Chapter-II

Female Voice, Male Discourse and the Nation; Dissent, Mergers and Silences

‘From the day when man, refusing to recognize the efflorescence of life and establishing ideals to his own convenience instead, and following those ideals tried to create the woman, seeds of rebellion were sown in the heart of woman since then….Since that day when she is denied the true potential of womanhood she has also been denying man his complete manhood, as a form of revenge.’

Rabindranath Tagore (on Chaturanga)

Our present effort concerns the story of man and woman in a country under foreign rule and which is poised on the threshold of the ‘modern’ age. This chapter is about a nation and its rising nationalist consciousness, trying to come to terms with its political subjugation on the one hand and its problematic negotiations with the ‘colonial modernity’ on the other. The ‘colonial’ brand of modernity was largely responsible for the ushering in of bourgeois capitalism and the bourgeois culture. This resulted in changes in civic space, social modes of behaviour, emergence of ‘clock-time’, new kinds of economic activities and most importantly changing equations between the ‘home’ and the ‘world’ (ghar o bahir). Large-scale social reforms were set in motion, both by the colonial rulers and the colonized society – the prime target of which were the women. While the colonial masters were trying to justify the imperial stance by pointing at the ‘degenerate’ conditions of the colonized women and their subsequent efforts for their uplift the ‘nationalist’ society was also risen from its slumber and began working on reforms, according to the terms set by the ‘native’ male subjects. All this was happening during the greater part of the nineteenth century and its impact was still strongly felt in Bengal in the first half of the twentieth. Although this tale is told many times by
historians and social scientists we shall discuss this in some length later in the essay for setting up the actual contexts of our discussion.

The main focus of our discussion is of course a study of the portrayal of Tagore’s ‘women’ in his major novels, novels mostly written during the first few decades of the twentieth but in which nineteenth century Bengal figure in a very prominent manner. Critics often single out three novels, *Gora* (1909), *Ghare Baire* (1916) and *Char Adhyay* (1934) as his quintessentially ‘political’ novels where nationalist concerns and issues are dealt with in a consistent manner. But my contention is that in the three novels the question of the necessity to form (‘recover’) a ‘self’ during the colonial subjugation and its possible contours is a very important motif, running through the twists and turmoil of the stories. This is, I think, where the question of man-woman relationship gets entwined with the overtly ‘political’ issues and how the ‘troubled’ nature of the male ‘self’ of the colonized ‘subjects’ makes its mark on this relationship. The ‘personal’ and even the ‘libidinal’ has a dialectical relationship with the ‘public’, and, therefore, with the ‘political’ in these novels. These tales are as much of the ‘nation’ as those of ‘love’ ‘sex’ and ‘danger’. For me, thus, alongside the three mentioned previously, it is absolutely essential also to closely look into his other major novels, novels like *Chokher Bali* (1903), *Chaturanga*, (1916), *Jogajog* (1929); novels which do not have overt ‘political’ dialogism of the novels mentioned earlier (I shall categorize these three as Tagore’s ‘domestic’ novels as opposed to the ‘political’ ones). The ‘domestic’ and the ‘political’ novels are like two sides of the same coin, as far as the reflection of the ‘nationalist’ male self, the ‘woman question’ and the man-woman relationship of colonized bourgeois *samaj* is concerned.

Coming back to the importance of the ‘troubled’ nature of the colonized male ‘self’ during a time of ‘colonial modernity’ – a modernity which unleashed ideas as disparate as ‘romantic love’ and *deshprem* (‘love for the nation’), ideas which reached Indian shore from the continent of Europe – its nature was instrumental in an attempt to create ‘woman’ as Tagore says, following ‘certain ideals’. The ‘woman question’, therefore, needs to be addressed in the context of the ‘wounded’ virility of a male self, a self caught in the crossfire between oppressive colonial regime which only gave ‘subjecthood’ without the full status of ‘citizenship’ and strong winds of change brought
about with the close contact with the ‘West’. A short-story written by Tagore in 1898, named ‘Rajtika’ wonderfully captures the trauma of the colonized male subject – the trauma of the hurt pride, borne out of the humiliations and insulting behavior of the colonial masters in almost all walks of public life, on the one hand and the utter vacuity of putting up a false show of virility in front of the women-folks at home on the other. Nabendushekhar, a Roybahadur-aspirant marries into a cultured Bangali family which has staunch British-hater father as its head. Nabendu, however, has the ‘good fortune’ of not only marrying a beautiful wife but also having four sister-in-laws who are equally beautiful, endearing and educated. Nabendu’s marital-life is torn between acting as a fire-brand anti-colonial activist before his loving sister-in-laws and scheming to move up the ladder of social success by playing it safe with the white masters behind their back. His intelligent and mischievous sister-in-laws quickly find out his ploy and his eldest sister-in-law plots against him in order to expose him. One day while Nabendu is bathing the servant informs him that none other than the British Magistrate has come to visit him. When Nabendu hurriedly comes out the bathroom the Magistrate has already gone. The next day when Nabendu visits the Magistrate in his office he makes a complete idiot of himself when he mentions the Magistrate’s visit the previous day. It is utterly improbable that the Magistrate would pay such a visit and it is only Nabendu’s extreme foolishness that he fails to see through the plot set by his sister-in-law. The final ironic twist to the story comes in the form of Nabendu becoming some kind of a hero among the Congress supporters by offering a hefty donation, again out of a compulsion enforced upon him by his brother-in-law and sister-in-law duo. One might as well echo Galileo’s famous remark from Brecht’s play, ‘…unhappy is the land that is in need of such heroes.’ But if one is able to ignore the irony for once, the plights of the colonized male subject seems to make such a haunting impression in the end of the story. More about the male subject later; now let us see what arrangements the male subject, during the rise of the nationalist consciousness, is making to fashion a self for their women that would suit them most.

‘Women’s Question’ in the Nationalist Discourse: Some Key Concepts

It is very important to note that the anti-colonial nationalist consciousness began to form during the second half of the nineteenth century. The corollary nationalist discourse which was by and large a male discourse started taking its shape as the century drew to a
close and finally got codified in the beginning of the twentieth century. During the ‘Swadeshi Movement’ the nationalist discourse which showed its capacity to appropriate discordant, marginal and critical voices had already codified into a master narrative: the battle against the mighty colonial ruler was to be fought exclusively in its own terms.\(^5\)

We shall now try to find out what role was ascribed to ‘Woman’ in the agenda of this discourse. Much work has been done in this area, particularly by Marxist and Subaltern historians and Feminist scholars. Despite their divergent views, all the scholars agree that the anti-hegemonic struggle of the Indian nationalism was most often fought around the issue of ‘Reforming Women’ and in the colonial situation women were used as crucial markers of cultural difference.\(^6\)

To begin with, this was a common imperial phenomenon. Colonizers regarded the woman’s position within the family and within religious practices in India, in Algeria, in South Africa and in countless other colonized countries as indicative of a degenerate culture. Reforms of women’s position, thus, became central to colonial rule.\(^7\) The similarity of the situations of colonized Algeria and those of colonial India is striking, to say the least. In India, colonial ideology worked on the premise of moral superiority, a claim which was built around the degenerate state of women in the society of the colonized. Uma Chakrabarty writes: ‘The ‘higher’ morality of the imperial masters could be effectively established by highlighting the low status of women among the subject population as it was an issue by which the moral inferiority of the subject population could simultaneously be demonstrated.’\(^8\)

The enunciation of such a major statement of the colonialist discourse took place in the form of innumerable books, travelogues, journalistic writings, memoirs written by European men and women. Teresa Hubel, in her book, *Whose India?* mentions quite a few writings of such kind by women colonial writers. Mary Frances Billington, an English female journalist, wrote a book entitled *Women in India* in 1895 with the purpose of penetrating ‘the mysteries which lie beyond the purdah.’\(^9\) The colonial administration came up with a number of legislations within its programme of social reform which contained the aim of reforming the condition of the women in India during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 was followed by the
1874 Right to Property Act, giving a widow a life interest in her husband’s share of property and the Age of Consent Bill of 1891 which raised the legal age for sexual intercourse from 10 to 12 for girls.

Social and cultural changes alongside new laws were ushered in by the imperial powers as Christian missionaries started setting up schools for women. Robert May established the first girls’ school on behalf of the ‘London Missionary Society’ in 1818. Miss. Mary Ann Cook established the Ladies’ Society in 1824. Thus it becomes clearly evident that the colonial hegemony was working overtime to rule not only through coercion but also by clever persuasion. In India the colonial programme for domination not only had a gender bias but it also had a streak of class dimension as well since the ‘reforming women’ agenda centered around the high-caste Hindu woman.

Now, to look at the other side of the story; the nationalist concerns for the creations of ‘New Woman’ in its own terms focussed on creating a new space and new idiom for reforming women in indigenous terms, rejecting colonial moves as far as possible. It is so very interesting to note that although in the first half of the nineteenth century the Indian elite and the middle class intelligentsia came forward in a big way in the programmes for reforming women by the imperial rulers – names of Raja Rammohan Roy and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar immediately come to mind – in the latter half of the century limits of Stree swadhinata (freedom for women) were beginning to be marked out within the realm of the centrally important motif of women’s emancipation in India. The result, as Sumit Sarkar writes, was that ‘Middle-class’ interest in women’s question and social reform in general evidently declined from the late nineteenth century with the rise of nationalism.10 It was because the nationalist consciousness had begun making counter-manoeuvering moves as soon as it took distinctive shape. Tanika Sarkar, in her book Words to Win, writes:

Since an autonomous sphere did not develop within civil society . . . social privileges and claims for self-rule and autonomy could only be confirmed in the sphere of . . . the Hindu joint family . . . Women were . . . the signifiers of the autonomy of the Hindu laws and their disciplines . . . The woman, as ruled
entirely by Hindu scripture and Hindu custom, was perceived as the site of a past freedom as well as of an emergent nationhood (italics mine).\textsuperscript{11}

The woman question achieved a much larger significance during the formative years of the nationalist consciousness. It was then trying to find its own ground against the onslaught of the narratives of ‘modernism’ and ‘progress’ as presented by the post-Enlightenment, post-Industrial Revolution Europe, and the corollary ideas of ‘nation-state’ and ‘citizen-subjects’. Nationalist consciousness was also struggling with the programme of defining the ‘Nation’ clearly for the colonized subjects to fight for its freedom. Redefining femininity and construction of ‘New Woman’ seemed to become the master-stroke to solve all ideological problems for the emerging nationalist consciousness. We shall try to see how.

Colonialist concern for the emancipation of native women were part of a large design — that of replacing the normal ethnocentric stereotype of the inscrutable Oriental by the pathological stereotype of the strange, primal but predictable Oriental — religious but superstitious, clever but devious, chaotically violent but effeminately cowardly — in short, a race to be guided towards the light of ‘Reason’ — reason enough for imperialism.\textsuperscript{12} Nationalist agenda, in this situation had to be to project a counter-discourse of Indianness in a language — ‘unknown to the colonizer’ — a language which ‘incorporates the language of the modern world’ but at the same time, ‘tries to remain outside it.’ It must proclaim that ‘India is not non-west; it is India’ Partha Chatterjee writes “What was necessary was to cultivate the material techniques of modern western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture”.\textsuperscript{13} Thus were born twin projects of nationalism — selective appropriation of the western modernity and championing the spiritual India as the real India. The discourse of nationalism during the transitional phase of moving from anti-colonial feeling to indigenous nationalist consciousness shows great maneuvering skills. The national/spiritual distinction of the Occident/Orient stereotype was redirected towards an analogous but ideologically more powerful dichotomy; that between the outer and the inner. The ‘authentic Indianness’ was to be discovered not in the material pursuits like the West — which are, outer and inferior motives — but in the inner spiritual principle which would prove the superiority of Indian culture. The impetus of social
reform by Bengali elites and intellectuals in the early part of the nineteenth century was reformulated as ‘as long as India took care to retain the spiritual distinctiveness of its culture, it could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt itself to the requirements of a modern material world without losing its true identity.’ The ‘inner/outer’ dichotomy was transposed into a new binary — ghar and bahir — the home and the world — the world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one’s true identity. So who were to bear the spiritual identity of the society, of the nation, of our superior culture? Those who live within the purview of ‘home’ (not Antahpur anymore, as Malavika Karleker reminds us; but still, nevertheless, the abode of the spiritual essence of the nation) — the women will be the ones. So, it became very necessary to bring the ladies out of their purdah, (Once again we see how the idea of the veil becomes important in the realm of nationalist consciousness); give them proper education, in indigenous terms, — and reinstate them within the happy bourgeois home, the symbol of the nation’s identity — so that they can take proper care of our culture, our heritage. It was necessary for the nationalist ideology to interpellate the woman to a new subject position of Bhadramahila, — a construction about which Malavika Karleker writes — ‘Enlightened yet domesticated, by nature loving and devoted to the family’s, well-being, her emancipation was to be viewed within the context of a family’s situation’. So it was necessary to educate the females, to change their coarse behavior and superstitions, unhygienic practices — to give them literacy so that they could read the prescriptive literatures of home-management printed and widely circulated in the market. The education had to be of indigenous type. Danger lay in the education given by the Christian missionaries — in the form of the emergence of westernized, licentious, self-deluded memsahebs. It is striking how much of the literature on women in the nineteenth century was concerned with the theme of the threatened westernization of Bengali women. Epistemic statement relating to the evil effects of westernized woman on society (Jatthechchararini, byapika, intemperate woman — a number of terms were invented) were repeated innumerable times in different discursive formations — in novels, farces, skits and jingles, in the paintings of the patua, in the compositions of Kabiysals.
The large-scale parodic representation of the western-educated woman was perhaps the inverted manifestation of a characteristic nationalist anxiety which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak formulates as: ‘White men are saving brown women from brown men’. But the threat of western education began to be removed when in 1850s Indians themselves began to open schools for girls. From 95 girls’ schools with a total attendance of 2500 in 1863 the figures went up to 2238 schools in 1890 with a total of more than 80,000 students. The spread of female education in Bengal was, therefore, remarkable, to say the least. The nationalist project tried very hard to ensure that there was to be no ‘bilingual’ ‘New Woman’.

Controlled and limited education and learning thus turned out to be the tool by which a new and somewhat synthetic femininity could be legitimized. The nature of the idea of the ‘synthetic femininity’ is something which needs to be looked at very closely. What were to be this idea’s specific markers? The problematic vibrating with the theme of changing times, voiced by a number of the newly educated women in Bengal was resolved by a three-point programme of the nationalistic project.

i. The New Woman’s superiority over the preceding generations of women.

ii. The New Woman’s superiority over women of low-class who were culturally incapable of appreciating the virtues of freedom — acquired through greater self-realization — came of education — freedom from ego; the capacity to serve and obey voluntarily due to the spiritual wealth of the soul.

iii. The New Woman’s qualitative superiority over the Victorian, British middle-class counterparts who miserably lacked the most important spiritual principle of life.

We see how discourse regarding the construction of this synthetic femininity time and again harps on the ‘spiritual nature’ — its corollary. It is because the idea of the ‘spiritual nature’ perfected in the ‘New Woman’ clears the path for the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother: mother possesses the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity etc. The image of woman as goddess or mother, thus, served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home. Sumit Sarkar in his article ‘The Woman’s Question’ quotes Kate Millet — ‘the female must relinquish sexuality if
she is to be in any sense autonomous.' During the *Swadeshi* Movement we see that the
society allowed wholehearted participation of women who were already ideologically
reincarnated as goddesses, whose potentially subversive sexuality, completely covered
under the garb of spirituality. One obvious example would be Sarala Devi Chowdhurani,
being advised against marriage by Atul Prasad Sen— if she was to be seen as being
dedicated to the nationalist movement.

Now, we move to the final twist to the tale of the ‘gendered spiritual’ under the
colonial rule brought about by the nationalist project. The nationalist discourse must
speak the language of ‘organic community’ whose basic building block ought to be the
paternal extended family. This ‘Oriental’ construct must be pitted against the Victorian
paternal bourgeois ideals based upon the notion of ‘companionate marriage’. Dipesh
Chakrabarty argues that the mytho-religious conceptualization of time (the very idea of
organic community harks back to a distant historical past) is manifested through the
female auspiciousness. He writes, ‘the truly modern housewife, it was said, would be so
auspicious as to mark the eternal return of the cosmic principle embodied in the goddess
*Lakshmi* (and clan, by extending the sentiment, the nation *Bharatlakshmi*) lived and
prospered’. The *Grihalakshmi* construct therefore became the master-stroke for
nationalist discourse. The European concept of the historical time built around the *telos of
progress* was thus successfully countered by making the family a site where the sacred
and secular blended in perpetual reenactment of a principle that was heavenly and divine.
Karlekar’s notion of ‘synthetic femininity’ therefore, becomes a signifier for a number of
signifieds, *Grihalakshmi*, the concept of ‘New Woman’ —where the problematic of
tradition and modernity is successfully overcome, as well as the image of the nation as an
affectionate protective, all-giving, powerful mother-goddess of the Hindus emerged —
either as *Durga* or *Lakshmi*.

The second idea that, of reformulation of the abstract notion ‘nation’ in ‘gendered
spiritual’ terms, was a very important agendum of the nationalist discourse. Rabindranath
wrote a number of songs during the First Partition of Bengal, the *Swadeshi* Movement
(1905-1908):

> The message of courage glows in your right hand,
Your left hand removes all fear
Love smiles in your two eyes
While the eye in your forehead assumes the colour of fire
O Mother, I cannot take my eyes away from you
Your doors have opened onto a golden temple today.\textsuperscript{23}

Tanika Sarkar in her book \textit{Adhunikatar du ek dik} discusses how this construct was manipulated by intellectuals to suit their different political designs.\textsuperscript{24}

Thus, from the last few decades of the earlier century we reach the first few decades of the twentieth century, traversing though the formative years of nationalist consciousness. This was the period when the official national discourse was codified. The ‘New Woman’ was posited at the core of nationalist \textit{episteme}.

**The Thematic and the Problematic**

However rigorously one builds up a grand meta-narrative of any dominant discourse of any period, there are bound to be innumerable instances of fissures, disjunctions, overlappings, contradictions, silences in it. Sara Mills in her book \textit{Discourse} comments that ‘discourses do not exist in a vacuum but are in constant conflict with discourses and other social practices which inform them over questions of truth and authority.’\textsuperscript{25} Mikhail Bakhtin formulates his own brand of dynamics, which is in operation — within the social matrix — ‘A unitary language is not something given [\textit{dan}] but is always in essence posited (\textit{zadan}) — and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia.’\textsuperscript{26} His concept of ‘heteroglossia’ (the Russian \textit{raznorecie} literally means \textit{different-speech-ness}) refers to the conflict between ‘centripetal’ & ‘centrifugal’ ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ discourses within the same national language. So how will these critical approaches help us when we shall enter into the fictional planes (to use another Bakhtinian concept, the \textit{chronotope} — the spatio-temporal matrix which shapes the narrative text) of Tagore’s novels?\textsuperscript{27} Hopefully they will enable us to see the texts not only as \textit{ideologemes}, individual \textit{paroles} of the \textit{langue} of nationalist discourse but also to locate in the texts a dialogical system in operation; — a ‘dialogised’ heteroglossia
between the hegemonic voice and the voices which for the most part are stifled and reduced to silence, marginalized or re-appropriated by the hegemonic culture. Literature often provides an alternative space where the inherent contradictions of the national language find articulation. They may or may not get resolved within the fictional plane. That is why the ‘silences’ in the novels are as important as the articulations. The discovery of dialogical interplay between the authorial voice, the male characters’ discourses about women and the women’s voices articulating different kinds of women consciousnesses — in the novels of Tagore – will hopefully give us insights into the dialectical nature of the relationship between literature, history and politics.

In the second section of this chapter I have discussed the ‘Thematic’ structure of the paradigm of nationalist consciousness. My next attempt will be to unearth (like an archaeologist) the ‘Problematic’; that is the fictional resolution of the ‘centripetal’ and the ‘centrifugal’, the ‘official’ and the ‘unofficial’.

Heteroglossia at Work

Dipesh Chakrabarty in his essay ‘Nation & Imagination’ quotes from Aditya Wahdedar’s book a comment made by the well-known sociologist Radhakamal Mukherjee about Tagore’s novels: ‘Tagore’s writings are without any quality of materialism — what he has painted in Achalayatan and Gora has no relationship to real life (bastab jiban)’.

The charge was often repeated by a number of critics and eminent personalities of Tagore’s time. Bipin Chandra Pal, for one, made similar comments in Bangadarshan in 1912. Rabindranath, on the other hand, had some clarificatory words to say about his projects. In the ninth volume of ‘Letters’ there is his letter written to one Hemanta Bala Devi (letter number — 45), written in 24th September 1931. He writes: ‘The ideas of Gora and Noukadubi came entirely from my head. Not that I am aware of such incidents ever taking place but if they would have taken place then what would have been the outcome was what I tried to write in a roundabout way.’ So, as a starting point of our discussion of the novels we have a glimpse of the motif of the problematical nature of the relationship between ‘reality’ what Rabindranath calls Bastabata and art as reflected in Tagore’s art and in the literary criticisms of Tagore’s day and afterwards. This
encourages us as this could be due to a strong sense of ‘heteroglossia’ present in Tagore’s novels. This element of ‘Heteroglossia’ will help us to differentiate between the fictional ‘chronotope’ and the ‘chronotope’ of reality.

At the outset of my discussion of the novels I would like to mention certain predominant characteristics in the career of Tagore the novelist. After his first two novels, Bouthakuranir Haat (1883) and Rajrishi (1887) Tagore never went back to writing historical romance – a genre made extremely popular during his times by novelists like Bankimchandra, Ramesh Chandra Dutta and Swarnakumari Devi. Tagore’s novels, from Chokher Bali (1903) onwards, are set in Tagore’s own times or in very recent past. It is very significant that Tagore, through the novel, wanted to confront contemporary reality head on. Secondly, Tagore’s many young female protagonists, who often make a more enduring mark on the readers than their male counterparts, are almost as a rule childless. This is striking, to say the least, if one takes into account the views expressed by social psychologists that in Indian society ‘motherhood’ and maternal identity confers upon a woman a purpose that nothing else in her culture can. To be a mother is, by definition, to be a good wife and in turn a good woman. In Tagore’s novels what we often encounter instead is widowhood, often a result of childhood marriage to much older husbands, and whom we meet are young widows who have no ways of attaining any legitimate right to motherhood. Their threatening sexuality, which is a genuine problem for colonized male ‘self’, often wreaks havoc among the family and the society at large. The third characteristic is – which is again a very important motif in all Tagore’s major novels – i.e. the homo-social bonding between male protagonists. Though some would argue that there may be covert suggestions on the part of the novelist of homosexuality; in my scheme of things, in Tagore’s novels male friendship does not aspire to the homo-erotic but remains strongly homo-social.

There is a reason behind my singling out these three features of Tagore’s novels. All three, in my opinion, are linked to and the result of the advent of colonial modernity in a fast crumbling traditional society, and a novelist’s artistic negotiations with it. No matter how insistently the official nationalist discourse harped on the necessity of the construction of a new kind of femininity, (repressing female sexuality in the process) – Bhadramahila – large scale winds of change blew and in real-life situations unsettled the
most powerful of discursive formations. On the one hand, to the middle-class youth, the English education with adequate doses of English Romantic Poetry, introduced the idea of ‘romantic love’ and the ideology of ‘companionate marriage’; on the other hand, rampant ‘incompatible marriage’ between child brides and older bridegrooms could hardly make possible what the young men understood as ‘romance’. Thus, friendship or even healthy companionship was hardly achievable among married couples with substantial age and educational differences. So, same–sex bonding was the only solution for men looking for intellectual gratification amidst human relationships: and most often sexual gratification, not love, was sought through visits to brothels, a burgeoning phenomenon in a fast-growing colonial city, exposed in a big way to bourgeois mercantile economy. Women in *Bangali* households were most often left to their everyday household chores in a potentially hostile environment of the in-laws’ house. If they happened to be young widows they were treated with very little affection and care. Their craving for love and companionship was the last thing on the minds of patriarchal society which instead ascribed a life of austere spirituality for these unhappy lots – the magnitude of which often crossed the border of physical and emotional endurance. Colonial modernity was successful, to an extent, to break down the walls of the traditional ideal of womanhood – ideal of mythical characters like Sita, the ideal mother and the ideal wife. So, if the society did not get rid of the widows by ‘banishing’ them to *Brindaban* it had to often negotiate with the stifled, deprived female subjectivities – trying to raise their voice for getting their share of familial rights. In his novels, largely through very sensitive portrayals of young women, often widows, Tagore draws our attention to the dialogical interplay between the ‘centripetal’ societal discourses about the role of women in society and the social reality of unhappy female consciousness, largely ‘centrifugal’ in nature. Many pages of Tagore’ major novels are, thereby, agog with an almost clinical exposure of the hypocrisy of and the exercise of power by the colonized patriarchal society with its overt ‘nationalist’ agenda – an exposure of the never-ending nights of the same ‘monotonous’ nature of the Victorian bourgeoisie, as categorized by Michel Foucault in his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. The articulation of feminine consciousness in the texts, by young women, with little love and even less sexual gratification – who are not biological mothers – during the ‘changing times’ of
colonial modernity is very much like an ‘irruption of speech’, ‘a reinstating of pleasure within reality’ against the ‘repressive’ principle of men. To add to that we must mention that the locality of the articulations is also very important, for the story-lines in Tagore’s novels often move from the metropolitan Calcutta to the rural countryside. The impact of the entrenchment of ‘colonial modernity’ varied in large measures between the country and the city in Tagore’s novelistic chronotopes.\(^{36}\) We, therefore, need a dynamic model to differentiate between the ‘interpelleted’ hegemonic subjectivities and the dissident and marginal consciousness-centers that differ in nature following a spatio-temporal manner. An understanding of that difference may bring to light that the discordant voices of women who dared to challenge the hegemony of the patriarchy involved in the nationalist discourse as well as marginalised female voices, muted due to the unaltered core of patriarchy in a changing time, along with the projection of the dominant image of new femininity of the rising nationalist consciousness — various strands of female consciousness are encoded in the texts, in a way which is unique and perhaps difficult to locate in reality, with much precision. The process of ‘making and remaking’ of national culture where an interplay between ‘dominant’, ‘emergent’ and ‘residual’ goes on, according to Raymond Williams, continually needs to be observed in the novels.\(^{37}\)

**The Domestic Novels**

*Chokher Bali* was published in book form in 1903 and it is well and truly Tagore’s *fin de siècle* novel in which a direct clash between *se kaal* and *e kaal* is very strongly felt. Rajlakshmi, the over-protective mother of Mahendra, the hero and, Annapurna, Rajlakshmi’s brother-in-law’s wife, both elderly widows, belong to the ‘by-gone’ era, *se kaal* and Asha, Mahendra’s adolescent wife and Binodini, the young ‘western educated’ widow are products of *e kaal*.\(^ {38}\) The two eras are separated by only one or two decades. Within a very short span, the advent of colonial modernity has made a radical split in the belief-systems and life-styles of even women, living inside the closely-guarded precincts of *Antahpur* (‘the inner house’). The temporal setting of the novel is such where two completely separate outlooks to life, of which women of two separate generations are the bearers, clash with tremendous force. Rajlakshmi plays the role of what Sudhir Kakar
calls ‘the good mother’ to Mahendra whom, during his early youth even, she psychologically thinks no more grown-up than a suckling child.\textsuperscript{39} The Oedipal nature of the relationship between Rajlakshmi and Mahendra not only influences Mahendra’s ‘self’ and his subsequent course of actions in the novel but also is a clear indication of Rajlakshmi’s assuming the role of a mother, over and above everything, thereby, attaining a position of undisputed superiority and power amidst the female quarters. This is the role that the ‘traditional’ patriarchal society used to ascribe to a woman and subsequently acknowledge her position of power in the family. Due to this issue of motherhood the other elderly widow of the family Annapurna never assumes any significant role in the family affairs, resides in the margin, although her love for Mahendra is no less than his biological mother, and quite early in the novel, voluntarily retires herself to the widow-quarters of Banaras.

The introduction of the woman of the new generation (\textit{e kaal er mahila}) in the novel is done through Ashalata who is, psychologically speaking, more a child that a fully-grown up woman. Her education is such that she can read modern-day novels and believe the incidents that take place in them as nothing but the truth. Her husband, the western-educated Mahendra (he is shown to be a medical student in the novel) searches for a true companion in ‘romance’ in her. His child-wife thinks him to the only God, deserving to be worshipped, but cannot provide him with pleasures and mysteries of true companionship. Their ‘incompatible’ marriage (the incompatibility is as much for the differences in age as for the ‘newly-arrived’ western education) soon grows stale for Mahendra who, during his early euphoric months of ‘marital bliss’ has severed the ties of an extremely close friendship with Bihari who has initially been chosen as the husband for Asha by Annapurna. The price that Mahendra pays for winning, over Bihari, the heart of Ashalata seems to be a gross overpayment for him as Ashalata hardly knows how to give her heart away in ‘love’.

At this point of the novel, enters Binodini – young, beautiful, ‘educated’ in a more complete manner – the woman with a deadly mixture of inscrutability and voluptuousness. She is a widow whose marriage to a sick husband has hardly reached any form of consummation. By a cruel twist of fate and willful ignorance on the part of Mahendra she has earlier missed out on the opportunity to become either Mahendra’s
wife or Bihari’s. Rajlakshmi visits her ancestral village and picks Binodini up who, according to Tagore, ‘…has been surviving like a solitary garden-creeper amidst the jungle, leading a joyless existence in the village.’ The kind of hospitality she shows to Rajlakshmi and Bihari in the village-home itself, with deft touches of fine taste and dedication that none can match, sets her apart, from the very beginning, from the common village-women. Although she comes from a rural background she is not the ‘residual’ type of consciousness-centre that belongs to the by-gone era. She is the ‘emergent’ kind of new female subjectivity whom western education, with its kind of Midas touch, has transformed into a woman with a mind and ‘heart’ of her own. She distances herself away from the blanket of spirituality that the society would have to offer; instead, she wants to have her share of recognition and happiness from the society. But she is a widow and Mahendra-Asha ‘conjugal bliss’, which she observes from close quarters once she lands in Rajlakshmi’s Kolkata home, can never, be hers. Mahendra who has by then exhausted his early days of marital effusion has started looking for ‘companionship’. Binodini’s ripe sexuality and the aura of enigma attached to it hit him like a thunderbolt. Her status of widowhood makes her guardian-less and someone who needs to be ‘protected’.

Interestingly enough, it all starts with photography, a technologized art-form that is a gift of colonial modernity to the urban bourgeoisie of nineteenth century Kolkata. Mahendra comes near to Binodini, to the point of touching her body, while photographing her. It is the sensitive nature of Bihari, Mahendra’s ‘dialogic double’ in the story, (in whom Mahendra is negated in order to be renewed) which can identify the real ‘womanly’ qualities in her, during his conversation with her in a picnic. Binodini opens her heart to him for the first time as she talks at length about her country, her past. Up to this point in the novel Binodini has been nothing but an object of desire, albeit without the societal sanction, in the full glare of the ‘male’ gaze. Bihari notices a characteristic, almost the binary opposite to the sensual young woman in Binodini – that of a devout lady engrossed in her solitary worship. The ‘binarism’ of these two strands of thinking about the woman in the dominant discourses of the times is precisely the liminality that Tagore’s fiction addresses through portrayal of characters like Binodini who cannot be ‘typecast’ as either Grihalakshmi, Byapika or any other.
Nirad C Chowdhury, in his *A Passage to England*, writes, ‘The history of love in Bengali Hindu society is fairly well established. It was introduced from the West... We in Bengal began to deal with love from the literary end... at first it was transferred to Bengali literature from English literature, and then taken over from literature to life.’ In *Chokher Bali*, the ‘literary’ angle to the theme of ‘romantic’ love is presented to a considerable extent through the letters that the protagonists write. Letters exchanged between Asha, Mahendra, Binodini and Bihari are not only an important marker of the element of the *noveli* (‘novel-like’) in the life of the newly-educated middle-class youth, a strange kind of transposition of the ‘fictional’ onto the ‘real’ life, but also, are clear indication of the different degrees of the ‘interiorization’ of that education as observed in the subjectivities of different characters. While Bihari’s letters are matter-of-fact and Mahendra criticizes himself for composing a letter to Asha with an excess of ‘literary fervour’ in it, Binodini writes letters on behalf of Asha in which she deliberately overplays the novelistic style of writing, made popular in her times through a number of discourses of ‘romance’. The three letters that she writes for Asha are clever ‘speech-acts’ devised by Binodini to highlight the ‘incomplete’ nature of Asha’s education on the one hand (as Mahendra is well aware that Asha is incapable of showing such a supreme command over *Bangla* language and recording, in such an in-depth manner, her feelings) and on the other, these letters become ‘her’ love-letters to Mahendra, an ‘act of seduction’, an act only which can offer a substitute for her (a young widow’s) cravings for ‘romantic love’ in such a ‘closed’ society. ‘Fiction’, ‘real life’, ‘love’, ‘lust’, ‘licentiousness’ and ‘society’ – all of their discourses intermingle in a breathtakingly heteroglossic manner when during one of the love-games that Mahendra and Binodini play, Mahendra discovers that Binodini has been reading Bankimchandra’s *Bishabrikkho* (an extremely popular contemporary novel of extra-marital love of which Calcutta Review wrote in 1873, ‘men and as they are, and life as it is’, is the motto of the present one.).

As the affair between Binodini and Mahendra gets going in a full-blown manner the members of *Antahpur* become at a loss as to what to do with Binodini’s potentially subversive sexuality. Rajlakshmi, who has so far been providing shelter to Binodini because to her Binodini has been nothing but a figure of caring womanliness, a role...
which would have full societal sanction. Binodini’s new role as Mahendra’s lover (and in turn the wrecker of Asha’s home) is miles away from the *Grihalakshmi* construct, or even that of a benign mother of the patriarchal discourse. The ‘emergent’ nature of her subjectivity, thus, seems to be in direct contrast to Annapurna’s self, the other childless widow of the text, whose act of dwelling within the discourse of *Iswarbhakti/Swamibhakti* (‘love for God’/’love for the husband’) cannot but be classified as following the ‘residual’ strand of the dynamics of *Bangali* culture. The clash between the ‘ideal’ and the ‘real’ reaches a flash-point when Binodini has a face-off with Rajlakshmi, her provider in Mahendra’s home. Binodini, who by now refuses to be tied down to the role of an austere widow, (in page 255 Binodini declares, ‘I am not afraid of the society. I obey nobody,’) tells Rajlakshmi on her face, ‘Pishima, we are a race of temptresses. I did not know what allurement I had in me, you found that out. You too did not know what trap you were setting up, I found that out. But there was guile, otherwise things would not have come to this…we are by nature devious.’ This is what happens when a self is not allowed to attain full bloom in a society where women are ascribed certain ‘roles’ and are expected to ‘conform’ to it. In a colonized setting the hurt masculinity of the male self tries to downplay ‘subversive’ female sexuality on the one hand, and can hardly resist the temptation of illicit enjoyment on the other, doing damage to the subjectivities of both the sexes.

In the next movement of the text, we see Binodini, for a temporary phase, retiring to the countryside, searching for anonymity. But, as we have mentioned that the distance between the country and the city has become remarkably lessened due to the introduction of the railways and news from the city reaches the country in no time. Binodini finds no peace in the countryside as neither the village community would accept her ‘deviant’ behavior nor does she find quietude and beauty of an ‘organic community’ which has been destroyed by urban invasion. For anonymity she would have to return to the gas-lit streets of Kolkata. The artistic design of the text does not allow us to see Binodini as a villainous woman. We see that she possesses ‘motherly’ instincts like any other woman which becomes clear the manner in which she interacts with Basanta, Bihari’s teen-aged step-son. Her ‘dissent’ and Ashalata’s ‘silence’ are indications the pitfalls of the project of producing ‘woman’ discursively. Along with Binodini’s motherly-self Tagore shows
us how Ashalata, quite like adolescent Mrinmoyee in the short-story, ‘Samapti’, attains womanhood and becomes the lady of the house in the end. Rajlakshmi falls sick; refuses to get treatment, (in p.306 she says, ‘in the older days widows were better off; they were burnt alive. This is simply to tie them up in order to rot and die.’) Annapurna takes Binodini along to Banaras. Widows are a burden – a ‘real’ problem which the text fails to resolve. It is only Bihari who can discover the full magnitude of Binodini’s femininity when in the end he declares his love for Binodini, the ‘complete’ woman. Binodini refuses to marry Bihari as it seems improbable to her that Bihari, with such a spotless character, should marry a ‘widow.’ The Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 26th July 1856. We end our discussion of Chokher Bali with a translation of a four-line poem, composed after the Act was passed, by Iswar Gupta, a mid-nineteenth century poet:

Where is the courage, where the conviction?
Nothing takes place with a mere enunciation
Pointless all ceremony, pointless biding time
Not empty words; acts will do it fine.44

After his spectacular study of the ‘political’ in the life of Bangali jati of his times in Gora (1909) (we shall discuss this novel at length later) Tagore once again returns to the ‘personal’(or one might say ‘psychological’ in the ‘western sense’) in his next novella Chaturanga in 1915. In the horizon of expectations inside the fictional chronotope of Chokher Bali perhaps the ‘widow-remarriage’ is neither a ‘realistic’ nor an ‘artistic’ possibility; Binodini and Bihari do not marry in the end. In Chaturanga, at the end of the novel, Damini, a young widow gives her consent to marry Sribilas. In this novel, like Chokher Bali, young widows take centre-stage. Damini, the heroine of the novel, and Nanibala, a character with ‘marginal’ presence, are the two widows who, in spite of their being contemporaries, represent two different types of points of consciousness – one ‘residual’ and the other ‘emergent’. Like Binodini, Damini refuses to be tied down to a state of ineffectual nothingness, a role that the society ascribes to the widows, without any kind of ‘free will’. She registers her protest in no uncertain terms, when she says to Sachis, the hero of the novel, ‘. . . Haven’t you people put chains round my feet and flung this woman without faith into the prison of devotion? . . . Some of you will decide this for
me, some that, to suit your convenience – am I a mere pawn in your game? Like Binodini Damini too is denied of marital bliss in her early life but for very different reasons. Her husband Sivatosh, while alive, renounces conjugal life as part of his act of abstinence from a life of earthly delights – a life in which kamini or kanchan has any significant role to play. Sivatosh dies and leaves his entire property, his Kolkata house and even the guardianship of his young wife, with a very strong zest for life, to his religious guru, Sri Lilananda Swami in a will.

In fact, neither the self-proclaimed atheist ‘Positivist’ Jagmohan, nor the ‘Vaishnava Revivalist’ religious guru Lilananda, the two diametrically ‘opposite’ father-figures of Sachis, can rise above the binary of ‘sanctified mother/lustful female’ in their interactions with women. Jagmohan accepts Nanibala, the young widow whom Purandar, Sachis’ elder brother burdens with pregnancy, with warm affection while he provides her shelter. But, to him Nanibala becomes a personification of the ideal of ‘motherhood’ and nothing else. He makes arrangements for Sachis’ marriage with Nanibala without deeming it necessary to know her mind. It is beyond his wildest imagination that Nanibala can possess any feeling of love for the rascally Purandar. For him Nanibala is more a concept in his larger design of the project of social uplift than a creature of flesh-and-blood. Nanibala cannot be openly rebellious like Binodini or Damini. But she, nevertheless, makes her ‘silence’ heard through her suicidal note in which she declares her undying love for Purandar.

While, on the one hand, to people like Lilananda or Sachis who are inside the discursive field of spirituality of the Vaishnava Revivalist type, Damini, the individual, merges with the ‘cosmic forces of Maya’ which are engaged ‘in a timeless sport beyond the pale of history’; on the other, to people like Purandar young widows are mere ‘unclaimed’, ‘unprotected’ female-bodies to be enjoyed without any subsequent burden of responsibilities. Both attitudes are tinged with crash objectivity, weak, escapist tendencies and the inability to discover in ‘woman’ a well-rounded personality. Although Tagore draws our attention to the ‘basic’ difference in the personality-types of man and woman while discussing the unique qualities possessed by women he writes in his essay ‘Woman’, ‘Wherever there is something which is concretely personal and human, there is woman’s world’, my contention is that the act of looking at women as a conceptual
problem is symptomatic of the anxieties of the colonial male during the advent of ‘colonial modernity’. In case of Sachis the anxiety becomes really acute as he finds it impossible to negotiate with female sexuality and it assumes the proportions of psychosexual trauma. Colonial modernity has been instrumental in importing ideas from the ‘west’, from the world of nineteenth century ‘Victorian puritanism’, whose one important resultant factor has been the ‘repression’ of sexuality, of which Foucault writes, ‘... repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence. ...’ When Sachis encounters this sexuality in a ‘pure’ amoral form (something outside the folds of a space like the parents’ bedroom – a utilitarian and ‘fertile’ space) in the ‘cave episode’ in which Damini makes an attempt to offer herself to him all he can do, because of his ‘repressive’ nature, is to violently reject Damini and recoil within himself further. When Sachis sees Damini knocking her head on the ground, her hair falling over her, as she mutters: ‘Stone, O you stone, have pity on me, have pity. Kill me’, Sachis trembles all over with ‘fright’ (sexual fear?) and runs back with a bound. Sachis, therefore, fails to respond to the selfless genuine emotion of love in Damini as he cannot rise above the society’s dominant idea of ‘desexualized widow’. Tanika Sarkar writes about the nationalists’ ideals of Hindu women, ‘... the discipline exercised upon her body by the iron laws of absolute chastity, extending beyond the death of the husband, through an indissoluble, non-consensual infant form of marriage, through austere widowhood. ...’ On the other hand, Sachis’ spiritual quest, interestingly, henceforth, takes a very significant line of Hinduism’s so-called ‘Vedantic’ quest of the self to find liberation from *eros*, which is one of the most salient elements of the religion of *Tantra* – another very old and powerful strand of Hinduism. The psychosexual fear and ‘wounded’ virility of the colonial male, thus, seeks refuge in idealized ‘spirituality’ and deliberately overlooks the ‘woman’ in Damini in order to search for the grand ‘feminine’ principle in the creation of God’s universe – a tortuous journey from the ‘individual’ to the ‘universal’.

To Sribilas, Sachis’ dialogic double, Damini, however, is not an ‘idea’; but, during their first meeting, she strikes him as ‘the lightning in the heart of Sravana rain clouds, having youthfulness to outward view, but flickering with restless fires within.’ Although Sribilas confesses that he lacks ‘experience of the secrets of a woman’s heart’
but he, nevertheless, tries to fathom the woman’s psyche – the woman as an individual, not as ideal – comes up with realizations like ‘woman is ready to give her heart away only where she receives sorrow’ and that women are neither ‘toys made of clay’ nor ‘pure notes of the melodious veena.’ Close acquaintance with Damini gives him opportunity to look at, from close quarters, the woman and the fascinating nature of the ‘woman’s time’, by listening to the ‘untold story’ of the woman. Just as to Bihari Binodini talks her heart out in Chokher Bali Damini pours out all her past memories to Sribilas – the one man ready to make contact with her personality on a human plane:

_I happened to be the only person about over whom she was not bothered for either love or resentment_, which explains why _she would pour out to me whenever she could an endless chatter about her past and present_, what was going on among her neighbours and all kind of trivial talk. She would sit on the covered terrace in front of our rooms on the upper floor and talk on and on…

That evening _Damini laid her heart bare_. She said things which are difficult to touch on even if one wants to and everything she said flowed from her mouth with an easy grace and beauty. As she continued I felt as though _she was engaged in exploring many hitherto unsuspected dark chambers of her mind_, as though by chance she had had an opportunity of meeting herself face to face. (Italics mine)

The fresh insights that he attains as a result of this acquaintance give him conviction to engage in an act of dialogic with Sachis to whom he has been nothing more than a mere shadow so far. In their debate over the true relationship between ‘woman’, ‘nature’ and ‘spirituality’ and to Sachis’ gross essentializations like, “It is obvious that woman is Nature’s spy, which is forever trying at Nature’s bidding to deceive us with her artful ways,’ Sribilas firmly declares, with a strong spirit of common-sense, ‘We must steer our boat of life’, [I went on],’ up the stream of Nature. Our problem is not to how to bypass the stream, but bow to keep sailing without sinking. What we need is a rudder.’”

In the end, when Damini accepts Sribilas’ proposal of marriage she neither remains a mere widow – an ‘unclaimed’ female-body to people like Purandar – nor an ideal feminine principle in the act of creation as in the eyes religious fanatics (‘Haven’t
you people put chains round my feet and flung this woman without faith into the prison of devotion?’) but a ‘complete’ woman. She realizes Sachis’ helpless inability to love her, shows respect to his life-long devotion to an ‘ideal’, takes care of the vulnerable man that is in Sachis, with all her heart, without desiring anything in return, and, in the end, releases him of her oppressive presence as she returns to Kolkata with Sribilas. Without surrendering her individuality she becomes an ‘ideal’ wife to Sribilas, much like in the manner of the ‘companionable marriage’. (‘But, lo and behold, what happened in this Calcutta lane! The jostling houses seemed to blossom forth like flowers of paradise.’, ‘... Damini’s work at home and my work outside mingled together like the Ganges and the Yamuna.’)

Societal problems in the real-life chronotopes do not always get resolved in the fictional chronotopes in an unproblematic manner; and the ‘widow-problem’ was a pressing social problem in Tagore’s times, in spite of the introduction of ‘widow-remarriage’ – a system that never really caught on. Sribilas-Damini ‘marital bliss’ is, therefore, a very short-lived one, ending with Damini’s untimely death in the very end of the novel. Damini has to die as widows continued to suffer in the ‘nationalist’ society of Bengal. There are enough traces in this short novel that the married women in the nineteenth century Bengali society, who had often to deal with loneliness and the promiscuous nature of the husbands were in a far from ‘happy’ state of affairs, through the ‘marginal’ presences of characters like Nabin’s wife, who commits suicide following her husband’s extra-marital affair, and Purandar’s wife, who wishes that her husband should commit suicide for the ‘Nanibala episode’. The male members of the society who are out to enjoy young widows will never show ‘respect’ to the wives and make them happy. Tagore once again returns to this problem in his full-length (originally planned as a trilogy) novel Jogajog in 1929.

Ashis Nandy in his essay, ‘Woman versus Womanliness in India’ writes. ‘To make the issues of emancipation of woman and equality of sexes primary, one needs a culture in which conjugality is central to male-female relationships’, and ‘If the conjugal relationship itself remains relatively peripheral, the issues of emancipation and equality must remain so too.’ Tagore makes the issue of conjugality the ‘central one’ in Jogajog – in the depiction of a society in whose culture to manipulate and control a woman by
forcing her to take on her maternal identity soon after marriage is much more important than the ‘peripheral’ notion of conjugality. Tagore returns to the theme of the exploration of man-woman relationship, almost in an obsessive manner, not only in his ‘domestic novels’ but also in his ‘political’ ones – and, as I have pointed out earlier, that the fact that all his heroines are childless helps him not only to focus on this theme in a more intense manner but also to judge, against the grain, the ‘dominant’ discursive tide of ‘women as mothers’. Cultural historians of the nineteenth century Bengal, like Malavika Karleker, Sambuddha Chakrabarty or Tanika Sarkar, emphasize upon the tendency of the patriarchal system to keep wives inside the restricted sphere of ‘Antahpurl/Andarmahal’, the sanctum sanctorum of the ‘colonized’ subjects and to treat them as nothing more than domestic maids (even by husbands from ‘educated’ families) and even to frown upon free mixing between husbands and wives during daytime. The advent of ‘colonial modernity’, with it, the import of ideas like ‘romantic love’ and the rise in prostitution in Kolkata as a result of mercantile bourgeois capitalism – often treated as ‘signs’ of moral degeneration of the ‘modern’ times – necessitated in the additional emphasis on the virtue of ‘chaste devotion’ to be strictly observed by wives, who used to spend, in addition to a thousand kinds of household chores, hours and days in performing bratas or semi-religious rituals for the long lives of their husbands, the birth of sons, well-being of relatives and so on, as a residual kind of ‘non-modern’ way of life.

Kumudini, the heroine of the novel Jogajog, is from an aristocratic zamindar family, past its prime, and is married to a nouveau riche comprador-bourgeois family, the product of the changing times of colonial modernity. Her husband, Madhusudan who has spent his early youth ‘among the crowd of suppliers, buyers and bullock-cart drivers’ goes on to make enormous wealth in linseed trade. Kumudini is as much a product of colonial modernity as Madhusudan; but it has a completely different impact upon her. She, ‘who had been educated at home’, ‘lived in the twilight between two ages’, and whose ‘shadowy’ world was ‘ruled over by Siddheswari, Gandheswari, Ghentu, Shasthi, the goddesses of women’s household rites’ during her childhood years in the ‘country’ is brought to the ‘city’ of Kolkata by her elder brother, the ‘Positivist’ intellectual, Bipradas (from Nurnagar to Baghbazar – from ‘non-modern’ to ‘modern’) and is given such kind of education which would make a Bhadramahila out of her. She
visits the museum, learns to play chess, the art of photography, pistol shooting on the one
hand (her brother’s exposure to the ‘modern’ world makes each of the items available to
them) and studies Sanskrit grammar and literature and the age-old art of esraj-playing on
the other. Kumu’s intimate acquaintance with Kalidasa and the ‘Shiva-Parvati ideal’
results in virginal meditations in which ‘her husband-to-be appeared radiant in the divine
light of purity.’ Madhusudan, on the other hand, a direct beneficiary of the colony’s
march from feudalism to mercantile capitalism, whose life is exclusively built upon the
idioms of commerce, is hardly aware of Kumu’s world of divine ‘ideal’, and, therefore,
habits a world in which the wife is allotted the unremarkable space of Antahpur.
“Behind the walls, shrouded by the triviality of daily domestic chores, she would carry on
with the life that women lead, a life controlled by their masters’ frown.”

The element of love that ‘generally validates marriage between a man and a
woman, a love in which looks, character, body, and mind are all bound up’ – is
something that both Kumu’s intense religiosity (her devotion to the ‘Radha-Krishna’
ideal as she ‘sought to veil her husband under the image of her deity’) and Madhusudan’s
crash commercialism (who knows only one means of tying his wife’s life to his own; ‘by
making her the mother of his children’) overlook. The result in the sphere of domesticity,
sexuality and morality is disastrous, to say the least. The liminality of the discursive
parameters of societal resolution of the ‘woman question’ in a colonial setting, where
‘modernity’ is causing a split with the ‘traditional’ – a split between se kaal ar e kaal
(‘then and now’) – gets exposed when we place two comments made by Kumu side by
side; “I was certain then that whatever one’s husband is, good or bad, he’s just an
occasion for proving the glory of the wife’s chaste devotion” and “What kind of men are
they whose wives are their servants?”(Italics mine.) To interpellate women into a
position of absolute chastity and familial domesticity on the one hand and considering
them as mere possessions and objects of bodily desires on the other can hardly auger well
for ‘conjugal’ bliss and also for woman’s ‘true’ emancipation. Bipradas’s comments
throws into relief the fissures of the dominant discourses of contemporary times, ‘The
men of our times have no virtues of their own, so they speak one-sidedly of the virtues of
chaste women. They can’t supply the oil, but command the lamp-wicks to burn. The
parched souls keep on burning and are reduced to ashes.” “Because women have no road open to them but to submit, they’re constantly abused.”

The intricate dialogical interplay between the ‘dominant’, ‘emergent’ and the ‘residual’ elements of the nineteenth century discourse on women observed through the portrayal of the triangular positioning of ‘Madhusudan-Kumu-Bipradas’ is taken to further heteroglossic possibilities through the presentation of the ‘pragmatic’ point of consciousness of Nistarini’s (Moti’s mother) character. She is the one who tries to break the spell of scriptures on Kumu (one resulting in Kumu’s state of self-delusion) that ‘the scriptures weren’t written for a virgin of nineteen.’ Her survival mantra is, as Tagore writes, ‘For her, it was only natural that the very moment the husband was pleased, the wife should consider it her good fortune. She regarded any deviation from this rule as self-indulgence’, ‘Whether the husband is good or bad, the compulsions of that household must be recognized.’

She shows great signs of sensitivity as she identifies the true nature of the incompatibility in Madhusudan-Kumudini marriage – which lies neither in their obvious age-differences, nor in the difference in their class-positions – but in Kumu’s (to whom marriage is the union of two souls) inability to satisfy Madhusudan’s raw sexual needs. To her, it seems, ‘as though an unknown beast, its slavering tongue greedily extended, sat crouched in a dark cave at whose mouth stood Kumudini, calling upon her deity.’ So, like the previous novels, sex raises its ‘ugly’ head in Jogajog too. In the nineteenth century Bengali homes, fed by the ‘Victorian repressive strategies’ the discursive presence of chaste wives with their complete (‘spiritual’ kind of) devotion to the husbands could not in any way diminish the overwhelming necessity of sex in the lives of males. Women, in most cases ‘unprotected’ women in the families, widows, became the victims of male lust. The sexual frustrations of not only the males but also the young widows created enormous emotional and familial imbalance in many families. In Kumu’s ‘family’ Shyamsundari, a ‘mature, shapely, dark but beautiful widow’ to whom married life has not given ‘very much to savour’, comes forward to fulfill Madhusudan’s bodily needs. Unlike Binodini or Damini who do not lose their physical purity within the novel’s plot, Shyamsundari, who, it seems to Kumu, is made of the same clay of Madhusudan, tries to fill in the void in Madhusudan’s conjugal life by sharing his bed. But, interestingly, she is totally unsuccessful in assuming a commanding position in the
family and gradually fades from the novel in the most unceremonious manner. She, in my opinion, is a most pitiable character. There were hundreds of them in many families, even in well-to-do ones, for whom even a slight deviation from the normative standard of ‘absolute chastity’ often resulted in their landing in brothels, a burgeoning phenomenon in Kolkata, the centre of ‘colonial modernity.’ It is extremely significant that the novel’s chronotope records her presence but does not ascribe any position of importance in recognition to her surrender to Madhusudan, body and mind, to her, although the author notes, ‘The Lord who dwells in our hearts knew that Shyama loved Madhusudan.’

Another deft negotiation between the authorial chronotope and the novelistic chronotope takes place in the very end of the novel when the author makes Kumu go back to Madhusudan’s house after it is known that she is carrying his child. All of Bipradas’s rebellious statements, (‘I can see that the humiliation of women is part of the social order.’ ‘It’s time for them to say that they won’t submit. Kumu, can’t you think of this as your home and stay here? You can’t go back to that house,’) and Kumu’s desperate pleas for freedom and identity (‘I’m your sister, Dada. I want freedom.’ ‘I’m their Barobou: does that mean anything if I’m not Kumu?’) prove ineffectual in the end when Bipradas rather meekly surrenders himself to circumstances when he says to Kumu, ‘How could I dare to deprive your child of its home?’ Bipradas’s prolonged illness, which according to Supriya Chaudhuri, is ‘a part of his character’ seems to become symptomatic of the project of large-scale enlightenment and woman empowerment in the ‘nationalistic’ phase India’s colonial history.

The Political Novels

Now, we shall turn our attention to the three other texts of Tagore, *Gora* (1909), *Ghare Baire* (1916) and *Char Adhyay* (1934), in which the treatment of ‘political’ issues have often drawn critics’ attention, sometimes more than the intricate intertwining of the ‘familial’ with the ‘political’ (the ‘private’ with the ‘public’), which can be perceived on closer scrutiny. In fact, in Tagore’s novels, the personal is political and *vice versa*. Therefore, our categorization is more in the manner of convenience than a truly thematic
one. We shall carry on with the problematic of the ‘woman question’, the nationalist discourse and the fictional representation of it in *Gora*, the longest of Tagore’s novels, and perhaps artistically most successful. We shall, in order to see the problem in an ‘against the grain’ manner, begin our discussion not with any of the main female characters of *Gora* but with Harimohini and Bordashundari, two minor characters and see how the dynamics involved in the continual making and remaking of an effective dominant culture gets caught in the symbolic act of art where ‘real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own forms, finds a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realism.

The Residual

As we have mentioned earlier that we have borrowed the dynamic model of ‘culture’ — the dynamism involved in the interplay of ‘dominant’, ‘emergent’ and ‘residual’ elements — from Raymond Williams it is time now to refer to his theories in substantial length before we begin to use his ideas for the discussion of our text, *Gora*. In his discussion ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’, Raymond Williams writes about his concepts of Residual Culture:

“A residual culture is usually *at some distance from the effective dominant culture*, but one has to recognize that, in real cultural activities, it may get incorporated into it. This is because some part of it, some version of it — and especially if the residue is from *major area of the past* — will in many cases *have had to be incorporated* if the effective dominant culture is to make sense in those areas. (Italics mine)

Harimohini is the representative of such cultural heritage — the residual type which is ‘from major area of the past’. Nineteenth century saw enormous transformations of social perceptions regarding women. The century saw extraordinary changes in female perceptions too. So, practically speaking, if during the last few years of the century any woman showed perceptions of the early and middle of the century one can say that she was caught in a serious kind of time-warp. We can see the projection of this residual culture by Tagore on to the image of the ‘High Caste Hindu Widow’ figure of
Harimohini — a ‘structure of feeling’ a bit anachronistic perhaps during the Swadeshi era — the era of the emergence of the ‘New Woman’. Harimohini hails from the early nineteenth century atmosphere of Kulin polygamy, child marriage, purdah custom, illiteracy and subjugation to the male members.\(^6\)

Now, let us look at the account of her own life which Harimohini narrates to Sucharita,

. . . when, I was eight years old I was married into the well-known Palsha family of Ray Chowdhuries, who were as wealthy as they were high-born. But my fate was not meant to be a happy one, for some misunderstanding arose between my father and my father-in-law over my dowry and my husband’s people could not for a long time forgive what they regarded as my father’s parsimoniousness.

In my husband’s home the family was large one and when I was only nine years of age I had to help in the cooking for sixty or seventy people. I could never have my own meal until everyone had been served and even then I had only what was left sometimes nothing out rice or rice and dal. I used to have my first meal as late us two o’clock and on some days not till almost evening and then the moment I had finished my own food I had to start cooking again for the morning meal. Not till eleven or twelve o’clock in the night did I have a chance to have my supper.

When I reached my seventh year my daughter Manorama was born. My position became still worse because I had given birth to a mere girl. . . An epidemic of cholera broke out in our neighbourhood and my husband and son died within four days of each other. God must have kept me alive to teach me that sorrow, which it is unbearable even to imagine can be borne by man. . . After the death of my husband and my son, my husband’s younger brother cast covetous eyes on my property. . . \(^6\)

The resemblance between life (Rassundari Devi’s or other women like hers) and art seems too striking, to say the least. But our purpose is not to go for some straightforward sociological analysis of the novel. What we are concerned with is the ‘structure
of feeling’ which Harimohini’s presence in the novel helps to show up.67 We could have restricted our discussion to Tagore’s portrayal of the wronged-woman’ or the ‘wronged widow’, a deep-rooted malaise of the High-caste Hindu Society – his successful use of the stereotype. But the point of consciousness which Harimohini’s character represents is much more complex.68 She is caught in the crossfire between the pre-colonial consciousness and the nationalist agenda for change. Throughout the novel her consciousness remains that of the residual type. Her response to the winds of change turns out to be only peripheral gestures; like making arrangements for a meeting between Kailash and Sucharita, which she thinks is a necessary prelude for an ‘arranged marriage’ of a new era:

“What is the use of his seeing me?” inquired Sucharita blushing.

“Just listen to her!” exclaimed Harimohini, “in these days all this business cannot be managed without seeing! In my young days it was different. Why, your uncle never saw me until the first suspicious look in the marriage ceremony.” (p.382)

The essential core of her consciousness refuses to change. When she hears that Anandamoyi, a high caste Hindu woman, has got no strong objections in taking refreshments in a Brahma house [to Harimohini ‘who spent all her life in a village’ the Brahmos were merely a sect of Christians] she becomes greatly perturbed. Anandamoyi explains to Harimohini her strong faith, in her own brand of belief in a superior kind of moral universe, the reason behind her willingness to take food in Bordashundari’s house:

“. . . Sister, so long as society seemed to me the most important thing in the world, I used to respect its rules, but one day God revealed Himself to me in such a way, that He would not allow me to regard society any more. Since He Himself took away my caste, I have ceased to fear what others may think of me” (p.219).

Harimohini misses the point completely and consequently develops a feeling of suspicion and dislike for Anandamoyi. She remains the voice of the residual pre-colonial consciousness; a replica of what Partha Chatterjee while discussing Rassundari’s
autobiography *Amar jiban* calls a “consciousness that was yet uncolonized by the Enlightenment”\(^{69}\)

Bordashundari’s cosmopolitanism, on closer inspection, is also revealed as another face of traditional conservatism; merely its articulation is differently phrased, and is codified in Brahmo-puritanism. Hers is the face of that strand of ‘Brahmo’ consciousness, as a result of which, Sumit Sarkar comments, “the very term ‘Brahmo’ has become in colloquial Bengali almost a synonym for prudishness.”\(^{70}\)

She ridicules Harimohini for her idolatrous rituals, makes life most uncomfortable for her by withdrawing the service of the Hindu high-caste servant to Harimohini, and offering the service of the low-caste servant Ramdin. She does not wish the Brahmo Samaj to show the least amount of prejudice over caste system as she ‘would go on to make it clear that she, for her part would lend no countenance to such laxity — no, none whatever so long as she had any strength left in her.’(p.193) She treats Sucharita’s unwillingness to take food along with her Brahmo friends after the congregations held on the terrace in front of Harimohini’s home with deep sarcasm, charging her with orthodoxy. But she herself shows her own orthodox self in full flow over Binoy’s decisions of first agreeing and then disagreeing to join the Brahmo Samaj.

But the fact remains that Binoy could have married Lolita without being initiated.\(^{71}\) Historically speaking, marriages between Brahmos and a Hindus were not something unprecedented during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the period in which the novel is set. But Bordashundari’s consciousness is of the residual type which, again speaking historically, was woven into the progressive programmes of the ‘Brahmo Religion’ which initially started off as a Reformation movement but later turned out to be just another detour for the establishment of a new order of patriarchy. Thus, we have seen how the dynamics involved in the process of ‘dialogised heteroglossia’ within the fictional chronotopic plane of a novel like *Gora* can register ‘structures of feelings’ of a bygone era even when the winds of change are blowing strongly.
The Emergent

We shall now turn our attention to another point of consciousness which is diametrically opposite to the ones we have been so far discussing; in the form of the character of Lolita. We again quote from Raymond Williams:

By ‘emergent’ I mean, first that new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences, are continually being created. But there is then a much earlier attempt to incorporate them, just because they are part and yet not a defined part of effective contemporary practice. We have then to see first as it were a temporal relation between a dominant culture and on the one hand a residual and on the other hand an emergent culture. 

Partha Chatterjee informs us that a striking amount of literature in the nineteenth Century concerns the threatened Westernization of the Bengali women. He writes ‘To ridicule the idea of a Bengali Woman trying to imitate the ways of a memsahib . . . was a sure recipe calculated to evoke raucous laughter and moral condemnation in both male and female audiences.’

Not only plays and other forms of popular culture but also through didactic tracts and speeches by the reformist leaders society’s censure for the emancipatory zeal of women and eagerness to attain equal status with men became apparent – a woman fighting for her own rights in her own terms was most likely to be identified as ‘Westernised’ and would therefore, be ascribed all that “normal” woman (mother/sister/wife/daughter) is not – brazen, avaricious, irreligious, sexually promiscuous. Any effort by any woman to achieve success in male-dominated fields, like creative writings, going for higher education, serving as professionals can easily be made redundant by adopting a simple strategy – to mark the woman as a victim of self-deluding Westernisation.

And there was another specific marker of “abnormal” behaviour for women as codified by the dominant discourse – to be aware of one’s own sexuality. We have already referred to Sumit Sarkar’s application of Kate Millet’s pronouncement of ‘the Victorian feeling that the female must relinquish sexuality’ to the nationalist anti-colonial Bengal. It is very interesting to note that although a lot had been discussed and seriously
debated over the necessity or reformulation of the idea of ‘Companionate marriage’ a post-Enlightenment, European idea to be incorporated into the social fabric of the emerging nation, the discourse of romantic love with the possibility of culminating in marriage was conspicuous by its absence.\textsuperscript{74}

But the emerging consciousness of woman, liberated and controller of her own life arrived in the scene to fight out its own battle. The \textit{Brahmo Samaj} once again became the ideological site and new social fold where the battle for greater freedom for women began to be fought. Women had to force open the doors of universities for them.\textsuperscript{75}

As for the emotional changeover, Meredith Borthwick mentions that the element of romance, a phenomenon so long denied a mentionable discursive plane began to be formulated and dealt with even by women writings in the new Bengali Literature in the later 19th century. Swarnakumari Devi’s novel \textit{An Unfinished Song} which was translated from the original \textit{Kahake} is a glowing example.\textsuperscript{76}

The achievements of some eminent western-educated ladies from the Brahmo Samaj during this period showed that the fiercely independent women, ready to fight out their battles against all odds and who did not care much for the phallocentric paradigms of nationalist agenda had arrived – the ‘emergent’ consciousness, in our scheme of things! Now let us get introduced to the ‘Emergent’ factor in the novel; Tagore’s conception of the fiery angel who is hell bent in setting rather than following rules.\textsuperscript{77}

The middle daughter’s name was Lolita. She was almost exactly the opposite of her elder sister. She was taller and darker, quite thin, \textit{followed her own rule} (italics mine) and though sparing of words, she could on occasion make very cutting remarks. Her mother in her heart of hearts, was afraid of her and took care not to rouse her temper. (p. 35)

The authorial voice of Tagore depends upon the most prudent and most receptive consciousness present in the novel – that of Paresh Babu to articulate the uniqueness of Lolita’s individuality.

Paresh Babu had for this capricious and unruly daughter of his even more affection than for the rest of his children, and his regard for her fearless
truthfulness was all the greater. . . he was therefore all the more careful to keep it under his fostering care . . . the beauty Paresh Babu saw in her face was not that of complexion or features but of the soul which there found its expression not just the pleasantness of faultless shape but the firmness of strength, the brightness of independence – characteristics which attract a chosen few, but repel most others. (p.166)

It is not very difficult to calculate why the qualities ingrained in Lolita’s character — ‘fearless truthfulness’, ‘beauty of the soul’, ‘firmness of strength’, ‘brightness of independence’, would have seemed dissenting in nature in the colonized (patriarchal) society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The nationalist project was then busy interpellating the woman subject to a new self of synthetic femininity, an apparently inscrutable combination of benevolent angel, upholder of age old spiritual traditions, goddess Lakshmi reigning in Antahpur — the sanctum sanctorum of the nation’s superior heritage. The new nationalist patriarchy was not prepared to incorporate into its dominant culture figure of the fairer sex demanding equal rights for men and women and unwilling to erase her sexuality — since these tendencies were potentially subversive for the nationalist patriarchy to become a hegemonic construct.

As we have mentioned earlier, the nationalist project during its years of consolidation clearly reformulated the question of ‘freedom’ for women along the spiritual line — taking full control of the self and freeing it from mere material pursuits meant greater freedom for women so that they could serve and obey voluntarily and any deviation from the established code was sure to be marked as ‘deviance’/‘lack of restraint’, jathecchhachar. Lolita is the one who vehemently protests against such hegemonic policing and ideological manoeuvering of the nationalist project actually denying freedom where claiming to offer greater freedom — and counterattacks it with her own sense of superior morality.

“I am determined to be free from this society of Haran Babu and his set!”

“You, I suppose, call unrestraint freedom!” said Haran Babu sarcastically.

“No,” replied Lolita “liberty for me means freedom from the slavery of falsehood and from the attacks of meanness. Where I see nothing wrong or
contrary to my religion why should the Brahmo Samaj interfere and put obstacles in my way?” (p.246)

Lolita’s cravings for liberty — to be able to have her own ways in her personal affairs are no mere romantic effusions but are built with iron determination:

“If Panu Babu and his party think that by driving me to the edge of the ocean like a hunted animal they will be able to capture me there, they will soon find out their mistake. He doesn’t know that I’m not afraid of jumping into the sea and that I would sooner do that than fall into jaws of his pack of yelping hounds.” (p.247)

Her ‘emergent’ consciousness is not afraid of social ostracisation but nurtured by Paresh Babu’s liberal humanistic ideals (‘father will never join forces with the hunters, He has never wanted to keep us in fetters.’) is quite prepared to take the battle to the opposition. The confrontation with a problem completely private in nature cannot make her withdraw into a shell but builds up her will to work in the public sphere, against all odds. When she learns from her father that there is hardly any suitable girls’ school where she can spread the lights of education she has received from her father among the hapless girls of her society she decides to start one. The colonial situation of her country has somehow been able to ignite the fire in her ‘lit up by the achievements of her sex in the Occident: ‘She even thought that it would be quite possible for here to emulate the glories of some of the European women of whom she had read, by devotion to a life of philanthropy’ (p.224), But one must add that her exposure to the “sweetness and light” of the Western civilization has not turned her into a self-deluded memsahib, an oft-represented stereotype in the popular culture of her times. Like Sarala Devi Chowdhurani, her rebellious spirit can raise its head not only in matters personal in nature but against the mighty British rulers. She is the only member among her family and associates who refuses to participate in the play arranged in honour of the Magistrate Brownlow to amuse him with the demonstration of Indians’ skills of acquiring Western Culture and manners — in protest against the injustice done against Gourmohan Babu (interestingly enough up to this point of the novel Lolita does not like him at all for his strong patriarchic ideals) and his companions. She does not mince her words either:
“Panu Babu, here, says that this Magistrate’s administration is a dispensation of providence for India. If that be so, all I can say is that our hearty desire to curse such administration is also a dispensation of providence” (p.149). One must also take notice of the fact that the enlargement of Lolita’s consciousness to incorporate critiques of social and political injustices is an independent achievement. She does not have the good-fortune like Sucharita to have a guardian angel in the form of Gora to blossom into a ‘New woman’ who will play a larger role in the emancipation of the nation.

In her article ‘Mrinal, anya itihaser sakshar’ Tanika Sarkar discusses Tagore’s conception of independent voices of protest, in the depiction of characters like Mrinal, Hoimo, Kalyani — all created in 1914. According to her all these characters emanate modernist consciousness in their own different ways. Mrinal, the heroine of the story ‘Streer patra’ she argues, is not merely Tagore’s portrayal of the colonized face of bourgeois individualism but a character steeped in nationalist feelings. Tanika Sarkar is quick to point out that Mrinal’s rebellious spirit has the existing patriarchy of her society as one prime target but it does not include a liberation of female sexuality in its programme. Lolita’s consciousness is an advancement in that respect. Lolita dares to fall in love although she knew

“…that Binoy was in orthodox society and marriage with him was out of question and yet thus to be wholly unable to control her own heart! ... She could see that Binoy was not averse to her and it was because of this that she found it so difficult to keep her heart in check” (p.170)

Her love is not of the common romantic type which reigned supreme in poems and novels of the Victorian period but it is quintessentially of rebellious nature. It is, simply because, conceived in society where winds of ‘revivalism’ began to blow anew quite strongly. Both the Brahmo Samaj and the Hindu Society were formulating their own brands of orthodoxy. She is out to prove that no matter how hard the nationalist discourse tries to recast women in a new form to suit the nation building agenda, one can never erase female sexuality. Her love-affair with Binoy is distinct from ‘Sucharita-Gora’ relationship from the fact that the later affair is conceived-clearly following the line of ‘Guru – Disciple’ parampara (tradition):
On seeing how then Gora looked, Sucharita felt a special regard from him awaken in her mind. ... She wanted to bow down and take the dust of his feet! Gora was revealed to her like the pure flame of a fire which is blazing so brightly . . . a devotion mixed with tender compassion so trembled in her breast. . . (p.273)

We shall have a fuller discussion about Gora-Sucharita later. As for Lolita-Binoy affair it is Lolita who casts a positive influence upon Binoy to a great extent. She helps Binoy to develop as Binoy stops living up to the personality of Gora, the figure of the ‘Imaginary Other’ for him. It is she who with her rebellious action of making a steamer journey with him alone makes him rethink the nature of his feelings for Lolita. She plays a vital role in Binoy’s achieving greater realisation of the true significance of marriage – an act performed not only to conform and enact the existing social customs but an occasion for the union of two souls. Her adamant actions, in fact, give Binoy enough strength to reconsider his decision to get initiated into the Brahma Samaj and at last to marry her, remaining within the fold of the Hindu Society. Lolita’s ideas about marriage are quite revealing, to say the least:

I have come to the conclusion, after much thought, that it can never be necessary for a man to cut off all connection with his religion, his beliefs, or his society, no matter of what nature they may be in order to be united with other men. If that were necessary then no friendship could exist between a Hindu and a Christian. (p.305)

It is imperative that we place Anandamoyi’s ideas about marriage alongside Lolita’s for our discursive scheme of identifying female subjectivity, dissenting in nature, within the rising nationalist culture: ‘Marriage is a matter of hearts coming together. If that happens what matters it what mantras are recited? It’s quite enough if the ceremony be performed in God’s name’ (p.183). The plot-progression of the novel is such that one can safely say that the realisations of Lolita and Anandamoyi are independently arrived at; however striking is the similarity, none of the two has influenced the other.

At this point of our discussion I would like to draw attention to the process of incorporation always at work in a society by the ‘dominant’ culture, of both the ‘residual’
and the ‘emergent’ elements of the cultural arena. The diachronic nature of this process of incorporation at work in the society gets synchronically manifested in a text which Jameson calls a ‘symbolic act’ which is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction. The nature of our novel’s chronotopic plane is such where the incorporation of the ‘emergent’ by the ‘dominant’ is clearly visible. The wind of revolution is gradually taken away from the progressivism present in Lolita’s consciousness by the authorial voice as the focus in the later stages of the novel, shifts to the magnificence of Anandamoyi’s dazzling personality. Lolita’s character fades fast in the final section of the novel where the reader is most likely to be dazzled by Anandamoyi’s mother figure. There the ‘Gora-Sucharita’ episode takes the front seat and Gora’s final identification of the nation of India with that of Anandamoyi clearly demarcates the area of contestation for the dominant discourses of nationalism.

‘The Dominant’; Iconic Figures and Figures of Silence

Sudipta Kaviraj, in his essay, ‘The Imaginary Institution of India’\(^7\) writes:

National groups, although they are gesellschaften must at least in the romantic period of their rise against foreign control, present themselves to themselves (because usually they are their own primary audience) as gemeinschaft. . . it must pretend, because of the newness and unprecedentedness of their sort of collective action that it is an immemorially ancient community. Actually, it must be a bond of secular interests, but in ideology it must be represented as a mystic unity. . .

The ‘dominant’ factor in the newly risen Indian nationalist discourse during the novel’s temporal background is a case in point. The corollary of the idea of ‘mystic unity’ is the conception of time not in politico-historical terms of ‘progress’ but mytho-religious terms – the time of Kula. Dipesh Chakrabarty writes in his essay ‘The Difference Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal’: ‘The self in its highest form was visualized as a part of the Kula, the self-conception of the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal extended family, a self-conception that was more tied to a mytho-religious idea of time than to the temporality of secular history.’\(^8\)

\(^7\) Sudipta Kaviraj, in his essay, ‘The Imaginary Institution of India’

\(^8\) Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his essay ‘The Difference Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal’
Accordingly the bourgeois individual self must be reformulated in terms of *Kula* family, a primary unit of ‘Organic Community’

And in the distinctive temporal, scheme of the rising nationalism we see the concept of ‘femininity’ turning into a signifier of ‘the quality of times with the difference’ It also had to be reconstructed according to mytho-religious idioms. Dipesh Chakravarty writes:

. . .in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengali tracts supporting women’s education and even the idea of ‘friendship’ between husbands and wives. . . was almost always tied to another ideal, the older patriarchal imagination of the mythical divine figure of the goddess *Lakshmi*. . .

. . . converting women into *Grihalakshmi* (*Lakshmi* of the household) through the novel means of formal education was the self-appointed task of a civilizing nationalism.\(^81\)

What was heard in the compound word *Grihalakshmi* in the nineteenth century were. . .ways of bringing together the domestic and the national in public narratives of the social life of the family . . . to imagine a connection between the domestic and a mytho-religious social . . .‘nation’.\(^82\)

Dipesh Chakrabarty also points out ‘*Lakshmi*, however, has—reverse side *Alakshmi* (not-Lakshmi) her dark and malevolent other’.\(^83\) *Bibi, mensahib* are such terms which were commonly associated with *Alakshmi* motif. Any deviational behaviour of educated ladies of the times from the ‘normal’ was ascribed to such terms. The ‘emergent’ consciousness of ladies emancipated from *Antahpur* had to bear the brunt. Lolita has been a fine example of that.

Now let us see who most clearly emanates the ‘dominant’ form of nationalist consciousness and who turn out to be dissents. We begin with Gora’s consciousness: ‘In this sunlight of midday, India seemed to be stretching out her arms towards him. . . Gora’s heart was so full that tears came to his eyes and all despondency vanished from his mind.’ (p.270)
He said to himself again and again: “Mother is calling me! Let me go to where the Bestower of all food (Annapurna in original Bengali text) the One who maintains the Universe (Jagoddhatri in original Bengali text) is seated so infinitely far away in time and yet present at each instant the One who sheds the glorious light of the Future on the imperfect and miserable Present . . . mother calls me to the infinitely far and yet infinitely close. (p.270)

Two female characters provide the emotional fulcrum to Gora’s character in his search for his ‘Nation’ as well as his true ‘self’, Anandamoyi, his adopted mother and Sucharita, a young Brahma woman, with whom he falls in love after much trepidation. The natures of consciousness of these two characters as well as the protagonist’s perception of their unique qualities manifest to a large extent the iconic representation of female subjectivity by the discourse of official nationalism. It will be worthwhile to quote Gora’s feelings for Sucharita at this point and one will be quite at ease to link his consciousness and the nationalist project regarding ‘women’. A few pages later the authorial voice informs us:

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 . . . He saw in her a manifestation of the power (Lakshmir Prakash in original Bengali text) which never forsakes the meanest of us in our sorrows or misfortunes, which never despises us, and although entitled to worship offers its devotion to even the most unworthy amongst us (p.272)

Anandamoyi and Sucharita thus turn out to be within the ‘chronotopic’ plane of the text, two iconic females around whose presence and influence the issues relating to nation its tradition, its reinvention, its reformulation as well as the rise of the nationalist ‘self’ are contested and resolved: ‘the faces of two presiding deities of that beautiful outside world the one lighted by a mother’s love known to him from his birth, and the other the beautiful and tender face of his acquaintance.’ (p.271)

Sumit Sarkar has drawn our attention to the fact that ‘Nationalism was increasingly translated into the language of religion. Gandhian austerity and calls for self-
sacrifice and periodic fasts evoked the traditional mode of renunciation’. In the text we see how Gora’s dawning of nationalist self follows the religious line ‘He was a Brahmin of India, it was for him to worship the divine Being on behalf of India, and his work was that of religious austerities’ (p.378) and his nationalist project must include ‘woman’ the necessary Other reformulated as Sadhonsongini: ‘I keep thinking that India can never be fully revealed only by looking at her men Her manifestation will only be complete when she has revealed herself to. . . women’ (p.313). For him Sucharita is the one. Sucharita’s vexations over her role in this larger nationalist scenario [“. . . Where was India? At what far distance was Sucharita?” (p.314) ‘Sucharita thought to herself “In this there is a work for me to accomplish. What is the work?” (p.358)] are answered thus by Gora ‘the Brahmin of India’ “Your place is in the solar system of India – you belong to my own country – it is impossible for you to be swept into the void by the tail of some wandering comet! When you are firmly established in your right place, then I will be able to relinquish you!” (p.301) The circle of the ‘domestic’ the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘national’ having the image of Lakshmi (Grihalakshmi to be more precise) at its centre gets completed in Gora’s letter to Sucharita:

. . . For women the path of life’s true realisation is the welfare of all. The world may be full of joy or full of sorrow – the virtuous and chaste woman will accept it all and make it her chief religious duty to give form to her religion in her home. (p.397)

So the relationship which is codified by the largely spiritual principles in operation between Guru and Shishya (Critics like Jyotirmoy Ghosh and Ashis Nandy have found the genealogy of the ‘Gora-Sucharita’ relationship in the celebrated relationship between Swami Vivekananda and Bhogini Nivedita, very prominent contemporary figures when Rabindranath was writing this novel,) has the ‘domestic and the familial’ as its core. So, the question may arise at the end of the psycho-spiritual journey undertaken by Gora during the chronotopic plane of the novel, does any fundamental change in Gora’s notion regarding the role of women take place? We refer to the opening movement of the novel when Gora says to Binoy: “that woman is deserving of worship because she gives light to the home” “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.” (p.9) The statement of the ‘gendered spiritual’ of the ‘dominant’ discourse is thus reproduced in the ‘chronotope’ of the text.

But in the beginning we have mentioned that the text shows signs of ‘dialogised heteroglossia’ and the ‘centrifugal’ does not give up without a fight. Let us consider again the text’s extremely powerful representation of Anandamoyi. She has been the granddaughter of a great Banaras Pandit and after her marriage to Krishnadayal she has accompanied her husband to various places in the north India during his tenure of a job in the Commissariat Department. The childless Anandamoyi through a dramatic turn of events, during the ‘Sepoy Mutiny’, gets an opportunity to adopt an Irish infant whose mother dies during those raging days shortly after giving birth to the child. Anandamoyi’s act of adoption gives her a unique liberal perspective which can come in contact all kinds of orthodoxies but can still retain its sense of superior morality. Being the provider to an Irish boy, she refuses to be tied up with any kinds of dogma. She says to Gora ‘But do you know that it was when I first took you in my arms that I said good-bye to convention?’ (p.13) We only have to compare the statement made by the authorial voice about Krishnadayal’s feeling for Gora (Krishnadayal is unmistakably a representative of the ‘Revivalism’ streak in the colonial patriarchy) ‘She knew quite well that he had never given to Gora the place of son in his heart rather he felt a sort of hostility against him’ (p.163) with Anandamoyi’s desperate answer to Gora during Gora’s most traumatic revelatory moments of life ‘Gora my child, you are the only son of mine. I am a childless woman, but you are more truly my son than a child born from own body could have been’ (p.402) to understand the liminal nature of orthodoxies and the superiority of her liberalism. Motherhood, everyday womanliness, essential instinctual qualities enrich her personality to such an extent that she attains the highest possible status for a humanist. Her deep faith in humanity and in true human relationships gives her enormous confidence. She says to Binoy, another consciousness, dissenting in nature: ‘God has not put any obstructions in my way! laughed Anandamoyi. He has made everything clear to me.’ (p.254) Together with Paresh Babu she touches the inner strength of the great Indian tradition, a strength that comes mainly from its synthesising and flexible nature far better than the authoritative voices of social orthodoxies, be it of the Hindu type, exemplified in Gora or of the Brahmo type, represented by Panu Babu. Ashis Nandy writes ‘what Paresh
has acquired through self-discipline, Anandamoyi has acquired through everyday womanliness, by being herself.86

Her common sense, untainted by any variety of orthodoxy, breaks open the code for the genealogy of the nationalist historiography – an history of ‘the nation’ which is an invented tradition, based largely upon the method of selection, and collaboration with the colonial Orientalists. To her consciousness the ‘Hindu past’ and the ‘Muslim past’, the high caste and the low caste happily coexist. Lachmia, the low caste childhood nurse of Gora, resides very close to her heart and she simply refuses to give any importance to Gora’s censures for Lachmia’s close proximity to Anandamoyi’s household. Her almost stoical faith in God’s superior justice and in humanity, she thinks, will see her through the toughest of oppositions and onslaughts of orthodoxy. Let’s look at a remark made by her to Sucharita, whose consciousness is deeply tied with the Brahmo orthodoxy:

Look here, in my own home I cannot observe which the rest of the family observe that’s why so many people call me a Christian . . . do you know that even Gora will not take water in my room! But why should I for that reason say that the house is not my home, and that their Hindu society is not my society . . . If the obstacles become insurmountable then I shall take the path which God will point out to me and it is their lookout whether they accept me or not. (p.256)

What Binoy’s colonial education (he is an M.A) cannot provide definitive answer to his serious emotional vexations ‘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 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?’ (p.251) the answer comes through Anandamoyi’s fluid open self-definition ‘What after all is the difference, my son, between Brahmo and orthodox Hindu? There is no caste in men’s hearts there God brings men together and – there He himself comes to them. Will it ever do to keep Him at a distance and leave the duty of uniting men to creeds and forms?’ (p.183)

We can see how the ‘centripetal’ tendencies of nationalist discourse had to fight quite hard with the ‘centrifugal’ forces during the late nineteenth century and the early
twentieth century as exemplified by Anandamoyi’s consciousness. Thus, in the whirlpool of the colonial Bengal where conservatism and radicalism were fighting it out the voice of sanity and good reason was not altogether lost interestingly enough most often it was pronounced by women. In the ‘Epilogue’ of the novel reconciliation between Gora’s nationalist consciousness and Anandamoyi’s practical morality takes place and Gora’s comment has assumed canonical proportions since the publication of the novel:

Mother, you are my mother! exclaimed Gora “The mother whom I have been wandering about in search of was all the time sitting in my room at home. You have no caste, you made no distinctions and have no hatred – you are only the image of our welfare! (Kalyan — in the original Bengali text with the unmistakable spiritual connotation) It is you who are India”.

During Tagore’s time the emergence of the educated (most often bilingual cosmopolitan Bengalis) novel-reading audience closely followed the emergence of the middle-class, most of whom worked in the Governmental offices of the colonial rulers and simultaneously nourished anti-colonial feelings in their hearts. The novel’s final closure, a happy resolution, however contrived it may seem on closer inspection, must have appealed to their ‘liberal!’ senses – ‘Woman’ — elevated to the position of being the ‘Nation’ itself, not merely remaining the inspiration behind the gendered conception of the nation — (Deshmatrika). But the text’s heteroglossia, its silences’ along with its utterances refuse to melt away! Sasimukhi, Mohim’s daughter who is married off to Abinash at the age of eleven along with the promise of a very handsome dowry does not get the chance to utter a single sentence and this happens right under the nose of the torch bearers of the emerging ‘Nation’. Her eerie silence along with the ‘silence’ of Labonya, the eldest daughter of Bordashundari who has got no other vocation in life but to wait for a prospective bridegroom — makes one feel really uncomfortable. The register of their ‘absent consciousness’ in the text is perhaps a proof to the fact that building up a discursive theoretical base for the ‘Nation’ is one thing and dramatically changing the lot of women is another. The enigmatic presence of Labonya and Sasimukhi in the ‘chronotope’ is a testimony to the novel’s problematic relationship with the Bengali society during the rise of nationalist consciousness.
At this point of our discussion we are confronted by role of ‘silence’ in the heteroglossic process in operation within the novelistic chronotope; whereas heteroglossia is all about articulation, the element of ‘silence’ poses problem for a theoretical discussion. But ‘silences’ can be perceived as different kinds of articulation if we posit Macherey’s theory of ‘silences’ alongside Bakhtinian idea of ‘heteroglossia’. Pierre Macherey in the chapter ‘The Spoken and the Unspoken’ of his book *Theory of Literary Production* writes, ‘The speech of the book comes from a certain silence, a matter which it endows with form, or ground on which it traces a figure.’ For elaborating his point further he adds, ‘... it is this silence which tells us ... which informs us of the precious conditions for the appearance of an utterance and thus its limits, giving its real significance,’ and ‘What is important in the work is what it does not say.’ His observations give us important insights into the ‘silences’ of the text of *Gora* of which we are discussing. If, according to Macherey it is ‘silence’ which gives a book its ‘form’ and informs us about the ‘precise conditions’ and ‘limits’ of utterance in the book then the silences of Sasimukhi and Labonya are extremely important for identifying the limits of the nationalist (‘constructed’) discourse. The glorification of Anandamoyi’s status — as a symbol of rich multi-textured, synthesizing heritage of India — is counter-pointed by the ‘silent’ presence of Sasimukhi and Labonya. In the domain of the ‘social Imaginary’ created by nationalist discourses is often projected the consciousness of an upper-caste woman who is past middle age with a distinctive characteristic of holding on to the essentially ‘true’ synthetic Indian tradition and bringing about a happy resolution between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ (of the ‘colonial’ kind) — a character who will hold the nation together and carry it safely to a new age. Anandamoyi is clearly a manifestation of such strategy of nationalist discourse. The hegemonic nature of such discourse is manifest in a subsequent accommodation and at the same time marginalisation of authentic female consciousness. The ‘constructed’ identity of newly-fashioned ‘femininity’ — the idea of *Bhadramahila* during the *Swadeshi* period gets ruptured by silences such as Sasimukhi and Labonya. The phallocentric, upper-caste grain of the nationalist discourse thus can be decoded within the chronotopic plane of *Gora* by the absence of consciousness of Sasimukhi or Nanda, the lower-caste fellow cricket player in Gora’s local club. So, this is perhaps an example, on a fictional level, of
the ‘split’ that exists between the ‘pedagogical’ and the ‘performative’ (as noticed by Bhabha and others) in most narratives of the nation.

**Bimala: the Voice of the Self-representing Woman**

In *Ghare Baire* (I shall, however, primarily be using Surendranath Tagore’s English translation, *The Home and the World*) Bimala’s character provides the main matrix for the contrasting narratives of the nation, of Nikhilesh and Sandip, to unfold. For our present purpose, however, we shall look closely into how both the diametrically opposite points of view of Nikhilesh and Sandip about perceiving the nation are guilty of looking at women as part of their project of negotiations with nationalism on the one hand, and ‘colonial modernity’ on the other. None of the two tries to gauge what a woman ‘really’ wants. Bimala’s ‘story’ (in the Bangla original ‘Atmakatha’) in *Ghare Baire* turns out to be a rift between Nikhilesh’s project of creating the ‘better half’ of a companionate marriage, following the ‘changing’ times, and Sandip’s programme of making her ‘one with the country’ during the time of nationalist upheavals. It is not merely that her venturing into the ‘world’ (*bahir*) is fraught with conflicting pulls, but her ‘home’ (*ghar*) too is ruptured from within; between the ‘ideal’ which, it seems to her, belongs to a bygone era and the ‘real’ which hardly seems promising. We see the image of her mother, in the beginning of the novel, as a devotional wife on whose forehead the vermilion mark has shown like the morning star and whose devotion, (‘Even in my infancy I would feel its power. It transcended all debates, or doubts or calculations; it was pure music,’) remains for Bimala, for the rest of the novel, an ideal, a transcendental signifier, an unattainable self during a changed time. She, in her own times, in her own family, sees the life of her sister-in-law, Bororani, getting devastated for her husband’s drinking ways as the example of life for woman at ‘home’. When, at the end of the novel, Nikhilesh wants to relive their past lives once again Bororani cuttingly remarks, ‘No, brother dear, I would not live my life again – not as a woman! Let what I have had to bear end with this one birth. I could not bear it over again.’ (p.313) Bimala’s *Atmakatha* thus, in a way, becomes an outgrowing of a life of conjugalyy – a conjugalyy that is played out within the limits of motherhood and the role of an ideal wife. It becomes a
record of the woman’s desire for love – a love that is not borne out of devotion but ‘evocation and elaboration of the here-and-now passion, an attempt to capture the exciting, fleeting moments of the senses.’ She envisages her own country in the same idioms of her passion – as a woman like her, standing expectant:

There is no call to her of children in their hunger, no home to be lighted of an evening, no household work to be done. No; she shies to her tryst, for this is the land of the Vaishnava Poets. She has left home, forgotten domestic duties; she has nothing but an unfathomable yearning which hurries her on, - by what road, to what goal, she reck not. (p. 143)

Through the voice of this ‘self-representing’ woman the limits of the nationalist project of the resolution of the ‘woman question’ are thus exposed. Here is a woman who wants to be as much a part of the nationalist struggle as to become a woman desired by men. The incompatibility between the two turns out to be not a happy one in Bimala’s life. Bimala’s life’s tragedy lies in the confusion between the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ – one between the nationalist self-glorification and the sexual desire. Her wakening sense of autonomy, which is charged with powerful eroticism; the act of making a choice between nurture and sexuality, turns out to be having links with, according to Tanika Sarkar, the discarding of the welfare of people and embracing a politics of ‘passion and destruction.’

In the end, both Sandip’s eulogies (‘You are the Queen Bee of our hive, and we the workers shall rally around. You shall be our center, our inspiration.’) (p.57) and Nikhilesh’s agenda of turning Bimala into a helpmate (‘There was a despotism in my desire to mould my relations with Bimala in a hard, clear-cut, perfect form. But man’s life was not meant to be cast in a mould . . . in trying to manufacture a helpmate, we spoil a wife.’) (pp. 327-328.) fail to bring out Bimala to the ‘outside world’, in any real sense of the term. Supriya Chaudhuri writes, ‘. . . Bimala never reaches the world which needs her in the way Nikhilesh had envisaged.’ It takes the experienced eye of Chandranath Babu (the wise, old man – the voice of sanity, much like the character of Paresh Babu in Gora), Nikhilesh’s teacher, to notice that “She is getting too narrow a view of the outside world from here, she cannot see men and things in their true proportions.’ (p.270) Neither
Sandip nor Nikhilesh can become an instrument for her ‘true’ emancipation – an emancipation that will help her to rise above the dichotomy of the ‘home’ and the ‘world’. They, instead, instill in her a sense of false pride for which she wants to live amidst nothing but praises – the danger of approaching women-folk with the discursive agenda of producing ‘synthetic femininity’ – : ‘Praise, praise, I want unceasing praise. I cannot live if my wine-cup be left empty for a single moment.’ (p.243) Bimala becomes self-deluded in the process, ‘[L]istening to all his allegories, I had forgotten that I was plain and simple Bimala. I was Shakti; also an embodiment of Universal joy. Nothing could fetter me, nothing was impossible for me;’(p.150) It is Nikhilesh, later in the novel, who finally realises the liminality of nationalist project for the resolution of the ‘woman question’, that ultimately becomes detrimental for both man and woman, ‘We must beware of clothing her in the witchery of our longings and imaginings, and thus allow her to distract us from our true quest.’(p.171)

Men in Tagore’s novels most often find women inscrutable, or to use the famous Freudian expression – as the Dark Continent – and this is largely because of the reformulating agenda of a colonized race coming in the way of the establishing contact at a human level. During the colonial period, in Nirad C Chowdhury’s words, ‘the search for ‘woman’ became man’s devotional quest for personal ambitious goals.’ It is interesting to note that women effortlessly break the ice in matters of human relationships when they come in contact with young boys and take up the role of the mother-figure. Bimala’s spontaneity comes to the surface when she interacts with Amulya – her motherly feelings wells up inside and she subsequently realises the true measure of things. Her relationship with Amulya has close parallels with those of Kumudini-Hablu, Binodini-Basanta and Ela-Akhil in Chokher Bali, Jogajog and Char Adhyay. The intuitive caring nature of the mother-son relationship for the childless Bimala gives fulfillment and the bursting forth of an authentic self. Motherliness helps Tagore’s childless heroines, including Bimala; find their spontaneous selves whereas conjugality turns out to be pathetically inadequate. Motherliness gives Bimala the opportunity to show her caring self, according to Tagore, ‘the true nature of a woman.’ She prepares sweetmeats for Amulya and feeds him with her own hands. She becomes extremely afraid that any danger may befall Amulya and in the process sees clearly for the first time
the destructive potential, involving ruthless and life-denying violence, in Sandip’s Swadeshi project. Through her newly-gained attitude of care Bimala wakes up from her slumber of self-delusion at the very end of the novel. In the backdrop of political violence, unleashed by the extremist form of nationalism, epitomized by Sandip and his followers in the novel, Bimala’s ‘caring’ attitude introduces a new paradigm to the text. In the words of a famous modern-day care ethicist, Carol Gilligan:

> The notion of care expands from the paralyzing injunction not to hurt others to an injunction to act responsively toward self and other and to sustain connection. A consciousness of the dynamics of human relationships then becomes central to moral understanding, joining the heart and eye in an ethic that ties the activity of thought to the activity of care.\(^{97}\)

The issue of care is discursively dealt with in greater detail in *Char Adhyay*, Tagore’s last novel. We shall discuss that later. We want to conclude our discussion of *Ghare Baire* with a glance at Satyajit Ray’s cinematic adaptation of the text. In the very end of the film, very significantly Ray shows Bimala as a widow, who, with white dress and closely-cropped hair, looks uncannily similar to Bororani, the other widow of the text. Tagore, in his text, does not clearly state whether Nikhilesh actually dies or not whereas Ray seems to ascribe widowhood to Bimala as a sign of the price she pays in order to come to a true understanding of life and its nature. Thus Bimala, the woman capable of ‘self-representation’ joins the band of widows from Tagore’s novelistic world whose female agency is shown in the end to be by and large ineffectual.

**Char Adhyay: Disintegration of 'Synthetic Femininity'**

Let no other woman suffer such a terrible widowhood.

Ela, *Char Adhyay*\(^{98}\)

Ela, the heroine of Tagore's last novel, unlike Bimala, does not arrive at widowhood; but, her ‘vow of celibacy’ makes her experience the emotional trauma of 'terrible widowhood' in her mature years. The novel was written in 1934 when Tagore was 73 years old and the country had already witnessed the violent bursts of extremist movement. Here the
discursive limits and aporia of the nationalist resolution of the 'woman question' surface, as a result of which Ela, a representative figure of the 'emancipated' Bhadramahila has to be 'eliminated' in the end, by the comrades whom she trusts more than herself, – all for a greater 'cause' of the nation. As the history of India's struggle for independence gradually unfolds, Tagore, too, through a greater part of his novelist's career, faithfully records the unhappy journey of Bangali Bhadramahila in search of finding her place in the 'imagined' nation. Sucharita's golden dreams and aspirations in Gora metamorphose into Ela's shattered life and tragic end in Char Adhyay. The final pages of Tagore's 'Collected Novels' (thirteen in all), thus, would ring true the idea how the 'nationalist' male agency ultimately finds woman's participation in the political sphere – a subject too 'hot' to handle. The conflicting pull of forces of 'eroticization of politics' and 'politicization of the erotic' in the coalescing 'private' and 'political' spheres of the Bangali samaj, with the advent of 'colonial modernity', tears asunder the nationalist project of arriving at a 'resolution' of the 'woman question' – a process which is shown in its preliminary stage in The Home and the World ultimately reaches its devastating end in Char Adhyay.

Nirad C Chowdhury observes that the Bangali jati received from the 'West' both the ideas of 'romantic love' and 'patriotism' which played somewhat like 'counterpoints' in the ears of the urban, educated class of Kolkata and from the very beginning the ideas shaped up to be incompatible. One has to remain celibate in order to serve the nation's cause. This became the ideal for every patriot and more so for every aspiring woman activist in the country's fight for independence. When Sarala Devi was contemplating marriage rather late in life she was warned by the eminent Congress member from Lucknow, Sri Gangaprasad Verma that her countrymen would be disappointed if she would marry after all as they would lose a soldier dedicated to the cause of the nation.100

'As soon as I saw you, I felt you to be a woman heralding the new age – the age beckons from within you.'[Indranath] (p.18)

'You will have to bind yourself by an oath that you will never bind yourself in the ties of domesticity. The social world is not for you. You do not belong to society. You belong to the nation.' [Indranath]

'This oath is mine,' said Ela raising her head. (p.14)
'Before you had come into my life, I had sworn that I would do the nation's bidding, that I would keep nothing exclusively for myself. I am betrothed to the nation. [Ela] (p.34)

Ela's sexuality is, therefore, 'pledged to the nation.' But, interestingly, in Char Adhyay her vow of celibacy is placed alongside the context of a record of domesticity in the 'Prelude' of the novel – the kind of bleak domesticity that hardens Ela's heart against conjugal or other kinds of family relationships. The domestic sphere, she witnesses, happens to be a storehouse of prejudices, worst kind of bigotry and ruthless torture of the powerful over the powerless. To her utter surprise it is the elderly members of the 'weaker' sex that are really guilty of inhuman wielding of the rod of blind tyranny within the precincts of 'home' – the liminal space of 'traditional' domesticity. Ashis Nandy writes, ‘. . . man's cruelty toward man is exceeded only by man's cruelty toward woman. But even man's cruelty toward woman is no match for the cruelty of woman toward woman.' It is from the clutches of this claustrophobic domesticity that Ela wants to escape – to rebel against.

The very first sentence of the novel reads, ‘Ela remembers that her first intimation of life came through rebellion.’ She wants to reach out to the 'world' – the world inhabited by people like Indranath, the mastermoshai, a powerful agent of the nationalist discourse; ‘What is more important that you are the very manifestation of primieval female energy, of Shakti . . . Give us power. Give strength to men.'[Indranath], (p.6.)

Unlike Sandip, who cleverly camouflages his erotic desires under the garb of political rhetoric when he seduces Bimala, Indranath eroticises the realm of politics by laying bait for young fearless revolutionaries like Atin in the form of wonderful feminine charm of beautiful Ela. Indranath tries to 'interpellate' Ela in the ideology of nationalist politics when he says to her:

What would you yourself know of the drop of blood-red sandal paste with which you mark the boys' foreheads – you do not know how it inflames them. Without this, it would only be a matter of bare wages. We are not those who renounce women and gold . . . where a woman has influence, we have put her on pedestal. (p.11)
Such blatant use of feminine charm for political purposes, overlooking the 'real' feminine self, betrays the discursivity of nationalist project of reformulating the nation's female race. Like most members of her sex Ela fails to see through the ploy. She, instead, fashions her 'self' as a devoted 'sisterly' servitor dedicated to the service of young revolutionaries:

When I think of the nation, I think of these gems, these boys – it is of them the nation is made. . . My heart breaks when I think that they do not have a place in their homes. I am mother, sister and daughter to them. It makes my heart overflow. Westernised women will stop at calling themselves servitors but my entire being says that I am one, a sevika. In serving you, is my worth. (p.45)

Mikhail Bakhtin in his book-length study on Dostoevsky says:

What is important to Dostoevsky is not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself.¹⁰²

His observation that the great Russian master's hero is ‘not only cognizant, but an ideologist as well’ is extremely significant for this novel's protagonists as well – Indranath, Ela and Atin the young revolutionary. All live through and for the 'idea' in which they believe in. The long discussions between these three characters bring out the dialogic nature of human thought and the dialogic nature of the idea. According to Bakhtin ‘At the point of contact between voice-consciousness the idea is born and lives.’¹⁰³ Ela's 'idea' of life, which in turn is shaped by Indranath's 'idea', gets involved in a dialogic relationship with Atin's – which almost runs counter to how Ela looks at her role in the society.

It takes Atin's fine sensitivity and intelligence to identify the element of artificiality involved in the situation and subsequently to gauge the vacuity of it all:

And so you would play the “Didi” with them whenever you could. You had even thought it necessary to stir up a little jealousy in order to make more perfect my patriotism. Expressions of affection care and concern, solicitous advice, uncalled
for anxiety – all of these you displayed before them like colourful commodities of your trade. (p.89)

In a trenchant manner he tries to expose the whole business of putting women on a high altar in the ritual of dedicating lives for the 'cause' of the nation:

Goddess! Goddesses all of you! The ornaments and attire of a false goddess, like all other pieces of a woman's attire, manufactured in the shops of male tailors. (p.76)

. . . [I] realised even then that this excessively goody goody sisterliness was manufactured at special request of your excessively pure Bharatvarsha. Quite the ideal of a professional sisterliness' (p.90)

The attempt to discursively produce 'woman' by the nationalists and other social reformers (of whom Indranath, the Mantradata, is the representative in the text), Atin realises, not only vitiates the 'man-woman' relationship in the society but also becomes instrumental in the fall from swabhava, one's own nature, for both the sexes. Its effect is equally felt in both the 'political' and the 'domestic' spheres, in Ghar and Bahir, in the 'personal' and the 'social':

. . . the great men in our country – the only ones who plan to act and to do something – wish to first renounce women. They are effeminate cowards who fear women. That is why, in this nation of cowards, you have sworn not to marry – lest your womanly influence distort a tender mind. (p.43)

At this point of our discussion categories like Tagore's 'Domestic novels' and 'Political Novels' ultimately coalesce when we encounter in a thoroughly 'political' text like Char Adhyay the view that the malaise of the outside world invades the domestic sphere or is it the other way round? We once again arrive at the hackneyed conclusion, 'the personal is political.'

. . . I often hear of the inhuman torture inflicted on the new bride and I find the mother-in-law features as the chief heroine. But who has given her this right to commit crimes against which there is no resistance? It is the mother's little darling! Someone who does not have the courage to defend his wife's dignity
against a tyrant . . . It is only when a man lacks paurush, his humane manliness, that a woman lowers herself and brings him down as well. (p.43)

In a poignant short-story, written much earlier, in 1914, named 'Hoimonti', Tagore dealt with the issue of domestic violence, unleashed by the in-laws of the bride and helplessly watched by her young husband, resulting in her tragic, untimely death. One of the chief 'flaws' of the bride in the story is shown to be that her husband loves her 'dearly' and with a tone of savage irony Tagore informs his readers that the 'loving' husband woefully lacks 'humane manliness' to protect his bride from his mother.

As Tagore writes in his Kaifiyat that Char Adhyay may or may not have any specific ideology to uphold but it well and truly revolves around the love story of Atin and Ela and discourses of 'nation', 'celibacy', 'pledge' come in the way of the consummation of their love. Ela struggles with her vows on the one hand and her love for Atin on the other. As a result, Ela fails to discover the 'real' Ela. Atin raves and rants against taboos thrown in the path of the lovers' union and finally betrays his true 'nature'. At last Ela outgrows the discursive horizon of nationalism, borne out of 'colonial modernity', and discovers herself linked to the 'non-modern' age-old tradition of Indian femininity – the tradition of heroines like Radhika and other Abhisarikas – one in full control of her sexuality. She decides to surrender herself to Atin, body and soul. But by then Atin has lost his swadharma and has turned into a cog in the wheel of the nationalist juggernaut – out to fulfill his duty to 'eliminate' Ela. Ela's action of ripping the front of her blouse, by far the most 'outrageous' gesture by any Tagore-heroine, minutes before the actual moment of murder shows off the indelible mark of Eros, ingrained in a 'man-woman' relationship. Her death assumes erotic significance. But the journey of the Bangali woman towards self-realisation remains incomplete in Tagore's oeuvre. The journey of the man too remains so for as Tagore says in his essay, 'Narir Manusatva', 'Only when, in our country, women, free from all artificial ties, will attain the status of complete womanhood men will achieve their own completeness.'

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NOTES

1 See, for example, Ashis Nandy, The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self, N. Delhi: OUP 1994


5 See Sudipta Kaviraj’s article ‘The Imaginary Institution of India’ in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (eds.) Subaltern Studies (VII); Writings on South Asian History and Society, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp.1-39 and also Sumit Sarkar, A Critique of Colonial India, Calcutta, Papyrus, 1985.


7 See Frantz Fanon’s article ‘Algeria Unveiled’ in his book A Dying Colonialism where he wonderfully captures manoeuvres and counter manoeuvres by French colonial doctrines and Algerian anti-colonial nationalist discourses. While “The dominant administration solemnly undertook to defend this woman, pictured as humiliated, sequestered, cloistered . . . transformed by the Algerian man into an inert demonetized, indeed de-humanized object . . . After it had been posited that the woman constituted the pivot of Algerian society, all efforts were made to obtain control over her.”

Against this, Algerian nationalism appropriates the feminine veil as a metaphor for political elusiveness. The Algerian woman, argues the nationalist discourse, should say ‘no’ to the colonizer’s ‘reformist’ invitation. She, on the other hand, should turn her feminine habit of wearing veils into an instrument of the revolutionary programmes. Following the male nationalist directives ‘she goes out into the street with three grenades in her handbag or the activity report of an area in her bodice.’


10 Sumit Sarkar A Critique of Colonial India, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1985. p.74


14 Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments, p.120

15 Malavika Karleker, Voices from Within, p.92.

16 Ibid.


19 What should be the ideal that the Bengali women of today ought to follow in their lives? Please do not refer to Sita and Sabitri. Those times are gone, those people are no more. They will continue forever to glow like stars on the horizon of our minds, but then starlight is hardly enough illumination for our lives. On the other hand, across the ocean in the West, the war marches of hordes of rebellious men and women and the flaming red of their torches are dazzling our newly awakened eyes and minds... Between the stars and the torches, who will light the unfluttering flame of the softly glowing evening lamp (sandhyapradip)?


20 Kate Millet, Sexual Politics (London; 1971) pp.77-78, quoted in Sumit Sarkar, A Critique of Colonial India, p.75.

21 See Malavika Karleker, Voices from Within, p.189. See also Nirad C. Chowdhury, Bangali jibone ramoni, p-152. For Chowdhury, Gora is essentially a tale of love where we witness a direct conflict between love for the nation with the romantic love that brews between Gora and Sucharita. One must add the case of Ela from Char Adhyay to this (whose character, some say, is modeled on none other than Sarala Devi) who is almost forced to accept a life of celibacy (‘widowhood’ as she herself calls it) the moment she decides to dedicate herself for her nation’s cause.


36 Nirad C Chaudhuri categorically states that in the late nineteenth century, Bangali samaj was not one but two; village samaj and the urban society of Kolkata. See Nirad C. Chaudhuri Bangali jibon’e ramani, p.100.

37 Binoy Ghosh, on the other hand, stresses the interpenetrating trend between ‘the country and the city’ in nineteenth century Bengal social history. For him, during the latter half of this century the influence of the city in the countryside was increasingly felt; so much so, that the rise of the absentee landlord class, who were quick to transform into the urban bourgeoisie, and due to the corrupting influence of the city, resulted in the negligence and subsequent decline of the rural community. See Binoy Ghosh, ‘Bangali maddhyabittosreni’, in Bangla’r samajik itihas'er dhara, Kolkata: Prakash Bhavana, 2007(rpt.), pp.171-172.


38 For an excellent study of an acutely felt paradigmatic shift in the realm of culture and the growing sense of the rise of a new temporal order during the second half of the nineteenth century Bengal one must read Raj Narayan Basu, Se kaal ar e kaal, Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad 1951,( 6th rpt.) 2004


41 For a detailed theoretical analysis of the importance of ‘Doubles’ in the novel see Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition in Dostoevsky’s Works’ in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Caryl Emerson (trans. & edited), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p.128.
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42 See Nirad C Chowdhury, *Banga jibon’e ramani*, p.158.

43 Ibid, p.146.

44 Quoted in Binoy Ghosh, *Banglar samajik itihas’er dhara*, p.289; my translation.


46 For an excellent study of Ramakrishna’s conception of evil and his repeated linking of *kamini*, *kanchan* and *dasatya* with it in Ramakrishna-kathamrita see Sumit Sarkar, ‘Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti: Ramakrishna and his Times’ in *Writing Social History*, New Delhi: OUP, 1997, pp.282-357.

47 In his autobiography Nabinchandra Sen (born-1846) writes a story about how his uncle arranges marriage between him and a rather plain-looking girl with enormous wealth. Nabinchandra was a young man with ‘western education’. He writes,

... My head was filled with female education, female emancipation, child marriage, romantic companionate marriage, championing of the nation’s cause and the like. I refused to be tied to a mere ‘bag of gold’ and disagreed to marry this girl. My uncle reasoned that I was acting like a fool. The girl might be ugly but *she had a young and exceedingly beautiful widow as her sister-in-law. I could kill two birds with a single stone*. (Italics mine)

See Sambuddha Chakrabarty, ‘Dampotya bhavna’ in *Andar’e antare*, p.98.


49 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p.4.


53 Ibid, pp.55-56.


58 Ibid, p.69, p.223.

Some examples of the lives and times of a few ladies belonging to such ambience may be quite pertinent here. In Chitra Deb’s book *Antahpurer amtkatha* we get to know about Tilottama Debi (1877-1909). She was the granddaughter of the famous lawyer Srinath Das. She was married off at the age of ten. She was barely literate although her mother Krishnabhabini Debi happened to be one of the first Indian women to accompany her husband to England and who was enlightened in every sense of the word. Tilottama’s marriage turned out to be a disastrous one. Her husband was greedy and had a very loose moral character. She gave birth to a son at the age of sixteen but the child died within a year. Her husband tried to dupe her of her jewellery, company shares, land-deeds given to her by her grandfather. She loved her husband dearly and to win his love she gave away everything. Her husband in return decided to marry again. She had to leave her in-law’s house when she was in her early thirty’s, heartbroken and very sick mentally. She died soon after, a very lonely and uncared woman. She composed small poems based entirely on her agonies which were later published, edited by her mother Krishnabhabini with the title *Akkhep*. She was, therefore, not the ‘New Woman’; but one wronged by traditional practices, even as the winds of change were blowing quite strongly in Bengal and especially in Calcutta. See Chitra Deb, *Antahpurer amtkatha*, Calcutta, Ananda, 1984, pp. 64-69.

Now we go back a few decades to refer to another life-story which was caught in this spirit of change in a strange sort of way. Rassundari Devi’s autobiography *Amar jiban* has become too well-known to give any sort of introduction. I would quote from her text very briefly to show that the ‘structure of feeling’ present in the text belonged to an age yet to be either colonized by the western civilization or reformulated by the nationalist agenda. Rassundari Devi was married at the age of twelve. Soon after, the entire responsibility of the family fell upon her shoulder. She writes:

... all the household chores fell on my shoulders. I was worried out of my wits. I had never been allowed to work before. Also, this household was quite a large organism. There was the household deity, and tending to him was a daily chore since his meals had to be ritually cooked. There was a perpetual flow of guests and they had to be fed separately. Our own meals were on a large scale. Though I had no brothers-in-law, there was still a number of servants and maid-servants. I had to cook for twenty five to twenty six people twice a day. On the top of all this, my blind mother-in-law had to be cared for.

She wrote in her autobiography that often due to heavy workload of house-hold chores she had to go without food throughout the day. See Rassundari Dasi, *Amar Jiban* (1876), Calcutta, Dey Book Stores, (rpt.), 1987, Tanika Sarkar (trans.) *Words to Win; The Making of Amar Jiban: A Modern Autobiography*, New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1999, p.159.

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61 *Relationships*, p.175.


63 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p.79.

64 Raymond Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’, p.41.

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67 This term is made famous by Raymond Williams. See his book, *Marxism and Literature*, London, Verso, 1977, pp.128-135. Williams gives the definition: ‘... structures of feeling can be defined as social experience in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and
are more evidently and more immediately available.’ ‘Structures of feeling’, therefore, have distinct diachronic dimension as they change following substantial cultural changes in the society. Through Harimohini’s character we are offered a particular ‘structure of feeling’ that became kind of passé during the nationalistic female emancipatory programme during the Swadeshi period.

68 The use of the term ‘point of consciousness’ is again inspired by Bakhtin’s theories of the novel. Bakhtin uses a new term ‘polyphony’ to describe Dostoevsky’s highly innovative narrative form in his book-length study Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics: Caryl Emerson (trans. and ed.), Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s genius lay in being able to develop within the novelistic plane individual consciousness and the dialogic interplay between them without binding them in a monologic authorial consciousness: ‘Dostoevsky portrayed not the life of an idea in an isolated consciousness, and not the interrelationship of ideas, but the interaction of consciousnesses . . . in Dostoevsky, consciousness never gravitates towards itself but is always found in intense relationship with another consciousness.’ (p.32) Thus, Dostoevsky’s achievement in the representation of character, dialogue and the relation of author to characters is to construct novelistic images of the ultimate unfinalizability of human consciousness. We have, therefore, following Bakhtin, coined the term ‘point of consciousness’ to refer to Tagore’s presentation of different independent consciousnesses in his novel Gora through the interactions between characters present consistently in the entire novel. While Williams’s notion of ‘structure of feeling’ is aimed at the macro-level of societal resolutions, the term of ‘point of consciousness’ is directed towards the micro-level of the textual plane.

69 See Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments, p.144.


71 Keshab Chandra Sen introduced “the Civil Marriage Law” (Law of Three) in 1872, according to which the parties involved only had to declare before marriage that they had no definite faith in one particular religion. In 1881 Raj Narayan Bose’s daughter Lilabati, one of Adi Brahma Samaj and Krishna Kumar Mitra, a member of Sadharan Brahma Samaj were married according to this ‘Civil Marriage Law’. Binoy and Lolita could have been married according to Hindu Rites as well. In 1882 Ramesh Chandra Dutta’s daughter Kamala, Brahma, married Pramathanath Basu according to Hindu Rituals.

72 Raymond Williams, Problems in Materialism and Culture, p.40.

73 See Partha Chatterjee, Nation and its Fragments, p.122. Let’s look at one example; here’s from the concluding paragraph of a very popular play by Rakhaldas Bhattacharya where Nepal, the westernised reform minded young man, laments the fact that he had earlier voluntarily undertaken to educate his wife Hemangini:

Oh; what a penance! I have been rightly served. As I have sown the wind, so have I reaped the whirl wind . . . oh, what dire consequences have resulted from female emancipation! Alas, I had been deluded into educating a shameless woman [byapika ramani] and now terribly have I suffered in consequence. . . . [Who would have realised] how venomous the strong women of the world are oh, this is insufferable.


Achievements of Bengali women were great in this respect. When results came out in December 1882 a marvellous fact came to light that Chandramukhi Basu and Kadambini Basu were the two first lady graduates in the entire British Empire. Kadambini later became the first lady doctor of India.


For an example of the ‘emergent’ female consciousness the ‘New Woman’ during the rise of nationalist struggle of the Swadeshi period see the life-story and achievements of Sarala Devi Chowdhurani in Chitra Deb’s book Thakurbarir andarmahal, Calcutta: Ananda, 1980, (rpt.), 1986., pp.159-175. See also Sarala Devi’s autobiography, Jibon’er jharapata, Kolkata: Subarnarekha, 2007, especially pp.79-84.

See Tanika Sarkar, Adhunikatar du ek dik, pp.35-46.


Ibid, pp.58- 60.

Ibid, p.81.


Ashis Nandy, The Illegitimacy of Nationalism, p.41.

Let us have a quick look at such kind of consciousness from the late nineteenth century Bengali Society. Kailashbasini Debi (1830-95) was the wife of Kishorichand Mitra (1822-75) and like Anandamoyi she spent several years, away from home, accompanying her husband to various places, living in company bungalows and houseboat. Her book Janaika grihabadhir dayeri has a number of observations which indicate that a clear pragmatic approach is quite capable of staying clear of fanatic orthodoxies (“I do not believe in the ritual of Hindu orthodoxy, but I follow all of them”). See Kailashbasini Devi, Janaika grihabadhir dayeri (1952); Calcutta, (rpt.), Ekshan 15, nos. 3-4 (Autumn1981) quoted in Partha Chatterjee, Nation and its Fragments, p.147. Chitra Deb’s comment is relevant here, “without accepting the rituals and customs of the Hindu Religion as God’s decree Kailashbasini tried to seek the logic of man-made laws behind them”. See Chitra Deb, Antahpurer amatokatha, p.37


Rabindranath Tagore, *Four Chapters: Char Adhyay*, Rimli Bhattacharya (trans.), New Delhi: Srishti, 2002, p.35. All citations are from this edition unless otherwise stated.


See Ashis Nandy, ‘Woman versus Womanliness in India’, p.34.

See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p.47.
