



## THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF WOMEN AS PICTURED IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTERJEE : A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

This paper aims at projecting 'mother' as a cult figure with wide connotations commending immense power in religion, myth and culture and examines how Rabindranath Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee have depicted the categories of possessive mother and charming, docile and meek women respectively bringing home the point that the Indian woman as pictured in the novels of Tagore and Bankim cannot be so easily ignored for they have all good virtues of sensitive human beings.

In Bengali society, 'Mother', is a cult figure with wide connotations. From the child of six to the old woman of sixty, each one is addressed as 'Ma' or 'Mother' and as a result, any woman could act the role of mother without restricting oneself within the strict boundaries of biological relationship. The concept of mother is, on one hand, detached from the person of the mother and thus transformed into an abstraction and on the other, this abstraction is totalizing in its universality that every female irrespective of the age and relationship is envisioned as the mother. This concept both limits the woman and invests in her immense power that the mother figure commands in religion, myth and culture. Throughout India, the concept of motherhood is reversed. The verse 'Matha' and 'Ma' connote "warmth, protection and giving power". (Jacobson, 61)

In the novel **Chokher Bali**, Rabindranath Tagore has depicted the category of possessive mother Rajalakshmi who is the mother of Mahendra. Being a widow, she bestows all her love and affection on her only son. She pampers him to such an extent that he becomes obstinate and impetuous. Rajalakshmi resembles Harimonini of **Gora** in cunningness and jealousy being an embodiment of jealousy and ill-feeling, she differs from Annapurna, her sister-in-law who is a paragon of virtue and kindness. Due to her lack of sympathy and understanding Rajalakshmi loses not only Annapurna but also the affection of Mahendra and Asha. Rajalakshmi is instrumental in bringing about the love entanglement of Mahendra with Binodini. It is she who brings Binodini to Calcutta as she is pleased by her services when she visits her native village. One can see even a few good qualities lying dormant in the character of Rajalakshmi. When Mahendra elopes with Binodini, she is smitten with guilt for making Asha's life miserable. She, in her own way tries to undo the wrong and reunite Mahendra with Asha. Rajalakshmi reconciles with Annapurna and feels sincerely repentant about her past shabby behavior with her. On seeing Annapurna, she feels that she has recovered her lost treasure. Through this character, Tagore points out how mothers like her due to lack of education, wisdom and being ignorant about the ways of the world spoil the children and thus bring misery around them.

If one explores through the range of Tagore's women characters, one can find that Khenkari is a rare type of combination of an orthodox way of life, refined taste and liberal outlook. She is an extreme example of women who preferred to sacrifice their husbands for the sake of what they considered their religious duty. Through this character, Rabindranath Tagore portrays the growth of Bengali women with the contemporary society. His characters are full-blooded and lively. Anandomoyi in **Gora**, belongs to the category of understanding and loving mothers. Through her, Tagore points out how the barriers of caste, creed religion and race can be overcome by love and understanding. This is the first modern woman character whose outlook on life transcends racial, religious and national prejudices. She is well ahead of the other women by a few generations in dress, behavior and outlook. Further she adopts a Christian orphan and that too a foreigner. One can find her playing a pivotal role by influencing, inspiring and guiding all the four major characters in the novel. To Gora, she is, being an ideal mother, a great source of inspiration and the very image of his beloved mother land; to Benoy, a living scripture; to Lolitha and Sucharita, a moral supporter and to Poresh Babu, a source of peace and solace. She is a universal mother who loves all for she makes no distinction between her adopted child, 'Gora and his friend Binny and later between Lolitha and Sucharita. She is the only character of Tagore's novel who does not take part in politics which occupies a major part of the novel, **Gora**.

No doubt, Anandomoyi appears to be a symbol of Tagore's broad vision of life – liberal and non-sectarian outlook and universal love. She echoes the novelist's idea of heaven of freedom where there is no barrier between man and man. The adoption of Gora is a soul shattering experience and that shakes the foundation of her beliefs and orphan child into her arms her religious outlook changes. She believes that human beings are not born with caste and there is no reason why they cannot be united in wedlock in spite of their different religion. That is why she welcomes the marriage of Binoy with Lolita. She is found to be a sharp contrast to Gora, a bigot. Binoy and others are surprised at her liberal outlook.



Anandomoyi is a great social rebel as a true follower of Raja Rammohan Roy. She does not care for her traditional and orthodox practices of her community. After adoption of Gora, she becomes somewhat unorthodox in her behavior and her habits and that does not come in conflict with her husband's religious life. She shows the same love, affection and concern for Binoy that she does for Gora. Unlike Gora, Binoy understands and admires her advanced, liberal and non-sectarian outlook. In short, she is "the image of all the mothers in this world" for Binoy. Binoy's love and regards for Anandomoyi find a fitting comparison with that of Bihari for Annapurna. Anandomoyi's relation with that of her son is not an ordinary one found between a mother and son. Her great confidence in Gora's mission in life is evident when he is jailed. She neither feels sorry for his imprisonment nor abuses the Magistrate for convicting him. She knows well that Gora is not a coward to allow any man made laws to stand in the way of what he feels to be right. Her love for Gora is not uncritical and that is why she is not blind to his drawbacks. She warns him about his religious fanaticism and never accepts his religious view and tells him that it is impossible for her to accept what he calls religion.

Anandomoyi is unique and noblest creation in the galaxy of Tagore's women characters. In her non-sectarian and liberal outlook, pervasive love and sympathetic understanding, Anandomoyi is nearer to Tagore's vision of life than any other character. In his portrayal of Anandomoyi, one may see Tagore's "transition from nationalism to internationalism" (p.31). If a comparison is drawn between Anandomoyi and Poreshe Babu, one can find that both have a liberal outlook. They are sympathetic with the people who come in contact with them. They have clear thinking, unperturbed minds and are free from fanaticism. Both act as philosopher guides to their respective wards. Both are humanists. The difference between Poreshe Babu and Anandomoyi lies in the way they realize the unity of humanity. The former realized through his intellect and the latter through the heart.

Among the widows depicted by Rabindranath Tagore in his novels, Baro Rani, the sister-in-law of Bimala in **The Home and the World** is an impressive character. She is a class by herself. Being neither crafty like Harimohini in *Gora* nor termagant like Rajalakshmi in *Binodini* nor cultured and dignified like a Yogamaya in **Farewell My Friend**. In one respect, she resembles Annapurna of *Vinodini*. Just as Annapurna is concerned about the welfare of her niece, Asha, Baro Rani is concerned about the well being of her brother-in-law, Nikkil. Baro Rani plays a considerable role throughout the novel. Her wise remarks provide the much needed comic relief as the novel is full of tension and emotional conflicts. She provides a rapport between the reader and major characters – Vimala and Nikhil.

In the sphere of mundane domestic matters, women from within their secluded and shattered existence often subvert male authority, sometimes openly, and other times by subterfuge and carve out a living space for themselves. "One may be tempted to argue that when the line between hostile environment and favourable is drawn close to the front door, the importance of the home and the status of the women inside, as it's symbol and guardian becomes correspondingly greater" (Ardener, 19). Mother of grown up sons wielded considerable powers in the family affairs, particularly in the matter of children marriages and things pertaining to them. In the words of Dovanne Jacobson, "Women also helped make important decisions in other family matters especially in the selection of mates for their children. Men do some of the scouting, but through their network of ties with women in other town and villages, women frequently have access to information vital for evaluating prospects" (p.63) One is reminded here of Sudhir Kaker's perceptive observation on interpersonal relationships and status of women in the context of strict hierarchy of patriarchal Indian society:

"Although the wife of the family patriarch may indeed pay a formal and often perfunctory deference to her husband especially in front of the strangers, she may exercise considerable domestic power, not merely among the other women in the household, but with her husband, and she often makes many of the vital decisions affecting the family's interest". (p.118)

Brajeshwar's mother in *Debichoudharini* in a very simple and straight forward way took the decision about him and Prafulla when Brajeshwar brought her back after an absence of ten years. She silenced her husband with some well-argued comments and the final treat of suicide if he refused to accept Prafulla back. The father had to agree. Bankim himself preferred to elaborate the implication: "We will have to accept that the mistress of the house showed rare skill in handling things. A house like a boat with such a navigator will always be able to steer clear of all problems".(p.714) To achieve women's separate identity and assert their individuality, women often traversed onto the path of confrontation. Confrontation is not an attribute that is conventionally associated with women; hence it enhanced significance in the present context. The expression of women's identity has often been characterized by a persistent questioning mixed with a bit of resentment inherent against if not outright opposition to the male dominance. And these aspects had eventually crystallized into non-conformity with accepted social norms as the symbol of women's growing individuality. What is striking is that some of these women of Tagore and Bankim with singular exception of Anandomoyi of *Gora* were denied motherhood by authors. This denial itself imparts to them certain uniqueness of identity, for conformity to the stereo type would imply a woman's ultimate fulfillment



in fecundity. Interestingly, it is not these women themselves who sought to shrug off the responsibility of motherhood. Indeed, they valued the experience of motherhood as the very expression of feminism, as the expression of their freedom.

Asha, the life of Mahendra is a docile, meek and charming woman. She is a foil to Binodini. She belongs to the traditional type of Hindu women who worship their husbands. Asha believes that her husband can do no wrong. She is an example of innocent and simple-minded woman who can be deceived both by her husband and the people around her. Through this character, Tagore points out whose bitter, sorrows, calamities and sufferings can transform a simple, artless and impractical woman into an efficient and able mistress of the household, commanding respect from one and all.

More often, women derive immense power out of conformity to the accepted social, moral and religious norms. Its power obviously equips the women to enlarge her space and legitimate her position in the family as well as in the immediate social community. "Some when undoubtedly found that behaving in accordance with the ideal gained them certain advantages, including protection and support, as well as social respect" (Hohler, 181) Women who conveniently stamp as conventional and without any original perspective on life demonstrate all the aspects of individuality that we encounter in general. Their lives are guided by the accepted social norms. The central character of *Brishka*, is Suryamukhi who is the opposite of Hira. She is beautiful, fair-skinned, married, kind, generous and a just mistress of the household. She has all the virtues of priestess of a family circle. Her husband says:

"Suryamukhi is just not my wife. She is everything to me. She is my wife by law, brother in affection, sister in carving, sister-in-law in esteeming, mother in tenderness, daughter in devotion, friend in pleasure, teacher in counseling and maid servant in nursing. No one is like Suryamukhi. She is my help maid in worldly affairs, the fortune in my house, the righteousness in my heart, the ornament on my body. She is my happiness in my present, my memories of the past, my hope for the future and my merit for the next world". (Bankim's *Briksha*, 353)

The Indian women in the novels of Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee know that in real life. Cinderella does not get her prince and life is never a rosy dream. She sees the new dawn through her own eyes. The point here is that the Indian women cannot be so easily ignored for they have all good virtues of sensitive human beings.

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