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TRACING THE HUES OF NON-CONFORMIST DESIRE UNDER THE DISMAL VEIL OF WIDOWHOOD: REREADING THE CHALLENGING PARADIGMS IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S CHOKHER BALI AND CHATURANGA

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Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore has succeeded in his endeavour in creating the compelling, full-blooded and devastatingly beautiful characters of Binodini and Damini in his novels Chokher Bali and Chaturanga respectively. His obvious construction of the sensuous and hedonistic characters of Binodini and Damini has sparked controversy, because of the portrayal of the widowed characters in challenging light. However Binodini and Damini are more sinned against than sinners. Mary Wollstonecraft has poignantly noted in Vindication of the rights of women, "Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience". Both Binodini and Damini are women of education bearing a futuristic outlook towards life. In the pre-independence Hindu society, women derived their status from their husbands, loss of which made them subject of humiliation and abasement. The sacred Hindu scriptures of the Dharmasashtra, has laid down stringent norms for widowed women, reducing them to the stature of ciphers, debarring them from attending any

auspicious celebration, and relegating them to a mundane life bereft of any aesthetic pleasure or epicurean tastes. Binodini and Damini both are the victims of patriarchy. It is through the exposure of their repressed passions that they challenge the unquestionable influence of patriarchy. Binodini and Damini rigorously try to demystify the old age customs through their futuristic outlook. In their attempt to dislodge the venerable status of patriarchy and ameliorate their position, Damini succeeds as she marries Sribilash defying the societal norms. But, Binodini despite acquiring the unfaltering attention of her much coveted Behari, refuses to marry him and walks away in solitude. The flamboyancy of the widows and their urge to rediscover their bodies by avowedly declaring their mettle and passion can be perceived as a form of resistance against patriarchy. The paper analyses the New Woman traits which is embodied in the figures of the protagonists, making them epitomes of true feminists.

Keywords: New woman, hedonistic, repressed passion, patriarchy, resistance

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Rabindranath Tagore as a playwright is eternally posited in an arena of conflict between tradition and modernity. Tagore's fictional constructs Binodini and Damini are embodiments of emancipated nineteenth century women, amidst uncountable social impediments, Tagore has taken up an unprecedented challenge of cataloguing these open-minded women with unabashed defiant demeanour. Tagore's sensitive evaluation of the contemporary women, helps him unfold the tormented self-assertive female psyche hindered by patriarchal inhibitions. Chokher Bali concretizes the silent sufferings of Binodini the protagonist who was already a victim of child marriage, being married off to an undeserving, feeble diseased man at the tender age of twelve.

The woeful condition of widows is unmistakably portrayed through Binodini's wretchedness, after the death of her husband. As against the simplicity and passive viscosity of Ashalata, Binodini is fiercely competent and efficient. Binodini is a potent and strong character shackled by the oppressive tentacles of patriarchy, initially Binodini is presented as a conformist, aligning herself to the societal demands and banishing her epicurean tastes as is expected of a widow. A society where a woman procures her identity from her husband Binodini and Damini are bereft of an entity; they are segregated from the

hegemonic order. Damini is propelled to a life of penance after the death of her celibate husband. Such is the play of fate, that even during the stint of her brief marital life; she couldn't relish the conjugal felicity due to her husband's rigorous spiritual devotion.

The hypocrisy of the colonized patriarchal society with its overt nationalist agenda is clearly portrayed through the valuable insights into the life of Binodini and Damini. The society tended to confine widows within the domestic territorial bounds and banished them to a life of penance. Captivated in a bane like existence, widows were expected to live a life of renunciation and austere spirituality, curbing even a modicum of carnality, enigma and passion. Binodini at the beginning didn't question the destiny of her marriage, stoically acquiesced to the existing moral codes of the decadent society, meekly accepting the position of unpaid exhaustive labour : "Like a single garden vine planted in a jungle, Binodini, since her husband's demise, had led a listless existence in the dreary environment of the village."(Tagore 47) Binodini has been subjected to three-fold marginalization, firstly as a victim of patriarchy, secondly as a colonized subject and thirdly a victim of Widowhood. The compulsive subjectivity of women under the phallogocentric society is evident when the widows are diminished to status of

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cyphers compelled to abjure the titbits of life. With the root of deprivation being similar, imprisoned in an unjust cloistered existence, Rajlakshmi takes Binodini to her home. Binodini quickly wins the trust and confidence of everyone through her meticulousness and efficiency: "Binodini was adept in every sort of housework, leadership was instinctive to her, she had no qualms ordering the servants about, setting their tasks and disciplining them when necessary." (Tagore 65)

Damini the flamboyant, enigmatic widow was more sinned than a sinner. Her husband Sivatosh had failed to satisfy her psycho-physical needs during her brief conjugal interlude, being an ardent follower of Leelananda Swamy. Damini's predicament exacerbates when she is expected to unquestioningly follow the demands and convictions of her husband. Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, has drawn upon Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon and poignantly noted that the perpetual monitoring of prisoners from a vantage point in a high tower helps to discipline the perpetrators. Sivatosh had once given away Damini's adornments that he had received as a dowry to his beloved Swamy, in order to penalize Damini for her blasphemous defiance and resentment of religion and scriptures. Engel's has observed the economic modes of production in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and*

State, and concluded that in a patrilineal family organization men are the controllers of private property who solidify the position of women as slaves. Without trying to know Damini's consent and considering her as a property, Sivatosh had bequeathed her custody to Leelananda Swamy's care. Damini is doomed to a life of penury after the unfortunate death of her husband. Leelananda Swamy can be interpreted as the impersonation of patriarchal phallus, omnipotent and omnipresent; he governs and dictates the entity of the widows. Damini's frustration and anguish resulting from her grounded existence under the religious eccentricities is duly highlighted by her pathos evoking statement: "Your Guru has given me nothing at all. He has not been able to give even a moment's calm to my troubled soul."

Behind the veil of Widowhood a heart throbbed with robust sensuous desires. Binodini is abjectly predicated at a situation where she cannot totally submit to the societal demands nor she can banish them altogether. Mary Wollstonecraft has proclaimed in *The Vindication of the rights of women* "Educate the female mind by enlarging it and there will be an end to blind obedience." Tutored in English, quite advance of her age, Binodini is articulate and verbose, as opposed to the tongue-tied, unsophisticated Ashalata. The conflict in the novel ensues with Binodini's intrusion

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as a disruptive force. Rosamund Lehmann in her seminal essay “The recurring dream of Romance” attests the view that romance is the fundamental reason for the rivalry and rift between women. After Binodini had befriended naïve Ashalata with her charming wit and vitality, Ashalata exposed herself as an open book, confiding her with every information even the details of frolic merriment and bliss of her marital life. Allured by the confidential intense titbits of Ashalata and Mahendra’s conjugal felicity, her libidinal desires are triggered, and the flame of passion so long uncherished is rekindled. Through her aptitude to exercise superiority over others, she ridicules Ashalata for her clumsiness, and makes her indispensable presence felt when she takes over the responsibility of looking after Mahendra’s food fads, wardrobe and his whims.

Soon the cordial relationship between Binodini and Ashalata turns acerbic as a powerful realization dawns upon Binodini. She bemoans the strange interplay of fate and the hypocrisy of the patriarchal society, while she was disappointedly rejected by both Mahendra and Behari as a compatible match for marriage, novice Ashalata was in possession of all the happiness and security that could have been hers: “What I was denied and deprived of now belongs to the slip of a girl, this little play doll.” Binodini through the course of the novel makes a

radical departure from the subservient character she had been at the beginning. She dynamically detaches herself from the interpellated status that she was assigned by the social hierarchy and assumes an enticing, conspicuous sensuous demeanour. Helen Cixous negates Freud’s misogynist ‘psychoanalytic closure of women’ and Lacan’s phallogocentrism, and advocates in ‘The Laugh of Medusa’, that women must unleash their repressed desires and sexual impulses. Cixous advertently stressed that women should refrain from internalizing images thrust on them by men. She argues that if women devoted themselves to writing they could attain the liberation and acquire the pleasures that were hitherto obscured. Damini and Binodini shun off the stereotypes that the authoritative descriptors had inscribed on their female body and psyche. Their minute acts against patriarchy and the prevalent social customs can be judged as monumental results which they have spurred within the domestic realm, when seen through the feminist lens. Pining for love and intimacy, Binodini distances herself from the blanket of spirituality and self-effacement, trying to transcend her grim mortified existence; she sacrilegiously compensates herself by mongering on the narratives of Asha. Through the image of Medusa with her tuft of twists Cixous extols female sexuality and provokes women to explore the pleasure of being within the world of self-esteem. Damini and Binodini exude corporeal heterogeneity and

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thus acquire freedom from their stifled existence. Binodini unleashes her passion untamed as the serpentine garden that emblazons Medusa's head expressing a radical split from widowhood. Damini too could not stay snuggled inside the closely guarded precincts of the household. She ecstatically highlights that through the expression of repressed whims and impulses that women could escape the oppressive binarisms.

Homi Bhabha has coined the term Third Space to designate an in between space, where cultures collide, and identities are shaped and reshaped. The position of widows can be alluded to the third space, a no man's land unacknowledged and excommunicated existence on the borders. The third space is a unmediated space, an unappreciated realm. It is associated with the repressed and colonized. It stresses on the sense of non-belonging, of being excluded and imposes a sense of otherness. However the third space can also be seen as a space where the oppressed plot their trajectory towards liberation. The third space also signifies the lost territory which came to recognize its value and strives towards the formation of a unique collective identity. Both Damini and Binodini through their discourse of dissent combat the oppressive forces of patriarchy, appropriating themselves as feminists voicing out their unrestrained demands. Young and vivacious Damini intends to

drink life to the lees. Unattainable and unconquered, she vehemently renounces the customs and conventions, and candidly flaunts her negligence of the sacred canonical texts. Simone De Beauvoir has refuted St. Paul's attitude towards women that "Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. For I don't allow a woman to teach, or to exercise authority over man, but she is to keep quiet." Damini finds the path of self-abnegation adopted by the widows acerbic, she outrageously voices her agony, by putting forward an overwhelming question: "Am I here of my own accord? Haven't you people put chains round my feet and flung this woman without faith into the Prison of devotion." Mary Wollstonecraft in *The Vindication of the rights of women* scoffs off the patriarchal claim that women were devoid of reason, she asserts that women too possess the innate capacity and aptitude for reasoning. Damini the feisty feminist rejects the narrow-minded orthodoxy of the society, her desire and urgency to script a space of her own is highlighted when she demands justice for a wife of one of the disciples of Leelananda Swamy, who had committed suicide, after excavating that her husband had an affair with her own younger sister. Damini's wrath for Swamy Leelananda is also evident in her recalcitrant speech, when Swamy had objected and branded her profane on finding her reading pornographic novels, she justified herself saying : "You are free to indulge your

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needs while I am supposed to need nothing at all.”(Tagore 60) Damini objects the patriarchal dictates that guide a woman’s life, she voraciously questions the callous cynical society : “Some of you will decide this for me, some that, to suit your convenience am I a mere pawn in your game?” (Tagore 56)

Freud in the ‘Aetiology of Hysteria’ makes a derogatory statement about women, alluding to the prevalent medical opinion during his time that, hysteria was a woman’s disorder, a psychological manifestation of the emotions emerging from the womb. A patriarchal interpretation of the character of Binodini would unthinkably stigmatise her as a hysterical woman starved of carnal pleasure. It would rather be irrational to brand her as a debauch, licentious woman, because it is her deprivation of a normal life and status that has fuelled her desire to quest for genuine love.

Binodini matures from a timid girl hiding her desires beneath the white folds of her widow’s attire to a woman denouncing the dictates of the moral world prescribed by the hypocritical society. Disappointed by the attentions of Mahendra and Behari refracted towards untutored, orphaned and child-like Ashalata and intensified with frustration and vengeance, she sets out to captivate Mahendra. While the society during Tagore’s time, voiced

avowed disapproval of female licentiousness, Germaine Greer in her 1970 manifesto ‘The Female Eunuch’ proclaims the right of women to escape the passive obligatory role imposed on them by culture. According to her a realized female sexuality is a militant act of revolt. Binodini filters herself into the role of an enchantress, exposing herself as a bait to Mahendra, in order to carve a niche into the household.

Binodini succeeding acquires the attention of hedonistic, opportunistic and manipulative Mahendra through her dexterity. Doomed to a life of imprisonment infested with irrational values, she plays a dubious game of attraction with Mahendra : “This happiness, this passionate ardour of the husband was my due and should have been mine; I could have ruled this house like a queen, could have made this husband into a slave and transformed both the household and the husband into something wonderful from the present shabby silly state.” (Tagore 49) Binodini’s dormant frustrated longings blossom during the stint of her adulterous relationship with Mahendra. The happiness in the marriage of Ashalata and Mahendra begin to evaporate in the presence of this unsolicited bewitching intruder. Ashalata disintegrates into a sea of despair, when she comes across Binodini’s clandestine letter to Mahendra reproaching him. Binodini’s rage against the society which had banished her

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to a life of drudgery, can be identified with the grimace and fury of Medusa, who although is regarded as a short hand for monstrosity, nevertheless had been subjected to a disembodied disposition through her rape.

Need for physical and emotional proximity makes Binodini blinded to the convictions of the centripetal society. The hazardous consequences of unharnessed carnal desires makes Binodini lust after Behari. Lacan has propounded in his Seminar on 'The Ethics of Psychoanalysis' that it is the jouissance which compels one to continuously attempt to transgress the prohibitions imposed on one's enjoyment to go beyond the pleasure principle. It is the jouissance which instigates the heroines to consciously play with the ethical and aesthetical conventions by assuming a scandalous demeanor. Both the widows derive unaccountable pleasure by transgressing the moral paradigms. Majestically rebellious Binodini flaunts a tendency of trifling playfulness, she thoughtlessly submits herself to passion and upsets the moral paradigm : "A mocking defiant fury against the whole world raged within Binodini's heart."(Tagore 146) Beauty is like a volatile poison with which she has victoriously ensnared Mahendra, however she is unable to entice the self-effacing, rational Behari. Behari castigated her as temptress, with destructive ruinous possibilities deriving pleasure in singing. Despite her ravishing beauty and

competence, the self-renouncing, idealistic Behari, who had once sacrificed his feelings for Ashalata refused to be lured by her. Behari advised Binodini to renounce the vile tricks and spare the life of naïve Ashalata. In the pre-independence Hindu society women were expected to self-immolate themselves in the funeral pyre of their husbands, thus acquiring the status of Goddesses Sati, Binodini subverts the prevalent ideology by exhibiting her passion for two men.

Oscillating her feelings between the two men and suddenly transforming her loyalty towards Behari, Binodini engenders the seed of rancor between the two friends.

Lucy Irigaray in *The Sex* which is not one refutes Freud's theoretical approach towards women's sexuality and condemns it as deeply entrenched within masculine parameters. She invites women to rediscover their bodies. Damini thrusts out her repressed desires and nonchalantly proclaims her love for Sachish, who however doesn't reciprocate her love. Damini desperately tries to tempt Sachish, but his steadfastness in his devotional path makes him deride her love as a distraction. Overlooking the conventions of the society which demands a widow like her to surrender herself to celibacy, Damini devises a strategy to acquire Sachish's attention. She obsequiously follows LeelanandaSwamy to the inaccessible

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caves, only to stay close to Sachish. Damini even creates a subterfuge, by feigning feelings of mettle and passion for Sribilash, only to engender envy with Sachish. Ambitious Damini uses Sribilash as a pawn in her game of passion.

Sribilash finding Damini's charm irresistible, falls for the defiant individual: "Damini is like the lightening in the heart of Shravan rain clouds, having the youthfulness to outward views, but flickering with restless fires within. In a desperate urge to explore her sexuality, the starved young widow stealthily enters the cave at night where Sachish had been sleeping and surrenders herself at his feet as a token of love. Perceiving Damini to be a primordial beast attacking Sachish, he kicks her off in fear until she leaves incurring a bruise on her breast. Damini's passion for Sachish remains undiminished despite his ruthless treatment of her. Damini's obsession for Sachish knows no limits, keen in her struggle to deviate him from his path of spiritual redemption, she submits herself dashing her head on the ground and pleading : "Stone, you stone, have pity on me have pity kill me."

Binodini's essential loneliness is highlighted in her impassioned candid revelation to Mahendra : "I have no right to love or be loved in this world. That is why I play at love to lighten my sorrow."(Tagore 86)Behari's estrangement towards her

dissipates when he sympathetically observes her during a picnic : "Her black velvet eyes normally sparkled with a playful ironic look which the astute Behari feared and mistrusted, were now suffered with so gentle and calm a tenderness that Behari feared he was looking at an altogether different person." (Tagore 66) Unlike the lewd Mahendra, Behari didn't objectify her as an erotic figure, rather a woman with tenderness and maternal affliction.

Behari recollects in introspection: "Bouthan, I misjudged you at first ; Please forgive me for that ; Since then I have glimpsed at your divine soul." (Tagore 88) Witnessing Behari's instinctive integrity and high esteem for her, Binodini is stung by conscience, she had never been put to a pedestal before.

Although she feels victorious for having transformed Behari's resentment towards her to respect, she delves into retrospection and is overcome with feelings of remorse. Although Binodini has never failed to enthrall us with her New Women traits, at the end of the novel she blatantly rejects Behari's proposal of marriage. But her rejection doesn't symbolize her lack of courage, rather it speaks volumes of her humanistic moral values, she rejects Behari's proposal because she didn't want him to face disgrace, defamation and Social ostracism. Binodini emerges as an

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emancipated woman, forsaking her aesthetic tastes, she dedicates herself in rendering selfless medical services to the pauper.

Tagore has sanctified the idea of widow remarriage in Chaturanga, which he had failed to do in Chokher Bali. Damini's obstinate stubbornness to unleash her forbidden passion makes her oscillate between the fiery flickering of her soul and the feigned submissive sweetness to win the compassion of Sachish. Sachish although was propelled by Damini's anarchic, heterogeneous, rhythmic flow of energy, couldn't altogether obliterate the idea of a desexualised widow. Trying to soothe Damini's indomitable tempest and whirlwind of raging emotions, Sachish implores her saying: "I desperately need Him whom I am seeking, I have need for nothing else. Have pity on me, Damini, leave me alone." (Tagore 82) Moved by Sachish's sheer asceticism and philanthropist, Damini is finally able to tame her passion, concealing and demolishing them to attain a transcendental calm.

Binodini at the end emerges as a New woman because she declines Behari's proposal for marriage, as she was somehow convinced that the proposal was made out of mere sympathy for her dilapidated disposition. Refusing to take anybody's support Binodini ventures out to drink life

to the lees, and decides to tread on a lonesome journey. Outrageous Damini despite being dissuaded and reprimanded for her unrequited love, retains her passionate demeanour and determinate in her endeavour marries Sribilash half-heartedly, thus subverting age-old conservative thinking. Despite having to undergo a defeatist attitude for prioritizing Sachish as the object of true love, Damini emerges as an awakening women as she does not deter from the path of marriage, despite the cynical glares and snares of the society. Through these women Tagore represents a dynamic model of new women who transcends her interpellated position and absconding her marginal consciousness exudes her new-womanly traits purposefully detaching herself from subjectivity under the hegemonic order.

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