

**DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE, GENDER, AND
SOCIETY IN TAGORE'S *CHOKHER BALI***

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Abstract

Chokher Bali, (translated as 'Eyesore') by Rabindranath Tagore is said to be the first 'modern' novel written in India. Though the book was published in 1903, it is modern in its narrative technique, subject matter, and delineation of the protagonist Binodini. Through this paper, I will study the text's historical, geographical, and cultural background. The analysis of the text will engage at the level of society, gender, and history. For this purpose, the novel has been examined through the lens of Cultural Studies to explore Tagore's depiction of the Indian society that was undergoing social transformation. The study also seeks to determine whether the characters' choices were governed by the cultural and religious practices of the specific time frame within which the narrative has been woven. My goal is to examine the novel as a cultural artefact that is shaped by its context and provides insight into the nuances of the age.

Keywords: *Social reforms, culture, agency, representation, emancipation, identity.*

"Where the mind is without fear, and the head is held high"

Rabindranath Tagore, born on 7 May 1861, was one of the fourteen children of Debendranath Tagore. Dwarkanath Tagore, his highly progressive grandfather, was an influential force behind the Bengal Renaissance. Tagore's father was spiritually inclined and believed in the Hinduism embodied in the Upanishads and other scriptures. He ensured that his children were exposed to both the Bengali tradition and Western culture. Tagore was sent to seek higher education in Bristol, England, in 1878. By then, Tagore was already writing poems in Bengali, translating Western plays, acting in plays, composing music, sketching, and painting. His collected poems *Kanyagravhali*, came out in 1896, and his first collection of short stories, *Galpaguchchha*, in 1900. Having established himself in India as a writer in Bengali, he later launched himself in England. With translations into English, he gained a wider readership and gained international recognition as an acclaimed writer. At a time when India was still under British Rule, Tagore won the Nobel Prize in 1913 for *Gitanjali*. He was the first Asian to have won the prize. Amit Chaudhary notes in his introduction to *The Essential Tagore*: Tagore was awarded the prize mostly due to the efforts of the Swedish poet Verner von Heidenstam, who had declared on reading the English *Gitanjali*: "I was deeply moved when I read them, and I do not remember having read any lyric writing to equal them during the past twenty years or more" (p.9).

Tagore was marvellously modern in his thoughts and approach. He was a visionary, a sensitive artist at heart who broke the shackles of orthodox beliefs and created masterpieces in works such as *Chokher Bali* (1903), *Gora* (1910), *Gitanjali* (1910), his plays, short stories, songs, music, paintings and

even a whole new system of delivering education which is practiced till date through Shantiniketan and Vishwa Bharti University.

Amartya Sen offers an important observation regarding Tagore's approach in his article, *'Tagore and his India, voice of Bengal'*. Sen maintains that Tagore did not merely create a synthesis of the West and the East, rather his approach entailed a non-sectarian representation of different parts of Indian culture as well as the rest of the world. Tagore believed that lack of education was the primary cause for Indian social, economic, and cultural afflictions. Sen quotes Tagore in the article mentioned above: In my view the imposing tower of misery which today rests on the heart of India has its sole foundation in the absence of education. Caste divisions, religious conflicts, aversion to work, precarious economic conditions – all centre on this single factor.

He questioned and rejected any practice or promise of commitment in the past that did not stand to reason in the present. We find the same pursuit for excellence, liberty, and unwillingness to submit to the stereotypes imposed by society in the character of Binodini in *Chokher Bali*.

Chokher Bali (1903), translated as 'Eyesore', is a towering example of Tagore's foresight, zeal for social reforms, and astute understanding of the characters' psychology and consciousness. It is a blend of Western progressive thought and a representation of the cultural ethos of Indian values, family system, and moral codes.

Historical and Cultural Background

The Revolt of 1857- 58 is historically believed to denote the onset of the modern age in India (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2006, p.92). Apart from being the first war of Independence, it also marked the commencement of technological modernization through the establishment of railways and telegraph and the setting up of universities. English Education Act (1835) decreed the allocation of funds for education in India. The Universities of Calcutta, Mumbai, and Madras were established in 1857, followed by Universities in Aligarh (1875), Punjab (1882), and Allahabad (1887). Concurrently, a spate of social reforms such as the Abolition of Slavery (1843), Widow Remarriage Act (1856), Bengal Sati Regulation Act (1929), and Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) were also introduced.

Tagore's lifespan from 1861- 1941 corresponded with the onset of modern thought. A sense of national pride in Indian traditions, customs, and religion accompanied British colonialism and Western education. In the article, *'Modernism and Modernity in Rabindranath Tagore'* Coquereau observes that at that time Kolkata, the capital of Bengal was of vital significance: (Kolkatta)... represents the locus of intersection of the local and the global, the traditional and the modernist, the colonial and the indigenous, the Bengali speakers and the English speakers, the international and the national. The conflicts and tensions of these different forces occurring suddenly in this single place transformed it into an important modernist city (p.84).

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The nineteenth-century social reform era brought the 'woman question' into the foreground. Efforts were made to uplift women, whether education, marriage, or even the right to remarry. Savitribai Phule in Maharashtra started the first school for girls as early as 1848, Tarabai Shinde wrote the famous, *Stree Purush Tulna* in 1882. In her article, "Promotion of Female Education in Nineteenth-century Bengal", Kaberi Chatterjee notes how the Bengal Renaissance integrated the native and Western attitudes concentrated on female education to achieve social regeneration (p.767). Brahmo Balika Vidhyalaya (1890) and Mahakali Pathshala (1893) were established in Kolkatta which widened the horizons for female education. Along with education also came the ideas of *bhadralok* (respectable gentlemen who were almost always upper caste Hindus), *bhadramahila* (respectable ladies of culture) who were the privileged class distinguished from *chotolok* (lower order). There was a specific code of conduct for the members of *bhadralok*, which amounted to the exploitation of the lower class and caste, leading to discrimination (Dwyer, 2016, p.21). Tagore picked up the cause of women in his works and created strong female characters. The most memorable of them are Charulata (*A Broken Nest* 1901,) Mrinal (*A Wife's Letter* 1914), Mrinmoyee (*Sampati*), Binodini (*Chokher Bali* 1901). They are all empowered progressive women who refuse to be subdued by their male counterparts or societal norms. They fight against social injustice, seek equality, and challenge social evils like rigid caste systems, untouchability, and patriarchy. Chakravarty (2016) notes: Tagore's ideas about modernity develop through various phases in response to changing historical contexts, demonstrating that the 'modern' is not a fixed idea but always a relational one, neither confined to a single time period nor identifiable with a single geographical location, namely, the 'West'. (p.1)

Chokher Bali, the "eyesore": *Chokher Bali* has been hailed as the first modern novel in India. It is interesting to probe what constitutes the elements of modernity. Radha Chakravarty succinctly points out that, "In *Chokher Bali*, modernity takes the shape of a new interiority, an attempt to psychologize the modern Bengali subject" (2022, p.243). In his preface to the second edition of the novel Tagore states that the literature of the new age does not merely narrate a sequence of events but reveals "the secrets of the heart" (Chakravarty, 2022, p.243). Tagore believed modernity to be the ability to look at things objectively without any prejudice or bias.

In its treatment of forbidden love, the novel centres around Binodini, a young, attractive widow, and Ashalata, the childlike, beautiful, uneducated wife of Mahendra and Bihari, the latter's friend. Rajlakshmi, Mahendra's dotting mother, and Annapurna his aunt, are widows who live an austere life of toil and penance. The equilibrium of the household is subverted because of Binodini's relationship with Mahendra. Binodini later renounces his company and is offered marriage by Bihari. She rejects that, too and chooses to live the life of a recluse widow in Benaras. The unfolding story

reveals intriguing aspects of Binodini's desires, her stratagems, her cleverness, and her composed renunciation of the two men. She emerges as an independent, self-possessed woman. Chakravarty recounts, "From his letters, it is apparent that he began with the working title Binodini but changed it to *Chokher Bali* not long before its publication in Bangadarshan" (p.243). She is indeed the chief protagonist of the novel. *Chokher Bali* means an eyesore, a grain of sand, an irritant in the eye. Though Ashalata and Binodini lovingly call one another "Chokher Bali", Ashalata emerges as the victim and Binodini as the 'other' woman who causes disharmony in the former's marriage. Who is the real 'eyesore', is a question left for the reader to ponder upon. Tagore's ultimate craftsmanship is evident in his presenting a thesis and an anti-thesis by pitting the opposites against each other, such as the ideas of man/woman, education/lack of it, married woman/widow, modernity/orthodoxy. He presents a compelling point and counterpoint. The reader is allowed to evaluate the characters' actions and draw deductions about the state of the widows, the importance of education for men and women, the sanctity of marriage, the issue of adultery, and the need for a woman's gratification of her bodily desires. The characters and their story are a product of the material cultural setting to which they belong.

Cultural Studies

What is Culture? Raymond Williams (1985) admits that "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (p.87) partly because of its complex historical development and because of its distinct and diverse usage across several disciplines. In its earliest usage, it served as a noun signifying a process such as tending crops or animals. The meaning of the word has transformed over the centuries. It later evolved to describe a way of life and denoted how a community or set of people live their lives. It also became a marker to signify people's achievements in the arts field, like music, dance, and films. Habib (2008) points out that "in modern usage, culture has sometimes designated the highest achievements of a civilization in its literature, science, and arts" (p.172). These are believed to be a repository of aesthetics and refinement. Anthropologists and sociologists have used it to describe not only arts but also beliefs and practices of various segments of society, groups, and subgroups- such as women, members of LGBTQI, ethnic minorities, and people of class and colour. Regarding the mutable and dynamic nature of the concept, Simon During (2005) maintains that: Culture is not a thing or even a system: it's a set of transactions, processes, mutations, practices, technologies, institutions, out of which things and events (such as movies, poems, or world wrestling bouts) are produced, to be experienced, lived out and given meaning and value to in different ways within the unsystematic network of differences and mutations from which they emerged to start with (p.6).

The term "cultural studies" is applicable to a wide spectrum of disciplines, such as Anthropology, Sociology, Arts, History, and even Literature. Literature includes not only the texts that have been in the mainstream

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canon but also popular literature, films, shows on television, mass media, music, and the like. Everyday life serves as a “text,” bringing about democratization and breakdown of the hegemonic structuring inherent in earlier exclusionary practices. ‘Cultural studies’ is a process that aims to produce useful knowledge by appropriating ideas and principles from theories such as Marxism, Structuralism, Feminism, and Postcolonialism. Cultural Studies explain how existing practices are ‘produced’ and ‘constructed’ out of power relations, social stratification, and hegemonic structures. The aim of Cultural Studies is to deconstruct the codes of culture to understand how people live in a community and how certain practices are manufactured and gain precedence over others. Chris Barker’s observation on the subject is as follows: ...cultural studies is centrally concerned with culture as constituted by the signs, meanings and representations that are generated by signifying mechanisms in the context of human practices. Further, cultural studies is concerned with the construction and consequences of those representations and thus with matters of power since patterns of signifying practices constitute, and are constituted by, institutions and virtual structures (p. xvii).

According to Stuart Hall culture is a site of “social action and invention where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled” (Procter, 2007, p.1). Hall believed that the study of culture could expose the power relations within a society, and it could devise a mechanism to consider how the marginalized, subordinate group could reclaim their cultural space from the dominant group. The proper service of a cultural critic and a scholar is to create awareness so that the marginalized sections are not exploited and ostracised. In this regard, During observes: The first characteristic feature of cultural studies is that it is... *an engaged study* of culture... I mean a sensitivity to the ways in which culture is (in part) a field of power relations involving centres and peripheries, status hierarchies, connections to norms that impose repressions or marginalisations. (p.9)

Cultural Studies also entails a commitment to celebrating or critiquing cultural forms, producing accounts of culture that can be fed back into cultural production to enable new exchanges between various cultural forms and people.

Cultural Analysis of *Chokher Bali*

Though published in 1903, it is still a popular novel that has been translated into English multiple times. The earliest translation by Surendranath Tagore appeared in 1914, followed by the 1959 translation under the title *Binodini* by Krishna Kriplani published by Sahitya Kala Akademi (Chakravarty, 2012, p.1). Radha Chakravorty’s translation in English appeared in 2012. It has also been translated into most of the regional Indian languages, into Russian (1959) and Chinese (1961) (Contributors to Wikimedia projects). It has also been adapted for the stage, the earliest example being in 1904 by the Classic Theatre in Calcutta (Chakravarty, 2012, p.1). In her review “Theatre Is

Easy” of the production at Broadway, Katherine Nedder notes, “*Choker Bali* takes on the daring task of bringing traditional Indian customs together with modern culture and female sexuality, through the medium of Greek tragedy... *Choker Bali* makes one think about the meaning of love, obsession, and longing” (2016). There have been film adaptations as well, those by Anurag Basu in 2015 on Netflix and Ritupara Ghosh in 2003 being the most popular. Despite having been written in 1901, the novel still has an abiding influence, its recent stage and film productions are a testimony to its contemporary relevance.

Cultural Materialism

The term Cultural Materialism, attributed to Raymond Williams, denotes the idea that culture is born out of material processes under specific historical and geographical conditions. Barker (2004) asserts that “cultural materialism is concerned to explore the questions of how and why meanings are inscribed at the moment of production” (p.39). This approach is an extension of the Marxist theory or historical materialism, which maintains that the production and reproduction of culture is a consequence of the material conditions of life. The economic ‘base’ shapes the ‘superstructure’ of ideas, politics, arts, and ideology. The relationship between the base and the superstructure is “rather mechanical and economically deterministic” (ibid. p39), hence it was rejected in favour of the Structuralist approach through which culture came to be seen as a “set of distinct practices” (ibid.p.39) with its own internal organization. Cultural materialism, therefore, treats culture as a dynamic process born out of economic, political, and social forces within a given historical and geographical framework.

In the article, ‘Cultural Materialism - an Overview’ Tolia-Kelly (2009) states that Raymond Williams believed that Literature of any age reflects the prevailing values of that society. Artistic endeavors such as novels, paintings, and architecture are cultural products that reveal society and its culture. Regarding the value of novels as a cultural product, it is stated in the *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography* that novels are not a mere reflection of social values but become diagnostic and political tools through which consciousness and transformation can be generated.

To sum up, Cultural Materialism considers culture neither to be a mere outcome of economic forces nor an abstract entity, rather it is constructed out of “texts” that are produced and consumed in each location at a specific time by the people of its community. It is a phenomenon that is governed both by the history and geography of the place. In my assessment, *Choker Bali* has been used as a diagnostic and political tool, through which Tagore presents the Indian ethos and enables the consumer of the novel/film/play to probe deeper into social issues, such as women’s education, man-woman relationship, marriage, sexuality, and patriarchy.

The ‘Woman Question in *Choker Bali*

Tagore was influenced by developments in the Western world, which had already witnessed the first wave of feminism in 1848 at the Seneca Falls Convention in New York. Apart from the demand for women's electoral rights, the activists had also raised slogans for the right to education, right over property and wages. The movement resisted female oppression and demanded equal legal rights. In an essay titled, 'The Woman Question', Janine Utell points out that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the term referred to "the problem specifically of women's suffrage, and more broadly of changing political, economic, and professional roles for women and of social and sexual liberation".

Tagore's female characters embody the same spirit and progressive outlook. Binodini's search for identity, her decision to not accept subservience, and her choice to walk out of the two men - Mahendra and Bihari, is a testimony to the author's modern outlook. Radha Chakravarty's (2016) remark regarding his predisposition towards women's issues is quite pertinent, she says: For Tagore, gender is an essential component of the idea of the modern. His concern with issues of women's changing position in society is integral to his formulations of modernity. Equally pressing for him are questions of changing definitions of masculinity in a society that finds itself in a state of flux (p.17,2016)

Role of Education

In *Chokher Bali*, Binodini wins over Mahendra, not only for her youthful beauty but also for her intelligence and her wit. She is educated and well-versed in music and housekeeping and has an enchanting raw charm. Binodini holds no qualms in betraying Ashalata, whom she calls 'Bali', she forgoes the codes of '*bhadramahila*' to experience fulfilment as a woman. Her transgression with Mahendra is contrasted with her relationship with Bihari in the later part of the novel. Despite their mutual love, she refuses to marry him, as she does not want her sinful past to cast its shadows on his future. Perhaps Tagore only intended to lead the readers to reexamine the possibility of widow remarriage and empathize with the widow's plight. The two older women in the novel, Rajlaxmi and Annapurna are also widows who have lived an austere life. Their orthodoxy has been contrasted with Binodini's modern outlook, which can be attributed to her education. Knowledge and education are shown to be empowering for women. The role of education is further highlighted by contrasting the naivety of Ashalata with the cleverness of Binodini.

Widow remarriage in Colonial India still had a stigma attached to it. K.M. Kapadia (1957) studied the impact of the Widow Remarriage Act (1856) in India with respect to Gujrat and Maharashtra primarily through literary texts. Kapadia writes that occasionally, widow remarriages had to be performed under police protection. Regional literature of that age documented the mistreatment of widows. Kapadia says: writers have written on the miserable lot of the widows- seduction, abortion, infanticide

and suicide as the known and fairly widespread results of enforced widowhood and condemned the apathetic attitude of the society to such a situation without the least moral qualm. (p.45)

Tagore's novel, like other literary works in Marathi and Gujrati, attempted to improve the condition of women and elicit sympathetic responses towards them. These writers rightly believed that regeneration of the society would be possible only when the condition of women improved.

Institution of Marriage

Chokher Bali also offers a critique of the institution of marriage. Women have traditionally been confined to the household, their realm has been defined in the private sphere, unlike men who held important social positions. Child marriage was rampant until the Minimum Age for Marriage Act was passed in 1829. Girls were married at a young age. Being trained only in household duties, they had no voice as they had no education or legal rights. Ashalata, in the novel, is an example; her innocence is initially charming to Mahendra, but he later finds it repugnant. Marriage is central to the novel's theme; girls were to be 'seen' by Mahendra and Bihari and 'chosen' for marriage if 'approved'. Binodini loses her husband in six months and is condemned to live a life on the margins. Marriage was the initiation into womanhood, and widowhood was its fateful end, thus circumscribing a woman's life within the circle of power wielded by men. Tagore compels the readers to reexamine such practices.

Ashalata dutifully accepts Mahendra at the end, despite his adultery – the dalliance of men is accepted, but Binodini is condemned for the same. *Bhadramahila*, was supposed to embody virtues like, chastity, submission, devotion, and kindness – like Ashalata. Binodini flouts these norms to seek her path of liberty because of her awareness and education. She has the courage to reject both men to fulfil her destiny as a discerning, empowered woman. Though modern in outlook, she is aware of the stigma of a widow's remarriage, she says, "I am a widow, a woman disgraced, I cannot permit you to be humiliated in the eyes of the society" (Tagore, p.389).

Patriarchy: The period from 1860 onwards witnessed sweeping social, economic, and political changes in India. The gentlemanly class, which had hitherto ensconced itself in the feudal system, began moving to the urban centres. Cities became the centers of education, social and cultural activities. People were drawn to new professions, like medicine, engineering, and civil services. Both Mahendra and Bihari are students of Medicine, while Binodini has been given basic education by her family so that she could find a suitable match in marriage. Her husband barely teaches Ashalata to read and write, and Rajlakshmi and Annapurna are uneducated. We see how patriarchy is deeply engrained in the social system; men wield power over women and treat women as objects of ownership, and such superiority over women amounts to the latter's subjection and loss of agency. Sylvia Walby (1989) considers patriarchy to be "an essential tool in the analysis of gender

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relations” (p.213). She defines “patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (ibid.p.214). Men enjoy autonomy, privilege, and power, which is denied to women in *Chokher Bali*. Binodini comes across as a woman who resists the force of patriarchy and emerges as the “new woman”. Radha Chakravarty (2023) notes: When Tagore wrote *Chokher Bali*, attitudes towards widows had become less straitlaced in progressive segments of the society. Binodini is expected to lead an austere life of self-denial but is not compelled to lead an ascetic existence. (p.53-54)

Agency: Agency is an important concept employed in Cultural Studies. Chris Barker (2004) discusses how it is commonly associated with “notions of freedom, free will, action, creativity, originality, and the possibility of change brought about through the actions of sovereign individuals” (p.4). It refers to an individual’s ability to act, take charge and make a difference to oneself and others. This ability is determined by how men and women are constituted as subjects. Barker further explains the concept as “a culturally intelligible way of understanding ourselves, and we clearly have the existential experience of facing and making choices (p.5).

Chokher Bali shows the reader the contrast between men and women. Distinct gender roles are prescribed for the two sexes. Men study, pursue a profession, are the decision-makers, and function in the public sphere. In contrast, women are either illiterate or only educated to seek a husband, perform household duties, and follow men’s commands. This kind of total disempowerment of women has been a common practice in most cultures. Limiting women to the domestic sphere, depriving them of education, and building narratives of femininity around virtues such as chastity, subservience, and obedience are some social determinants that perpetrated patriarchy. Binodini, however, embodies confidence and agency- an anomaly in the social context but presented by Tagore as a desirable goal for women to aspire.

Identity: The concept of identity, too, is a cultural formation since it is a product of the cultural discourse. We are constituted as individuals through ‘acculturation’, and our identities are products of ‘performative’ gender roles, and these are, in turn, structured around the discursive social practices. Identity also links the “emotional ‘inside’ of persons with the discursive ‘outside’” (Barker, 2004, p.94). Barker explains:

The argument that identity is not a universal entity, but a culturally specific discursive construction is grounded in an anti-representationalist account of language whereby discourse defines, constructs and produces objects of knowledge. Consequently, what we can say about the identity characteristics of, for example, men, is culturally circumscribed (p.94).

Cultural and social codes determine the characters' identities in Tagore’s *Chokher Bali*. Women’s identities are established through their husbands, and men’s identities through their professions, the use of clothes,

deportment, and language. Observance of rituals also imparts the characters their specific identity. Widows were not supposed to wear colourful clothes or ornaments, which married women did. Women were not allowed to be professionally educated, unlike men. Ashalata whose identity is that of a daughter-in-law, requires her to be submissive. It compels her to forgive Mahendra, she is subservient not only to men but also Rajlakshmi as the identity of a mother-in-law embodies more power. Annapurna, a widow, is dependent on Mahendra's household. At the novel's end, she and Binodini move to Banaras, almost as if in exile, as the society has no place for them. Humans are known by their identities, which are products of cultural discursive practices.

Conclusion

Cultural Studies democratize and break the hegemonic structure of society. It enables a researcher to expose power relations and introduce a mechanism to consider how marginalized and subordinate groups can reclaim their cultural space. Through a close reading of Tagore's *Chokher Bali*, I have attempted to unravel the cultural practices prevalent in Bengal at the turn of the nineteenth century. The novel reveals Tagore's concern for the position of women, and Binodini's character offers social criticism of the oppressive practices. As mentioned earlier, works of art and literature serve as diagnostic tools and cultural artefacts through which we can gauge the temper of the age, evaluate social aspirations, and reveal the politics which allow the predominance of certain discourses at the cost of others. Tagore championed the cause of social regeneration and believed in an ideal world order without 'narrow domestic walls' governed by the principles of reason and rationality. Tagore encouraged a debate on every issue and avoided conclusions based on redundant practices. A cultural analysis of *Chokher Bali* impels one to ask pertinent questions about issues such as education, the position of women, patriarchy, and hegemonic identities. It creates opportunities for educators and students to bring about social change through consciousness-raising and awareness.

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