mahendre is also involved in an adulterous relationship with the widow Binodini. Adultery is a trait usually associated with the male gender. As Nemai Sadhan Bose in the book *The Indian Awakening and Bengal* states, '... 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). By

juxtaposing Bimala against Mahendré Tagore challenges the stereotypical notions of adultery and fidelity.

The question of masculinity in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century Bengali society was a debatable issue and many scholars have given their alternate concepts for it and Tagore has also dealt with this issue very well in his character of Nikhilesh of *The Home and The World*. Tagore here also stresses on the human subjectivity and questions the prevalent myths of masculinity. Nikhilesh, though fully aware of his wife's infidelity, never blames her. He rather remains passive and blames himself for all that is happening. This passiveness is a trait which is considered to be feminine. Here Tagore tries to come up with a new conception of masculinity that is 'effeminate' according to conventions but according to Tagore is humanistic. On the other hand, there is a female character Ashalata wife of Mahendré in the novel *Chokher Bali*. She also suffers the same fate as Nikhilesh. Being an average wife of a husband, she is unable to accept Mahendré's adultery. She does not voice any protest, because of her stereotyped trait of remaining passive in all circumstances

including the lapse of the husband. Both the characters of Tagore; a male and a female exhibit the same trait of remaining passive. By creating such characters Tagore once more challenged the stereotype of remaining passive and critiqued the prevailing notions of masculinity and femininity.

Woman's predicament is always a central concern in the novels of Tagore. But widow's predicament is perfectly manifested in his iconoclastic character Binodini of *Chokher Bali*. During the times of Tagore, widows are supposed to lead a hardcore life of celibacy. Dipesh Chakrabraty observes, 'the widow, denied voice and desire, represent the ultimate level of sub-alterneity within the domestic sphere' (60).

Tagore was very much moved by the lack of any social status to the widows. So he created a dissident desirous widow; Binodini. The trait 'desire' that is usually an attribute of men and mostly socially denied to or labeled, unacceptable in women is taken out of the conventional gender connotation and treated as a basic woman trait. This is poignantly underlined by Tagore by associating it not only with the woman but with a widow that was at the time considered a social and religious

sacrilege. The character of desirous Binodini created havoc in at the time. Radha Chakravarty asserts, 'the contemporary critics were outraged at the baldness with which the novel challenged prevailing myth about women, particularly the legend of 'Sita' the epitome of the purity' (93). Out of her desirous ambitions, Binodini indulges in all those activities that are associated with married women to the extent that she begins to occupy the central place, associated with the lady of the house, in Mahendré's household. Sandip of *The Home and the World* on the other hand is also an embodiment of desires and passions. Sandip also gets what he desire in the novel. As in the previously discussed instance Ashalata is juxtaposed with Nikhilesh, here Binodini and Sandip are parallel characters drawn on similar lines despite or may be because of their gender differences. Love, desire, lust, acceptance, tolerance – the basic emotions and feelings, according to Tagore, transcend the domain of man or woman and are placed in the domain of human.

Tagore's views on gender are very much comprehensive and he is not blind to life and he understood that there are no fixed traits for both the sexes. He is presenting the

realistic picture of human traits that are psychologically accurate rather than idealized stereotypes, his characters of the novels do not have a specific agenda, they are bound to express the spirit of the age. Due to bursting most of the prevalent gender stereotypes in society, a wave of adverse criticism was directed towards him. In defense, Tagore published his profound views on gender, in a paper titled 'Sahityavichar' or 'Thoughts on Literature' in the chaitra 1326 issue of the journal *Prabasi*. Here he argued that he was writing about human nature, not in black and white, but in all shades of grey, and that despite the popular feeling that he had betrayed the lofty ideals of Hindu civilization, the classical text of that civilization were always alive to the mixture of traits that makes up human character (R. Chakravarty 94).

While redefining the existing notion of 'masculinity' and conventional 'femininity', Tagore created characters, which contradicts the gender construction, although some of his observations at times suggest a simplistic notion of 'natural' division of sex roles. His idea of being a complete human lies in a letter, which he wrote to Hemantbala devi (3 December,

1931), where he speaks of a 'feminine' side to men and a 'masculine' side to women, arguing for a balance between these dual tendencies within each individual. He says: 'In a sense, each of us embodies the *Ardhanarishwar*... if the world was divided between pure women and pure men; there could never be a union of the two. Hence, mutual understanding between the sexes is not blocked, yet it also remains possible to retain our respective rights and distinctive characteristics' (R. Chakravarty 20). It is due to such holistic appreciation and comprehension of humanity that Tagore's position in the world literary canon remains that of a Social writer.

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