



ISSN Print: 2664-8717  
ISSN Online: 2664-8725  
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00  
IJRE 2024; 6(1): 146-148  
[www.englishjournal.net](http://www.englishjournal.net)  
Received: 11-12-2023  
Accepted: 19-01-2024

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## Delineation of Tagore's women in fiction and films

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i1c.179>

### Abstract

This paper seeks to attempt a study on the portrayal of women in Tagore's fiction and the films based on these fiction. Tagore's women are vibrant examples of coming-age women, who did not conform to societal rules in many occasions and tried to carve an identity on their own.

**Keywords:** Tagore, women, fiction, film, identity

### Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore formulated his own ideas of celluloid art and manifested them during the flourishing of cinema. Bioscope was first introduced in India in 1896. Tagore's first interaction with camera occurred on 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1905, when Hiralal Sen made a documentary on the anti-partition stand of the Bengali intelligentsia which was titled as "The Story of Genuine Patriotism". The civil society of Bengal observed an extemporaneous Hartal in which Tagore took active part with a multitude of people singing songs written by Tagore himself. The documentary made by Hiralal Sen was later shown to promote public awareness against colonialism.

Each of Rabindranath Tagore's nine novels, built around the themes of family, community and gender, has at its centre stage a principal female protagonist. We find in Tagore's earlier works, child-like girl heroines or naive marginalized women confronted with social/parental antagonism. His later novels, written in the third literary epoch, revoke the pattern through intellectually enlightened, mature heroines with greater social authority. In this paper, which is meant to be a critical discourse on the portrayal of women in select textual narratives of Rabindranath Tagore and visual narratives of Rituparno Ghosh, I have tried to introspect the characters of Kamala and Hemnolini in Tagore's *The Wreck* and Rituparno Ghosh's *Naukadubi* on one hand while Ashalata and Binodini in Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and Rituparno Ghosh's film of the same name on the other hand.

Since 1960s, most of the Tagore films that have been released till date are women-centric. In case of many movies, the male gaze has become the deciding factor in imaging women for cinema. In her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey states: 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact.' (Durham, 346). When the audience sees Aishwarya Rai Bacchan as Binodini in *Chokher Bali*, her spectacular attractiveness cannot be missed. The fact remains same for the cast of Ria Sen and Raima Sen in *Naukadubi*. Sohini Chaudhuri, one of the feminist film theorists, has identified six key concepts in the post-colonial films adapted from Tagore's fictions. The key concepts are: the male gaze, the female voice, technologies of gender, queering desire, the monstrous - feminine and masculinity in crisis (Chaudhuri, 11).

Tagorean novels resemble traditional apprenticeship novels or Bildungsroman. In his analysis of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Max Wundt points out five general features of archetypal novels in this category. He listed the following characteristics:

'The focus on inner life, which relates it (Bildungsroman) to the novel of sentiment, itself an outgrowth of the romantic novel (Liebesroman); the striving for knowledge of the world of the novel of travel, itself a later development of the novel of adventure; 'the critical attitude towards the world' of the satirical novel; the 'presentation of individual development 'of the

psychological and biographical novels; and ‘the colourful portrayal of life and the world’ of the broader novel of culture. (Shaffner, 7).

The classic example of the dynamic process of growth and the consequent formation of identity is Kamala in *The Wreck (Noukadubi)*. Her Bildung manifests itself to successful orientation to her consolidated social roles as Ramesh’s “child-bride, young beloved and would-be mother of his progeny. Ramesh established within his heart the image of ‘Kalyani’ his child-bride as his would-be beloved” (RR, Vol. 8, *Noukadubi*, 504). She employs religion as a potential mechanism and redemptive agency which crowns her with a sense of self-worth. The shaping, deepening and perfecting of Kamala’s domestic role is in tune with the salvation and vindication of her life itself, motivating her growth in Bildung within the textualised space of household culture. The ripening of inner powers, so long latent within kamala’s person, vents itself in her mounting independence in personal choice and her penchant for carving out for herself a distinctive identity as mistress of her personal world. She develops considerable proficiency in money-management, becomes a proficient reader, and attains social graces. With this comes her great capability for ‘Dama’ (Restraint), ‘Dana’ (Charity) and ‘Daya’ (Compassion), which asserts her emotional emancipation and her identity.

The novel *Chokher Bali* has all the five characteristics mentioned by Shaffner. The plot in *Chokher Bali* is centred on the inner life of the protagonist; Binodini’s cravings for the knowledge of the world is evident in her quest for intellectual information from books as well as in her sessions of self-exploration. Moreover, we can say that this novel is a ‘presentation of individual development’ because it is primarily the struggle for Bindoni’s self-assertion in an environment where the forces of ‘bourgeois society and orthodox family’s loyalty demands conformity from her. Tagore’s detailed narrative and his imaginative insight in building the characters definitely contribute to the “colourful portrayal of life and the world.” I think the most significant point in the female protagonists’ passage towards growth and development through Bildung process recorded in the Tagorian novels occurs during Binodini’s sojourn in a ‘secluded villa on the banks of the Jamuna’ in *Chokher Bali*. During Binodini’s exile, in the villa, she is unforeseeably over-powered with an aversion to sensuality. Seclusion and disillusionment might have effected it to a certain measure, but more importantly, it is welled up from a chastened and sharpened moral judgement that perceives extravagant sensuality as a destroyer of moral virtue. What emerges from this is not necessarily a morbid sense of despair, but commitment to austerity, detachment and quiet resignation to her destiny in life. The narrator defines this incredible transformation in Binodini: “Binodini could have easily acquired and reigned supreme over Mahendra’s wealth, leading a life of indolence and glory. Yet, when she could have claimed ownership of all this wealth, she turned away from all this opulence and seemed to embrace a life of strict asceticism. Rabindranath is supposed to have implemented the Upanishadic theme of self-luminosity, which brings about in Binodini’s case spiritual ascendancy over spiritual lust.

Rituparno Ghosh’s movies *Noukadubi* and *Chokher Bali* are only inspired by Tagore’s novels but are not ditto of them. Rituparno Ghosh’s movie *Chokher Bali* takes many liberties with the rather subtle and covert sexual innuendoes in

Tagore’s novel *Chokher Bali*. Rabindranath in *Noukadubi* shows Kamala as the ideal ‘angel in the house’, the self-effacing Lakshmi, the domestic goddess. On the contrary, Ghosh’s film does not portray Kamala garlanding the sandals of her husband Nalinaksha and engaging in domestic chores in her marital family. In *Chokher Bali*, Binodini is shown partially as a ‘monster-woman’ by Tagore while Ghosh portrays Binodini as a self-asserting woman who is conscious of her sexuality and the power she can exercise to dismantle the patriarchal equilibrium. In the film *Chokher Bali*, Rituparno Ghosh repeatedly focuses on the plights of the young widows, who have all the physical cravings of a young woman but is doomed to lead a life of celibacy after the demise of her husband just a year after their marriage. Binodini’s conversation with one of the nuns of the missionary school, her white sari without any blouse, her craving for the chocolate given to her by the nun - every detail has been wonderfully portrayed by Rituparno Ghosh. When she burns the chocolate wrapper, it may be interpreted as a symbol of her burning passion. The film also foregrounds the nationalist movement that became prominent with Lord Curzon’s decision about the partition of Bengal. The film ends with the last frame informing the audience that the partition in fact became a reality in 1947, forty years after the novel was published.

In his review of *Noukadubi*, Pratim D. Gupta wrote in *The Telegraph*

“True to the spirit of original Tagore novel, the four people at the heart of the boatwreck first become victims of calamities, social and natural, and then start building new worlds around the remains. Before they are tossed around again.” (The Telegraph 2011)

We find intricate psychological tensions in the lives of Kamala, Hemnalini, Ramesh and Nalinaksha.

Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay drew an interesting comparison between *Chokher Bali* and *Noukadubi*. He opined: “In *Chokher Bali*, no question had been raised about religion, society and family intervening in a man-woman relationship. In *Noukadubi*, the traditional notions of religion and morality had been the guiding principles in a man-woman relationship, some even state that *Noukadubi* was constructed as an opposite reaction to *Chokher Bali*.” (Mukhopadhyay, 89).

In Tagore’s fiction, *The Home and the World*, Nikhilesh and Bimala formed an ideal friendship through their companionate marriage, through friendly discussions and debates on different issues. Everything was alright until the sudden eruption of the fervour of swadeshi and Sandip’s apparently charismatic personality infatuated Bimala and drew her out of home into a tempestuous world. She had no point of return. Satyajit Ray made the film dramatic by changing the structure in his adaptation of the novel. Ray’s Ghare Baire begins with the end: Bimala is in tears after the tragic death of Nikhil. There is the sense of foreboding doom accentuated by the theme music.

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