TAGORE’S FEMINISM IN GORA

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore the colossus, learnt his own pace learnt the importance of developing empathy and sensitivity towards the social issues of his contemporary society in a very profound manner but at his own pace. Being the champion of social consciousness, he could fully understand the state of women in the post independence era. Resultantly he has taken the rights of the women, at his hand, to get them their rights as equal to men. He has attempted to create a good ambience for the empowerment of women by making them the protagonists of his novels and plays. He firmly believes in the fact that the key to women’s incessant problems and their liberty from the patriarchal domain could only be possible through education. Most of the plays and novels of Tagore are centered on the life of women- their struggle for life irrespective of the situation and self-actualization which leads to their emancipation. There is no wonder for his concern towards women and their state of being in the society, since he has much acquaintance with the social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy. This paper would analyse Tagore’s contribution on the emancipation of women with particular reference to the text Gora. In what follows, I wish to offer a perspective of looking at Tagore's novel Gora on the basis of Tagore's characterization of the principal women in the novel. The novel, created and serialized at the turn of 20th century, is regarded as an important milestone in the history of Indian fiction, and there have been numerous attempts to interpret each move Tagore has made here. The ongoing telecast of Gora on Doordarshan Channel itself reveals the influence of the same in the present scenario.

KEYWORDS: Acquaintance, Doordarshan, Emancipation, Empathy, Empowerment, Patriarchal, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Self-Actualization, Sensitivity

INTRODUCTION

Rabindranth’s role in the liberation of Bengali women was a seminal one. Initially, he exposed the plight of women and argued for their autonomy in his letters, short stories and essays. Through his novels, he was able to construct new and vital female. Later, by his act of admitting females into his Santiniketan school, he became an innovative pioneer in coeducation and women empowerment.

Around 1907, when the interests of nationalist resistance to British imperialism were competing with the attraction of Western modernism for the loyalty of young Indians, Tagore wrote his greatest novel, Gora. This was the time of political upheaval in India but this novel did not deal with any political agitation rather it showed the attempts that were being made to understand the newer outlook to life in the wake of Western education and realization of a rational approach. Sharad Srivastava writes in this connection:

The woman is liberated when she analyses and reflects upon her position as a woman in the scheme of things which includes the social moral and spiritual fields. (17-18)

A liberated woman is completely different from the woman who thinks of seeking equality with men, asserting her own personality and emphasizing on her own rights as a woman.
SUMMARY

*Gora* is set in Kolkata in the second half of the nineteenth century and focuses on the generation coming age a few decades after the mutiny. The action is informed by an atmosphere of mounting nationalism, separatism. Set in the context of a national interrogation of cultural, political and religious identity, the novel stages dialectics not between British colonialism and Indian resistance, as western readers are accustomed to expect, but between a fiercely orthodox Hindu nationalism and the liberal Bengali Reform Movement within Hinduism, the Brahmo Samaj. Brahmo Samaj is an eclectic and syncretistic movement in which many good western tendencies were also adopted like it was against Sati Pratha, Purdah System, child marriage, caste system and was in favour of widow remarriage and education for women although these were the British attempts that were made to bring reforms in Hinduism. Although R. N Tagore was an ardent nationalist, he had an appeal for universal religion and culture, to him which was the real Hinduism. As Upendranath Bhattacharya comments in *Rabindranath’s Short Story and Novel*:

The area of dialectical discourses between the ancient Hindu religion and the new fangled Brahmo religion was marked out and extended. The ‘relation’ between the traditionalist conservative society and reform conscious progressivist Brahmo society gradually soured through animosity and sarcastic exchanges. (323)

The corpus of the works of Rabindra Nath Tagore, the first Nobel laureate in Asia, has been a popular field of study for more than half a century. Extensive critical enquiry has been made into his poetic creations. In spite of his being an outstanding Indo-Anglian poet, prophet, philosopher, novelist and essayist, much critical attention has not been paid to his fiction. In my presentation, I am dealing with the womanhood concept in *Gora*, a remarkable novel of Rabindranath Tagore. Throughout human history, the female person has been portrayed as a symbol of fertility, a Goddess representing the Motherland, or even as a class of people whose best place is in the kitchen and within the home. In each of these cases the woman is not viewed as an individual, but she is a part of one philosophy or the other. Tagore begins his novel with Binoybhushan, a highly educated Bengali young-man who had situated himself within the socio-religious debates on education and national priorities as well as on the things that were then considered to be matters to be dealt by women, namely the woman’s relationship within and outside their gender. Binoy, as he is called subsequently, is seen looking out through his window in a pacific mood. While doing so, he hears a baul singer singing a folk song, "The unknown bird flies in and out of the cage, if I could catch it, I would place the chains of my mind on its feet (1)." These lines of the text conveys the very message clearly – what a man thinks about a woman, How he wants to have her according to his own wishes. Rabindranath Tagore has presented the whole milieu of the Indian society. He has depicted women who have tremendously courage and strength in trying situations and have played a key role within their ambit of operation to break down those shackles of dogma, begin to lurk in our mind. The novel, created and serialized at the turn of 20th century, is regarded as an important milestone in the history of Indian fiction, and there have been numerous attempts to interpret each move Tagore has made here. *Gora* is supposed to be viewed from the viewpoint Gourmohan, the Irish orphan adopted by a Brahmin family amidst the mutiny of 1857. The novel can be taken as a saga of a triumph over colour and caste prejudices also. One another alternative is to consider the story in terms of an inter-generational attempt to coming to terms with the forces of Westernization of the educated segment of Indian society. The multiple layers of meaning can be obtained from *Gora* as it
focuses on the cultural root of Bengal and Bengalis and the debasement of the society with the onslaught of the western mode of thinking brought about by the British rule. Incidentally, Rabindranath, the author of this 500 odd page novel could have named his work for several reasons - after its central character, Gourmohan also known as Gora by his friends, or called it gora (‘white-skinned’) after the shade of the central character's body, or called Gora which could be translated into "essence and root of a matter." Viewing the novel through these three different pedestals would produce confronting and interesting comparisons about the details of the novel. But the central theme of freedom, woman education and their emancipation as well as the yearning for it would not change.

The novel starts with Binoy when he faces Sucharita, face to face in a road accident, and his world begins to change forever. Binoy, like most Indian male youths, has not interacted with women much, except for those in his family. He has seen women only as a symbol of maternity (Anand amoyi) or a person who spends her entire life serving the men at home. For the first time, he looks at Sucharita's reflection in the mirror, a face "lowered in loving anxiety glowed with a tenderness” which was to Binoy a "newly manifested wonder of nature" (2). It is interesting to note that Binoy does not find courage to look at her directly; Instead, he opts to look at her reflection and now he was fascinated by the beautiful face he saw reflected in the mirror. His eyes were not adequately trained to examine each line and curve of a countenance. Tagore introduces Sucharita, a central female character as a symbol of nature, and as the novel progresses, slowly but imperceptibly, he transforms this symbol into a form and a figure, and provides her with a very independent and individual mind. Gora is brought into the book via an argument with Binoy about the latter's accepting to Paresh Babu's invitation. Binoy is genuinely eager to associate himself with Paresh Babu's family to learn more about the family, and acquaint himself with this woman who lit up the whole room like Goddess Saraswati.

Gora is a staunch Hindu Brahmin boy who worships in the morning and in the evening and is very careful for what he eats. He stops taking water from his mother's room as she keeps a Christian maid. In his dress also he is "an incarnation image of revolt against modernity". (138) His brother Mohim says:

Many a bigot have I seen in my day, but this beats them all. You are going one better than even the Benares or nadia Pundits (64).

He initially associated himself with the Brahmo-Samaj for a short period of time but now vehemently abhors this new creed of the British bootlicking educated ones reflecting so much like the Christians. He does not approve Binoy's decision to visit his Brahmo neighbour. The tall, broad-shouldered Brahmin fires arrows at Binoy's "temptation", as he proclaims that it is best to "worship woman" where "they are installed as Mother." Gora's idea of womanhood is extremely stereotypical and is prevalent until this day in India. The Mother is the highest pedestal offered to a woman under such scheme. "The Feminine Individual" is not given the individual status. Gora assumes Binoy's admiration to be a vent for his lust. Gora is brought out to the readers as a voice for the reformist Brahmins rather than that of an enlightened individual. This tragedy of Gora's fate is comparable to the fate of Indian women- who could at best be the home maker, or a force like Kali, or Shakti ready to step out of home to destroy all evils, but never as an ordinary woman in the educated Bengali society of that time.

Binoy is a man of the heart but Gourmohan is a man of revivalist Hindu ideology. The fallacy of Gora's ideology is evident when he restricts Binoy from eating food served by Lachmiya, the Christian maid who saved Gora's life when he was suffering from small pox in his boisterous years. Tagore uses food as a weapon, something like a sword used to wield power and control the lives of others.
Even though Gora preaches the ideology of placing women at a Mother's mantle, yet he forgets to pay his respect to a woman, Lachmiya who mothered him along with Anandamoyi. As, "The statement" of a concept "no longer has the same certainty" (pg.18) when applied to a person. Gora is incapable of this theory to practice association, and this impotency is magnified when Gora interacts with the womenfolk of the novel- particularly, when he is shown as abstaining from communication with Sucharita in several encounters that they would have in the novel.

Anandamoyi, the daughter of a learned Benares scholar, discards "the traditions of seven generations" (13) and chooses to be an outcast in her house for her love of Gora whom being childless, she regards as a God’s gift to her. Without succumbing to the blandishments of Gora, she assumes the responsibility for Binoy's marriage to Lolita which is objected to by the rigidly sectarian Brahmans as well. Her defence of the marriage gives an indication of her enlightened mind, free from all vestiges of communal bigotry and religious intolerance:

"... Marriage is a matter of hearts coming together- if that happened, what matters it what mantras are recited? .... There is no caste in men's hearts- there God brings men together and there He Himself comes to them. Will it ever do to keep Him at a distance and leave the duty of uniting men to creeds and forms? (183)"

Anandamoyi, an idealized character, stands isolated in her family and exemplifies the ideals which Gora comes to cherish towards the end of novel, the distinction between the two being that the former has gained the breadth of vision by his intellect and the latter through the warmth of her heart. Her husband is like many "forward" thinking Bengali youth who catered their intellect and loyalty to the services of their English masters. Although her transformation into the magnanimous human persona is not dealt with in much detail in the novel, the change is something, modern 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 man oblige her with. But in Gora Anandamoyi 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 a gora child as a part of her own family. This is one of the first individualistic traits depicted in Anandamoyi. As Binoy discovers very early in the novel, Anandamoyi is the "face ... of his motherland." (19). 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 have. Interestingly, the number of female to male characters is equal. The women who are the pillars of the narrative go through drastic transformations, too. In contrast to Anandamoyi, Baradasundari is a Brahmo Samaj woman who is doubtful of everything Hindu. Barada's change is superficial. Tagore introduces the hypocrisy of the modern educated class through the voice of Baradasundari who has a sour taste for idol worship, traditional clothes, religious names and everything that is non-Brahmo. The philosophy of Barada's version of Brahmo-samaj philosophy is not in the essence of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's teachings but these are the social nuances, the Brahmo's had picked up from the British.

Tagore delicately balances the growth of womanhood by providing opposing examples, almost like binary opposites - and churning out a victor from them. Tagore methodically plays the tunes of the individuals versus societies in his novel. It becomes clear when we have a look at the character of Anandamoyi as she is 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 her 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 something in his life. It is not only the liberal and humanistic streak in Paresh babu that attracts him and in Binoy, in whom 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. Responding to Gora's approach for his unhindu conduct, the barber says: "What is the difference, Sir? We call Him as Hari, they as Allah, that's all" (133) This neighbourhood is in trouble because it is the only neighbourhood that has not submitted to the unjust impositions of the British Sahibs. Although it remains unspoken, Gora finds here in Sardar, the leader of the Muslim village, the grit and determination to stand up and refuse to be subjugated. 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 ir-religiosity we are upholding in India 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!” (133).

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. 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. 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.

Tagore gives feminism a meaning of his own - he provides his feminists lead to find themselves in the face of society without hurting others. 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 away 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 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. Feminism at an accelerated pace only annoyed the people of India of that time. 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 feminists of Indian society 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 of that time, 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 the eastern philosophy and had little flesh and blood of the characters, but in Gora Tagore successfully webs 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
Tagsore is notorious for dealing with the "whole" of a concept rather than the fineness of it. In *Gora* Tagore successfully blends his wholesome philosophy of human nature with the details of everyday life. One has to appreciate the liberal face of Hinduism that Anandamoyi stood for, a position to which Gora is finally shown to have reached after traveling a full circle. It was not a position easily reachable by a woman who was not educated in a western tradition, nor was a Brahmo who would be engaged in this kind of debate at a socio-cultural level. The debasement that corroded the aspect of humanism in the Hindu society of those days is hinted at by Paresh Babu in his discussion with Sucharita when he mentions that with the advent of the British legal system bringing in equality among practitioners of all faiths, the Hindu society would collapse with his stratification and inner contradiction. To that observation, Sucharita asks in a very disturbed voice:

Father, is it not the duty of all of us to prevent this? Shall we accentuate the decline of this Hindu society by abandoning it? Is it not the most apt time to hold onto it ardently? (432)

**Pareshbabu said in Deep Affection**

Can we save someone just because we wish so? There is a natural law for survival - anyone who violates that innate law, others abandon him naturally. Hindu society debases and abandons human being. That's why day by day it is becoming increasingly difficult for her to defend herself. She can't hide herself any longer. All the roads in so many directions have opened up around the world. People are traveling from all directions. She can't keep herself isolated by building walls made of scriptures and customs. If the Hindu society does not collect itself together and abates the cancer, the interaction with the people from outside will be a severe blow to her (444-445).

As against this true depiction of the great fall in the morality and human values among Hindus, Anandamoyi stood out as an exceptional woman who mothered Gora to believe in those values that went against sectarianism.

**CONCLUSIONS**

As a whole, 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. Undoubtedly, both the female characters have liberal outlook in their thinking.

The one, Suchrita finds herself at an equal ease within and outside home and has a strong mind of her own; the other, Anandamoyi, too, is ready to break the shackles of dogma prevailing in the contemporary society of their times. Tagore has persistently advocated for equal rights for women as that only would enhance and enrich our growth. *Gora*, is relevant even today.
The ongoing telecast of the same at doordarshan channel is an outstanding attempt to convey the message of nationalism, women education and their emancipation to the masses.

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