

## **Trope of Woman as Motherland in The Indian National Imaginary in R.N. Tagore's Gora**

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**ABSTRACT :** My paper is about a woman who can be the image of our motherland. How a woman is different from everyone in this earth? It's also telling about the political context of 19<sup>th</sup> century India and how India becomes the mother of everyone. It's about nationalism in its broad sense, compared to internationalism.

**KEYWORDS :** Feminism, internationalism, motherhood, nationalism, relationship.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The works of fiction which deal with the question of nationhood always seem to be located in a particular historical context. This is especially the case with literary works which employ the fiction of nativity to examine a paradoxical moment of historical origin. And the historical origin of *Gora* is particularly the post-Mutiny context and somehow it is related to Second Afgan War of 1870. It is a fable of nativity used to test notions of home, place, family and above all the magical or accidental liaisons of narrative with the proper blending of political and social situations. Post-Mutiny time is very much an important thing of discussion as my intention is to represent the idea of nation according to Gora, a crucial character of this particular period.

**PAPER:** The most significant theme of *Gora* is the Nationalistic approach of the then Bengal (or India). Throughout the novel Tagore used the symbols, phrases and icons employed towards Nationalistic ends, and what benefits it can do in the society. The novel consists of several emblems of Nationalism: the image of Bengal or India as a woman and a Goddess; the main image of mother is here Anandamoyi who is representing the broadness of our country. A mother should never discriminate anyone and Anandamoyi is such a mother who can embrace all with her broadness. Here comes the nature of our motherland. Gora's *Bharatvarsha* is such an ideal country who can embrace all and as a symbol of inclusivity she rises above the narrow Nationalistic idea of mother as Nation or Nation as mother.

The ideology of motherhood has been put forward as the natural and primary destination and responsibility of woman. In India, a long history of mother-goddess worship legitimises woman's glorification/deification as the divine mother, the source of energy, power and fertility while the same motherhood is an institutionalised form of oppression and subjugation of women. In a patriarchal kinship structure, a woman's status in the household is determined by her ability to produce male issue for her husband's lineage. Her identity revolves around the wife/mother roles beyond which no individuality needs to be established or recognised. Indian culture is deeply informed with the myth that motherhood is woman's inevitable destiny and happiness can come only through it. With Sita and Savitri as predominant models of reference, Indian women are expected to be pure and faithful as wives and self-effacing, loving and giving as mothers. But every mothers are not suppressed by male, some mothers are just like Anandamoyi who is regarded as goddess by the male.

Anandamoyi is the main motherly character in *Gora*. She is the foster mother of Gourmohan (Gora). Anandamoyi, a one-time orthodox Brahmin girl who was married to Krishnadayal, one of the many "forward" thinking Bengali youth who catered their intellect and loyalty to the services of the their English masters. Although her transformation into the magnanimous human persona is not dwelt within much detail in the novel, the change is something which modern day feminists would praise. Normally the last name of the Indian woman changes in a marriage, and she is bogged down further in the family matters. She has to satisfy herself with the little men oblige her with. But in *Gora* Anadamoyi is shown as raising an Irish-British orphan as her own child. Even though she is not his biological mother, she holds herself strong amidst societal pressures and shunning to raise Gora as a child of the part of her own family. When orthodox Gora tried to teach her mother about caste-system, she said:

Yet it was only when you landed on my lap that I gave up all customs. Only when you take an infant into your arms do you realize that nobody is born on earth with a caste. The moment I realized this, from that moment I have been sure that if I were to look down upon somebody else because he was of low caste or a Christian, then Ishwar would take you away from me. (*Gora* 15)

This is one of the first individualistic traits depicted in Anandamoyi. As Binoy discovers very early on in the novel, Anandamoyi is the "face of his motherland": "May the radiance of affection of her face protect me always from all the failures of my mind. Let this face be the image of my motherland, let it direct me towards my duty, let it make me steadfast in performing it." (*Gora* 190). He is able to differentiate between Sucharita, a girl he has affection for, and Anandamoyi who is his "Ma" - for both of whom he has respect and admiration. Tagore gives his female characters individual faces, just as the men in his novel. Interestingly, the number of female to male characters is equal but females perform the important roles in men's life. The men who go through a moral and character change deal with women on an individual basis. The women who are the pillars of the narrative go through drastic transformations, too.

In Anadamoyi's conduct throughout the novel, we find her to be a noble hearted woman who did not want to get into verbose argumentation on which was the right path, but one who desired to enhance and enrich our growth as 'human beings', without which religions, societies, customs, ideologies- with all progressive or reactionary ideas - can become a terrible bondage. The freedom that she had accorded to Gora, and the ease with which she was shown to be able to assimilate the others who came in his life-story added to her weakness for the nobility and gentility in Binoy's approach. All her actions bore testimony to this fact. In Tagore's depiction of Anandamoyi's womanhood, there is no disrespect or denial of religion, but a profound and unspoken protest against what people themselves often make out religions to be. The character of Anandamoyi has been shown to be reflected in so many ways in the novel, with liberal and tolerant attitudes of her finding reflections in others who Gora comes to contact with, and from whom he learns a lesson or two in life. It is not only the liberal and humanistic streak in Paresh babu that attracts him and Binoy, where he sees the reflection of the same values that Anandamoyi stood for- the broad humanistic concerns, but even later in the depiction of Gora leaving to be away from his home and see the world little bit, when he came to a predominantly Muslim village, which happened to be the only one of that kind in that area, where he found only one Hindu family, a barber, who also took care of a Muslim boy. This neighborhood is in trouble because it is the only neighborhood that has not submitted to the unjust impositions of the British Sahibs. Although it remains unspoken, Gora finds here in Foru Sardar, the leader of the Muslim village the grit and determination to stand up and refuse to be subjugated. Here, the barber humbly shared with Gora. It was here that Gora realized that liberal humanism was more precious than sectarian beliefs, as we find him reflecting while sympathizing with the victims of injustice: "What kind of monstrous irreligiosity we are upholding in Bharatvarsha by turning purity into an external object. My caste would be saved in the home of those who are persecuting Muslims, and it would be lost in the home of that person who is willing to endure hardship, danger and alienation to save a Muslim child!" The event of Ghoshpara sparked a shock to Gora's heart. Only after his encounter with the poor barber family does Gora learn to adopt Binoy's philosophy of applying principles to people- things are not quite the same when lives are involved and not abstract like ideas. His time in the jail cell gives Gora time to reflect on himself and amusingly enough he is plagued by the same romantic disease he had accused Binoy of- love. The events of Nanda's death, the Muslim man and his shopping basket being knocked aside by the Brahmin cab, discrimination at Ghoshpara and the view of rural Bengal brings forth a new face of Bharatvarsha- It is no more an idea but a land filled with millions of people. During this trance of Gora he sees Sucharita's tender face in his mind. His puzzlement is not unique, as neither Sucharita understands her affections towards Gora, a man she'd considered to be hard, rugged, loud spoken and outright scary. Tagore imbibes a soft touch to his lead characters and makes them look true to life - more than words would have described them. This is also the same time that Gora has his renewed realization of India. He himself detected a major flaw in his earlier concept of Bharatvarsha: it excluded women altogether. If women existed for him at all, as symbols of grace, purity and motherhood, they were supposed to perform their functions in the enclosed domestic space, invisible to the outside world. But at the end of the novel, through a long and circuitous way, he arrived at a position which considers his mother as his Bharatvarsha, his everything:

Ma, you are my only mother. The mother for whom I have looked for everywhere—all this time she was sitting in my house. You have no caste, you do not discriminate against people, you do not hate—you are the image of benediction. You are my Bharatvarsha...(*Gora* 477)

Tagore utilizes the importance of idea of Swami Vivekananda, who highlighted the importance of women as he makes us realize that history of India was incomplete without any understanding of the trials and tribulations of women. Women constituted half of Bharatvarsha, that is- India as a nation of people. As seen in the great Indian epic written by Vyasa Muni, the Mahabharata presents much social, religious, political, and philosophical discourses through the dynamics of a few members of a large family- Tagore does the same thing with the people in Gora. Anandamoyi and Sucharita can be compared to Mother Kunti for they share their zeal to bring right deed into the forefront of matters. Just in the way Kunti hides the truth of Karna's birth, so does Anandamoyi hide Gora's lineage from her dear boy. Sucharita is adopted into the Bhattacharya family just as Kunti was taken into King Bhoja's household. Both characters went through a name change- but their inner cores do not change. In the lines of the Mahabharata, Sucharita is shown as an outspoken feminist just as Draupadi was. Although the similarity of feminism exists between the two characters there is an important difference between Draupadi and Sucharita- Draupadi's frustration is sexual, and she is vengeful of the Kauravas. But Sucharita does not have violence in her blood- nor does she have this streak thanks to her training at the care and concern of Paresh Babu. She is a quieter and more humane character than Draupadi. Tagore gives feminism a meaning of his own- he provides his feminists leads to find themselves in the face of society without hurting others. It should be noted that Draupadi's feminism cost the lives of the Kauravas, and many others both royals and paid soldiers of the Kaurava family. Anandamoyi and Sucharita are not causes for mighty disasters as they lack the extreme pride which is often the folly of larger than life characters of epics. Tagore keeps himself from making his feminine players superhuman beings. Sucharita's initial hostility towards Gora is understandable. Moral cleansing is not an objective of Gora rather Tagore takes revered care for the change in novel's people and takes most of his characters through a life journey in which they are able to discover their own personal humanity. Lolita's badly planned girl's school is means for Tagore to prove that haste makes waste. Feminism at an accelerated pace only annoyed the people of the then India. Tagore published Gora in 1924, although it appears serially even earlier. The story was written contemporary to the times Tagore lived in. Lolita's failure is Tagore's tool to convince the then feminists of Indian society (if only a handful) that the sudden outcry for freedom and dissolution of woman from Hindu society would get them very little - the little Baradasundari got from her Brahmo feminist ideology that let her wear revealing clothes, and converse with men in daylight. Even this "little" freedom would have meant a lot for the womenfolk then, but it was not something for which one had to bring forth a cultural and social revolution. Tagore uses psychological realism to paint a better picture of freedom- a freedom without any chains, just as the bird's independence of the Baul singer's song. Indian novels were often platters of greater than thou eastern philosophy and had little flesh and blood of the characters, but in Gora Tagore successfully weaves the life of Feminism in a unique un-adulterated fashion. Despite Lolita's social failure, Tagore benevolently gives Lolita a ticket to maturity in her conversation with Anandamoyi in which she tells Anandamoyi that it is not "necessary for him to give up all that in order to establish mutual relations with another human being." (*Gora* 366) Binoy's dilemma is clarified with Anandamoyi's help who convinces him that there is no need to change. Thus Binoy grasps the totality of the gnawing Tagorean humanism through the blooming of his relationship with Lolita. Tagore brings his belief in "manushyattva" (humanism) in the forefront when Binoy says, "If affection cannot put up with differences, then why do differences exist anywhere in the world?" (*Gora* 367)

The novel relates to the odyssey of a young man Gora from the narrowness of the institutionalized religion he believed in to disillusionment and enlightenment as a 'human being', the journey is surely eased by the fact that he had a liberal-minded Hindu surrogate mother in Anandamoyi- much ahead of her time and society in understanding the spirit of humanism in the Hindu way of life, in which there had been a liberal streak always trying to assimilate the other ways of living, thinking and relating. In her conduct throughout the novel, we find her to be a noble hearted woman who did not want to get into verbose argumentation on which was the right path, but one that desired to enhance and enrich our growth as 'human beings', without which religions, societies, customs, ideologies- with all progressive or reactionary ideas - can become a terrible bondage. The freedom that she had accorded to Gora, and the ease with which she was shown to be able to assimilate the others who came in his life-story added to her weakness for the nobility and gentility in Binoy's approach all bore testimony to this fact. In Tagore's depiction of Gora's mother, there is no disrespect or denial of religion, but a profound and unspoken protest against what people themselves often make out religions to be. This is the motherly nature of our Bharatvarsha which is represented by the character Anandamoyi. She is the portrayal of an ideal Ma. Mothers have always different place and by glorifying them, man can easily achieve what he desires. During nineteenth century, Bengali mothers stood for affection, manifested in an underlying spirit of self-sacrifice for the family. The social reform era, when there were vigorous protests against overt oppression of women such as child-marriage, perpetual widowhood for the caste Hindu women, widow burning on the husband's funeral pyre' considered motherhood in a very positive light. Mothers were justified by their greatness of their sons, Bagchi writes: "Regarding the image of goddess for the woman, Tanikar sarkar has

**written:** Nationalism was generally more comfortable with manageable, maternal, alternative of the goddess Durga, the presiding deity of Kitchens and sickbeds." (National Iconography) She always is being mythicised in the name of 'mother' or 'goddess'. Jasodhara Bagchi has very beautifully written the mythicising of woman for the self-serving purpose of the man. She explains:

The burgeoning nationalism in colonial Bengal of the last quarter of nineteenth century caught hold the image of the mother to represent the nationalist aspiration. The ideology of motherhood was given an enormous importance in the cultural life of Bengal. As a phenomenon, it was quite unique – religious, cultural and aesthetic domain were politicized with the help of the notion of motherhood. This was specially facilitated by the ideological aspect of motherhood. It has served the purpose of taking away real power from women and creating a myth about her strength -and power.

**According to Jasadhara Bagchi:**

Tagore's *Gora*, narrated against the backdrop of the emerging cultural Nationalism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, uses the insights gained from the *Swadeshi* movement to introduce radical critique of the essentialized, reified motherhood of Nationalist discourse.

The iconification of 'women as the nation' creates a framework of imagination where women's bodies appear literally as the map of the country. The spatial connection drawn between the female body and the territorial landmass symbolises women as the nation. Rabindranath Tagore's famous song, 'Amar Shonar Bangla' or 'My Golden Bengal' uses this template of representation as the landscape of Bengal transforms into different parts of the female body. The mother's face, her smile, the ends of her sari all become diffused in the visualisation of the nation as the female entity assumes a maternal role: "Oh mother, in autumn, I have seen your sweet smile in the harvesting fields, Alas! What I behold, your sweet smile, my golden Bengal, I love you...what a sight, what a shade, what gentle love, what attachment you have spread with the ends of you sari..." As the ends of the mother's sari become the umbrella of national solidarity, motherhood is politicised and "stereotypically situated" at the breaking down point between the public/private dichotomy. The iconification of 'women as nation', on the other hand, imposes the qualities of the nation on to women. Nineteenth century Bengali nationalism sought its unique, spiritually superior and private domain of nationalism by locating unique national attributes in women. Women, thus, became the ground upon which nationalism flourished and modernity was authored. For example, the nineteenth century Bengali nationalist interpretation of the word 'freedom' differed from the Western notion. It was argued that in the West, 'freedom' meant *jathechchachar*, to do as one wished, and the agency to self indulge; in India, however, 'freedom' meant freedom from one's ego, the capability to sacrifice and serve willingly. Imagining 'nation as women' thus, operates with the logic of imposing national cultural attributes on women, resulting in the deliverance of a circumscribed notion of individuality to the modern Bengali woman.

After returning from the jail when Gora saw Sucharita, he thought:

Carried away at the time by a wave of emotion, Gora had regarded Sucharita not as an individual but as the personification of an idea. In her image was made manifest to him the whole nature of womanhood in Bharat. This image would invest every home in the country with grace, affection and purity. She was the goddess who nourished the children of Bharatvarsha, tended the sick.... we received her infinitely tolerant and forgiving bounty as Ishwar's blessing. (*Gora* 330) The attitude of the ruling power was always disapproving of Bengali culture and its latent nationalism especially in the formulation that culture received in the life-styles of Bengali women. Thus in the cultural milieu of the period immediately preceding the mass uprising of 1969, all the cherished cultural paraphernalia of Bengali life, the red and yellow festive sari worn by the women, the 'tip' on the forehead, the local flowers, *Melas* or fairs, the Bengali diet of puffed rice and molasses, Tagore songs, and poetry sessions, assumed the significance of a symbolic protest--a form of cultural resistance.

The concept of Motherhood and Nation during the nineteenth century was the main theme of Tagore's novel *Gora* as Tagore had a complex relationship with Nationalism. What is very interesting is that Tagore had used the very same register of motherhood to put forward the critique of the emerging icon of the mother in the anti-colonial resistance that grew in Bengal in the latter part of the nineteenth and in early twentieth century. Tagore's *Gora* is the identification of motherhood with an idea of the nation. This might refer to a specific period of Bengal's history when, in order to lend force to nationalism, the ideology of motherhood was given an enormous importance in the cultural life of Bengal.

**Bagchi wrote:** Ramprasad's intimate and heart-rending songs to Kali were given a new currency in the nineteenth century by the other worshipper of Kali, Ramkrishna Paramhansa. Through the meditating channel of Ramkrishna, the songs of Ramprasad jumped the barrier of colonial education and entered the arena of the colonial mainstream culture of Bengal in the nineteenth century. Then the spiritual domain was the weapon in the hands of nationalist, the glorification of motherhood was the double refined spirituality that was used as a major mode of representation by the Bengali nationalists. As worship of the mother goddess became a major domain of Bengal/ India, the land itself became the mother. The symbolic representation of India as the mother was just the comparison with Anandamoyi, the real mother. This motherly image helps the then Indian Nationalist to be much more aware about the nature of Indian Nationalism. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee also has given the motherly image to India. But it has a polar difference with Tagore's concept. Bankim Chandra's *Bharatvarsha* is so much narrow minded that it differentiates between Hindu, Muslim; the two pillar castes in India. Muslims were hated in his famous novel *Anandamath*. Though Bankim Chandra also had a nationalistic approach but it is totally different from Tagore. Bankim Chandra called India as *Bharatmata* and also worships India as mother. But this mother had a narrow boundary; she can only care for her own *santan*, not the out-sider. While *Bharatvarsha* in *Gora* never discriminated between Insider and Outsider; between high caste and low caste; It is the India which is ideal. Bankim Chandra's *Bharatmata* is also bound by society but in *Gora* she is much more liberal and she had the power to think.

## II. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gratitude cannot be expressed by words, still I acknowledge my deep sense of gratitude to my revered teacher and guide **Dr. Ashok Kumar Mohapatra** for his constant guidance, meticulous care and encouragement and keen interest without which I would not have been able to complete my work. So both personally and academically I remain grateful to my Guide. I expressed my profound thankfulness to all my faculty members of the P.G. Dept. Of English especially to our HOD, Prof. Ram Shankar Nanda for their kind inspiration and cooperation. The contributions of Seminar Library, the Central Library and the Dept. Internet facilities are praiseworthy without which my work would not have been successfully accomplished. I convey my gratefulness to my parents for their blessings, encouragement and support to help me in all possible ways. I extend my special thanks to my friends and classmates, each of whom in their own way has tried to be of great help to me.

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