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Research Article:

Transgressing the Borders: Ambiguous Queer Spots, Homoerotic  
Silences and Tagore's *Gora* and *Two Sisters*

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Transgressing the Borders: Ambiguous Queer Spots, Homoerotic  
Silences and Tagore's *Gora* and *Two Sisters*

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Queer is a performative signifier that enacts a sodality by showing how 'normative logic[s]' of heteronormativity depend "not on some natural law but instead on the performative citation of a norm, constructed as a *cause* or natural origin, that is nonetheless an *effect* of its very citation" (Burger and Kruger xi). As an episteme that relies in the performative logics of gender, it disrupts the stabilised notions of identity and normality that present themselves as unchanging and unchangeable *causes* in the world, showing these instead to be *effects*. Being a postmodern narrative, queer theory espouses homophobia that strikes at the very root of patriarchy that supports the conjoining of the male and female principles for its sustenance and explores how queer desires were closeted in the normative discourses of heteronormative paradigms. Through readings and re-readings as its (pro)creative strategy, queer theory problematizes the monolithic notions of identity by expounding homoerotic resonances in literary texts that apparently represent heterosexual relationships.

According to Anupama Mohan:

Queer readings involves, for instance, ironic reconstructions of traditional gender roles, re-imagining supposedly heterosexual characters in literature as, in fact, "closeted" gay/lesbian lovers, and agitating to make formerly marginal forms of pleasure and desire in to perfectly acceptable, mainstream ones. Queer theory and queer literature remind us that there is always a

subtext, and these subtexts problematize dominant ways of experiencing social intimacy and ways that institutions enforce highly restrictive sexual roles on individuals and families. (124)

By problematizing writing and reading practises that has the conventional salience of heterosexual bond, Queer theory attempts to dismantle hegemonic assumptions of 'divinised' hetero sexist literatures. Queering of Tagore's *Gora* and *Two Sisters* can stimulate a variety of new interpretations untouched, so far, in conventional Tagorian studies. Traditional readings of these novels tend to emphasise conflicts in heterosexual love affairs and marriages in the context of colonial modernity ignoring the same sex intimacies covertly represented in them (Raj 89). In the fictional contexts of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century such same sex relationships whether affectional or sexual could not be explicitly dealt with and they could only be represented by means of absences, slips and gaps in the narration.

Tagore profoundly represented the intricacies of human relationships (Iyengar 47). During his life time itself he had become a hugely controversial and iconoclastic figure on account of his daring and candid representation of the so called "deviant" sexual desires. His *Binodini* and *Chaturanga* deal with love of widows in an age where sexual desires of widows were normally ignored. While *Two Sisters* and *The Garden* foreground the illicit love of married men and then his *The Home and The World* depict, perhaps for the first time in Indian literature, an extra marital love affair of a woman that destabilizes the patriarchal ethos of the (in)authentic *pativrata*. Thus as a writer who trespassed the discursing logic of all mainstream narratives, Tagore archly alludes an unusual aesthetic sensations that unconsciously celebrates the quotidian realities of non-straight subjectivities in his narratives.

The central theme of most of the novels of Tagore centres around a woman. In novels like *The Wreck*, *Binodini*, *Two Sisters*, *The Garden* and *Gora*, besides the heroine, there is another woman who is closely associated with the heroine who also plays a significant role. *Gora* is the only Tagorian novel that centralizes a male character instead of a female in the lead role. Besides female bonding, as in other works of Tagore, the novel also addresses the salience of male intimacies. In *Gora*, besides the titular protagonist, there is another male, Binoy, who is closely associated with the hero and who plays an important role with him in the plot. As usual the novel turns round the theme of love in addition to other more serious concerns that the text addresses: cultural nationalism, Hindu reformation, Hindu Muslim divide, caste untouchability and so on. In *Gora*,

Tagore has gone beyond the usual doldrums of heterosexual love relations by having the rare type of 'bonding' between his male protagonists and between his female protagonists that slips through their verbal intimacies and covert mannerisms.

The novelist at the very outset introduces the readers to the salience of male intimacy between Gormohan and Binoy Bhushan. They sit on the damp roof terrace of Gora's house and engage in a merry conversation on a dark rainy evening. In the description, Tagore leaves us in no doubt as to the genuineness of their past intimacies.

On this terrace, when they had been small, these two friends had played together on return from school, before their examinations it was here that they had loudly committed their lessons to memory, pacing up and down as though in a frenzy; and in hot weather it was here that they used to take their evening meals on returning from college, often arguing till two o'clock in the morning, waking up startled when the sun arose to find that they had fallen asleep together on the mat [...] (13)

Men, unlike women have traditionally been allowed by patriarchy for 'male' bonding, in sporting arena, same - sex educational institutions, clubs, offices, military etc. These institutional structures have something to do with the *closetedness* of homosexual desires. The novelist further relates how as a committed and loyal partner, Binoy had always been actively interested in giving emotional and physical support to Gora. He, being bright and intelligent, was superior to Gora in studies. Gora could not understand things so quickly as Binoy, "So Binoy, as his faithful steed, had to bear Gora along with himself through all their college examinations" (14). The imagery of the horse and the rider in the text has oblivious homoerotic connotations. Binoy's love and admiration for Gora is such that he actually has a large photograph of his friend hung on the mud wall of his house to see his friend whenever he is not by his side.

In addition to 'male bonding', *Gora* also represents the 'female bonding' Sucharita/Lolita, obviously to push the novel to its inevitable resolution involving heterosexual pairing. As in typical sex pairing where partners exhibit diverse characteristic traits Lolita and Sucharita in *Gora* represent two aspects of womanhood. While Lolita is an extrovert brimming with energy and confidence, Sucharita is introvert and submissive. While Sucharita "is not a spirited rebel" and

prefers a life of peace and contentment, Lolita is a fiery, rebellious, and outspoken woman. In this respect she invites comparison with Bimala, the protagonist in Tagore's *Home and the World*. While Lolita is self-willed, bold, assertive and modern, Sucharita is docile, submissive, gentle and traditional. Lolita in a sense anticipates the women's liberation movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when she asks Sucharita, "Because we have been born girls, are we to wear our hearts out within the four walls of our home. Are we never to be of any use to the world." (59). Lolita not only has a strong individuality but she asserts it any cost. She exhorts Sucharita that God has not given them intelligence to "expound other people's ideas and mouth simply to repeat other people's phrase [...]" (60). She also derides Binoy for being a shadow of Gora and echoing his opinions. Despite their differences, Lolita and Sucharita remain intimate friends of many commonalities. As in the case of Gora and Binoy, the deep bond of intimacy between Sucharita and Lolita is revealed in the numerous instances of merry tête-à-tête between them. The following incident is self revealing:

At this moment Lolita came out in her night dress and without saying anything, went and stood by the balustrade. Sucharita smiled to herself, for she realised that Lolita was vexed with her, as she had promised to sleep with her that night and had entirely forgotten about it. But nearly to acknowledge the forgetfulness would not have been any good for appeasing Lolita- being able to forget her was the real fault. And Lolita was not the sort of girl to remind anyone of a promise. She had determined to keep still in bed, without a sign of being hurt, but as time passed the keenness of her disappointment increased until, able to bear it no longer, she had left her bed just to show quietly that she was still awake. Sucharita left her chair and going slowly up to Lolita embraced her, saying "Lolita, don't be angry with me". But Lolita feels chocked with tears and the very thought that Sucharita had forgotten her is breaking her heart. Sucharita tried to console her saying "come dear, let's go to bed". But, Lolita is stubborn and finally Sucharita had to drag her along to their bedroom. Lolita in choked voice complains "why are you so late? Don't you know it is eleven 'O' clock? I have heard all the hours strike [...]" to which Sucharita replies "I am so sorry, dear" and draws her closer to her (122).

The deep bond of intimacy between the siblings is such that they could not think of remaining separate even for a while and at night they sleep together close in each other's arms. Such jesters are at odds with the normal, the legitimate, and the dominant sexual discourses of the age (Halperin 62).

Similar instances as the above further recur in several parts of the novel. A 20<sup>th</sup> century writer like Tagore, who is solemnly spiritualised, can only represent such relationships as a slippage between friendship and 'ambiguous' but dynamic same-sex desires. Until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, homoeroticism and lesbian tendencies were indistinguishable from other forms of male/male and female/female friendship and such desires are more secreted in India, a country that claims of a rich spiritual tradition. Earlier literary representations of such relationships were considered as depictions of close romantic friendships that never deride the apparent normalness ascribed to it. It's evident in the comradeship of Moorthy and Sonu in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Kapila and Devadatta in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*. We can easily trace in abundance snippets of close female bonding in classical and medieval Indian Literature. Examples are Anasuya and Priyamvada in Kalidasa's *Shakuntalam*, Sita and Urmila in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Vimala and Tilottama in Dhurgesh's *Nandini* to name only a few. Chitra Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* is a typical example of the closeted desires in literature of contemporary times.

The social contexts of Tagore's novels demanded a closure to the queer predicaments of the male and female protagonists. Hence we find the main characters move towards heterosexual pairings in the later part of the novel: Gora/Sucharita and Binoy/Lolita. The characters initially appear to be undecided in their choices for heterosexual partners. When Sucharita feels love mixed with admiration for Gora, the latter does not seem interested and even ignores her. The novelist is silent about the reason for Gora's coldness towards her. Initially Sucharita too found Gora too orthodox, superstitious and arrogant. Lolita's love for Binoy too was not in any case "love at first sight". In fact initially she felt disgusted by Binoy's inability to assert his individuality and his inability to free himself from the dominance of Gora. Later when they fall in love with each other, Gora stands in their way as he strongly opposes Binoy's relationship with Lolita. Tagore does not give any convincing reason here also for Gora's opposition. Gora even threatens to snap off his friendship with Binoy if he continued his affair with Lolita. This was Gora's final frantic attempt to have Binoy all for himself. Gora both physically and psychologically gets estranged from his friend after Binoy's elopement and subsequent marriage with Lolita. Lolita on her part consciously attempted to create a rift between Gora and Binoy in order to free Binoy from the influence of Gora. She had provoked Binoy to do things against the wishes of Gora in order to take him away from Gora. She pleaded with Binoy to take her and her sisters to the circus and had made him take part in the play to be staged before the magistrate with a view of inciting Gora. The estrangement caused between Gora and Binoy on account of

latter's marriage was apparently heartbreaking for both. However, the novelist finally resolves the queer predicament of his male and female protagonists by conjoining them in heterosexual love relations, the only relations acceptable, if not possible in the high class Bengali society of Tagore's time.

Another Tagorian novel that obliquely represents the salience of female desire is *Two Sisters*. As the title very clearly suggests the novel is about the unnatural bonding of two sisters, Sarmila and Urmimala, representing two facets of womanhood. Sarmila is a mother kind exuding homely grace with large, gentle eyes, always attending to the needs of her busy, careless husband Sasankan. Urmimala, on the other hand, is the beloved kind, beautiful and always eager about everything, excited about every interesting thing around her. She is engaged to Nirad, a young doctor, on the wishes of her father and after their engagement Nirad leaves for Europe to pursue his research. Nirad was a strict and disciplined sort of person whose sole intellectual pursuit left him ignorant of worldly affairs. He was also a demanding type of husband and therefore it was quite natural that Urmimala, a playful, cheerful and freedom loving woman could not find his personality attractive. She was only happy to get rid of him when he left for Europe. In the meantime, Sarmila fell ill and got bed ridden. The whole affairs of Sarmila's household become unmanageable. So she seeks the help of her sister and asks her to take care of the household affairs. Though Urmi, as she was always affectionately addressed by Sarmila, comes home with the intention of attending to her sick sister, she is directed by Sarmila to take care of the affairs of her husband.

Sarmila is typically a traditional Indian woman who treats her husband as superior and considers serving and worshiping him as her sole supreme duty. On the other hand, Urmimala represents the "new woman" who does not consider her husband superior but an equal partner. Urmimala's arrival at the house brings about a total transformation in the life of Sasanka. Her vitality, buoyant and playful spirit relieves Sasanka of his personal and professional pressures and rekindles in him a renewed zest for life. Urmi, unlike Sarmila never shared Sasanka's concern for his work. Instead, much like a playmate she wasted most of his time, getting involved in childish pranks with him. In Sasanka, she finds her ideal of a man and husband. She felt a secret joy in the fact that she is a source of happiness to Sasanka. The luminous intensity of her mind radiated on her face, making every aspect of her personality endearing and attractive to him. At last unable to hold back his feelings any more Sasanka, while they were walking in the garden, seizes her hand and tells

her about his love “surely you know that I love you” (61). This is the beginning of an intense love affair between Sasanka and Urmimala.

What is strange is the reaction of Sarmila to her husband’s affair with her sister. Tagore leaves us in no doubt that what happens between Urmi and Sasanka has the silent approval of Sarmila:

Though no one ever told him in so many words, it seemed to Sasanka that what he was doing had the silent approval of all around him. He had convinced himself that Sarmila was in no way unhappy, that on the contrary she felt happy in watching the happiness of this pair. This might have been impossible in the case of an ordinary woman, but then Sarmila was no ordinary woman. (61)

By allowing her husband to carry on an open affair with her own sister, Sarmila surpasses the type women characters quite usual in Indian literary narratives. Though the novelist unconsciously explicates her difference, he does not make it clear what was distinctive about her. In other words Sarmila’s attitude towards her sister is left without an objective cause. Earlier when Urmi decides to leave the house out of guilt, Sarmila strongly opposes it and in spite of her opposition Urmi leaves asks begs her husband to bring her home: “please bring her back here-tell her I want her to return. I am sure she won’t object”. One is left to speculate what must be the true cause of Sarmila’s readiness to live with her sister even by sharing in with her sister her conjugal rights. It is the absence of this cause and the failure of the text to acknowledge it which makes the relationship between the two sisters problematic and dynamic.

Their bond becomes more dynamic and vibrant when Sarmila forgives her sister’s transgressions unconditionally. Urmi, once she is convinced of her guilt she cries and prays for forgiveness: “Kick me away from your house, drive me away from your presence, now, this very minute” (59). Although Sarmila had made up her mind not to forgive Urmi’s transgressions, when she cries Sarmila’s heart melts and gently caressing Urmi’s head she consoles her. When Urmi falls at her sister’s feet and begs for forgiveness, Sarmila’s words non-plusses the reader. She asks “who is to forgive whom sister? And wiping her tears she says “life is so perplexing! We are baffled in our hopes, cheated of our loves”. What does she mean by saying “we are cheated of our loves”? If her intention is to make her husband happy with the presence of Urmi, she is successful in that. But it’s clear from the very text that she is baffled by some unmentioned causes which might well be her lesbian hopes. Tagore here explores a rare kind of love between Sarmila and Urmimala in *Two Sisters* by

means of many absences, slips and gaps in the text. It is a kind of love that makes one willing to share anything and everything with the other and hence goes beyond the typical patterns quite usual Indian narratives. Sharmila even becomes ready to share her man with her sister. She asks Urmi “is it rare in our Hindu society for sisters to be co-wives?” The rare kind of love that binds them and their intimate longing for companionship are unmistakably expressed in these words. There is a sense of mutual love, understanding, and co-existence that inform the relationship between the two sisters. Such possibility of female bonding that Tagore was acutely aware of is hinted in the poem “When the Two Sisters Go to Fetch Water” taken from *The Gardener*:

We the two sisters go to fetch water, they come to this spot and they smile.

They must be aware of somebody who stands behind the trees whenever they go to fetch water.

The two sisters glance at each other when they come to this spot, and they smile.

There is a laughter in their swift-stepping feet, which makes confusion in somebody’s mind who stands behind the trees whenever they go to fetch water.

Their glance and smile at each other are in fact capable of creating confusion not only in the mind of the person in hiding but also in the mind of the reader. The poem never makes it clear why two sisters are aware of somebody who stands behind the trees and secretly watching whenever they go to fetch water. And for a normal reader fetching water is quite a common act and there isn’t any strangeness involved in the act. Alexander Doty, a major American Queer theorist, suggests that ‘literary texts offer the potential for queer readings that focus on connotative rather than denotative meaning, that is, to find credible readings hidden in text that a culture of homophobia and heterosexism bars us from seeing’ (17). Here the phrase fetching water is rather used in a connotative dimension which has supposedly nothing to do with obvious act of fetching water. Instead the phrase is used in a polished poetic language which is connotatively dynamic enough to mean homoeroticism which must be expressed only with precautions in a homophobic culture like ours.

Though Tagore seems to uphold the salience of the female relationship in *Two Sisters*, in the social contexts of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, he could neither apparently justify the love outside marriage nor the unnatural love between the siblings and hence he falls as a victim to the regimes of the normal (Warner xxvii). The novel

finally moves towards a conventional heterosexual resolution involving the rejoining of the heterosexual partners. Urmimala goes to Europe (the possibility of a reunion with Nirad cannot be ruled out) wishing Sasanka and Sarmila conjugal bliss once again and Sarmila entreats her husband to train her in wifely duties to become worthy of his admiration. Apparently the narrative concludes with the typical heterosexist message that in spite of all the problems, the partners will have to adjust to the situation and put up with each other till the end once they get married.

Dominant discourses of all times create a homophobic logic which inadvertently finalises that certain courses of sexuality must be altered, corrected and cured. The sole project of this essay is to critique these killing prohibitions of compulsory heterosexual norms which find an apparent feasibility in Tagorian narratives especially in *Gora* and *Two Sisters*. Queer bonds of these texts are consciously marginalized due to the heterosexual dominant norms which propose only the idealised masculine and feminine bonds as the true and normal ones (Cohen 143). As a result, the dynamics of all those relations which cannot be fit enough to the existing parameters of heterosexuality are essentially sacrificed for more accepted desires. Although Tagore succeeds in representing different facets of love covertly in his novel, he could not justify them considering the social pressures of his time. So interpreting Tagorian characters in a queer angle and exploring closeted bonds in his novels are not a miss hit and an over interpretation. But it's a creative attempt to acknowledge the greatness of Tagorian literary universe that takes into account all sorts of marginalized desires. As a chronicler of human relationships, he deals with every aspect of life. Therefore it is quite logical to believe that queer relations were not an anathema to Tagore, for we believe that the works of Tagore are comprehensive enough in representing all intricacies of human relationships.

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