

University of Alberta

Indeterminacy in Rabindranath Tagore's Representation of Women and Minorities

by

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the position of women in Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* and *The Home and the World* written in the early decades of twentieth century. Moreover, it examines the presentation of Muslim community in *The Home and the World*. I argue that though Rabindranath glorifies women and sympathizes with the Muslim minority, his novels marginalize them who were significant elements in the national space. Thus, Rabindranath's imagined national sphere is unsettled and questioned as a secular and equitable domain.

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction.....	1
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CHAPTER TWO

The “New Women” and the Mother in <i>Gora</i>	12
2.1 Women in <i>Gora</i> : Literature Review	15
2.2 Theorizing women in <i>Gora</i>	24
2.3 Sucharita’s Position in <i>Gora</i>	32
2.4 Anandamoyi’s Position in <i>Gora</i>	45
2.5 Lolita’s Position in <i>Gora</i>	58

CHAPTER THREE

Bimala and the Muslim community in <i>The Home and the World</i>	67
3.1 Bimala’s Reception: Literature Review	71
3.2 Indeterminacy in the Representation of Woman in <i>The Home and the World</i>	74
3.3 An Alternative View of the Muslim Minority in <i>The Home and the World</i>	92

Conclusion	105
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Work Cited	107
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This dissertation focuses on the representation of women and the Muslim minority in Rabindranath Tagore's (1861–1941) political novels *Gora* and *The Home and the World*. Rabindranath¹ wrote these novels in the early decades of the twentieth century when the stirring of nationalism in British India, particularly in Bengali society—Calcutta was considered the second capital of the British empire—took organized shape through the formation of political parties. In particular, the last half of the nineteenth century experienced the emergence of cultural nationalism reflected in the reformation of the indigenous Hindu religion, revitalization of the classical past of ancient India, modernization of Indian women, and experimentation with the native language as a literary channel. Some notable intellectuals and initiatives that contributed to the growth of nationalism in Bengal—or the Bengal renaissance—were Raja Rammohan Roy's reformed religious group *Brahmo Samaj*, Debendranath Tagore's *Tattvabodhini Sabha* and *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, Bankimchandra Chatterji's novels and *Bangadarshan* literary journal, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's women-emancipation projects, and Swami Vivekananda's preaching of Hindu nationalism. Through these religious and social reform endeavors, associations, and literary attempts, the glorious past of Indian civilization was recreated, indigenous language and culture were appreciated, and ancient religion was reformed from prejudices and evil customs that often embarrassed native society in the eyes of its colonial master.² Consequently, the cultural change in educated elite and middle-class intelligentsia

stimulated it to imagine a space, sovereign in its tradition and modern in its outlook. In other words, this space was the desired national space named India, which the intellectuals defined in various ways. Among them Rabindranath was an important figure. This dissertation explores how Rabindranath's two political novels—*Gora* and *The Home and the World*—feature indigenous women and the Muslim community in the national collectivity of India.

One of the important aspects of cultural nationalism in nineteenth-century Bengal was the appearance of the novel as a literary genre in Bengali society. Even though appropriating the form from the West, the novels derived subject matters from native elements (R. Ray 67). For example, Bankimchandra Chatterji's novels responded to cultural nationalism by presenting indigenous history, man–woman relationships, domesticity, philosophy of Hindu religion, and so on (S. Gupta 68-77). Rajat Kanta Ray writes:

The Bengal Renaissance . . . was the product of a characteristically home-grown blend of Western and traditional elements that was strikingly depicted in the Bengali fiction of the age. The renaissance and its fiction drew sustenance from a deeply indigenous realization of the nature of man, the nature of woman, and the dynamics of their interaction in a changing society which nonetheless remained firmly rooted in its identity. (67-68)

In a situation like this—it can be easily surmised—novels portrayed an internal and external picture of Indian society, which formed a commonality different from its English rulers' by religion, language, tradition, history, and emotion. This

different and individual formation reflected the national consciousness of India as sensed by the novelists. Rajat kanta Ray's remark is relevant here: "There was not a single major novelist in Bengal, male or female, who was not a nationalist" (73).

Likewise, the two narratives—*Gora* and *The Home and the World*—reflect the contemporary responsibility of a literary intellectual to imagine and distinguish a national (or individual) space. This dissertation examines the position of the major women characters and the Muslim minority in these two novels and argues that the texts exhibit the women uncertainly. As the products of a historical time of cultural nationalism and gender reformation, these two novels trace signs of women's emancipation—such as intellectual improvement, rational and liberal thinking, sexual freedom—and identify the importance of unity among indigenous religious communities. But while I read the texts, I sense an internal tension intervening them. The texts of these two novels, as this dissertation particularly argues, establish an unequal, often inferior and thus disturbing place for women and the Muslim community, which unquestionably are two important elements in the large socio-national milieu. Rabindranath's visualized national sphere in the novels emerges as a fluctuating, questionable, and incomplete space. Because though it points out failure of destructive politics and triumph of women's sensibilities, it cannot demonstrate equitable position for women and the Muslims who were fully present in over-all national and intellectual reality.

In my opinion, Rabindranath has an ambivalent view about nationalism. Both imperial hegemony and national resistance concerned him. At the same time, he worried about the potential for violence in combative nationalism. On the

one hand, he shared national consciousness to the extent it allowed him to rejuvenate individuality of tradition and affirm the necessity of strengthening native language and literature in a colonized setting. For example realizing the limitation of alien colonial education, Rabindranath established the *Brahmacharya Ashram* or hermitage-school in Shantiniketan in 1901 with the intention of building an educated generation, trained in a philosophical learning of the ancient Indian civilization and connected with rural people (U. Gupta 17-23). He wrote to Brajendra Kishore Dev, the *maharājākūmār* (“prince”) of Tripura, that he wanted to bring up the pupils in the ancient ideals of India’s hermitage schools and keep them away from “*bīlātī bīlāsa*” ‘English luxury’ and “*bīlātēr andha mōha*” ‘blind attraction to England’ (qtd. in N. Majumdar 198). In the view of the notable biographer Uma Das Gupta, Rabindranath’s modeling of his school on the ideals of an “ancient Hindu institution” and “Upanishadic concept” for the regeneration of the country was his reaction to the “‘cultural dislocation’ of a colonised country” (17-18). In his speech delivered at the annual meeting of *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad* or Bengal Academy of Literature on April 7, 1895, Rabindranath appealed for the introduction of the indigenous language—Bengali—at school, not only to promote the “life-fostering mother tongue” and its literature, but also to create a bond of unity among different classes:

It is now being said that our schools should introduce more instruction in Bengali. Why is it necessary? It is necessary because without the Bengali language, one cannot hope to fulfill the desire and the need that education has instilled in our hearts. There would

have been no problem if we were content to work for the sahib and serve as office clerks at the end of our training. But the ideal of duty that education has implanted in our minds is that of serving the people. We have to link ourselves to the people with the bonds of service, impart education to all, imbue everyone with the vital juice of thought, unite everyone with the ties of *nationality*.

Without recourse to our indigenous language and literature, this task will never be accomplished. (Tagore, “Bengali National Literature” 186-87; emphasis added)

All these instances confirm the fact that considered from the socio-cultural context, Rabindranath, who was deeply rooted in his own heritage, nurtured a nationalistic ideal.

On the other hand, Rabindranath disapproves of nationalism from political and economic perspectives. In the first decade of the twentieth century, global and local political turmoil—such as the First World War and Hindu–Muslim riots in Eastern Bengal—made Rabindranath bitter against the idea of nationalism. The aggressive and selfish political attitudes that he found in Japan and western countries and in the apathetic colonial administration and extremist *Swadeshi* nationalists made him believe that nationalism was synonymous with imperialism. Rabindranath writes in *Nationalism*, “A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose” (9). These “mechanical purposes” are to defend the subject community of people from the attack of others and to attack

others for political and commercial profit. As an “organization of politics and commerce” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 12), a nation originally emerges from that power of a society which “goads all its [a society’s] neighbouring societies with greed of material prosperity, and consequent mutual jealousy, and by the fear of each other’s growth into powerfulness” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 9). Thus the idea of a nation encourages aggression and conflict in human civilization.

Rabindranath believes that the idea of nationalism is typically a western ideology (*Nationalism* 7) and involved with particular ethnic unity and supremacy. He writes in *Nationalism*:

We have to remember that in Europe, where peoples had their racial unity from the beginning, and where natural resources were insufficient for the inhabitants, the civilization has naturally taken the character of political and commercial aggressiveness. For on the one hand they had no internal complications, and on the other they had to deal with neighbours who were strong and rapacious. To have perfect combination among themselves and a watchful attitude of animosity against others was taken as the solution of their problems. In former days they organized and plundered, in the present age the same spirit continues—and they organize and exploit the whole world. (97-98)

When we analyze this quotation, we see that Rabindranath finds the attitude of exclusiveness in the western races as the basis for their politics or nationalism. In his perspective, in western history a particular group of people, which formed a

nation or individual organization for self-defence and prosperity, neither needed to be mingled with other human groups nor welcomed mingling with neighbor societies.

However, it should be noted that nationalism has a positive aspect as the expression of the resisting consciousness of a colonized society against the colonial oppression. About the native “response to Western dominance” Edward Said writes,

Along with armed resistance . . . there also went considerable efforts in cultural resistance almost everywhere, the assertions of nationalist identities, and, in the political realm, the creation of associations and parties whose common goal was self-determination and national independence. (xii)

Paradoxically—as I have already mentioned—Rabindranath himself participated in cultural nationalism though the concept of “nationalism” denoted to him a political ideology of invasion and moral perversion. So in essence, Rabindranath believed in the idea of nationalism as long as it created an individual cultural selfhood of the colonized nation. But he rejected jingoistic nationalism, especially based on a particular ethnic religion that encouraged division and prohibition in human society.

The two novels—*Gora* and *The Home and the World*—capture this tension that ideas of nationalism created in Rabindranath. On the one hand, these two novels show different elements of the indigenous society that have formed its national consciousness: patriotism in contrast to imitation of the west,

acknowledgement of the religious sects—both traditional and reformed, and acceptance of a young generation, educated in western learning but rooted in traditional values. The characters of Gora and Bimala celebrate the virtues of native tradition and domesticity respectively in *Gora* and *The Home and the World*. On the other hand, both novels reflect the limitation of extreme nationalism, specifically backed by religion and political interest.

Very naturally a question arises: what was Rabindranath's desired national space? For India's individual identity, Rabindranath visualized a space synthesized by various races—both ethnic and religious—instead of being dominated by a particular racial community. The (national) distinctiveness of India lies in her acceptance of various races—even the western—that form the great Indian civilization. And here Rabindranath is beyond exclusive nationalism. Rabindranath's vision of India as a synthesized nation, united by humanity in spite of racial diversification, is summarized in his poem:

O my soul, awaken slowly
 in this holy pilgrims'-place,
 where India's greatness reigns, before
 the ocean's space.

 Here are Aryans and non-Aryans,
 Moguls, tribes-of-East,
 and Huns and Scythians, Pathans, Dravidians,
 all in a body pieced.

Now the West has opened its door –
 And bringing gifts all through it they pour,
 to give, to take, their mixed mixing make . . .
 their way they will not retrace,
 where India's greatness reigns, before
 the ocean's space.

.....

O come Aryans, come non-Aryans,
 Hindus, Muslims, all
 come all of you, you English too,
 come you of the Christian call.

.....

Come come quickly where the Mother is crowned,
 in this pilgrims'-place where the pots are found
 that are not yet full of the touched-by-all-
 made-holy-water-of grace,
 where India's greatness reigns, before
 the ocean's space. (1-4, 19-28, 71-74, 79-84; 2nd ellipsis in orig.)

Where is the position of women in this desired national space? How does the narrator represent them in the narrative? This dissertation attempts to answer these questions. I argue that the image of women in these two political narratives is uncertain. I show in chapter two that though *Gora* celebrates the main women characters for transcending the limitations of caste, creed, and ethnic identity, and

also for embodying some moral virtues, the narrative device marginalizes them through uncertain meanings of words and situational irony. Sometimes Rabindranath's predilection for a gender theory which is divisive transmits through the channel of the narrative mechanism. In other places, though the narration may not intend, it implies disparagement for the women. In chapter three I demonstrate that in *The Home and the World* the heroine's presentation is very paradoxical—it simultaneously approves and denies her agency. In spite of attributing intellectual empowerment and sexual freedom to the women, the narratives tend to be patriarchal by subordinating them. As we will see in the following chapters, their representation supports Nira Yuval-Davis' claim:

Women usually have an ambivalent position within the collectivity. On the one hand, . . . they often symbolize the collective unity, honor, and the *raison d'être* of specific national and ethnic projects . . . On the other hand, however, they are often excluded from the collective “we” of the body politic, and remain an object rather than a subject. (305)

Moreover, chapter three unfolds that *The Home and the World* is censorious to the Muslim community. The unfair negative image of the minority group unsettles Rabindranath's vision of a secular national space.

Notes

¹ As is customary, Rabindranath Tagore is referred to by his first name. However, to find details of his works see under Tagore in Work Cited.

² To know about the cultural renaissance of nineteenth-century Bengal, I find useful *Studies in the Bengal Renaissance* (1977) edited by Jagannath Chakravorty, *Renaissance in Bengal: Search for*

Identity (1977) by Arabinda Poddar, *The Foundations of New India* (1963) by K.M. Panikkar, and *Women in Modern India* (1998) by Geraldine Forbes. The articles on the mentioned reformers from *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh* (2006) edited by Sirajul Islam are also helpful to formulate an idea about the emerging nationalism and awakening modernism of nineteenth-century Bengal.

CHAPTER TWO

The “New Women”¹ and the Mother in *Gora*

Deeply worried at the militancy of nationalism during the First World War, Rabindranath Tagore condemns modern civilization by comparing it with pugnacious masculinity, “At the present stage of history civilization is almost exclusively masculine, a civilization of power, in which woman has been thrust aside in the shade” (Tagore, *Personality* 172). The rescuing force to liberate human civilization from the hostile power of nationalism lies, as Rabindranath believes, in “passive qualities of chastity, modesty, devotion and power of self-sacrifice” that are essentially attributed to women (Tagore, *Personality* 173). A few years ago, the message Rabindranath presented through the character of Anandamoyi in the novel *Gora* was that woman’s “power of sympathy” was the hope for reconstructing human civilization (Tagore, *Personality* 183). But ironically, in *Gora* sometimes Rabindranath’s narrative device succeeds in marginalizing women through unstable use of language. In other places the prevalence of ironic situations in the plot unintentionally “thrust[s] [women] aside in the shade.” This chapter focuses on the peripheral position of the main female characters in Rabindranath’s *Gora*, written and serialized between 1907 and 1909.

I will show in this chapter that the narration in *Gora* is problematic because of two reasons. First, Rabindranath creates a narrative voice (or third person omniscient narrator) which fails to create an objective narration. The author’s disturbing view of gender intrudes through many parts of the narration. And thus Rabindranath is intended to propagandize certain ideas such as

genderizing some values. Second, in other places the narration yields such interpretation which presents the marginalized position of women.

At the beginning of the novel, the eponymous character Gora is a militant nationalist who has his ideas and ideals based in Hindu ideology. In contrast, at the end of the novel, he cultivates a universal humanism that is beyond caste, religion, and nationality. Within this binary opposition of Hindu nationalism and universal humanism, some other binaries of the changing cultural matrix are also dramatized in the plot: the Hindu–Brahmo conflict, the division between sectarian tradition and westernized liberalism, and the gap between traditional “feminine” values and the emerging New Women’s ideology, based primarily on western education.² These issues form supplementary components of the characters’ struggle between tradition and modernity.

Fraught with conflicting actions and contrasting perspectives, the novel presents its major female characters—Anandamoyi, Sucharita, and Lolita—for a significant purpose: they all embody a philosophy of humanism and secularism in a religiously conservative and much-divided Indian society during the early twentieth century. The female characters underline Rabindranath’s belief that humanity is greater than religion, caste, and nationality. Their function is, in Rabindranath’s language, the “function of the soil”— they help civilization to grow harmoniously just like the soil maintains the growth of a tree “within limits” (Tagore, *Personality* 172). Hence, for example, Ashis Nandy (1994) writes, “Anandamayi [Anandamoyi] represents in her womanliness the spirit of India more truly than his [Gora’s] pure, disinfected, masculine version of Indianness

and Hinduism” (41). The three women, in their own journeys, reflect the conflict between social expectation and individual choice. Gora, the militant hero, finally accepts Anandamoyi’s humanist philosophy and learns to reject religion-based nationalism. Similarly, Lolita willingly marries a Hindu even though this upsets her own Brahmo community. And at the end of the novel, Sucharita seems likely to accept Gora as a marriage partner even though, through a narrative twist, he is revealed to be an outcast. The three women ultimately achieve their desires and reach their goals. In this sense, they appear to be triumphant in their struggles. It is no wonder that the existing critical literature acclaims the exceptional individual qualities that distinguish the female characters in this novel.

However, while praising the women, critics often idealize them. By admiring the women characters critics, in other words, accept Rabindranath’s presentation of women. But, they overlook the problems in Rabindranath’s narrative device (or narrator), which frequently describes women in essentialized feminine terms and by doing so, it reflects Rabindranath’s personal view of women. In this way, the narration loses objectivity. In the novel, and in the view of most critics, the value of women is restricted to their possession of qualities such as love, affection, motherhood, nurturing, chastity, modesty, and domestic skills. It seems as if only women can possess such qualities. In fact, during the nineteenth century, in an effort to distinguish native culture from western culture, the nationalist-reformists of colonial India determined these qualities to be the virtues specific to the women of India.³ Later we will see that Rabindranath also cherishes similar kind of notion about women by genderizing these attributes.

What is disturbing is that the culturally defined feminine virtues determining the role of women, particularly to be a sacrificing mother or an inspiring and chaste wife, restrict women's agency to decide their roles themselves. Critics analyzing the female figures in *Gora* overlook this disturbing implication of the essentialized feminine framework. Moreover—to note another significant point—they are unable to notice the vulnerability of women as reflected in the equivocal linguistic choices in narration and situational irony. Departing from the existing critical literature, I explore the ways in which these women, in spite of their brilliance, are subject to more ambiguous readings. Through the narrator, Rabindranath marginalizes these female characters even when he intends to glorify them. In my view, the novel imposes patriarchal ideology on women when it celebrates them, and the women get implicated in patriarchal hegemony while never realizing their faltering position as individuals. In advance, I should note that the similar kind of paradoxical image of woman is also present in *The Home and the World* which I will discuss in next chapter.

2.1 Women in *Gora*: Literature Review

In Kh. Kunjo Singh's (2002) reading of the novel, we find a much too simplified description of Anandamoyi, Gora's foster mother. Singh presents few details about Anandamoyi and completely idealizes her position:

Anandamoyi, one of Tagore's noblest creations, emerges from the novel as the eternal type of Indian mother, who in her tender loving care, is not inhibited by caste, creed or nationality.

Liberated from the darkness of soul which had held him in thrall for so long, Gora extols her as the very epitome of Indian spirit: . . . (110)

Singh appreciates Anandamoyi for her “enlightened mind, free from all vestiges of communal bigotry and religious intolerance” and emphasizes her motherly affection that ignores Gora’s original non-Hindu parentage (110). However, a critical look at Anandamoyi’s motherhood enables us to suspect the innocence that Singh associates with her motherhood. In section 2.4, I will examine the extent to which the glorification of her motherhood impedes her agency.

In fact Kunjo Singh echoes other earlier critics in his comments on women in the novel. Well-known critic Bimanbehari Majumdar (1968), writing about the female characters in Rabindranath’s novels, also extols Anandamoyi for her liberal mind: “She appears as the herald of a new age in the history of civilisation of mankind. She does not consider any barrier of caste, colour or race an effective bar to the flow of love and affection” (231). Majumdar finds her liberal because she accepts the newborn orphan Gora even though his parents were Irish and Christian and brings him up with unreserved motherly care and affection (231-32). Majumdar notes, “Anandamoyi found that love and affection could overcome all barriers of caste, creed and race” (232). Anandamoyi accepts Binoy and Lolita’s inter-religious marriage in a society in which Hindu revivalism and Brahmo liberalism put these two religious beliefs in opposite and often pugnacious positions. In Majumdar’s view, Anandamoyi is ahead of her time and anticipates the approval of inter-caste and inter-communal marriages that become

familiar much later to educated circles (232). However, in Majumdar's analysis, we do not find any criticism of the narration which sometimes marginalizes Anandamoyi. Neither do we find any comment about Anandamoyi, who sometimes allows herself to undergo hegemonic experiences. Viewing her in the most desirable light, the critic simply idealizes her.

M. Sarada (1988), another critic writing about gender issues in Rabindranath's novels, simplifies Anandamoyi's motherhood by idealizing it, claiming:

She plays a pivotal role by influencing, inspiring and guiding all the four major characters in the novel. To Gora she is, besides being an ideal mother, a great source of inspiration and the very image of his beloved motherland; to Binoy, a living scripture; to Lolita and Sucharita, a moral supporter and to Paresh Babu, a source of peace and solace. She is the universal mother, who loves all. (65)

Like Singh and Majumdar, Sarada also picks out Anandamoyi's liberal and non-sectarian philosophy as noteworthy and adds, "She [Anandamoyi] echoes the novelist's ideal of 'heaven of freedom', where there is no barrier between man and man" (66). Sarada underlines Anandamoyi's motherly affection in the context of her non-sectarian perspective, as revealed in Anandamoyi's adoption of the orphan Gora and her approval of the marriage between the Hindu Binoy and the Brahmo Lolita (66-67). Again, like Majumdar, Sarada presents Anandamoyi as someone who goes beyond the "tradition and taboos" of her time (67). To Sarada,

Anandamoyi is not a “docile” woman, but rather a “staunch individualist” who “does not follow any of her husband’s religious fads” (67).

The views about Anandamoyi expressed by Majumdar and Sarada show that when they laud her for her humanitarian and unorthodox attitude, they give examples of her virtues of giving love, support, and encouragement to the male characters such as Gora, Binoy, and Paresh Babu. But the problem in their readings is that, by idealizing her love and inspiration as virtues of the “universal mother” (Sarada 65), they essentialize Anandamoyi’s womanhood, as does the narrator of the novel.

How should we view the idealization of the major female character who echoes the author’s intellectual position on humanism? What remains an untold story, beneath the excuse of appreciating supposedly feminine virtues, is the marginalization of Anandamoyi. I will attempt in section 2.4 to discuss the degree of instability present in the idealized representation of Anandamoyi’s character. The extent to which her individualism can stand alone will also be explored in section 2.4.

Critics appreciate the two Brahmo girls, Sucharita and Lolita, for their uncommon intellectual abilities and the rebellious steps they take. Lolita’s protest against any kind of tyranny—be it that of an English magistrate or of the threatening Haran Babu—is always immediate and sharp. In Sarada’s view Lolita’s “courage, confidence, and energy” make her a distinguished character (60). Sarada notes, “Protest is her medium of expression. She never takes defeat in her stride and does not believe in doing things by halves. Life, to her, is a

practical reality. Constraints like womanhood, tradition and religion cannot bind her spirit of individualism and free thinking” (61). Lolita refuses to participate in the English play to be enacted in the English magistrate’s quarters. Her moral principles prevent her from entertaining a colonizer who mistreats Gora—a true patriot who has been fighting for the cause of the oppressed common folk.

Leaving the magistrate’s house, Lolita takes her chaperon-less return trip to Calcutta with the family friend Binoy. In Bimanbehari Majumdar’s discussion, Lolita’s role is identified with that of a feminist for her extraordinary decision to come to Calcutta with Binoy (227). Lolita refuses to comply with the social norm that demands women’s resignation to everything (B. Majumdar 227).

Commenting on her defiance, Sarada notes, “Her patriotism is as militant as that of Gora. . . . it [her decision to return to Calcutta with Binoy] is a sheer protest against the racial discrimination of the British towards the Indians” (62). Through Lolita, Sarada continues, “the dawn of political consciousness among Indian women” is apparent (62). In Bimanbehari Majumdar’s view, Lolita’s action implies the practice of *satyagraha*, or non-cooperation, and Rabindranath might have sketched this character as having been influenced by the “boycott resolution passed by the Indian National Congress at the Calcutta session in 1906” (226-28).

In Lalita Pandit’s (1995) discussion, the political implication of Lolita’s night journey is apparent. By leaving the magistrate’s house with the Hindu Binoy, Lolita rejects “colonialist mimicry and sycophancy” and returns to the indigenous heritage of the “Hindu fold” (Pandit 229). In Pandit’s view, Lolita derives the courage to “fight colonialist cowardice” from love “rooted in India’s mythological

past” (229). From Pandit’s political reading of Lolita’s night journey, we can sense Lolita’s rebellious attitude. Through her departure, she—unlike her mother—refuses “to entertain, to please, to flatter, to seek the approval of the British magistrate” (Pandit 229) and thus puts herself in danger of causing much dissatisfaction and incurring the wrath of the colonial master.

Each of these critics has appreciated Lolita’s audacious, rebellious spirit. But what does the narrator choose for this fiery spirit’s destination? She enters into a controversial marriage with Binoy and, in the opinions of the critics mentioned above, this choice of a spouse from a different sect only makes her defiant spirit sparkle further. But contrary to this evaluation, I argue in section 2.5 that her rebellious marriage ultimately turns out to be a patriarchal trap.

In fact, critics have always overlooked Lolita’s vulnerability as the narration establishes in the text. They have not noticed that the feminist Lolita finally has to conform to the essentialized feminine achievement (that is, the culturally determined goal of a woman’s life)—marriage. Rather, sometimes the critics’ remarks limit her to the position virtually imagined for woman. For example, about her more active role in her relationship with Binoy, Sarada writes, “The shy, reticent, mild, orthodox Binoy, who is a shadow of Gora, is transformed into a bold, independent and sophisticated man by the influence of Lolita’s love and guidance” (63). Lolita’s encouragement energizes Binoy’s character. Niharranjan Ray (1961) notes, “From a comparatively inferior position he [Binoy] rises to a height of magnificence; from a rather shadowy associate of Gora, he comes to discover his separate identity. All credit is due, for this transformation,

to his philosopher and guide Lalita [Lolita]...” (“Three Novels” 174). These comments are meant to praise Lolita’s personality, but they actually confine her personality to an essentialized feminine role of inspiring a male. In section 2.5 we will see that ultimately Lolita has to choose the typical feminine destination—marriage.

Critics have always viewed Lolita’s inter-communal marriage with Binoy in a desirable light. Lolita’s marriage proves her progressive outlook by evaluating human personality beyond religion—a fact the omniscient narrator and the critics glorify. For example, Sarada writes that Lolita is “far more advanced than Sucharita” because “She [Lolita] does not consider religion an obstacle to marry Binoy” (64). When she decides to marry Binoy, who is Hindu, it causes much dissatisfaction in her family and in the Brahmo community. But Lolita never turns back, even though her decision to marry Binoy seems to be “detrimental to social order” (B. Majumdar 229). Her senses of “rationalism” and “independent judgement” make her, in Bimanbehari Majumdar’s view, a true disciple of Raja Rammohan Roy (229), the pioneer figure who explained religion and life rationally in the early nineteenth century. Both of their communities finally ostracize Lolita and Binoy; still, the couple goes ahead with their nuptial choice. Binoy and Lolita’s marginalization from their society because of their marriage, in Pandit’s judgment, “sets them free to aspire to gender equality in love and marriage” (229). But the politics related to Lolita’s marriage is not as innocent and laudable as the critics have suggested. In section 2.5, I will argue

that the use of certain prominent romantic tropes in narration to describe and approve Lolita's marriage is patriarchal.

Another Brahmo girl, Sucharita, symbolizes the "new woman" of the late nineteenth century: educated, sophisticated, and free from superstitions (Chatterjee 627-28). Like Lolita, under Paresh Babu's guidance Sucharita receives western education and learns to practice intellect and rationalism in judging human relationships, personality, and creed. For example, she gradually sees through Haran Babu's snobbery and discovers Gora's genuineness. As Bimanbehari Majumdar observes, "with her keen intelligence she found out that Haran was a self-conceited fool in contrast with the forceful personality of Gora" (229). Her critical abilities are exemplified by her argument with the orthodox Gora about Hindu religion.

One of Sucharita's important roles is her influence on Gora in his development from narrow sectarianism to humanism. It is Sucharita's intellectual depth that leads Gora to rethink the position of women in a nation's identity. Previously Gora had been intellectually conservative in his nationalistic views, excluding women from the nation's public domain. By learning to accept women's public role, he takes a step toward a wider humanism; Sucharita's influence triggers this advancement. Niharranjan Ray writes, "It is Sucharita again who administers the necessary dose of liberalism to his too narrow ideals . . ." ("Three Novels" 175). However, I want to emphasize the often overlooked fact that Gora's transformed views about women are actually infused with patriarchal

implications. Rabindranath and his narrative device are also complicit with Gora in this hegemonic politics. I will discuss this issue further in section 2.3.

Sucharita is also motivated by Gora to widen her own consciousness. Gora's passionate appeal to her to participate in India's development moves her, and consequently she very soon begins to think of herself as his true apprentice in his patriotic mission. Bimanbehari Majumdar claims that with her transformation "Rabindranath is presenting here the dawn of political consciousness of Indian woman" (230). But how much the political awakening approves a woman's autonomous agency is an issue that requires critical judgment. In spite of having intellectual and political consciousness, Sucharita's representation in text proves her marginalized position, as I discuss in section 2.3.

To summarize, while the critics look into the question of gender in this novel, it is noteworthy that they tend to elevate the women for their positive characteristics. They are liberal, rebellious, individualistic, and humanistic. I do not disapprove the validity of these points, but I find that the critics overlook the women's marginal positions, which are very much apparent in the text. In sections 2.3 to 2.5 I will explore how the omniscient narrative voice puts the New Women into a corner of the emergent and supposedly egalitarian frame, how at places Rabindranath's personal view about women becomes transparent through narration and consequently he becomes an accomplice in exclusive politics, and how the text of *Gora*—a narrative of the nation—demonstrates a peripheral position for the women in the imagined nationalistic space of India. Their representation in the text and in some places their ideological standing are

contradictory to the glorification they receive. Their positions in the narration reflect their marginalization though their personal achievements are commendable. Thus they become grey characters.

2.2 Theorizing women in *Gora*

Colonial writings—suffused with the self-other binary—attempt to establish a center to which the margin is opposed. While colonial representation (representation by the center), taking the colonizers' cultures as superior, labels the colonized in derogatory terms, nationalistic literature (representation emerging from the margin) enables some valuable native agency to create a separate indigenous identity and show the binary to be an intentional misrepresentation of native cultures. As Elleke Boehmer (2005) notes, the nationalist resistance, in its endeavor to form self-identity, recognized the native culture as “rich, pure, and authentic” and “unadulterated by the depredations of colonialism” (96). This native mobility of self-assertion—embodied in indigenous literature—broke the literary monopoly of the center and subverted the manifestation of its “cultural superiority and rightness” (Boehmer 94-97). In the process of undermining the centre-margin or self-other binary, the idea of nation is a significant element. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2006) write:

One of the strongest foci for resistance to imperial control in colonial societies has been the idea of ‘nation’. It is the concept of a shared community . . . that has enabled post-colonial societies to

invent a self image through which they could act to liberate themselves from imperialist oppression. (117)

The concept of nation originated as a challenge to colonizer's constructions of the colonized people's identity (Loomba 185-86) or of the self-other binary in a colonial setting.

To resist the colonizer's construction, a nationalistic culture assumes to include all necessary elements, such as past tradition, class consciousness, and gender participation. However, the literature produced by that culture often fails to integrate many of these elements and excludes them just as the colonizer discards, neglects, misrepresents, and fabricates the social and cultural attributes of the subject people. Thus, nationalists inadvertently assume a covertly welcoming attitude toward some aspects of the colonial center. Discussing various critics' views about nationalism, Ania Loomba (1998) makes it clear that nations or "Imagined Communities," a term defined by Benedict Anderson, are actually not homogenous entities.⁴ In the imagined community called the nation, along with "fraternity" among all elements, fracture is common as well: "The 'fraternity' which represents the nation does not explicitly include them [women, lower classes, etc.] as equals, however, it always implicitly claims to represent them" (Loomba 197-98). In the next three sections, I will discuss how the narration in *Gora* marginalizes women such as Sucharita, Anandamoyi, and Lolita, whom critics frequently regard as the embodiments of liberal thought in the imagined and desired national space named India. I will argue that the novel's unidentified narrator exposes women to marginalization; at times the characters

too are made to assist this process. More importantly, sometimes Rabindranath fails to hide himself from narrative politics of exclusion. My perspective on the peripheral position of women in *Gora* distinctly differs from positions expressed in much of the existing critical literature. In fact, the main women of this novel—Anandamoyi, Sucharita, and Lolita—are appreciated by critics for their liberal and secular views and their individualistic stances in a space where women were mostly treated as dependants. But, in spite of being attributed with uncommon characteristics, which critics rightly point out, these women are pushed into a corner in the imagined community of the nation state.

To help me explain the marginalized position of the women of this novel, I will use Partha Chatterjee's (1989) theory about the home-world dichotomy in the discourse of Indian nationalism during the late nineteenth century. According to this critic, the nationalist project in British India divided the colonized space into world and home. The world was the domain of the native man, the "terrain of the pursuit of material interests." In the external and material world, the colonized male needed to compromise according to the requirement of the materially more powerful colonizer; he needed to learn modern science, technology, and political form from the West or the colonizer to fulfill his own material deficiency. On the other hand, the home, represented by the native woman, was a place for retaining a supposedly native spiritual culture. The term "spiritual" here meant virtues such as love, self-sacrifice, devotion, chastity, submission, patience, and so on, which the nationalists and gender reformists constructed to be essential attributes of the native woman. Chatterjee's research claims that the discourse of Indian

nationalism during the late nineteenth century considered this indigenous spiritual culture to be superior to the material culture of the colonial power. A native woman possessing spiritual virtues maintained her nation's identity as distinct from and superior to colonial culture. The nationalist construction of the new woman demanded that the native woman should nurture the spiritual or essentialized feminine virtues, even though she might experience changes in her material life because of western influences such as education and the removal of purdah or veil (Chatterjee 624-29). As Chatterjee summarizes, "No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become *essentially* Westernized" (627). In my reading of Rabindranath's novel *Gora*, I find the ideology of representing the spiritual domain through women working in the narration and in the actions of the characters. And the framing of this particular gendered space reduces the agency of women as I describe further.

In *Gora*, the New Women—as epitomized by Sucharita and Lolita—balance the outer or material world and the inner or spiritual home. They connect the public and private domains by being formally educated on the one hand and by retaining propriety on the other hand. While, according to Chatterjee's theory, education here is an outer or material and western impact, their modesty, loyalty, love, sacrifice, and submission are inner or spiritual and native essences. In a practical sense, female education, as we see in *Gora*, refines the critical faculty of women such as Sucharita and Lolita, and as mentioned above, critics have also agreed about the intellectual depth of these women. However, liberal training,

such as secular education, fails ultimately to make them autonomous individuals. In sections 2.3 and 2.5 I will explore how the women are confined to limited ability behind the shadow of this limited emancipation.

Chatterjee's other line of thought, which relates significantly to the next sections, is that when the nationalistic discourse included women mainly for their supposedly valuable femininity, it confined women under a patriarchal hegemony. The reformers expected to emancipate women from backward tradition by exposing them to liberal training, such as education and anti-colonial politics; nevertheless they addressed women in essentialized or culturally determined feminine terms for embodying the national identity and thereby determined set boundaries on their function (Chatterjee 627-29). In Chatterjee's view:

The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honor of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination. (629)

I find Chatterjee's critical view of nationalism noteworthy, because it crosses the obvious dividing line between colonial and national forces (632). Just as the colonized margin is viewed as the effeminate other in the masculine eyes of the colonial center, native women are viewed as pliant ground by their nationalistic male compatriots. The nationalistic and colonialistic ideologies then overlap in the case of gender. In *Gora*, Rabindranath's vision of a true civilization or national space, as symbolized by the femininity of Anandamoyi or Sucharita in

contrast to Gora's masculinity, ultimately conforms to the colonial ideology of women's submission.

In essence, though the discourse of nationalism claims to include women as supposedly autonomous subjects, they are also expected to be "feminine" in the name of creating a national identity. Thus nationalism, though seemingly launching an anti-colonial struggle, ironically plays a hegemonic and patriarchal role toward its own women, as does the colonizer. Under the pretext of the glorification of feminine virtues such as love, sacrifice, and motherhood, patriarchal nationalism affords little or no agency to women. The women are actually turned into mere elements of exclusion in the national space as they are subordinated to patriarchal hegemony. And here the binary of national/colonial is ineffective; rather, it creates an intersected space where both national and colonial ideologies share language. Two seemingly opposites—western colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism—intersect with each other in the subordination of women.

It is true that Rabindranath opposed nationalism, which, during the turmoil of the First World War, he denounced in *Nationalism* (1920) as the devouring "organization of power" originating from "the spirit of conflict and conquest" (21). Although he rejects the idea of political nationalism for its association with aggression, in many places in his political novels such as *Gora* and *The Home and the World*, he cannot come out of a nationalistic and therefore masculinistic view of gender. Rabindranath himself viewed women within the ideology of Victorian respectability, which shared a generalized male nationalistic vocabulary. In many

of his later writings Rabindranath celebrates women for the qualities that he regards as particularly feminine, and these qualities are the ones that the discourse of nationalism approves of as spiritual strengths. He views women as healers and nurturers in the essay “Woman” published in *Personality: Lectures Delivered in America* (1917):

Woman is endowed with the passive qualities of chastity, modesty, devotion and power of self-sacrifice in a greater measure than man is. It is the passive quality in nature which turns its monster forces into perfect creations of beauty—taming the wild elements into the delicacy of tenderness fit for the service of life. This passive quality has given woman that large and deep placidity which is so necessary for the healing and nourishing and storing of life. (173)

In the essay “Woman and Home,” published in *Creative Unity* (1922), Rabindranath expresses that love and tenderness are women’s exclusive property; that Indian women have “their simple faith in the sanctity of devotion lighted by love which is held to be divine. True womanliness is regarded in our country [India] as the saintliness of love” (162). As Rabindranath indicates in this essay, the possession of tender attributes—such as love, affection, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and the giving of encouragement—makes women ideally and psychologically distinct from men (*Creative Unity* 157-66). The same view recurs in his immediately pre-Second World War essay, “Nārī.” In this essay, he praises women for their “hrīday sampad” (“emotional assets”) which, Rabindranath believes, can rescue civilization from man’s destructive adventures (*Rabindra-*

racanabāli 24: 377-83). Rabindranath's featuring of women's attributes, in fact, mirrors the nineteenth century reformers' appeal to the New Woman to preserve and cultivate "such womanly virtues as chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience and the labors of love" (Chatterjee 629).

If we appreciate that Rabindranath shows utmost honor to women by prioritizing feminine virtues over masculine ones, it will be blind glorification. As we will find in the following sections, Rabindranath's gender view is reflected through the narrative device in *Gora*. It limits women's space behind the shadow of what Rabindranath terms as feminine virtues or spiritual strength and establishes their dependence on male characters. Thus Rabindranath appears to deliver a biased-message regarding gender through this novel. Moreover, in other parts of the narration the ironies and paradoxes unfold a marginalized image of the women. I explore particularly this similar kind of analysis in next chapter which deals with another novel—*The Home and the World*.

In *Gora* the women are backed into vulnerability in two ways. First, the narrative voice describes the actions and emotions of the female characters in a way that establishes their surrender. Second, the unidentified narrator's description of some male characters'—such as Gora's and Binoy's—feelings and reactions toward women determines the space of women and limits their power and ability through the ironic glorification of feminine virtues. The narrative of *Gora* marginalizes women through situational irony and equivocal word choices in the novel and sometimes Rabindranath is complicit in the process.

2.3 Sucharita's Position in *Gora*

When critics laud Sucharita's intellectual ability and critical faculty, they overlook her conformity to the nationalistic construction of a modern woman. After his one-month imprisonment, when Gora returns home, he realizes for the first time the necessity of including women in the nationalistic mission. The omniscient narrator describes Gora's feelings about Sucharita, "The womanhood of India was revealed to him in the figure of Sucharita, and he regarded her as the manifestation of all that was sweet and pure, loving and virtuous in the homes of his Motherland" (Tagore, *Gora* 272).⁵ In the narrative language, Sucharita becomes the "incarnation of the grace which shone upon India's children, *served* the *sick*, *consoled* the afflicted, and consecrated with *love* even the most insignificant" (*Gora* 272; emphasis added). She becomes the embodiment "of the power which never forsakes the meanest of us in our sorrows and misfortunes, which never despises us, and although entitled to worship offers its *devotion* to even the most unworthy amongst us" (*Gora* 272; emphasis added). Her praise continues: she represents a dedicated person whose "skillful and beautiful hands put the seal of *sacrifice* on all our works . . ." (*Gora* 272; emphasis added). Conforming to the discourse of nationalism as we saw in section 2.2, the narration here fixes some attributes—such as love, devotion, providing consolation, and sacrifice—as the virtues of a woman. Though these qualities are worthy of admiration, by essentializing these particularly to be feminine, the narrative decides and restricts the activities and space of women. It may seem that the text

elevates the woman to the position of a deity (“incarnation”), but it is a deity whose functions are predetermined and limited to those of healer and nurturer. Through Gora, the narrator here expects Sucharita to perform the tasks of sacrificing self, nursing the distressed, and loving the downtrodden. Sucharita is not choosing her actions; rather, being a woman, she is expected to accomplish the actions that Gora determines for her. Thus, a woman may receive a sanctified position being “consecrated with love,” but must suffer the restraint of subjectivity within the frame of the expected or imposed essentialized feminine image.

Very disturbingly Rabindranath personally approves the division of space and action based on gender (Azad 116-27).⁶ In the poem “Sōnāra Bāndhana,” Rabindranath addresses the woman as “grīhalakshmī” (“The Goddess of Home”) who is deeply tied with the virtues of “snēha” (“affection”), “prēm” (“love”), “karunā” (“pity”), and “shēba” (“providing service”) (*Rabīndra-racanabālī* 3: 26-27). Analyzed in this context, it clearly shows that Rabindranath articulates his notion about specific gender through the narration and character of Gora and thus plays the role of an accomplice to specify women’s function. Later, we will again find that Rabindranath’s fictional voice in *Gora* fails to conceal his subjective views on gender and thus loses objectivity.

In some places in the novel, Gora shows Rabindranath’s tendency to view women with the values traditionally imposed on women. For example, Gora invites Sucharita, “For my India, as a man, I can only work and if necessary die, but who, except you, can light the lamp of welcome to her? If you stand aloof the

service of India can never be beautiful” (*Gora* 313-14). In the duties required to form a nation, the role of the man is that of a worker, an active agent, who can choose to lay down his life. But the woman’s role is decorative and symbolic. Her contribution includes passively “welcom[ing]” or receiving the country, holding out a lamp and beautifying the nation. It reminds us of the cultural role of women to make a home graceful. We can also sense that Gora’s invitation reflects Rabindranath’s vision about the *grīhalakshmī*. But the woman’s proposed activity of welcoming and ornamenting the land appears to be indolent and unassertive compared to the man’s commitment to work and even, if necessary, to die for the nation.

The third-person narrator sketches Sucharita in images of shade and silence. Apparently, the image patterns reflect a New Woman’s modesty and gentle demeanor. For example, in chapter 20, while listening to Haran’s reading of an English article, Sucharita shades “her eyes from the glare of the lamp with a palm-leaf fan” (*Gora* 98). In the same chapter, when Gora is engaged in debate with Haran, “Sucharita was gazing at Gora from behind the shelter of her fan . . .” (*Gora* 99). Here the fan is not merely an object to protect Sucharita’s eyes from the light. It is also a screen behind which Sucharita can keep modest distance from direct eye contact with the gaze of a male, such as Haran or Gora. But Sucharita’s placement behind the shadow of a fan denotes her diffidence. She is attracted to Gora’s charismatic personality but she is under the “shelter” of the fan. She cannot come forward to have an open look at Gora. While indicating her bashful nature, the narrative voice ensures her self-resignation: “If she had been

conscious that she was staring at Gora she would doubtless have felt ashamed, but she was utterly oblivious of herself” (*Gora* 99). Sucharita, whom critics praise for her critical faculty, becomes unobservant of her own opinion. She engrosses herself so much in the charm of Gora’s oratory that she is “oblivious” or “*aātmabīsmrīta*” to her own presence.⁷ One might argue that this is the beginning of Sucharita’s love for Gora. But, in my view, this is also the beginning of Sucharita’s self-effacement under the supposedly feminine attributes of modesty and love.

It is not merely Sucharita’s intelligence, earned through her education and Western learning from Paresh Babu, that Gora admires; rather he is also impressed that Western influence, through education and public socialization, and though imparting her with keen intelligence, fails to make her undomesticated. In chapter 20 when the text describes Gora’s observation of Sucharita, the implied narrative voice seems to share Gora’s elation at finding a perfect embodiment of the feminine virtues:

Where was the least trace of the immodest forwardness which he [Gora] had always associated with educated girls? No doubt her [Sucharita’s] expression was one of bright intelligence, but how beautifully softened it was by her modest shyness. Her brow was pure and stainless like a glimpse of autumn sky: her lips were silent, but how like a tender bud with the soft curves of the unspoken word. (*Gora* 101)

The quotation here records the removal of Gora's misconception about educated woman. Through Gora's new realization, the implied narrator imparts the message that the educated New Woman does not mean to be arrogant. The New Woman also possesses delicate traits such as modesty and softness or in other words, *hrīday sampad* as Rabindranath has described elsewhere. But paradoxically, through the praise of an essentialized feminine virtue (modesty), the narrator impedes the operation of Sucharita's selfhood, for she has no voice besides the voice of Gora. Her lips are silent with the "unspoken word," "anūchchārīta kathā".⁸ If her silent lips indicate her humility, they also characterize her unassertiveness. Indeed, the qualities that the narration, impelled by Gora and also Rabindranath, picks out for fulsome praise themselves exemplify the passivity they impose upon Sucharita. The appreciation of Sucharita's feminine virtues in the text conforms to the patriarchal ideology of ascribing fixed or pliable attributes to a woman.

The image of Sucharita's silence recurs in the narration repeatedly. A list of examples can be drawn: "When Gora saw that Sucharita listened to him without attempting to make any answer his mind was filled with compassion . . ." (*Gora* 295). "As with these parting words he [Gora] left the room the very air seemed to tremble for a long time after he had gone, and Sucharita remained sitting motionless like a statue" (*Gora* 301). "She [Sucharita] merely suffered in silence without finding any remedy" (*Gora* 312). "For a long time she sat with her hands in her lap, still and silent like an image in a picture" (*Gora* 317). "Sucharita made no reply to this, but that she was ready to rely upon him to the full was

manifest even in her silence” (*Gora* 330). This series of quotations emphasizing Sucharita’s silence may reflect her calm and composed nature, but in most cases her silence preceded by Gora’s long and powerful speeches implies her unchallenging and sometimes compliant spirit.

I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that the narrative device of this novel demotes the major woman characters to subordinate status. As I show in the following and in next sections, sometimes the equivocal meanings of words and situational irony in the story demonstrate the working of discriminating gender politics in the text. Another of Rabindranath’s novels—*The Home and the World*, which is my concern in the next chapter—also bears words and images, the uncertain meanings of which expose the heroine to an ambiguous, often subjugated position. Moreover, we also see in this chapter that in other places the description or representation of woman in the text manifests her yielding and vulnerable image.

In section 2.1 I noted that Sucharita’s company enlarges Gora’s views, especially about women’s role in the national space. However, ironically, the novel presents Sucharita as a passive listener to Gora’s preaching. When Gora discusses religious and national topics with her, Sucharita’s reaction is mostly inquiring—receptive but rarely argumentative. The narration describes her in these words: “Sucharita listened with bowed head, her heart palpitating to find Gora addressing her specially, with such great eagerness” (*Gora* 103). Elsewhere, “Sucharita remained lost in thought awhile, and finding her silent, Gora went on: . . .” (*Gora* 104). Apparently, the image of her bowed head (*nata mūkh*)⁹ implies

both the concentration of her thoughts to Gora's words and also the expected modesty of a "bhadramahilā" ("respectable woman"; Chattejee 628) before a male stranger. But, with her "bowed head" and obliviousness of self, surely she appears to the readers to be intellectually defenseless before Gora's eloquent spirit.

The image of her bowed head also recurs later in the novel. In some examples, Sucharita's bowed head seems to denote her loyalty, obedience, or dissatisfaction. But as we will see, it conveys other meanings as well. The readers find Sucharita "listening with her head bowed" (*Gora* 296) to Gora's enthusiastic speeches about patriotism and immediately asking him for direction of her action. Here the gesture of a bowed head apparently shows her loyalty to the leader of a patriotic mission. In another example, on hearing Gora's support for idol worshipping, Sucharita "did not answer, but remained with head bent low" (*Gora* 311). As a Brahmo girl, Sucharita does not believe in the idol worship that Gora's Hindu practice requires. The meaning of her silence and bowed head is here a humble gesture of her dissenting belief about religious practice. But the readers do not find her expressing her objection in strong terms or even verbally. In both examples, Sucharita's loyal and humble gesture of a bowed head also shows her acceptance of Gora's authority over her.

Of all the women Sucharita employs her intellectual faculty the most. In an example we are told, "These were not words [Gora's words] which Sucharita could be expected fully to understand, but the first tide of impending realisation sets in strongly, and the realisation that life is not confined within the bonds of family or sect overwhelmed her with a painful force" (*Gora* 104). The

unidentified narrator exposes Sucharita to a wider intellectual domain beyond the teachings of her father, Paresh Babu, or her potential husband, Haran Babu. She also begins to develop her intellectual capacity with her new “realisation.” But she fails to swim in the “first tide of impending realisation;” rather, its “painful force” submerges her. Again, in the narrator’s view, Sucharita loses agency.

Looking closely at the semantic choices of the narration, it is evident that Rabindranath’s narrative device presents Gora before the end of the novel not only as an enthusiastic nationalist, but also as a strong male subduing this intelligent and educated New Woman, Sucharita. For instance, in chapter 23, the unidentified narrator is sympathetic to her confused intellectual state, but gives her no defense to overcome it. Failing to resist the living spirit of Gora’s words associated with the “power of faith” (*Gora* 122), Sucharita succumbs to him emotionally. The narrator asks rhetorically, “How could she have the heart to raise her hand against him [Gora] in rejection?” (*Gora* 122). The remark is meant to indicate Sucharita’s love for Gora, which begins to bloom at this point in the novel. Nevertheless through this question, the narrative voice welcomes Gora’s authority over Sucharita. It establishes the restriction imposed by Gora’s influential speeches on Sucharita’s heart and hands, the organs of her individual thought and action.

Sucharita’s life choices are influenced by male opinions. Some critics, such as Sarada and Bimanbehari Majumdar, find her to be a silent rebel, especially in her refusal to meet Kailash, the potential groom selected by her aunt. But for the most part the influential men in her life control her choices. Her

rebellion is fragile before Gora and Paresh Babu. Initially, Gora's militancy creates repugnance in Sucharita thus indicating some degree of independence. But very soon, being overwhelmed by his verbal fervor, she turns away from many of her lifelong beliefs. After having intellectual discussions with Gora about country and religion, Sucharita begins to change her own views. The text notes Sucharita's exclamation to herself: "'How insignificant my life has been,' she felt. 'What I thought of as certain up to now has become full of doubt; what I have been doing every day seems meaningless'" (*Gora* 119). It is noteworthy that Sucharita chooses the passive position for herself. Sucharita feels secure with Gora, as expressed by her acceptance of him as her "guru" or master (*Gora* 335). Sucharita is willing to serve the nation, but the shape of her work depends on Gora's instruction. The narrative records, "She felt that Gora ought, at such a time, to come to her and give her his commands, and show her the way" (*Gora* 358-59). She willingly accepts her position as a subordinate needing direction. Overwhelmed by Gora's preaching of Hindu nationalism, she comes out of her long-practiced Brahmo faith and confesses to her foster-father, Paresh Babu, "Look here, father, I tell you the truth when I say that I am really a Hindu, though before this I could never have got myself to acknowledge it. Now I say, without any hesitation, and even with emphasis, that I am a Hindu!" (*Gora* 354-55). Upon Paresh Babu's inquiry about her new faith, Sucharita informs him that she "read widely on this subject and had many discussions on it" (*Gora* 355). But her information sources are actually interviews with Gora and articles written and supplied by him.

A most unsettling part of the narration regarding Sucharita's religious transformation from Brahmoism to Hinduism is the implied narrator's indeterminate attitude toward nationalism. Gora's view of religion-based nationalism is the narrator's object of criticism. But the narrative device does not direct any indictment to Sucharita's conversion when she embraces Gora's philosophy. We can see the course of Sucharita's religious conversion in two ways. First, Sucharita's conversion exhibits conflict between the Brahmo and Hindu faiths, Western and Eastern ideas, and tradition and modernity on the evolving stage of Indian nationalism. In this view, the sequence of her progress—her initial repugnance toward Hindu idolatry, her emerging consciousness about India's heritage as gradually awakened by Gora's preaching, her acceptance of the Hindu faith, her simultaneous acknowledgement to Brahmo Paresh Babu as her father, and finally her approval of Binoy and Lolita's inter-communal wedding—traces a balancing between multiple faiths in a common space. Second, her journey records mental confusion, indecisiveness, and intellectual dependence of an educated woman who, unlike Harimohini and Barodasundari, ought to have deeper critical faculties. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the latter interpretation of Sucharita's journey through some extracts.

Gora's arguments in favour of the Hindu caste system begin to alter Sucharita's repulsive feeling about Hinduism and, until Paresh Babu shows her a counter-rationale, she undergoes tremendous inner turmoil. The omniscient voice reports, "As Paresh Babu was speaking, she felt for the time relieved of her internal conflict. . . . It was for the same reason that she now felt this restless

desire in her heart to be constantly taking shelter under Paresh Babu's wing, as she had done when a child" (*Gora* 121). Sucharita here seems to find temporary mental relief through a healthy discussion with Paresh Babu about Gora's views. Like a "child" she learns from her father about differing views. But unconsciously, she is inclined to be "relieved" by Paresh Babu's fatherly assurance; she is relying on Paresh Babu's intellectual support. In seeking intellectual shelter, the suggestion presented is that of a child, associating her with helplessness and dependency and thus reinforcing the view of Sucharita's intellectual subjection.

Another example of Sucharita's marginalization in the text is evident in her decision to marry the Brahmo fanatic, Haran Babu, while she is in a stage of spiritual vacillation. In the story the readers see her exercising her own will to choose her groom, but the decision itself is presented in an objectionable way. She seeks to shift her dependence from Paresh Babu to Haran Babu by "clutching at any support for setting at rest her distracted condition" (*Gora* 127) and "shap[ing] her life according to his [Haran's] ideas" (*Gora* 128). She is again presented as a weak, unstable human being, groping for support and strength outside of herself and her own faculties.

After Sucharita becomes familiar with Gora's ideas, "the conflict which was taking place, at every step, between the habits and customs which had their roots in her very childhood, and the new life towards which Gora was drawing her," as we are told, "made her restless" (*Gora* 311). The choice of the word "restless" ("asthīr")¹⁰ reveals the inner anxiety that she undergoes because of this

spiritual conflict. However, “restless” also connotes unsteadiness and inconsistency, mirroring Sucharita’s failure to show any firm belief of her own.

Later, when Sucharita takes Gora as her master and echoes his teachings to Paresh Babu, she cannot maintain her own stand rationally. Rather, her responses to Paresh Babu’s inquiry into the drawbacks of Hindu society are emotional: “‘I understand nothing about that,’ said Sucharita in a pained voice. ‘If this is true, that to-day all are forsaking it [Hindu society], then at such a time I at least will not forsake it [Hindu society]. Because we are children of this unfortunate time we must all the more stand by our society in its distress’” (*Gora* 357). Sucharita, who has already crossed the long road of spiritual tension and finally accepted the Hindu faith, recognizes herself as a child of restless times. By the word “child,” she may mean the intellectual helplessness of an individual in a transitional time in history, but like a “child,” she also acts unreasonably here. Indeed, like a child, she claims to “understand nothing” of Paresh Babu’s rational refutations of her positions.

After she offers herself in response to Gora’s appeal to work for India, “she asked herself why Gora had not put her to the test, and called her to undertake some well-nigh impossible task—in the whole of his party was there a single man who could, like herself, sacrifice everything so easily?” (*Gora* 359). Apparently the narration describes a woman’s eager desire to be involved in work for her nation. Nevertheless, there is a disturbing implication here. While “sacrifice” conveys the dedicated nature of Sucharita’s patriotism, it also has the connotation of renouncement. Thus through this word, she is associated with the

effacement of herself. Rather than actively choosing how to channel and prove her patriotic dedication, she is prepared to surrender her active agency through a “test” that she passively receives to prove her ability. In the narrator’s presentation, Sucharita’s patriotism is to be approved rather than proved.

To summarize, diction such as “restless,” “internal conflict,” “child,” “clutching support,” “understanding nothing,” and “distracted condition” in the extracts presented here reflect not only the conflict between the Hindu and the Brahmo faiths, but also identify a New Woman’s mental turbulence, her intellectual subjection to an influential man, and, finally, the surrender of her self. Sucharita has received a liberal education but she is not allowed in the narrative to exercise self-determination that comes with that education. She is in a dilemma until she chooses among options presented by males, whether the option is Paresh Babu’s affectionate teaching, Haran Babu’s wedding proposal, or Gora’s masculine appeal to rethink India.

Words such as “sacrifice,” “self-forgetfulness,” “disciple,” and “devotion” are used to reflect Sucharita’s character throughout the text. Nationalistic discourse may celebrate a character like Sucharita for these essentialized feminine virtues and, within its framework, a New Woman is allowed to be more educated, enlightened, and rational than women of lower classes or of the previous generations, such as the working girl, Lachmi, or the deprived widow, Harimohini.¹¹ However the material changes effected by education cannot erode the spiritual characteristics expected from her. Ultimately, independent power lies with the male in the ideology of male-dominated nationalistic discourse (which

ideology Gora and Rabindranath's narrative device share in complicity), which constructs this spiritual image of the woman and denies her autonomy. That is why Gora can be certain that Sucharita expects his "summons" (*Gora* 376).

2.4 Anandamoyi's Position in *Gora*

Anandamoyi is also a paradigmatic, marginalized character held under patriarchal hegemony. Two aspects of her character are commendable: her loving and self-sacrificing motherhood and her exceptional practice of secular humanitarianism in a fanatically religious society. In the opinions of critics, these two elements of Anandamoyi's character are related, as they associate her motherhood with tolerance and dedication to humanity. In spite of being the daughter of a Hindu scholar, she brings up a foreign, Christian foundling with motherly care and unflinching support, revealing her extraordinary philanthropism and individuality. In contrast to the simple way that the critics have seen Anandamoyi, I demonstrate that her presentation in the narrative is more problematic. In some places in the novel, as we will see, the narrator presents Anandamoyi in a way that the exercise of her agency becomes either destabilized or limited.

In the particular diction used in the third-person narrator's descriptions of Anandamoyi, we find an instability that shows her marginalized position, perhaps in spite of the narrator's opposite intention. For example, in Chapter 7, when Anandamoyi shares her meal with Binoy, she "fetching another plate for him [Binoy], helped him from her dish with the greatest solicitude and affection"

(*Gora* 31). In using the word “solicitude,” the narrator intends to express Anandamoyi’s attentiveness in serving a meal to her son. But the word also carries the meaning of “anxiousness.” The orthodox Gora reacts violently if Anandamoyi, who supposedly has turned into an untouchable by abandoning all kinds of religious customs, serves the high-caste Binoy in her room. Gora, to preserve caste purity, prohibits Binoy from taking a meal in Anandamoyi’s room. Gora’s reaction when Binoy dines in Anandamoyi’s room may cause Anandamoyi to feel some disquiet while sharing a meal with Binoy from the same plate and thus breaking Gora’s prohibition. Though she might be proving her unorthodoxy by inviting Binoy, who is high-caste, to her “untouchable” room, she cannot forget the orthodoxy of domineering Gora’s prohibition of her for serving food to Binoy. When the narrative voice uses the word “solicitude,” it is uncertain whether it means to describe Anandamoyi’s motherly care for Binoy or the anxiety she feels as she anticipates Gora’s indignation. In my view, both senses are implicated here and they help destabilize any settled meaning of the text.

Later, when Gora is imprisoned for his anti-colonial protest, Anandamoyi desires to meet her son in jail. But she is unable to approach either her husband or her elder son to accompany her as both of them are hostile toward Gora. The narration describes her loneliness: “For she also knew that it would be impossible to get any member of this orthodox household to take her, the lady of the house, to the lock-up where Gora was . . .” (*Gora* 164). Normally the word “lady” refers not only to a respectable woman or a mistress of the house, but also to a woman with authority. While the omniscient narrator is apparently sympathetic to the

distressed mistress of the house, who has no one to accompany her to meet her son in jail, he unintentionally creates irony by the use of the word “lady.” The mistress of the house actually has no authority over any male member of the family.

The image of Anandamoyi throughout the entire novel is one of a revered, motherly figure. To Gora and Binoy “she had offered the full adoration of a mother’s love from their early childhood” (*Gora* 177). The narration continues describing her affectionate raising of Gora and Binoy: “She had, indeed, shaped them [Gora and Binoy] with her own hands, like the images of Shiva which girls make for their own worship, and they had appropriated to themselves the whole of her devotion” (*Gora* 177). The narrator thus associates Anandamoyi’s love for her sons with the devotion expressed to the god, Shiva. But the mother’s position is subordinate to the position of the sons. Here, the mother is compared to the worshipper of her god-like sons. Moreover, the god Shiva, often worshipped as an ideal husband by Hindu virgins, is also an authoritative figure who is supposed to give wholeness to femininity. In comparing Gora and Binoy with Lord Shiva, or with “two idols” (*Gora* 177), the narrator again lowers Anandamoyi’s position, presenting her as a worshipper of her divine sons, who grant completeness to her female life.¹² Thus again we return to the theme of Anandamoyi’s marginalized position.

The Gora–Anandamoyi relationship is significant in this novel for a special reason: the narrative device shows tension between Hindu nationalism and universal humanism through their relationship. It presents the limitation of Gora’s

particular religion-based nationalism while indicating that Anandamoyi's liberal humanism is a better philosophy to create a harmonious space. For example, Gora's religious bigotry breaches his friendship with Binoy, but Anandamoyi's humanistic generosity helps to create a loving family. However, contrary to this interpretation, I find another dimension in the son–mother kinship. In the following, we see that Rabindranath's biased gender notion is transparent through his narrative voice in the Gora–Anandamoyi relationship.

The colonial trial sentences Gora to imprisonment and Gora courageously accepts the punishment. Before his trial, Gora sends a letter to Anandamoyi from the police station. In this letter we find the image of male as a combatant in the outside, material world as reflected in Rabindranath's poem "Sōnōra Bāndhana." Gora writes to his mother Anandamoyi in his letter:

But, mother, don't be thinking only of your child. There are many other mother's sons lying in gaol,—through no fault of theirs,—I would stand on the same ground with them and share their hardships. If this wish of mine is fated to be fulfilled this time, pray do not let that distress you. . . .

So to-day I say to myself: 'I am going to gaol voluntarily, of my own accord, without regrets, or anger, simply to take its shelter.' There is a certain amount of inconvenience in its food and other arrangements . . . What we accept of our own free will ceases to be a hardship . . . I go there, [gaol] willing and content.

While in the enjoyment of our comforts at home, we are quite unable to appreciate what an immense privilege it is to have the freedom of the outside air and light—we are all the time forgetful of the multitudes who, with or without fault of their own, are subjected to confinement and insult and deprived of this God-given privilege. We give no thought to these multitudes, nor feel any kinship with them. I now want to be branded with the same stigma as they, not to keep myself clear by hanging on to the goody-goody majority who are dressed up to look respectable.

I have learnt much of life, mother, after this experience of the world. (*Gora* 162-63)

With his chosen “experience of the world” and “certain amount of inconveniences” in prison, Gora emulates Rabindranath’s male-striver in “Sōnāra Bāndhana” involved in “sangsār-sangrāmē” ‘material struggle’ or “yūdha-dwandwa” ‘conflict’ (*Rabindra-racanabālī* 3: 26).

Now the question is how Rabindranath’s narrative voice reports this correspondence. And how does it present Anandamoyi’s reaction? The omniscient narrator praises the letter as “wonderful” (*Gora* 178), thus validating Rabindranath’s definition of male activity and space. Another of Rabindranath’s poems “Mother Bengal” (1896) also specifies male-action and domain:

In sin and saintliness, to rise and fall,
in joy and sorrow let your offspring grow.
Do not home-nestle them, O fond Bengal,

eternal infants all – but let them go.

.....

Let them risk all, themselves their only aid,

with good and bad to tussle in the fray.

Take up your reedy sons, that pious brigade,

and send them homeless out on a hard way. (1-4, 9-12)

Not surprisingly Gora's self-chosen struggle makes him the son of the nation as desired by Rabindranath and he approves Gora's undertaking through the acclamation of his narrative device.

On the other hand, the omniscient narrator recounts Anandamoyi's emotions in the following manner when she fails to meet her son in jail: "So she forebore to press her request, and returned to her own room with compressed lips and the shadow of suppressed pain in her eyes. . . . It had always been her habit to adjust all her anxieties silently within herself" (*Gora* 164-65). Anandamoyi's tolerance reminds us of the sacrificing image of Rabindranath's *grīhalakshmī* or Sita and Savitri—the mythic characters whom he pays homage in "Woman and Home" for their self-renouncing ideal.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the text separates actions and roles according to gender. The male has public, material, and outside responsibilities in which he is an autonomous decision-maker. In contrast, the woman is confined at home, doing service and sacrifice for the man. Though a woman might seem to be magnanimous for generosity of her heart, the very determination of her space and action is restricting her own choice.¹³

Rabindranath's subjective gender philosophy also gets interwoven with his narrative mechanism and thus the text appears to encourage the home-world dichotomy with emphasis on woman's glorification, which, actually, is ironic.

In the colonial battleground, Gora's relationship with his mother is founded on a nationalistic concept that incorporates the cult of motherhood. In the article "Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal," Jasodhara Bagchi writes that during the late-nineteenth century colonial confrontation, Bengali motherhood—typically identified as the symbol of love, self-sacrifice, and endurance—came to represent native identity and individuality (65). For the Bengali male, the best symbol of national identity was motherhood that they could distinctively call their own (Bagchi 65-66). Likewise, Gora imparts a nationalist message in distinguishing Indian womanhood from Western womanhood:

"The scriptures tell us," persisted Gora, "that Woman is deserving of worship because she gives light to the home,—the honor which is given her by English custom, because she sets fire to the hearts of men, had better not be termed worship." . . .

"I affirm that all the exaggerated language about women that you find in English books has at bottom merely desire. The altar at which Woman may be truly worshipped is her place as Mother, the seat of the pure, right minded Lady of the House." (*Gora* 9)

Under this seemingly glorified position of motherhood, Gora emphasizes what Bagchi describes as the "social philosophy of deprivation for women" (70). As

Bagchi continues, the legitimacy of motherhood ideology ultimately deprived women of exercising their own agency (70). Other than “producing heroic sons” and sacrificing themselves (including their physical and mental health) for the welfare of those sons, women had no choice of self-fulfillment (Bagchi 70). Gora’s letter to Anandamoyi reveals his unconscious expectation that mothers like Anandamoyi should “sacrifice everything for their menfolk” (Bagchi 70). Gora knows he is the only support in his mother’s life. Losing him would mean losing “everything” for Anandamoyi. Ironically, Gora desires to alleviate the “hardships” of imprisoned male nationalists by burdening his mother with emotional hardship. Anandamoyi is left with no choice other than to tolerate the pain caused by Gora’s chosen activity (imprisonment). Even while Gora’s preoccupation with an all-enduring and self-sacrificing mother places the woman’s image in a noble light, it is disturbing.

Anandamoyi’s function as presented in the text, can sometimes be interpreted in more than one way. For example, after receiving his custodial sentence, Gora is dejected at sensing the impending breach of his friendship with Binoy. The fruitless enthusiasm of Abinash and his gang also frustrates him. At this juncture, his mother’s image revives him with the promise of regeneration: “No matter what happens, I have my mother. And she is calling for me. She will unite me with everyone. She will not permit me to remain at a distance from any one” (*Gora* 269-70). We can analyze this comment in two ways. First, here, Gora expects that his mother will unify everyone with indiscriminate filial love, just as his motherland shelters the followers of different religions and languages without

discrimination. The mother is dynamic in a sense that she is able—as suggested by the verbs “call”, “unite,” and “permit”—to create a world, emotionally peaceful and morally inspiring. This feminine form of mother creates a nationalistic dimension against the masculine force of colonial oppression.¹⁴ The masculine strength of colonial power creates a wound in Gora’s material world; the colonial trial sentences Gora to imprisonment. Moreover, colonial influence is responsible for his separation from his closest friend, Binoy, who intends to marry a Western-educated Brahmo girl. In contrast, the feminine image of the loving mother soothes Gora’s emotional injuries. Now, like Gora, Rabindranath’s narrative device presents this regenerative vision of the mother in a positive light. The narrator describes the vision as taking place in the “sunlight of mid-day” (*Gora* 270), leaving the effect of “complete harmony” (*Gora* 270) on Gora. The brightness of the time and completeness of the effect of the vision indicate the narrator’s positive attitude toward Gora’s vision. Interestingly, Rabindranath implicates his own view about women—that they are the reservoirs of *hrīday sampad*, tender virtues of a *grīhalakshmī*—through his narrative system and the character of Gora.

Second, in this particular example, the narration limits Anandamoyi’s activity like Sucharita’s. While the presentation of the mother is entirely positive, Gora determines Anandamoyi’s only function as that of a healing encourager. By speaking so approvingly of Gora’s vision, Rabindranath’s narrative voice or omniscient narrator also restrains the woman’s power. Like Sucharita’s, Anandamoyi’s task is fixed inside the frame of providing emotional service. In

fact in this novel most of the time the women actually bear the responsibility to render emotional support. Returning to the issue of the author's connection, I find that here Rabindranath himself is involved in complicity with the omniscient narrator and Gora to ascribe certain virtues only to women and thus to define their boundaries.

The readers are aware of Anandamoyi's suffering through the unidentified narrator's report:

Gora had always stood between them [Anandamoyi and Krishnadayal] as the Vindhya mountain range, dividing their married life. On the one side was Krishnadayal [Anandamoyi's husband] with all his paraphernalia of strict orthodoxy, and on the other Anandamoyi alone with her untouchable Gora. . . .

Thus Anandamoyi's affection for Gora had become wholly her own treasure. She tried in every way to make his life in that family, where he was merely on sufferance, as easy as possible. . . . The whole burden of Gora, she felt, rested on herself alone. . . .

In the midst of this hostile family she had submitted to much revilement and had endured much sorrow, without being able to ask any one else to share it. (*Gora* 163-64)

In my view, Anandamoyi's suffering as presented in the text has a two-fold significance. First, it portrays a liberal and altruistic picture of Anandamoyi. She herself conceals her pain from everyone, and particularly from Gora, so that it will not distress him. Gora's adoption exposes her to conjugal disruption and

backbiting from her surroundings. Anandamoyi's hiding of her suffering from Gora indicates the nobility of her mind. But, her sacrifice has a second dimension, which is my concern here, because it is not as innocent as the first. While Anandamoyi conceals her sorrow, the central character Gora is also ignorant of and inattentive to her agony, even from the most noticeable events such as his father's distance from Anandamoyi and the virulent backstabbing to which the society subjects her. This ignorance and inattention mirrors patriarchal society's ignorance of the plight of women, subsumed under the predetermined image of self-sacrificing motherhood projected by the motherhood-ideology of the nationalist era in nineteenth-century India.

However, the implied narrator does not leave Gora's unawareness beyond criticism. Apart from knowing Anandamoyi's sacrifice, here we also sense disapproval of Gora's ignorance through the use of the single word "burden." Through its use, we perceive the narrator's observation that Gora, who should have noticed and shared his mother's untold pain, is instead carelessly unconcerned about it.

Anandamoyi sometimes marginalizes herself to leave space for Gora's development. As we saw in section 2.1, Anandamoyi receives much attention for her secular and humanitarian philosophy and, in the tug of war between society and the individual, Anandamoyi has chosen her corner of her society in trying events and has exercised her autonomous will. Nevertheless, she cannot help but conform to patriarchal society in certain circumstances. Bagchi and Chatterjee have noted that the hegemonic coaxing of becoming a loyal and sacrificing

mother was a patriarchal strategy to limit women's agency in the nationalist era. Anandamoyi is also a victim of this patriarchal trap in some instances, as for example, in her separation from her own society and custom. It is not that she excludes herself from her Hindu surroundings for her own needs. Rather, her self-banishment is the result of her wish to give Gora a sense of belonging to a particular family, society, and identity. Viewed in this context, Anandamoyi's claim that her life is not "merely to please husband and children" becomes questionable (*Gora* 219).

Anandamoyi's success or failure as a woman with liberal attitudes ultimately depends on Gora's inner development. If, at the end of the novel, Gora did not reject his narrow fundamentalism, Anandamoyi's secular philosophy would have been pushed to the fringes of this vast narrative. Anandamoyi's triumph is not in her influence on Gora because we do not find the narrative device establishing Anandamoyi's principle until the protagonist Gora willingly accepts it for himself. The characters she can affect—such as Binoy and Paresh Babu—are never bigots like Gora and so she cannot claim any extra credit for convincing them. It is Gora's final change into a secular man that validates her philosophy and gives it significance. This is noticeable in Gora's final conversion. In his rejection of "sectarian barriers," he embraces Rabindranath's philosophy of "building of a Mahajati in India on the basis of a broad humanism" (S. Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement* 85). Gora, in the final episode of the novel, comes to symbolize Rabindranath's vision of India as a harmonious whole of all races, castes, and religions that he (the author) has been expressing in his writings

during the post-riot period of the *Swadeshi* era (S. Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement* 85-86). While it is Anandamoyi who has embodied Rabindranath's vision throughout the novel, ultimately the narrator requires the conversion of the male protagonist (Gora) to establish this philosophy. When Gora recognizes the futility of his narrow sectarianism, he first comes to Paresh Babu to be initiated by *mantram* or the principle of secular humanism:

To-day give me the *mantram* of that Deity who belongs to all,
Hindu, Mussulman, Christian, and Brahmo alike—the doors to
whose temple are never closed to any person of any caste
whatever—He who is not merely the God of the Hindus, but who
is the God of India herself! (*Gora* 407)

Gora's new ideology has been Anandamoyi's all along, but rather than come to her first, Gora comes to a male *guru* in order to be a devotee of the "He" God who personifies his new faith. He finally embraces Anandamoyi in the last chapter, and her secular sensibilities are now accorded prominence—but only because the male protagonist has come to prove their dignity through his acceptance.

One may argue that the readers are free to prefer Anandamoyi's viewpoint to Gora's. Even if Gora did not accept Anandamoyi's approach at the end of the novel, it would not lose its importance to the readers. But, as I have already mentioned, in that case, Anandamoyi's perspective would have been left with other ideas in this vast novel—full of contrasting and different opinions. Rabindranath needs to consolidate Anandamoyi's outlook, which is also his, and

that is why he needs to show Gora as a follower of Anandamoyi in the terminal point to signal the weight of Anandamoyi's philosophy.

2.5 Lolita's Position in *Gora*

Like Anandamoyi and Sucharita, Lolita contributes to the development of a male character in this novel—Binoy—by creating a nurturing space through love, sacrifice, loyalty, and devotion. While she is encouraging and supportive of Binoy, her fiery rebelliousness prods Binoy's growth beyond the shadow of Gora's influence. Even then, her defiant spirit finally finds its destination in marriage, which the patriarchal ideology judges to be essential to complete womanhood. Often the essentialized feminine values are embodied through the social institution—marriage, the typical cultural destination of women.

As we saw in section 2.1, existing criticisms have viewed the Lolita–Binoy inter-communal marriage in a desirable light. Lolita's love and marriage manifest several messages: a woman's rebellion against conservative social custom, gender equality, and liberal–humanist practice. When the novel was written, inter-communal marriage was almost impossible because of religious and ritualistic differences. Lolita, a Brahmo, falls in love with Binoy, a Hindu, and after overcoming tremendous social obstacles, they marry. It is a radical step for a single woman to entertain a marriage proposal from a man to whom marriage is not socially acceptable. The message that the Lolita–Binoy subplot conveys is that marriage is a bond of two human hearts beyond caste and creed. Lolita and Binoy's marriage contradicts the mutual suspicion and hostility that their two

sects bear against each other. The conflict resulting from inter-communal marriage of a Brahmo and a Hindu captures the tension between narrow sectarianism and liberal humanism in this novel.

But there are other aspects that trouble the interpretation of the Binoy–Lolita inter-communal marriage as an example of progressive minds. The need for their marriage is also driven by the matter of chastity, revealing a vulnerability of women in a male-dominated society. When Lolita leaves the English magistrate’s house alone in protest of his tyranny and returns to Calcutta with her family friend Binoy, her action provokes much controversy in the Brahmo community. Lolita’s regular meetings with Binoy at her father’s home and, finally, her chaperone-less night journey by steamer with Binoy transgress the socially determined interaction limits between men and women. Scandalous rumor against Lolita spreads throughout the Brahmo community and profoundly damages her reputation. Thus, Lolita suffers the assault that patriarchal society inflicts on a woman’s individual choices by questioning her chastity. To stop Lolita’s reputational crisis, the narrator chooses the option of marriage when Anandamoyi advises Binoy that by marrying Lolita, he can “easily save her from the clutches of such a rumour” (*Gora* 253). However, while the false scandal itself is offensive, the solution to the scandal—marriage—is disturbing. Her marriage to Binoy, undertaken to stop the scandal, emphasizes that marriage is the ultimate harbor for a woman’s honor.

One may argue that the marriage is never a gross compromise on Lolita’s part, because the love that grows between her and Binoy drives the couple to be

united through marriage. But the narrator provides eyewash for Lolita's social vulnerability by hiding it under the guise of love. The text through which the narration depicts the love problematizes Lolita's liberal and feminist image. In the following, I illustrate this argument through some quotations. We will also see that though the purpose of the narration originally is not to devalue Lolita, an implication of her being underestimated is always present in the text.

The narrative voice refers to the idea of a male God in chapter 30 where it narrates the experiences of the night journey. The narration directly compares watchful Binoy guarding sleeping Lolita in the steamer cabin with a male God, the "ever-awake Bridegroom, who watches over the universe" (*Gora* 154). In the romantic setting of the riverbank and the woods, the metaphor of the bridegroom is connected with the growing love and care for Lolita that is in Binoy's heart. But by relating Binoy to God, the comparison also raises Binoy's status to that of the supreme protector for Lolita in her vulnerability. More broadly, it is disturbing to see Rabindranath's narrative device draw an analogy between the husband's position and God's. The metaphor raises the husband's position to the level of divinity while the potential bride or Lolita is subordinated to the position of an object. It should be noted here that Lolita is compared to a natural element—the "pearl in its shell." The husband here is not an equal companion but rather a superior being, the Highest Supreme Self, the *Purusha* keeping vigilance to protect Lolita or the potency of the *Prakriti* or Nature. Thus, although the narrative voice extols the love that is growing in Binoy's heart, it actually determines a dependent and lower position for Lolita, who believes in and aspires

to gender equality. The metaphor continues: Lolita, the “untameable girl,” (*Gora* 153) the one who has inspired the development of Binoy’s character, now lies in a crouching position in her sleep. The narrator writes, “Like a pearl in its shell, Lolita lay wrapped in the silent darkness, enveloped by the starry heavens . . .” (*Gora* 154). Lolita, the exceptionally courageous girl, who has accepted Binoy as her special companion during this night journey, must be as valuable as a pearl to the fascinated Binoy. But the metaphor is problematic, confining, as it does, the space of this “pearl” within the constraints of its shell. She is now “wrapped” in a “silent darkness,” and even the limitless “starry heavens” confine her. This constrained space, predetermined for her, is marriage, and within that shell she is to be protected, a pearl for her male companion, to be sheltered, guarded, and appreciated as a passive thing of value. Even her core trait of fiery rebelliousness cannot save Lolita from her fate of being constricted and suspended in this way, and the narrator is complicit in this process.

In the same chapter, the narrator describes Lolita’s love for Binoy when, in the morning, after waking up from sleep, Lolita stares at the tired Binoy sleeping on a deck chair:

Immediately she [Lolita] slipped back to her cabin with tremulous footsteps and, standing at the door, gazed on Binoy . . . —his [Binoy’s] figure, for her, becoming the centre of the galaxy of stars which watched over the world.

As she looked on, her heart filled with an indescribable sweetness and her eyes brimmed over with tears. It seemed as

though the God whom her father had taught her to worship, had come to-day and blessed her with outstretched hand; and, at the sacred moment when, on the slumbering bank of the river, cosy under the foliage of its dense woods, the first secret union of the coming light with the departing darkness took place, the poignant music of some divine *vina* seemed to ring through this vast star-spangled chamber of the universe. (*Gora* 156)

In the narrator's language, two beings exist in this setting—the *Purusha* or God who manifests himself through the sleeping Binoy, and the rest of the universe, the outward nature, the *Prakriti*, consisting of woods, river, sunlight, and Lolita. The divine music pervades nature of which Lolita has become a part. The union of *Purusha* and *Prakriti* reminds us of an ideal Hindu marriage which, from a symbolic perspective, establishes harmony between God and a human being. However, the harmony created between Binoy and Lolita through love places the male partner in a divine, high, and overpowering position while determining the role of a passive receiver for the female partner as the text notes God condescends to bless Lolita.

The description continues to prove patriarchal, restraining Lolita's subjectivity, as we are told, "For it had come to this pass, that the thought of Binoy had taken complete possession of her mind" (*Gora* 224). Apparently, by the word "possession," the narration denotes that love for Binoy completely occupies Lolita's heart. However, the use of the word "possession" in the sense of control or ownership also suggests that Lolita loses her self-control and Binoy

now “owns” her heart. In this latter view, Lolita, whom critics always praise for her subjective decision to control her own life and actions, is in the narrative’s language in fact an object to be owned or controlled. Once again we return to the argument of Lolita’s marginalization in the text which is my key concern in this section.

In chapter 52 we find the description about Binoy’s secret rapture at the prospect of his probable union with Lolita: “Had not this flood of abuse which had overwhelmed Lolita taken her and floated her to the secure refuge of his heart? He could not banish from his mind the image of Lolita borne by this flood away from her own society towards him . . .” (*Gora* 249). Society is uncompromisingly pitiless with Lolita, and Lolita has no place to go except the “secure refuge” or “hrīdayer dāngā”¹⁵ that Binoy can offer. By using the phrase “secure refuge,” the text ensures Binoy’s love for Lolita and indicates that only Binoy’s marriage proposal can secure a place of safety for her. Apparently in this presentation we sense the implied narrator’s implicit joy that human feeling triumphs over societal division. Nevertheless, here the image of Lolita is disturbing. It presents her as a helpless and distressed woman; she is like floating straw struggling for a stronghold possibly in marriage with Binoy. Lolita, who has been fighting against social taboos and endeavoring to establish identity, is shown as rootless and dependent, like a piece of straw floating on a flood of abuse. The very word “refuge” denotes several meanings connected with shelter or escape. Binoy’s love is the only secure anchorage on which she can depend.

In the same chapter, Lolita and Binoy's inter-communal marriage is predicted favorably:

There was no true obstacle to the union of Lolita and Binoy. God, the inner Lord of both their hearts, knew how ready Binoy was to sacrifice the whole of his life for her welfare and happiness—was it not He who had drawn Binoy so close to her from the very first? —there was no obstacle in His eternal decrees. Was the God who was worshipped in the Brahmo Samaj by people like Panu Babu some different Being? Was He not the Ruler of human hearts?
(*Gora* 251)

By the “eternal decree” of God, these disciples of two different sects fall in love with each other. Again we find the narrative voice identifying inter-communal love as a unifying and permissive societal force. But, in its language, at the agency of a male God, it is Binoy's life that is to be “sacrifice[d]” by rescuing the damsel in distress. The sacrifice is seen as being Binoy's, even though, in reality, Lolita too made a similar sacrifice by risking her good name. Thus the use of the word “sacrifice” cannot escape the partial perspective of the narrator. More disturbingly, the god is here patriarchal because, instead of proving Lolita's innocence, he decrees refuge in marriage for her uncommitted deviance. Lolita is accused of transgressing social propriety. The overall tone of the narrative indicates that the Brahmo community doubts her, suspecting that she was unchaste during her night journey with Binoy, even though she actually slept in the steamer cabin all through the night.

Rabindranath envisages a secular space—religiously tolerant and essentially humanistic—for emerging India, as I discussed in chapter 1. When his narrative device presents Lolita’s inter-communal love and marriage in a positive tone, Rabindranath’s vision is reflected through it. However, as I discussed above, the narration itself marginalizes Lolita, the educated New Woman, through text and situational irony. As the narrative mechanism in many places mirrors Rabindranath’s subjective notions about nationalism and gender, he cannot escape the responsibility when his device indicates a subordinate position for Lolita in the text.

It is undeniable that Sucharita’s intellectual depth and patriotic commitment, Anandamoyi’s unprejudiced motherhood, and Lolita’s non-sectarian love are some exemplary key-steps to create Rabindranath’s cherished humanistic national state. Nevertheless this is not their only presentation. On the whole, the gender issue in *Gora* unsettles it as a homogenous narrative of a nation distributing equal importance between male and female agency. The nationalistic discourse, through its literature, seeks to liberate the dependent identity of the colonized; however, in the case of its own women, the same discourse applies hegemonic force to ensure women’s dependence. Likewise, the text of *Gora* enfeebles the subjectivity of the main woman characters—Anandamoyi, Sucharita, and Lolita.

Notes

¹ For the phrase “new women” see Partha Chatterjee (627-28). Also see it as quoted in Geraldine Forbes (28-29). The “new women” referred to modern, educated and purdah-free Indian women emerged in colonial Bengal.

² To know about Hindu Revivalism and Brahmoism see Syed Akram Hossain (61-63). Also see Forbes (12-13) to understand colonial reasons and insistence for Indian women's modernization.

³ For details see Partha Chatterjee's article cited and discussed in section 2.2. Also see Keshab Chandra Sen's "The Reconstruction of Native Society" in *Keshub Chunder Sen's Lectures in India* (299-320), Rajnarain Bose's *Sē kāla āra ē kāla*, and Bhūdeba Mukhopādhyāya's essay "Lajjāsīlatā" in *Bhūdeba-racanāsamhāra* (453-56). Rajnarain Bose, the Brahmo-nationalist and modernist regretted that contemporary native women lacked the traditional virtues such as affection, kindness, and devotion to husband ((87-88). Keshab Chandra Sen, the dynamic Brahmo reformer and leader, was alarmed to find that the contemporary female education was incomplete as it failed to train the native women to "please" their husbands and parents (313-14). In other words, these intellectuals recognized these attributes as the distinguishing features of their own women.

⁴ See Anderson's "Imagined Communities" in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (123-25). Anderson defines the nation as an "imagined political community" (124).

⁵ The subsequent quotations from the English novel are taken from Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* published by Macmillan. For details see Work Cited.

⁶ I find Humayun Azad's criticism of Rabindranath useful. From a feminist perspective, Azad analyzes some of his poems and essays. Like Chatterjee's, Azad's work also depends on the home-world theory. It provides the theoretical basis of some parts of this dissertation which concentrate on Rabindranath's two novels that are hardly discussed in Azad's work. Azad's argument is that based on Victorian home-world concept, Rabindranath's gender notion confines women into home and ensures male domination over her (116-44). However, some paragraphs from Sucharita and Anandamoyi sections will show that unlike Azad, I do not see the supposedly feminine virtues essentially negative attributes. Rather these can be interpreted in more than one way.

⁷ For the Bengali term see *Gora* (Tagore, *Rabindra-racanabāli* 6: 236).

⁸ For the Bengali term see *Gora* (Tagore, *Rabindra-racanabāli* 6: 238).

⁹ See *Gora* (Tagore, *Rabindra-racanabāli* 6: 240).

¹⁰ For the Bengali term see *Gora* (Tagore, *Rabindra-racanabāli* 6: 471).

¹¹ For reference to the expected distinction between educated New Women and other native women, see Partha Chatterjee's article cited in section 2.2.

¹² Rabindranath wrote "dutī krōdadebatā" for "two idols" in Bengali *Gora* (*Rabindra-racanabāli* 6: 327).

¹³ Chatterjee's and Azad's discussions help me to formulate this interpretation.

¹⁴ As Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan note, in the prevailing post-colonial view, colonization is represented through masculine metaphors (102-103).

¹⁵ See the Bengali phrase in Bengali *Gora* (Tagore, *Rabindra-racanabāli* 6: 406).

CHAPTER THREE

Bimala and the Muslim community in *The Home and the World*

This chapter focuses on the uncertain representation of woman in Rabindranath Tagore's eighth novel, *The Home and the World*—the translation of *Ghare-Baire* published in 1916. In the previous chapter, I showed how Rabindranath through the narrator marginalized women in *Gora* a few years earlier. In this chapter I will argue that in *The Home and the World*, the representation of woman in narration is quite ambiguous. Between the publications of these two novels, Rabindranath becomes more bitter about the politics of nationalism; *The Home and the World* reflects Rabindranath's disapproval of jingoistic nationalism. But while the presentation of politics is clear in this novel, the image of woman participating in gender modernization and anti-colonial politics is uncertain. I will argue this proposition by examining Rabindranath's indeterminate use of images, metaphors, and semantic choices in the novel.

Rabindranath develops his narrative technique in this novel. In *Gora* he uses univocal narrative mode; and in *The Home and the World*, he employs multi-voiced narrative strategy. In stead of a third-person omniscient narrator, there are three narrators—Bimala, Nikhil, and Sandip—in this novel. As none's narration is privileged over others', the readers evaluate a character from the narration and report given by all three voices. This kind of polyvocal narration helps readers sense the ideological differences of the characters and see the events from different angles. Nevertheless, there is a stylistic similarity in the stories narrated

by these three characters. In their narrations, I find words, phrases, and images which suggest bipolar nature of the woman—Bimala.

There are similarities between the portrayals of women in these two novels. Like Sucharita and Lolita, Bimala, the heroine of *The Home and the World*, connects the private space—the home—with the public space—the world—by receiving liberal education and participating in *Swadeshi* movement or the anti-colonial politics on the one hand and by performing the traditional duties of a housewife on the other. As we saw in the previous chapter, the narrator in *Gora* marginalizes Sucharita and Lolita although seemingly intending to celebrate them. Similarly, the narrative of *The Home and the World* acknowledges various positive aspects of Bimala's character, such as her agency, sexuality, and inner strength while marginalizing her at the same time. As we will see later the delineation of Bimala is very much paradoxical.

Apart from discussing Bimala's representation, I will also focus on the marginalized image of the Muslim minority directly reflected through narration. During the time of India's developing nationalism, Rabindranath was deeply concerned about the welfare and political position of the Muslim minority in the religiously pluralistic society. In the last section, I will argue that in spite of Rabindranath's having a personal philosophy of religious tolerance, the narrative of *The Home and the World* presents a biased portrayal of the Muslim minority. The image of the devalued Muslim community in this novel questions the authenticity of Rabindranath's secular national space. The ending of *Gora* celebrates the concept of universal humanism among all religions, castes and

racism. Instead of the ideal of nationalism, Rabindranath chooses it as a way for harmonizing a pluralistic society. However, I find none of the narrators created by Rabindranath as a follower of the author's proposed idea of tolerance.

I mentioned in chapter two that in Rabindranath's view militant nationalism was destructive for human civilization while woman was a constructive element for it. When I compare these two novels, I find that from 1909 to 1916, Rabindranath's view about the politics of nationalism and women does not significantly change. Rather, he becomes more vocal for women's dignity and rights as reflected in his short stories, such as "Haymantēē" and "Strēer Patra," published in 1914 in the famous literary magazine *Sabuj Patra*, in which *Ghare-Baire* too was first serialized. However, when the narrative of *The Home and the World* shows the downfall of Bimala by associating her with the politics of nationalism (*Swadeshi* movement), Rabindranath's supportive view about women's emancipation becomes uncertain. By criticizing nationalism through Bimala's tragedy, the narrative, in turn, restricts Bimala's agency, which the politics of *Swadeshi* nationalism activates. Thus the woman is marginalized in this novel. But, ironically, the narrative at the same time acknowledges and celebrates the woman's subjectivity and sexuality, which had been ignored in contemporary conservative Bengali society. Now my purpose is to discuss this indeterminate presentation of Bimala.

A brief synopsis of the novel may be helpful for the reader. The three main characters of the novel—Nikhil, Bimala, and Sandip—narrate the story from their own perspectives. The plot of the novel centers on Bimala, the wife of

Nikhil, the philanthropic *zamindar* (“landlord”) of an estate in East Bengal. Bimala has been serving her husband with the utmost devotion of a traditional Bengali wife for eight long years. Unlike his libertine and insensitive male ancestors, Nikhil proves to be an exceptional husband holding a liberal vision of conjugal equality. With a view to modernize his traditional Hindu wife, Nikhil exposes her to western education and introduces her to the world outside *zenana*, the private space traditionally reserved for women. During the anti-British political struggle known as *Swadeshi* movement—or the struggle to bring about the independence of the country, Nikhil’s close friend Sandip, a demagogic nationalist, comes to his estate to rouse people against British raj. Both Bimala and Sandip find passionate inclinations towards each other and very soon Bimala responds to Sandip’s seductive wooing. Comparing her with an inspirational goddess, Sandip also encourages Bimala to participate actively in the nationalistic cause. Under Sandip’s magnetic influence, Bimala begins to think of herself as a symbol of the motherland and separates herself from Nikhil who cannot ally himself with the violent nationalistic zeal that Sandip propagandizes. Sandip’s aggressive policy instigates communal dissatisfaction. The more Bimala involves herself with Sandip, the more she becomes caught up in complex emotions of confusion, guilt, and repentance for neglecting her traditional wifely role. When finally she becomes aware of Sandip’s hypocrisy, her home has already been shattered and the estate is in riotous peril. At the end, Bimala reconciles with her husband who has suffered but never punished her for her infidelity. Sandip leaves

their house; Nikhil rushes to quell a riot and receives a fatal wound; Bimala is left to an uncertain fate.

3.1 Bimala's Reception: Literature Review

Before proceeding to my argument, I want to note that I find three tendencies in existing critical literature about Bimala's presentation. First, one group of critics views her character traditionally; they emphasize some of her characteristics which project her conventional feminine image: her repentance for turning away from her husband, her return to the position of wifhood, her exuberant emotion, and her subjection to men, such as her husband Nikhil and Sandip. In M. Sarada's (1988) view, Bimala's significant characteristics are "her repentance for her behaviour and love for her husband that brought her back" to Nikhil (85). In Santosh Chakrabarti's (2004) opinion, Bimala represents the "traditional Indian way of life" through her "surrender and homecoming" (11). In some critics' arguments, Bimala's character stands for passivity and irrationality—the supposedly typical attributes of women as determined by a patriarchal society. For instance, in Sumit Sarkar's (2005) view, Bimala's spontaneity or uncontrolled instincts preclude her self-development. His contention is that Bimala is an embodiment of "naturalness", the absence of autonomous self-development through reason and strenuous effort" and Rabindranath through her criticizes the lack of self-development through cultivation of intellect ("*Ghare Baire* in its Times" 166-67). Sumit Sarkar divides the characters in masculine and feminine terms by which Nikhil is represented as

an active and rational agency, though this agency is not enough for women's independence, since Bimala is portrayed as passive and emotional. Elsewhere Sumit Sarkar (1973) writes about the trio, "A believer in the emancipation of women, he [Nikhil] has to watch his wife Bimala being swept off her feet by the virile but essentially nihilistic personality of Sandwip [Sandip]" (*The Swadeshi Movement* 91). In my view here, Bimala, by implication, is merely a dependent being who finds shelter with a man (Nikhil) after being manipulated by another man (Sandip).

Thus from the readings of the first group of critics, I find a partisan view of Bimala as a passive, traditional, and emotional object to be acted upon. The same tone recurs in Ashis Nandy's (1994) seemingly more complex evaluation. Nandy writes, "her [Bimala's] personality incorporates the contesting selves of the two protagonists [Nikhil and Sandip] and becomes the battlefield on which the two forms of patriotism fight for supremacy" (14). What Nandy expresses here is that both Nikhil and Sandip with their respective philosophy of constructive and aggressive patriotism compete to influence Bimala. But presenting Bimala as an ideological experimental ground for Nikhil and Sandip, the critic turns her into a mere receptor, subject to the two males' operations. Once again we return to a passive view of Bimala.

Second, in contrast to the first group of critics, some others argue for an important characteristic of Bimala: her autonomous subjectivity. Tanika Sarkar (2005), for example, contends that Bimala has her own political and sexual independence though she does not possess a definite ideal upon which she can

model her autonomous identity (38). Tanika Sarkar thus presents Bimala in a new way in which she is neither an object of masculine power play nor a mere imitator of conventional femininity.

However, I find two significant gaps in the readings of the first two groups of critics. First, they—particularly the critics of the first group—portray a one-sided picture of Bimala and second, by being predisposed to present Bimala in a typical feminine image, they overlook the ironic image of Bimala reflected in the text. In the next section, I will argue that Bimala's representation in the novel is ambiguous and the uncertainty of her image is reflected through the words and images used in the narrative. In my view, an attempt to explore Bimala's ambiguity through style is significant, as the style combining indeterminate meanings of words shows Rabindranath's veering attitude about modern Indian woman of the early twentieth century.

The third inclination among critics is to consider an ambivalent image of Bimala. For example, though Sangeeta Ray (2000) traces an inner power in Bimala, she simultaneously shows Bimala's subjugation to Sandip's political maneuvering and Nikhil's emancipatory project and patriarchal generosity. Ray in fact inclines to echo the first group of critics by focusing on Bimala's submission. In Sangeeta Ray's opinion, Bimala may have an inner strength to refuse Sandip finally and her own political voice to disagree with Nikhil, but she builds her subjectivity from the two men's desire, for "her identity depends on what the men choose to adorn her with at any given moment" (109-20). Moreover, while discussing her subject matter, Ray focuses on ironic situations. In contrast, my

concentration in section 3.2 will be to highlight the ironic and paradoxical implications of images and words in the narrative to argue for Bimala's ambivalent illustration.

Another critic, Michael Sprinker (2005) has mentioned, though has not developed, an ambivalent tension regarding woman in the novel. The tension lies between the facts of preserving indigenous feminine virtues such as wifely devotion, and of altering the traditional feminine role such as contacting the world by coming out of purdah (Sprinker 120-21). Like Sprinker, I also think that for Bimala the novel has created an ambivalent space. In the next section I will develop the theme that Bimala can be interpreted in multi-dimensional ways. And the text creates an opportunity to read Bimala's characterization in several ways through Rabindranath's indeterminate use of words, phrases, and metaphors.

3.2 Indeterminacy in the Representation of Woman in *The Home and the World*

In this novel, it is uncertain where a woman's position should be in this transitional time of history when gender roles are changing. Unlike her mother and mother-in-law whose whole lives were occupied at home, Bimala comes in contact with western influence outside her home. She is required by her husband to be educated in western learning; she participates in *Swadeshi*—the anti-colonial movement. In the novel it is uncertain whether the home or the world is the true place for a woman who, at such a moment in history, bridges the private and public domains.

The narrative shows the uncertainty of woman's position through the use of the word "ideal." Bimala recollects the astrologer's prediction before her wedding that she has been cherishing till now—"She will become an ideal wife" (Tagore, *The Home and The World* 2).¹ The word "ideal" denotes two meanings: perfect or flawless state and imaginative or unreal condition. From the first perspective, the word "ideal" indicates that woman's identity depends on her perfection as a wife devoted to her husband. Her place is at home where she serves her husband as Bimala's mother did, who "arranged the different fruits, carefully peeled by her own loving hands, on the white stone plate, and gently waved her fan to drive away the flies while my [Bimala's] father sat down to his meals" (*The Home* 3). Bimala too nurtures this home-centered ideal. We find her performing the traditional role to serve her husband, Nikhil, by taking the dust of his feet in the morning. In this perspective (as viewed by Hindu nationalists) an ideal or perfect Hindu wife is the key to building the virtuous form of Indian nation in contrast with a western family-culture that is thought to be inferior (T. Sarkar 28). So, Bimala objects to any kind of intrusion of western influence in the family because it might pose a threat to her becoming a perfect traditional wife. But from the second perspective, Bimala's desire to be a perfect traditional wife becomes unrealistic after she learns western education and politics. With the reception of outside influences the ideal of conventional wifehood is bound to change and hence, Bimala's wish to return to the previous state of wifehood becomes unrealistic and impossible. These two contrasting perspectives point confusion about woman's position. The confusion lies in the choice given to

Bimala between two probable options—whether she should be satisfied merely with the ideal of traditional wifedom, devoted to her husband, or whether she should change her ideal by receiving western imports. The novel does not clarify which option a woman should choose. And the narrative makes it clear that while internalizing either one of the two, the other becomes impossible.

The indeterminate position of woman is also evident in the idea of “education” evident in the novel. Bimala recollects the days when she was “educated, and introduced to the modern age in its own language” (*The Home* 5). The idea of education relates to several meanings: literacy, instruction, and guidance. In one sense, education gives Bimala literacy and empowers her, and in another sense, Bimala is instructed and guided to reject her ideal of accustomed wifedom that she had learned to cherish so far. As we will see, the first view of education leads Bimala to intellectual enlargement and the second view causes the dismantling of her cherished selfhood.

From the first perspective, Bimala’s education widens the space of conjugality, till now limited by traditional rules in the mother-in-law-dominated palace. Along with becoming an ideal daughter-in-law, she also begins to grow as an equal conjugal partner. Because of her education, unlike the other ladies of the *zamindar* palace such as her sister-in-law, Bimala gets more opportunity to communicate with Nikhil, even when he stays in Calcutta, far away from the village. Her literacy helps her understand her husband better than other women. As Bimala writes in her *smṛītkathā* (“memoir”), “He [Nikhil] used to write to me almost every day, a few lines only, and simple words, but his bold, round

handwriting would look up into my face, oh, so tenderly!” (*The Home* 5).

Moreover, Bimala achieves another form of self-fulfillment from her newly derived knowledge: she becomes a writer. Her *smrīṭīkathā* records a writer’s honest self-assessment at a particular time of anti-colonial politics. It describes the lifestyle, psychological conflict, and political change from the perspective of a lady belonging to the *zenana*, the secluded part of a home, inaccessible to the males except very near ones. From the perspective of historical value, Bimala’s *smrīṭīkathā*, the product of her education, is thus remarkable. As Tanika Sarkar notes:

The self-representing woman is not only a newcomer in Rabindranath’s writing, she is a startling new character on the Bengali literary and social landscape. From the late nineteenth century on, Bengali women’s writings had begun to appear in significant numbers. They spoke of experiences of pain and held out visions of intellectual autonomy that were quite beyond the imagining of the most daring of reformers. (29)

However, from the second view, the new education, carrying other meanings such as instruction and guidance regarding unfamiliar ideals like liberty, political consciousness, and social responsibility, is a weapon for Nikhil. By providing her with new education, Nikhil compels Bimala to discard her traditional state. In the passive sentence—“I [Bimala] have been *educated*, and introduced to the modern age” (*The Home* 5; emphasis added)—the very action of Bimala’s modernization and guidance through education is more emphasized than

the hidden action-doer. The emphasized action of Bimala's modernization through education indirectly highlights that her previous state (traditional Hindu wifehood) is downgraded and her release from it is made necessary. But though the subject is hidden in this passive sentence, his agency is stronger than Bimala's and it is evident from his ability to change Bimala's cultural role that she was accustomed to play in the period of conventional wifehood. In another sentence Bimala addresses her husband, "You [Nikhil] showed your love by decorating me, by educating me . . ." (*The Home* 7). As a reader when I read the text, I feel strongly that the word "decorate," can impart a negative connotation. Here again, Bimala's role is inactive; she is the object in the sentence, whom the subject Nikhil can decorate and reshape according to his taste.² As a passive recipient, while Bimala receives education, she merely obtains guidance rather than acquiring an agency that gradually grows.

Next the images of fire or flame that are strewn throughout the novel also present the position of woman in an uncertain way. If on the one hand the image of fire associated with woman symbolizes her creative inner strength, on the other hand it also indicates her destructive sexuality that disrupts cultural order. I will examine this proposition by looking closely at three quotations from the narrative. First, Bimala writes about her first experience with Sandip, "I said within myself that his [Sandip's] language had caught fire from my eyes; for we women are not only the deities of the household fire, but the flame of the soul itself" (*The Home* 25). Second, Sandip admires Bimala:

‘I have never yet found any source of inspiration suffice me for good. That is why I have been constantly moving about, rousing enthusiasm in the people, from which in turn I draw my own store of energy. To-day you [Bimala] have given me the message of my country. Such fire I have never beheld in any man. I shall be able to spread the fire of enthusiasm in my country by borrowing it from you.’ (*The Home* 48-49)

Third, his admiration continues, “It seemed to me that the gold border of her [Bimala’s] *sari* was her [Bimala’s] own inner fire flaming out and twining round her. That is the flame we want, visible fire!” (*The Home* 58). In all these examples, the speakers through the image of fire symbolize Bimala’s inspirational power, which invigorates Sandip’s nationalist zeal. Not only Sandip but also Amulya, whose patriotism is genuine unlike Sandip’s, is energized by Bimala’s company. Looking at Amulya’s eyes, Bimala realizes that her “creative force had begun its work in his [Amulya’s] blood” (*The Home* 144) because Amulya has envisioned Bimala as the goddess of creativity, *Shakti*. It is Bimala’s “fire” for which “the wick of his [Amulya’s] life is all ablaze” (*The Home* 144). Thus, through the image of fire, the narrative emphasizes the creative and motivating energy of woman, which Rabindranath also believes an attribute of hers:

She [woman] has been an inspiration to man, guiding, most often unconsciously, his restless energy into an immense variety of creations in literature, art, music and religion. This is why, in India,

woman has been described as the symbol of Shakti, the creative power. (*Creative Unity* 157)

However, while I go through the narration, I find a disturbing implication in considering the image of fire exclusively as a symbol of creative strength. What does Bimala's "fire" create after all? While her "fire" kindles the energy of the nationalist workers, as Sandip's rhetoric persuades her, it also destroys the values of conjugality and the order of Hindu domesticity. Bimala's "fire," metaphorically giving the meaning of her sexual passion, then presents a completely different picture of Bimala who attracts her husband's friend Sandip by her sexual drive. Sandip's claim that he has never found such "fire" in any man consolidates my suspicion that the altered mode of eroticism is at work here. The provocative power of Bimala's female sexuality is symbolized by the image of fire. In this latter perspective, their first eye contact exchanges a sexual message when Sandip's "language had caught fire from my [Bimala's] eyes." The gold-bordered *sari* that wraps round Bimala charms Sandip, and at the same time the "inner fire" or sexual beauty apparent in the physical curves of *sari*-clad Bimala seduces him. Fire interpreted as passion is destructive in Bimala's case, as her extramarital relationship, primarily based on sensual indulgence, devastates her conjugal relationship with her husband Nikhil. Thus, as an element of both creation and destruction, the metaphor of fire mostly associated with Bimala places her in an ambivalent position.

The uncertain meaning of "fire" continues till the final chapter of the novel. In her last story, Bimala writes, "I now fear nothing,—neither myself, nor

anybody else. I have passed through fire. What was inflammable has been burnt to ashes . . .” (*The Home* 325). In one sense of “flame,” Bimala exhausts her creative strength to reconstruct her home. Though Bimala repents neglecting her husband and reconciles with him, it is unlikely that the couple will return to the previous conjugality and companionship, as the wound created in their hearts is very much unhealed. The flame to forge something new finally dies. In another sense, the fire of her sexual passion is extinguished after Sandip’s hypocrisy is divulged. By the latter view, Bimala’s sense of inner guilt, caused by her gradual discovery of Sandip’s selfishness, smothers the flame of sexual excitement that originally involved Bimala in the extramarital affair with Sandip.

Bimala, compared to “primal fire” (*The Home* 108), reminds us of the archetypal function of *agnī* (“fire”) to destroy and to purify. In the long mythic and religious tradition of Hinduism, fire is always associated with death, purification, or salvation. For example, the dead human body is cremated on a pyre to destroy its evil and thus the soul is purified. Fire vindicates the chastity of the mythic character Sita, wife of Ram in the epic *The Ramayana*. Fire—itsself being the symbol of purity—is used as the witness in any sacred religious ceremony such as a Hindu wedding. Similarly, being compared with “primal fire” in the middle of the novel, Bimala also anticipates the pattern of destruction and purgation: she gradually destroys the charm of Sandip’s evil seduction that mesmerizes her for a long time and emerges as a self-discovered character at the end of the novel. In the final chapter, Bimala is redeemed metaphorically after realizing the difference between private and public spaces that she had confused

until now. However, the irony in the comparison between Bimala and fire is that while, from a traditional perspective, Bimala is a sinful and unfaithful woman in turning away from her husband, the narrative compares her with the prime symbol of purity—fire. And when she purifies herself and returns to her husband, she is associated with ashes. The irony is sharp in that Bimala is figuratively compared to ashes rather than fire in her discovered purified state. These ironies related to the image of fire unsettle any fixed interpretation of Bimala and expose her character to ambiguous readings. Once again we return to the semantic uncertainty that is the key concern of this section.

In the narrative, another image that equivocally associates woman with both creation and destruction is that of a queen bee or “makshīrānī”.³ As Nikhil remembers Sandip’s enthusiasm about Bimala, “You [Bimala] are the Queen Bee of our [male nationalists’] hive, and we the workers shall rally around you. You shall be our centre, our inspiration” (*The Home* 49). In the insect world, the queen bee is associated with sexual potency and sexual suicide. A queen bee in a hive is sexually the only reproductive female bee and after mating with a queen bee the drones or male honeybees die immediately (“Honey Bee”). Thus, a queen bee is the central figure for reproduction, continuation of the species, and also the means for male bees’ death. Now in the text the presentation of Bimala as figurative queen bee elevates her to the position of the royal leader of the patriotic hive. Moreover, the narration actually places her in the central position of erotic seduction under the disguise of political vocabulary. The association between queen bee and Bimala immediately turns our attention to Bimala’s sexual charm,

which creates the erotic attachment with Sandip and arouses the lover and poet in him. However, finally like a queen bee, she destroys Sandip's mental peace and alienates him from the life-giving support—Nikhil's moral and financial assistance. Thus the image of queen bee indicates equivocal representation of Bimala.

When I go through the narration, I sense indeterminacy in Nikhil's view of Bimala. Realizing Bimala's erotic attachment with Sandip, Nikhil understands the fallibility of his idealized teachings that he invested in modernizing Bimala, "I was too greedy. I created an *angel* of Bimala, in order to exaggerate my own enjoyment. But Bimala is what she is. It is preposterous to expect that she should assume the role of an *angel* for my pleasure" (*The Home* 85-86; emphasis added). The word "angel" generates double meanings: on the one hand, purity and immaculateness, and on the other, an idealized bodilessness. In one sense, Nikhil derived intellectual pleasure from considering Bimala a pure being like an angel. Nevertheless, in another sense, Nikhil's comparison of Bimala with an angel also indicates his attempt to annihilate her sexuality. An angel is an incorporeal figuration. By viewing Bimala as an angel, Nikhil apparently glorified Bimala's morality, but at the same time, unconsciously denied the reality of her body and sexuality.⁴

Unlike Nikhil, Sandip acknowledges, instigates, and glorifies Bimala's sexual power. But even his celebration of Bimala's sexuality seems ironic to me, when I sense his patriarchal view of woman. I will explain this idea through two

quotations. First, Sandip envisions the idea of the country in the image of the goddess *Shakti* whom he directly compares to Bimala:

Have I not told you that, in you, I visualize the *Shakti* of our country? . . . When you have anointed me with your own hands, then shall I know I have the sanction of my country; and if, . . . I fall fighting, it shall not be on the dust of some map-made land, but on a lovingly spread skirt—do you know what kind of skirt?—like that of the earthen-red *sari* you wore the other day, with a broad blood-red border. (*The Home* 99-100)

In the second example, Sandip beholds the goddess *Kali* in Bimala, “I am a worshipper of Kali, and one day I shall truly worship her, setting Bimala on her altar of Destruction” (*The Home* 119-20). In these examples, through the images of the goddesses *Shakti* and *Kali*, both celebration and marginalization of Bimala’s sexuality are apparent. *Shakti* is the creative energy associated with female reproductive organs and also possessed by the goddess *Shakti* (“shakti or sakti”). So, the comparison between the goddess *Shakti* and Bimala in the first example has a distinct sexual overtone; the sexual metaphor is intensified when Sandip wishes to die on the “skirt.” The word “skirt” immediately reminds us not only of some remote part of the country, but also the petticoat, worn by Bengali women under a *sari*. The image of Sandip falling on Bimala’s skirt is sexually provocative. In the second example, the comparison between Bimala and *Kali*—the “shameless” (*The Home* 119) goddess—emphasizes the idea of displaying the power of female sexuality, as the almost naked goddess *Kali* is directly associated

with female sexuality (“Kali”). The overall tone of the two quotations suggests that Sandip noticeably considers sexuality as a property of his self-created inspirational goddess and celebrates her for it. Both of the examples thus recognize the reality of female sexuality, explaining the religious symbols in a highly sensual way, suppressed in conservative Bengali households. Nevertheless, the other ideas associated with *Kali* make the exaltation of female sexuality ironical and even questionable. Unmarried *Kali* is an example of a “wild, uncontrolled, dangerous” goddess symbolizing the “rampant, unsatisfied sexuality” of an unmarried woman (Smith 122). The sexually dangerous image of an unmarried goddess is generated from a patriarchal view that woman’s sexuality is to be controlled through marriage. Nancy Bonvillain (2001) mentions this patriarchal view of Indian society while analyzing the difference between married and unmarried Hindu goddesses:

Goddesses in their benevolent, nurturing manifestations are depicted as faithful wives. In contrast, dangerous, vengeful goddesses are unmarried. This distinction implies that only when women’s sexuality is controlled by men, as in marriage, are they benevolent. When they are independent and control their own sexual behavior, they are dangerous. (275)

Now from the conventional perspective, which Sandip also shares, the comparison between Bimala and the goddess *Kali* oddly judges Bimala’s sexual choice as unrestrained and destructive. She is selecting a partner herself and turning away from her marital relationship or her husband. Bimala’s

marginalization lies in the fact that, though she is glorified to make her sexual choice, the choice itself is indicated as disastrous and rampant in the narrative through its association with the goddess *Kali*. This contradictory interpretation about Bimala, originating in the ambiguous use of the word, again leads us to interpretive indeterminacy.

The uncertain representation of female sexuality is evident also in the use of other metaphors in the narrative. As we saw earlier in the examples of angels and Hindu goddesses, either the reality of the female body is nullified, or even if the female body is acknowledged, its agency is subject to patriarchal control. In the following, I will elaborate this argument through the description of Bimala's secret sexual pleasure that Sandip's charm evokes. Bimala writes, "Nevertheless this flesh-and-blood lute of mine, fashioned with my feeling and fancy, found in him [Sandip] a master-player. What though I shrank from his touch, and even came to loathe the lute itself; its music was conjured up all the same" (*The Home* 91). In my sense, the image of "lute" or "bīnā"⁵ presents the female body in two unpleasant ways. First, the comparison between the lute and Bimala's body denotes her response to Sandip's sexual appeal; but ironically, the metaphor of the lute itself emphasizes an aesthetic representation of the body instead of focusing on the carnal sensibility of it. The narrative mentions a body of flesh and blood, but the body assumes musical rather than physical hunger and appeasement. The two issues—the acknowledgement of female sexuality as part of life on the one hand, but the presentation of female sexuality in an aesthetic fold on the other hand—seem to me contradictory. The second objectionable notion about the lute

image is that the lute itself is a passive instrument. Its response depends on the lute player. Bimala's body as the lute is subject to Sandip's artistic mastery. Sandip is the player while Bimala is played upon. In their physical relationship, Bimala is not an equal partner but rather a subordinate.

It is important to summarize here that the ambiguous meanings of the images discussed above—such as fire, queen bee, and the Hindu goddess *Kali*—present Bimala's contrary valuations in the novel. Through these images, as I am about to discuss, the text shows Bimala departing from her traditional feminine role, determined by the patriarchal society, but simultaneously submitting to a new kind of patriarchal entrapment. In the first view Bimala's response to Sandip's wooing is an audacious move against the patriarchal ideology of nationalist discourse that seeks to characterize woman as an asexual object through the image of goddess or mother. As Partha Chatterjee (1989) points out with disapproval the late-nineteenth-century discourse of Indian nationalism:

As with all hegemonic forms of exercise of dominance, this patriarchy combined coercive authority with the subtle force of persuasion. This was expressed most generally in the inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes; the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother. . . . In fact, the image of woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home. (630)

Contrary to the asexual image of woman heightened by the goddess metaphor, Bimala's delineation through the images discussed earlier acknowledges her

sexuality and gives different and sexual explanations of religious and natural symbols. Bimala's depiction as a sexual lover, as Tanika Sarkar suggests, is a deviant imagery in the tradition of Indian nationalism in which the country is envisioned as a mother (34-35). In her view, Bimala's sexual impulse is connected with "the glory of a wakening sense of autonomy," "independence over domestic discipline" (34-35). Supporting this critic, I want to add that Bimala's textual presentation also breaks the patriarchal convention that only males, such as Nikhil's polygamous ancestors, are entitled to sexual freedom. Nevertheless, this is not the absolute or final interpretation. Paradoxically the second aspect related to Bimala's characterization in the narrative is that through the images discussed earlier her sexual liberty itself is depicted as dangerous and disruptive. Her sexual choice subordinates her to Sandip's command, expectation, and pleasure. Thus, we see and will continue to see in the following, the uncertain meaning of the semantic choices or images that generates an ambivalent picture of Bimala.

In addition, the use of other natural symbols such as a storm, which Bimala notes in her narrative to describe her inner feelings, serves to impart dual meaning. At least in two episodes of the novel, the storm image presents an indeterminate picture of Bimala, suggesting both emotional confusion and strength at the same time. In the first example, Bimala comments on her own inner state, completely spellbound by Sandip's first nationalist speech: "I returned home that evening radiant with a new pride and joy. The storm within me had shifted my whole being from one centre to another. . . . Only some personal

sacrifice, I felt, could help me to bear the tumult of my exaltation” (*The Home* 26). In this example through the word “storm,” we sense Bimala’s inner turbulence, intensified both by the political enthusiasm and erotic desire that Sandip’s fiery speech ignites in her. The emotional upheaval is, indeed, as overpowering as the outburst of a storm so that it displaces Bimala’s concentration from the private center of a traditional household to a public matter of nationalist politics. Particularly, in this first view the choice of the word “storm” records Bimala’s uprooted, confused, overwhelmed, and defenseless senses. However, in the sentence “The storm within me had shifted my whole being from one centre to another,” the word “storm” also suggests the tremendous force of emotion that energizes Bimala. The force of her newfound passion drives Bimala to widen her space of activity from *ghar* (“home”) to *bahir* (“world”). Before facing this “storm,” Bimala was merely a housewife who used to perform domestic duties; she was incapable in exercising her own agency. For example, although Bimala had a political consciousness from the beginning, she lacked until now the strength to make her political desire take tangible form. As we saw, she had earlier in the novel failed to burn the foreign cloths and persuade her husband to drive the English tutor away from the house. But now, after meeting Sandip, her inner strength symbolized by the “storm” becomes so intense that she starts to gain and manifest her own agency. She moves her self from *ghar* (“home”) to *bahir* (“world”); as we see immediately after this episode, for the first time she wishes to come out of purdah to meet a stranger and nationalist leader. Though, in Bimala’s language, her change is a “personal sacrifice,” the sacrifice

(removal of purdah, in this case) is the result of her own will to delight herself. In this second view, the storm does not dislocate her; rather it activates her agency.

The storm metaphor recurs in Bimala's narrative when she is confusedly involved in an amorous relationship with Sandip: "The thing that was agitating me within was merely a variation of the stormy passion outside, which swept the country from one end to the other" (*The Home* 135). Like the previous example, the word "stormy" also suggests both a frenzy that confuses everything and a force that mobilizes. At the micro level, national politics disturbs the harmony of Bimala's home through Sandip, though it motivates her material agency; and at the macro level, jingoistic nationalism confuses the social order by aggravating hatred among different communities, in spite of arousing the supposedly patriotic force in Hindu youths of the upper and middle classes. Thus, the word "storm" catches these two-way features of politics in *ghar* and *bahir*.

Bimala's ambivalent representation continues through the collapse of the vision-blindness implication. Apparently, the construction of vision and blindness works in this way: Bimala as a "caged bird" is blind to the world outside her home; then both Nikhil's and Sandip's teachings widen her intellectual capacity; her vision is enlightened (*The Home* 14). That is why the image of fire or of light is associated with Bimala in an abundant way after Sandip's arrival. Obviously this indicates her political and sexual awakening. However, paradoxically, the widening of her vision to the outside world causes blindness to the inner home. When Bimala is ablaze with *Swadeshi* fire, she does not care to cast her "glances" on her husband's "agonised face" (*The Home* 93). She cannot blame anyone for

disorder in her home lest the condemnation backfires: “Where were your eyes all these days!” (*The Home* 94). Thus Bimala possesses both vision and blindness at the same time. This paradoxical representation of Bimala is best narrated in her last story. The daylight “fade[s]”, the sun “set[s]”, the surrounding becomes “darker and darker” and everything far and near grows “more vague” (*The Home* 330-31); but even in this growing darkness, Bimala can see through the course of her journey.⁶ She can re-evaluate her actions going deeply into her memories and assess herself, which for a long time she fails to do in broad daylight.

To recapitulate, as a reader I find the text presenting Bimala in multi-dimensional ways: the narrative exhibits her as a woman both with and without agency; it acknowledges, celebrates, and simultaneously restricts her female sexuality; the narrative shows her both as a woman used to represent creation as well as destruction. This indeterminacy in the representation of Bimala is reflected in the style—in the uncertain meanings of words and images. This stylistic novelty articulated with Rabindranath’s polyvocal narrative mode generates the thought that Rabindranath himself retains an indeterminate attitude toward modern woman emerging in colonial Bengal. The conflict between the *world*—connected with the ideas of western education, anti-colonial politics, and unrestricted female sexuality—and the *home*—associated with preservation of traditional feminine virtues, such as subservience to the husband and nurturing the family—is the driving force of the plot in this novel. Through the narration, the conflict is very much apparent.

This novel of Rabindranath can be termed as a narrative of nation in the sense that it shows beauty of indigenous domesticity which the colonial intrusion ravages; it signals the potentialities of a native woman rising through literary and sexual empowerment. However, Rabindranath's text concurrently shows his heroine's captivation to male hegemony or patriarchal discipline. At this stage, pointing out chapter one, I want to remind of Rabindranath's adored space which he imagines for Indian nation—a space enriched by the contributions of and unity among all racial and religious communities. *Gora* introduces this vision and *The Home and the World* implores to implement it. But unfortunately, women like Suchairta, Lolita, and Bimala—the important participants in Rabindranath's expected national space—are dependent on and inferior to their male partners. Failing to escape bipartisan politics, Rabindranath's novels show this gender division in disguise of ironic celebration.

3.3 An Alternative View of the Muslim Minority in *The Home and the World*

I analyze the textual representation of the Muslim minority in *The Home and the World* in this section. I will argue that although Rabindranath is personally sympathetic and tolerant toward the Muslim minority and supportive of Hindu-Muslim unity, the disturbing picture of the Muslim community emerging directly from images and phrases in *The Home and the World* reflects a biased and partisan imagination working behind the narrative. In other words, Rabindranath creates a narrative in which the presentation of the Muslim community does not accord with his personal philosophy of religious tolerance.

Below I will demonstrate the validity of this proposition after discussing the Muslim position in the *Swadeshi* movement and Rabindranath's attitude to Muslims.

Regarding *Swadeshi* politics, there is a clear division between the Hindu and Muslim communities in *The Home and the World*. The Muslim peasants of Nikhil's estate refuse to assist Sandip in his nationalist cause. The political disciples who participate in the freedom struggle under Sandip's leadership are mostly students and they come from upper-class Hindu families. From the very beginning, Sandip faces the Muslim tenants resisting his policies of boycotting foreign goods in the local market. The political gap between Hindu and Muslim communities in this novel actually reflects historical facts. *Swadeshi* movement was launched as protest against the imperial decision of Bengal partition (1905), which divided the Bengali-speaking area into two provinces—Bengal merged with Bihar and Orissa, and Eastern Bengal joined to Assam (Gordon 82-83). *Swadeshi* movement strongly opposed the idea of partition, and involved supporters from politically aware Hindus, students, and a few Muslims in western Bengal (Gordon 82-83). Generally, politically active Muslims and poor rural Muslims alienated themselves from this movement. The reason for Muslim separatism was that the partition promised profit for Muslims in a proposed new province that had Muslim majority (Gordon 92; "partition of Bengal"). Apart from the Muslim gentry, the peasant class of which Muslims were great in number was also apathetic to the *Swadeshi* movement for it endangered them in terms of economic loss (S. Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement* 78-80). By

boycotting foreign products, *Swadeshi* supporters sought to promote local goods and industries (Gordon 83). But often the quality of those products was inferior though price was high. The local peasants, naturally, were disinterested in this venture. As tension between Hindu *Swadeshi* fomenters and Muslim opponents grew, communal riots broke out in various districts of East Bengal in 1906 and 1907 (S. Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement* 78-80). The other factor to cause communal agitation was the anti-*zamindar* feeling among Muslim peasants against Hindu *zamindars* and money lenders and to some extent, communal turmoil was instigated by *Maulvis* or Muslim religious leaders (Gordon 92-93).

Rabindranath opposed the partition of Bengal, because a religion-based division of the Bengali-speaking population into two political parts seemed to him a threat to Bengali solidarity. In the early years of *Swadeshi* movement, he participated in Anti-Partition enthusiasm by writing numerous patriotic songs, leading public processions, delivering speeches in political rallies, and organizing *Rākhībandhan* or the “tying of friendship wristlets” ceremony between the Hindu and Muslim communities to signify “the undying unity of undivided Bengal” (N. Ray, *An Artist* 59). Rabindranath’s hope was to use the fervor of nationalism for the constructive works for national revitalization (Kripalani 201). However, as the movement became violent and ignored the “creative and constructive ideas and ideals of nationalism,” Rabindranath withdrew from the political scene (N. Ray, *An Artist* 60). In particular, the 1906–07 Hindu–Muslim riots significantly changed Rabindranath’s political approach.

One of the new features pervading the post-riot writings of Rabindranath is his re-evaluation of Hindu–Muslim relationships, the bitterness of which, in his view, is largely caused by evil Hindu customs (S. Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement* 83). Rabindranath analyzes the social relationship between Hindu and Muslim in his later essays and letters to find the clues that can unify the two communities rather than merely condemn Muslims for their rejection of the Anti-Partition movement. In his letter to Kalidas Nag, reproduced as the essay titled “Hīndū Mūsalmāna,” Rabindranath mentions the communal grievances that the Muslim community of his own *zamindari* estate in East Bengal used to face. He found in his *zamindari* experience that Muslim tenants were not allowed to sit on a mat with other Hindus because they were considered untouchable (Tagore, *Rabīndra-racanabāli* 24: 376). He writes about the communal gap between Hindu and Muslim in various essays compiled in *Kālāntara* (*Rabīndra-racanabāli* 24: 243-383). In the essay “Hīndū Mūsalmāna” we find Rabindranath accusing Hindus of creating disunity between the two communities; Hindus, he writes, promote emotional distance from Muslims by pushing them (Muslims) aside with their social customs and prejudices (*Rabīndra-racanabāli* 24: 376). He claims in the essay “Lōkahīta” originally published in 1914 that though the issue of Bengal partition was felt as an emotional blow on the Bengali heart, the Bengali Muslims could not share this suffering (*Rabīndra-racanabāli* 24: 262). The reason for Muslim separatism, he continues, lay with the Hindus who never embraced the Muslims nor sought a harmonious emotional relationship with them (*Rabīndra-racanabāli* 24: 262). Rabindranath was greatly concerned about the communal

gap that caused the Muslims to be unwilling to participate in the *Swadeshi* upheaval. In 1908 he writes:

When our speakers failed in Mymensingh and other areas to win the heart of the Mussalman peasantry, they [Hindu *Swadeshi* supporters] felt very indignant. They [Hindu *Swadeshi* supporters] never thought for a moment that we have never given proof of our real interest in the welfare of the Mussulmans or of the common people of our country. We cannot, therefore, blame them [Muslims] if they [Muslims] are rather suspicious of our professions of goodwill. A brother does, of course, suffer for the sake of another brother, but if somebody just turns up from nowhere and introduces himself as brother, he is not very likely to be straight away shown into his share of the inheritance. (qtd. in Gordon 93)

Thus, we notice that Rabindranath's essays and letters record his supportive and sympathetic view toward the Muslims.

Some scholars have noted Rabindranath Tagore's humanitarian view when he used to visit his East Bengal estates as a landlord or *zamindar*. As Amitabha Chaudhuri (1996) writes, when Rabindranath went to Shilaidaha in 1891 after taking up his *zamindar* duties, he came to know the Muslim society and its loyalty to the landlord (377-78). Rabindranath was sympathetic to his Muslim tenants for their economic adversity (Chaudhuri 378). Poverty and deprivation in Muslim subjects drew his compassion for them (Chaudhuri 387). Mohammad A. Quayum

(2007) notes Rabindranath's altruistic initiatives to benefit his tenants:

Rabindranath established a bank, local industries, and even a local judiciary system to help his subjects (112). In the view of these critics, the literary counterpart of Rabindranath is Nikhil, the landlord in *The Home and the World* who reflects Rabindranath's benign attitude toward the tenants and philosophy of Hindu-Muslim unity. As Quayum writes, "Nikhil chooses not to support the reckless activism and violent nationalism of his friend Sandip, only because it causes antipathy between the Muslims and Hindus, thus jeopardising the safety of his Muslim tenants" (112). Moreover, like Rabindranath, Nikhil also attempts to promote a constructive *Swadeshi* movement by establishing local industries and a bank. However, the problem in both Chaudhuri's and Quayum's readings is that by highlighting merely a small part of the novel, they conclude hastily that Nikhil is respectful and benevolent toward his Muslim subjects. In contrast to their evaluation of Nikhil, I will show that sometimes Nikhil himself is not free from communal partiality.

In spite of Rabindranath's compassionate view toward Islamic citizens, the image that we get of their community in the novel *The Home and the World* is quite the contrary—and most disturbing. The character of Nikhil may in part be based on autobiographical facts of the author's life, but through Nikhil's and two other speakers' accounts Rabindranath creates a narrative that demonstrates failings and baseness of the Muslim people.

In Sandip's account of events, the Muslims are stubborn and violent. When the nationalist workers target banning imported cotton yarns in the local

Suksar market in order to avert foreign influence, they fail to receive support from poor traders like Panchu. Marwari and Muslim traders also go against them. The Marwari traders are manageable because they “were offering to pay a penalty, if only allowed to clear their present stocks” (Tagore, *The Home and the World* 169-70).⁷ In other words, they agree to forfeit their commercial right. But, the Muslim traders are “obdurate” (*The Home* 170) and stick to their refusal to prohibit foreign products for business. The very word “obdurate” portrays the Muslim traders as headstrong mercenaries.

The supposed savagery of the minority community is recorded in Sandip’s narrative where Muslims are dehumanized. Failing to gain support from Muslims, Sandip’s realization is, “So they [the Muslims] must be suppressed altogether and made to understand that we are the masters. They are now showing their teeth, but one day they shall dance like tame bears to the tune we play” (*The Home* 182). In their misguided notion of a free nation Swadeshi workers like Sandip are not able to imagine an equitable state, nor are they willing to leave behind baggage of feudal attitudes. However, if *Swadeshi* leaders like Sandip are presented here as cruel and dominating, simultaneously the Muslims are animalized through their association with growling dogs and tame bears.

In this novel, the Muslim characters are not individuals; they represent a general mass. They are given hardly any speech. Even those few dialogues, such as Kasim’s absurd deposition about treasury-dacoity and Mirjan’s imploration characterize them unfavorably. In Sandip’s account, the semantic choices show Muslim boatmen to be men of weak ethics. They seem to be pawns in the hands

of militant nationalists. The narration continues, “Most of the boatmen had been won over to refuse to carry foreign goods . . .” (*The Home* 171). In one sense, the word “won” implicitly criticizes Sandip’s workers who bribe the poor boatmen not to transport foreign cloths to the market. But, in another sense, the word establishes that the Muslim boatmen are greedy enough to be easily conquered by inducements. The “insubordinate” (*The Home* 171) chief of the boatmen, Mirjan, cannot demand justice when Sandip’s men sink his boat. The narrative presents Mirjan in the following manner:

He [Mirjan] came to me [Sandip] in tears to beg for mercy. ‘I was wrong, sir—’ he began. . . .

‘I [Mirjan] now see my mistake, and if excused this time I will never . . .’ with which he [Mirjan] threw himself at my [Sandip’s] feet. (*The Home* 172; 2nd ellipsis in orig.)

The image of Mirjan prostrating himself at Sandip’s feet and begging for mercy for no crime of his own empties out the Muslim boatman’s dignity in the readers’ eyes, even though the readers feel sympathy for him. For expressing his own agency through resisting Sandip’s boycott policy, Mirjan was previously characterized as “insubordinate.” But that rebellious image does not last long in the narrative. Very soon, the boatman is drained of his spirit.

One may argue that because of the author’s antagonism to the idea of militant nationalism, Sandip’s portrayal as a nationalist loses authenticity and Sandip’s narrative does not reflect the proper view of the *Swadeshi* nationalists about Muslims. Rabindranath personally apprehends that nationalism instigates

people to be “the most virulent self-seeking without being in the least aware of its moral perversion” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 43). So through Sandip, Rabindranath creates a caricature of terror and selfishness that, in his view, the idea of nationalism would encourage. Therefore, one may show logic that as Rabindranath deliberately creates a negative picture of a *Swadeshi* nationalist in Sandip to denounce jingoistic nationalism, Sandip’s stories intentionally present an objectionable picture of the Muslims who historically alienated themselves from *Swadeshi*. According to this view, the author intentionally depicts a deplorable and violent picture of Islamic citizens in Sandip’s stories so that secular and humanitarian readers can realize and reject Sandip’s politically discriminating philosophy.

But, even if that is the case, even the narratives of Nikhil and Bimala, who do not believe in Sandip’s coercive policies, fail to present a positive image of Muslims. When we look into Nikhil’s and Bimala’s stories, we do not find a picture of the minority community much different from Sandip’s. These Muslims belong to the low class of the society. But the text presents them in a way that their destitution hardly evokes sympathy for them. Rather their malevolence and atrocity suspected, reported, and predicted by three narrators, exhibit an all-together negative picture of them.

In Nikhil’s narrative, the image of the Islamic minority is that of an intolerant and pugnacious mass. As is evident from his story, the restoration of the cow-slaughter practice by the Muslim community is read by Nikhil as the malicious intention to incite communal hostility. Nikhil predicts the evil

moments: “At the bottom was a pretence of fanaticism, which would cease to be a pretence if obstructed” (*The Home* 256). The reference to a pretended fanaticism that will “cease to be a pretence” demonstrates Nikhil’s perception that Muslim subjects are waiting to rise in rebellion. Nikhil can sense the Muslims’ religious fanaticism that, as he fears, will spread out if he prevents them from cow-killing. What must be noted here is that Nikhil tolerates—from a sense of insecurity—the Islamic custom of cow-slaughtering, which was long-forgotten on his estate but is now suddenly restored. It is not religious tolerance for which Nikhil allows cow-slaughter to be practised. Rather, it is his fear of inciting more violence from the Islamic community that prevents him from controlling the Muslims. He says that compulsive action “will not only not prevent cow-killing, it may lead to the killing of men as well” (*The Home* 257). The image of a violent and disorderly Muslim community always lurks in Nikhil’s consciousness and makes him reluctant to apply coercive policies.

Nikhil reports, “A number of Mahomedan preachers are being sent over from Dacca” (*The Home* 255-56). We hear Nikhil warning Sandip about rampaging Muslims, “Mahomedan preachers have been about stirring up the local Mussulmans. They are all wild with you, and may attack you any moment” (*The Home* 250). In all these examples, the image of the Muslims is threatening and vindictive. In *The Home and the World* both Hindus and Muslims are responsible for manipulating religion to instigate communal disharmony. Both Sandip’s anti-Muslim hostility and the Muslim religious leaders’ anti-*Swadeshi* position trigger

communal conflagration. However, as we have just seen, it is the Muslims who are mentioned and focused on for propagandizing communal malice.

In the novel there are other incidents that, as we will see, justify Nandy's opinion: "the image of the Mussalman in Bengali upper-caste Hindu minds emerges as that of a primal force, representing untempered, unmediated 'primitive' impulses" (15). Nikhil unconsciously thinks the Muslims "trouble" though apparently he is the most tolerant character in the story. In reply to Sandip, who wants to apply a drastic policy to suppress the "trouble," or the Muslims, Nikhil asks him, "So you [Sandip] want to make trouble to prevent *trouble*?" (*The Home* 183; emphasis added). Through this question, Nikhil dismisses Sandip's aggressive policy or "trouble." At the same time, the emphasized *trouble* in the quotation reflects Nikhil's ever-present apprehension about Muslims. Deep in his heart lurks the view that the minority is 'trouble'. In the second example, when the *zamindari* treasury is looted, the assumed suspect is a Muslim. In the police inspector's mind, the suspect is "Kasim, the guard" (*The Home* 261). The episode brings back the image of Muslims as outlaws.

Finally, the representation about outrageous Muslims culminates in Bimala's narrative. Mussulman tenants are reported to be the real culprits in the riot that breaks out on Nikhil's estate in Chandranath Babu's report: "Nikhil, the Mussulmans are out of hand. They are looting Harish Kundu's treasury. That does not so much matter. But what is intolerable is the violence that is being done to the women of their house" (*The Home* 329). Nikhil rushes out to quell the riot but is mortally wounded. Amulya, Bimala's foster brother, is shot dead. Thus the

portrayal of the Muslims in the last section blatantly connects them with plunder, rape, and murder.

Here I should note that the narrative makes a distinction between Sandip and the Muslim community as destroyers of order. Sandip also ravages Nikhil's home by seducing his wife. Metaphorically, Sandip is as guilty as the riotous Islamic tenants. But in the novel, Sandip has also the status of a lover and the narrative privilege of interpreting matters in his own words. There is nothing to compensate for the defamation of the Muslims. Moreover there is another imbalance between Sandip's and the Muslims' roles as communal agitators. We find Sandip directly and openly attacking the Muslims' profession and dignity. But the Islamic citizens are only *reported* to be involved in provoking communal outrage. They are always behind the scene. The terminal presentation and repetitious verbal reports take their fanaticism for granted.

To summarize, the novel presents a disturbing view about the Muslim minority. Beyond the text, a much different and opposite outlook of the author about the minority can be found. But from the perspective of the narration, it creates opportunity for readers to read the minority in a cynical way. As a reader, I receive an unfairly violent and revengeful view of the Muslim minority.

Notes

¹ The subsequent quotations from the English novel are taken from Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* published by Macmillan. For details see Work Cited.

² In the original Bengali *Ghare-Baire* Rabindranath used the verb "sājānō" for "decoration" (*Rabindra-racanabāli* 8: 145). The nuance of the Bengali verb imparts similar interpretation as does that of the English one.

³ See the Bengali word in *Ghare-Baire* (Tagore, *Rabindra-racanabāli* 8: 173)

⁴ Rabindranath approved the word “angel” for “manasī tilottamā” (*Rabindra-racanabāli* 8: 197).

⁵ See the Bengali word in *Ghare-Baire* (Tagore, *Rabindra-racanabāli* 8: 200).

⁶ The novel has a circular self-enclosed temporal structure. The opening scene in which Bimala is remembering her past, is actually taking place in the last section.

⁷ The subsequent quotations from the English novel are taken from Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World* published by Macmillan. For details see Work Cited.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction I mentioned that Rabindranath viewed imperialism and nationalism as two sides of the same coin. To him, patriarchal tendencies are at the root of historical action of nationalism. The emergence of the “mechanical organization” named nation leaves patriarchal, divisive and militaristic effect in human society (Tagore, *Nationalism* 10).

But ironically, Rabindranath’s two political narratives—*Gora* and *The Home and the World*—incline to be parts of patriarchal discourse by marginalizing the major women characters. As narratives of a rising nation (or literature originating from a colony to establish its own identity), these two narratives apparently present women for several purposes. First, these distinguish virtues such as love, devotion, self-sacrifice, loyalty, chastity—which Anandamoyi, Sucharita, and Lolita possess—and traditional domesticity—which Bimala possesses—essentially to be the feminine sensibilities or properties; in the view of scholars these can form a more comfortable and harmonious space than aggressive masculine nationalism received from the colonial West. As in *Gora*, the women temper the fanaticism of divisive politics by their perceived feminine values. Particularly, the women become the embodiments of liberal, humanistic and secular thoughts. Second, the novels set up examples of gender modernization. These novels allow women like Sucharita, Lolita and Bimala to exercise their intellectual ability and sexual freedom. However, as we saw in chapter two and three, the situational ironies and paradoxes in the story and the narrative style—uncertain meanings of words, phrases and metaphors—ultimately

jeopardize their place to male subordination. And more alarmingly, at times, the women themselves approve male hegemony on them. Not only the women but also the Muslim minority receives a degraded position in the narrative, as I discussed in chapter three. It is true that the evils of communal conflict and importance of mutual brotherhood are revealed in Rabindranath's works. But the illustration of the Muslim community in his novel is not consistent with his concern. Compared to the volume of the novel, the account of the Islamic citizens is inconsiderable. Even their exiguous description is pejorative. The two chapters establish the fact that the style manifests a partisan imagination working behind the narration.

Lastly, this dissertation draws a new roadmap to the continuing research on Rabindranath's works. This dissertation, as chapter two marks, very distinctly differs from existing views about women and unfolds a new image of them. It shows that sometimes Rabindranath's univocal narrative device is faulty as it fails to recount events objectively. Rabindranath's partial gender-notion influences the narrative mode. Chapter three reveals a different method to examine woman's position. Rabindranath's vision of an integrated culture, as summarized in the introduction and the disturbing implications in the representation of women and Muslims in his narratives are contradictory. This self-contradiction makes his liberal, flexible, and tolerant idea about India dubious.

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