Chapter Three

**Transitional Women: Towards Self-Assertion**

She does not accept the destiny assigned to her by nature and by society; and yet she does not repudiate it completely. Thus, she is divided against herself. (Beauvoir 330)

The early twentieth century witnessed an upheaval in many spheres of the Indian society. The spread of Western education led to fundamental changes in the thinking of many sections of people in India. The spirit of humanism in Western culture began to show itself in the attitude, conduct, and the writings of this period. The writers began to look critically at their social and religious practices and initiated changes in them. In this process, the relationship between the older and the younger generations and between men and women began to change. It was best reflected in the social novels of the early twentieth century, which mirrored the transformation of the period, the cross currents of conflicting ideologies and the triumphs and tragedies of the suppressed women fighting to survive in a complex social milieu. They were part of a larger discourse in which social institutions and relationships were examined and new norms were formulated.
In the nineteenth century Indian society, the wife and widow were polarized as the two aspects of femininity as defined by patriarchy. Educated upper caste Indians, conscious of having lost their power in all spheres under colonial rule except within their homes, were supremely preoccupied with the education and conduct of their women. This preoccupation was reflected in the controversy that raged over the Sati Act of 1829, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, the proposals to introduce divorce in the 1880s and the Age of Consent Act of 1891. As a result of this, rigid norms in the life of widows were beginning to relax. While there was an attempt to make the conjugal relationship more liberal, and the rights of wives and the obligations of husbands were being increasingly recognized, there were also fears regarding the disintegration of the family.

The transition dramatized the conflict between the inevitabilities of rules and the inevitability of breaking them. There was a conflict between the desires of human beings and the desires of the society as a whole. The sufferings and frustrations of the widows were recognized, but their transition to remarriage was severely condemned because it threatened the existing power structure of the family and society. Tagore’s contributions in the discourse of widow-remarriage and
man-woman relationship are significant and they are epoch making.

How Tagore depicted the condition of oppressed women was discussed in Chapter II. Now, in the changing social scenario how the subjugated women attempt to break the patriarchal hegemony and how far they succeed is scrutinized in this chapter through his two novels *Binodini* (1903) and *Yogyog* (1929).

Even though The Widow Remarrige Act was passed in 1856, it did not have its total impact immediately on the society. The number of young child widows increased and their status in the society was quite deplorable.

A large number of girls were found to be widows in Bengal during the census of 1931. The report for the year states that the number of widows in the age group of 4 to 6 was 8904 in the 7 to 13 age group was as high as 37,564 and between 17 and 23 it had risen to 2,24,176. (Majumdar 124)

In the case of a widow, “pativrata” (to be virtuous) necessitated a complete withdrawal from participating in the social life of the community. The hassle of an austere discipline made her existence an implicit social death. For all practical purposes, she should live a life of an ascetic and any violation of her discipline would
result in a very unhappy rebirth. Nevertheless, it also
imperilled the welfare of the soul of her dead husband,
who might suffer in the after-life for the shortcomings
of his wife on earth. The Dharma Shastra has prescribed
that,

A widow should give up adorning her hair,
chewing betel-nut, wearing perfumes, flowers,
ornaments and dyed clothes, taking food from a
vessel of bronze, taking two meals a day,
applying collyrium to her eyes; she should wear
a white garment, should curb her senses and
anger. She should not resort to deceit and
tricks, should be free from laziness and sleep,
should be pure and of good conduct, should
always worship god, should sleep on the floor
at night on a mat of 'Kusa' grass and she
should be intent on concentration of mind and
on the company of good. (Kane 584)

In this rigid rule for a Hindu widow, widowhood
traditionally meant one of these three things: immediate
death, lifelong disapprobation to exclusion and drudgery,
and enslavement to denigrating sexual exploitation by the
males of the family or locality. “Just as birds flock to
a piece of flesh left on the ground so all men try to
seduce a woman whose husband is dead” (Kane 524).
The majority of widows in India had to observe strict celibacy. The restrictions on their diet, attire, and movements and their hairless heads were the attempts to defeminise and desexualize them. Efforts to make widow remarriage acceptable in Hindu society continued until the end of the nineteenth century. Controversy regarding widow remarriage, which peaked in the nineteenth century, the way in which it could be resolved, were the themes taken by novelists in Bengal during the early twentieth century.

The spirit of humanism in the Western culture began to reflect in their writings. In particular, they tried to reorganize their domestic arrangements, educate women, and bring them out of seclusions to make them more suitable partner in their endeavour of modernizing the Indian society. In this process, the relationship between the older and the younger generation and between men and women begin to change. Such changes towards the social outlook are revealed in the social novels of this period. Rajul Sogani observes;

The Indian novel has followed two different courses, the documentary novel which presents social problems realistically and suggests possible solutions to them; and the romantic novel which explores the complexities of human
relationships and the moral conflicts within an individual or a community arising from the norms prevalent in the community. (30)

Broadly speaking there are three ideological passions, which the novelists take on the issue of widow remarriage— the reformist, the orthodox, and the one seeking a compromise between the first two. There were at least three Bengali novels and a Tamil novel: *Sansar* (1886) by R.C.Dutt (1848-1909), *Jugantar* (1901) by Shibnath Shastri (1846-1919) and *Murola* (1888) by Debiprasanna Raichaudhary (1854-1920) and A.Madhavaiah’s (1872-1925) *Muthumeenakshi: The Autobiography of a Brahmin Girl* (1903) in which the writers expressed a strong plea for widow remarriage and attempted to answer all the objections against it.

However, in both Bengali and Tamil scenario the widow remarriage was unacceptable to the society and the orthodox Hindu readers resented it. Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the predecessor of Tagore, in his novel *Vishavriksha* (*The Poison Tree* 1872) deals with the story of a beautiful young widow Kundanandine, and projects the young widow as a seductress and as an evil woman. Chatterjee followed the orthodox path in order to be popular. Thus in *Vishavriksha*, Bankimchandra Chatterjee juxtaposes widow remarriage with polygamy and indicts
both. He was criticized for being a conservative moralist and for compromising his art for social conventions. The problems of young widows are projected in such a way that it reflects the author’s as well as the contemporary society’s deeply ingrained aversion to these unfortunate victims.

True to the spirit of social reform, Tagore turned his attention to writing a novel based on the problem and predicament faced by young widows. The novel was initially titled *Choker Bali*. This novel marks a turning point in the treatment of widow remarriage in Indian fiction. In 1903, the title was changed to the name of the protagonist, Binodini. R. N. Roy rightly quotes the assessment of Srikumar Bandopadhyay, the pioneer critic of Bengali fiction, that, “Choker Bali can be called the inaugurator of a new era of Bengali novels” (79). Humayun Kabir says “. . . with Binodini the Bengali novels attain maturity and joins the main stream of world fiction” (34). The seed of Bengali Novel which reached its perfection in Sarathchandra Chatterjee lies in *Choker Bali*. According to R.C. Majumdar “Rabindranath relied upon the detailed psychological method, in which, incident and intentions are marshalled in a close array and every step in the evolution of the story and
character is subjected to a process of a minute analysis” (Glimpses of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century 916).

The novel is remarkable because Tagore depicted in a narrative not just pallid love, but desire and indeed the urge driven by sexuality for the first time. This novel is also significant for the ruthless depiction of the suffocating domestic interior of a middle class Bengali household, the complexity of the relationship between women in the inner quarters, and the tendency of many men in that environment to be mother-dependent like the “Kangaroo-cub” (Binodini 1). There is the interplay of the suppressed desires and the flexibility of the ethics of the Indian male, and finally the suppression which the widows suffer in such a society. Tagore’s awareness of the consequences of dispassion and dehumanization which the spell bounded widowhood had to undergo in Indian society is delineated in Binodini. Tagore suggests that the betterment of their situation is not merely in remarriage but also in creating conditions for the harmonious realization of their selfhood by men.

Binodini is a precursor of Damini, another widow heroine of Tagore in his later novel Chaturanga (1916). Tagore’s depiction of Binodini does not match with the stereotypes of the nineteenth century Bengali woman created by Bankimchandra Chatterjee, because Binodini is
neither a devotee who worships her husband nor a neglecter of home and hearth in her quest for education and social sophistication. Binodini is an intriguing combination of the various types of Bengali women that Bankimchandra Chatterjee has divided into various exclusive compartments. According to Swain, Binodini “. . . endeavours to come to terms with how protean female roles as a lover and devoted woman and discover her womanhood through self-abnegation” (192).

The beautiful and talented Binodini is educated by a European tutor at home by her parents, who spend much on what little they had. Rajalakshmi is the childhood friend of Binodini’s mother. Her son Mahendra rejects the proposal of marriage with Binodini. Mahendra’s friend Bihari also declines to marry Binodini. Due to economic deprivation the widowed mother of Binodini, in her inability to offer any dowry, gives her in marriage to a sickly poor boy Bipin. He dies, leaving Binodini as a young widow without consummation.

Mahendra marries, against his mother’s wishes, his aunt Annapurna’s niece Asha, who is a simple and almost illiterate girl. She is intended to be the bride of Bihari. In compliance to the hollow principles of the traditional Hindu mother-in-law, Rajlakshmi despises Asha as undeserving of her son and regards her as an unsought
encroach into her family. Rajalakshimi, as the imperious, possessive and dotting mother of Mahendra, feels neglected and exiles to her village home. There she is in the hospitality of Binodini.

Tagore wrote this novel when attitudes towards widows had been relaxed among the progressive families in Bengal. When there was progression of Renaissance in Bengal, it was no longer necessary for young widows to shave their heads. There was no restriction in their movements. There is no great pressure on the widow Binodini to live like an ascetic. At home, an English woman educates Binodini. Her elderly friend Rajlakshmi immediately recognizes Binodini’s qualities as a potential wife and homemaker. She takes her to Calcutta to be her companion and to assist her in managing her establishment consisting of her son Mahendra and his young bride Asha. Binodini befriends Asha and assumes the role of a mentor. Binodini who has a rare combination of beauty, grace, dignity and intelligence, wins the admiration of all including the high-souled Bihari. Rajalakshmi wants to show her son that there are many girls far superior to Asha in the world. In this attempt, she wishes Binodini might be her daughter-in-law. Such confession naturally bolsters Binodini to command everyone in the house.
Binodini is both the subject and object of desire, but this desire is fanned by the repressive social practices. Binodini feels that the happy domesticity enjoyed by Asha is indeed hers. The destiny has dealt her a cruel blow. Tagore delineates; “Binodini looked around the room and at the bed with a painful frustrated longing” (56). She wonders the denial of her place in this house. She is pained to think that she is a mere guest who would and must depart soon.

Binodini, starved of love, listened to the young bride’s experience of first love with the avidity of an addict thirsting for the fiery wine. . . . The chilly-and-spice part of love was all that Binodini could taste. The main dish was outside her reach. Her nerves tingled as though scorched by a flame. Her eyes shot sparks of fire. (40)

The passions and cravings, which unjust social restrictions attempt to control by condemning a widow to an austere, futile and sterile existence, begin to assert themselves in Binodini. Sarada rightly observes; “The entry of Binodini into the life of Mahendra begins the love triangle to which Bihari adds the fourth dimension” (22).
The first stage of the love entanglement of Binodini with Mahendra begins with her reading of Mahendra’s letter to Bihari. In that letter, Mahendra goes into raptures, describing the romantic thrills of his conjugal life. This letter leads Binodini, the voracious reader of romantic novels, to imagine the physical and emotional pleasures of married life which are denied to her.

Binodini’s ego is hurt when Mahendra pretends to be indifferent about making her acquaintance even though she has been in his house for a long time. Binodini somehow wants to assert herself as an eligible woman better than Asha to lead the household. The indifferent attitude of Mahendra towards Binodini makes her annoyed:

Why this indifference? As though she was a piece of furniture? Was not she human, was not she a woman? If he only came to know her, he would see the vast difference between her and his pet chuni. (53)

Mahendra soon discovers how superior Binodini is to Asha and begins to pity her. Binodini too is attracted to him. Moreover, Rajalakshmi, jealous of her daughter-in-law, encourages Binodini to seduce Mahendra by bidding her to attend on him, when Asha is away at Kashi. She ignores the growing intimacy between Mahendra and Binodini until it is too late. When Mahendra’s infatuation for Binodini
becomes public and threatens to destroy his ties with his family, Rajlakshmi is panicked. It is then that she accuses Binodini of transgressing the code of a guest.

Binodini retorts that Rajalakshmi has herself transgressed as a mother by encouraging the seduction of her son because she was jealous of her daughter-in-law. Binodini’s ideal feminine instinct cannot tolerate the sight of a son being emotionally and spiritually overwhelmed by his mother. As an outspoken and ingenious, she reproaches Rajlakshmi for bringing about the moral wreck of her son Mahendra on whom she fondly dotes.

What cunning there was in me, you understood better than I did. I too saw through your cunning better than you did yourself—or else all this would not have happened. I had set a trap not fully realizing what I was doing. You too had set a trap, knowing and yet not knowing what you wanted. Such is the way of our sex.

(78)

Bihari ascertains that a vivacious girl like Binodini cannot expect to spend her days in the wilderness, but expresses his anxiety about her usurping Asha’s place. There are alluding references to Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s *Vishavriksha* throughout the text. Mahendra
discovers Binodini secretly reading *Vishavriksha* in Asha’s absence. Bihari warns,

> What another poison tree!... Even if you throw her out, it will not take her long to return. There is only one remedy; get the widow remarried. That will remove the poison fang forever. Mahendra replies, Kunda too had been married off. (42)

Kunda, in *Vishavriksha* (1873) is an innocent young widow in love, who becomes a transgressor by marrying another woman’s husband. Rohini in *Krishnakantar Will* (1878) wilfully seduces a married man; but Rohini is destroyed by her wanton behaviour. Bankimchandra Chatterjee has ended the novel as moral teaching to such seductress widows. He upholds the traditional morality that the transgressors should be punished for their lapses. Tagore has perpetually mentioned Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s novel to deconstruct the false image of widows in the fictional world. Nevertheless, Tagore differs from his precursor by portraying a similar character from a different point of view. Tagore has delved deep into the feminine psyche and sorted out the reasons for such an act on the part of a widow.

The natural repressed desire of Binodini is made use of first by Rajlakshmi to fulfill her jealousy for Asha.
Mahendra attempts to seduce her in the absence of Asha to fulfill his lust. From the feminist perspective, Tagore has delineated through Binodini the real conflicts, which a widow as a woman would undergo. Binodini is neither a typical widow steeped in pathos nor a martyr renouncing her right to love, but a human individual who emerges as a better person from the havoc of unwittingly created human lapses. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar comments, "Tagore’s is a subtler, more convincing psychological study than either of the two novels of Bankim which exploits a similar theme" (87).

Binodini decides to avenge her humiliation by entangling Mahendra. At this point, she has no deliberate plan to wreck the married life of Asha and Mahendra. The nature of her own feelings towards Mahendra is not clear to her. She has not forgotten that he has spurned her hand in marriage for no reason and has deprived her of her right to live and happiness.

Did she hate him for it and sought to avenge her wrong, or did she love him and wanted to offer herself in self-surrender? All she knew was that, she was being consumed by a passionate flame inside her, whether of hate or love or both she could not say. . . . Do I wish
The oscillating consciousness reveals the tangling emotional disparity between the natural feelings of womanhood with emotions and the state of being a victim within the trapped norms of patriarchy. The picture of Binodini at this stage of characterization is that of a woman who is denied of her right to love. This fires the repressed natural instinct with jealousy in the mind of Binodini and affirms her womanpower by bringing Mahendra to her knees. Sarada rightly observes, "Her attitude is one of tempting him while retaining her own self-control" (20).

In the first part of the novel, Binodini is a lapse-widow who deliberately seduces a married man. Nevertheless, in the second half of the text, her love for Bihari transforms her personality and she gradually turns to a life of austerity. She is a combination of the stereotypes of a transitive woman and a widow in love. Once, when all the four go on a picnic, to Dum Dum garden, Bihari’s notion of Binodini as a seductress is changed. At that time, Binodini reveals her mind to Bihari that changes his apprehension towards her. When both get to know each other, he realizes that "Binodini
looks like a butterfly but deep inside her burns the light of a pure and devoted woman" (76).

Binodini unlike traditional uneducated women who fall prey to the romantic words and love-advances of the patriarchy, strongly analyses the fickle-minded Mahendra, and once for all she unmasks his real character. When Mahendra proposes his love to Binodini, she says, “At one time you thought you were in love with Asha. It was false. Now again you are in love with me. That too is false, you love only yourself” (163). She later wants to suspend the sexual advances of Mahendra towards her. In a letter, she tells him “Today out of pity for you I renounce you” (164). As a woman of wit and self-determination and educated, she declines Mahendra’s false proposal as, “I have no right to love or be loved in this world. That is why I play at love to lighten my sorrow ... I have no desire to play the game any longer” (165).

In her bid to satisfy her emotional urges, she has created a storm from which she sees no escape. However, Binodini is spiritually untainted and unsullied. To her love is spiritual and aesthetic and a matter of conscience. Her desperate need of love as well as protection drives her towards Bihari who seems to her the only refuge. She realises the difference between Mahendra
and Bihari. Mahendra is egocentric, proud, and impulsive, whereas Bihari is self-controlled and selfless. Mahendra is weak and unreliable, with no backbone. Binodini comments,

He would run after you if you eluded him but would run away from you if you tried to hold him. The shoulder that a woman can lean must be strong, reliable and firm. Such a shoulder was Bihari’s. . . . (203)

However, Bihari fails to understand Binodini’s entanglement with Mahendra. Bihari holds her responsible for making Mahendra madly in love for her. She accepts this and requests him to understand her heart. She confesses her love only for Bihari and not for Mahendra. Her love for Mahendra is not of carnal one. However, it is an expression of yearning for a selfless true love from a longing soul. Nevertheless, Mahendra tries to consume her void for his selfish need. Her search for love is more spiritual and genuine, which she finds in Bihari. She passionately pines for societal companionship to abate her loneliness and to attain this she ventures to achieve selfless love. She pours her heart out:

I know where it hurts Thakurpa. But please bear with me and try to understand what agony I must have gone through to have cast off all shame,
all fear and come running to you tonight to
one, who once did have regard for me, who only
had loved me, would have saved me, and turned
my frustration into fruition. (157)

Tagore portrays with great psychological subtlety the
unfulfilled physical and emotional yearning of love of a
young widow in her prime of youth to make known to the
entire society. The society has not gone into the psyche
of a young widow but which looks at her as a sinner only.
Binodini is the symbol of a new class of emerging women
who no longer inclined to be vanquished and obliterated
but to fight to assert their right in a patriarchal and
materialistic society. Her rebellion is a Hindu woman’s
protest against the unjust deprivations of a stern
sobering existence. Here Tagore awakens the society to a
sense of realism in understanding and treating the widow
as a woman with her natural impulse.

To Binodini love is an experience of sharing, of
communion. However, she does not succeed in mitigating
her inner frustration through love. Bihari also fails to
understand Binodini and thinks of her poignant
countenance as “melodramatic and theatrical” (158) and
advises her to go back to her village. Binodini suddenly
drops on the floor and clasping Bihari’s feet with her
arms pressed them hard to her breast, she kisses his feet
repeatedly saying, “Don’t freeze into perfection like a stone God. Be human and just a little bad by loving the bad” (158). Tagore makes his contemporaries and reading public to understand the passions of young widows in a humanistic way. He does not delineate the desiring passions of widow and longing to love and to be loved as fault but as a natural human disposition.

This unexpected behaviour took Bihari completely by surprise and for a moment paralyzed his will. She closes her eyes and raises her lips to him and says,

Dearest, she murmured, I know you can’t ever be mine, but today . . . for once . . . for a moment only, do not deny me your love. Let me then disappear in the wilderness of my village. I shall ask nothing more of anyone. Give me something a moment’s memory, to cherish till my death. (159)

Without any response, Bihari removing Binodini’s arms reminds Binodini that there is a train in the morning to reach her village to which she agrees. Bihari drops her in her village and returns.

Rejecting Mahendra and rejected by Bihari, Binodini finds her time miserable in her village. As her activities like communication through letter and free movements between Calcutta and Barasat village and her
unshaven head are not conforming to the traditional widowhood, the village people frown at her. At that time madly in love with Binodini, Mahendra arrives at her village home. Binodini shows exemplary endurance and moral strength in dealing with the weakness of Mahendra. She makes use of his frailty in the guise of eloping with him. She wanders in quest of Bihari. After a long struggle, Binodini is able to locate the village in Allahabad where Bihari lived for a short time. She has but one goal to vindicate herself before Bihari. She celebrates her symbolic solitary marriage with Bihari in his room by deckimg herself with flowers like a bride. The ritual unites her with him in spirit and simultaneously releases her from her obsession forever. Towards the end, Bihari comes to Allahabad in search of Mahendra to tell him to attend on his ailing mother. When Bihari finds Binodini in a room in the village bedecked with flowers, where he used to sleep during his stay there, he becomes suspicious of the relationship between Binodini and Mahendra. She reveals yet another side of her character, her capacity for self-denial. Binodini dispels such doubt. She says;

Because your thought was in my heart I remained chaste. Your image hard and severe, ordering me into exile---this Image I have carried in my
heart, hard and severe like burnished gold,
like a precious stone, making my life,
worthless before; infinitely valuable. I swear
to you my angel. I touch your feet and swear
that nothing has happened to destroy this
value. (241)

On hearing this Bihari is delighted and he expresses his wish to marry her. She probes;

To redeem this sinner?

No because I love you, because you are dear to me.

Then let these words be my final reward.

I want nothing more than what you have just affirmed. If I took more, it would not last.
Religion and society would never tolerate it

Why not? Asked Bihari

'The very thought of it is shameful' said Binodini. 'I am a widow and besides a woman in disgrace, I can never allow you to lose your caste on my account. Please, don’t ever again utter such words. (243)

Love to her becomes only an illusion. It is a fabrication of her imagination, and a dream. Society does not permit it. The Hindu revivalism disdains a widow nurturing the notion of love. Binodini is conscious of this social
taboo and hence she makes a cautious move in every step of her life. She continues,

Do not deceive yourself. You will never be happy, if you marry me. You will lose your pride and self-respect and I shall lose mine. Live your life as you have always lived it. Detached and serene, let me remain at a distance, engaged in your work. May happiness and peace be ever yours! (244)

Meena Shirwadkar observes aptly: “As a woman she cannot help responding to her lover, but as a Hindu widow she cannot marry him. So she remains a silent, throbbing, longing woman” (17). The necessity for love is sacred for all human beings. In the conservative Indian society, a woman revealing her heart is itself frowned upon as an undisciplined act. A marginalized widow who becomes the “other” has to undergo an unbound suffering if she dares to choose a conjugal life. Tagore is true to his nature in his discomposure against all kinds of inhibitions that stunt the growth of one’s individuality. This is what he intends to tell the society. The novelist seems to “. . . question the very foundation of our social and cultural order which has been a monopoly of men” (Cameron 86).

Torn between the two extremes of her love and protection, Binodini suffers the loss of her real and
fails to have a complete understanding or identity with the woman’s world, for it is a world apart. It is this fractured self of Binodini that struggles to attain wholeness. In line with Marxist feminists, Tagore is perhaps trying to create the kind of world in which “. . . women will experience themselves as whole persons, as integrated rather than fragmented or splintered being” (Tong 45).

Sexual passion in women especially in young widows is not a sin, but a basic instinct, which is common to all human beings. Tagore was the initiator in Bengali Literature to discuss this subject openly. He wanted that society should recognize this, and should not view the young widows as seductresses. A widow is not a social outcast, nor an evil omen. Binodini fights for this right. In Tagore’s depiction, Binodini is not an ordinary woman. She is educated, intelligent and has an inner pride for her womanhood. She is a dignified woman with firm conviction and has tremendous confidence in herself. Tagore raises the passions of Binodini to the spiritual level. Love must have a pride of its own. A widow is in need of not a mere remarriage but a better understanding of her individuality as a woman with heart and longing soul. Tagore questions the tradition constructed by
patriarchy that cramps the emotions, passions, and the right to love of women.

Bihari is a challenge to be reckoned with. In the end, Binodini has proved herself as a woman capable of even melting a rock-like character Bihari. Bihari has begged her love. Nothing could be a better pride to her than this. She had all along maintained dignity in her character. She wanted to live and love. It is an indication of not only her freedom, but also a freedom for womanhood. Binodini is a symbol of an emerging womanhood, where they no longer want to live in a world where men compel them "... to assume the status of the other" (Beauvoir 42). S. P. Swain rightly quotes Waugh’s idea:

A subjectivity based on a relational identity where sameness and difference are not mutually exclusive or split into categories of gender, but are recognized as equally important aspects of an effective sense of self. (85)

Binodini is assertive and liberated. Though she wins her battle against the society to understand a young widow’s passion as that of an individual human being which is real and should not be looked down upon as a sin, she does not have the courage to accept the offer of Bihari to marry her for the fear of social ostracism that
prevailed at that time. For her it is sufficient to be loved by a man like Bihari.

Binodini accompanies Annapurna to Kashi to emulate her ideals of selfless devotion. Before her departure, she modestly turns down Bihari’s request for a lock of her hair as a remembrance, and instead, gives him all her money as a token of her devotion to him and renunciation of worldly temptation. She neither chooses death like traditional widow, nor accepts a life of marriage, but decides to exile. She cannot be called an emancipated woman in as much as she has failed in her ultimate mission. This classifies her in the category of woman in the transitional stage, having fought the patriarchy and won half of the battle but not achieving success at the end.

There was a time when women accepted unhesitatingly the do and dont’s men had decided for them. Nevertheless, Binodini refuses to accept that somebody else should decide for her. Here she asserts her individuality as a woman by rejecting both Mahendra and Bihari. At one sense, the rejection of marriage may be seen as an act of rebellion, but her option of a life of exile in spirituality is a sublimated form of self-courted “Sati”. Tagore does not see man-woman distinction as discriminations but one of sameness. If men like Mahendra
and Bihari have the right to love, then why not Binodini, because she is a widow? She is also a woman and must live as other women in the society live. Tagore as a social reformer has portrayed the fluidity of a widow’s identity through the delineation of herself. Binodini represents the womanhood that is externally restrained by cultural heritage on the one hand and by an internal process of self-definition and self-discovery on the other. Majumdar remarks,

> From the sociological point of view it is necessary for Rabindranath to show how thousands of childless widows would reconcile themselves to their hard lot by a process of sublimation of sexual instinct” (216).

The ending is characteristic of Tagorean. Patricki Colm Hogan observes: “understanding the nature of empathy in Tagore’s work helps us to understand some of which appear to be contradictions in his writings” (4). In the mixed ambivalent emotion of Binodini, Tagore attempts to question the gender stereotypes, the conflict between social morality and the need for emotional freedom. Binodini’s self-abnegation affects the reader’s emotions and makes them empathize with the character by turning their attention to the inhuman treatment of the young widows by the patriarchal society, and change their
attitude towards her. Tagore’s first step towards championing the cause of widow’s remarriage started with this novel.

Nevertheless, from the feminist stance, she is a failure. For fear of social ostracism, she rejects the socially respectable life as a wife of Bihari. She does not want to lose her dignity as a virtuous widow, which the society expects of her. Binodini has thus emerged to the status of a woman with self-actualization but does not have the courage to over-rule the patriarchal mores.

Tagore’s depiction of Binodini is certainly revolutionary. Viewed from the twenty first century point of view, what Binodini does seems to be a very ordinary act. However, Tagore must be studied in the historical context of the period in which he lived. Tagore wrote at a time when patriarchy was dominant and unassailable. Even women had been made to accept patriarchy as something natural and inevitable. Women themselves believed that patriarchy alone could safeguard women and the society in general. At that time, it was completely impossible to think of an alternative for patriarchy even for a woman. Nevertheless, Tagore who had been born into a traditional Bengali family initiated a discussion on widow remarriage. His Binodini is a landmark novel in the sense that it challenged the existing notions regarding
widowhood. Tagore’s success and greatness lay in changing the thought current of the public. Hence, Tagore can undoubtedly be regarded as a champion of women’s rights and Binodini can rightly be called a transitional woman in the evolution of the Indian New Womanhood.

_Yogyog_ was written when the society was in transition during the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century, when decaying aristocracy made way for a rising class of mercantile capitalists and caused a major upheaval in social relations, lifestyle and attitudes. Ashish Nandy writes,

> To make the issue of emancipation of woman and equality of sexes primarily one needs a culture in which conjugality is central to male-female relationship and if the conjugal relationship itself remains relatively peripheral, the issues of emancipation and equality must remain too. (41)

With an admirable steadfastness, Tagore upholds his commitment to man-woman relationships based on mutual trust and honest communication between two equal individuals. He is deeply concerned with the failure of marital relationship. Tagore strongly insists on marital relationship based on temperamental compatibility rather than measured material transaction. The temperamental
incompatibility leads to the marital disharmony, which results in the husband and wife alienation.

Tagore makes the issue of conjugality as the central theme in *Yogyog*. He depicts the society in which culture manipulates and controls a woman by forcing her to take on her maternal identity soon after her marriage, whether she likes it or not. Tagore returns to the theme of the exploration of man-woman relationship almost in an obsessive manner. Dipankar Roy, the cultural historian of the nineteenth century, insists upon the disposition of the patriarchal system to withhold wives,

... inside the restricted sphere of *anthapur*/*andarmahal*, the sanctum sanctorum of the colonised subjects... they were treated nothing more than domestic maids, even by husbands from ‘educated families’. (10)

Motherhood as an instrument of oppression and female subordination is also the motif of the novel *Yogyog*. From this aspect, this novel is a feminist one. The values attached to motherhood in human societies indisputably establish the resolute hold of patriarchy over women’s biology. It is difficult for women in India to challenge the biological functions of reproduction and construct a discourse to overthrow or disrupt the forced motherhood or mothering. The patriarchy influences an ideology that
makes biology as woman’s destiny. This process of politicization is in operation behind the entire dialectics of reproduction. Motherhood becomes another patriarchal institution working on the dynamics of oppression to support the hegemony of androcentrism.

Adrienne Rich says; “Motherhood is not only a core human relationship but a political institution, a keystone to the domination in every sphere of women by men” (216). All the feminine characteristics like patience, self-sacrifice, love, and care construct and support the cult of true womanhood. They are used to foster the essential image of ideal motherhood. The cultural construct that promotes a feminine mystique associates woman’s identity with her maternal role and propounds the view that only when her womb is alive does a woman play her useful and stipulated role in the society. Woman, who is at the core of this glorifying culture, is socially conditioned in such a way that she is unable to perceive the fine dividing line between her freedom and confinement. She therefore becomes the victim of a subtle indoctrination and an agent of a specific hegemonic construct. Deeply grounded in this overpowering cultural pattern, she perpetuates her own subordination through her belief in the sanctity of the mother-image.
The texts created by the conservatives nurture an indispensable image of feminine psyche. It faithfully clings to both the biological and cultural imperatives of motherhood. However, a significant decoding of this stereotype takes place in Tagore’s *Yogyog*. Tagore indicates how the patriarchal structure exploits the femininity through motherhood to enhance the self-interest and to vindicate the power of patriarchy. The romanticization of motherhood hides the irony of social reality wherein behind the ostensibly happy exterior of acceptance lie women’s helplessness, choicelessness and a compulsion to make a virtue of necessity.

*Yogyog*, which Tagore wrote in 1929, portrays a clash between the two antipodal concepts of marital love and sex as represented by a commercially successful, wealthy industrialist, Madhusudan, and a sensitive nineteen-year-old woman Kumidini. Kumudini is grown up on the Hindu ideal of womanhood and traditional concept of wifehood. As the last daughter of the family, and of refined taste but depleted resources, she is married to a self-made man who is proud of his enormous wealth. Nurtured by the mythology of “Siva-Sakti”, she was mentally prepared to love the abstract idea of a husband, ignorant of the crudeness of the actual man to whom she is married. Nevertheless, the ground reality after her marriage
throws everything out of gear and an unmitigated process of disillusionment sets in. Her admiration for her elder brother created an added complication in the marital relationship.

Her elder brother Bipradas is an idealized character. He is liberal, intellectual, positivist, compassionate and artistic with an aura of melancholy about him. Bipradas is the representative of the crumbling aristocracy. Unable to make money, he sinks deeper and deeper into debt until the entire family property is irretrievably mortgaged to Kumudini’s husband who belongs to the rising commercial bourgeoisie. Kumu is caught in between her husband and brother; the former wants to settle the score with Kumu’s brother owing to their three-generation-old family rivalry. Only because of this reason, Madhusudan chooses Kumu as the bride. Madhusudan comes to know about the debts of Bipradas. He first buys up Bipradas’ debts and then sends the proposal of marriage to the last unmarried daughter of the Chatterjee household, Kumudini. Bipradas first rejects the proposal. Nevertheless, Kumudini somehow wants to relieve her brother’s anxiety of getting her married and asks her brother to accept the marriage proposal.

In the clash of opposing ideologies and value systems, ownership of the woman becomes a mark of
victory. The narrative of events leading up to Kumu’s wedding is based on the ownership of woman and of territory. Before claiming the bride, the groom’s party takes over Bipradas’ land that had once been their families’. Marriage is treated as a transaction between families and not between individuals.

Tagore makes a bold plea for the need to redefine gender roles within marriage. For the first time he deals with marital compatibility. He depicts the importance of recognising woman’s individuality within marriage. The collapse of his own daughter Meera’s marriage to Nagendranath Ganguly during the writing of this novel may have indirectly influenced Tagore to insist on the issue of marital compatibility in Yogyog. This is Tagore’s first novel, which carries a powerful feminist agenda as the plot, even though the protagonist does not succeed and becomes a victim of patriarchy. For the first time Tagore makes a male character, Kumu’s brother Bipradoss, to advocate feminism more explicitly. The traditional Kumudini is also transformed into a more assertive, individualistic woman at the end.

Kumu, a highly idealistic woman looks upon the husband as the deity of the wife’s life and takes marriage as a divine dispensation. She keeps her mind and body pure. She is an ideal wife and dedicates herself to
her deity. Madhusudan is materialistic to the extreme and accustomed to imposing his will on all around him. He cannot understand the high ideals of his wife. He imagines that he can possess her merely because she is his wife. According to him, the husband is the supreme lord and the wife is his slave. She is nothing but another item in the inventory of his possession. Therefore, in Madhusudan's concept love is non-existent.

To him the wife is a commodity for sex-gratification. The behaviour of the groom's party at the time of the marriage has made Kumudini begin to fear her husband. In Tagore's words, "... the bird had started to think, there was no nest for it but only a noose" (77).

The wedding has taken place in such a way that everyone feels unhappy. Tagore here deftly describes a number of traumatic events that bring out the incompatibility between the couple. The discordant note is struck from the first day of their married life. The causes of disagreement between husband and wife are the ring that she wears, the paperweight, and the letter from Bipradas which is concealed by Madhusudan. On the first day itself Madhusudan dictates Kumudini to remove the sapphire ring of Kumudini which is a present from her brother Bipradas. Madhusudhan feels that sapphire will bring ill luck to him. He does in a way as to establish
his authority over his new acquisition that is his wife. This makes Kumudini’s sensitive heart to bleed. She thinks that it is audacious on the part of her husband and feels her husband does not recognise her individuality. She feels it is an insult to her individuality and womanhood. The inner psyche of Kumu is revealed here. The conflict rises between the ideal wife-image she has nurtured in her and the woman’s individuality. Her notion that the husband is the deity is shattered.

Kumu who has no companion other than her brother Bipradas, lives in a dreamy world which is not related to the real world outside. Her education at the hands of her brother is an exercise in nostalgia for a bygone age. Guided by her brother, Kumu reads Kalidasa, learns to play chess and takes up shooting, and photography. This enlightened education is contrary to the superstitious faith that governs her private life. This lands her in trouble in facing the harsh realities of life. She takes away the ring and puts it in her bag.

Next morning Kumu discovers that her sapphire ring has been taken away by Madhusudan. She realises her loss of freedom in her husband’s home. At this time, Motti’s mother, her sister-in-law comes inside. Kumu asks Motti’s mother, “From today, is there nothing I can call my own?”
Motti’s mother says, “No nothing. Whatever you have
depends on your husband’s favour. Don’t you know, in your
letters you’ve got to sign yourself his servant?” (106).

Tagore’s portrayal of Kumu’s status echoes the stand of
Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1860) the American feminist,
which Deborah quotes,

> The married woman surrenders all her rights
> including the right to control her own body,
> though her husband gives up nothing, she
> becomes an unpaid domestic drudge. (70)

In accordance with the transitional society of her time,
though grown up as a traditional woman, Kumu believes in
the companionate relationship between the couple.
Accordingly, Kumu stands apart in between tradition and
modernity. As a woman of individuality she is stunned by
hearing the concept of a wife as a servant.

As Kumu is well-versed in Sanskrit literature, she
remembers the description of Indumati in the Kalidasa’s
*Raghuvamsam* “once a wife, a councillor, and companion,
dear disciple in the graceful arts. . .” and she
questions, “No mention of servant in that list! Was
Savitri Satyaban’s servant? or Sita in
*Uttararamacharitam*? (115). Tagore sends in the satirical
note that in the two religious scriptures which Hindus
take in as models to live the life, there is no mention
of wife as a servant. Here Tagore questions the biased scriptures which teach all the moral values only for the women but not for men. For Kumu, the contradiction between the myth and reality puzzles her and makes her question the misinterpreted scriptures. Through Kumu, Tagore has subverted the stereotypical scriptures, which sanctify the subordinated status of women.

Kumu assures that each day she would repay what it costs to feed and clothe. Moreover, she would not stay in that house as an unpaid wife and servant. Here Tagore insinuates the perception propounded by the American Marxist feminist writer Gilman about the sublimated status of woman in her book *Woman and Economics* (1898):

> She must consider what he likes, not only because she loves to please him or because she profits by pleasing him, but because he pays for the dinner, and she is a private servant.  

(116)

Gilman points to the fundamental condition of women under capitalist patriarchy. This is pertinent to Kumudini in this situation. In Gilman’s view, capitalism and patriarchy work together in the economic and sexual exploitation of women. Under capitalist patriarchy, “the economic relation is combined with sexual relation” (117) and the consequences are women’s dependence and
subordination. Gilman uses the concept of evolution to point out that under these conditions a particular type of woman is bred. Men choose women for marriage and reproduction. In marriage, a man becomes the woman’s food supply.

Gilman comments that women are the only animal species in which the female depends upon the male for food, clothes, and ornaments, to take from man always and never think of giving anything in return except their womanhood. This is the enforced condition of the mothers of race. It is to the role of the consumer rather than the creative producers of the economic wealth that women are confined. This is what makes Madhusudan to think that Kumu can be easily enslaved. However, he is disappointed as Kumu is spiritually oriented and not materialistic. This is made clear to him when he presents three gold rings including diamond to compensate her sapphire ring that he has stolen from her bag. She lives in a mental plane, in the world of thought and ideas, the life of mind and spirit. This is not understood by Madhusudan that is the root cause for the incompatibility between the couple.

As they are leaving the room, Kumu reveals her heart to Motti’s mother, she comes prepared to give herself as a devoted wife, but he would not let her do it. There let
him live with his servant and that he won’t get Kumudini.

Motti’s mother says,

The woodcutter only knows how to cut trees down; he does not get the tree, he gets the wood. The gardener knows how to keep trees alive. He gets flowers and fruits. You’ve fallen into the hands of a woodcutter—he is a businessman, after all. There is no pity in his heart. (108)

Another incident that causes a rift between the couple is a glass paperweight which Kumu presents to Hablu, the nephew of Madhusudan. The child is the only source of consolation to her, on whom she pours all her affection. She finds utmost joy in its company as it soothes her soul. Madhusudan not only takes back the paperweight from the boy, but also scolds him as a thief and beats him up. Kumu is once again hurt by the peevish nature of her husband. Kumu dares him how he could steal her own sapphire ring from her bag. Kumu retorts him if he could keep his things and why she should not be allowed to have her own, for which Madhusudan replies that there is nothing in that house for which she can claim her ownership. Kumu to allege her self-respect, exiles the room saying that in that case, he can have his own room
for himself. The feminist agenda is kept up throughout in the novel.

Even though Kumu is a traditional woman, she has her own individuality and independent thinking. She gets another reminder of her being a non-entity in the household. She retaliates against the authoritarian hegemony of her husband by self-ostracism, by taking refuge in a small room, where only oil lamps are stored. Madhusudan has usually been to cajole her into surrendering to his amorous embraces. Kumudini evades his lust by shutting herself in a separate room every night. He has decided, "There was only one means of tying Kumudini's life securely to his own, by making her the mother of his children . . . . His only thought was how to defeat the power of the powerless" (112). Here, in Bengali the powerless denotes women in general.

The values attached to motherhood in human societies undoubtedly establish the indomitable hold of patriarchy over women's biology. Madhusudan's subtle idea represents the hegemony of androcentrism that dynamically works on the oppression of womanhood through mothering. In Tagore's description, a parallel can be drawn to Catherine Machinnon, the American feminist, who looks at sexuality from a historical perspective and conceives it as "a potential form of power, which has virtually
institutionalised the male sexual dominance and female sexual submission” (82). Tagore makes a bold exploration of sexual relations within marriage and its recognition of the ways in which history impinges upon human lives.

Madhusudan oscillates between command and entreaty for the sole purpose of sex-gratification. In order to win over Kumu’s mind so that she submits to him, Madhusudan brings in Nabin and Moti’s mother to Kumu, and revokes the order given to them earlier to go to their village home and engages them in her service. He thinks that this act on his part will raise her self-esteem to some extent. He stoops to his unaccustomed low to cajole his wife, for he cannot wait anymore. This lowliness of Madhusudan creates insoluble problem for Kumu for she can cope up with a rough and insolent Madhusudan but fumbles for solution when he is meek and mild. To the deceptively mild yet intolerable call of Madhusudan to come to bed her reply is, “I still have not prepared my mind. Please give me a little time” (148). Nevertheless, ultimately she has to submit to his sex hunger as persuaded by him. This is a tragedy for her from which even her god cannot save her. The surrender of Kumu to a loveless, insensitive husband is nothing but the molestation of her womanhood.
What had filled Kumu with such a distaste was the sweaty touch of slavering greed, whose power of restraint was slack, whose love was kin to material appetite. (154)

Tagore makes the uncharacteristic authorial comment on Kumu’s defeat and Madusudan’s triumph: “But can it be called a triumph?” (154). Tagore, being an individualist and idealist, has faith in the potential integrity of man’s dignity and self-respect. He is of the firm opinion that marriage is a union of souls, an association by free choice. He presents Kumu like Ibsen’s Nora, a remarkable saga woman with wild, deep nature possessing moral strength, sharpness, innocence, and self-respect that awakens her responsibility as an individual and, as a result, throws off the yoke of subjugation imposed on her by her selfish, shallow, and egotistic husband.

According to Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), an American Feminist, personal freedom is the first right to be proclaimed and that does not and cannot now belong to the relation of wife, to the mistress of the isolated home, to the financial dependent. Kumu makes conscious and determined efforts to worship him as the deity of her life and yields to his amorous embraces. Madhusudan being one sided, self centered, shallow, narrow minded and egotist could not at all identify himself with his wife
Kumudini whom he pretends to love. He is not a balanced and integrated personality.

Kumu abhors his lack of moral courage and strength, his self-pride in his money, and his material power. She gets disheartened. She yearned for a whole man, an entire man who could love her deeply and sincerely. She cannot live with a soulless man. Madhusudan is the counterpart of Helmer, the husband of Nora in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Unable to bear the chock-imprisoned life Kumu eventually leaves her husband’s house. In Kumu’s absence, Madushudan finds gratification in the amorous embrace of Shyama, his widowed sister-in-law. Kumu finds shelter in her brother Biprada’s Calcutta house. Bipradas has his own doubt about the stay of Kumu in his house. He comes to know the illicit relationship of Madhusudan with his widowed sister-in-law Shyama. It becomes an open secret. Bipradas strokes it is an affront to the womenfolk in general and so he incites his sister to wage a war on the society, which is very niggardly in giving the woman her due. Bipradas sees in the transgression of Madhusudan, he has committed a sin not only against Kumu his wife as an individual but also to the entire womanhood. He tells Kumu,

I can see that humiliation of women is part of the social order. It is not any individual
woman’s lot... All this time I’d thought that the pain was mine alone, and I suffered for it, ‘said Bipradas, but today I realize that we have to fight it on everyone’s behalf. Because women have no road open to them but to submit, they’re constantly abused. It’s time for them to say that they won’t submit. Kumu, can’t you think of this as your home and stay here? You can’t go back to that house. (223-224)

Tagore, as a great humanist and a critic of traditional morality and social laws, ventilates his grievance that a woman has not been considered as an individual possessing a soul. Therefore, he defends his cause vehemently. Tagore is of the opinion that women should be treated equally by patriarchy. He is against the patriarchy which obstructs the self-realization of woman as an individual personality having her own self.

Bipradas says that so many instruments have been devised by the society to make the wife helplessly subservient to her husband, yet there is no certain way of saving the helpless woman from her husband’s oppression. Bipradas refers to his mother’s suffering at his father’s wronging his own love towards her which she could not bear. Bipradas had never been able to forgive
the way in which his father had allowed his wife to be
shamed before everyone by his repeated transgressions.
Bipradas was inwardly proud that his mother had not
forgiven it either. He exclaims,

The insult my mother received shamed all
womenfolk. That sin is society’s, I can’t
forgive our society for it. Society has no
love; it only has rules. We should fight
against the society that’s given so little
worth to women. (225)

Bipradas’s speech against the oppression of women by
patriarchy makes him a staunch feminist. It is Tagore who
speaks through Bipradas. When he says, “all this time I
thought the pain was mine alone” (225), Tagore should
also have been in the same state of mind due to her
daughter Mira’s estranged relationship with her husband.

For the first time Tagore, through a male voice in his
fiction makes an explicit comment about the suppression
and oppression of women by the Hindu patriarchy in the
name of tradition. Kumu a traditional woman, who
considers her husband as a deity, changes her mind only
at the very end of the novel. She decides not to go back
to her husband’s house, when Moti’s mother and her
brother-in-law visit her and inform the infidelity of
Madhusudan. They advise her to return to her house very soon to save her familial life.

When fully protected, Kumu played her conventional role in the patriarchal structure flawlessly. She, like any stereotyped woman, had accepted marriage as her destiny and wifehood as her function within the domestic interiority. She once felt that a wife’s duty to her husband was sacred. However, when her sincerity is not reciprocated, when her individuality as a woman is unrecognised, and her space is deprived of, she concludes that one’s duty to her own soul is more sacred. Tagore sends the message that equal partnership and companionship are sacramental in an ideal married life.

Bipradas realizes that women value themselves as least of all. They do not even know that this makes easy for them to be insulted in every home. It is they who put out their own light. In the darkness that follows, they exist in an agony of fear and apprehension, submitting to the depression of the unworthy thinking that, “silent sufferance is the highest fulfillment of a woman’s life” (228). Bipradas concludes that such contempt of humanity should not be encouraged.

Tagore wrote this novel between 1927 and 1929. By this time, he had visited America, United Kingdom and other foreign countries and he came to know the emerging
feminism there. His awareness of women’s liberation is expressed through Bipradas, when he says to his sister Kumudini:

Don’t you understand that a storm of protest has risen across the world today against such ruthless despotism of party or creed? For too long, human beings have tolerated all kinds of blind self-inflicted slavery under high-sounding names. It’s time now to tear down its dwellings. (228-229)

Bipradas speaks for the entire womanhood. Tagore as a feminist conscious writer is against all those aspects of contemporary living that obstructed the free self-realisation of an individual’s personality, hypocrisies, and conventions, fear of social ostracism, rigidity, and bigotries of institutionalised religion. Tagore believes that all the factors, under the guise of duty and loyalty or moral obligation, stop the growth of the personality, inhibit the natural development of the individual and shut one off from genuine living. He dislikes the outdated attitudes and opinions which he found inappropriate for the new individual. He is anxious about what one owed to oneself. Man-Woman relationship is delicately portrayed and it is inconsonance with the ideologies of the Marxist Feminism and Radical Feminism.
Through Bipradas, Tagore raises his voice against the oppression of the married women. Sukantha Chowdhri in her “General Editor’s Note” in *Selected Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore* attributes to the indirect influence of the breaking up of marriage of Meera, Tagore’s daughter, with Nagendranath Ganguly. The court proceedings, together with the unsuccessful attempt at reconciling the estranged couple, happened during the period of writing this novel. The issue of marital compatibility weighed painfully on poet’s mind. This is the only novel, where Tagore explicitly reveals his concern for the suppressed sufferings of women true to the later day feminist ideologies.

In this novel, the protagonist is a traditional woman devoted to her husband. The male member, her brother, advocates for the rights of woman to fight for her individuality on her own. Bipradas, the brother, is the only feminist representative in the novel who sees his sister’s insult as the insult to all women, and insists that her stay in the house is her own right. The mutual compassion and empathy from the male member of the family is itself a change, which Tagore promotes to restrain the domestic oppression of women. Mostly the women spell bounded under the patriarchal domination could not even realise their submissive status. Even if
they realised they could not voice out for the fear of social ostracism and lack of support from the parents and siblings after marriage.

When Bipradas and Kumu come to know that Kumu has conceived, they have to reverse their decision. Kumu is under compulsion to return to her husband’s house. Now the choice before Kumu is self or motherhood. A woman does not have many options to exercise. She has to accept the patriarchal structure and play the roles as daughter, wife and mother. By being a mother, her womb further complicates her dilemma. Madhusudan has won the battle by entrapping Kumu in the name of motherhood from which she cannot escape. Before coming to know her pregnancy, when Madhusudan himself visits Bipradas’s house and calls Kumu to his house, she declines and sends him back. Her firmness, not to return to Madhusudan’s house to live with him goes in vain. When she bids farewell to her brother she affirms that she will free herself after having handed over “their child to them” (253). She will certainly not stay there. She will perhaps cut off connections with her husband by embracing a willing death as her mother did. The depersonalization of herself from the emotional bonding as a mother resulted from a loveless conjugal life and her position as a child-
bearing machine is revealed in her above description of "their child". She asserts her individuality by telling, There is something one can’t loose even for the sake of one’s child . . . I am your sister dada. I want freedom one day when the bond snaps, Ma will bless me; I can assure you of that. I am their Barobou: does that mean anything, if I am not Kumu? (252)

For Kumu bound by Hindu tradition, she knows the ultimate fulfillment is in motherhood. However, by telling her brother she cannot lose herself even for the sake of her own child, she has proved her decisiveness as an idiosyncratic woman. Her brother Bipradas doubts her for the firmness of her decision, after the child is born. However, Kumu reminds him what her mother did. In order to punish her husband for his infidelity, she ended her life without caring for their children. Similarly, she will also follow suit just like her mother. In order to assert her individuality she is even prepared to forego her blessed motherhood. Kumu seems to conform to the later day feminist ideology that motherhood is the mode of subjugation of woman by patriarchy. This shows Kumu’s transformation from traditional to the self-assured woman. In the delineation of Kumu, Tagore seems to echo the Socialist feminist theory that
“... mothering is a central experience of many oppressed homes be it Indian or American” (Tandon 135).

Tagore in the characterization of Kumu, has heralded the theory of Eco-Feminism also. Eco-Feminists view that colonialism and patriarchy are the power structures that exploit women and nature. They consider the interconnections between sexism and the domination of nature. Eco-Feminism opposes the inequalities of social hierarchies including the rules of men over women and nature. “The concept of motherhood conceived by male imagination restricts woman’s quest for wholesome. Motherhood is equated with mother Earth, one who should surrender, serve and remain perpetually crushed” (Tandon 131).

However, many literary critics have commented the ending of Yogyog as abrupt. The ending is appropriate and wholesome in the light of Eco-Feminist perspective. Eco-Feminism evolved during the period of the Second Wave Feminism i.e. after 1960. It is interesting that some similar points of comparison may be drawn between Tagore’s heroine Kumudini and the Canadian Feminist writer, Margaret Atwood’s nameless heroine in her novel Surfacing (1972). Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing has been interpreted as Feminist novel and can be explained in terms of Eco-Feminism also, like Tagore’s Yogyog (1929).
It is true that the socio-cultural scenario of times, the techniques of the authors are too obviously different due to nearly four and half decades of time gap between the two novels. Still there is some affinity. Madhusudan’s steadfast and unwavering pursuit of wealth is similar to that of American imperialism described in *Surfacing*. The rising Bengali bourgeoisie resembles that of the American culture in *Surfacing*. The American culture stands for the epitome of consumerism, muscle power, and man’s insatiate greed.

Madhusudan sees Kumu scrubbing a heap of old tarnished lamp-stand early in the morning, “his only thought was how to defeat the power of the powerless” (112). Similarly, the nameless protagonist in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972) remarks:

> It does not matter what country they are from . . . they are still American, they are what’s in store for us. What we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cell chant from inside and the ones that have the disease can’t tell the difference (130).

In *Yogyog*, Nabagopal reports to Bipradass that the bride groom’s English friends shot at least two hundred snipes and they are planning to slaughter on a monstrous scale,
the ducks in their breeding season; "... fits for the
funeral offerings of Ahiravana, Mahiravana, Hirimba,
Ghatakacha—even ten headed Ravana in the world of spirits
might get locked at such feast" (73). Kumu out of womanly
tenderness for animals and birds asks Bipradas to send
word to the bridegroom’s party to stop shooting the
ducks. This wild act can be compared to the stabbing of
the bass in Atwood’s *Surfacing*. In Margaret Atwood’s
novel *Surfacing* (1972), the heroine’s friends shoot the
bass and begin to cut it. The protagonist muses: "We were
committing this act of violence for sport or amusement or
pleasure recreation they call it. There were no longer
the right reasons. That’s an explanation but no excuse"
(121). Atwood feels the deep disgust towards the killing
of animals and compares it with oppression and harassment
of women due to the muscle power of patriarchy.

In *Yogyog* the protagonist Kumu is subjected to
legalised rape and unexpected motherhood by her husband
in order to defeat the power of the powerless. In
*Surfacing* the nameless protagonist is subjected to a
termination of pregnancy by her ex-lover who feels no
emotional attachment for the child, for him it is "simple
like getting a wart residual ... it was not a person
only an animal" (165).
The popular Eco-Feminist writer Atwood emphasizes the fact that men exploit the bodies of women for their needs, just as they exploit nature. Even motherhood, the prestigious privilege given to women by nature, cannot be exercised by women according to their choice, but it is controlled by men. How oppression of women and nature go hand in hand under the system of patriarchy is delineated appropriately. That Tagore has identified women with nature until his last breath, has envisioned Eco-Feminism in *Yogyog* even decades before the birth of it.

In *Yogyog* the economic dependence of women, consumerism of women to avenge the family rivalry between men, incompatibility of marriage between the couple, and the subjugation and suppression of a tradition-bound woman are discussed compassionately. This novel is a discourse of dissent against the imposed structures of patriarchal values and the discovery of individuality of a woman strikingly unshackled by her motherhood and its related manifestation. Tagore’s feminist agenda is complete in the story though it does not succeed in the end. He touched the chord of Eco-Feminism also which evolved in 1974 during the period of Second Wave Feminism.

Tagore makes a plea for a change and revitalization of the Indian society. It is only with courage, strong
self-assertion and realization of self-identification as an individual, that a woman should realize and reveal to free herself from the bonds of the suppression. The novel affirms the faith in life that Kumu will relieve herself from the materialistic marital bond of Madhusudan after giving birth to the child. Like Binodini, she is also classified under the woman in transition.

Both Binodini and Kumudini, the two female protagonists of the novels *Binodini* and *Yogyog* respectively, vehemently fight for their individuality and assert themselves to win over the patriarchal hegemony, but failed. They are categorized in the transitional stage. The feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization. To apprehend oneself as a victim is to be aware of an alien and holistic force which is responsible for the blatant and unjust treatment of women and for a stifling and oppressive system of sex roles. The holistic power in the form of norms of society for young widows oppresses Binodini, and she struggles against them. Kumudini opposes the hostile power in the form of man, her husband. By the portrayal of Madhusudan Tagore conveys the message that in the increasing materialism and masculinity in today’s modern world man has lost his intuitive soul. In this aspect, Tagore is relevant even in the twenty first century.
Tagore’s heroines in these novels are endowed with a strong sense of individuality and analytical mind but they shuttle themselves between traditional and modern values. They are the transitional women who are being radically alienated from their world and divided against themselves. The disturbed feminine psyche in a period of transition to modernity is pictured through these two women characters. Thus, *Binodini* and *Yogyog* represent the transition taking place in the individual and the society during the early twentieth century.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Bengal; women existed in a deplorable state of ignorance, illiterate, superstition, and physical suppression of patriarchy. Kailassbasini Debi (b 1837), the author of *The Degraded Condition of Hindu Women* (1863) said, which Radha Kumar quotes; “women were like beasts, unable to voice their feelings dominated by male ethos” (76). It is well known that movements for the improvement of women’s condition were started in the mid-nineteenth century and that men provided its leadership. Their purpose was to improve the position of women within the patriarchal framework and to make them more capable of fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers within the family. That is why the paradigm of “Modern Woman” was imported from
Victorian England with the traditional qualities of Indian woman added to it.

The reform movement was historically the upshot of the tussle between two ideologies, the colonial and the indigenous. While the women were to be educated and modernized, they were to bear all the traditional responsibilities of a respectable woman and depend totally on the patriarchy. Naturally, the educated women at the receiving end of male patronage internalized male concepts of the new womanhood. This meant that women should be able to read and write Bengali and preferably some English, presumably to communicate with the ruling class. They should learn household skills and aspire to become good mothers and good homemakers.

While nineteenth century contradictions were not resolved in the twentieth century, new forces and influences were released to shape the contours of women’s consciousness. Women started participating in the political activities during (1910-1929), by the call of Mahatma Gandhi. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, a young widow joined the political movement in 1905. Sarala Debi Choudharini (b 1872), the niece of Tagore, was the first Bengali woman leader in Indian National Movement. Swarnakumari Debi (b 1855), the eldest sister of Tagore, was the editor of the journal Bharathi. Named by Tagore,
she founded “Sakhi Samidhi” movement in 1885. It was the first women’s society initiated by a woman for the welfare of women in general and young widows in particular. Along with the political participation of women there emerged the feminist consciousness to transform the suppressed women under patriarchy.

During this changing political scenario, Tagore reflected the transitional period of the Indian women’s status in the novels Yogyog and Binodini. Tagore’s experiments with women’s cause started revealing in his writings from this period. Binodini and Yogyog are the novels which represent the transitional phase in the evolution of womanhood in the fictional works of Tagore. Tagore respected womanhood. He was not happy with the way it was treated during his period. He wanted to bring about a change in the social attitude towards women. However, he was also aware that a drastic change could not immediately be brought about. He believed that change could be effected only gradually. Hence during the middle phase of fictional career he created his heroines who are in between the traditional and modern. Through Binodini and Yogyog he has recorded the psychological drift of women between the bounded patriarchal tradition and the driving self-assertion which they want to explore. How Tagore heralded the New Woman of future who emerged as
the emancipated women breaking all the conventions of patriarchy will be scrutinized in the next chapter.