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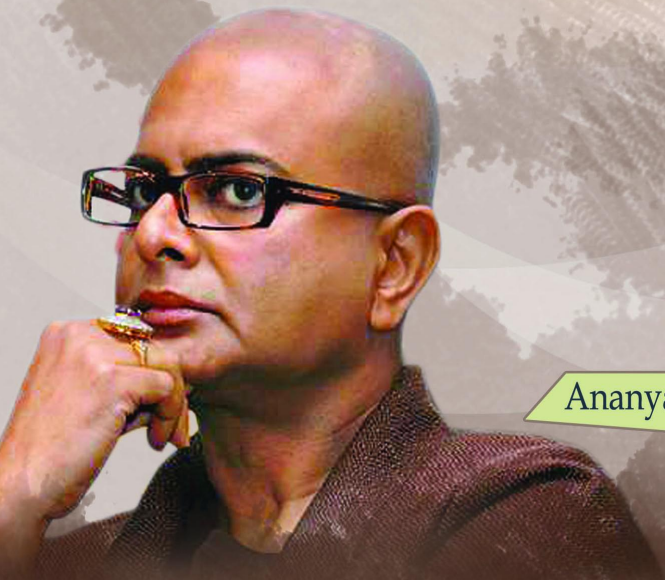
The Women Question in Tagore`s Writing

A Case Study of Rituparno Ghosh's Chokher Bali



Ananya Bhattacharjee

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To
my Parents
for their love and encouragement

Foreword

Nineteenth century Bengal has always fascinated writers, historians, cultural theorists and film makers alike. The tremendous traffic of knowledge both to and from Bengal, the nascent (and soon to be burgeoning) sense of nationalism, the social reform movements, the consistently changing landscapes of politics and history, and above all, the radical changes that were coming about in the lives of women: these are the contexts of *Chokher Bali* by Rabindranath that Ananya Bhattacharjee examines in this book. While Tagore's period is fascinating in itself, it is doubly interesting to analyze how a postcolonial / post-independence filmmaker like Rituparno Ghosh enters into the area and presents it to modern spectatorship. Like all adaptation studies, this book has to keep in view two different timelines and the complexities involved in the process of retelling a well-known text from an iconic author and presenting it on celluloid. Additionally, there are questions of genre that must be addressed. These are some of the challenges that Ananya faces, and she enthusiastically manages to grapple with the tricky issues that are thrown up. Her writing is lucid and her engagement with her subject places this book as an honest and very readable work in the area.

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Preface

Fiction and film are two distinct and different genres but both have emerged as one of the most accessible communicators of narrative in our modern culture. A comparative study of these two different media helps incredibly to analyse a text in a unique and new light. In this book, a humble attempt at a comparative study of Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Chokher Bali* and its film adaptation by the director Rituparno Ghosh has been made which, it is hoped, will open up new vistas for aesthetic and intellectual gratification.

By making a comparative study between literary composition and cinematic works of various periods, one is able to find the similarities and differences between these two media and discover the literary qualities inherent in almost all cinemas. Adaptation, since its inception, has been quite popular among the audiences. Works of writers like William Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy, Daniel Defoe, Emily Bronte, Joseph Conrad and others have been adapted into the cinema. Director William Wyler received great success with the release of *Wuthering Heights* (1939). Akira Kurasawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), an adaptation of *Macbeth* and Orson Welles *Macbeth* (1948) are some of the best films made on Shakespeare.

Coming to the history of Bengali cinema, it started in 1890s when the first 'bioscopes' were shown in the theatres of Kolkata. In 1919, the first Bengali movie *Billwamangal*, a silent one was made. Several works of popular Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee were adapted into films such as *Krishnakanther Will*, *Bhishabriksha* and so on. In 1935 Pramathesh Barua directed and acted in Saratchandra Chatterjee's popular novel *Devdas.* The films, were in the beginning, theatrical adaptations and then were cinematic translations from popular literary pieces and novels by renowned writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhayay, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhayay and others.

Along with directors like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen, Rituparno Ghosh is one of the most experimentative directors in the Bengali film industry. Though he has worked in Bengali, his native language, with tales and themes that are rooted in Bengali culture, his films have an appeal so universal

that it has reached out to the national and international audiences through various film festivals worldwide. Ghosh started his career by directing in advertisements. His debut film titled *Hirer Angti* was released in 1992. His second movie *Unishe April* won the 1995 National Film Award. Since then Ghosh has directed *Dahan*, *Utsab*, *Chokher Bali*, *Asookh*, *Bariwali*, *Antarmahal*, *Raincoat* (in Hindi) and has many other films to his credit. The film "Chokher Bali" is based on Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Chokher Bali.* In order to make a distinction between the identical names of the novel and the film, *Chokher Bali*, I have italiced the name of the novel and used inverted commas to denote the film throughout my book. But the names of the rest of the films are in italics. Interestingly enough, Tagore's book got published in 1903 and the film was released a century after the novel in 2003.

Rituparno Ghosh is the creator of many intellectual films in India. He considered himself as part of the parallel or art films tradition in the country. Apart from commercial cinema, there is also Indian art cinema, known to film critics as "New Indian Cinema" or sometimes as "Indian New Wave". This genre of art films was established during the 1960s. The directors of the art cinema owed much to foreign influences, such as Italian Neo-Realism or French New Wave. The famous New Cinema directors were Mrinal Sen, Bimol Roy, Ritwik Ghatak, Satyajit Ray and others. Most of the parallel cinema has female protagonists performing the central role. All of Ghosh's award-winning films namely *Unishe April*, *Dahan*, *Asookh* and *Bariwali* have women-related issues as its theme. "Chokher Bali" is also no exception. Ghosh confesses that he dislikes adding his films with more glamour than necessary. *Asookh* deals with two things Ghosh is famous for, solitariness of an individual and fragmentation of human relationships. "I am more interested in the subterranean layers of such relationships: be it between mother and daughter (*Unishe April*), two young women bound by the commonness of their gender (*Dahan*), unrelated men and women (*Badiuli*) or a father and a daughter (*Asookh*)", explained Ghosh (Personal Interview in *Star Jalsha*). His contribution towards film-making is immense but unfortunately he died young, following a hear attack in 2013.

After the release of "Chokher Bali" in 2003 he made the following statements in an interview. He said that "Chokher Bali" had been a long-time dream-come-true for him. He also commented that he loves to make films on subjects that he understands the most. He feels that he understands the inner feelings of a woman, their passions, agony and sufferings. Binodini is one of the most complex characters Tagore has etched. Since this was an adaptation from an original work of literature, there was nothing new he could have done with the story or script. But of course his treatment was different. It was the delicate interplay of relationships that touched him. The story offered him a vast matrix of relationships, which, he as a director, could play around in myriad different ways. *Chokher Bali* struck him as a very original text to begin with, dealing as it

does with fragility of loyalty within marriage. The 'period' flavour he could invest the film with was another attraction. Tagore's original story did not have any time-reference. The novel offered him the chance of preparing the 'period' for the film, in a way bringing in a sense of history and retelling.

The object of my study is to investigate the issues concerning the relationship between women and nation. I will place the novel and the film in the historical and socio–cultural conditions of the late 19th and early 20th century Bengal. I will discuss Tagore's views on women and society through his novel and also analyse how Ghosh, being a contemporary director responded to that period of Bengal via Tagore. This book has been divided into six chapters.

Acknowledgement

During the period of my study, I have been guided and helped by many people to whom I must extend my heartfelt thanks. I express my gratitude to my M. Phil guide Dr. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri, who has introduced me not only to the issues surrounding the phenomenon of adaptation but also helped me to understand the evolving relationship between gender and nation. I am indebted to my Ph.D. supervisor Dr. Aparna Bhattacharyya for her constant support, suggestions and motivation. Her mentoring and encouragement has helped me to grow as a research scholar. I must also thank Dr. Bibhash Choudhury who has advised and helped me at different moments of my study.

I thank my parents without whom this book would not have ever happened. Their love and care has sustained me so far and I cannot thank them enough for the sacrifices they have made for me and my career.

Ananya Bhattacharjee

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1

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore is a major presence when one thinks of Bengal and its culture; a paramount figure in Bengali literature. A collection of poems, *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings), secured for him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. He excelled in various genres of art and culture and became renowned as a poet, dramatist, novelist, composer, actor, singer, editor of the Bengali literary journal (*Sadhana*). He composed more than 2000 poems and 3000 songs. As a literary genius he had deep knowledge of the society of his days and was a staunch lover of nature. Tagore founded *Shantiniketan*[1] in a natural surrounding thereby giving vent to his passion for nature and a new education system. It is common knowledge that Tagore was absorbed in the world of words and his imaginative world resulted in the production of a great number of novellas, songs, poetry and plays. It is interesting to know how Tagore got associated with cinema. During pre–independence times, Tagore travelled to various places to perform and collect funds for the establishment of his university (*Vishvabharati*). It was during those days that his troupe staged a dance-drama, *Notir Puja*, based on a story he had written. In 1932, on the occasion of Tagore's 70th birth anniversary, New Theatres, one of the prominent filmmaking studios, arranged the filming of *Notir Puja* which the poet had staged in 1927. This was the only time that Tagore was so closely associated with cinema with the screenplay being written under his guidance by his nephew Dinendranath Tagore while he himself composed the background music, with students of *Santiniketan* acting in the film. Tagore not only directed but also played a significant role in the film.

Over the years, close to a 100 films, more than half in Bengali, have been

made on Tagore's works, making him one of the most adapted writers of all time. This number would have been bigger if many of the films had not been lost forever. Also, many do not even acknowledge Tagore. Many more projects have been- announced in the last few years, ever since Tagore's work came into public domain. Rabindranath Tagore's contribution to cinema thus demands serious attention from scholars of cinema, literature and history itself.

Tagore and the Socio-Cultural Space

During the latter decades of the 19th century, questions about the roles and rights of women were outwardly overtaken by the rhetoric of the imperialists' efforts to use Indian women as cultural markers in the argument about whether there was any justification for British rule in India. Tagore, in a series of women-oriented stories written between 1892–95, offered a dissenting outlook to the idea that the 'women's question' disappeared during this time through his depiction of the physical and psychological struggle experienced by Bengali men and women caught between the competing legal and societal regulations of British–controlled India. Tagore succeeded in showing that the question of the role of women remained an important issue. Tagore's heroines lived within the spaces created by nationalist and imperialistic ideologies and began to emerge as hybrid versions of simultaneously traditional and modernised Bengali subjects. His description of their defiance to externally imposed identifications present a powerful critique of the way nation, gender and imperialism intersected under colonial rule. Tagore claimed *Chokher Bali* as his first full–length work of literature. In this story, the issue of Bengal's partition and the lack of freedom for Indians are blended with the protagonist Binodini's personal quest for independence. Tagore's project focussed on contemporary women in Bengal which many films based on his writings has reflected. His women – be it the little girl Minnie in "Kabuliwala" or the adolescent Mrinmoyee in *Upahar* – are successful portrayals of the same dilemma that Binodini faces.

The Cinematic World of Choker Bali

Tagore's works are universal in time, place, feelings and human relations. They offer directors a challenge to make the film as strong and alluring on screen as it is in words. Many films based on Tagore's works have caught attention of various critics. Among them a huge volume of scholarly essays came out after Satyajit Ray's *Charulata*, leading to a new genre of writing on films based on Tagore's works. In "Chokher Bali" Rituparno Ghosh reconstructs the various worlds of Tagore so that it mirrors the past almost superimposed, as it were, on our present.

We have seen numerous efforts by filmmakers across the world striving to bring the sensitivity and pathos of the widows of the pre-independence era on

screen. One such exemplary effort is "Chokher Bali", (2003) a remake of Tagore's novel. Set between 1902 and 1905, Rituparno Ghosh illustrates Tagore's characters skilfully in this dramatic tale of deceits and relationship manipulations. In the film we are straightaway introduced to Binodini (Aishwarya Rai) whose marriage proposal is rejected by Mahendra (Prosenjit Chatterjee) because he isn't ready for marriage. She gets married to another man, Bipin who unfortunately, dies within a year. A widowed Binodini accepts her fate and settles down to a monotonous life in her village.

Meanwhile, there are celebrations in Kolkata as Mahendra brings his new bride Ashalata (Raima Sen) home, who was supposed to be marrying Mahendra's cousin Behari (Tota Raychaudhuri) till Mahendra stepped in. Behari has a soft corner for his sister-in-law but doesn't disclose it for his family's sake. On the other hand Mahendra's mother Rajlakshmi (Lily Chakraborty) visits her native village and brings Binodini along with her to Calcutta home as a maid and support.

It is within these relationships that love and faith degenerate into lust, deceit and adultery. Binodini and Ashalata instantly become best friends and even find nicknames for each other, 'Chokher Bali' which literally means 'sand-in-the-eye'. Sreejata Guha explains this metaphor in her note on the title of the book *Chokher Bali*. She says that the phrase 'Chokher Bali' means a grain of sand that lodges in the eye, an irritant, a source of discomfort. A grain of sand can bring tears to the eye, and can cause a pearl to form inside the oyster's shell. In *Chokher Bali* Binodini performs the function of this grain of sand. She lodges herself within Mahendra and Ashalata's household, afflicts their romance and through tears and tribulations, helps their relationship mature into a pearl. Binodini, suppressing her physical needs, is easily fascinated by the only two men she is close to at home, Mahendra and Behari. Mahendra reciprocates but although Behari is attracted he cannot make a move as he is sworn to celibacy. Mahendra and Binodini begin an affair which eventually turns out to be devastating as Ashalata continues to blindly trust Binodini and also her husband.

Finally, when the cat is out of the bag, it wreaks havoc in the household; Binodini rushes to Behari for repentance and forgiveness. The rest of the film unfolds in the holy city of Kashi where decisions are made and truths revealed. Binodini, on the other hand, remains indecisive about her future till the very end. Despite Binodini's clever tricks and attempts at enticing men, she does not come across as a clichéd negative character, such is the sensitivity of the director and the genius of Tagore's writing.

Tagore's Reflection on the Ending

Tagore commented that he had always regretted the ending of *Chokher Bali*. He ended the novel with the words of Binodini, "You forgive me too, Thakurpo.

May God grant you two eternal happiness." (Tagore. 2003. 287). It is suggestive that after this Binodini and Annapurna settle down at Kashi as was decided by both of them earlier. Binodini gave up all her hopes from the world and retired to an austere life at Kashi. Tagore later thought that such an ending was not in keeping with the kind of person Binodini really was. The ending suggested complete submission on the part of Binodini towards the orthodox and conservative society of her times. A non-conformist position would have been a more suitable ending for a 'strong' woman like her. The film "Chokher Bali" by Rituparno Ghosh follows almost the same storyline of the novel and tells a story about changing relationships and temptations. It is a saga of a widow who does not give into the prevalent cultural norms and society's rules. It is a glimpse into the rich Bengali culture and its conservative mindset, where for instance, drinking tea by a widow was considered a sin. Ghosh ends his narrative differently from Tagore's story. Ghosh's Binodini does not return to the confines of her society but rather disappears leaving behind a letter for Ashalata and the opera-glasses which she had used to view the world outside.

Chokher Bali/ "Chokher Bali" is situated at the time when the British were planning to divide Bengal for their own political interests. Against this is set the story of a woman struggling to free herself from the bondage of the age-old systems. My discussion will therefore engage with –

- The 'Women's Question' dominant in the late 19th and early 20th century discourse in Bengal.
- The attempt of representing how the political/personal binaries—the home and the world—share spaces with each other with the effect of projecting women within an alternative framework of cinema.

The Bengali Society and the Bengali Woman

In order for us to understand these issues, it would be useful to grasp the idea of "individualism" that was constructed for Bengali middle class women of the 19th and 20th century. The colonial period had witnessed the duality of Bengali nationalism in shaping women's subjectivity.

Women were situated by the Bengali nationalist ideals in the realm of the ahistorical, traditional, and spiritual arena of the home. The rules and logic that worked in the public life were questioned and altered in the private domain of the home. I shall try and analyse this home-world, public-private, Western-Bengali dichotomy by studying Tagore's treatment of female characters in *Chokher Bali*.

Now, the question that can haunt a researcher is—was individualism prohibited for 19th century Bengali women by the newly constructed patriarchy that worked towards the purpose of female emancipation? Partha Chatterjee, in

his "Nation and its Women", has spelled out the home/world, spiritual/material, private/public, East/West, and female/male dichotomy to locate the ahistorical, *shastric*, and self-sacrificing positioning of women by 19th century Bengali nationalism.[2]

The home, the private space, and the woman were the three realms which constituted the spiritual domain and were identified as the sacred space where the Bengali all-powerful male exercised his sovereignty. It is in this context that the idea of Western modernism came to be seriously contested. This was done through changing the meaning of the word "freedom" for women with the intention of restricting them from fully exploring their individual wills and desires, and thus keeping intact "the ideal" of an extended joint family that demanded total subjugation, selfless devotion, and endless service from women. The nationalists conceptualised this word to create cultural demarcations that assumedly differentiated the "European" from the "Indian." The 19th century "Indian" interpretation of the word "freedom" considerably differed from the one understood in the West: it was argued that in the West, "freedom" meant *jathecchachar*, to do as one wished, and the agency to self-indulge; in India, however, "freedom" meant being free from one's ego, and the ability to sacrifice and serve willingly.[3] It is in the context of this understanding of the word freedom for the female individual that Tagore's rendering of Binodini's character in *Chokher Bali* (1903) is delineated.

Hence, Tagore's Binodini becomes an interesting read because *Chokher Bali* is hailed by critics as the foundation-stone of the modern Bengali novel that relied upon the detailed psychological method in which incidents and intentions are seen in a playful act. Although Tagore made an effort through *Chokher Bali* to delve deep into interrogating the widow's psyche, and offering a social solution to the widow problem by constructing the widow as an individual with free will and desires, in the end nevertheless, the novel returns to an ahistorical understanding of the widow's sexuality as a means of aesthetic rebellion against Westernised idea of modernity. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that sympathy derives from the application of reason to the human mind, and it creates a transcendental modern subject who from the position of a generalized and necessarily disembodied observer is capable of self-recognition on the part of an abstract, general human being. It is this so-called "sympathy" that enabled Tagore to realise the pangs of widowhood, and made possible for him to seek the interiority of a widow's mind. *Chokher Bali* provides a unique space to a deprived widow who followed her own will in order to occupy an honourable position within a patriarchal society.

Tagore admits in the Preface to *Chokher Bali* that the jealousy of Mahendra's mother Rajlakhsmi towards his wife, Ashalata, is the driving force of the novel, which creates the ground for Binodini and Mahendra's illicit love affair. Binodini's

primary jealousy around Ashalata is due to her recognition of her being a better householder than Asha. An unreciprocated sexual desire further aggravates Binodini's jealousy. Behari, Mahendra's friend, is introduced as a counter-force to Mahendra's selfishness and aggressive sexuality. Binodini's love creates complete unrest in the family, but she, being an enlightened individual, takes the aid of her reason and decides to gravitate towards Behari after understanding the futility of her relationship with Mahendra. Behari, however, refuses to accept Binodini's proposal, and Binodini is awakened by the ultimate triumph of her reason at the end, after Rajlakhsmi's death, when she suddenly leaves the house of Mahendra, thereby making a decision for herself as a modern individual.

There has been a continuous tendency on the part of the women characters and their emotions in the novel to conquer the masculine forces of the novel. The men's emotions, love and selfishness, are rooted from their desire to own and master as many feminine forces in the novel as possible. Behari emerges triumphant over Mahendra, because at the end, Behari's intelligence and his application of reason gains him respect from all the female characters in the novel. Asha's complete mastery over Mahendra in the first part of the novel accounts for Mahendra's mother Rajlakshmi's jealousy towards her which in turn brings Binodini into the scene, and Binodini's jealousy against Ashalata and love for Mahendra pushes the narrative to a more complicated state where this play of emotions announces the absolute degeneration of moral and emotional equilibrium of the characters.

The Idea of Maya as a Counterblast to the Western Aesthetics

At the closure of the novel, it is reason that rules over emotion for every character, and things reach a settlement with Binodini's departure from the scene. Rubaiyat Hossain, a filmmaker and writer, comments that the word Tagore uses to describe the feminine emotions of love and jealousy is *maya*; women in this case are shown as *mayabinis*, creatures capable by their sexuality to manipulate and create instability in the masculine mind. Asha is shown as being naive in the game of *maya*, as opposed to her mother-in-law or Binodini. The absence of the essential female power of *maya* in Asha's character makes her more benevolent than the others.

Tagore's understanding of *maya* is developed on the same way as his nationalistic poetic mode described by Dipesh Chakrabarty, where the real nation portrayed in the prose language would transform itself into a poetic transcendental icon to mitigate the distance between the desired state of the nation from the actual chaos. Tagore uses the prose language to describe the moral pitfalls of his women characters but when he draws the conclusion, and tries to find out the cause for that, he probes into the domain of the ahistorical where the essence of *maya* and it mastery in the world of the mythical provides an explanation for the violent

treatment of female sexuality. Tagore's rationalisation for separating the feminine to the realm of the ahistorical is part of his larger design of aesthetic rebellion against the West.

Ghosh's Adaptation-Structure

Coming back to Rituporno Ghosh and his adaptation of the novel, the film "Chokher Bali" has presented a critique of a Hindu Bengali family that questions human society and its standardized beliefs. In this screenplay he has interwoven the cardinal human desires along with the rising nationalist zeal. He has visited 20th century Bengal and the picture that we are presented is from a 21st century viewpoint. Ghosh's Binodini stands as a recreation of Tagore's protagonist but in a new light. Ghosh has added some episodes to the original text that brings out the aspect of modernity more profoundly. There is a scene where Binidini orders to cut down some trees which initiate an argument between her and Behari. According to Behari cutting down trees is unethical to which Binodini replies that the tea he was drinking is also made of leaves that had once life in it. The way she defends her acts is quite in keeping with her education and provides justification of her modern approach towards life. Her abilities of a being a better 'housewife' than Ashalata is also clearly evident in the film. Mahendra's books in the library get eaten up by insects and termites and Binodini quickly provides a solution to it by surrounding the books with naphthalene. The red-jacket and tea-making episodes also speak of Binodini's ability to mould her to the changing times.

Fig. (i) The tea-making episode. A scene from "Chokher Bali showing Binodini in conversation with Rajlakshmi and Annapurna

In Fig. (i), Binodini convinces the two widows to relish the taste of tea which is otherwise forbidden for widows especially Brahmins. She talks about the refreshing quality of tea which also helps in getting rid of headaches. Binodini also states that according to Holy Scriptures, there is no mention of a sin relating to having tea by widows. The widows then agree to have it but they make sure that the room is closed and nobody sees them committing this 'sin'. They actually enjoy the drink and later ask for forgiveness from God.

In the red-jacket episode, Binodini teaches the naïve Ashalata to wear the red-jacket (blouse) which Mahendra has gifted her for their first anniversary.

Fig. (ii) The red-jacket episode in "Chokher Bali"

Binodini and other widows do not wear a blouse but drape themselves only in a piece of white cloth. Unlike others, Binodini knows to dress in a modern fashion. In this little moment of teaching Ashalata, Binodini takes a momentary bliss in dressing as a modern woman and this is a scene which projects Binodini's inner desire to move beyond the limitations of widowhood. In Fig. (ii), for the first time she is seen dressed in a red colour, a colour which is suggestive of marriage, sexuality, passion and so on. Throughout the film, Binodini is seen presenting a sharp contrast to the other female members of the family and she is viewed as the "New Woman"[4] that Tagore had represented in most of his literary pieces.

In my review of literature on these various aspects of my field of study, I will dwell upon various areas such as film theory, social science, history, women's studies and other relevant topics.

Books such as Tagore's *Rabindra Rachanabali* (16 vols., 1961), Prabath

Kumar Mukhopadhyay's *Rabindra-Jeevoni O Sahitya Prabeshak* (1970), Prashanto Kumar Pal's *Rabi Jeevoni* (2006), Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson's *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad Minded Man* (1995), Abu Sayyid Ayub's *Adhunikata O Rabindranath* (1968) and others have contributed immensely to my understanding of Rabindranath Tagore and his works. They introduced me to Tagore's contribution towards art and literature and also analysed his perception of ideas such as 'nation', 'freedom', 'modernity' and so on. Through most of his works he gave us some very bold women characters growing out of the new age. With that he abused in his own way the established social system and its evils hindering the advancement of women. His works have such a universal appeal that even today they attract directors across India to adapt them into films.

Film adaptations of literary texts have been going on since the very inception of the genre of film. There are various theories and practices that work for the making of a film. In order to understand the aspects that are involved in the process of film making, I have used books such as *Film Theory and Criticism* (2004) by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen and *Double Exposure: Fiction Into Film* (1989) by Joy Gould Boyum who have talked about the practice of translating books into films and described the various techniques involved in it such as the use of the close-up, parallel editing, montage, dissolve and others. It also suggests that films have the ability to embody, communicate, enforce and convey meanings. Andrew Dudley's book *Concepts In Film Theory* (1984) has brought to my attention the essential ideas integral to film making such as perception, representation, signification, narrative structure, action, interpretation and so on. Sergei M. Eisenstein's *The Film Sense* (1970) and Satyajit Ray's *Our Films Their Films* (1976) provides some of the most essential analyses and commentaries on cinema. These books provide a glimpse of the fundamental lessons of film-making and show how cinema has developed as the century's most potent and versatile art form. As a reference book, Timothy Mitchell's *Questions of Modernity* (2000) has been quite useful with regard to the issues concerning this study. It comments on the film "Chokher Bali" from a feminist perspective and offers a critique of the relevant period.

The period which the novel and the film in question deal with is of the distant past. As such a sound knowledge of the historical milieu of late 19th century and early 20th century is required for the proper understanding of the texts. Therefore, I have used some contextual works and one of them is Judith E. Walsh's *Domesticity in Colonial India* (2004). It offers an important analysis of the impact of imperialism on the individual, familial, and social structures of colonized people's lives. Walsh traces the altering Indian gender relations and the social–cultural reformulations of the late nineteenth century. The book *Rabindranath Tagore: A study of Women Characters* (1988) by M. Sarada seeks

to make a socio–political and psychological study of the women in Tagore's fictional world. The book provides a historical overview of the socio–political, cultural, religious and other influe-nces on the Bengali women folk at the turn of the century. The writer makes a perceptive study of the inner workings, the crisscross move-ments of the characters' thoughts. There is a rich diversity in Tagore's women, both in his conception and rendering of them. As the writer says, these characters are as varied as life itself. Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential *Provincializing Europe* (2000) addresses the symbolic figure of Europe that is often taken to be the original site of modernity in many histories of capitalist shift in non–Western countries. Chakrabarty's work gives us a pervading language to deal with modernity and anti–nationalist encounter. It also deals with basic themes of the thoughts and ideologies set by modernity and cultural diversity.

In *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (2005), Tanika Sarkar discusses ideas and traditions of India that have structured the conceptions of femininity, domesticity, wifeliness, and motherhood, and of India as a "Hindu" nation. Sarkar analyzes literary and cultural developments, the intellectual voices and popular culture that helped to create the real world of India today. Other books like *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (1989) by Sangari and Vaid, *Voices From Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (1991) by Malavika Karlekar have provided a comprehensive knowledge about the historical and socio–cultural milieu of colonial Bengal and also discussed extensively about the position of women during that period of time.

Almost all the writings of Tagore are women–centric. Be it fiction or play or poetry, he shows keen interest in women's life, their thoughts and feelings. Very few people have been able to understand female psychology like Tagore. The same holds true for the ace director Rituparno Ghosh. Most of his films have a central female protagonist and the whole story revolves round her and the society she lives in. He has offered many challenging roles to women with the motive of bringing a revolution in the mindset of the society which is seen, most of the times, being guided by orthodoxy and unjustified beliefs. This book concentrates on the lives of the women characters in *Chokher Bali*/"Chokher Bali".

Notes

1. *Shantiniketan*: It is a small town near Bolpur in the Birbhum district of West Bengal, India, and approximately 180 kilometres north of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). It was made famous by Rabindranath Tagore, whose vision became what is now a university town (Visva-Bharati University) that attracts visitors from all over the world each year. *Shantiniketan* is a tourist attraction also because Rabindranath lived here and created many of his literary classics. He founded this institution with the motive of spreading education in a natural environment in order to instil in his students the love of nature and art. He also attempted at blending the methods of learning of the

East and West. Visva Bharati, now more than a hundred years old, is one of the most prestigious universities of India with degree courses in humanities, social science, science, fine arts, music, performing arts, education, agricultural science and rural reconstruction.

2. See Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nation and its Women', in *Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, P-120

3. See Dipesh Chakrabarty *Provincializing Europe*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000, P-75

4. The 'new woman' of nationalist construction was to be free from some of the constraints of the older patriarchal tradition. She would be educated but would also maintain her Indian female identity and perform her household chores deftly.

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2

Historical Background of The Novel and The Film

The novel *Chokher Bali* by Rabindranath Tagore and the film "Chokher Bali" by Rituparno Ghosh deals with the period of colonial Bengal that is marked as the Bengal Renaissance. It is an age of awakening in Bengal in the various fields of philosophy, literature, economics, science and politics. The Bengal Renaissance initially was confined within the elite Bengali society but later spread out to all socio-cultural classes including the residential Muslims. This period began with the emergence of Raja Rammohon Roy and lasted through the nineteenth century. The other leaders of the Renaissance in Bengal were Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, Raja Radhakanto Deb, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansa and later Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Prafulla Chandra Roy, Jagadish Chandra Bose, Syed Amir Ali, Girish Ghosh and so on. Two prominent features of the Renaissance in Calcutta were: the formation of associations, societies and organizations; and emergence of innumerable newspapers and magazines. Another important aspect of the Bengal Renaissance movement was the formation of reform movements in both religious and socio-cultural fields. Western ideals and principles influenced this Renaissance movement in Bengal considerably. Thoughts about nationalism and independent ruling derived from the west were disseminated by the educated Bengali elite to all the masses through the various organisations, movements, and magazines.

The relation between the western influence under colonialism, the advent of print and standardised high literature and an awakening of the Indian thought

has been shown in many narratives of modern India. For long Bengal has been regarded by historians as the forerunner of modernity in the subcontinent. Invigorated with western education, Bengali intellectuals are supposed to have brought a western style 'Renaissance' in contemporary thought and the liberal arts. These studies have concentrated primarily on a dominant print culture by the educated elite, and have tended to assume a connection between western education, control over print technology, and dissemination of occidental knowledge.

Although nothing definite can be identified by the term, 'women's literature', it remains for us as a significant category. Throughout the 19th century, literary reformists looked down upon this literature as such, i.e., belonging to 'women'. As women developed as a significant reader group, they continued to be classified and stigmatised along those lines for the greater part of the period. Recent research on *bhadralok*[1] attempts to shape an ideal woman in the middle class, *bhadramahila*,[2] has been seen, to an extent, as a male *bhadralok* project to establish hold over the domains of the home and woman, to compensate for the loss of power and honour in public life. A primary concern of the nationalist reformers was to 'educate' the woman by isolating her from the vulgar 'antahpur', and refining her sensibilities in conformity to the dominant cultural discourse.[3] As the powerful and widely popular print culture entered the inner domains in the latter half of the century, works described as 'women's literature' were attacked.

Born in 1861 into a renowned family, Rabindranath grew up in the heart of Calcutta. He belonged to a period when the currents of three movements had moved the whole of India. The religious movement was headed by Rammohan Roy who laid the foundation of the *Brahmo Samaj* (1828), which had an overwhelming impact on a section of *bhadralok* community, including Tagore's family. The literary movement which was a revolution in literature had been initiated, especially in Bengal, by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the political movement started to lend voice to Indian people's dissatisfaction against colonial rule. The poet's mind and sensibilities were influenced by these environments.

In *Personality*, in an essay entitled "A Poet's School," he emphasizes the importance of an empathetic sense of interconnectedness with the surrounding world:

> We have come to this world to accept it, not merely to know it. We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy. The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence. But we find that this education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored in schools, but it is severely repressed. From our very childhood habits are formed and knowledge is imparted in such a

> manner that our life is weaned away from nature and our mind and the world are set in opposition from the beginning of our days. Thus the greatest of educations for which we came prepared is neglected, and we are made to lose our world to find a bagful of information instead. We rob the child of his earth to teach him geography, of language to teach him grammar. His hunger is for the Epic, but he is supplied with chronicles of facts and dates...Child-nature protests against such calamity with all its power of suffering, subdued at last into silence by punishment (Tagore. 1917. 116).

Tagore witnessed eighty eventful years in colonial Bengal, and his ideas about women went on changing with time. There were fast developments in India which had an indelible impact on his writings. Any modern history book will tell us of the developments in political, economic and social conditions during the early and late 19th century. Granted the limitations of scope of this study, I will confine my discussion only to the realm of literary developments in Bengal.

The elements of romance evident in European literature had become a dominant theme in Bengali creative writing. The idea of romantic love was introduced into Bengali writings by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–94) and this was followed by Rabindranath Tagore who took this tradition to its zenith. Although Rabindranath dominated the literary field in Bengal, other major writers, such as Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1898–1976) also emerged during his time. During the first half of the 20th century, there appeared a strong group of young writers, who considered themselves modernists and became associated with the journal, *Kallol.* Although Tagore was admired by this group, they tried to move away from his influence. Rabindranath was censured for the lack of realism in his writing but the criticism was not fully justified. For example, Binodini in *Chokher Bali* and the nude Urvashi in his short story "Laboratory", we find women who are physically rejuvenated and behave like enchantresses.

It needs to be mentioned here that with the introduction of women's education, women, too, started to write and publish since the late nineteenth century. The majority among them advocated traditionally prescribed values for women. Many of the newly educated (earlier superstitious) women fought for their self-esteem and independence. A more rebellious move was seen with the coming of the freedom movement. Not just the educated, but women from all sections of the society joined the independence movement. Till then political activities were the domain solely of men, but with the nationalist movement, the barrier broke down. Binodini, in the film "Chokher Bali", presents such a picture. She is seen signing a protest letter against the British for the fact that no woman in the village was educated except her. Moreover, she requests Behari to take her to a meeting presided by Bipin Chandra Pal thus showing her interest in the freedom struggle

movement. The effect of this change was felt in the domestic arena as well. The women for the first time saw themselves reflected through a public mirror. In fighting against the British domination, many of them also began to break away from their domestic bondage. They started to question the inequality that existed between men and women. Even some housewives took a bold step in writing in women's journals about women's marginalisation in society. Men with liberal mindset also raised their voices on discrimination between men and women. Kazi Nazrul Islam proclaimed:

> I sing the song of equality
>
> In my eyes there is no difference between men and women.
>
> ("Naari," *Nazrul Rachanabali*, Vol. 1: 241)

Such was, briefly, the scenario of the literary field in the first three decades of the twentieth century in Bengal. In the background of this new thoughtful society, Rabindranath initiated a new turn in his writings. In "Swadesh O Samaj" (Our Country and Society), a collection of essays published in 1961, he wrote:

> The similarities and differences that mark the two distinct identities of men and women are both equally weighty. Yet, it is the differences that stand out with heavy bias" (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 13: 21).

In the context of his novel *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World), he commented: "The period during which a writer is born gets reflected through his writings, may be, for a purpose…. The writer's period plays a role, deliberately or otherwise, in a writer's mind". (Mukhopadhyay, Vol.2: 546) He did not merely reflect his age in his writing but gave a new shape and direction to his time. His message was:

> The discriminatory treatment of women had existed, complacently in our society for ages. Men must accept the responsibility for sustaining this discriminatory practice of the past (*Rabindra Rachanaboli*, Vol. 13: 24).

In *Chokher Bali,* the boundless plight and pathetic state of widowhood deprived of any right of remarriage and conflict of worldly desires and morals forms the basic plot of the novel. Hindu widows have been often romanticized and depicted as tragic beings in Indian as well as Western works. Westerners of earlier period were attracted by the reports they heard back from India of "*sati*" or "suttee," the ritual burning of a widow on her husband's cremation pyre. For the fact that sati was declared as illegal, modern views focus on their customary ascetic lifestyles. The role of a widow is a significant one for Hindus because the widow, in her own unique ways, came to represent independence from colonial rule. This association between the widow and independence is presented brilliantly in *Chokher Bali,* the novel, and "Chokher Bali", the film.

The life of a Hindu widow is a hard one since she has to lead a life not of her own but follow the one charted out by the society. As such she has to be under certain regulations which might be totally displeasing to her. Binita Mehta has said that the role allotted to Hindu women was marriage and motherhood. It follows, therefore, that a wife had no reason to live if her husband died. The widow had to spend the rest of her life in social and economic misery.[4]

Traditional widows must not put on colourful clothes, nor may they adorn themselves with any sort of jewellery. Sometimes their hair is also trimmed. They must follow a very strict diet and are prohibited from taking edible things like fishes, egg, meat, spices and so on. Tanika Sarkar says that willed chastity enables the widow to desire the aesthetics and sacrifices that her condition imposes on her. Since she still belongs spiritually to her husband in a transcendental sort of way, worldly comforts have actually ceased to matter and her body and soul draw pleasure, not pain, from the rigours of material existence.[5] However, all widows were not contented with the place Hindu society had given them. Ghosh, in the film, has depicted the picture of widows comprising two generations. The change is quite visible. Rajlakshmi, Mahendra's mother is seen in short hairs whereas Binodini has beautiful hair adding to her beauty. The two widows, Annapurna and Rajlakshmi are first shown as being repulsed at the thought of having tea but later when Binodini comes and insists, drinking tea becomes a habit. These are small but important changes taking place in a society which was not yet liberated from orthodox Hindu thoughts.

Few films which are inspired by literary works tend to form a bridge between the two varied modes of narration. Rituparno Ghosh in the remake of Tagore's *Chokher Bali* makes such an attempt. The film "Chokher Bali" by Ghosh is more modern in its attitude and approach. Ghosh says that in the original novel, Tagore has not tried to capture the events within a particular time frame, but he is rather very particular in this regard. In the very beginning, the director is careful enough to mention the period of the film from 1902–1905. But Ghosh is not satisfied with this only. He introduces two episodes both at the beginning and at the end of the film as subtext. The film begins with the death of a monk, who could be most presumably Swami Vivekananda in 1902 and ends with the anti–Bengal partition movement in 1905.

In order to present the picture of the earlier period of 20th century, Ghosh has taken help from many social and political developments. Ghosh's sincere efforts of capturing the Calcutta of the early 20th century is quite evident; he mentions the street vendors' (*pheriwala/phoolwala*), talks about the Swadeshi movement, and particularly draws attention to the '*Babu culture*'. This helps Ghosh in recreating the Calcutta of the early 20th century. Again, the characters of Ghosh's "Chokher Bali" have the same names as those of the novel *Chokher Bali*. Apparently the film appears to be a classic translation of Tagore's famous

novel but it is quite clear that the film did not merely end as a saga of a love triangle. As an intellectual and conscious director, Ghosh invests it with modern vision and relevance. He retells an early twentieth century tale with a twenty-first century mindset. While adapting literary texts, film directors see themselves either as mediators (between author and the reader/audience) who are responsible for bringing forth the author's meesage to the audience or as free 'representators' who owe loyalty neither to author nor to the reader. There are others who follow a different trajectory. These directors remain faithful on the whole to the spirit of the book, and yet experiment with the material at hand, interpreting it from their own standpoint. What we often find is the postcolonial/postmodern reinterpretation of the master–text. This kind of an approach is seen in adaptations that we are witnessing in recent years–Rituparno Ghosh's "Chokher Bali" and Subroto Sen's *Char Odhyaya* are some notable examples.

One of the predominant themes in Chokher Bali/"Chokher Bali" is women's education. The model for women's education can be seen in a proposition made by a Brahmo magazine named *Tattabodhini Patrika*:

> A woman's nature is generally emotional while a man's rational. Only that therefore can be termed as women's education which primarily aims at improving the heart of a woman, and only secondarily at improving her mind...The main aim of real female education is to train, improve and nourish the gentle and noble qualities of her heart...Under such a system [of education], attempts should be made thruogh means of religious education, moral education, reading of poems which inspire noble feelings...so that women can become tender-hearted, affectionate, compassionate and genuinely devout to be able to be virtuous and religious-minded (in Sangari and Vaid, 160).

Meredith Borthwick, for instance, who has greatly enriched our understanding of the changing conditions of the *bhadramahila* 'respectable' middleclass Bengali women during the period 1850–1905, has utilized approaches originally devised to study the history of women in the West. She finds that the categorical conception of *bhadramahila* was emerging as a response to the *bhadralok* 'middle-class Bengali men', who in turn were reacting to the British rule. Therefore, it is not surprising that she finds that the *bhadramahila* did not display any 'feminist consciousness'. She states:

> When I began my study I was interested in locating a 'feminist consciousness'. The possibility still interests me, but as I understand more about the lives of women at that time, the more misguided I feel it is to expect that kind of perception then (Borthwick. 1984. 22).

One could argue here that the expectation was misguided, not because such

a feminist perception did not exist, but because its absence was already predetermined by Western connotations of feminism. Malavika Karlekar in *Voices from Within*, on the other hand, has offered a refreshingly different analysis. By treating autobiographical writings as 'personal narratives', she showed the range of responses made by nineteenth-century Bengali women. While tracing the formation of women's subcultures in the *antahpur* 'inner house', she effectively demonstrated how literacy and education enabled at least an elite section of Bengali women to question male constructions of Indian femininity. Sumanta Banerjee makes an observation in this context:

> The acquirement of and proficiency in the new literary forms was not necessarily a passport for entry into the society for the bhadramahila. The bhadralok insistense on membership of the andarmahal, on the total dependence of the woman on the male head of the family, on strict adherence to the traditional responsibilities of a respectable home, was an important pre-condition for a woman's literary apprenticeship (in Sangari and Vaid, 164-165).

Argument directed towards women's education and the 'educated woman' or *bhadramahila* in Bengal in the 19th century indicated far beyond the prevailing social problems of women and served as a suggestion of the composition of social subjectivities of the middle classes. The print world worked as an important agency in offering women a vast communicative space. The social reforms happening around the 19th century Bengal was mostly for the interest of the women. It also aimed at rebuilding basic social relations and ideals structuring the family and lives of women among the middle classes. The new Bengali woman was the object of attention among the colonial state and the Bengali male intellectuals. But women had by then already started to contribute themselves to this developing process of their social identities and agencies. Education seemed to be the most important factor for social reform and thus it attracted much attention by virtue of its scope and possibilities. By the later part of the last century there was a greater development of the middle class, of a clearer political agenda, and new negotiatory terms leading to varied formulations of the relations between nationalism, class structuring and needs of women. Education was considered as having both positive and negative effects on women's active role in society. There were sometimes furious or calm reflective thoughts and projects on women's education, for example, or the family. Binodini's rebelliousness could be related to her English education.

> Ashalata laments, "Oh, if only you hadn't learned English!". While Ashalata holds that "God does everything for our good," Binodini snaps back, "Is that so? I was widowed within a year of marriage. For my good." Ashalata moans, "Really! I can't understand why you had

to learn English. Otherwise, you'd be happily living with your husband somewhere"[6] (Ghosh, "Chokher Bali").

It seems as if the lack of English education would have solved all of Binodini's problems and sufferings. It was, after all, Binodini's education and intelligence that attracted Ashalata's husband Mahendra and it was this that made her crave for a life different from that of a widow's.

At first, Binodini's defiance is quite convincing, and she succeeds in making the widows drink tea.

> "I quite like it," says Rajlakshmi, "I felt a little sinful at first, but she said – and she's read a lot–that the scriptures don't forbid it." She also comments on the widow remarriage debates taking place at the time: "I hear that the learned Vidyasagar and our scriptures, too, say that even widow remarriage is not a sin. Yet, our young widows are still made to observe rigid penance such as giving up fish and meat. Widow's fast. Has this changed one bit?" Binodini tells both widows: "My English tutor said that a sin is not a sin if you repent," and when the other widow asks if Christian repentance will work for Hindu women, Rajlakshmi replies, "Each religion has its own rules. Since tea is a Christian thing, one must observe their tenets" (Ghosh, "Chokher Bali").

The women then ask god's forgiveness for drinking the tea and then continue to do so. After Binodini's affair with Mahendra has broken the household into bits and pieces, Rajlakshmi rejects Binodini and her foreign tea. "By giving me tea once a day, you think you control me?" Rajlakshmi screams. Binodini snaps back, "Is only physical desire a sin? Is gluttony not?" (Ghosh, "Chokher Bali").

It is perhaps her education that leads her to question and counter the strictures that were placed on her and her widowhood by the family and society at large. In spite of the fact that there were attempts to emancipate the women, one could not expect any expression of women's aspirations. The literature they were exposed to was constrained by their obligation to be refined, more cultured and to speak in a language that did not come spontaneously but had to be leart with great effort. The fact that women were always expected to be silent is seen in a women's magazine named *Antahpur*:

> Even if the husband uses abusive language out of blind anger and behaves rudely, the wife's duty is to accept it in silence. It is extremely improper to show disobedience before the husband. Even if you are at the point of death, you should never speak ill of your husband to others...(in Sangari and Vaid, 165)

It is therefore quite clear that, no matter whatever be the circumstances,

women could not speak against anything and were expected to be subservient towards their husband or be it any other elder member of the family.

But during the turn of the new century, certain changes started taking place within the family itself. Tagore during his forties was at a height of his creative powers. Quick to sense the restlessness of the early 20th century Bengal, he created a series of short stories and novels including *Chokher Bali, Ghare Baire and Nashtoneer.* While young Rabindranath, inspired with romanticism, looked at women as sources of imagination, by the time he wrote his novella *Nashtoneer* (1903), he had learned to situate women in their real worlds, to see them as rational and desiring subjects who were constrained by social rules and norms. *Nashtoneer* was an attempt on Tagore's part to give voice to women's subjectivity and was quite successful in that matter and the theme was developed in many subsequent writings between 1903 and 1940. In Tagore's reputed novel *Gora* (1910), Sucharita and Lalita, the two main female figures, held their individual opinions on marriage. In *Ghare Baire* (1916), Rabindranath advanced a new picture. Nikhil, the male protagonist, wanted his wife Bimala to take her own decision regarding their relationship. He gave her personal freedom so that she might judge the worth of their relationship and then love him if she so desired. *Yogayoga* (Links and Gaps, 1930) depicts a conjugal relationship based on compulsion rather than choice. Tagore's message here is that Madhusudan's – or any man's for that matter – idea that women were mere submisssive beings is not acceptable.

Fig. 2.1 A scene from the film *Laboratory* by Raja Sen

Although not prounounced clearly, the appearance of the "New Woman" is noticeable in these novels. These women had started to assert their individuality and their independent ideas. Tagore contributed to the development of the "new woman" through works such as "Laboratory", *Nashtoneeer* ("The Broken Nest) and "Streer Patra".

The most prominent "new woman" is seen in Sohini of the short story, "Laboratory".

Sohini is a woman with sharp features adding to her magnetic personality. She walks in a sari with a knife hidden at her waist. Yet she uses her feminine charm and delicacies when necessary.

Sohini asserts astutely, "Deceptions need strategies, just as wars do" (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 984) Interestingly, Rabindranath had no strong disapproval of the tricks sometimes employed by women. In "Swadesh O Samaj," he wrote:

> Of course women do resort to deceptions and that is also another aspect of women's strength. The demands of men when they exceed the women's resources, are often met by ruses and machinations. It is we men who have dubbed women as enchantresses. Indeed we wanted them to so. If they come short, we give them a bad name, when they are useful, we sing their praise (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 13: 21).

His Sohini applies her analytical bent of mind and her sharp intellect. In her first meeting with Nandakishore, she tells him what the local trading community thought of him – that he being a Bengali, had no sense of business, and would be a sitting duck for them. "Well, I found," Sohini continues, "that none of their intrigues worked. Rather they have fallen into your traps; but they still have not realised this, which I have" (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 979). Nandakishore is taken aback, "Some girl she is!" he exclaims. Her assessment was perfect. "The spirit of her character comes shining from inside her. It is clear that she knows her worth" (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 979-80). Sohini is quite aware of her capabilities and qualities and so she can neither be neglected nor be defied. In Rabindranath's writings, there are few instances of such powerful women character as Sohini. She knows her worth as a human being and so wants to be recognised in the society. Sohini's love is that of a strong woman. The traditional all-giving love of a submissive wife is not what is seen in Sohini. It may be noted here that Rabindranath believed:

> By natural instinct women are creative and graceful. It is women who make the home, which is no way less valuable or easier than running a business. The motivating force that shapes a home is a woman's love. Love is not merely an emotion of the heart. It is a force like the force of gravitation (*Rabindra Rachanabali,* Vol. 10: 546)

That love is represented in Sohini's character. Nandakishore has trained her in his own branch of discipline. He used to say, "An engineer husband and the wife, only a homemaker minding the kitchen, are not acceptable. The knots that bind them are not the same. I will make them uniform" (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 980). If a man looks for a suitable wife, then they both must have similar aims in life. Equal stature for men and women in a marriage is the message that Rabindranath conveys through Nandakishore. Although a similar concept of love is found in *Chitrangada*, an earlier writing of Rabindranath, where Chitrangada, a woman, claims a place beside her husband (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 5: 470), this modern concept of love comes out much more forcefully in "Laboratory." Sohini and Nandkishore's feelings for each other as a husband and a wife are not merely due to the physical aspect of their love. A bond of respect and gratitude takes their conjugal love to a higher plane. Sohini explains, "He won me over by his steadfast mission of educating me" (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol 7: 986). Full of confidence in her own merit as well as of gratitude to her husband, Sohini maintains:

> In relation to the qualities that he found in me, he regarded my shortcomings as insignificant. He reposed his complete trust in a non-descript woman like me, and I have never betrayed this trust…. My smallness he ignored, but gave me unstinted respect where he found I was worthy. Who knows to what level I would have sunk, had he not valued my good qualities? (*Rabindra Rachanabali,* Vol 7: 997)

After Nandakishore's death, Sohini assumes the mantle of Nandakishore, with great love and regard and undertakes his mission as hers with firm determination:

> This laboratory was my husband's sacred place of meditation. If I can find a suitable person to occupy the place beneath his altar and keep the lamp burning, then my husband wherever he is, will be at peace (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 982).

Nandakishore has left behind enough money, but Sohini does not use it for herself. She decides to spend every rupee of the inheritance on the laboratory. Finding a person deserving of the laboratory has become her sole mission in life. Through Sohini's resolution of her mission, Rabindranath portrays the strong bond and loyalty of an extraordinary lover. Sohini is full of affection. She loves her aged grandmother who has raised her. She manages to rescue the about-to-be-sold home of her grandmother with the money of Nandakishore, her would-be husband at the time, and when the grandmother falls ill, she runs to far away Ambala to look after her, leaving behind her precious laboratory. She is compassionate also towards animals. She picks up a stray dog and saves its life; she dreams of setting up a hospital for the disabled dogs, cats and rabbits who suffered from

experiments in the laboratory. Without such tenderness of heart Sohini would have been an incomplete character. Portrayal of these characters clearly shows how far ahead of his time Rabindranath was in visualising the "new woman."

Charulata in *Nashtoneer* or "The Broken Nest" is also one of the finest examples of a new woman in Tagore's stories.

Fig. 2.2 Charulata busy reading a book in *Charulata*

She is portrayed as an educated woman who is interested in reading books and has refined sensibilities. She has a keen interest in art, literature and poetry. The fact that her husband Bhupati is always engrossed in his business of running a newspaper makes her feel lonely at home.

She engages herself in all sorts of activities to while away time but she misses the bond that a husband and wife shares. Her brother-in-law Amal comes to her rescue as he spends a lot of time with her and they have many things in common for example their love for poetry and arts. Charulata forgot her cheerless plight; she was blossoming in Amal's company as she sang and played all around. This bond that they shared took a different turn as Charulata's innocent flirtations made her deeply attached to Amal. When Amal left, she was shattered as she lacked his charismatic presence and was brought back to her ennui. At the end

of the novella when she wants Bhupati to take her along with him on a trip that he was about to go, he hesitates and Charulata says 'let it be'. She was in love with Amal and finally decided to stay back and refused to go with her husband. Her decision was quite courageous if we take into account the period in which the novella is set when women could hardly make their own choices in life.

Fig. 2.3 A still from *Charulata*

The character of Charulata can be seen as in light of the social hypocrisy of Bengal Renaissance where the idea of liberty and independence was celebrated but women like Charulata could experience it only by staying within the boundaries of the 'andarmahal' (inner chambers of the house). Her urge to move out of the confines of her house is clearly evident by her free spirit and playful nature while she spends time with Amal.

Satyajit Ray who has adapted Tagore's work into a film has beautifully rendered the character of Charulata in the movie. In the film she seems to a lover

of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and this is represented as she sings and calls out Bankim's name while browsing books from her library at time. She is a woman filled with desire to 'see and feel' the outside world and this is depicted through the use of looking glasses in the film. Ray's ending of the film is quite interesting and different from Tagore where he portrays Charulata and Bhupati in a freezing scene, both held out their hands for a union which is ambiguous given their present circumstance of life.

The novella "The Broken Nest" is believed to have autobiographical elements in it because of the mystery that surrounds Tagore's and his sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi's relationship. It is also mysterious that Kadambari Devi committed suicide after Tagore's marriage with Mrinalini Devi. Researchers have shown a lot of interest in this aspect of Tagore's life and many found similarities of his relationship with Kadambari Devi with the text. Like Charulata, Kadambari was also a lonely wife whose husband, Jyotirindranath Tagore, was a businessman who travelled a lot and could hardly spare time for her. Rabindranath Tagore and Kadambari Devi were almost of the same age and Tagore's biographer Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyaya says that Tagore was her playmate and companion after she came to her in-laws' family.

Fig. 2.4 Kadambari Devi at her young age

The fact that she committed suicide is always related to Tagore's marriage to another woman. Kadambari Devi might have felt isolated once Tagore started a new life with his wife. Devoid of love and companionship, she finally decided to take away her life, an incident which deeply affected Tagore. Tagore described his feeling as one of a devastating sorrow as he lost the most important support of life. He dedicated a number of works to her and Charulata's character reminds one of Tagore's understandings of Kadambari Devi's experiences as a woman.

Tagore's other works such as "Steer Patra" exemplifies the pathos of a young woman whose marriage was constricting in many ways.

Fig. 2.5 A scene from the film *Streer Patra* by Purnendu Pattrea

Sitting by the side of the sea shore, Mrinal realizes how closely she loved freedom and, therefore, resolved to end her marriage and wrote a letter to her husband stating that she would never come back. Mrinal writes a letter to her husband where she recollects how she was married off at a very young age when she did not have any idea of what marriage was all about. She states that marriage

was a journey for her from a familiar world to an unknown place. Her in-laws were constantly reminded of Mrinal's intelligence which Mrinal had guarded for fifteen years but unfortunately there was no scope for emotional development in her. She mentions in the letter that her mother was intimidated because of Mrinal's intelligence because, according to her, education and independent thinking were not considered as virtues for women.

A woman was expected to conform to existing rules and conventions and being educated did not ensure such abeyance. Therefore Mrinal was criticized by her in-laws for her questioning nature and was opposed many times when she moved beyond strictures. She remembers how she had lost her daughter when she was born because of the unhygienic and pathetic state of women's dwelling place. In spite of all the odd circumstances, Mrinal was blessed with the gift of writing poetry which gave her an opportunity to break free from the restrictions of the family by letting her imagination travel beyond rules of life.

Through her interaction with Bindu, Mrinal's eldest sister-in-law's sister, she understood the pangs of a child who lost her mother at a tender age and was ill treated by her cousins. When Bindu came to stay at Mrinal's in-laws' house, she was treated like a slave by her own sister because Mrinal's eldest sister-in-law was herself a non-entity in the house and lived a circumscribed life following her husband's rules. Mrinal's character was entirely different as she stood up for what she believed was right and did not accept injustice done to her or to others like Bindu. When Bindu attained the marriageable age, Mrinal's in-laws found a ploy and decided to get rid of her by marrying her off.

Mrinal was concerned about this orphan girl and was doubtful about her married life as no one had come to see her from the groom's house. She pledged to help Bindu even after her marriage if she faced any problems in her in-laws' house. The terrified Bindu came back running from her husband's house because the man whom she married wass insane and she managed to escape while he was asleep. Mrinal was enraged at this incident and asked Bindu to stay back at their place. Mrinal's in-laws were against this decision that Mrinal took but she was firm in supporting Bindu and defending her.

Unfortunately Bindu's brother-in-law came one day and took Bindu along with him after which she never returned to see Mrinal again. No one knew where she had gone and eventually Mrinal found out that she had set herself on fire as she was unable to bear the tortures of the family.

Mrinal was taken aback at this news and realized how women were subjected to extreme brutalities that made them take away their lives. Unfortunately Mrinal did not receive the letter that Bindu had written to her before

she died. Except Mrinal no one acknowledged the tragedy that Bindu had faced in her marriage. Her death was not even condoled by her family but it was death that let her free from the atrocities done to her. Bindu's death was a waking call for Mrinal who could no longer hold herself with societal oppression and wanted to release herself from the confines of her house and marriage. Leaving behind the shackles of her family and society was a celebration of her selfhood and at the same time it was a resistance against the injustice meted out to women. Having left home, confronting the unknown world, she discovers herself and her capabilities. She starts her letter with the addressing note "Sricharanakamaleshu" which means at your lotus-like feet and ends the letter by referring to herself as "Charanatalashraychhinna" which means separated from your lotus-like feet. This addressing note signifies the end of a life and the beginning of a new found freedom and empowerment which enabled her to go on a voyage that is devoid of all prejudices and confinement.

Thus, Rabindranath gave women both the space and the individuality to express their views on love, marriage, relationship by giving them a voice that was long denied to them. *Chokher Bali/* "Chokher Bali" primarily focus on the life of the women particularly the widows. Tagore and Ghosh have attempted to present a realistic picture of their predicament in a radically changing society and nation. Both the writer and the director has challenged the pre-determined notions of the society by creating a representational space for these oppressed women and offered them a powerful role which was quite ahead of their times.

Notes

1. The term *bhadralok* literally means a cultured person something like an English gentleman.
2. The Bengali term *bhadramahila* translates as "respectable ladies" and is generally taken to refer to women with a tradition of family literacy.
3. See Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal*, 1849-1905, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, P-60
4. See Binita Mehta *Widows, Pariahs and Bayaderes: India as Spectacle*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2002, P-35
5. See Tanika Sarkar *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001, P-41
6. The dialogues of the film that are quoted throughout the book are my own translations.

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3

Women's Position During Tagore's Times

In the 19th century, the control of British power in India enforced a foreign culture on native life–ways. By the last decades of the century, the influence of that alien culture was so deep in urban centres like Calcutta that the entire world of Hindu domestic life and its most close relationships had become disputable grounds. Nowhere are these issues more pronounced than in the print literature from late 19th century Bengal. In various genres of literature, both Bengali and English in this period, Bengali *bhadralok* writers displayed their interest with the related issues of women's functions and their relationships, their domestic life and management of daily life. One of the interesting fields of study has been the relation of late 19th century discourse on domestic reorganisation with that of Hindu nationalism. Banished from the political power structures of the British domination, Hindu nationalist came to call the domestic world as their own; this was an area over which they could acheive some mastery and autonomous self–identification. Long before the nationalists began their political fight against British imperialism, they had created a domain of self–governance within colonial society itself, a domain which included the domestic world of women and the family. This was the circumstance in which the 'women's question' came to dominate late 19th century discourse in Bengal. The novel *Chokher Bali* is concerned about a period when the anti-colonial movement and the freedom struggle against the Britishers were gaining grounds. Behari is the character who is much interested in this freedom stuggle and there are a few references in the novel. One of such is when Mahendra comments on the nationalist spirit of Behari "... But Behari, you always kick up a ruckus wherever you go-perhaps you'll invite a whole bunch of local children there or stir up a fight with a whiteskin, one never

knows what to expect with you" (Tagore. 2003. 67). Another reference is made at the time of their return from the picnic spot, when Binodini asks to stay a little longer and Mahendra replies, "Oh no, then we'd run into drunken white men on the way back" (Tagore. 2003. 72). But the film "Chokher Bali" has more references to the freedom movement than the novel. The chorus of *vande mataram* is constantly heard with scenes that are shot outside or sometimes the sound simply enters from the outside to the inner domain of the house. This use of sound pattern is done quite cleverly as it signifies the inextricable relationship between the 'home' and the 'world.' The protest slogans, strikes, agitation campaigns are mentioned throughout the film.

Large numbers of social reforms were taking place, both by the colonial rulers and the colonized society–the prime concern of which were the women. This was occurring mostly during the nineteenth century but its impact was still strongly felt in Bengal in the first half of the twentieth. It is necessary to find out here what role was assigned to 'Woman' in the programme of the nationalist treatise. Much work has been done in this area, particularly by Feminist scholars, Marxist and Subaltern historians. In spite of their difference in views, all of them hold similar opinion that the anti–hegemonic struggle of the Indian nationalism was most often fought around the idea of 'reforming women' and in the colonial situation women were used as crucial markers of cultural difference. In India, colonial ideology worked on the proposition of moral superiority, a claim which was grounded around the degenerate state of women in the society of the colonized. This is evident in various books, travelogues, journalistic writings, memoirs written by European men and women. However women's autobiographies express a sense of weak attachment with their family or with the land they belonged to, either of their father's or the one possessed by their husbands. The colonial era imbibed in the colonised male an experience of their own subjugation and gave them a fresh and acute sensitivity in relation to bondage. *Adhinata* became a highly loaded word, fraught with two guilts: the sin of succumbing to foreign rule, which necessarily conjured up the associated guilt of submitting the woman to a state of subjection. The two senses of the word would continuosly flow into one another, inter–aminate with each other.

Crucial to the entire narrative is the figure of Binodini, the desiring widow who rebels against her fate. "I am not a piece of furniture, I am a person, I'm a woman!" she protests (Tagore. 2003.50). Her words are important when placed in the context of Bengal's history at the dawn of a new century, when educated Bengali elites were struggling with the problem of constructing a subjectivity that was within their altered social scenario.

At the beginning of the film, there is a scene where an English nun comes to meet Binodini after she was widowed. Looking at the way she was dressed in

a white sari without a blouse, the nun asked Binodini if she was expected to remain uncovered throughout her life.

Fig: 3.1 Binodini dressed in widow's apparel

The nun sympathises with her fate but advices her to remain in touch with her books. This is the only way that could bring solace to her life. She asks if Binodini is allowed to eat chocolates and assures that they are not made of animal fat. It was important for a widow to maintain their vegetarian diet after the death of her husband. This is one among the many restrictions placed upon a widow and very few of them dare to flout such norms. But Binodini was different from others. She listened to her conscience more than what was told to her by others.

Binodini shows rebelliousness against the strictures of widowhood, when an English nun gives her some "favorite chocolates" and she accepts. Binodini eats the chocolates in secret and burns the wrapper of it without anybody noticing her. Her transgressed activity is cast against the narration of an excerpt from a famous Bankim novel about a widow narrated by Behari:

Rohini was in the full blush of youth, her beauty over–flowing as the full

moon in its glowing autumnal phase. Widowed very young, she flouted the strictures placed on widows. She wore black-bordered saris, bangles, chewed betel–leaf perhaps. Her culinary skills could match the legendary Draupadi's. And her unrivalled artistry– she was excellent in preparing delicacies. Who else could paint such lovely floor decorations or make intricate ornaments, flowers, toys and embroidery? She alone knew how to style coiffures and adorn brides. (Ghosh, "Chokher Bali")

Fig. 3.2 Binodini eating chocolate in secret

As the scene changes, we see Behari, Mahendra, and Mahendra's mother Rajlakshmi sitting and discussing the novel. "These very accomplishments drove her to her death," Mahendra says (Ghosh, "Chokher Bali").

The film not only gives its voice for the liberation of women but also exposes the double standards of the patriarchal society. The film begins with the scene of Binodini's marriage, especially with the ritual of the '*subho dristi*'.[1]

Fig: 3.3 Binodini during her wedding ritual of *Shubho Drishti*

At the time of wedding as shown in Fig. 3.3, Binodini did not even hold her head up to have a look at her groom, a hand forcefully held her chin upwards. The scene has a great relevance, as it signifies that the marriage was against her wishes. Being denied by Mahendra, Harimati arranges to get her daughter married off in order to be free of her motherly responsibilities without thinking about her daughter's wishes. Thus, in Fig. 3.3 the hand is symbolic of the hard and fast rules of the society and the chains of the patriarchal society. Again at the end of the film, when Binodini desires a red shawl (for widows cannot wear colour) from Mahendra in Kashi, he immediately refuses to give her the same. These nuances point at the duality of patriarchy. Mahendra does not hesitate to stay with a widow like Binodini, but then he does not want her to disregard the rules and regulations of widowhood. Thus it is quite clear that patriarchy shapes the rules of society according to its need and this is exhibited through the above incident.

The film provides a glimpse of women's position in the social and political sphere. The film highlights a number of issues worth mentioning. The plight of widows in Calcutta during the early period of the 20th century has to be taken note of; there are some interesting moments in the film when Binodini shows Ashalata how to wear a trendy blouse that her husband brings for her. And while in Kashi, Ashalata, being pregnant, is served fish curry by the widows. The widows then were abstained from having fish, and one can see the hunger in the eyes of the other widows when Ashalatha takes the fish curry. Assumedly, as shown in the film, the widows were also restricted from drinking tea.

The 'antahpur' was a sacrosanct domain within which upper class women were restricted by a patriarchal society, unseen by any male member of the family beyond the immediate relatives and to which even husbands visited only at night. The nineteenth century re-invented this arena as a sort of preserver of Indian spirituality and heritage in what Partha Chatterjee calls the last frontier of uncolonised space where no encroachments by the coloniser could be permitted by Indian men who were themselves exposed to Western culture and education and adheres to the Western value system in public life. This is how a *bhadralok* described an *andarmahal* towards the end of the nineteenth century:

> It is needless to add that their [the women's] familiar conservation is not characterized by that chaste, dignified language which constitutes a prominent characteristic of a people far advanced in civilisation. Objectionable modes of expression generally pass muster among them simply because they labour under the great disadvantage of the national barrenness of intellect and the acknowledged poverty of colloquial literature (Bose. 8)

The victim of the male desire for preservation of culture was the woman, stereotyped as chaste wife or austere widows. The ideals of womanhood in conservative Hindu society were reinstated by allusions to mythical references to female virtues, thereby introducing a spiritual dimension to the worship and devotion towards their husband. The emergence of the "New Woman" towards the end of the nineteenth century, educated, liberated, modernised, confident and dressed differently from her traditional counterparts and exposed to the new milieu of education, yet bounded to the *antarmahal*, resulted in a serious clash of ideas. It is this conflict that Tagore externalises through the study of latent female sexuality and Ghosh through a series of symbols signifies especially the dramatic turmoil within women like Binodini of "Chokher Bali" and Adithi of *Unishe April* and others. The image of the ideal home or *griha* which comes from the magazines pages like *Antahpur* and to which the concept of the *bhadramahila* is integral, offers a critical perspective into the changes in the existing organisation of the social space in 19th century Bengal. The common use of these words *andar/ antahpur* and *griha* is exchangeable. They are used to designate a 'private' social space as different from the 'public' one and to suggest a physical, architectural and social interiority. But as women reflect in these magazines on the reformation of their social space, and construct the ideal home, the newness of the understanding of *griha* (now) and its difference from *andar* (then) is quite apparent. The *andar/antahpur* concept which refers to the social domain is the living place of women, children, domestic servants and the nocturnal habitat of adult males, can only be understood in its specificity when contrasted to *griha*, the home which forms the central project of thoughts on women's education.

The material/spiritual division was put forward by Indian nationalists as similar to the division between the public and the private, inner and the outer, the *ghar (*home) and the *bahir* (outside). The novel and the film offer a scope to explore the various ways in which these ideas get blurred in relation to the 'women's question' set against the backdrop of the nationalist movement. Both the texts of *Chokher Bali* tell the story of a family living in a country under foreign rule and which is on the threshold of a modern age. In the tale of a family of Bengal, politics find its way into the narrative even as transgressive sexuality appears along with activist nationalism. It is about a country and its rising nationalist awareness, trying to come to terms with its political oppression on the one hand, and its conflicting reconciliation with the colonial modernity on the other. The consequence of this was that there were changes in societal behaviour, new kinds of economic activities and the most noticeable difference was seen in the changing relations between 'home' and the 'world' (*ghar o bahir*).

In *Chokher Bali*/ "Chokher Bali", man–woman relationship becomes interwoven with the political issues. The 'personal' has a dialectical relationship with the 'political'. The nationalist concerns for the creations of the 'New Woman' in its own way concentrated on preparing a new space and new idiom for reforming women in traditional terms, preventing colonial influences as far as possible. The Orient/Occident stereotype was rephrased towards a similar but ideologically more powerful binary; that between the inside and the outside. The 'authentic Indianness' was not to be found in the earthly pursuits like the West—which are ulterior motives—but in the inner spiritual principle which would prove the superiority of Indian culture. On the materialism of the West and the spiritualism of the East with its bearing on women, Swami Vivekananda said:

> On the one hand, rank materialism through foreign culture has caused a tremendous stir, on the other through the confounding din of all these discordant sounds she hears in low yet unmistakable accents the heartrending cries of her ancient Gods, cutting her to the quick. There lie before her various strange luxuries...new manners, new fashions, dressed in which moves about the well educated girl in shameless freedom. All these are arousing... desires. Again the same scene changes and in its place appears, with stern presence Sita, Savitri...Sannyasin, Samadhi and the search for the self. On the one side is the independence of western society, on the other the extreme self sacrifice of the Aryan society (476).

The 'inner/outer' opposition was figured into a new binary–*ghar* and *bahir*—the home and the world—the world is the outside, the realm of the material; the home, on the other hand, means one's inner self. So the question arose as to who were to bear the spiritual identity of the society, of the nation, of our superior

culture. It would be those who live within the boundaries of 'home'. So, it was quite essential to bring the women out of their *purdah*, give them the required education and reinstate them within the happy bourgeois home, the symbol of the nation's identity–so that they could be the receptacle of our culture and our heritage. There was an endeavour to place the women on a new subject position, that of the *bhadramahila*. In this context one can recall what Malavika Karlekar write –'Enlightened yet domesticated, by nature loving and devoted to the family's well–being, her emancipation was to be viewed within the context of a family's situation'.[2] Partha Chatterjee comments in this context:

> No matter what the changes in the external conditions for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (i.e. fiminine) virtues; they must not in other words, become *essentially* westernised. It followed, as a simple criterion for judging the desirability for reform, that the essential distinction between the roles of men and women in terms of material and spiritual virtues must at all times be maintained. There would have to be a marked *difference* in the degree and manner of westernisation of women, as distinct from men, in the modern world of the nation" (in Sangari and Vaid. 243).

Many of Tagore's novels including *Chokher Bali* (1903) are set in his own time or in the very recent past. It is noteworthy that Tagore, through the novel, wanted to challenge the contemporary reality. Most of Tagore's female protagonists, who often make a more lasting impression on the readers than their male companions, are mostly childless. This stands in contrast to the views proposed by many social psychologists that in Indian society, 'motherhood' and maternal identity bestows upon a woman a prestige that nothing else in her culture can.[3] To be a mother is, by definition, to be a good wife and in turn a good woman. In Tagore's fiction what we often come across is widowhood, which is the result of childhood marriage to old-aged husbands, and women whom we encounter are young widows who have no way of accomlishing any legitimate right to motherhood. However it is their sexuality which poses a real problem for the colonized male 'self', thereby devastating the family and the society at large. All these are consequentially linked to the arrival of western modernity in a fast disintegrating traditional society. No matter how firmly the official nationalist discourse dwelt on the necessity of the construction of a new kind of femininity— the *Bhadramahila*— drastic changes were observed in daily life which unsettled even the most powerful of discursive formations. Formal education was not only welcomed but it turned out to be an essentiality for the construction of the new *bhadramahila* when it was realised that it was possible for a woman to receive the cultural refinements without jeopardizing her position at home. It was a purpose the women had aimed for themselves in their individual lives as the object

of their will; to achieve the benefits of learning was like achieving freedom. But problems arose when the boundaries between the demarcated area of 'home' and the 'world' were dissolved. In Chokher Bali/"Chokher Bali", Binodini, who was motivated by the enlightenment philosophy, entered into the household of Mahendra. It seemed that she had fitted herself into the *bhadramahila* image and so along with herself she had brought the new aspects of modernity. But these same characteristics proved to be her undoing and the ultimate cause of the upheaval that shook the entire family. The traditional ways of life were questioned and the position of the other women of the family was jeopardized.

There is a scene in Tagore's *Chokher Bali* where the widowed Binodini bursts into Behari's abode one evening and begs for his love, asking him not to judge her by conventional norms. "If I tell you the events, you will not really understand what happened." (Tagore. 2003.173). What she meant to say was that from an account of external happenings he would not be able to understand the inside story. It was this "inside story" that fascinated Tagore when he wrote the novel and that it was the psychological probing of the characters that led him to pronounce the advent of the modern Indian novel. It is important to know what modernity meant to Tagore, and why he had made a female character as the mouthpiece of these words.

Notes

1. '*Shubho drishti'* is the ritual of Bengali marriages where the bride and the groom see each other for the first time during the marriage ceremony. The bride covers her face with a *paan* (betel leaf) and gradually removes it to let the eyes meet each other.
2. See Malavika Karlekar, 'The Social and Historical Context of Antahpur' in *Voices From Within*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991, P-72
3. See Ashis Nandy, 'Woman versus Womanliness in India' in *At the Edge of Psychology*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980, P-32

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4

Representation of Women on Cinema and Ghosh

The woman, as sign, became entwined with an idealised picturing of successful mothering and joyful domesticity that became synonymous with a heavily nationalist imagining of India. The image of Mother India or 'Bharat Mata' is a powerful cultural signifier which can be seen as a site for mythic unity in the face of disintegration. The idealised construction of woman's body is a metaphor for representing national identity. Thus women's bodies have been identified as the markers of boundaries for both the community and the nation. The idea of the term 'body–work' refers to this principle paradigm in which women and their bodies are required to 'work' in such a way that could uphold social, communal and national identities. This reminds one of Judith Butler's notions of gender performativity, the "stylized repetition of acts" that must be performed in order for gender to be achieved. Certain bodily acts, which are socially constructed and performed, are in accordance with the ideals that conform to regulatory cultural models of sex and gender. Through the maintenance of these norms via 'body–work', hegemonic gender roles and cultural notions of womanhood as highly idealised are realised and maintained.

In the film, through her 'body work', Ghosh shows Binodini actually commenting on and critiquing the moral and sexual social codes that suppress her individuality and thus depicts her as a bold and rebellious character who is fighting to transgress what Ghosh has described as the "shackles of the norm" (personal interview in *Star Jalsha*) in her search for freedom and a new life for herself. Her body, as it is shown, is not conforming to the assigned norms of the society, it is not in the service of domesticity and gender regulation. Rather

through her 'body work', her manipulation of her clothing and jewellery allows her to negotiate these values and express herself.

Her clothing is contrasted with that of Ashalata's who is always dressed in red and gold silk sari, embellished with jewellery and her beauty is enhanced with the help of cosmetics.

Fig. 4.1 Ashalata and Binodini in different dress code

Initially, Binodini is performing the 'social regulatory norm' by adhering to the dress code of conventional widowhood pertaining to certain social bodily practises. However, as the film progresses we see Binodini in a new light. There is a particular scene in which Binodini is trying to put on jewellery with Ashalata in the secrecy of Ashalata's bedroom. Behari praises the beauty of Binodini who has adorned herself with such jewellery saying that the ornaments suit her personality.

Fig. 4.2 shows Binodini who has worn the jewellery and visits Behari's house to confess her love towards him as she realises that there is no future with Mahendra. She tries to convince him to marry her but he refuses her proposal.

Since a widow is in eternal mourning of her husband, it is considered inappropriate to dress in a way as seen in Fig. 4.2. Significantly, this act blends together sterile widowhood indicated by the white sari with the possibilities and

passions of marriage suggested by jewellery, thus blurring the boundaries of socially demarcated roles.

Fig. 4.2 A still from "Chokher Bali" where Binodini adorns herself with jewellery

Towards the end of the film Binodini and Mahendra, who was deserted by his wife, take shelter in the ghats of Kashi. It is during this time when Binodini demands a red shawl from Mahendra who believes that it is inappropriate for a widow to wear red colour. But Binodini firmly comments that she is bold enough to face the consequence of wearing a colour that is forbidden for widows. She ultimately gets the red shawl from Mahendra but one morning she visits the ghats of Kashi and comes across a widow who was one her death-bed. Surprisingly enough, she covers the widow with her own shawl.

The red-shawl episode as shown in Fig. 4.3 is symbolic and can be interpreted in many ways. First, it signifies the daunting spirit of Binodini who does not bury her desires in life just for the fact that she is a widow. Associating herself with red colour is a transgressed act that she performs. Moreover, she gives away her shawl to the dying widow. This act might signify the idea that Binodini is trying to fulfil the hidden desires of widows who could not but accept the miserable life ordained for them. Leading a life draped in a single piece of white cloth is not a life that a woman dreams to have. This red shawl is just one instance of the many desires that dies within the hearts of the widows.

Fig. 4.3 The red-shawl episode in "Chokher Bali"

Binodini is seen transcending the assigned spaces of her social identity by some manipulative use of clothing and adornment. In doing this she expresses elements of her own self that is not ruled by the social conventions. This is emphasised by Binodini's assertion, "I have three identities–I am a young woman, educated and a widow but all have eclipsed my real identity... I am also flesh and blood" (Ghosh, "Chokher Bali"). Although Binodini is a widow she has passions for life, she desires a family and motherhood and it is this coexistence of different facets of femininity that tends to question the purity and homogeneity of the 'female ideal'.

The female body and feminine identity are the primary issues concerned in Hindu cultural and social traditions. The Vedic texts say that a 'good' woman pleases her husband and reproduces male children. Thus it is quite clear that marriage and motherhood are established principles to be followed by women in Hindu society. In an orthodox Hindu family, thoughts of honour and shame, purity and impurity control a woman's life and differentiation of age and gender direct the ways in which women and men behave with each other. Women are expected to be devoted, honourable and submissive wives and all-giving, self–sacrificing mothers. The honour of a family and preservation of class and caste boundaries is heavily dependent upon women's behaviour which in turn seems to control of their bodies. Once a woman attains puberty she becomes conscious of her body as sexualised and for the rest of her life she experiences vacillation between the periods of bodily purity and pollution, during which her movements are restricted;

she may have to perform *purdah* and observe certain regulations or rituals such as not entering the kitchen during menstruation. It is suggestive that the notions of honour and shame, modesty and sin, purity and pollution in traditional Hindu culture have created an ambivalent position for women where they experience the feminine sexuality as always oscillating between pollution and purity.

Ghosh has used strong visuals to communicate these subtle feelings of a woman, particularly of a widow. Binodini along with other widows is seen engaged in the preparation of Durga puja. But her menstruation compels her to leave the prayer room with a sense of disgust. Ghosh has used the colour red vibrantly throughout the film in order to show a widow's capacity of fertility and also to present a sharp contrast to Ashalata who is always dressed in red garments whereas Binodini has to spend her life covered in a piece of white clothing. The paradoxical association of the festival of immersion of Durga idol with menstruation and the pathos of widowhood are also taken into consideration. Perhaps Ghosh was thinking of a greater, sensible audience who would fully appreciate the pains of a young widow only through such powerful visuals.

The relationship between feminine ideals and aspects of domesticity is focussed upon the pre-independence nationalist movement. During this period, a nationalist consciousness tried to inculcate only what was 'modern' from the polluting influences of the colonial world and it was believed that this demarcation was possible only by retaining the essential spiritual core of the national culture through an exclusion of the external, physical world from the spiritual, internal world of the home. Partha Chatterjee says, in this context,

> The colonial state, in other words, is kept out of the 'inner' domain of national culture; but it is not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not Western. If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being. In this, its true and essential domain, the nation is already sovereign, even when the state is in the hands of the colonial power. The dynamics of this historical project is completely missed in conventional histories in which the story of nationalism begins with the contest for political power. (1993. 6)

Women were placed within the home as protectors of India's traditions and culture and this initiated a move which demanded the revival of the 'traditional' woman in which the 'eternal' past was adapted "to the needs of the contingent present"[2] to express and reinforce 'Indianness'.

> The formation of desired notion of spirituality and of womanhood is thus a part of the formation of the middle-class itself, wherein heirarchies and patriarchies are sought to be maintained on both material and spiritual grounds. The vedic woman, both in her own time, and after her appropriation by upper castes and classes in the nineteenth century, is built upon the labour of lower social groups and it is also a mark of distinction from them. Nowhere is class character of middle class and nationalist reform of women more apparent than in the differential construction of the private and public sphere in the colonial period (Sangari and Vaid. 10).

The introduction of women's education and the advent of modernity sometimes seemed to be an obstacle in the conjugal and domestic life of a woman. In the novel, Mahendra says to Annapurna,

> Remember that alphabet book–the root of all evil? I dont know where it has vanished, but it simply cannot be found. If you were there, you'd be happy to see that Chuni is faithfully fulfilling the duties of a woman, in so far as it is advisable for a woman to neglect her education (Tagore. 2003. 103).

In the film, there is a clear resistance to western learning. Annapurna's dialogue with Ashalata must be seriously taken into account. When a British woman comes and enquires about who wants to have English education, Annapurna firmly says that none in the house was interested. She opines that it is this education that will beget misfortune in a woman's life.

It is clear that discourses concerning women, sexuality and their place in society, in combination with the nationalist demonstration of these conventions, subjected femininity to processes of hegemonisation and homogenisation whereby it became static within the 'pure' domestic space and in pre–conceived categories such as wife and mother. In doing this, patriarchy ignored any other characteristic of female identity that may have existed outside established stereotypes and neglected any differences that may occur between various women and their own personal experiences of being female in India. Moreover, women lose a sense of control over their bodies as the body is not so much a body of one's own but a 'body–for–others' (Thapan, 6.1997). It is in this context that Meenakshi Thapan has noted that the female body becomes an instrument and a symbol for the community's expression of caste, class and communal honour. Chastity, virtue and above all, purity are extolled as great feminine virtues embodying the honour of the family, community and the nation.[3]

Asha Kasbekar observes that the 'ideal woman' played an important role in the nationalist prerogatives and cinema soon became the most significant agent

in disseminating this image by indulging in "hyperbole rhetoric on the subject of Virtue and Honour".[3] Thus heroines were always presented as docile, tender, modest and self– sacrificing and are stereotyped as either the virtuous all–sacrificing mother, or long–suffering wife. These stereotypes were realised and reassured through particular bodily practices and dress codes.

Ashalata's character in the novel as well as in the film represents such an image. In the novel, she is introduced in this manner–"Asha stepped into her new home, swathed in fetching shyness. Her gentle trembling heart did not envision even a single thorn lining the fabric of her cosy haven" (Tagore. 2003.15). She tried to perform all her duties to the best of her ability. Unable to perform the household chores deftly she often complained of herself to her husband that she is not capable of adhering to the qualities of an 'ideal woman'. Ashalata often failed to express affection and care which was demanded from most women. On the other hand, Binodini, although seen in terms of so called 'bad' sexuality, has been regarded as a woman bearing the qualities of a nurturing woman. Tagore described her in these words– "She carried that image of suffering in her heart the way a mother carries about a sick child on her bosom" (Tagore. 111.2003).

Clothing has strong associations with what can be read as female sexuality. Such a device is used in the film when Binodini wears the red blouse in front of Ashalata. Ashalata's gaze has to be taken note of in this particular episode. Through her gaze the audience witnesses an erotic female body (Binodini) and by doing this Ghosh has evoked a sense of pathos as well as the dominant sexuality within Binodini herself.

Laura Mulvey and many other notable film critics have critiqued cinema for eroticising the female body, claiming that it becomes a passive object of the active male voyeuristic gaze. By recognising women in terms of their sex only, female identity is imagined to be formed around two opposite strands of sexuality – *dharma* and desire. There is no other attempt to probe into the range of emotional and psychological characteristics that may exist in between these extremes. Binodini's character has to be read in terms of this frame. She is a woman who is torn apart by the conventions of society (*dharma*) and a part of her individuality (desire).

The fictional words of Tagore attempt at bringing the dilemmas of modernity, gender, politics, and narrative into moments of focus. This kind of an endeavour is also seen in the cinematic presentations of Satyajit Ray that even historians have sometimes missed entirely. Rituparno Ghosh is a self-proclaimed successor of legendary filmmaker Satyajit Ray (1921-1992). In fact, the film "Chokher Bali" also has distinctive portions that may be seen to be direct tributes to Ray and his films. An intertextual reading of *Charulata* and "Chokher Bali" can be made in this regard.

Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (1964) is situated in the nineteenth century Bengal, the period generally referred to as "The Bengal Renaissance". It was an age of confluence of various currents of freedom and individuality. Philosophical thinkers had put forward their ideas challenging the age-old traditions and customs and promising a new century of renewed hopes and aspirations. The tale of *Charulata* depicts the dilemma of individuals facing new thoughts and values. The characters of Ray's film, that is itself based on Tagore's novella *Nashtoneer*, Bhupati and Amal, representing the upper-class Bengali society, excitedly embrace the westernization of their culture. Most visibly Bhupati is seen right from the beginning of the novella as a man greatly instilled with the renaissance spirit. He spends all his wealth and time on propagating the new ideals through his newspaper *The Sentinal*. Bhupati's journalistic venture is also part of the manifestation of these new nationalist feeling. He also dresses like an Englishman and is interested in politics rather than the literary discussions in which Amal and Charu are constanaly engaged. Amal and Charu are referred to as "the writer and the reader" and it is via them that the whole literary scenario and the gamut of important figures like Bankim, Manmatha Dutta, Emerson, Steele and many others are brought in.

The huge enterprise of writing and readership is an integral part of the story. It was a time of proliferation of radical thoughts through books, journals, magazines, pamphlets and all these are seen in the film in their literary and physical forms. But social change coupled with a lack of comprehension brings in emotional upheavals which are clearly manifested in the life of these three characters and the disastrous end which they all are destined to face finally.

Such a kind of scenario is also visible in Ghosh's "Chokher Bali" where Binodini is shown to enjoy the privilege of taking lessons in English while at the same time wilfully engages in literary discussions with Mahendra. There was an obssession with reading during that period. There are references to Bankim's *Bishabriksha*, *Kapalakundala* and *Anandamath* over which Mahendra and Binodini have active reading sessions. The novel contains five letters written by the characters which are an integral part of the story. The letters are important from the point of view of the narrative as most of them are emotional exchanges between Mahendra and Binodini, the revelation of which cause unhappiness and discord within the family.

Then, there is the deliberate use of Rabindra Sangeet in "Chokher Bali" as well as in Ray's *Charulata.* The contexts are different but both convey similar feelings of joy and communion. A lot of background music has been used when Binodini appears on the screen, the song *"Mora jale sthale kato chhole maya jaal ganthi*" (We cast our spells in the land and the sea) is played. The song was sung by a group of enchantresses called the *Mayakumari* in Tagore's dance drama

Mayar Khela (*The Game of Illusion*). Like the enchantresses, Binodini believes that women have the power to cast magic spells on earth. She was indeed referred to as 'mayabini' by Rajlakshmi who rebuked her for casting her intellectual and physical charm upon her son, Mahendra. The song *"Pran keno kande re"* (why does the heart cry?) is played as the background score when Mahendra and Binodini exchange love letters and are drawn towards each other more after being physically intimate.

There is also the use of songs in the swing sequence (made iconic by Ray's *Charulata*) and the scenes where the opera-glasses are used. They work almost like a palimpsest in Ghosh's film. In *Charulata,* the entire swing scene is viewed from Charu's viewpoint. Ray conveys very carefully and subtly the changes of desire occurring within her 'self' at this crucial moment. The dizzying see–saw reflects the blurring of her own passions in the newly found outdoor atmosphere. When she stops swinging, a calm and resolved Charu focuses her lorgnette on Amal. As his magnified face appears in close-up clearly before her, we realize that Charu has confronted herself and her desires without any thought of fear. However, the swing sequence in "Chokher Bali" has different connotations. It is on a picnic when Ashalata and Binodini are able to bring themselves out of the four walls of their house and spend a carefree time devoid of any household duties.

Fig. 4.4 Ashalata left and Binodini right

It was a time for refreshing their childhood memories as the song *Purano shei diner kotha*[4] was sung by the two friends. As seen in Fig 4.4, both these women have moved outside the domestic realm and tried to enjoy being themselves for the first time. Ashalata, in this particular scene, flatly refuses to prepare tea for her husband when he demands and she also prevents Binodini from doing the same.

Fig. 4.5 Charulata sees the outside world with the opera glasses

The opera–glasses, on the other hand, are used as important strategic tools in both the films. Charulata uses them as a means to look at the outside world.

In figure 4.5, the first scene of the film, she moves from one part of the room to another to have a glimpse of different people walking outside and some entering her house. Later Charulata uses the opera glasses to capture sights of Bhupati, and later, Amal from a point of vision that she desires.

In "Chokher Bali", the glasses are an important part of Binodini herself. During her stay in the Kashi ghats she used the opera glasses to see the world which was quite different from the world she lived in. Through them she sees a woman singing the *thumri*[5] and is swayed away with the feelings evoked by the

song. She sees people engaged in various activities on the river banks such as washing clothes, bathing, playing and so on.

Fig. 4.6 Binodini sees the Kashi ghat with the opera glasses

The glasses serve to be the only medium through which her vision of life (otherwise limited to only a handful of people) is dramatically enlarged. Thus the glasses assume significance on the part of these two characters-Charulata and Binodini and is a functional agent to find their 'selfhood' with the help of the world outside themselves.

Both *Charulata* and "Chokher Bali" can be said to be a journey of self-discovery that takes a woman into her unconscious thereby making her privy to the functional standards of the psychic drives. Charu and Binodini learn who they are in terms of what they have been taught to suppress and deny by an orthodox society. Tagore through both the stories tries to project a woman's urge for freedom to love, the need for companionship in place of mere loyalty, the sense of being an individual being and so on. What Suranjan Ganguly observes in Charulata holds true for Binodini as well:

We see her struggle against guilt and fear as she reclaims this "lost" self and brings it to the surface. In this respect, her story encapsulates the experience of

all nineteenth-century women who stumble upon their unconscious and turn it into a source of energy and power... We will see how reading, writing and gazing will provide Charu with the means of intuitively find her way out of the male labyrinth of her time. And they will all converge to shape her most transgressive act: Falling in love outside marriage (65).

Fig. 4.7 Ashalata and Annapurna at the Kashi ghat

While Binodini looks around the river, she catches a glimpse of the pregnant Ashalata in Kashi. Fig. 4.7 clearly represents the image captured through Binodini's opera glasses. The next moment itself Binodini's urge for having a child is vehemently pronounced; but she has to leave the scene with a weary heart as the innate feelings within her found no echoing response.

Notes

1. Performativity is not a singular 'act' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the convention of which it is a repetition.
2. See K. Sangari & S.Vaid 'Recasting Women: An introduction' in Sangari and Vaid's (eds) *Recasting Women:Essays in Indian Cololnial History*, New Jersey: Rutgers, 1989, P-9
3. See M.Thapan 'Femininity and its Discontents: The women's body in intimate

relations' in M. Thapan (ed.) *Embodiment: Essays in Gender and Identity.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, P-115

4. See Asha Kasbekar 'Hidden Pleasures: Negotiating the Myth of the Female Ideal in Popular Hindi Cinema' in C. Pinney & R. Dwyer (eds) *Pleasure and the Nation: The History Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, P-293
5. It is a song written by Rabindranath Tagore popularly known as Rabindra Sangeet.
6. The song in the film is suggestive of Binodini's concealed desire to venture out a world for herself.

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5

The New Discourse on Women and Nation by Tagore and Ghosh

Women have been regarded as strongly related to the nation. People living in foreign countries sometimes call their country of birth as "motherland" or "mother country." In literature or on screen, a raped woman is sometimes compared to an invaded country. Recent scholarship establishes that national images are determined by gender politics. The traditional allegorization of female chastity with national purity is often represented through the depiction of the dishonouring the female body by foreign invaders. Thus, this connection of raped women and foreign invaders serve to degrade the 'female' to a signifier of insignificance and sacrifice. In *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, Tanika Sarkar proposes that Indian women, especially wives and widows, are strongly tied in this manner to the notion of Indian independence:

> ... the absolute and unconditional chastity of the Hindu wife, extending beyond the death of the husband, was equally strongly grounded by this discourse in her own desire. This purity, since it is supposedly a conscious moral choice, becomes at once a sign of difference and of superiority, a Hindu claim to power... Women's chastity, then, has a real and stated, not merely symbolic, political value (Sarkar. 41).

Sarkar goes on to state that the restrictions placed on Hindu widows have a deeper connection:

> ... strict ritual observances root the widow's body in ancient India, thus miraculously enabling her to escape from foreign domination. The

> cloth she wears is necessarily indigenous, the water she drinks is to be carried from the sacred river and not through foreign water pipes, and the salt that goes into her food is special rock salt untouched by machines. Ergo, the nation needs aesthetic widowhood (41).

"Chokher Bali" shows the connection between woman and nation wonderfully. The story takes place between 1902 and 1905, during which there was an outburst of nationalist activities. Ghosh delineates the aura of nationalism through various ways such the slogans of the people protesting against the British rule, Behari's nationalism, references to meetings held by nationalist leaders and so on.

Fig. 5.1 The protestors in a rally in "Chokher Bali"

One is obviously faced with the challenge of understanding the troubled relationship between women and nation. On the one hand, a woman and the body are seen as potential threats who might pollute the sanctity of the sacred idea of nation if her chastity is violated being a source of desire. On the other hand there is a feminist space that nation holds while projecting the typical image of the nation as 'deshmata' or 'bharatmata'. This image is a symbol for nation's purity but at the same time it is also vulnerable to contamination. In the case of nationalism, India or the 'deshmata' is oppressed and tortured by foreign rulers. While men had their own understanding of nation, women saw it differently and here it is significant to look at what Binodini thought or perceived of nation.

Binodini is able to discover her own 'desh' because she is liberated from all the prejudices and could live without the support of any male, for example, Mahendra or Behari. Binodini has challenged conventional beliefs, violated social norms and displayed an innate desire for love. She has suffered rejection in love several times by men and realised finally that there is a space she could create for herself devoid of any patriarchal support. It is this space which she calls 'desh' which is quite larger than the space that marriage could offer. Binodini has found a new nation or 'desh' which is not the nation that the nationalists are fighting to free from the foreign rule. It is a space or 'desh' of her mind that promises her a world of self-discovery and self-rule. She leaves behind the opera glasses in the film before she disappears because she no longer requires the glasses as a medium to see the world outside her; she has found a new world or space within her own self. Binodini's letter to Ashalata is quite revealing of Binodini's understanding of the world,

> Dear [Chokher] Bali,
>
> Do you remember asking me what desh means. [. . .] Is Beharibabu's desh same as ours? After I was estranged from you, these questions haunted me. [. . .] I realized that our cloistered life in Darzipara Street prevented us from seeing the outer world. That is why we tried to fulfill all our desires with the only man we had come across. But our desires remained unfulfilled and our small world (which you can call 'desh') was also shattered. If Lord Curzon succeeds in partitioning Bengal, then you and I will be in two countries. While living in two different countries if we only think about the insults, deprivations and sorrows we had suffered, then it would mean that we have accepted defeat. Actually our desh is in our mind. [. . .] I came to realize what desh means the day I stood on the ghats of Kashi ("Chokher Bali").

This is the most moving part of the movie where Binodini draws a resemblance between their situation and their land, Bengal. She regrets thinking that their lack of exposure to the outer world, and confinement to the four walls of household resulted in both of them fighting over a single man, and thus ruining the whole household. She hopes that even though, they have both parted ways (much like Bengal was divided into East and West Bengal), they would continue to recollect their erstwhile friendship, and that it would still ensure that any future meetings between them, if it were to occur, would be cordial and as friendly as they were before.

Having talked about the connection between women and nation, it is also important to look at the evolving relationship between gender and modernity. In an essay called "The Condolence Meeting" (1894), marking the demise of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Tagore argued that contact with European culture was

transforming both external conditions and subjective feelings, creating new social needs that demanded new modes to fulfill them. He said that Indian society, which had long been a domestic (*garhasthyapradhan*) realm, now had a new element, the "public", generating new responsibilities, including that of educating the public. Tagore had realised that it was a world in flux and that it became necessary to construct a type of "modernity" in keeping with the demands of the changing scenario. One needs to give a thought to what Binodini means when she talks of recognizing her as a 'woman' but more importantly as a 'human being.'

Dipesh Chakrabarty refers to this period as one that marked the emergence of a modern and collective Bengali subject.[1] But this idea of modernity is not quite synonymous with the Western standard. The word "modern" was first recorded in 1585, to refer to something of present or recent time. But the terms "modern/ modernity" holds quite a different connotation for Tagore. In his essay "Modern Poetry" (1932), he asks: "who is going to look up the almanac and fix the limits of the *modern*? Modernity is more about ideas than about periods" (in Das and Chaudhuri, 280).

The notion of the modern is a loaded conception, but as Timothy Mitchell points out, modernity often functions as a synonym for the West. It is generally the adoption of lifestyle: the non-western countries who adopt it are seen to mimic this mostly unsuccessfully. In a letter to Pramatha Chaudhuri (1891), Tagore describes his mind as a battleground, "as though the restless energy and the will to action of the West were perpetually assaulting the citadel of my Indian placidity" (in Dutta and Robinson, 25). His novels play out this internal conflict, undoing and redoing the modern in ways that cannot be accommodated by either the Western idea of modernity, or by subsequent theorizations of the postmodern. The conflict never reaches its point of resolution. Tagore opines that the word 'modern' is an evolving idea which cannot be defined to belong to a particular period of time or keep it restricted to a certain geographical area, namely the West.

The gender issue is crucial to Tagore's understanding of what is modern. The dichotomy that is coexistent with the conventional view of modernity–old and new, East and West—to this, gender adds another vital category. By creating an element of difference into the concept of the "human," it does not negate humanism but calls for an alternative form of humanism based on heterogeneity rather than homogeneity. Despising what he thinks as 'crisis in civilization', Tagore blames the situation to a large extent on the male subjugation of women, insisting that discrimination of gender hampers not only women's personal development, but also hinders the progress of human civilization as a whole. Even Gandhi expresses concern over the patriarchal rules laid down by the scriptures:

> ...it is said to think that the *Smritis* contain texts which can command

> no respect from men who cherish the liberty of women as thier own and who regard her as the mother of their race...The question arises to what to do with the *Smritis* that contain texts...they are repugnant to the moral sense. I have already said that all that is printed in the name of scriptures are not to be taken as the word of God or the inspired word (Gandhi. 85)

The preoccupation with the "women's question" began during the 19th century social reform movements, strictly meant to be anti-colonial nationalism, and remains a matter of conflict in India's socio-cultural and political sphere. The issue of gender being crucial forms the basis for India's women's movement. One important gender concern was status— that is, the rewards and oppurtunities deserved by women on India's journey to self-identification, democracy, progress, modernity, and development. Consequently, these ideas became gender issues. Data on gender discrimination in job recruitment, education, land distribution, inheritance, nutrition, and health could not be ignored. The colonial period is considered important in understanding gender relations. During this period modernity was initiated through colonial and indigenous ways. Modernity was associated with capitalism, which under colonialism transformed agricultural production, commerce, and large–scale industries. Moreover, the anti-colonial nationalism began at the end of the 19th century and by the early 20th century the formation of the nation–state evolved. These developments led to the growth of independent Indian state. These movements brought drastic change in the economic and socio–political trends which shaped and explained gender relations in India.

An adequate knowledge of India's colonial past is crucial in understanding gender relations and the role of nation in moulding these relations. The women's movement that emerged during the colonial period is intrinsic to the history of these contexts. The role of the nation-state and the male intellectuals were responsible for determining the idea of modernity for Indian women. This period saw the construction of a New Patriarchy which struggled to meet the urgencies of colonial rule and the urge for progress. But soon "New Woman" forged a new identity for them and spoke for a future different from the one fashioned by the new and old patriarchy. James Mill wrote in his *History of India* in 1817 that the condition of women in a society is an index of that society's place in civilization. "Women," "modernity," and "nation" became essential and inseparable elements in a connected discourse of civilization.[2] The "women's question" not only dominated public discourses, it also became the crux of the colonial-nationalist encounter, along with the discussion of modernity and the legitimisation of political power. For the colonialists, the tortures perpetrated on the Indian women became a firm moral ground on which they could start their "civilizing" mission.

They could justify their project by assuming to fight for the cause of Indian women, protecting them from brutal patriarchal practices. The colonisers were in fact confronted with certain horrific social practises which they had never even imagined to have actually existed. For example, accounts of *sati* (burning widows alive on their husband's funeral pyres), female infanticide, prohibition of widow remarriage, and child marriages drew their attention largely. The prevalence of such activities led the colonizers to come to the conclusion that the status of women was definitely degraded and that men of that society were extremely barbarous. Although the new patriarchy tended to 'modernize' women, it adopted several elements from 'tradition' as signs of its indigenous cultural identity.

Such was the image in which Indian men were compelled to view themselves when western education actually made its first impact. The upper caste Hindu elite welcomed the enlightenment philosophy of liberalism and individualism. They looked into the inhuman traditional practices against women as social evils that needed to be eradicated from the society. The social reform movement thus began as an effort on the part of the new elite to do away with the worst ideals of the old patriarchal order under the aegis of the British rule. Women became the centre of attention on the programme of the social reform movement. Samita Sen says that for reformers, women's emancipation was a prerequisite to national regeneration and an index of national achievement in the connected discourse of civilization, progress, modernity, and nationalism.

The movement dealt with various issues. It worked for the implementation of proper legislative powers. A series of protests ultimately abolished *sati* in 1829 and widow remarriage was made legal in 1856. Another section was concerned with creating the female counterpart of the new male elite, "New Woman", who would have equal scope and opportunities as those enjoyed by the men in the family. The best apparatus was formal education but this became a problem with the section of upper classes that practised gender discrimination (and the *purdah*) and further reshaped the public-private gender roles. But it is significant that when speaking of the reforms for 'emancipating' women in the nineteenth century Bengal, we often tend to ignore the possibility that the issues around which the debates on 'emancipation' revolved might have concerned only the *andarmahal* of women of respectable *bhadralok* homes who constituted a minority of Bengali women.

Various organizations were set up in India under the influence of the female emancipation project forwarded by the British. This happened during the early and middle part of the nineteenth century. Organizations like the Brahmo Samaj in Eastern India, the Prarthana Samaj in Western India, the Arya Samaj in Northern India, and the Theosophical Society in Southern India worked for the upliftment of the women section of the society. The male intellectuals joined these movements and questioned many of the cultural and social restrictions to which

upper–caste women were vulnerable. These women were allowed to enjoy the fruits of modernity and eventually joined the public spheres of life, participating in politics, employment and leadership. The literary world of Tagore embodies an image of India caught up in the commotion of opposing beliefs, of the questioning of the old values and customs in search of self fulfillment, the clash between the moderate and extremist ideologies in politics and most importantly the conflict in the human feelings between love and sacrifice. The novels *Chokher Bali*, *The Wreck* and *Chaturanga,* all the three of which are adapted into films, relate to some of the burning social issues which moved the Bengali Hindu society towards the end of the 19th century. *Chokher Bali/* "Chokher Bali" exteriorises the struggle of young beautiful widow for self recognition and honour in a social system that denies all scope for such a possibility. The protagonist, Binodini, though brought up in a small village is adept in household chores like cooking, knitting and interior decoration. Her father employs an English governess to educate his daughter at home in spite of not being so economically sound. This shows the growing consciousness of the people who were faced with a new world that they were trying to come to terms with.

These developments came about after the colonial state's deplorable representation of the Indian society. The colonial discourse had somewhat clarified the probability of the existence of a domestic world order which was quite impossible for the colonizers to easily access. But the colonizers also realised that without a thorough knowledge about the colonial state, they would not be able to have complete mastery over the Indians. This domestic space was regarded in colonial discourse as the symbol of unique Indianness. The early articulation of nationalism thus tried to redefine the domestic space and focused on the domestic as the repository of Indianness and the politically subjugated male elite's only domain of autonomy.

However, by the end of the nineteenth century there came about a break from the reformist agenda. This was due to the separation of the domestic 'space' as the territory of nationalist resistance to colonial intervention. Women had become the topic in which understanding and conflicts took place between the colonial administration and the colonized subjects. It was not acceptable to give the colonial state any legal right to impinge on the sanctified domain of the family. Early nationalists were against any colonial interference in gender relations on the grounds that these were anti-conventional and, therefore, anti-national. Nationalist opposition to reform took the shape of safeguarding the tradition. The good woman, the devoted wife and self-sacrificing mother guided by spiritual strength, became the quintessential representation of the nation.

This transformation of the imaging of women had varied consequences. First, their new stature provided no scope of inquiring into social reality of a woman's life. Second, the idealized opposition between domestic and public had

situated women strictly in the domestic realm, with housework and nurturing children as their sole aims. Third, "Woman" had become the point in which community and class issues came into conflict. In such a diverging space, the unity of nation necessitated the domination of its women. Hence, women's aspirations for gender equality were turned down owing to their position as low caste or economically poor. Therefore, a small group of upper class women became the inheritors of colonial modernity and were able to negotiate patriarchal spaces to receive education and employment and to aim for political participation. Yet the refashioning of patriarchy in the image of high–caste and upper–class norms meant that most women were deprived of the benefits of modernity and also their traditional rights and freedom. Thus, the new patriarchy was no less savage than the society it wanted to civilize and change. When Tagore speaks of an emergent new social order in "The Condolence Meeting," he insists: "Especially since women have no place in our outer society, our social life itself is seriously incomplete" (Partha Chatterjee in Mitchell ed., 38).

In the essay "Nari" (1936), Tagore says: "If a bird has beautiful wings and a sweet voice, people want to capture it and put it in a cage, forgetting that its loveliness belongs to the whole forest". "Similarly," he continues, "since a very long time, men have confined women's nurturing skills and sweetness of nature to serve their own personal needs" (Das and Chaudhuri, 64).

Tagore, through his novel *Ghare Baire*, expresses the feeling that we all are a part of the universal supreme self and talks of a similar global sentiment throughout the novel. One such instance is a conversation between Nikhil and his mentor who says:

> I tell you Nikhil, man's history has to be built by the united effort of all the races in the world, and therefore the selling of conscience for political reasons-this making a fetish of one's country won't do... Here in this land of India, amid the mocking laughter of Satan piercing the sky, may the feeling for this truth become real! What a terrible epidemic of sin has been brought into our country by foreign lands (Tagore. 1919. 224)

Another significant aspect is the condition of women in society that remains a concern in the entire fabric of Tagore's novels, evolving through various stages during his long writing career. The female characters in Tagore's works reflect this process, but instead of concentrating only on definite characters, it is more useful to examine Tagore's attitude towards the role of gender in the conditioning of private and public history. His perspective remains multifarious and contradictory, for the novels not only mirror a divided world, but also play out Tagore's own internal conflicts about issues of gender. He tried to study the mind

of man in its realisation of different aspects of truth from diverse viewpoints. The internal conflicts that are played in the inner recesses of his mind are dramatized through his fictional characters.

In *Chokher Bali*, modernity emerges as a new interiority, an attempt to project the 'inner self' of the modern Bengali subject. In his Preface to the second edition, Tagore announces the advent of the modern novel in Bengal. He says that 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 mode of *Chokher Bali*. Modernity, in the text, also postulates the need to "modernize" the concept of 'gender' within society. The female characters in the novel namely, Ashalata, Binodini, Rajlakshmi and Annapurna raise the issues regarding women's education, child marriage and gendered power relations within the family and of course, the plight of young widowed women.

As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out in Mitchell's *Questions of Modernity*, that the widow, being denied voice and desire, represents the ultimate level of subalternity within the domestic sphere. Thus, by giving Binodini both voice and individuality, the text makes a powerful statement about the need to give birth to a new idea of the modern subject. This subject is invested with an interiority that heralds the modernist novel in the West.

Critics opine that the action of *Chokher Bali* occurs during the period when it was still a tradition to hire Englishwomen to tutor female pupils.

Fig. 5.2 Binodini with her teacher in "Chokher Bali"

In the novel and the film, women receive their education at home. Binodini's father employs an Englishwoman to teach her, while Mahendra gives English lessons to Ashalata himself. Rajlakshmi, who belongs to an older generation, does not appreciate education. She therefore dislikes Mahendra's wish to educate Asha. Though Mahendra's efforts in educating Ashalata are treated with irony because he uses them as a means to spend time together, the text does not reject the idea of women's education. Deserted by her husband, Asha seeks a new birth through self-education. Likewise, Binodini's control over people relies a great deal on the talents and expertise she has acquired through education.

Like female education, widow remarriage was another crucial issue in Bengal at the beginning of the century. Though there are references that the *Rigveda* approved of some forms of widow remarriage, from medieval times, the idea of wifely devotion demanded that the widow must withdraw from the earthly desires and live a life of austerity and celibacy. The reformists of the nineteenth century in Bengal tried to improve the position of widows which culminated in the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, and a change of attitudes towards widows among the more liberal sections of society. Thus, in *Chokher Bali*, although Binodini is expected to lead a spartan life, she is not compelled into an ascetic existence. At some point of time, Behari suggests Mahendra to "marry off this widow- that'll take care of her for good" (Tagore. 2003.45). But Mahendra mocks at him saying, "Kunda in *The Poison Tree* was married off too." Therefore although some change was taking place, the orthodox society continued to object to widow remarriage. When Binodini refuses Behari's proposal of marriage, it is to prevent him from the social disgrace of marrying a widow: "I am a widow, a woman disgraced. I cannot permit you to be humiliated in the eyes of society" (Tagore. 2003, 269). Besides Tagore, there have been many attempts to portray the figure of the outspoken widow in Bengali literature.

If Tagore's modernity makes him unique among his other contemporaries, it is also distinct from "Western" ideas of sexual liberation. Some theocentric readings of *Chokher Bali* "locate the text in relation to the Vaishnavite celebration of the romance of Radha and Krishna, a legendary narrative of love outside marriage" (Sogani. 67). Binodini is represented as 'timeless and ageless, forever a Gopika', "...With all her anguish, the pangs of separation and the full burden of her youth...she stand there thus, waiting for the boatman to ferry her across" (Tagore. 2003, 256). Tagore's modernity was based in a particular culture which is seen in his use of older Indian myths of romance to question the nineteenth century ideals of fidelity and conjugal love.

Ideas of maternity also come in for critical analysis as the childless Binodini urge for motherhood.

Fig. 5.3 A scene from "Chokher Bali" where Binodini embraces Basant

In the scene as shown in Fig. 5.3, Binodini's underlying maternal instincts are out in the open and they are represented in the text as a positive redeeming force. When Behari rejects Binodini's advances, she finds solace in her affection for the eight year old Basant who is Behari's pupil. In contrast, Rajlakshmi is introduced as an over-possessive mother who assumes her son as a replacement for her husband, and despises his attachment with Asha. Although he is twenty-two, Mahendra remains under his mother's veil:

> Figuratively speaking, just as a kangaroo cub is most comfortable in its mother's pouch it was second nature for Mahendra to stay in his mother's sheltering shadow (Tagore. 2003. 1).

She represents a nature of mother–love which does not comply with the ideals of motherhood in nationalist discourse in nineteenth century Bengal.

Chokher Bali marks the downfall of the idea of 'combined family' in Bengal, a situation about which Tagore had become aware quite early. The novel depicts the events of a family with a male as the head. Asha, the daughter–in–law, is desirably to remain under the domination of her mother–in–law Rajlakshmi. In this condensed domestic arrangement, Annapurna and Binodini occupy the

position of temporary residents. In the novel, Mahendra marries Asha for love. This break from the traditional arranged marriages indicates the shift towards love marriage, an idea that was gaining currency in Bengal as a result of the influence of Western culture. *Chokher Bali* thus presents a society in transformation, and the ways in which there was shift in the family structure had an impact on the lives of women. In the same way, Ghosh raises issues and extends the dimension of discussion that concerns the relationship between women, the family and colonial modernity in twentieth century colonial India.

The treatment of Asha's character can also be analysed in terms of modernity. She does not fall under the categories suggested by Bankimchandra's stereotypes of *prachina*, the traditional woman expert in household works, and *nabina*, the westernized "modern" woman who seeks social recognition being indifferent to household responsibilities and obligations. Asha's innocent and naive nature, which Mahendra finds so fascinating in the beginning, begins to irritate him when he comes across Binodini's domestic skills. Asha, however, cannot reconcile with Mahendra's betrayal with the timely disclosure of his infidelity, and changes herself to a great extent.

> This new face of Asha was a novelty to him. This Asha had no diffidence, no inadequacy; this Asha was confident of what she was doing and she wasn't begging for protection from him. (Tagore. 2003. 221)

Asha's defiance of tolerance bestowed upon the devoted Hindu wife, her refusal to abide by the principles of tradition and the scriptures, is a notable aspect of the modernity of Tagore's novel. Even though she forgives him in the end, she does so with a newly discovered assurance of choice and self–decision.

Behari, Mahendra's friend, represents that section of the society which is inspired by the emerging spirit of individualism characteristic of the time. His disapproval of Mahendra's love for Binodini suggests a conservative mindset; yet his decision to marry the widowed Binodini shows a modern outlook and forward–looking social awareness. Behari finds himself thrown into a tussle between the rule of reason and passion and is unable to live up to his own ideal of morality. He has secret feelings for Ashalata and then feels drawn towards Binodini. It is this uncertainty that gives his character the inner complexity that brings forth the modernity of Tagore's approach in *Chokher Bali*.

In these contexts obviously, the most interesting figure is undoubtedly Binodini herself, the central protagonist of the *Chokher Bali*/ "Chokher Bali." She dissolves the characteristics between *prachina* and *nabina* image created by Bankimchandra in his novels. Instead, she emerges as an intriguing blend of the

different types of Bengali female characters that Bankimchandra Chatterjee has put into selective compartments. Binodini, in the beginning of the novel, is presented as a trangressive figure but her affection for Behari gradually transforms her character and at the end she follows the dictates of the society by welcoming a life of austerity. But the film closes on a different note. Binodini suddenly disappears from the scene the day she was supposed to get married to Behari. This act is significant because Binodini, as a modern individual, took this step of deciding the next course of her life all alone. Whatever she might have decided must have been done with great courage and the confidence she gained was the result of the radical changes that were taking place in the 'modern' society. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, the body, as a site for the struggle between opposite tendencies is an unresolved problem in the text. He argues that "*rup* or physical beauty is not an issue in *Chokher Bali*" (Dipesh Chakrabaty in Mitchell ed., 72). Many readers and viewers might tend to think that the character of Binodini is provided with additional physical charm. She is both the subject and the object of desire for Mahendra and Behari. Binodini's inner desire is intensified by the suppressive social practices of nineteenth century Bengal, and it does not fit the models provided by Western theory. The modernity of Tagore's text has to be understood by a special reading dimension.

Having created such a revolutionary figure, Tagore seemed at a loss to find a proper resolution to her problem. The fact that he twice changed the ending of the novel indicates his own dissatisfaction with the story's denouement. Although the tale ends in reconciliation, Binodini's disappearance into oblivion at the end leaves us with the feeling of an unfinished story. But then, incompleteness, fragmentation and open ended-ness are also characteristics of the modern novel which *Chokher Bali* definitely caters to.

Writing on the Bengali widow as the product of modernity meant like recording not just the external conditions of the widow's life but her inner suffering as well, the way passion tussled with reason within her to make her modern. To peep into her deep and conflicted self, to hear her own voice as it were, required the development of a set of observational techniques for studying and describing human psychology. This was a role performed by the novel.

Chokher Bali/ "Chokher Bali" makes an attempt to delve deep into the inner psychic recesses of the central protagonist and focuses on the problem of a young world of a widows, whose feelings were not accorded any recognition in the society. Binodini as the new Bengali subject desired freedom and self-expression. One basic point of departure between Bankim's treatment of desire in *Bishabriksha* and that of Tagore in *Chokher Bali* is that there is no issue of *rup* or 'eye of love' in *Chokher Bali*. Both Tagore and Ghosh make it clear that

Binodini is the new woman endowed with interiority and subjectivity. It is the educated and enlightened Binodini who is focused in the novel without giving any due importance to her physical beauty. Unlike the widow characters in Bankim novels, Binodini is literate; she is, in fact, depicted as a reader of Bankim's novels. Tagore, in the Preface to the 2nd edition, describes how the emergence of this novel heralded a sudden change. Its novelty lay in its emphasis on studying the interior space and the psychological forces of human beings. The widow characters in Tagore's novels often choose spiritual dependence to reconcile the resentment against social injustice. In *Chokher Bali*, for instance, Annapurna, an aunt of Asha, illustrates this point. Her determination to keep her innermost self chaste was as at the same time her quiet rejection of social conventions. This becomes clear from the following conversation between Ashalata and Annapurna.

> Asha asked, "Aunty, do you ever think of uncle?" Annapurna said, "I was widowed at the age of eleven. My husband is like a shadowy memory to me." Asha aksed, "Aunty who do you think of then?" Annapurna smiled. "I think of Him who is now the keeper of my husband—of God" Asha said, "Does that bring you joy?" Annapurna stroked her heart lovingly and said, "Child, what would you know of the matters of my mind? It is known only to me and to Him on whom my heart is fixed." Asha said, "But He knows your heart and so He is pleased. But what if the husband is not satisfied with the dumb woman's devotion?" Annapurna said, "Not everyone has the capacity to satisfy everyone, my child. If the wife serves her husband and his family with utmost devotion and genuine dedication, then even if the husband throws away her service as useless, the Lord of the Universe will pick it up and treasure it...Chuni, my child, I do not have the power to protect you from sorrows, travails and hardships of life at all times. This is my advice to you: however anyone may hurt you, keep your faith, your peity intact; may your integrity always be uncompromised." (Tagore. 2003. 154)

Notes

1. See Dipesh Chakrabarty "Witness to Suffering: Domestic Cruelty and the Birth of the Modern Subject in Bengal" in Timothy Mitchell's *Questions of Modernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000, P-49
2. See Dipesh Chakrabarty "Witness to Suffering: Domestic Cruelty and the Birth of the Modern Subject in Bengal", in Timothy Mitchell's *Questions of Modernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000, P-56

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6

Conclusion

Both *Chokher Bali*/ "Chokher Bali" deal with two crucial themes-the restricting nature of social conventions and the lack of socially approved space for the establishment of female identity outside these restrictions. The story is set in the early 20th century Bengal and raises some profound and universal questions. Rituparno Ghosh's cinematic adaptation is a 21st century retelling of the novel wherein he has introduced certain innovations in keeping with the modalities of his medium. It looks at our deeply ingrained sense of tradition and morality and the consequences it faces when in conflict with the orders of the heart. Ghosh builds upon this aspect of the human nature and keeps shifting us around and placing us in ambivalent and morally confusing positions, thus questioning our sense of vulnerability. He projects the overall scenario of early 20th century Bengal, of the moral, social and thoroughly confused political order of the time.

Abhik Mukherjee's excellent cinematography, background score by Debajyoti Mishra which has the ideal selection and blending of Tagore songs based on the themes of romance in its varied manifestations, the placement of the songs complementing the situations, the moving performances by Aishwarya Rai, Raima Sen, Lily Chakravarty, Prasenjit and Tota Roychoudhury, Indraneel Ghosh's period production have shaped "Chokher Bali" into perhaps the best film ever directed by Rituparno Ghosh and the best Tagore film after *Charulata.* Ghosh focussed on sound design to bring about the message of the political upheaval in Bengal happening at the same time as the destruction of Mahendra's marriage

inside the home. The echoes of *vande mataram* entering into the home, the shouts of hawkers selling their goods, keertana singers dancing around singing their holy songs, a *thumri* drifting across the river ghats, the chanting of holy mantras to relieve an old lady of her pains on deathbed, offer a different dimension to the overall impact of the narrative. Aishwarya Rai gets into the character of Binodini and it is through her and her dialogues that Ghosh comments ironically on the conservative society of the times. Her body language has been well directed, the use of her eyes are important as at times it speaks on her behalf, and also that it sees the outside world with a critical lens. She has been portrayed as one of the best Tagore women brought to life on the Indian screen.

Ghosh's Binodini, in his 21st century rendering of Tagore's novel, is a woman who evokes, not sympathy, but admiration. "Chokher Bali" reminds us that there was a time when drinking tea was considered a sin for the widows and if they wanted a cup of it, they had to have it within locked rooms. Binodini, however, is projected as a woman of strong resolve who makes her own choices and decisions in life. Discussing the ending of the film Ghosh comments,

> Today, when you read the novel, you can make out that this *cannot* be the ending. A lot of people wanted Binodini to get married to Behari. I think that would have been a solution 30 years ago when people were propagating widow remarriage, they would have been content if she were given another marital home. But in today's time, I think a woman can live on her own completely (Ghosh. 2005. n.p).

Binodini's portrayal offers a sharp contrast to the other widow figures in the story. Unlike Rajlakshmi and Annapurna, Binodini does not remain confined to the boundaries created by widowhood because she is educated and enlightened and therefore does not accept the pathetic fate of being a victim of widowhood. She creates a new space for herself being liberated from patriarchy, colonisation and widowhood and finally embarks on a journey towards self-realisation.

Binodini is clearly a representative figure of the 'new woman' of the colonial period in Bengal. In figure 21, she is seen signing a paper supporting the movement against the British. Behari has approached her for signing a pact and Binodini notices that there are no signatures of any women. Asking the reason behind it, Behari explains that either women are illiterate or they are too concerned about their handwriting.

Fig: 6.1 A still from "Chokher Bali"

Through this scene, Ghosh makes an important statement about the lack of education among the women folk. It is this inability to read or write that makes them deprived of many things in life. To know how far Indian women have progessed since those days or to know where they still stand, it is necessary not only to look back, but to look at more searchingly. "Women have more often been imaged against than imaging" (Ramaswamy. 2003.1). In the novel *Chokher Bali*, we see Tagore's treatment of his characters being rooted in the then Bengali society. Ghosh has quite successfully retained the same but with a 21st century perspective.

Ghosh designs interplay of the inherent human passions and its conflict with the traditional ideologies in his screenplay, manipulating the years slightly to make use of the political scenario of the age. *Chokher Bali* was first published in 1903. Ghosh sets the film between 1902 and 1905. In the film, the 1905 Partition of Bengal becomes the background against which the story is set.

Mahendra (Prosenjit Chatterjee) and Ashalata's (Raima Sen) conjugal life has lost all its charm. Following the first physical encounter and its later consummation, the couple soon exhaust the romance in their relationship. They fall prey to the first mediator of external influence in the household, the educated and beautiful widow Binodini (Aishwarya Rai). The situation is similar to another

passion play by Tagore, *Ghare Baire*, where Nikhilesh exposes his wife to the external world and once out of the closet, she is captivated by the lust of Nikhilesh's friend, Sandeep.

In the film, Ghosh tries to capture the various manifestations in the relationships through a different mode. There is a scene where Binodini orders trees to be cut down so that the well furnished but dark bedroom of Mahendra and Asha is filled with air and light. The mingling of light and shade; and the beams of the golden sunset that light up Binodini and Ashalata are beautiful and at the same time, a symbolic representation of the various facets and shades of relationships.

Disloyalty in a conjugal relationship, however short-lived, can be hardly forgotten and has a deep impact throughout the life. After the revelation of her husband's infidelity, Ashalata becomes hopeless and her comment on the nationalists' efforts to prevent the political divide proves so. She senses the temporary reconciliation in her relationship with her husband which she thinks might be short-lived. Future tensions and disharmony may continue to ruin her seemingly happy life. All the characters are unpredictable in their thoughts and actions. And it is the resulting inconsistency that which characterises both the novel and the film as modern. Ghosh deftly expresses the sensibility of a young bride through Ashalata's character. Paradoxically juxtaposed against the vibrancy of her youth is her simple naivé nature with all its frivolousness which also works a positive binding force. Binodini is a complex character. Intelligent, educated, and exceedingly attractive, Binodini's sense of self-esteem and recognition of her own individuality is far ahead of her times and its social milieu. She has in her the qualities of an enchantress, which she believes resides in every woman, and this becomes a fatal attraction for all those who willingly or unwillingly come close to her.

The subtle nuances in Binodini's character are beautifully projected by the director. Rai, with her acting skills, meets the director's needs in dialogue delivery and movement of the eye or hand. Ghosh also makes it quite clear that a few years of education at home with an English nun does not generally help an Indian girl in the beginning of the century who was largely still not exposed to Western ways of life—to speak English with a perfect accent, which is shown in Binodini's inability in pronouncing the word 'spleen'.

Ghosh's greatest asset is his eye for detail and his inquisitiveness. He creates an aura of authenticity with the assistance of art director Bibi Roy's refined sense of aesthetics and history in the film, with mainly indoor shots except a few which are set in the ghats of Varanasi and the garden house where the picnic episode was shot. The song sequences from Tagore's musical "Mayar Khela" provide a charismatic effect to the film which is the site of passions and enchantment. The

natural storyteller in Rituparno Ghosh has convincingly surpassed the bounds of a period–piece and succeeded in making an iconic translation of the novel with universal statements.

In a letter written to his wife Mrinalini in 1901, the year he began publishing *Nashtoneer*, as well as *Chokher Bali*, Rabindranath Tagore wrote in the journal *Bharati*:

> My inmost being continually craves emptiness, not just the emptiness of sky, air and light, but an emptiness within the home, an emptiness of furnishings and arrangements, an emptiness of effort, thought, fuss *alternatively*–empty of furnishings and arrangements, empty of effort, thought, fuss (Pal. 18).

In his various genres of writing, Tagore not only describes the concrete spaces in which his characters live, but employs abstract ideas to represent the contours of a character's inner life or its expectations which may be viewed against its positioning in a material world or in the public domain. It can be seen that Ghosh, who was a careful and perceptive reader of Tagore, made remarkable use of this aspect of Tagore's representational technique, and not merely attempting a simple translation of Tagore's metaphors and symbols into visual forms, but replacing them with cinematic frames within which space, interiority and self-discovery receive ample treatment. Space in a written or visual text may be explained in two ways: as *place* and as *vacancy*. Things can be read in terms of its difference with others and so can be done with this constitutive category. The notion of the vacancy is integral to Tagore's understanding of the psyche of his characters. It refers to the notion of emptiness that Tagore repeatedly mentions in his works and it is this aspect that features the idea of the modern novel.

The constant realisation of this *vacancy* suggests the idea of a *space* as a yet unfilled category. This vacancy is constantly felt in the conjugal life of Ashalata and her husband. Binodini is also obsessed with this idea throughout the novel and the film. Tagore's characters are situated within the private or public domain which occupy and therefore *place* them in certain spaces. They are either restricted by place which may be a materially and socially determined category which, if they so desire, have to transcend physically. Simultaneously, Tagore's texts consistently refer to a mental or symbolic space which can be reached by thought or feeling, but cannot be contained by it. Such space may be viewed as an ideal, like the *bahir* into which Binodini seeks to release herself. Her inner self aspires for the attainment of that external, public space. The representation of this so–called 'space' may be either real or imaginary.

Both in the novel and the film the confined, narrow spaces of domestic life are constantly contrasted with the openness of a vast and limitless outside world, and this becomes a potential instrument through which the experiences of the

character's inner life or their aspirations can be construed. Ghosh has discussed the relevance of "Chokher Bali" as a contemporary thought on the issue of liberation of woman. He says, "a woman does not have a country of her own, just as she has no surname of her own [. . .] But a woman can have a space [. . .] For an independent woman, therefore, I would wish to define it as space or domain. And that is what Binodini speaks of at the end" (Ghosh. 2005. n.p).

Tagore has described relationships and its various facets mainly through symbols and wordplay. He was to some extent grounded in his society and was always conscious about its sanctions and taboos. But Rituparno Ghosh, being a 21st century individual, is far more loud and intense in the treatment of his subjects and tries to narrow down the gap of 100 years. We find many ironic comments on the society of the past through the perspective of the contemporary times. But one has to remember that adaptation does not allow total freedom to the director. He has to work within the spaces that are offered to him by the text which he is adapts on screen. However, it is quite clear that our attitudes towards widows haven't really changed much although we have travelled more than a century from Tagore's time.

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Figure 2.4- https:// anilcm.wordpress.com/2015/05/09/tag…

Figure 2.5 -https://learningandcreativity.com/silhouette/streer-patra-bengali-film

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