

## Portrayal of Women in Literature

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### Abstract

Literature is mirror image of life. Generally it realistically presents life in different hues and colours but sometimes it is overstated. Gender bias is not a new phenomenon in the world but age old tradition. Literature of all times realistically portrayed this. Women are ill-treated, battered, physically abused, deprived of rights and have no freedom to live their lives in their own way. On the one hand we honour women by calling her ashtabhuji, shakti and devi, on the other hand we do not value her sentiments, wishes and way of thinking. The great, time-honoured epic Ramayana presents that even an ideal, model person and God incarnate Ram exiled his pregnant innocent wife to the forest on the false instigation of one foul mouthed person. If a much venerated, worshipped and loved God-like person can be so hard and indifferent towards the predicament and troubles of his pregnant, guiltless, devoted, loving and truthful wife, then what to say of normal common earthly human-beings. Before her kidnap by the powerful demon Ravana, even Indra's son Jayant tries to molest her in the form of a crow. Much before Ram, Ahilya, beautiful wife of Rishi Gautam was physically abused by god Indra and in turn cursed by her husband to be a stone to be redeemed by the touch of Lord Rama.. These incidents present the attitude of the society towards women. Even in the Mahabharata epic, a mighty queen of a great empire, was publically dragged, abused and humiliated in the court in front of the elders and so-called learned persons. Her own relatives tried to strip her. In her exile also there were attempts to mistreat her. This is the behavior meted out to women in Bharat where it is said that gods reside where women are honoured. Learning of the great immortal works of the noble laureate Gurudev Ravindranath Tagore can also add to our ideas about women's portrayal in literature.

**Tagore's Portrayal of Women:** Gurudev has realistically presented the situation of women of Bharat in nineteenth century when the country was seething under British control. Women were more underprivileged lot as there were customs and traditions totally against the honor, freedom and integrity of women. Child marriage, sati pratha, forceful loneliness of widows were some of the evil customs. Widows had to lead a socially and economically deprived life. Besides that, there were social stigmas related with them. They were considered ominous and not allowed to attend social functions. They had no right to remarry and get pleasure from life. Most of the widow-victims used to accept this and used to sacrifice all the delights of life at the altar of social customs but there were some rebellious and unorthodox voices of revolt against these gender specific customs.

**Binodini's Character :** Binodini, is a magnanimous lady, who is courageous, educated, well-mannered, highly sophisticated but becomes a victim of social customs. As her poverty-stricken father marries her at an early age with a mortally ill person she becomes

widow at an early age. An exceptionally beautiful and gifted Binodini is left to fend for herself as she did not have any relative and financial support. She refuses to surrender to her ill luck and lives a life of chastity and sanctity in a poor impoverished home of a deserted village. She leads a simple life devoid of any comfort, lavishness or luxury. But her mother's friend visits the village. Earlier she wanted to get her married with her own son Mahendra. Delighted at the manners and welcome offered to her, she takes her to her home in Calcutta perhaps to teach lesson to her daughter-in-law Asha. She is simple, artless, innocent, unsophisticated and over pampered by her husband.

**Revenge by Binodini:** Binodini is jealous and frustrated as her marriage proposal was rejected by Mahendra Babu, a much loved and pampered child of his mother. Binodini becomes jealous of the simple, tactless, innocent and illiterate girl Asha, wife of Mahendra. She first befriends Asha and then tries to ensnare Mahendra through her devoted service, feminine attraction and coquettish flirtations. Asha, a real simpleton is not able to detect the clever plans of this manipulative and scheming lady and sometimes even helps her to seduce her own husband.

The success of captivating Mahendra through her coquettish charm doesn't bring any happiness as she knows too well that she doesn't love that cowardly man, who lacks vigor to carry any responsibility. She clandestinely appreciates and loves Bihari, a friend of Mahendra. A large-hearted, noble, gentle, simple and having mannish potency and feminine gentleness, he is found endearing and adorable. But truth is that, Bihari clandestinely loves Asha, the simple, childlike girl whose offer of marriage was once for him.

On the one side, illicit relationship between Binodini and Mahendra disturbs the conjugal peace of Mahendra and Asha, on the other side Binodini also realises immorality and depravity of her illegitimate behavior and of disturbing the matrimonial bliss of once a happy family. On the suggestion of Bihari, a morally decent person, she goes back to her village but the severe poverty of her situation and slanders and accusations by the rural ladies prompt her to return to city with Mahendra Babu.

**Internal potency of Binodini:** Though sensuous and passionate, she doesn't yield to the physical advances of Mahendra Babu as her moral sense troubles her. She repudiates the physical advances of Mahendra. Highly infuriated and insulted, Mahendra, sets out to take revenge and considers Bihari responsible for his rejection and troubles. He doesn't hesitate to insult his, bosom and most loyal and trusted friend.

**Redeemed Binodini:** Ultimately illness of his mother, devoted love of his truthful wife, and rejection by Binodini brings Mahendra back to marital paradise. Sympathetic Bihari offers to marry Binodini but she rejects the offer as the social custom of that time doesn't allow a widow to remarry. Instead she offers her services to help Bihari to serve people.

**Portrayal of Women in Chaturanga:** In his other novel, Chaturanga, there is a widow who rebels and declines to bow down before social pressures. Chaturanga, a faithful chronicler of the time presents various shades of woman characters. This is also an attack on the wicked social customs of the time such as unnecessary rituals, untouchability, discrimination with Muslims and injustice with women.

Harimohan, though an atheist was a powerful advocate of secularism, brotherhood and love. A bachelor, he loves and looks after his nephew Sachis as his own son who has same open-minded outlook and tries hard to protect the honor of a poor girl, who has been oppressed by his own brother. A little widowed girl Nanibala is also a victim of social taboos and conditions. Nanibala was protected and honoured by Jagmohan, but she was hounded by her exploiter Purander, brother of Sachis. He lets hell round her to make her life insufferable and intolerable. To save her from further tortures, Sachis decides to marry her but she is unable to break the social barriers and commits suicide.

Harimohan, a true humanitarian serves Muslims and Scheduled caste people suffering from plague. In this epidemic, Harimohan also dies. Sachis, an outstandingly gentle and knowledgeable person starts following a Guru, in his quest for spiritual progress. Sri Vilas Babu, a fervent admirer of Sachis also joins him. The ashram was looked after by a widowed woman rightly named Damini due to her electric like shocking characteristics, who has been forced by her husband to devote herself along with her property to the Guru Lilananda Swami.

When her husband Sivatosh died, he left his young childless wife at the disposal of Guru ji. His ambition being that the house would in time grow to be the rallying point of his sect. The young widow still has loving fervent feelings. Though apparently following social customs of that time, she refuses to surrender before the unfair and unjust command of her dying husband. Her inner revolt is reflected in her attitude and behaviour towards Guruji.

She is not interested in spiritual progress but wants to feel real, earthly love as a real human being. Sachis, a fine, decent gentleman fails to respond her feelings as he has set himself on the spiritual voyage to know the answers of vital questions. Her feelings are reciprocated by more down-to-earth, less spiritual Vilas Babu who begins to love her and wants to marry her.

The novel again presents the predicament of a widow who has all the qualities of a good wife and mother but social customs and traditions demand that she should live life of an austere person. There is constant struggle between her worldly desires and social taboos. Besides realistically chronicling the women-folks of that time, the novel presents a young widow whose choices and wishes are not respected at all. The story presents a widow who furtively loves Sachis who is not able to respond her sentiments as he has selected spiritual path. Frustrated and disappointed but not defeated, she finds comfort in less sacred but more realistic and worldly person and agrees to pass her life with him. She is indeed an epitome of energy who can work both for creation and destruction.

Women in 19<sup>th</sup> century as presented in Tagore's Books: A critical analysis of these books present a situation where women had to face following evil social traditions.

1. Child marriage was quite common. A girl was married before puberty. Nobody cared about her wishes and choice.
2. There were many marriages in which spouses did not suit each other. In the case of educated, well-mannered and cultured Binodini, her husband was a poor terminally ill person. She was married this way due to lack of money.
3. Women at that time were confined within the four walls of the house which was their world where they have to seek comfort, peace, love, happiness and

- contentment. They were not allowed to move out . They were allowed to move out, with a male escort.
4. Once a widow, a woman has no right to love and find happiness. She has to live a secluded, austere and lonely life.
  5. Some rebellious women like Binodini and Damini refuse to surrender before the social customs and traditions. Their energy, desire to find love and happiness creates confusion and turmoil in the society.
  6. Mostly strong social system wins and women have to accept the unwritten laws of the society.
  7. Women have to suffer due to no fault of theirs. Nanibala commits suicide as Sachis' brother Purander makes life a hell for her.

These reflections clearly present a biased attitude of the society towards females in nineteenth century when women have to shoulder the responsibility of being morally and socially upright whereas men-folks had total autonomy of marrying as many times as they want. All the social stigmas were about women only. Sadly, though many evil customs like child marriage and purdah pratha changed but evil customs have taken other forms like eve-teasing, rape, molestation, triple talaq, dowry, forced prostitution, black-mailing and female foeticide. A strong government will and awareness of people may end these evil practices.

**References:**

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