

**THE CONCEPT OF NEW WOMAN IN TAGORE'S *GORA*: AN ECHO OF THE IDEAL BHARATVARSHA****N SUMAN SHELLY**Ph.D. Scholar,
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Gora (1909) was set during the troublesome times when Bengal society was distinctly divided into the traditional orthodox Hindus and the newest fad Brahma Samaj which indoctrinated the modern, liberal thinking. On the one hand, the Hindus unquestionably followed the nascent practices and religiously observed the ceremonies; on the other hand, the Brahmos protested the Hindu orthodoxy and all societal conventions. Nevertheless, both the communities had their own hypocrisies, incongruities and distortions. But then, the acceptance of English education among the youth of Bengal society led the intellectual awareness to gain momentum. Gora as a novel, discards all sectarian and communal feelings. It breaks the lock between Hindu nationalism and Indian patriotism. For Tagore, nationalism is a project of power and inclusion of imperialism whereas, patriotism or passionate love for country and motherland is a project of care and nurture, love for people, land and as a whole, for earth. Therefore, the new woman as a template of colonial modernity situated in a very liberal space beyond the dogmatic reformism is the image of ideal Bharatvarsha. My paper, therefore, aims to study the problematic aspect of Gora's origin, calls the dogmatic reformism into question, and harmonizes the concept of mother with the motherland.

Keywords: New Woman, Colonial Modernity, Synthetic Femininity, Historicization,

Orthodoxy, Reformism, Dogma, Liberalism, Nationalism, Patriotism

Purposed against such a vulnerable socio-cultural and political backdrop, Tagore's characters in *Gora* stand independent and individualistic. It is through these characters that he discusses the major issues such as, religious conservatism and woman question. Therefore, the novel keeps swaying between prediction and disinclination. A lot of research has been conducted by the Feminist scholars, Marxist and Subaltern historians on the trope of 'woman' as Motherland. In spite of their contrasting opinions, they concur on the subject of 'reforming women' which they thought was the chief anti-hegemonic struggle within the nationalist agenda. They also believed that women were pivotal markers of cultural difference in the colonial scenario. The colonial administration on the one hand, emerged with several enactments in the second half of nineteenth century in order to reform the position of women



in India. The Widow Remarriage Act was followed by the 1874 Right to Property Act and the Age of Consent Bill of 1891 which discussed the issue of legal age for sexual relationship for girls between the age group of 0-12 years. On the other hand, 'New Woman' had been a nationalist concern. Creating new space and idiom through indigenous terms was the focal point.

The perception of Gora as a messenger of pan-national ideological burden is very similar to Sucharita's unconventional education. Tagore has therefore, very carefully presented Sucharita as a kind of woman very different from her time. Initially, she is presented as a symbol of nature but as the novel progresses, she gradually develops into a woman with a very independent mind. Just like Gora she too, turns into idealistic notes. It is their shared interest for the larger cause of nationalist struggle and the misery of the fellow countrymen for which they were attracted to each other in the beginning. Gora regarded Sucharita not just as a woman but as a perfect example of the Indian feminine self. The drift from the romantic episode to the epic mode could be observed when Gora immediately after experiencing strong attraction towards Sucharita decides for an expedition to the countryside of Bengal. Tagore did not want to develop their relationship on the basis of the generational and societal pulls just like Binoy and Lolita. Besides, there are several parallel incidents that could be noted. The night spent by Binoy in the steamer as a protector to Lolita is the same night of Gora's first imprisonment. Their contrasting activities as romance hero and epic hero could be clearly marked from this circumstantial separation. Even the two heroines have also spent their nights apart. Lolita as a romantic heroine, energetic, impassioned, undertakes a night-long journey which allegorically symbolizes the uproarious transformation in her life. On the other hand, Sucharita just like Gora decides for herself a self-inflicted confinement. In due course of time, it is she rather than Lolita who emerges out as a confident and economically self-sufficient heroine. While Gora was imprisoned for a month, Sucharita dedicated herself to a number of selfless missions such as keeping Anandamoyi's company, directing Lolita and Binoy's relationship towards a happy consummation, extending a helping hand towards the distressed Harimohini, aiding Lolita in running girls' school, and most importantly, learning Gora deeply through his writings and publications. Sucharita's deliberate commitment for these schemes more than contributing to the Romantic plot, have a great similarity with the practices of late Romantic and a Victorian English women who were economically independent. The discourse to proclaim India not as non-west but as India was the motive that turned out to be the projection of a counter- discourse of Indian-ness, in a language, unknown to the colonizer, and yet helpful in articulating the modern world-view. But at the same time it would help the subject to remain outside it. It therefore, gave birth to a couple of projects- first, the nationalism which is a selective dispensation of western modernity, and second, the spiritual India as the real India. The modern/ spiritual distinction and the inner/outer dichotomy were repositioned into a new binary i.e. ghar and bahir (the home and the world) which has been presented in a very comprehensible manner in Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and its Fragments*. Interposition of the woman to a new subject of *Bhadramahila* i.e. the synthetic femininity was an important agenda of the nationalist ideology. The concept of synthetic femininity is a construct which Malavika Karlekar discussed as "Enlightened yet domesticated, by nature loving and devoted to the family's well-being, her emancipation was to be viewed within the context of a family's situation." If we look into the history, from the beginning itself, woman have been attributed either as a Goddess who represents Motherland and a symbol of fertility, or the talent of the kitchen i.e.



‘ranna gharer prathibha’ which is considered to be her ideal place. In both these cases, woman has been idealized as a philosophy and not as an individual.

Indian education system for girls started to gain momentum in 1850s. In 1863, there were 95 girls’ schools with total attendance of 2500, which rose to 2238 schools in 1890 with 80,000 students. The image of woman that was taken into consideration from the point of view of *Bhadramahila*, as a goddess or mother, therefore, struck out her sexual orientation in the world outside her home. It could also be marked that during the Swadeshi movement, woman who were ideologically re-embodied as goddess were welcomed as participants of the movement with their subversive sexuality having completely veiled under spirituality. Therefore, synthetic femininity is the signifier for the signifieds- grihalaxmi (Goddess), Bhadramahila, and tradition vs. modernity as a problematic aspect. Since woman as the image of nation and the image of Hindu Goddess Durga or Lakshmi emerges powerfully as a protector and provider, the concept of new woman therefore, is also re-posed in the nucleus of the nationalist *episteme*. It is important to mention here that the concept of *Bangali Bhadramahila* and Victorian New Woman however, should not be judged from very close proximities.

Sucharita curiously catches the site of Gora’s vision while listening to him. Moreover, she also falls in love with Gora for the heavy intellectual exchanges between them. It is with her own clear sense of reasoning (taught by her father) that she repeatedly questions the fundamental ideas of Gora’s argument. It is solely her love that compels her to accept the Hindu discipline which Gora impels as a chief mode of patriotism on her. But gradually, Sucharita realizes that she should sacrifice her love and should marry a man of proper caste and lineage. Lolita and Binoy’s marriage was an event which constantly illusioned and disillusioned Sucharita. It was not possible on Sucharita’s part to forsake her beloved sister Lolita for the sake of Hindu nationalism. Therefore, her experience of love made her shove away the injustices and tyrannies of society, and come out victoriously with a disciplinary power. For Sucharita, faith was always larger than country, and she therefore questions Gora about the significance of identifying nation by a faith to which Gora answers-

“Our faith is our history, it is what the country had always had... this is true of all countries, each of them lives through a faith that expresses its essence. For India, that faith is Hinduism. That alone can establish a link between our past and present make our country as one.”

Another key concept in *Gora* is ‘Bharatvarsha’, a symbol beyond the constituents of geography and administration. Gora propagating the concept of ‘Bharatvarsha’ in the early part of the novel has a very powerful and strong resonance. For example, Gora retorting to Binoy’s question in Chapter 7 i.e. “Which is this Bharatvarsha of yours?”, or his endeavour to assert his identity with his nation and religion to Sucharita in Chapter 20, or in several other debates with his adversaries, or even while urging his followers. The gradual shift from the abstract to the concrete, the symbolic to the real occurs through several phases often marked by Gora and Sucharita’s conversations. Gora’s ideological position on women is indirectly stated by his conscious holding back his attention off Sucharita. A woman who did not follow the conventions, audacious enough to take part in the rational debate between two men was thoroughly dismissed. However, Gora’s development as an individual is heavily influenced by contemplative and individualistic attitude of Sucharita. It is after the intense verbal



exchange with Sucharita that we find Gora to be emotionally unresolved and requires isolation (140). Unexpectedly, Gora developed a sensible attitude towards all those things which he never noticed previously. For example, while spending time in solitude beside the river, he instantaneously develops a consciousness about the flowing water, the aromatic climbers and the darkening sky. Gora's humanization is simultaneously a process of feminization. The word *prakriti* in the original text which is a symbol of nature bears a feminine idea so far as, the concept of creation is concerned. The author's opinion i.e. "Today Gora was somehow caught by prakriti" is therefore, loaded with meanings. Tagore's purpose to situate woman as the cornerstone in the nationalist agenda in his novels is a very radical and historic endeavour so far as, his own time is concerned. Moreover, it is also an indirect riposte to Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's version of militant motherland patriotism and convalescence of Hindu manhood as reckoned in the text *Anandmath* (1882). The idea of recapitulating this is to deeply understand the social and political practices of that time that demanded the exclusion of women from the realm of action in all the texts.

The neo- Hindu revival and nationalist discourses largely focused on the issues of conjugality and domesticity with regards to colonial modernity. Likewise, Gora was also engrossed in contemporary questions. The narrative of *Gora* is informed by Act- III Bill (1872) which is again very controversial. The Act was set in motion with an authoritative order of the Brahmo Samaj. It legitimized Civil Marriage with the symmetry of caste and creed in infringement of Hindu Samaj, and acclaimed a higher marriageable age for girls. The marriage of Binoy and Lolita, and the reunion of Gora and Sucharita were possible only because of this Act. Nevertheless, it was an Act which was thoroughly debated by orthodox Hindus and the orthodox Brahmo Samaj as diabolic and sinful. Interestingly, the idea of 'dogma' when closely examined i.e. the Brahminian dogma as well as the reformist dogma; it could be noticed that, this reformism completely loses its value having dogmatized. As an example with regards to this, the narrow-minded, parochial orthodoxy of Haran Babu has been called into question, proclaiming himself as a reformist, he is thoroughly dogmatized.

A similar sort historicization could also be marked in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-1872). The novel *Middlemarch* has a spectacular ending not because of Dorothea's fearless announcement of her marriage with Ladislaw which is strongly opposed by her kith and kin, but this bold announcement of Dorothea co-occurs with the rejection of the Reform Bill by the Lords in the Upper House in May 7, 1832. This legislative backdrop is temporary because, the bill was passed in June 4, 1832 with the negotiation between Earl Grey and the new king William IV. Nevertheless, this event brought immense socio-political changes. With reference to the Foucauldian concept of the archeology of historical knowledge, Eliot endorsed Dorothea as a symbol of radicalism and progressivism by inscribing her moral imagination into the character she created.

Similarly, in connection to another Odia new woman novel *Basanti* (1931) which is again a template of colonial modernity, I have found spectacular points of intersection with *Gora*. First is the vision of felicity and engendered hope in the novel *Basanti*. The announcement of the marriage of Ramesh and Suniti at the end of the novel and the marriage between Basantakumari and Binod Bihari opens up a new horizon that wedding between the liberal minded spouses is not an impossible idea; it is rather a preferred model of marriage which leaves room for aspirations.

So far as *Gora* is concerned, we, therefore, have to think of a liberal space, and in that space, the position of new woman is what matters because, that would be the ideal Bharatvarsha. I have recorded few inferences with regards to the new woman in *Gora* which again has interesting linkages with *Gora*'s problematic origin. It is interesting to know that *Gora* was an orthodox Brahmin boy who was born to an Irish man and English woman. He was adopted by Anandamoyi and Krishna Dayal (foster parents) because *Gora*'s mother died soon after giving birth. It is with the revelation of *Gora*'s biological origin that his concept of the self which he had erected on the basis of caste, religion, nation and purity of birth being the most important is completely dismantled. At the end, *Gora*'s deep sense of realization is very evident from following lines,

That which I sought day and night to become, but could not; today I have indeed become that. Today I am Bharatvarshiya. Within me there is no conflict between communities... (Gora 473).

This knowledge of Irish parentage transformed *Gora* completely from into a true Indian redeeming him from all sectarian identifications. In my opinion, *Gora*'s appropriation of his voice of Bharatvarsha is where his hamartia lies. It is through *Gora*'s surrender of his monologic superiority that Tagore victoriously establishes his authorial voice.

It is also important to learn here that, bound by no restrictions; Anandamoyi seems to be above all divisions. Interestingly, the liberation she symbolizes is not just the liberation from colonial rule but also from the psychological and the spiritual oppression. The vast and variegated quilt that Anandamoyi constantly stitches is the India imagined by Tagore, and this work of art he touchingly harmonizes with its maker; Anandamoyi. Therefore, Anandamoyi is a true image of Bharatvarsha who embraces all diversities. Further, Tagore's idea of liberalism, expressing nationhood and new woman is very fluid in terms of its agenda.

The allegorical family reunion between *Gora* and Anandamoyi and between *Gora* and Sucharita allows Tagore to strike a balance between his vision and its manifestation. To conclude with, this text engages itself in an evocation which sustains the longing for its distinct identity; and the urge for an emancipated *desh* (nation) and the emancipation of women in deeper sense.

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