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Emergence of Bhadramahila: Re-reading the principal women characters in Tagore's novel Gora

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Abstract

This paper tries to attempt a critique on the principal women characters in Tagore's novel *Gora* from a postcolonial perspective. The novel focuses on the building of the principal women characters and also throws light into Partha Chatterjee's concept of Bhadramahila and how Tagore has shown the emergence of new woman (Bhadra Mahila) in 19th century Bengal.

Keywords: Gender, Bhadramahila, Nation, Nationalism, Motherhood

Introduction

Gora, written in 1909 is a novel set against the tumultuous background of early Indian Nationalism, during the later half of the 19th century. It was a time, when many leaders were confronted with the task of forging a critical apparatus to fight colonial oppression and women became caught in the middle of that storm. However, by the last years of the century, the newly developed Nationalist fervour had thrown the 'woman question' to the winds, as Partha Chatterjee argues, it was resolved by equating women with spiritual India. The mark of woman becomes synonymous with Nation the real woman disappears as she is assigned the role of a mythic past. This is exactly what finds expression in *Gora's* speech, where he declares with great ardour: "The scriptures tell us that woman is deserving of worship because she gives light to the home. The alter at which woman may be truly worshipped is her place as Mother. The seat of the pure, right-minded lady of the house" (Tagore 9).

As we are going to pursue women characters in *Gora*, especially the characters of Sucharita, Lalita and Anandamoyee as well, we have to keep in mind the fact that neither does Tagore subscribe to the impulsive furore of rather bigoted Nationalism, nor does he endorse this scripture-oriented notion of superficially glorifying women as a spiritual inspiration of motherhood, and not as a woman, vibrant, dynamic and embellished with the ever-widening ideal of modernity and progressiveness.

Sucharita, one of the most crucial women figures in *Gora*, represents the best part of modern, emancipated Bengali femininity. Nevertheless, she is not without problems or contradiction, just as her sister Lalita is not. The Brahma Samaj, in the gamut of which Sucharita is nurtured under the generous and liberal tutelage of her foster-father Paresh Babu, emancipated women to some extent but also hemmed them in the confines of its own prejudices. This almost begins with the renaming of orphan Sucharita, as she enters her foster-home. Barodasundori changes her original name Radharani as it has a Hindu connotation. Thus, Sucharita/Radharani is often torn between two identities.

Sucharita is an intelligent young woman and though well past the orthodox Hindu age of marriage, she is yet to reach 18. She is portrayed as a striking personality, who seems to Binoy, during their first incidental encounter, "newly manifested wonder of Nature." (Tagore: 2). The real strength of Sucharita's character lies in her superb grace, her charming dignity, her resilience and her accommodating nature. It is during heated conversations in their home between her suitor Haran, an outstanding member of the Brahma community and *Gora*, that she recognises the insipidity and pettiness of Haran. Well-nurtured by Paresh Babu's unbiased teachings, Sucharita is liberated. It would be a folly to define her just as an idea of sublimity. Sucharita is indeed a full-blooded woman of flesh and blood who has a romantic heart, capable of being enthralled by the robust forceful personality of *Gora*.

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Despite his staunch Hinduism, she falls in love with him, but remains inarticulate quiet in synchrony with the gracefulness and composure of her personality. Though Gora first ignores Sucharita, mainly on account of his long-standing, strained aversion to women, he is soon unable to disregard her presence. Driven by the exquisite charm of this blossoming woman, Gora begins to notice Sucharita's features. Her dignified beauty enthralled him. The arrival of a real woman on Gora's mental horizon slowly begins to dilute the hold of the mythical one. There lies the triumph of Sucharita.

Well, we find Sucharita to be caught in a snare of ambivalence with regard to the role of religion in her life. It disturbs her, torments her, but never does she work herself into tantrums. Sucharita, has had her own Bildung experience. It is not privilege, but painful anguish, suffered by her, because of Haran's humbuggery and Harimohini's tormenting possessiveness about her that she matures into a woman of empirical adulthood. She sheds tears in solitude and bears with the traumatic situation with the incomprehensible patience of a Stoic.

Towards the fag-end of the fiction, Sucharita, just as Gora, Lalita, Binoy and Paresh Babu, sails across fragments of walls. Ostracized she is by her own Samaj, just as Paresh Babu and Lalita are, but now it matters nothing. Sucharita has found Gora, as her soul-mate unshackled of all fetish and she is raised to the higher scale of humanity, where caste and creed are windbags of nothing.

Lalita, a flanking heroine of a high-voltage ardour, brings out how Rabindranath signals the historical emergence of woman, who are assiduously questing for their distinctive identity in an otherwise patriarchal set up. There seems to be in Lalita's person an elemental strength that prompts her distinction, her aloofness, frequent fits of violent impulsiveness, without giving any fore-warning. The text portrays her variously – as Paresh babu's unruly daughter, one known for her cutting remarks and foul temper. She defiantly spurns her mother's pleas to recite Longfellow before the guests. A creature of motley-mindedness, of complex responses and forthright honesty, Lalita unwittingly sets the course for eventual trauma. During the stage of Lalita's maturity process, she demonstrates an escalating degree of sympathetic identification with Binoy, Gora's friend and shadow-self, whom she begins to perceive as a victim of an authoritative Gora. "If anyone puts me in the shade, I won't like it", she says in a movingly empathetic admission and then goes to declare she would "love to untie his bonds" (Pearson 1985:90,91). Disgusted at Binoy's subservience to Gora, a vigorously self-respecting Lalita continues flinging sarcasm at him. However, she soon gets mellowed into a compassionate concern for Binoy's failure at self-assertion. In the very next phase in her female Bildung process, Lalita's character proceeds on to attain redemption and stabilization. At this stage, we find her to be potentially resourceful. When Mr. Brownlow, the magistrate, imprisons Gora unjustly, Lalita breaks out into a furious protest by withdrawing participation in the play to be held in the Brownlows'. When Haran, the intrusive visitor, tries to denigrate Gora, Lalita instantly retaliates with a strong rebuff: "Be quiet!".

The transitional stage is further marked by the heroine's ambivalent feelings towards social constructs and the resultant attempts at individuation. There is a constant sense of fragments coalescing into a definite form of crystalising

in her self-knowledge. She questions the assumptions of patriarchal dictum, diverts her energies into defiance, or displays valiance through patient resistance.

Lalita's entry into the further building phase marks the consolidation of her inner consciousness and chastening of her external functions. Binoy, who has so far watched her progress from a distance, now admires her increasingly sound bravery, conviction and her rebellion against anything wrong. In one of her attempts to clear the debris of the past, Lalita acknowledges to Binoy her aversion to Gora's frantic idealism. She makes this confession an act that is beautiful and courageous. Another chastening agency is her sharp sense of remorse. It unquestionably leads her to self-amendment. The boat-episode poses an instructive experience at this stage in that, Lalita is forced to rethink and reorder the comparative isolation of the self-exile. As she boards a boat for Calcutta to flee a coercive tyranny of her mother, Lalita exposes herself to social excommunication, since Binoy's presence in the same boat threatens her chastity with scandals. The boat episode puts Lalita's loyalties to a litmus test, compelling her to choose between the vapid security of social endorsement and the risk of romantic commitment.

At length, Lalita accepts her emotional liberation both as a social sign of freedom and an act of pure self-knowledge. She flies in the face of her Samaj's cringing hostility to Binoy's religious philosophy and plays down social demand for Binoy's conversion to Brahmoism in order to ensure ideological harmony within their marriage. Lalita's response to this issue in chapter 61 exhibits an extraordinary degree of boldness and understanding on her part. Their amorous ties are inartificial. So, Lalita tells Binoy how she cannot bear feeling that she will be accepted by him only in case of his affiliation with the Brahma Samaj. It would have degraded him in her own estimate. They thus transcend the spurious socio-religious embergos and raise above all this, the standard of their common identity as two human souls fastened together in perfect camaraderie.

Tagore's outlook on Nationalism and religion is based upon a rational and holistic philosophy of Universalism. He unmistakably perceived in resurgent Nationalism a dangerous propensity towards patriarchy as it conflated woman and motherland in order to construct a mythical Nation. Madhu Dubey shows us the famous feminist author Fanon's recognition that tradition building produces a "hard core of culture" fixated on the past and exiled from "the current of history". Tagore too saw through this ominous element in Ultra Nationalism, which is inherently conservative and sectarian. Tagore championed the noble cause of disinterested service, "To restore the voice to these dumb, dry, benumbed lips to resonate with hope these tired, withered, broken hearts" ("Ebar Phirao More"). Tagore always tried to inspire among his countrymen the sublime dream of a truly free India, "where the world has not been broken up into fragments/by narrow domestic walls" ("Where the mind is without fear", "Gitanjali"). Tagore envisages "Bharatbarsha" as the sea-shore of great humanity. His thoughts, imagination and vision of this 'Bharatbarsha' crystalise into one beautiful image: "Anandamoyee", Gora's foster-mother. She is perhaps the most perfect figure that Tagore has created in his enormous entire corpus of work. In the words of Narayan Gangopadhyay: "*Gora* is not simply a novel, but the history of the thought of Rabindranath considering India. Paresh

Babu represents the free, calm, wise self of India. Anandamoyee is Mother India personified” (1987:425). Liberated to a great measure by the potentials of her ingrained large-mindedness, Anandamoyee rears the orphaned Gora of Irish birth, harbours the Christian Lachmia with genuine benignity and takes refuge in her own domain of peace and tranquility. It is not that she abjures faith she simply casts off all the fetish and rituals that raise an artificial barrier between man and man. She is a composed, decided character. On the question of Binoy’s marriage with Lalita, she plays an excellent role in favour of their love and firmly distances herself from Gora’s Hindu obscurantism and the prejudices of the Brahmha Samaj. There is no wonder that, after the mystery of his birth is illumined by a dramatic turn of events, Gora comes back to Anandamoyee and says: “Ma, it is you and you alone who is my mother!. You have no consideration of race, no discrimination, no hatred-you are the image of benediction! It is you who are my Bharatbarsha” (Tagore, 1909).

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