

A GRAIN OF SAND

Rabindranath Tagore

Chokher Bali (A Grain of Sand, 1903, Tagore)

Overview *Chokher Bali* (or *A Grain of Sand* [in the eye]), is thought by many to be the first 'modern' novel written in India. It began as a serial in a literary magazine and was first published in book form in 1903, in Calcutta. It was Tagore's third novel, written whilst also publishing a large number of poems, short stories and plays.

Story

Set in late nineteenth-century Bengal, the novel begins when a mother (now a widow) seeks a husband for her young daughter, Binodini. She pleads with her friend, Rajlakshmi, to have her son, Mahendra, marry her. Pressured by his mother, Mahendra at first agrees and then refuses to go ahead with the wedding. As a result, Binodini is married to an older man who soon dies. Binodini is now a widow but still young and beautiful. Meanwhile, Mahendra marries Asha, an illiterate and innocent girl.

Later, Binodini comes to live with Rajlakshmi in order to care for her in old age. The problem is that the house is dominated by Mahendra, who rejected her, and Asha, his young wife. Their cosy, happy domestic scene is about to fall apart because Binodini is full of hatred at her widow's status and jealous of the married couple's happiness, a happiness that by rights should have been hers. She thus becomes the 'grain of sand' in Asha's eye. At this point, another character arrives. He is Behari, a friend of Mahendra, who brings a measure of calm and rationality to the already boiling pot of emotions in the household.

Tagore deftly describes the tangled passions that eventually destroy the characters. Binodini begins to tempt Mahendra with her sexual charms, while still remaining a close friend of Asha. Asha is too innocent, and imperceptive, to understand what is going on and admires Binodini as an educated and accomplished woman. Mahendra slowly succumbs and begins to make advances toward Binodini, who can now return his injustice by rejecting him. Meanwhile, Binodini is drawing closer to Behari, although she buries her passion deep within her. For his part, Behari is attracted to her and even asks her to marry him. Binodini, however, is a widow, barred by convention from remarriage, and she turns him down in a supreme act of self-negation.

After several more twists and turns, Mahendra runs away with Binodini. Binodini may not be entirely satisfied with Mahendra as her extra-marital lover, but she has achieved her goal of (temporarily, at least) ruining his and Asha's life. In the end, though, Asha's enduring devotion for her husband brings him back to her.

Mahim, who had already realized his folly in running away with Binodini, understands that his home is the only place where he will be forgiven and even loved. Mahim's mother passes away. Asha forgives Mahim (most women do!) and reaccepts him. At the end, we see Mahim calling Binodini 'Bouthhaan' or 'Sister in law' respectfully - indicating he has remembered his place again.

After the last rites of Mahim's mother are over, Binodini declares her decision to go back to her village and live the pious life of a widow in solitude. She had already refused to marry Bihari, arguing that this wedding would only dishonour him. Nothing, not even Asha asking her to stay back, persuades her to change her mind. Bihari, who continues on his path of celibacy, softens his stance towards Binodini (throughout the book [until the wedding proposal], he is either too formal or too harsh with Binodini - possibly because he always knows that Binodini loves him and believes that this love is sinful and would not lead to good). He asks Binodini for a lock of her hair as a memento. Binodini gives him instead her inheritance of 2 thousand rupees - to use it in the service of the nation. She further shows

him the scar, caused by him pushing her in anger, and says this is the best memento she could ever have.

Themes

The joint-family In one sense, the setting for this novel—a traditional Bengali joint-family living in a single house—is also its central theme. The four main characters (Binodini, Mahendra, Asha and Rajalakshmi, Mahendra's mother) live as a 'family,' bound by blood or marriage. Tagore uses this novel to explore and expose the human frailties that naturally arise in this 'hot-house' setting. On the one hand, the domineering mother (Rajalakshmi) is overly protective toward her son (Mahendra) and places herself between him and his young wife (Asha). The Oedipal nature of this mother-son relationship is commented on in most of the critical literature, although Tagore hints at this only subtly. What he shows more explicitly is that the joint-family is (or can be) a breeding ground for extra-marital relationships. Binodini and Mahendra, once engaged, now live under the same roof, a situation that she exploits in order to attract him and exact her revenge. Meanwhile, Behari (a friend rather than relation) gets drawn into the turmoil when he falls in love with Binodini.

Widowhood If the joint-family is shown to be a source of great personal and social harm, it is the hapless fate of a widow in colonial India that is Tagore's true target of his social critique. Binodini is the narrative and emotional centre of the story. It is her novel. She is married to an older, diseased man, who dies soon after their marriage. She, herself an only child, is then not only widowed but also childless. As a widow, she is expected to wear white, the colour of death, restrain all emotions, especially romantic ones, and lead a pious life of devotion to the gods. In Binodini, Tagore shows us the destructive force that such negation creates, for Binodini's widowhood is the engine of her hatred and revenge. All the evil that is stored up in the humiliated and repressed figure of the traditional widow is unleashed and destroys the happiness of the blissfully happy couple, Mahendra and Asha. And yet, because Tagore is a novelist of great skill, Binodini is not just portrayed as a social rebel. We are shown the secrets of her heart and her strength toward the end when she refuses to marry Behari because widow remarriage is not allowed and would bring humiliation to her husband.

Characters

Binodini Binodini, the central character of this complicated novel, is a young and attractive woman from a village family. She is engaged to be married, through family arrangements, but her fiancé pulls out of the marriage at the very end, leaving her humiliated. She spends the rest of the novel plotting and gaining her revenge.

Mahendra Mahendra is an overly-indulged son, controlled by his widowed mother and lacking self-direction. His family is middle-class and based in Calcutta, so he goes to college, ostensibly to study medicine, but shows little initiative. After rejecting Binodini as a wife, he marries Asha, whom he attempts to 'educate.' Their marriage breaks down and he leaves her for Binodini, but in the end he returns to Asha.

Asha Asha is Mahendra's young wife. She is simple, loving and innocent, even childish. In other words, she is the complete opposite to Binodini's brooding, calculated and passionate personality. Although at first, she enjoys a happy marriage with Mahendra, for most of the novel she suffers cruelty from her mother-in-law, betrayal by her best friend (Binodini) and desertion by her husband. Finally, however, she is reunited with her husband.

Behari Behari is a long-term friend of Mahendra, who comes to live with Mahendra, Asha and Binodini. Unlike them, he comes across as even-tempered, mature and pragmatic. However, like them, he becomes trapped in the web of wild emotions, as Binodini silently falls in love with him. When he eventually asks her to marry him, she says not, but only because she does not want him to be humiliated by marrying a widow.

Rajlakshmi Rajlakshmi is Mahendra's mother, a lonely, pious widow who smoothers her son with affection. Her happiness rests on the tenuous tie with him, and she is soon jealous of her daughter-in-law whom she treats badly.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

BINODINI (Vengeful)

Character Binodini is one of Tagore's greatest creations. She is both a symbol and a distinct personality. She is a villain and a heroine. She destroys the happiness of two people content in their marriage, and yet we sympathise with her. Binodini is an only child in a village family, though she is educated and composed and perceptive. She is also beautiful and skilled in domestic tasks. Then her life is destroyed when she is rejected in marriage and is married off to an old man who dies and leaves her a widow. She is only about 14 or 15 years old but is forced to wear the white clothes of a widow and live with in seclusion with the elderly widows in her village. This is the source of her later destructive urges as well as her normal desire for affection and love. As the product of injustice, she becomes the producer of injustice. But she is not simply a stereotype, manipulated by the writer to make an argument about social ills. She has inner layers, of repentance, longing, doubt and tenderness. Through her interior thoughts, Tagore explores the complexities of human relationships. In that respect, she is an 'everywoman.'

Activities During the first part of the novel, as a young village girl, she goes to school, studies hard, helps her mother and longs to wear pretty dresses. Later, when widowed, she lives in seclusion with other widows, all elderly, in the village. And then she moves to a distant relative's house in Calcutta, where she schemes to destroy the marriage of Mahendra and Asha. We see her playing the role of a carer, helping with household tasks, befriending Asha and reading a great deal. These outward activities, however, are a screen for the powerful urges underneath, which Tagore explores in depth.

Illustrative moments

Perceptive One of Binodini's endearing characteristics is her deep understanding of people. This quality, which may come from the fact that she was an only child, is demonstrated early on in the story. When Mahendra rejects her as an 'arranged' bride, she writes a letter to him, in which she says, 'You have received love since the day you were born, but still you crave for it...Now you think you love me, this too is a lie. The only one you love is yourself.'

Resigned Despite her earlier rebellious spirit, in the end, Binodini reverts to her traditional status as a widow who does not remarry. She is resigned to the fate imposed on her while still a young girl. This shift, though not perhaps so surprising because Tagore is not a fantasist, comes near the conclusion. Earlier, she had encouraged Behari's attentions and even half-asked him to marry her, but he hesitates. Then, when he does seriously ask her to marry him, she says no. In part, her decision is motivated by concern for Behari—he would be socially ostracised if he married her. But this change is also consistent with other shifts in Binodini's character, through which she becomes almost apologetic about her secret dreams and desires.

Passion A less evident but still strong element of her character is passion. In some instances, her passion is destructive ('Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'), but in one scene we see that it is also tender and caring. She has an argument with Behari, her secret love, during which he flings her away and she suffers a small cut on her hand. When he tries to treat the wound, Binodini makes a pledge that she will never touch the cut. 'It is your mark on me. I will cherish it forever,' she says.

Vengeful The driving force of Binodini's character is her desire to take revenge for her miserable condition as a young widow. For this she (rightly) holds Mahendra responsible and therefore sets out to wreck his life. This is demonstrated when she becomes a member of the household where Mahendra lives with his young wife. Binodini sees their bliss and says to herself, 'This happiness, this passionate ardour of the husband was my due and should have been mine. I could have ruled this house like a queen... What I was denied and deprived of now belongs to this slip of a girl [Asha].'

MAHENDRA (Weak-willed)

Character Mahendra is a pampered son, who loses his father early in life. Smothered by his mother's love, he never develops into a mature, independent man and turns out to be self-centred, insecure and vain. On the opening page of the novel, he is described as a 'baby kangaroo living in his mother's pouch even after birth, he had become accustomed to the shelter of his mother's

protective care.’ He does become a devoted husband but then is lured away from his wife by another woman, with whom he elopes. Although weak and, at times cruel, Mahendra can also show compassion. He is kind and loving to his wife, at least for the first half of the story, and while he does a terrible thing in leaving her, temporarily, for another woman (Binodini), he does eventually come back to his family home. He returns ostensibly because his mother is dying, but as readers we suspect that he has realised the folly of leaving his wife. At the very end, he seems to have achieved some kind of spiritual awakening and begins to refer to Binodini by a respectable term for a female relative.

Activities In the first part of the novel, Mahendra is a college graduate who is studying medicine, except that we rarely see him with any books. Instead, he sleeps a lot and slouches around the house, eating and chatting with servants or strolling about the garden. Later, he spends a lot of time with his friend, Behari, discussing social and political issues with an apparently liberal point of view. He is often seen in drawing rooms, talking with relatives or friends, but rarely outside a house. One would not ask him for directions to any place in the centre of Calcutta.

Illustrative moments

Indulged A somewhat humorous illustration of Mahendra’s indulged characters comes in the first chapter. He goes onto the terrace in the evening and lies down for a nap. Then his mother comes and requests him to come down for dinner. He refuses, saying that she should bring his meal up to him. Feeding, in Hindu culture, is a metaphor for showing love, and so his mother dutifully brings his food to him, lounging on the terrace.

Weak-willed Mahendra seldom shows any initiative or resolve. He is controlled by his mother, then lapses into dreamy husband-hood and is eventually entrapped by Binodini, against his better judgement. His lack of will power is subtly demonstrated in a scene, where Binodini tells him that she is about to leave the household. [She makes up an excuse, and only wants to test his feeling toward her.] He attempts to persuade her to stay, but she won’t give in until he impulsively grabs her hand and almost cries. Now, Binodini knows she has conquered him and will play with him, like a cat with a mouse, until she destroys his marriage.

Disloyal Eventually, by the final third of the novel, Mahendra becomes disloyal to his once-beloved wife. Her innocent, unsuspecting manner begins to grate on him, as he is more and more drawn to the more complex character of Binodini, the woman he once rejected as a bride. This disloyalty is demonstrated in a scene when he urges her to visit her ailing aunt, not because he cares for the aunt but because he wants her out of the way so that he can carry on his affair with Binodini. When his wife, who suspects his true motive, says she will stay, he becomes angry and cold toward her.

ASHA (Trusting)

Character Asha, the young (perhaps 14- or 15-year-old) wife of Mahendra, begins life as an orphan but is fortunate enough to be married into a well-off family. She is, in fact, the only married woman in the novel who is not a widow. In this and other respects, he is the polar opposite to Binodini. Asha is illiterate, she is innocent, and she is happy. Her great failing, however, is her innocent trust of others. She also does not have children and devotes herself to her husband. Trusting and innocent, she also befriends Binodini, the woman who has come to destroy her happiness. Unlike Binodini, she is also incapable of organising a household, of managing servants, of appeasing her (domineering) mother-in-law or understanding the emotions of others. She looks up to Binodini, whom she considers a great friend, and accepts her superiority in education, intellect, household skills and beauty. Being naïve, she is eager that her husband, too, should befriend this wonderful person and gain from her friendship.

Nevertheless, by the end of the novel, Asha shows great courage and strength when she leaves her husband, after a fierce quarrel, and begins to educate herself. By the final pages, perhaps as a result of her grief during the temporary break-up of her marriage, she becomes a mature, accomplished and confident woman. Asha never gives up on her unreliable husband and her devotion to family proves more powerful than the fickle emotions of others.

Activities We see Asha mostly inside the house, and often in disagreement with her mother-in-law, who fears that she will steal her son away from her. She undertakes domestic chores but is somewhat incompetent in running the household and seeks the protective company of her husband.

She is put through a series of 'educational' lessons by her husband, which she usually fails. At other times, she spends time with Binodini, talking at great length about her thoughts and fears.

Illustrative moments

Naïve Asha's naivete is clearly shown in one scene when she arranges a meeting between Binodini and Mahendra (her husband), thinking only that these two people, her husband and her best friend, should become friends. Mahendra, who knows what Asha does not know (that he had once been engaged to Binodini and that he still desires her), pretends to be indifferent to Asha's suggestion of a meeting, which only makes Asha try even harder to bring about the meeting. As the scene unfolds, the reader begins to see how her innocence leads her into situations that will harm her. Rather than condemn Mahendra, who is not a very likable character, Tagore reveals how some people are their own worst enemy.

Devotion Another one of Asha's defining characteristics, a corollary of her naivete, is her absolute devotion, especially to her husband. This aspect of her personality is shown mid-way through the novel when she and her husband have a fierce quarrel concerning why and when her husband should meet Binodini. Stunned into silence and incomprehension by his anger and coldness, she is further confused when he goes to bed alone. Confronted by his rejection, she reacts in the only way she knows how. She grabs his feet (a traditional Hindu gesture of obeisance) and won't let go. Then she wets them with her tears, which is likened to bathing the image of a god with water. Later, they talk and she says she will go to a pilgrimage site to do penance. 'Why should you go when you have done nothing wrong?' her husband asks. 'Because somehow I must have committed a sin, or such unpleasant things would not have arisen between us.'

Loyal Asha's steadfast character extends also to her friendship with women, especially with Binodini. Although Binodini is the 'grain of sand' in her eye, Asha respects her greatly and even goes to great lengths to introduce her to her husband (with disastrous consequences). Her loyalty is clearly illustrated in one chapter midway through the novel, when she inadvertently overhears a conversation between Mahendra and Binodini. Now, Asha knows that Binodini, her great friend, is trying to sexually attract her husband and that Binodini is only doing this in order to harm him. Hidden behind a door, Asha hears this and almost bursts into tears. But she suppresses her feeling because she does not want Binodini to know that she knows of her betrayal. That would upset Binodini. Asha's loyalty would be admirable if weren't self-destructive.