

Theme of Love and Suffering of Women in Rabindranath Tagore's Novel 'A Grain of Sand' (Chokher Bali, 1903)

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Abstract

The novel, 'A Grain of Sand' (Chokher Bali, 1903), is about the social problems of early marriages, widowhood, and extra-marital affair of a married man with a young widow. In this novel, Rabindranath Tagore has portrayed the problems of women in Indian society like widow-remarriage, child-marriage, dowry and illicit extra-marital relationship along with the predicaments of widows in Bengal at the end of the nineteenth century. The difficulties and complications of human relationships and the significance of love in the human relationships are portrayed in this novel. He has encouraged the need of female education and the abolition of social evils like child-marriage, dowry, widowhood and illiteracy of women, domestic hostility and submissiveness of women are presented in his wonderful novels and stories. In the centre of these social obstacles, female education is revealed as a greater need in the Tagore's novels. He has portrayed the solitude, sufferings, disappointments and unfulfilled suppressed desires of sexuality of a Bengali widow Binodini in this novel 'A Grain of Sand'. Rabindranath Tagore had seen social realities from a psychological point of view and performed the role of a social reformer or a moralist. He has presented the problems of women by examining what is happening in the society. In this novel Tagore has shown an

amazing notice of the predicaments of women of the Hindu society. In this study an investigation has been made to show how Rabindranath Tagore has depicted the theme of love and suffering of women in this novel 'A Grain of Sand'.

Keywords: Love, Human Relationships, Frustration, Family and Society.

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's writings, especially his novels bring out the experiences of abandoned widows and isolated women. It depicts great compassion and understanding towards the predicament of women of that period. Through his works, Tagore is seen to shatter the fake principles of the society and thus tries to liberate women from their bondages. In the novel 'A Grain of Sand', Tagore has presented how the force of impatience and illegal sexual desires can weaken a conjugal relationship in a family. He also shows how a man disregards the love and promises with his wife under the dishonest desires of illegal extra-marital relationship, where he has no ability to conquer it. Man is generally depicted as weak, unstable-minded and always vacillating between marital and extra-marital relationships. In this novel, he has presented the importance of love in human relationships. Rabindranath Tagore believed that love is the only truthfulness of life and it is not simple sentiment; it is the eventual truth of human relationship. Tagore says:

Want of love is a degree of callousness; for love is the perfection of consciousness. We do not love because we do not comprehend, or rather we do not comprehend because we do not love. For love is the ultimate meaning of everything around us. It is not a mere sentiment; it is truth; it is the joy that is at the root of all creation. (Sadhana, p-59)

Tagore is a lover of mankind. He believes that emotions, passions and beauty are the eternal truths of human life. Tagore's view of love is based on the divine concept of unity in

all created things. The life which is full of greed, pride, cruelty, self-seeking and full of false ambitions is a sort of divine sleep. It makes man forget the ultimate reality that surrounds him. Love is free because it comes from within, it is an element of the soul itself. The relation between the individual and the universe is not one of the quarrel and hostility, but one of union and love, sexual excitement is selfish and unsympathetic, but when controlled by the principle of pure love, it becomes a sign of man's spiritual combination with the God.

Outside conjugal relationship, there exist several relationships. Extra-marital relationship is an unlawful relationship which happens outside marriage. Marriage in India is regarded as a sanctified and acceptable relationship based on the foundations of love, faith, devotion and expectation. If these are broken, a self-respecting wife or husband finds it very difficult to accept infidelity which has always been a great obstruction in a marriage. Tagore regards marriage a very important relationship but not a sacred association. He thinks that monogamy, faithfulness and sacredness of marriage are tough for human beings to adhere to and, therefore, majority of men and women find it to be a very difficult duty. Human beings are essentially social creatures; they depend on one another for survival and happiness; they have a powerful need for love, companionship and belonging; they are frightened of dissatisfaction, rejection and isolation.

Tagore has depicted the frustration of Binodini, a young Bengali widow in this novel 'A Grain of Sand'. The perfect conjugal relationship between Asha and Mahendra, intensifies Binodini's dissatisfaction and jealousy. Initially, she was unaware of her real mental condition. She thinks that as she loves Mahendra, she was jealous of his wife, but very soon, she realizes that it was the lack of love in her life that makes her hate Asha. Therefore, she plans to demolish the happiness of married life of Asha and Mahendra. Then, she tries to seduce Mahendra, but she hates his passionate behaviour and weak personality and says:

You wrote that you love me. That may have worked while we were playing games-but if you want me to take it for the truth, I do not believe it. At one point in time you believed you love Asha-that was a lie too. Now you think you love me, this too is a lie. The only one you love is yourself. (A Grain of Sand, p-91)

Binodini starts playing with the mind of Mahendra with her beauty and sensuality and sees that it is very easy to seduce a married man like him and consequently, she begins to dislike his weak character and hollow personality. Therefore, she rejects her love for Mahendra. In the novel, Tagore has presented the secret aspirations of love of an abandoned widow Binodini, her covetousness, detestation and opposition, which emerged out of his deserted life. Her sorrows, loneliness and aspiration for love induce her to do hostility with her friend Asha. It is a story about the frustrations of sexual desires and emotional disappointments of Binodini.

In this novel, 'A Grain of Sand' Tagore has presented the suppressed desires of love of a lonely widow Binodini, her jealousy, hatred and enmity, which emerged out of his loveless life. Her sadness, loneliness and desire for love incite her to do hostility with her friend Asha. In this novel, the social evils like child marriage, dowry, lack of female education, women's subjugation, the status of women, their predicament, and their struggle against injustices in a patriarchal society are clearly presented. The theme of the story presents the conditions of women in Indian society who are estimated to be obedient, polite and passive wives. Tagore wrote many novels, which deal with feminist problems like domestic violence and submissiveness of women, inequitable treatment to women in various ways right from the birth and their terrible condition in the patriarchal society at that time. All will be free from domination, terror, slavery and suffering of every kind, is the aim of his writing.

In this novel 'A Grain of Sand' (Chokher Bali, 1903), there are six main characters. Mahendra- the main character, an elegant and attractive young man, his sensitive and obedient wife Ashalata, his affectionate yet over-considerate mother Rajlakshmi, Mahendra's intelligent friend Bihari, the disobedient widow Binodini and Rajlakshmi's brother-in-law's widow Annapurna. The idea of the joint family is revealed in this novel. Rajlakshmi and Annapurna are the old widows of the ancient times. Rabindranath Tagore has described various relationships like the mother-son relationship, husband-wife relationship, extra-marital relationship, and lover-beloved relationship in this novel. Rajlakshmi has certainly achieved the central position among the female characters of the family. Due to this, Annapurna the other old widow of the same family never plays a strong part in the family matters. Although her care for Mahendra is as significant as his real mother.

Mahendra gets married to Asha, an unpretentious and timid girl who is an orphan and unaware of the complexities of relationships. She is extremely devoted to her husband Madhusudan. She was an immature woman, a girl child who didn't know calamity until it was right in front of her. Mahendra's mother Rajlakshmi was overprotective for her son and she felt jealousy for her own daughter-in-law Asha. Widowhood is the greatest curse for a woman, and widows are dominated physically and mentally by the Hindu orthodox society. During the time of Tagore, widow-remarriage was restricted by the Hindu society. The torments and wretchedness of lonely widows, shows their deplorable conditions. In the past, in spite of the reformation movements and arguments cited in support of widow remarriage, the society remained disinclined to accept it. Widows were excluded of the right to lead a common life, deprived of financial protection, treated as unsympathetic, often subjugated sexually and even forced into illegal relationships. Tagore had seen the miseries and unhappiness of widows, which he has presented in this novel.

Ashalata, Mahendra's wife, represents the woman of the new generation. She is more an adolescent at heart than a mature and clever woman. Her education has been useless as she was unable to recognize the betrayal of Binodini. Mahendra, her husband, searches for friendship and love in his marriage but Ashalata only considers him as a god who deserves to be worshipped and cherished. She is incapable in providing him the enjoyments of true marital life. The emptiness in their relationship is heightened due to their dissimilarity in age and education. At this moment, we observe Binodini- the immature, attractive and educated woman with a combination of mystery and rebelliousness. Her marriage failed as her husband was sick and incapacitated. She has obtained the status of a widow. Rajlakshmi visits her ancestral village and invited Binodini in her own house. Her life is described as 'unhappy' and 'lonely' due to the fact that a Hindu widow has to withdraw from searching any worldly happiness. Working as a caretaker in the house of Rajlakshmi, Binodini acquires an excellent sense of experience and is courteous to Rajlakshmi and other members of the family. Her compassionate qualities distinguish her from the other village young women. She is an evolving woman who has been changed through education into a liberated and emancipated woman. She isolates herself from the deception of false spirituality imposed on the woman by society. She desires to be recognizable for her own merits.

But the greatest problem in her life is the fact that she is a widow and so she can never enjoy the happiness of married life enjoyed by married couples. Meanwhile, Mahendra was disappointed and tired by his loveless marriage is now searching for a fresh companionship. Soon Binodini's enigmatic attraction and emerging physical appeal attract him and then initiates an illegal extra-marital affair. Binodini's widowhood position also gives the sense that she needs a man to defend her and provide her security. She is primarily attracted to Bihari but later responds to the proposals of Mahendra who is passionate about her. Tagore is unable to conclude the issue- whether a marriage once broken by a violation of faith can be

restored into a true conjugal relationship. Bihari too fluctuates between his friendship with Mahendra and his unanswered love for Binodini. He is torn between the incompatible emotions of love and duty. The unsympathetic condition of the society portrays the cruel ill-treatment and discrimination done to the woman. Three widows in this novel are intertwined in brutal situations and complex relationships. Rajlakshmi-the overprotective mother, Annapurna-the one who represents the character of a traditional Bengali widow and Binodini- who has a miserable luck fated by misfortune.

It is Bihari, Mahendra's friend who can actually recognize Binodini's womanly aspects of desires of true love, while speaking to her at a picnic. Binodini shares her personal feelings about her life, her past and her motherland. So far the narrow-minded society only considered her as an object of aspiration. But Bihari understands that Binodini is not a sensual or immoral woman but a devoted lady who needs love and support from the society. She is a woman misunderstood by the society. Passionate love is also revealed through the letters exchanged between the protagonists Mahendra and Binodini. Mahendra is irritated with himself for composing a letter to Ashalata. But Binodini's letters on Asha's behalf highlight the uselessness of Ashalata's education while at the same time act as a means for the seduction of Mahendra, since they are addressed to him. Binodini needs infatuated love and these letters provide her the freedom to express her emotions without timidity. Mahendra also observes her reading a novel by Bankimchandra on extra-marital love. This presents their attraction for one another which is now revealed even to the society.

But their illegal relationship does not have a public sanction. The society has a dualistic approach in its interpretations. While Mahendra by virtue of being a man, was liberated for extra-marital relationship but Binodini was disliked by society. But Binodini confronts the society and Rajlakshmi fearlessly when she declares that she will not obey the rules imposed by the society on widows. The news about Binodini's extra-marital affair with

Mahendra spreads like wild fire. She finds no tranquility in Rajlakshmi's house as Binodini's defamation has brought adversity in Mahendra's family. Binodini becomes a complete rebellion who is abandoned by everyone. In the end, Rajlakshmi encourages Asha to win back her husband, but only to keep her son from leaving home. After her refusal by society, Binodini finally understands her faults. The issue of widow-remarriage is also projected by society in this novel. At the end, when Bihari proposes to Binodini, she rejected his proposal of marriage, because widow-remarriage is condemned by the Hindu society and remarriage will blemish his unblemished personality. Binodini is aware of the consequences of the disobedience of social traditions if she marries Bihari. Binodini has the humiliation of being a widow whose remarriage is considered a prohibited work by the society. She sacrifices her true love for maintaining the reputation of her lover Bihari. Binodini leaves Mahendra's house and goes to Banaras for the service of the humanity.

Binodini held up Asha's chin and said, 'Yes, my sister, it's time for me to leave. Once, in the past, you had loved me-now, in times of joy, set aside a bit of that love for me, my friend-and forget everything else.' (A Grain of Sand, p-158)

During her stay on the Ganges, she realizes that she doesn't need any man to identify or complete her. So, she discarded Bihari's proposal of marriage. This is a kind of feeling, where her sexual desires, emotions and feelings of impolite love are transformed in to true love or spiritualism and self-realization. Therefore, we find that love is the liberty of soul. The beauty of love is found in the liberation of soul because love is free from any bondage of physical love or sexuality, which pertains to the field of impudent love. Here, Binodini's profane love is changed in to spiritual love.

Conclusion

In the novel 'A Grain of sand', Tagore has depicted the loneliness, sufferings, frustrations, and secret aspirations of love of an abandoned widow Binodini, her covetousness, detestation and opposition, which emerged out of his deserted life. Rabindranath Tagore has shown the attraction between man and woman even outside the conjugal life, which was not acceptable in orthodox society. The truth of human relationship is loyalty and love for each other. The novelist apparently suggests that what is fundamental for the development of a young widow is to allow her to attain a realization of self in harmony with society. The conflict between traditional norms and the natural desires of Binodini are presented in this novel 'A Grain of sand'. However, in literature, as in life, basic conflicts often remain unresolved. Tagore, thus highlighted the need for society to allow a widow to realize her own idea of self-affirmation.

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