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Asserting Voices of Women Against Orthodoxy: A Reading of *Gora* by Rabindranath Tagore

Dr. Gulab Dhar, Assistant Professor, Department of English.
Govt. Chhatrasal PG College, Panna MP India.

Abstract

Gora is a novel by the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore with the themes of politics, religion, liberation, universalism, humanism, gender, feminism, caste, class and orthodox versus modernity. Current study is focussed on asserting voices of women against orthodoxy. First reform moment of the status of Indian women took place during the 19th century in Kolkata, during the time period of British Raj. In the novel, female characters Sucharita, Anandamoyi, Lalita and Brodasundari are asserting their voice against orthodoxy. Harimohini is orthodox female character. Sucharita is introduced as the central female character. Sucharita revolts against orthodox. She becomes liberal after her acquaintances with Gora and Binoy. She refuses to marry Haran because of his dogmatic outlook and arrogant behaviour. In the beginning she finds Gora orthodox, superstitious and arrogant. But in the course of time she understands him and sympathizes with him. She is free from the narrow sectarian outlook that is the reason she encourages marriage between Lalita a Brahma girl and Binoy a Hindu boy. Anandamoyi is the liberal face of Hinduism. She is against any kind of orthodoxy. She is the mother of Gora (orphan). She shows the same love and affection for Gora's friend Binoy. She supports Binoy's marriage with Lalita and does not hesitate to oppose Gora. She also warns him about his religious fanaticism and never accepts his orthodox views. Orthodoxly duties of men and women are divided but Lalita was against this orthodox division of duties. She starts a school to serve people by teaching. She wants to join the National Movement and participate in the cause of the upliftment of the country. All these women characters are not only asserting their voice against orthodoxy but they are also getting success in changing the views, behavior and attitude of characters like Gora and Binoy. These women have a great role in self-discovery, enlightenment and humanization with the elements of feminization in the life of Gora and Binoy.

Keywords:- Orthodoxy, Women, Humanization, Sect, Marriage.

Rabindranath Tagore was born in Calcutta in 1861 and died in 1941. He is popularly known as Gurudev. He was awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize in 1913 in Literature. He was a poet, dramatist, novelist, short story writer. Gora the protagonist is a staunch follower of Hinduism, optimist about prosperous and happy India by uniting all caste and class under the large umbrella of Hinduism. Sucharita, Lalita and Anandmoyi are the women characters who are constantly opposing any kind of orthodox tradition in the society.

Haranbabu was a very enthusiastic Brahma. He was a High school teacher, newspaper editor and secretary of the girls school, he had a hand in every Brahma activity. Everyone hoped that he would one day occupy a very high position in a Brahma Samaj. Like all other Brahma Sucharita too had very high regard for Haranbabu. When Sucharita and Haranbabu become acquainted with each other Haranbabu does not hesitate to express his attraction for Sucharita. Everyone assumed the certainty of Sucharita's marriage to Haranbabu. And she too had mentally consented to the match.

But when Sucharita started analysing the contrast between Poreshbabu and Haran, she found that in Poreshbabu there was no trace of arrogance. He bore greatness of truth in his heart but Haranbabu was a different one. His aggressive self-projection and Brahma manifested in ugly way, in all he said and did. But Sucharita is unable to bind herself to the orthodox loyalty for a community and later she refuses to think about that match.

There is a close friendship between Gora and Binoy, while a conversation between Gora and Binoy was going on, Binoy said, "I think there is a serious lack in our patriotism. We see only half of Bharatvarsha...We see Bharatvarsha as the land of men without noticing women at all"(Gora p110). Then Binoy acknowledges that it is a recent and sudden discovery. He also confesses that he was blind to such an immense reality for so long. He counts himself fortunate to have discovered it.

India is a nation of diversity with various castes, cultures and languages. The question regarding the caste system hovers in the mind of Sucharita. Sucharita asks Binoy if Gora believes in caste differences or if the caste system is an exaggerated form of patriotism? She wants to know whether dust from Brahman feet can purify people. If there human deity exists? Regarding all these questions, Binoy answered- Indian society is a stairway, meant to enable mankind's ascend to a particular goal. Keeping in mind both activities and their outcome, our society has created caste and division of labor. Brahmins who are fearless, who despise avarice, conquer grief, Ignore deprivation, who are unshakable, calm and free. That is the kind of Brahman Bharatvarsha wants and only when he is found can Bharatvarsha really become free.

Once in a debate between Lalita and Binoy, Lalit declared that men serve the world and women serve men it is impossible for her to accept. This argument shows that Lalita is rational and at the same time she is against orthodoxy.

On Sucharita's question to Poreshbabu about condemning caste discrimination, Poreshbabu expostulated that there is no harm in a cat approaching once plate and devouring rice from it, but if a certain human being enters the room, the rice must be thrown away. If caste discrimination causes men to treat other men with such humiliation and contempt, then definitely it should be called anti-religion. Those who can treat human beings with such contempt can never attain greatness. They must suffer the contempt of others. Here we can see the prudence in Sucharita's interrogation and sagacious guidance by Poreshbabu.

When Lalita was leaving for Kolkata with Binoy in a boat/steamer, she said, she does not understand why she must bear everything because she was born a woman. She had not only grace but also the fire of independence and firmness of strength, a firmness not everyone finds appealing. She attracts a few special people, but repels many others. She had given a very harsh reply to Haranbabu when he tried to disrespect Poreshbabu on the issue of her arrival with Binoy in a steamer. Sucharita also supported Lalita when she replied to Haranbabu in harsh words.

Anandmoyi is a liberal woman. She likes Sucharita and Lalita from the core of heart even though they belong to the Brahmo community. When Sucharita and Lalita visited Anandmoyi's house for the first time Anandmoyi wished Gora should marry Sucharita.

If we compare Lalita with Harimohini's daughter Manorama on account of liberty given to women. We find that Lalita is not only independent but she also asserts her voice when needed. But Manoram was subjugated by her in-laws and she was not getting proper respect. Harimohini's property is also usurped by her devar when become widow.

Harimohini is an orthodox woman. She does not accept water being drawn from the well by Ramdeen, because Ramdeen being a low caste. When she faces trouble in obtaining water, she give up looking altogether. She began to live on milk and fruits which she had dedicated to her deity as holy prasad. By all these activities Sucharita becomes extremely distressed. On the other hand Anandmoyi does not bar Lachhmia from doing any activity in her house because she is a woman of other faith.

The day when Sucharita was about to leave Poreshbabu's house to shift with Harimohini in another house, she wanted to dine with everyone in the house. At this wish of Sucharita Harimohini is displeased and remains silent. Sucharita, sensing her attitude, assures her (Harimohini) that God will be pleased if we dine with everyone. The same all knowing God has ordered to eat with everyone today. If she doesn't obey He will be angry. In this way Sucharita pleased Harimohini. Sucharita has no hesitation in dissociating herself from the restrictions concerning purity.

For Lalita freedom means, liberation from assaults of baseness and enslavement to falsehood. Where she sees no wrong, no breach of faith. Even she wants no restraint from her own Brahmi Samaj.

When, rumor spread about the marriage between Binoy and Lalita. Binoy was very much confused to tackle the situation. Then it was Anandamoyi who assured Binoy to marry Lalita. She suggests Binoy to meet Poreshbabu to make everything clear. She also meets with Poreshbabu regarding this matter.

To get married with Brahma girl Lalita, Lalita's mother Barodasundari wants Binoy to change his religion from Hindu to Brahma. For this reason that he wants to change his faith to Brahma, Binoy writes a letter for publishing in newspapers and gives it to Barodasundari. The same letter in which he has written for initiation into Brahma Samaj Lalita tears down and goes to Anandamoyi and tells her that there is no for initiation of Binoy into Brahma Samaj. It is demeaning for him. Whatever a person's religion, faith or community might be, it can never be possible that people can only come together by erasing all those things. In that case, there can be no friendship between Hindus and Christians either. Then one might as well raise high walls and keep each community confined with their own separate fence. She also declared that she can't bear dishonor, bending and belittling of Binoy by himself in order to have her.

Lalita's Father Poreshbabu is a believer of Brahma Samaj with progressive mindset. He has given his consent to marry Lalita with Binoy a Hindu without initiation of Binoy into Brahma Samaj. It is because the teachings of Poreshbabu, Lalita and Sucharita have developed liberal attitude towards all humans.

Anyhow, marriage between Binoy and Lalita is fixed. Anandamoyi wants this marriage to take place from her own house but Gora denies, declaring that it is not possible. At this stance Anandamoyi professed for arranging other premises.

After the marriage of Binoy and Lalita, Anandamoyi goes to Binoy's house for his care because Binoy's mother is no more. She has always given him love like a mother. Anandamoyi also seeks permission from Harimohini for Sucharita to go Binoy's house. Here we can see how bold decisions these women are taking to make a prosperous and homogenous society against all faulty traditions.

Gora believes that he should not acknowledge a woman because he is a orthodox Hindu. But when he looks at Sucharita he finds her to be an intelligent, cultured, demure and strong woman. Gora was inclined towards Suchitra but he refuses to admit that he has feelings for Sucharita. To make a last attempt to stop the marriage between Binoy and Lalita, Gora goes to Sucharita. There Harimohini notices that Sucharita has become emotionally attached to Gora. And Gora is preaching to Sucharita that India can't be complete without the involvement of its women.

Gora in his early life was the follower of Brahma Samaj but after the dishonor by Britishers he became a staunch believer of Hinduism and visualizes his idea of nationalism. As Binoy is his close friend, Binoy visits every day to the Brahma girls Sucharita and Lalita. Gora too goes to their home. After a few meetings with Sucharita, Gora is attracted to Sucharita. Gora is involved in an emotional conflict, his love and service to the country. But later on Gora's heart changes. Now he believes that he must make Sucharita his and rushes to her house as a potential suitor, but is disappointed not to see Sucharita, as Sucharita has gone to live with Anandamoyi to help her with wedding preparations.

When Gora's father thinks that he is on the verge of his death, he tells Gora in the presence of Anandamoyi that he is not their own son but a foundling during the Sepoy Mutiny, a son of an Irishmen. This revelation is astonishing to Gora and he goes to Poreshbabu and confesses that he belongs to nowhere and no longer has any identity. He asks Poreshbabu to be his teacher and offer him guidance in the pursuit of truth. Then Gora tells Sucharita that he is no longer her 'guru'. On his request to take his hands Sucharita joins with his hand and both become united.

The novel depicts the character of Anandamoyi and shows how the barrier of caste, creed, religion and race can be overcome by love and understanding. Sucharita plays a crucial role for the growth of Gora's personality and self realization. Lolita is the pioneer of women's freedom and feminist movement of the contemporary period. Lolita is modern and a supporter of women's freedom.

From here we can conclude that Anandamoyi is much ahead of its time. She is ready to break the shackles of dogmas prevailing in the contemporary society of their time. Sucharita finds herself at equal ease within and outside home and a strong mind of our own. Lalita is the freedom loving woman, she can't be confined within any community for the sake of orthodoxy. Tagore has consistently advocated for equal rights for women.

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