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**MOTHERLY WOMEN OF TWO FACES IN  
 RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S *CHOKHER BALI***

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**Abstract:**

*Rabindranath Tagore, a great writer of special interest on women. As an exquisite writer of all themes and talents he is very good at handling the emotions of women in a rare way of astonishment. Besides male characters in his novels he has beautifully organized the women characters with enlightenment. All his women characters playing both major and minor roles are like designs on a finely woven fabric. There are two main divisions of women in every novel they are young women both married and unmarried and motherly women as aunts, mothers, mothers-in-law. Like the female protagonists, the motherly women characters are also important for the perfection of a novel. In **Chokher Bali**, the two motherly characters Rajlakshmi and Annapurna are presented like the two sides of a coin with distinct characteristic features, one is for disapproval and the other one is for applause. The woman of disapproval (Rajlakshmi) is an indication of how a motherly woman should not be and the women of applause (Annapurna) pose herself as a role model to the female society.*

**Key Words:** *Motherly women, formidable woman.*

Rabindranath Tagore was born on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1861 to Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi as a thirteenth child in the family of Jorasanko. Since his childhood days Tagore spent most of his times in contemplating about the persons in and around him and also about the society. He nourished his mind in reading many Bengali books and periodicals and also Vaishnav lyrics. He was also influenced by Sanskrit literature and Western literature. He is a man with different and multiple talents. He is called first of all as a poet and secondly as a novelist, a short story writer, a dramatist, a musician and a painter. All his works are the reflection of his own society of his time in an admirable way of excellence. Apart from all his recognition of other issues which were prevalent during his days he showed a greater interest on women generally. His acknowledgement for women in the society started from his family, accommodating larger outwitting female inmates. He comprehended the vitalities of women and assured his confidence over them for the betterment of the society. In all his major novels, women are given with different interesting roles.

His notable women characters playing the role of protagonists are Binodini and Asha (**Chokher Bali**), Bimala (**The Home and the World**), Sucharita and Lolita (**Gora**), Kamala and Hemamalini (**The Wreck**), Labanya (**Farewell, My Friend**) and Damini (**Chaturanga**). Simultaneously there are also motherly women characters to be intended for analysis. Of all the motherly characters of Tagore Anandamoyi of **Gora**, Kshemankari of **The Wreck** and Annapurna of **Chokher Bali** are worthy of notice.

On August 1941, the great legend and an erudite, Tagore passed away leaving behind his foot prints immortal Srinivasa Iyengar states:

He belongs unquestionably to Bengali literature but he belongs to Indo - Anglian literature too - indeed, he belongs to all India and the whole world. He was a poet, dramatist, an actor, producer; he was a musician and a painter: he was an educationalist, a practical idealist who turned his dreams

into reality at Shanthiniketan; he was a reformer, philosopher, prophet; he was a novelist and short-story writer and a critic of life and literature; he even made occasional incursions into nationalist politics, although he was essentially an internationalist. He was thus many persons, he was a darling of versatility and still he was the same man; he was an integral whole, the Rishi, the Gurudev (99).

Since her birth every woman has to through many stages such as “a daughter”, “a lass”, “a wife”, “a mother” and “a gran”. Normally a man couldn't lead a complete life under the bond of marriage or love. Every woman is bestowed with the blessings of multiplying her generation with joy and not as a burden. Woman of all nature is a carrier of “love” and “devotion”. At many places and numerous instances she is made silent for no meaning but for bearing the name as “a woman”. A powerful woman is able to create or to destroy whatever she wishes. Each male is directed either right away or obliquely by a formidable woman. Usually a woman takes over the responsibility of a family in a better way than a man. What is impossible for a man in his family is possible by a woman; either in the form of a wife or as a mother.

It is blessed to be related with others. Each relation stands for its own prestige. Especially being in a motherly state is a divine boon to all women whether she has given birth or not. Every woman imbibes motherhood and mothering from her within, after her marriage. Mother is the best parent and first friend to all children of both the sexes. She is the paradigm of various abstract qualities which is certainly gifted to her by God specially. Every Mother of all homes is “An Archangel” of her own family in preventing her members from all calamities. She is an embodiment of positive vibration embracing all her inmates. It is a mother's love starts shaping an individual of her family and extends to her relatives and still lengthens to the society where she lives and finally dies. On a surface level the duty of a mother might be simple but her duty is emotionally, mentally and sentimentally intact which also has to be dealt delicately with proper care.

This article aims to interpret the two motherly characters of the novel (*Binodini*) *Chokher Bali*. It clearly mirrors their feature, principles and attitude in their respective roles. It also brings out the contrast between two characters.

The novel *Chokher Bali* is a great psychological novel which beats any other novel of its time in its standard of scrutinizing the mentality of the women characters peculiarly. Not only the female protagonists Binodini and Asha presented carefully but also the other two women Rajlakshmi playing the role as a “Mother” and “Mother - in - law” and Annapurna playing the role as an “Aunt” are also scrutinized with care by Tagore. Tagore is a forerunner of introducing a new genre in Indian Fiction. It is with Binodini (*Chokher Bali*) Indian Fiction has taken a new pace in characterization and portrayal of characters. Niharajan Ray praises it as “the first all-round psychological novel devoted to study of social problems. Besides being a psychological novel, the novel also probes deep into the plight of young widows in Hindu society through the larger perspective of their self - actualization” (165). Premature marriages of many young girls resulted in losing many of their husbands at an early life and struggled to rear their children without support. Apart from other ladies many widows underwent a great turmoil and led their lives lacking patronage. It is only few widows intellectually accepted their pathetic situation and proceeded their lives with strong faith on themselves. Tagore also brilliantly pictured many of the widows in his novels successfully in imparting a new sphere of life to other women and widows who travel in tougher situation.

### **Rajlakshmi: A Reckless Mother**

Rajlakshmi is the mother of the fatherless Mahendra. Being a widow she showers all her love and affection on her only son Mahendra, a medico. She lacks the aim of bringing up her son morally and intellectually. She is a self - centered woman without the motherly quality. She is similar to the nature of Harimohini of *Gora* and Bara - Rani of *the Home and the World*. She is very liberal in handling her words which is known for its stinging on whomsoever like Asha, Binodini or Annapurna. Like a Mother bird, she

caresses Mahendra by pampering.

Having lost his father very early in his childhood the affinity between Mahendra and his mother was deeper than the normal mother and son kinship (*Chokher Bali* 1-2).

When Rajlakshmi finds Binodini a beautiful and intelligent girl for her son's marriage, her words gets no importance from her son, Mahendra and remains vain. Rajlakshmi has brought up her son only with her inordinate love and not by feeding her motherly love of divinely nature. Bihari, Mahendra's friend is also insisted by Rajlakshmi in making him to marry the rejected girl, Binodini. In case of Rajlakshmi, which is beyond the acceptance of anyone. She views everything in a plain and simple manner without the awareness of the importance of the matter.

Bihari feels the reckless nature of Rajlakshmi and says,

Ma, I am afraid, this I cannot do. On many occasion in the past you offered me sweets declined by your son, which I had happily consumed, but marriage is altogether a far more serious issue. In any case, I find it most inappropriate to accept a bride whom you had intended for Mahendra (*Chokher Bali* 3).

Annapurna's cautioning Rajlakshmi about the marriage of her son Mahendra at the right time provokes Rajlakshmi to be on the wrong notion as "Nothing but a childless widow's envy for a mother blessed with a son." Rajlakshmi's rearing and caring Mahendra has made him to be imprudent and unfair at most of his times which is clear when he marries Asha at the last moment where the proposal has been basically made only for Bihari. She devised her own evil plans in separating her own son from her daughter in law, Asha which is very silly to her own age and experience. It is very frivolous for a mother to bring a young widow with her after returning from her home town. Binodini is a young widow and also proposed girl to marry her son, Mahendra, which unfortunately did not happen.

She does not think that a young widow would ruin the marital life of her son, Mahendra instead she wishes for a non-related person to fulfil all her requirements and not her daughter - in - law, Asha. Rajlakshmi does not notice the transformation of her daughter - in - law after returning from her native village. She discouraged Asha who almost like Rajlakshmi shadow helping her all time in kitchen and all house hold chores. Her words of barbs are, "Leave that alone. Why try to do something that you know nothing about? You will only spoil it" (*Chokher Bali* 45).

Rajlakshmi shows a very least respect on others if anyone advises her on morality.

As a mother of Mahendra she herself the instrument in spoiling her son's mind by creating an opportunity for another lady (Binodini) in no way related to him to take care of him, even it is reminded as a misdeed by the opportunist. Her malignant words against Binodini are, "What is bothering you Binodini. There is no harm in doing what I am asking you to do. You are not a stranger in our home, whatever others may say" (*Chokher Bali* 133).

Rajlakshmi mind is often known for the instability. Binodini whom she wished as her care taker once, after guessing the changed behavior of her son Mahendra she daringly calls Binodini as a "temptress" without realizing that she is the cause in using the same temptress to divert her son from his wife, Asha. When she is being pointed out for her own mistake she accuses Binodini as "a wretched woman, how can you accuse a mother scheming against her own son, your tongue will shrivel for such blasphemy" (*Chokher Bali* 180).

It is only when the situation becomes worse with the desertion of her home by Mahendra going away with Binodini she recognizes her mistake and whole heartedly confesses her wrong doing of not authorizing Asha as her daughter - in - law. She admits her misdeed as, "It is my misfortune that I have no recognition for a long time to such a fine daughter- in - law that I have" (*Chokher Bali* 208). When Rajlakshmi finds that her son has stopped loving her and has gone astray she starts thinking about Mahendra's good friend, Bihari whom she thought as a person of less importance.

During the last stage of her life her confidence on Bihari is like a rising sun and expects his presence

to attend her on her illness. Her faithful words on Bihari:

I am sure if Bihari were here he would have looked after us in these sad times. He would not have allowed the situation to go out of hand. I am confident if Bihari gets to know about my illness, he would rush here to help me (*Chokher Bali* 234).

### **Annapurna: A Graceful Mother**

**Annapurna in *Chokher Bali*** is a refined and the finest character of all. She is soft and benevolent in nature. Like Rajlakshmi, Annapurna is also a widow since her childhood with no issue. She assumes Mahendra as her own son even he too finds true love of a motherly care from Annapurna more than his mother. Her love on everyone is equal and she is a pious and a spiritual woman. She engages herself in thinking of God and leads her remaining life with the name of God. Annapurna encounters all her situations with her conscience and tolerance when Mahendra suggests an idea of arranging Annapurna's niece for marriage with Bihari she delicately says Bihari, "If you do not find her suitable, you will be under no obligation to marry her. I give you my word" (*Chokher Bali* 8).

After becoming the daughter - in -law of Rajlakshmi, Asha undergoes silent suffering inexpressively. When Annapurna finds a rift is setting out between Mahendra and his mother she subtly tries to resolve the anger of Mahendra with her objective words as:

She is a young, immature girl, an orphan **who had no mother to instruct** her about her obligations.

How would she know what is right or wrong? (*Chokher Bali* 22).

It is who Rajlakshmi accuses Annapurna for being the cause of disruption in the mind of her son, Mahendra. Before making the situation worse she plans for a holy journey to Kashi to find peace for the rest of her life and stay divine further. Irrespective of Rajlakshmi's attitude towards her, Annapurna meets her at her parental home to seek elderly blessings as a token of showing respect before departing to Kashi.

She bids her farewell as a lady of saintly concern for all the inmates of her home. She leaves her care and regards for all, as for Asha; 'As for your daughter - in - law'. She said, "she is just a child who has no mother she may have been delinquent, but she is still yours and yours only" (*Chokher Bali* 38), like your daughter; as for Bihari she gave him a pair of gold bangles as a property for his future wife, as for Mahendra, her words of caring, 'please keep an eye on my Mohin and Asha', as a deed of gift she has inherited her share on Mahendra's favour. In all his trouble, Mahendra seeks the feet of Annapurna as his source of his solace. Her mind is always filled with good thoughts and philosophical too. Her estimations are always real and practical. She energizes Asha with her fond words by the name of God. She shares her life experience to Asha and teaches her the wants of life of a woman. She preaches her the unknown of a universal life:

Look it is not possible for any individual to please everyone. If a wife devotedly and sincerely attends to her husband, then **God** himself will reward the wife, even if the husband disdains her care (*Chokher Bali* 165).

From the above two motherly women characters, the one Rajlakshmi playing the role of a mother and the other Annapurna playing the role of an aunt are very notable and distinctive motherly women characters of Tagore. Rajlakshmi stands for the pessimistic option of life while Annapurna looks everything in an optimistic manner. For Rajlakshmi all the characters are unimportant except her only son Mahendra. In case of Annapurna she values everyone with great care. Rajlakshmi is narrow - minded and peevish in nature. Annapurna is gracious and gentle in disposition with appealing attitude. She is the energy - giver to Asha, Mahendra and Bihari during their miserable situation. It is Rajlakshmi who changes the situation miserable. Rajlakshmi is a self - willed but embodying wrong notions to abide it and spoils her inner happiness and also others. To the contrary, Annapurna is the source of happiness and comfort seeking her salvation under the feet of God. Tagore points out clearly that mothers like Rajlakshmi, due to lack of education, wisdom and unawareness towards the changing they nurture misery to their family by their senseless love. It is Annapurna, whom Tagore portrayed as an altruistic woman living for the service of

other people by self - effacing.

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