

ICSSR-NER Lecture

Motherhood Through a Gender Lens

Professor Jasodhara Bagchi

Organised by

OKD Institute of Social Change and Development:
Guwahati

In collaboration with

Department of Geography,
Cotton College,
Guwahati

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Motherhood through a Gender Lens

I would like to begin by thanking Professor Indranee Dutta and her colleagues for conferring upon me the honour of giving a lecture under the aegis of this Institute which enjoys enormous prestige in fostering Social Sciences in their true worth. I am, further, honoured by being asked to deliver this lecture in a College as haloed as Cotton College, whose reputation hit us as far back as our student days in Presidency College, Calcutta.

My topic of discussion today is Motherhood, seen through a gender lens, a subject that has occupied me in one form or the other, during the last fifteen years. This is a subject that covers a wide range of areas in our lives and societal involvement. It has bearings on our affective and analytical aspects. It forms the first encounter, for each one of us, of the gendered aspect of our material and emotional lives.

Since it is a vast subject, I will, perforce, have to steer a path through the terrain. In doing this, I will have to take your prior permission that I will be using quite a bit of my research-based writings of the past fifteen years, as I have mulled over them. I have organized my presentation as an implicit tribute to Rabindranath Tagore, with whose words and melodies I have lived, without always recognizing their full scope and meaning.

Motherhood is one of the words/concepts that are the most naturalized of the highly gendered terms in use. Its indelible etymological imprint is to be found in the word 'engendering', a synonym for reproduction both in being impregnated and

impregnating. Since motherhood stands at one end of this mutual engendering process, setting up the gender lens on motherhood involves, the not enviable task of prizing it open from layers of patriarchal possession. It is, obviously, an elaborate process that involves the separation of, what Adrienne Rich had very perceptively called the 'experience' of motherhood from the 'institution' of motherhood (Rich, 1977). It is in the multi-layered working out of the institution of motherhood that its gendering process has got embroiled. The 'experience' of motherhood catches the gender lens in very different prism. To capture the all-too-familiar, yet de-familiarised process in its complexity is the daunting task that I have undertaken in this talk.

I

One of the major problems of gendering the experience of motherhood, is its simultaneous uniformity and diversity of experience across regions of the world, and across class, caste ethnicity or religious communities even within each region. One will have to recognize this ambiguity about birthing and motherhood in general, in broaching this subject which lies so close to human heart and is, at the same time, so vulnerable to the multiple social pressures that can be brought to bear upon the most natural of phenomena with which human society has emerged from time immemorial to the present day.

A gendered understanding of motherhood, has, therefore, got to take into account the context within which such a study may be presented. I will have to acknowledge my unique location in modern day India within a Women's Movement that has spawned a burgeoning literature related to Women's Studies. This, again, has led us to access gender critiques of motherhood available in English. Consequently, the matter to be covered is

vast covering many areas of life, both private and public. This has broken out across disciplines touching on major issues pertaining to specific cultures, the family, state, scientific and technological experiments. This builds up the challenge of handling the complicated and sensitive issue of looking at motherhood through the gendered lens.

In trying to do this it is important to remember not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The experience of motherhood has a lot to be cherished. With all its travails, motherhood and the bonding it produces, though it need not have its origin in the biological mothering in the womb, nor its tacto-labial experience of lactation, still has something very special about it. It encompasses much of the experience of femininity itself. In Bangla there is a saying that almost translates itself into a truism, that women belong to the 'race of mothers'. It is this tendency to essentialize womanhood and femininity through motherhood that makes it specially important to prize open this 'naturalisation' of women's 'biological destiny' of motherhood and to look at the layers of social construction that have gone into the social relations that constitute motherhood .. (Since my involvement with the gendering of Motherhood is at least a decade and a half old, I may be permitted to revisit some of my own formulations in order to get properly started on this terrain that is thorny)

The boy asked his mother
"Where did I come from
Did you pick me up anywhere?"
Mother replied, laughing and crying,
Hugging the boy to herself
"You were the desire in my heart."

(*Rabindranath Tagore*)

Motherhood is a phenomenon of 'infinite variety' though, not infrequently, 'staled' by 'custom'. Yet whether it is in myths or traditions or in scientifically inflected psychoanalysis, motherhood is one of the prime sites of reproduction. We must remember, that it is not only the human species that is reproduced, but motherhood and mothering themselves are reproduced, (Chodorow, 1978) to keep the patriarchal structure of society intact, to perpetuate the 'world-historical defeat of the female sex' that Engels had talked about. (Engels ed Leacock, p.20) In a society like the modern day India motherhood is one of the essentializing signifiers of womanhood and femininity. Far from being an unchanged static category, motherhood is capable of many permutations, refracting some of the major stratificatory categories. The position of motherhood in our understanding and experience of our everyday-everynight predicaments is quite complex. It cannot be unduly glorified nor minimised in our commitment to feminist exploration of it. Let us, therefore, recapitulate some of the debates that were thrown up by feminists since the seventies. A number of the British Council Newsletter CONNECTING sometime back, mentioned that a large survey of the most beautiful and beloved words in English has zeroed in clearly on MOTHER. I have a feeling that in many other languages this kind of finding is likely to happen. It is not for nothing that the editor of a collection of essays in the Indian context, in which much of this appeared as Foreword, has spoken of the mother-child relationship as 'the oldest love story'. The inevitability of the relationship, interestingly enough, also makes it one of the most controversial. For feminists in particular, Motherhood has meant both an unmistakable assertion of women's agency and the most obvious capitulation to patriarchal ruling. What Catherine Mckinnon had said about sexuality and labour in the context of feminism

and Marxism is truer than ever of motherhood: that which is most her own and most easily taken away. A woman's most obvious power to reproduce and nurture the species is then made into the most effective engine of her enslavement. This is one of the most central paradoxes of society that is camouflaged by the halo that usually surrounds the word Motherhood.

The paradox is intensified in the situation of a slave woman whose motherhood is an intrinsic part of her enslavement. Such a voice is the famous one of Sojourner Truth, whose motherhood was indeed a precondition to her slavery, because apart from her productive labour, her reproductive labour to produce more slaves was also part of the package of her enslavement:

Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Sojourner Truth, 1851)

As it turned out, for class and caste-ridden societies, the hallmark of privilege lay with the women who were delinked from productive labour and relegated to the reproduction of status through procreation of species. All the institutional build-up of Motherhood, whether through upper-caste rituals, specially when a woman fulfils the expectation of perpetuating the patrilineal clan by producing a son, or through the glowing affect of the white, well-fed mothers breast-feeding healthy babies with beatific smile, are ploys of reproducing the dominant patriarchal structure of privileges. That is why it is salutary to remember the underbelly of motherhood as experienced by the Black slave woman before she was freed to be named Sojourner Truth.

The early engagement of feminists of the Second Wave with the theme of Motherhood both in its theoretical aspect and in the institutional aspect of the nitty-gritty of living through motherhood, was only to be expected and these forays yielded memorable results. Adrienne Rich's *Of Women Born*, (Adrienne Rich, 1977) which has been likened to Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, (de Beauvoir, 1949, tr. 1953) is a magnificent road-map of the triumph and travails of maternity. Nancy Chodorow's classic diagnosis (Chodorow, 1977) brings out the necessity of our society to have motherhood and mothering reproduced endlessly, so that it gets naturalized. What is very noteworthy is that the so-called traditional and the so-called modern converge on the myth of motherhood because it appears to give the most effective boost to the patriarchal control over women, not just her body, but also her mind. In the west the Freudian revolution in designating a child's psychological development, as later feminists have pointed out, reinforced the nature-culture dichotomy- the mother standing for pre-civilizational nature. With their strong reading of Marx, both Mary O'Brien (O'Brien, 1982) and Allison Jaggar (Jaggar & McBride, 1985) have taken issue with Marx for having accepted the distinction between reproduction and production, with motherhood occupying the private domain as mere reproduction whereas the motor-force of history belongs to the public domain of production and politics. Just as the socialization process is assigned, under the Freudian explanatory system, to the regime of the father, in an uncritical understanding of the Marxian system the domain of historical change is dominated by the male who clearly occupy the productive sphere.

In a more traditional world of imagination, like the Hindu India, motherhood enters into a symbiosis with the world of goddesses, drawing upon the mythical world. According to this

myth the mother goddess is called Shakti (energy), an imputed power is attributed to Motherhood, yet mothering, is, so far, one of the most disempowering of social roles in traditional or poor families (Bagchi, 2001). The ambivalence that surrounds motherhood appears to have a transcultural spread. Motherhood, thus, is a standard way of implementing authoritarian regimes, such as imperialising countries. The Fascist agenda of Motherhood in the Fatherland is another such myth with which women and her womb are targeted in order to reproduce domination (Haug, 1988).

Stripped of this patriarchal aura, however, Motherhood and mothering do involve women's agency, her affective qualities and her desires and dreams. The myth and reality of motherhood, therefore, offers a Gordian knot that is not easy to cut. As Mary O'Brien argued so forcefully, there is a willful degradation of women's reproductive function in the available theory of social reproduction:

Women are evidently tied to nature by the a-human act of giving birth to humans. The unanimity and harmony of the male-voiced intellectual choir has had some curious and damaging effects. Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, despite the power and integrity in her work accepts without question the evaluation of childbirth as an inferior animal activity and the biological curse of femininity (Mary O'Brien p.104)

Mary O'Brien likewise critiques Shulamith Firestone's explanation of the biology-centredness of motherhood and agrees with Juliet Mitchell that replacing *nature* with *technology*, as Firestone suggests, is dualistic not dialectical and, therefore, simplistic. (Ibid) Though contraception does revolutionize motherhood in introducing the space for choice and volition into it, however, the power that it offers to women is limited,

fraught as it is with notions of patriarchal control that wishes to regulate maternity.

Private and Public

If the division between reproduction and production is fraught with dialectical tension, the division between private and public is equally fraught on the question of motherhood and maternity. For all the privacy imputed to conception and childbirth, motherhood is one of the most publicly controlled institutions in modern and traditional societies alike. Much of the most privately experienced anxieties are really played out most overtly in the theatre of the public arena in life. (see Bagchi, 1990)

If reproduction is so clearly relegated to the private sphere, why is population control so blatant an area of public policy? The fact of the matter is that with all the confidence with which the 'modern' system of social organization tries to separate the public from the private, as soon as it comes to taking a close look at women's agency and what it can produce, the iron curtain between private and public between reproduction and production breaks down to produce a continuum. Women's writing, like women's maternity, are as much part of the public sphere as political debates and state policies. The site of production in each case is the private space of women's corner in a room because she may not have a room of her own or in the artificial seclusion of an anturghar (indigenous birthing place in Bengal) or, at best in the segregated maternity ward of a hospital, but the impact on the civil society is enormous. The science of demography is built around births, survivals, deaths. As this is the area in which the state tries to control births in the name of population control, motherhood becomes captive to state control often using coercive methods like two-child norms for occupying public offices, including Panchayati Raj Institutions. As the initial reaction of

the majoritarian Hindutva forces to the early release of Census data broken up into different religious communities indicated, women of the minority community giving birth pose a threat to the communalist forces in the country. Both from the normative and the transgressive points of view, therefore, women's wombs become major players in the power game both of the nation-state, and of the market-driven multinational corporations.

One of the major challenges to the institutional practice of motherhood in India has been generated by the advanced technology of pre-natal, diagnostic tests, originally meant to ensure the well-being of the mother and the child to be born. Planted in a traditional patriarchy, that is largely inflected by upper caste and upper class domination, this so-called well-meaning technological aid has further contributed to the vicious son-preference and the lucrative prospect of dowry to smoothen the passage of girls to their marital home, and has spawned the dreadful practice of cruel aborting of the female foetus, often endangering the survival of the mother. As Malini Bhattacharya's succinct couplet in Bangla brings out, desire for a son says, girlie, don't come. Such are the extreme contradictions within which motherhood is institutionalized in our society.

You want only a boy

Saying, 'girlie, don't come'.

Patriarchy

Celebration of motherhood has happened in most cultures in the world, and the Indian culture is no exception. The oldest available cultural artifacts in the pre-Aryan civilization in Mohenjodaro and Harappa bear testimony to the mother cult. The principle of fertility represented by the embodiment of mother is the oldest testimony to the sense of continuity of the

species. Not just birthing but the process of nurturance that makes it incumbent upon homo sapiens to recognize the value of the mother.

In her magnificent exploration of *The Creation of Patriarchy* Gerda Lerner has given us a number of valuable insights into the different aspects of the mother in the initial emergence of patriarchy. (Lerner, 1986)

Gerda Lerner's journey into the origins of patriarchy gives us insights into the unique situations in which motherhood may be placed. She very rightly points out that it is one of the oldest relationships in the world. Lerner has talked about the basic dyad, mother and child. (p. 38) What Lerner's extremely insightful analysis brings out is the centrality of motherhood and birthing to the emergence of sexual division of labour.

Going back into the dim days of pre-history Lerner argues for different communities adjusting, each in their own way, to the needs of a distinctly sexual division of labour arising out of the needs of the women to mother. As a feminist thinking and working in the West which had been under the control of Christianity, Lerner turned to the pre-historic times of the Near East, as, perhaps, part of her own pre-history. Her purpose was to understand the historical process of the emergence of patriarchy which she found emerging over a period of 2500 years (p.8), and that, too at different paces in several distinct societies of the 'Ancient Near East'. She argues with the help of other scholars against a cataclysmic explanation such as the one offered by Engels, who saw 'the world-historic defeat of the female sex' in the overthrow of 'the mother right' Lerner's contention is that

The appropriation by men of women's sexual and reproductive capacity occurred prior to the formation of private property and class society. Its commodification lies,

in fact, at the foundation of private property. (p.8).

Indian scholars have interpreted Engels's explanation in varied registers. Malini Chattacharya has seen in Engels's theorizing possibilities of historical ruptures that mark the coming together of class and gender. (Bhattacharya, 2002). Lerner does not believe in an overthrow, but is interested in tracing the different stages of negotiation in fixing women's functions around their mothering role in order to establish the sexual division of labour. The irony is that 'labour' also stands for childbirth. At the same time it is the compulsion of childbearing and nurturing that brought about the exclusion of women from the world of, what has been designated as the 'productive' labour. Hence motherhood became the causal link between women's place in the sexual division of labour in the domain of reproductive labour that was second in rank to the male domain of productive labour.

Focusing on the 'creation' of patriarchy Lerner has called attention to the various forms of negotiation that must have gone in different communities to look after the working of the day-to-day life. It is the reified institutionalization of the quotidian practices preserving the balance and sustainability of the renewal of the species, its food and other security of the renewed generation, that produced the tilting of the balance in favour of the male in the hierarchisation of the sexual division of labour. The inferiorization of the reproductive to the productive, led to the solid foundation of the marginalization of women in a society in which the male was the norm. This is why, according to Simone de Beauvoir, women were naturalized as the 'Second Sex'. (de Beauvoir, 1953)

Held as the prime cause of the lowering of women's status in the entire socialization process, motherhood was one of the primary targets in the early feminist protests. Almost as

compensation for this degradation, it was noticed, fairly early, that a massive glorification of motherhood had come to be adopted in various stages of our society. One such complex phenomenon is the presence of mother-goddesses in cultures across the world.

Mother Goddess

That there was ample recognition of the power of the mother is indicated by the presence of small figurines of fertility goddesses in many of the early civilizations. These figures of goddesses were often associated with the great procreative principle which alone could ensure the continuity of the human species. In her invaluable chapter 'The Goddess' Lerner refers to the massive archaeological data in confirming the widespread veneration of the mother-goddess in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods:

.... approximately 30,000 miniature sculptures in clay, marble, bone, copper and gold are presently known from a total of some 3,000 sites in Southeastern Europe alone. (p.146, Italics mine)

Lerner further quotes from E.O. James to talk about a 'fertility cult' which was "firmly established in the region of the Ancient Near East with the rise of agriculture in the Neolithic civilization in and after the fifth Millennium B.C.

The 'fertility cult' induced the making of female figures all emphasizing breasts, navel and vulva, usually in a squatting position which is the position commonly adopted in childbirth in this region ... It is not only in Turkey that you find forms of the pregnant, the birthing goddess, but you find similar figurines in the Don valley of Russia in Iraq, Anatolia, in Nineveh, Jericho and in Southern Mesopotamia. (Lerner pp.146-7)

The transformation of the Mother Goddess as the creative principle to the dominance of the one male God as the Creator that marks the Western civilization is not easy to explain. Lerner relates it to the changing social relations in the emerging societies leading to gender discrimination. She suggests the following 'observable pattern':

... first the demotion of the mother-goddess figure and the ascendance and later dominance of her male consort/son, then his merging with the storm-god into a male creator-God who heads the pantheon of gods and goddesses. Wherever such changes occur, the power of creation and of fertility is transferred from the Goddess to the God. (Lerner p. 145)

Shifting our attention from the pre-history of the Western civilization to our own, we are struck by the presence of the Mother Goddess in our living material culture even to this day. However this presence goes back to hoary antiquity. As Sukumari Bhattacharji's crisp Introduction to her book Legends of Devi begins:

The worship of the Devi or Goddess in India dates back to the period of Indus Valley Civilization .It became widespread and was accompanied by complex rituals after the Aryans settled on the land.(Bhattacharji, 1995, p.ix)

After the nomadic Aryans settled down to cultivation and reaped the harvest of the fertile land of the Gangetic delta they came to worship Prithvi, the mother who provided them with security and prosperity. As Bhattacharji points out, it is Atharvaveda that contains the first celebration of Prithvi or Bhumi:

... she holds everything, is the abode of all treasures- firm with golden breasts, the repose of everything that moves. We shall milk her for honey-let her sprinkle with splendour.

Let this land, mother of mine, yield milk for me, her son ... this firmer land, this earth protected by Indra-may I inhabit it unharassed, unsmitten and unwounded ... She holds the bipeds and the four-footed ... What redolence rose out of thee, o Prithvi, that which the plants contain in them, as also the water. .. (Ibid, italics mine)

We notice that the dominance of the storm-god mentioned by Lerner has already taken place, but she remains the repository of the life-giving sap which will sustain the son. The mother goddess has become accommodative of patriarchy.

This is already indicative of the later contrast that Bhattacharji points to, between the mythical status of mother as goddess, who is an active agent, and the passive victimhood of mothers in lived life as captured in the Scriptural injunctions under Brahmanical dispensations. As Bhattacharji points poignantly,

The two mothers belong to diametrically opposite planes. The human mother is within her heavily circumscribed domestic region with little scope of asserting her will, even for the good of her child ... on the other hand the divine mother's will is creative at the cosmic level. The mother goddess discharges her functions without any pain, with divine delight, the human mother begins and ends her motherhood in pain ... Her motherhood brings her some months of bliss when the infant is very young and totally dependent on her. But soon, rather too soon, this brief reprieve is over and the glory of motherhood fades slowly but surely. (Bhattacharji, 2010, p.65)

Motherhood and Nationalism

The very presence of Mother Goddesses in the belief system in the web of a culture makes it generative within certain political situations. Here I would like to draw upon my own research to argue about the complex and symbiotic relationship

within which the mother goddess cult was harnessed in embodying strong Nationalist sentiment against colonialism in Bengal in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is undeniable that the prevalence of goddess worship in Bengal certainly facilitated the empowering of the mother image in Bengal so that it becomes the most dominant myth of colonial Bengal. It is difficult to think of any other myth that might have been a more compelling emblem of the humiliation and deprivation due to colonial exploitation. The mother image is drawn as much from the mainstream religious worship of the Hindu as from their local religious practices and folktales. The neglected good wife of the king who has been won over by the machinations of the glamorous second wife is a quintessential mother figure? In a famous nationalist song of Tagore, the deserted woman is made into a poor mother image and made to stand for Bengal under foreign domination:

When I had neglected to look you in the face I had thought you were the poor mother left deserted in a broken house, suffering endlessly ...

The moment of nationalist uprising is seen as that of the transformation of the mother: she comes out resplendent in a goddess form from the 'heart of Bengal'.

Where are your rags, where is your pale smile?

The splendour of your feet has overspread the sky. Tagore continues to explore the paradox dear to the heart of Hindu Bengalis: in her transformed shape Bengal combines the image of the Shakti, the all-powerful goddess who puts fear into the lives of miscreants and the reassuring smile of an affectionate mother. Sword in your right hand you remove fear with your left two eyes smile with affection, the third emits fire ...

The mother image that was projected by the anti-colonialist uprising was a combination of the affective warmth of a quintessentially Bengali mother and the mother goddess Shakti, known under various names as Durga, Chandi or Kali, who occupy a very important position in mainstream religious practice. It is in the writings of Shashi Bhushan Das Gupta that we get a detailed account of this (Das Gupta 1953).

Worship of the Devi as the female principle has an old tradition in Bengali culture. There are records of Devi worship going back to the sixteenth century. Most of the great twelve chieftains of Bengal known as Baro Bhuinyas were worshippers of Shakti. In the seventeenth century there were celebratory poems extolling the devi, derived mostly from 'Seven hundred Durgas' (Durgasaptashati) or Chandi derived from the Markandeya Purana. Among the famous mangalkavyas written in the eighteenth century, Chandimangalkavya is one of the most famous. However, the worship of mother goddess showed a resilience in Bengali culture that was quite remarkable. In the great tradition, Shakti worship helped to bring together different schools of philosophy and worship, such as Samkhya, Vedanta, Vaishnavism and Tantrism (DasGupta 1953: 68). However, the local village level deities were mostly female and looked after the everyday problems of disease, epidemics, childbirth and so on (Ray 1949: 852-3; Ray Chaudhuri 1953:137-39; Nicholas 1982: 200). It was certainly fed, as Kosambi suggests, by pre-Aryan, often tribal cults of mother goddess, sometimes going back to matriarchal forms of society. (Kosambi 1962: 86-91; Ray 1949: 588-92).

Despite references of other mother goddesses in the Vedas, popular worship of mother goddesses such as Durga, Chandi or Kali did not take off either in the Vedic age or the age of the

epics. However, it is made amply clear that the cults of mother goddesses, though marginal in these phases, remained associated with harvest and fertility.

In a comparative study of folktales from seven different regions of India Sudhir Kakar has demonstrated that Bengali culture is exceptionally prone to a destructive and threatening aspect of mother (Kakar 1974). The presence of the mother goddess at the lower reaches of society is usually associated with such poverty and deprivation that many of the mother goddesses were forces of the dark to be propitiated. Of all the forms of Shakti worshipped in Bengal the darkest and the most terrifying was Kali, the female energy that stands on male possibly the most unique form of a consort who dances on the corpse of a husband.

Outsiders to Bengali culture possibly notice the terrifying form of Kali but miss out the tenderness that gets addressed to even such a terrifying symbol. The Shakti cult among Bengalis, paradoxically enough, is upheld by the affective qualities of a son's yearning for the mother. A blend of the Vaishnava sentiment of Bhakti with the worship of Shakti marks the mother worship in Bengal. This 'woman' at any rate has no fear of being 'womanly;'

Before a western audience Swami Vivekananda used motherhood to assert the distinctiveness of Indian culture.

Now the ideal woman in India is the mother, the mother first and mother last. The word woman calls up to the mind of the Hindu, motherland; and god is called mother.

In the west, the woman is wife. The idea of womanhood is concentrated there as the wife. To the ordinary man in India the whole force of womanhood is concentrated on motherhood. (Vivekananda, Vol. 8:57, 172)

Women's reproductive domain is thus abstracted, even fetishised, as Tanika Sarkar suggests (Sarkar 1987: 2011) Since the spiritual domain was the weapon in the hands of the nationalist, the glorification of motherhood was the double refined spirituality that was used as a major mode of representation by the Bengali nationalists. If worship of the mother goddess was the exclusive domain of Bengal/India, the land itself became the mother. The symbolic representation of India as the mother as well as the mother goddess became a major source of 'mass contact'. (Sarkar 1973). It helped to spread the message of swadeshi, both economic and cultural which erupted in Bengal at the turn of the century.

It was Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay who had first made an emblem of the country as mother in the song Vande Mataram. The song which was originally written to fill out a gap in his journal Bangadarshan, found its political context in his proto-nationalist novel Anandamath. The novel with its apparently collaborationist tag became the parable of the militant nationalism. The emphasis on the crisis ridden social order provides the fitting context for the rhetoric invoked by Bankim in a mixture of Sanskrit and Bengali. The 'invention of tradition' is so successful that it became the slogan of all militant nationalism. The song Vandemataram is, however, merely an item in a far more consistent effort of Bankimchandra to politicise the mother goddess image. We begin to notice a new domain emerging. In their intense search for what may be considered their own, Bengali writers often turned to that intensely Bengali festival of the autumnal worship of Durga. Bankim attempts a concentrated building up of the religious sphere of Shakti worship into a political domain.

Throughout his career Bankim meditated upon the political significance of the goddess Durga in her different manifestations as Shakti. In his creation of the early but brilliant

confessions of his opium-sodden 'double' Kamalakanta, Bankim writes a very telling piece on the worship of the mother goddess Durga. In one of his psychedelic visions Kamalakanta sees, floating on turbulent waves.

The gold-adorned autumnal mother image of
The first day's festivity (Saptami) smiling.
Floating on water, radiating lights. Is this
Mother? Yes, this is mother. I recognize
my mother, my land of birth in this image
of clay, embodying mother earth, adorned
in many jewels but now buried in the
wombs of time (Rachanavali 11: 80).

Kamalakanta's prayer is full of the agony of the subject race.

Arise, O my mother, golden Bengali arise
Now we will be good sons, will not let you
Down. Arise, Blessed mother - we will
henceforth renounce narrow self-interest,
will do good to other, will give up indolent
sacrilegous sensuality. Arise, mother, tears are
blinding me, arise, O mother Bengal (Ibid).

Bankim has tried to historicise this metaphor of the mother goddess as the motherland. In a very early piece published in 1873 in his own journal Bangadarshan Bankim interprets the ten forms of the mother goddess as Dasamahavidya and sees the evolution of the Indian society in the ten successive forms, right from the past when non-Aryans were subdued by the Aryans (Kali) through the wretched conditions of India under the Muslim rule (Dhumavati), right up to the futurist vision of Mahalakshmi when the Indian society will be prosperous and bountiful. This, one may say, is very early prefiguration of the famous series of Mother images mentioned in Anandamath,

the fiction that gave a shape and form to militant nationalism. This is the novel in which the full span of the 'condition of India question is to be found in the three successive images of the Mother goddess, corresponding to past, present and the future of Indian history. In his presentation of the present misery Bankim Chandra collapses the Muslim and the British rule and thus creates one of the most powerful icons of nationalist struggle. The description of the three images, "mother that was, mother that is, mother that will be', .

Tagore Swadesh and Mother

In this final section I shall use the gender lens to examine Rabindranath Thakur's critique of the patriarchal essentialization of motherhood in the revivalist strand of cultural Nationalism that gripped Bengal at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

In 2011 we are just past the centennial year of the publication of *Gora*, the novel, as everyone will remember, was serialized in Ramananda Chatterjee's prestigious journal *Prabasi*, between 1907 to 1909 and published as a novel in 1909. I would like to take up this novel from the point of juxtaposing nation and motherhood that we have just examined at length in the emergence of cultural Nationalism, with a distinctly Hindu identity for the Motherland. The time frame of *Gora* corresponds to the emergence of Hindu revivalist Nationalism, which has been re-examined by Rabindranath in the resurgence of the Hindu Nationalism during the Swadeshi movement that raged in Bengal from 1905 to 1908. The collapsing of the two phases of our Nationalist resurgence gives *Gora* a special perspective, which has been examined by several scholars, (Bagchi, 1996; Bhattacharya 1996; Sarkar, 2009), but which I would like to take up from the perspective of motherhood.

I would like to begin with Tagore's response to the felicitation he received from the students, colleagues and admirers in *Visva Bharati* on completion of his seventieth birthday in 1931. In this he talks about 'desh' (country) and contrasts it with 'rashtra'

Desh is the creation of human beings. It is not simply 'earthly' but it is also 'conscious'. If humanity is made visible, only then will 'desh' express itself. (Rabindra-Rachanavali vol.1:xxiv translation mine)

Making a clear dig at the most pronounced icons of celebration of Motherland in Bankimchandra's *Bande Mataram*, he says,

The louder the proclamation about the land well-watered, fruit-bearing and cooled by breeze (*sujalang suphalang, malayajashitalang*) is, the more we remain accountable. The question will arise, the natural bounty provides the ingredients alone, how much human resources have we generated? If the human beings are instrumental in drying up of water, withering of fruit, the air is polluted with destruction, the land becomes infertile, then it will not be possible to cover up our shame in poetry. 'Desh' is not made up of soil, but of its people. (Ibid)

Whereas the human component in 'Rashtra' (more like the nation-state) is of a very different nature. According to mature Tagore:

There are some constructions that take human beings as ingredients, such as the 'rashtra' where the strength of the work is in numbers, there is always conflict in drawing people to your own group. When faith is lowered, the net is torn, the human ingredients are not fully available. (Ibid:xxix)

Gora is one of Tagore's pivotal novels that discusses the enormous significance of the human beings that comprise 'desh'

as opposed to the instrumentality of the nation-state. The time of the novel goes back to the eighties of the nineteenth century (since Gora, the eponymous hero was an orphan of the 1957 rebellion) and there is a lot of meaningful cogitation about the rich implications of 'Swadesh' (one's very own 'desh') and its contestatory but dialogic relationship with the notion of the Hindu nation that had been constructed by the reified motherland as a Hindu goddess by the cultural Nationalism that had emerged in the wake of Bankimchandra's *Bande Mataram* and Chandranath Basu's *Hindutva* .. The garb of Hindu Nationalism that Gora dons, is then made to confront the culture of the Brahmo Samaj, a product of the Social Reform initiated by Raja Rammohan Roy, Tagore's grandfather Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and other elite gentlemen of the first half of the nineteenth-century Bengal. The Brahmos staked their claim of reform in the attempt to purge the Bengali/Indian society of the dross of Hindu orthodoxy, mostly in advocating the rights of women to education and their ability to be seen in public, and facilitate its march to progressive modernity.

The narrative spins round the conflict between two orthodoxies, one of the Reformed Hindoos, as caricatured by D.L. Roy, i.e. the Brahmos, the other the orthodox Brahmanical Hindus, who claim to be the true inheritors of Swadesh and its culture. It is important to note that Tagore rises above the limitations of his birth and upbringing in a Brahmo family, to demonstrate how both sides of the divide are vitiated by principles of rigidity and exclusion that belie the true identity of 'Swadesh', with which the dialogues and cogitations in the novel are full. The space that is being contested by the two groups is a society under the grip of colonialism in which attempts to alienate the Indians from their own 'desh' was a matter of genuine anxiety.

As a result, apart from the opposition between Orthodox Hindus and orthodox Brahmos, Tagore introduces yet another set of binaries. On one side are the essentialized embodiments of orthodoxy. In a parenthetical recall of his own comment on the problem of self-identity

Human identity is the identity of his (a person's) nature. Part is ripe, part unripe: one is created by his will, the other is quite beyond it. It is dangerous if all his nature is ripe, just as if all of it is unripe. (RR vol 18, 452)

We might say, that Tagore means what may be considered the uniformly over-ripe part of society: Gora's father Krishnadaya, and his weak elder son Mahim; who wants to marry off his ten-year old daughter, entirely in conformity with the demands of the re-invented Hindu orthodoxies of the eighties of the nineteenth century and Krishnadaya, whose orthodoxy reaches a kind of paranoia so that he is gradually relinquishing his touch of anybody in the family and lives in an enclave of his own: Harimohini, the orthodox Hindu widowed aunt of Sucharita, who misuses the shelter she receives from the liberal Brahmo Pareshbabu, to extend her Hindu orthodox tyranny over Sucharita's finely fashioned personality epitomized by her aggressive use of Sucharita's Hinduised name Radharani. On the other side of the same coin, in the name of Brahmoism, operate Panubabu, the Brahmo intellectual (who could easily have been the young Tagore himself, because there was a group of young intellectuals who tried to bring life into Brahmo community), sucking up to the British magistrate and upholding the providential presence of the British, and Barada Sundari, the ubiquitous anxious mother, waiting to get her daughters married to eligible bachelors in projecting them to felicitate the British magistrate. Between these ugly faces of orthodoxy hover the

two young pairs of men and women, the growth of whose consensual love for each other forms the central structure of the novel. Benoy, more acted upon than acting and the spirited argumentative Lalita, chafing under the subservient mentality of her Brahmo compatriots.

Gora, the eponymous hero, impetuous and meteor-like, who has donned a Hindu orthodox robe in order to serve his own country and to free it from British domination; and Sucharita his model helpmeet, brought up on what is creative and rational within the Brahmo upbringing she had from her foster father Pareshbabu. In her person she combines a joint Hindu and Brahmo upbringing. The desired ideal space in the novel is shared by the two elderly units of parenthood. Pareshbabu the Brahmo Reformer without orthodoxy and, finally, Gora's mother Anandamayee. I would like spend the rest of my time to discuss the significance of this unique portrayal of motherhood.

In more senses than one, Rabindranath lays bare his cards quite openly at the beginning. The two friends Gora and Benoy are presented in conversation about Benoy's new acquaintance with the enlightened Brahmo family of Pareshbabu. Gora, (ironically named, with intended ambivalence of the word Gora, usually applied to the alien and fair British in India), the unrelenting champion of orthodox Hindutwa that we had seen emerging in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as an embodiment of cultural Nationalism, immediately takes up a critical stance. Benoy's interest in the civilized friendliness of Pareshbabu's family is interpreted by Gora as compromising collusion with the ruling whites and their tainted social mores, specially vis a vis the social visibility of women. To Benoy's modest claim that he reveres women, justifying it with reference to the Hindu Shastras, Gora counters by claiming that according to Hindu Shastras 'women are to be revered because they light up the home. It is better not

to call it reverence, when the western convention is that the light up the male heart' This claim of superiority of the Hindu culture because it is untainted by any form of the sexual aspect of male attention to women had become common in some Nationalist iconic thinking, as I have illustrated from Swami Vivekananda's views on the difference between the Eastern and the Western ideal of woman quoted earlier. For Gora Benoy's interest in the young women of Pareshbabu's family stood for such capitulation to the western notion of consensual partnership.

So, the initial debate between the friends is on man-woman relationship, which has enormous bearing on the unfolding of the plot of Gora. But following close upon it is one of the most important sites of the novel- it is our first glimpse of Go ra's mother Anandarnayee.)

Anticipating, in a most unexpected context, Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as institution and motherhood as experience, Tagore offers a radical critique of the Nationalist reification of Motherhood that I have examined at length above, in a subversive counter-image of an experiential mother in the figure of Anandamayee. Several years ago, I had called her the most oppositional figure of Motherhood in India's colonial history. All the dialogic cogitation about what constitutes 'Swadesh' and the fitting identity that can claim it, come to a fruition in the everyday practice that this mother in an orthodox Brahman household adopts for herself. As the novel opens, we find Gora declining to eat or drink in her mother's room for the ostensible reason that her maid Lachhmiya, who is a Christian, has full access to it..

One of the first things that we notice about Anandamayee is that contrary to the orthodox Brahmanical Hindu practices,

she wears a chemise with her saree. This was interpreted among older generation as new-fangled and was derided as a Christianising trait. The rest of her description presents her as a hard-working, useful housewife who looks after her own family and is mindful of the needs of the neighbours, and hence used to a certain social mobility. When Gora insists that she must conform to all the strictures of an orthodox Hindu household, she says with fervour:

"Do you know that I let go of all the orthodox practices by taking you in my lap? Once one takes a child in one's bosom, one realizes that no one is born with caste in the world. The day I realized this, I knew that God will take you away from me the day I hate anyone as a Christian or a low caste. I would rather you remain here illuminating my room, filling my lap, and I will drink water from all the castes in the world!"

Full of Sophoclean irony this bold experience of motherhood is Tagore's answer to all narrow appropriation of Motherhood as an institutionalised icon of essentialized Hindu Nationalism. Having simply accepted as her own, an Irish baby whose mother had found shelter in their house during the Great Rebellion of 1857, and who died giving birth to him, Anandamayee crosses the barrier of casteism and narrow Hinduism, and becomes the true practicing mother of a plural multi-race India.

In setting out the human perspective in Gora Tagore has given a very special space to Anandamayee. One should note, in particular, her refutation of Gora's objection to the unrestricted presence of Lachmaniya, a lower-class Christian maid in her kitchen.

Gora, my child, please do not say such a thing! From the beginning you have eaten from her hands - she has brought

you up from infancy. Only till the other day you did not relish food without the chutney made by her own hands. When you were little, you had 'pox' - I will never forget the way she nursed you back to life. (p. 126)

Gora in his blind identification of his own country with the ritual purity prescribed by orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism thinks that Lachmiya should be pensioned off rather than be allowed to be part of her mother's kitchen. Anandamayee, on the other hand has the truly 'inclusive' spirit of humanity that does not flinch from acknowledging the affective entitlement of even a surrogate mother (not in today's technical sense of a womb sold) even though belonging to lower caste and belonging to a different religion.

Gora, you think you can pay off her debt with money? .. She will die if she does not get to see you. (Ibid)

When Gora accuses her of transgressing the ritual purity of a Brahmanical household, she narrates the effort she put in in breaking the shackles of Brahmanical orthodoxy in her own life. Her husband had encouraged her to give up orthodoxy, to suit his own purposes. The British masters were so happy to find a Brahman employee whose wife was liberal enough to accompany him to his various workplaces, that they had promoted and rewarded him. Now that he had earned tons of money, Anandamayee is perspicacious enough to observe, he has resigned from service and reverted to the orthodox Brahmanical ritual with a vengeance. For Anandamayee the giving up of orthodoxy was a matter of principle, her husband may revert to orthodoxy, she adds,

But, I will not be able to do it. My seven-generation old orthodoxies have been uprooted one by one - will these simply come back for the asking? (p.126) This is the mother, who is an individual with ethical integrity, for whom the experience of

motherhood was a momentous personal choice of inclusivity that enabled her, as even Gora will understand towards the end of the novel, to embrace humanity, irrespective of religion, race, caste and class.

Going back to the reading of the scene at the beginning of the novel, we find Benoy, prevented from eating in Anandamayee's kitchen, comes home and instead of writing about the saving the country, finds his attention drifting towards Anandamayee's room from which he had just been forcibly taken away by Gora. This is an epiphanic moment in which Anandamayee's room acquires an iconic significance that makes it coeval with one's own country. It is worth looking at it closely:

The bright floor, with 'ponkho' work is shining in its cleanliness, a wooden bed on one side is covered with a spread that clean and soft like the wings of a white swan. Next to it is a stool on which a lamp with linseed oil is lit. Ma is stooping towards it with threads of many colours, embroidering the 'kantha' (i.e. a coverlet), Lachmiya talking endlessly in her stilted Bangla, Ma is paying attention only half-heartedly. Whenever she feels sad, she buries herself in her craft. Benoy cast his inner eye on her silent face, intent on work and said to himself 'let the affectionate glow of this face save me from my mental turbulence. Let this/ace be the image a/my motherland, inspire me in my duty and help me to remain firm in it.' He called out to her inwardly as mother and said 'I will not let any scriptures prove that your food is not my elixir' (pp 126-7 italics mine) .

Throughout the novel Rabindranath signals at the iconic significance of Anandamayee as consciously transgressing the norms of Hindu Brahmanical orthodoxy in order to achieve a more inclusive image of the 'samaj'. Even Gora, while donning

the garb of an orthodox Hindu, had realized, early in the novel, that his real ties were not with his rigidly conformist father, whose ritual purity found most people, including Gora, beyond the pale of his touchability, but with his mother, who was a rebel against orthodox rituals, however much he would criticize her for her non-conformity. (p. 249) But it takes Gora much longer to arrive at the proper ground for this affinity.

It was Benoy who had realized Anandamayee's luminous personality, who starts talking about the insensitive treatment of their womenfolk even by the so-called educated and privileged Hindus:

... We are supposed to respect our women - call them Laxmi or Goddess ... We call our country motherland, but if we do not recognize that celebration of the female image in the actual women of our country - if we do not perceive our women as complete mature energetic and powerful in their intelligence, power and the breadth of their sense of duty - if we keep on seeing weakness, narrowness and immaturity within our own rooms - then the perception of that country will never acquire brightness within ourselves. (p.275))

As the novel advances we find that it is the dissident, unorthodox mother Anandamayee who shows her full capability in recognizing the agency of the two strong, principled young women, Lalita and Sucharita. The narrowly conformist mothers and mother substitutes, Baradasundari, the ambitious, narrow Brahmo mother of Lalita, and Harimohini, the ritual-riddled short-sighted and pettily greedy Hindu aunt of Sucharita, fail both the girls in their moments of greatest need. It is this glow of inclusivity in Anandamayee that is unconsciously picked up by Gora when he realizes the limitation of his sense of his swadesh, because he had not remembered to include its women. (pA 74)

In the final scene of denouement when Anandamayee reveals to Gora the truth about his birth and origin as an alien Gora asks Anandamayee "are you not my mother?" she answers "You are the son of my sonless self, you are much more than the child of my womb' (p.566) She explains that it was the fear of losing him that made her suppress the true account of his birth from him. In reply Gora simply called out to her "Ma!", at this Anandamayee's usual restraint gave way to tears.

On coming to know the truth of his birth, however, Gora feels strangely liberated. He goes to visit Paresh babu and Sucharita and declares

Today I am a true Indian. There is no conflict between Hindu, Mussulman or Christian in me. Today all the castes of India are my caste, everyone's food is my food all these days I traveled with an invisible barrier within me- I simply couldn't overcome it. Hence there was an emptiness in me, I tried to cover it up with embroidery, to beautify it. ... Today I am saved, Pareshbabu, by being relieved of the vain efforts to beautify it.

He further adds, coming back to the image of the mother in the final beatific vision of India, that is not touched by any of the ritual pollution of any kind

Today I have been so purified, that I am no longer afraid of being polluted even in the house of an untouchable' chandal'. Pareshbabu, this morning I have been born, with my mind wide open, in the lap of India. Today I have had full realization of what is the lap of a mother.

From the bosom of Anandamayee, the transgressive, exemplary mother, Gora is released to the real India, his Swadesh, which he had been searching all through the novel: Thus, he says to Pareshbabu

Give me the mantra of that god who is the god of all: Hindus Mussulmans, Christians and Brahrnos- the door of whose temple is not closed to any community or individual- the one who is not a god of Hindus alone but of India)

In the concluding appendix of the novel Gora reads his swadesh by reading his mother experientially, not through an institutionalised reification:

Ma, you are my ma. The mother I was looking for was sitting inside my house. You have no caste, no sense of ritual purity, no hatred, you are the symbol of well-being. You are my Bharatbarsha. (p. 571, Italics mine)

Thus, the institutionalized, essentialised mother celebrated in the Brahmanical Hindu Nationalism of both the last quarter of the nineteenth century and that of the Swadeshi movement at the beginning of the twentieth, is actively replaced by Rabindranath by the principled pluralism of an experiential mother, more, not less than a biological mother. That is the reading of 'desh' not of 'rashtra' or the 'nation', of Mother/land - a human being throbbing with affect, not of a Goddess, inert, divine and reified.

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***All translations of Rabindranath's texts are mine.*

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