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NATIONALISM AND GENDER IDEOLOGY IN BENGALI LITERATURE

by Simonetta Casci

The creation of a nationalist identity in India was a long process which challenged colonial power through the critical, selective elaboration of traditions and of cultural symbols. In this process, the search for a strong masculine identity, which expressed the martial opposition to British rule, and the definition of Indian manhood and womanhood rendered the ideology of gender vital to the nationalist discourse.

My focus is on nationalism in Bengal and on 19th-20th century Bengali literature, where the gender issue emerges in the construction of a new ideal woman. The female characters as they are portrayed in the works of exponents of Bengal's intellectual élite—P.C.Mitra (1), Rabindranath Tagore (2), Saratchandra Chatterjee (3) — show the contradictory aspects of nationalism through the definition of gender roles. Both in politics and in literature, the answer of Bengali women to the dominant discourse was not uniform as caste and class divisions generated different answers. In spite of such divisions, the shy criticism of nineteenth century women changed into a more assertive self-

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(1) Pyaricamd Mitra (1814-1883), a student of the Hindu College, an active social reformer and a writer, later became a successful businessman by profession. Using the pen-name Tekcamd Thakur, he started Bengali fiction with *Alaler Ghorer Dulal*, an amusing social satire. In his old age he gradually moved towards theosophy and Hindu revivalism.

(2) Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a member of a famous 19th century Calcutta family, dominated Bengal's cultural scene till his death: he was not only a poet and writer, but also a reformer and an educationist. In 1913 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature after the publication of *Gitanjali* (1910), a collection of poems translated into English.

(3) Saratchandra Chatterjee (or Chattopadhyay) belonged to a lower middle class Brahmin family. After living as a wanderer, he worked in Burma for several years. He then returned to Bengal, where he dedicated his life to literature gaining great popularity.

awareness and induced them to consider critically the imposition of stereotyped roles within the dominant nationalist ideology. This not only had an instrumental attitude towards the gender issue, but often considered women as the embodiment of communal identity.

In the early 19th century the gender issue became a central issue in the encounter between Indian and English civilisations. Bengali social reformers were challenged by the British attacks on Indian customs, which were denounced as barbaric and which were considered as evidence of India's inferiority, and therefore as a justification of British rule. The deplorable conditions of Indian women, the colonisers argued, indicated the degeneration of India's civilisation, which could only be overcome by modernisation and westernisation.

The reformers' desire to introduce modernisation while preserving an original identity, created different strands within the Bengali middle class. The neo-orthodox Radhakanta Deb spearheaded the movement against the abolition of the sati ritual, considered by him as a punishment for women 's lustful sexuality and as an opportunity to grant to the victim and to her relatives a superior spirituality. At the same time, Radhakanta Deb advocated women's education, denying the superstitious belief that literate women were bound to become widows early in life. On the other hand, the liberal Rammohan Roy fought against the sati ritual arguing that, in accordance with the ancient Hindu scriptures, widows could reach a far superior spirituality through meditation and chastity. However, both Deb's and Roy's basic assumptions, which mixed western values and Vedic myths, showed that for Indian women there was no escape from the oppressive patriarchal system.

Pyaricamd Mitra, as an intellectual of the enlightened middle class, echoed these reformers 'views in his novel *Alaler Ghorer Dulal (The Spoilt Son of a Rich Family)* (4), which was published in 1856 in *Masik Patrika*, the first Bengali monthly magazine for women. The novel, a social satire, which is didactic in character, tells the adventurous story of the two young sons of Baburam, a rich *bhadralok* (gentleman), and argues for limited modernisation. It is within this debate on Bengali society, that Mitra discusses the issue concerning women through the description of the *antahpur* (women quarters) in Baburam's home.

The author's definition of a modernised Bengali woman reflects his Brahmo ideals. Mitra's thesis is that moral sentiments and feelings

(4) B. BANDHYOPADHYAY, S. DAS eds., TEKCAMD THAKUR, *Alaler Ghorer Dulal*, Calcutta 1984 see S. CASCI, *Pyaricamd Mitra ed il Rinascimento Bengalese*, Milano 1990.

of benevolence can generate an harmonic society. In such a society, women will happily accept their subjection to an enlightened patriarchy, but they will never give up their feminine virtues such as patience and devotion, even in the presence of a tyrannical husband.

As a dependent wife and a nurturing mother, Baburam's wife is the quintessence of femininity: she dedicates her life to the moral improvement of her sons and she spends her time in the *antahpur* performing rituals for the wellbeing of her foolish husband. Nevertheless, encouraging the modern evolution fostered by the reformers, Mitra stresses the need for female education which will provide the rudiments of reading, writing and a superficial knowledge of Puranic literature through home tuition. At the same time a training in the domestic chores will be necessary for the creation of the perfect middle class wife. This education will transform the ignorant and illiterate woman into the new *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman), a supportive but still dependent helpmate for the westernised man. In the novel, through the witty characterisation of a poor Muslim woman, who earns her own living through all sorts of activities and rebukes her husband for his laziness, the writer confirms that the wife's independence can only generate vulgarity.

Women's superiority is shown only through their capacity to suffer. The daughters of Baburam are ignored by their father and deprived of education. The two girls have been forced to make unhappy marriages of convenience. The first has been abandoned by her husband, a greedy Brahmin *kulin*, while the second one has become a widow. Both live in loneliness and despair. Yet, Mitra's attacks on polygamy and enforced widowhood do not envisage the protest of the *bhadramahila* thus suggesting the acceptance both of a sexual double standard and of the identification of women with male honour. It was through the reinforcement of the patriarchal family system and the rule of seclusion that the *bhadralok* kept the control of the domestic domain and strengthened his male identity opposing the colonial stereotype, which viewed the Bengali man not only as primitive, but also as weak and effeminate (5).

In the novel, the image of the perfect *bhadralok* is described by the character of Baradababu Babu, the wise teacher of one of Baburam's son. Barada Babu has worked in an English school, knows the English language and appreciates western culture. Yet, even if he looks for a synthesis between tradition and modernity, his life is inspired by the religious harmony of Hinduism. In contrast, Baburam is

(5) I. CHOWDHURI, *The Frail Hero and the Virile History-Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal*, Delhi 1998.

ridiculed as a superficial and dishonest anglicised *babu*, who flatters the English sahibs, gives up Hindu principles, but does not forget obscurantist religious practices.

While during the first half of the nineteenth century the female image reflected the middle class attempt to modernise, in the 2nd half century the representation of women was embedded within a more radical nationalism, which opposed the rulers' interference with the home and which asserted the superiority of Hindu culture in revivalists terms. Mitra's short novel *Abhedhi (Similar)* (6), written in 1871 when he was already attracted towards spiritualism and theosophy, mirrors the Bengali effort to build a stronger identity through a new interpretation of gender roles.

Abhedhi is the story of a Brahmin, whose house has been destroyed by a fire and who wanders through forests and villages looking for his beloved missing wife. After a long and tormented search the two meet again and, overcoming any sexual attraction, they devote their lives to God.

In his novel Mitra criticises western progress for its indifference to spirituality and emphasises religiosity as an intrinsic value of Hindu culture, and as an essential presupposition to a higher social evolution. And the two characters, who represent two different myths, the myth of the heroic Sabitri (7) and of the all renouncing Shankara (8), are used for the construction of a militant Hindu identity (9). Patibabhani, the female character of the novel, is not passive: it is thanks to her energy that her husband will meet her again as it is thanks to *prakrit* (female energy) that *purusha* (male energy) becomes a dynamic substance (10). Yet, in spite of their cosmic energy, the female characters continue to represent the ideal woman as a subordinate and chaste wife deprived of sexuality. The episode narrating the immolation of a widow, whom Mitra describes in her divine ecstasy, reminds the reader that women reach higher spirituality only through a masochistic self-denial.

The shift towards a more conservative social attitude has been explained by recent historiography, which argues that nationalism demonstrates its superiority in the spiritual domain of culture where it

(6) M. MANIRUJJAMAN (ed.), *Pyaricamd racanabali*, Dhaka 1968.

(7) Sabritri represents the devout wife. In the Puranas it is narrated that, thanks to her dedication and courage, she rescued her husband from Yama, the god of death.

(8) A name of the God Shiva.

(9) I. CHOWDHURI, *op. cit.*

(10) S. CASCI, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

avoids the contamination of the colonial culture (11). Thus the elaboration of an idealised powerful female image does not correspond to a commitment to the improvement of women's conditions. As Indira Chowdhuri points out, the act of climbing the pyre without hesitation becomes an heroic performance, and shows the moral superiority of Hindu women over Western women, who are considered lazy and depraved. The Bengali woman is a victim and as such she is not a threat, but is complementary to the male image of the *sannyasi*, the ascetic hero who transcends material concerns (12). The male character in Mitra's novel represents a traditional myth which, a few years later, in the work of Bankimcandra Chatterjee and in the nationalist ideology of Swami Vivekananda, will express a threatening virility.

What was women's reaction to their role as envisaged by reformers and early nationalists?

In a very interesting study, Malavika Karlekar analyses the personal narratives of nineteenth century middle class women (13). In these, women such as Rassundari Debi (14) and Sharadasundari Debi (15) show their consciousness of male domination and their desire for their own personal evolution. Rassundari Debi self-perception as a bird in a cage; her secret struggle for literacy; Sharadasundari Debi's tenacity in the fight against the ill treatments, inflicted on her by the joint family after the death of her husband; her adventurous religious pilgrimages as an escape from oppression—all these episodes of their lives suggest a discrepancy between the male and female version of the new *bhadramahila*. To the suffering and self-denying female ideal offered by the dominant culture they opposed the simple request for a better life which did not challenge the existing social order.

At the same time, many writings by female authors on the social behaviour of young girls, seem to accept the new model of womanhood as elaborated by Bengali reformers. This acceptance is stressed by the support middle class women gave to the successful offensive by westernised gentlemen against female popular culture. At the beginning of the century, spontaneous female folk art enjoyed a wide female

(11) P. CHATTERJEE, *The Nation and its Fragments-Colonial and Post-colonial Histories*, Delhi 1997.

(12) I. CHOWDHURI, *op. cit.*.

(13) M. KARLEKAR, *Voices from within-Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women*, Delhi 1993.

(14) Rassundari Debi (1809-?) came from a conservative Hindu background and was married to a *zamindar* of East Bengal. Her autobiography was published in 1876.

(15) Sharadasundari Debi was the widowed mother of the Bengali social reformer Keshub Chandra Sen. As she was illiterate, she dictated her autobiography to her grandson-in-law in 1892.

audience both in upper and lower classes. Songs, poems and plays, which ridiculed male authority, male immorality and unfaithfulness, with a colloquial and abusive language, expressed female dissent and protest. The emergence of the *bhadramahila*, a chaste and respectable woman, signalled the decline of a popular culture, considered licentious, voluptuous and, above all, threatening to male supremacy. In this process middle class women, who accepted dominant values, definitively broke away from their more marginalized sisters (16).

With the beginning of the nationalist movement as Congress concentrated on the political struggle and avoided a debate on social reforms, the nationalist agenda ignored women's request for an improvement of their condition. This was particularly clear in Bengal, where the emergence of extremism in 1905 reinforced the dualistic vision of women as heroines and victims.

The movement, launched in 1905 by the educated middle class against the partition of Bengal, with its emphasis on female energy and its glorification of the Mother Goddess as Mother India, indirectly encouraged female entrance in the outside world, but ultimately denied female emancipation, in the same way as revivalists had done in the previous century.

Various elements converged within the Mother India icon. *Bharat Mata* manifested her energy in several representations: she was the emaciated widow, who retains strength in spite of her frailty, she was the primitive Kali and she was the powerful Durga. As Tanika Sarkar argues (17), in Bengal where female cults had always been very popular, the image of a devastated and vindictive Mother aroused deep emotions. In popular belief she not only inspired her subjugated sons, but also empowered them through her destructive and erotic force. Thus the selection of a traditional icon such as the blood thirsty Mother enabled extremists to challenge the *raj* asserting their invincibility. According to Ashis Nandy, masculinity allowed Indians to emulate the colonizers adopting a violent ideology, which reflected the virile westernised nationalism and obliterated Indian androgynous tradition (18). In this process women were again relegated to subordination.

(16) S. BANERJEE, *Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, in K. SANGARI, S. Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi 1989, pp. 127-179.

(17) T. SARKAR, *Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in Nineteenth Century Bengali Literature*, in « Economic and Political Weekly », 21 Nov. 1987, pp. 2011-15.

(18) A. NANDY, *The Psychology of Colonialism: Sex, Age and Ideology in British India*, in A. NANDY, *The Intimate Enemy-Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, Delhi 1992, pp. 1-63.

It is no wonder then that this dualistic approach to the gender issue was perceived by Rabindranath Tagore, whose criticism of an exclusively aggressive nationalism induced him to withdraw from the political scene towards the end of the *svadesi* movement amidst much clamour. Following the liberal tradition of his Brahmo family, Tagore's nationalism blended elements of Sanskrit culture and of Vaishnava tradition with Western classicism. To him nationalism was one expression of harmony, the ultimate aim of moral perfection, which in the political context of India was to be realised through the acceptance and appreciation of its cultural diversity. His patriotism refused to accept the narrow nationalist perspective of Bengali extremists and communalists, which, in his view, would only lead to the construction of a nation-state, unable to recognise the superior universal order.

Ghore Baire (The Home and the World) (19) explains Bengal's contradictory political emancipation through the dramatic entrance in the outer world of Bimala, the young wife of Nikhil, an enlightened *bhadralok*. Bimala's entry into the public world is encouraged by Nikhil and coincides with the *svadesi* movement of 1905. Her passionate involvement in the struggle for the reunification of Bengal and her infatuation for Sandip, a radical leader and a friend of Nikhil, lead to the tragic conclusion of the drama. The novel has been interpreted as Tagore's indictment of the extremist ideology, but, if Bimala represents Bengal, this does not prevent the author from developing a vibrant female character, caught between the fear of the world and the desire for personal evolution.

Bimala's identity is accentuated by the contrast between her and the two other female members of the family, Nikhil's grandmother and his widowed sister-in-law. They represent the perfect *bhadramahila* as women of rare beauty, who have spent their lives suffering silently for the deprivation of their two husbands. Bimala is no great beauty, but, in spite of her dark features, she emanates a radiant sexuality and a captivating charm. Bimala remains an élitist, traditional woman, who leaves *pardah* on her husband's request and accepts patriarchal control. At the same time, Bimala, a childless wife, affirms her self through a strong emotional relationship with her husband and through her extra-conjugal friendship with Sandip. Through love she gives her support to the extremist cause and because of her continuing affection to her husband ultimately takes a distance from the extremist movement and its leader. In spite of her vulnerability, sexuality and love transform the docile *bhadramahila* into a woman with an autonomy

(19) R. TAGORE, *The Home and the World*, London 1985.

of thought, which remains unaltered by the dramatic accident of Nikhil, and by her possible return to *pardah*.

In *Strir Patra (Letter from a Wife)* (20) again Tagore explores the difficult condition of women within Indian society. In this story a wife, Mrinal, who is on pilgrimage in Puri, writes a letter to her husband communicating her decision to abandon his household. In this letter, which she starts with a traditional respectful address (« to your lotus feet ») and ends resolutely as « Mrinal who is torn off the shelter of your feet », the woman narrates her gradual detachment.

Mrinal recollects the sense of fear and oppression she experienced at the decision of her early marriage and tells the humiliation of being priced like a beautiful object with no talent or intelligence. The pain of seclusion and the gradual loss of self-respect are accentuated by the description of the unhygienic female quarters where she spends her life deprived of air and light. Mrinal recovers her self-esteem only through the reciprocal love between her and Bindu, the little orphan, who joins Mrinal's household where the child suffers continuous cruel ill-treatment. After the suicide of Bindu, who has been forced to marry a mentally ill man, Mrinal leaves for her pilgrimage. In Puri, alone in front of the blue sea, inspired by the mystical experience of Mirabai, she decides to leave forever the stonewalled house of Calcutta, and to start her journey towards spiritual fulfilment.

Like Bimala, Mrinal asserts her identity through love, but differing from Bimala, Mrinal defies the patriarchal control: her bitter criticism of seclusion, her sad contempt for the submissive sister-in-law and her female solidarity with Bindu are mixed with a strong desire for freedom and with a latent anger, which is sublimated by the mystical conclusion.

The concept of harmonious unity with its emphasis on moral consciousness, which pervades Tagore's concept of nationalism, also dominates his perception of the gender issue. The ethic of self-improvement allows Tagore to articulate an androgynous discourse, where both female and male characters strive for their « best-self ». In *Ghore Baire* Nikhil's criticism of the *svadesi* movement and his courageous non-conformism manifest a spirituality, which does not aim at challenging the colonial power, but reflects his constant desire for moral self-improvement. Bimala's search for her identity moves her to-

(20) R. TAGORE, *Letter from a Wife*, in K. BARDHAN (ed.), K. BARDHAN, *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants, and Rebels-A Selection of Bengali Short Stories*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1990, pp. 96-109. Dated Shravana 1321 (July to August 1914), *Streer Parva* appears in R. TAGORE'S *Galpaguchha*, vol. 3 (Calcutta. Visva-Bharati Granthayan Bihag, 1926), pp. 213-223. I am thankful to Sudipta Kaviraj for suggesting that I should read this short story.

wards a deeper self-awareness, which is strengthened by the tragic ending. At the same time Mrinal's mystical decision mirrors the power of her divine inner energy.

Tagore's neutrality towards gender and his sympathy for the improvement of women's lives does not suggest a radical challenge to the patriarchal system. This attitude is indirectly explained by Bikash Chakrabarti who considers Tagore's literary response to the value of energetic action after 1905, the result of a deep suspicion of the disorganised, irrational and radical element (21). Even if the female characters do not reinforce traditional myths and are not represented as pale shadows, they still adhere to the romantic ideal. Thus individual evolution dissolves in an aesthetic reconciliation, which accepts Bimala's return to seclusion and Mrinal's renouncement of the world as the only possible way to transcend male authority.

While Tagore give us a psychological insight into a rarefied élitist society, Saratchandra Chatterjee's narrative describes the lower middle classes ordinary life and suffering in a realistic way. The plots of his novels are tortuous, but lack the depth of Tagore's narrative. Yet, his overwhelming sentimentality and his capacity to identify himself with the oppressed and with those who rebel against social injustices assured success and great popularity for his literary work.

Saratchandra Chatterjee's nationalism mirrors the influence of nineteenth century Bengali renaissance. Savyasachi, the protagonist of the popular novel *Pather Dabi (Demand of the Road)*, represents Vivekananda's ideal Hindu man, who with his heroic action frees the motherland from the English invaders (22). If Ashish Nandy underlines Savyasachi's hyper-masculinity, Joya Chatterjee goes a step further, arguing that culture is an unifying symbol of the Hindu identity of the *bhadralok* (23). She discerns in Saratchandra's novel the legitimisation of the *bhadralok's* political role, when Bengali political context saw the decline of the old society and the emergence of a stronger communal tension. Within this construction of the *bhadralok's* cultural identity nationalism is viewed as an intrinsic Hindu virtue.

The gender ideology hinted at within the short novel *Arakshaniya (The Unprotectable)* (24) confirms these theories. In the novel,

(21) B. CHAKRAVARTI, *Tagore's Idea of Culture and the Arnoldian Context*, in J. BAGCHI (ed.), *Literature, Society and Ideology in the Victorian Era*, Delhi 1991, pp. 295-315.

(22) A. NANDY, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*, Delhi 1996, pp. 27-34.

(23) J. CHATTERJEE, *Bengal divided-Hindu Communalism and Partition*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 164-173.

(24) S.C. CHATTOPADHYAY, *The Unprotectable* in M.N. CHAKRABORTY, DR. RANI RAY (eds.), *A Treasury of Bangla Stories*, New Delhi 1999, pp. 33-90.

Gyanada, a thirteen year old dark complexioned girl, and her mother Durgamoni live in great poverty after the death of Prionath, Gyanada's father. Durgamoni's main concern is the arrangement of a marriage for the young girl, who, having already reached puberty, is in danger of remaining unmarried. The women's only hope is Atul, a handsome young man, who promised on Prionath's deathbed to look after his grieving daughter. There is mutual attraction between Atul and Gyanada, who has saved the boy's life nursing him with love and devotion during a dangerous illness.

Life becomes more and more dramatic for Durga and Gyanada as they are cruelly discriminated against by society and as Atul is keen to marry the beautiful Madhuri. Resentful against her spinster daughter, whose social stigma brings disgrace upon her, ostracised by the village, Durgamoni dies. When Gyanada thinks that suicide is the only possible solution, Atul comes back and asks her to forgive him.

The novel is a powerful attack on social injustices, a recurrent theme in the work of Saratchandra, who views prejudices against the lower classes and women as a divisive element within Hinduism and as an obstacle to a successful nationalist struggle. The writer reveals the daily social cruelty of Bengali village life; he does not suggest a solution, but the happy end suggests a paradigmatic vision which is not as radical.

Gyanada does not represent the ideal *bhadramahila*: she is neither beautiful nor cultivated. Madhuri is the stereotyped portrayal of the middleclass woman: compared to Gyanada who is described by her own mother as a black owl, Madhuri not only has the beauty of a goddess but also has a good education. At the same time she has that natural shyness, required from a girl of good family, which contrasts with the abrupt manners of Gyanada, whose behaviour is misjudged as disrespectful and shameless. And, at the end of the novel, the positive hero is Atul, who overcoming his natural infatuation for the attractive Madhuri and the superstitions of the orthodox villagers, recognises the virtues of Gyanada.

The contrast between Atul and the village inhabitants, still tied down by social prejudices, shows Atul as an agent of modernity. Yet, Atul's acknowledgement of a benevolent Hinduism is not dissimilar from the conception of Hindu tradition as elaborated by Baradababu, the positive character of Mitra's *Alaler Ghorer Dulal*. Like Baradababu, Atul is fond of Hindu tradition, but condemns obscurantist social practices thanks to his superior education, a combination of Eastern and Western knowledge. Furthermore Atul's final decision to abandon the cultivated Madhuri, who represents a more modern reality, and to marry Gyanada who represents the authentic traditional

world, stresses his conformist logic. In the picture of this Hindu village community, both the two female characters, the virtuous Madhuri and the long suffering Gyanada, re-enacting the myths of Sita and Savitri and respecting the boundaries imposed upon them by patriarchal norms, fit perfectly.

In the political domain, it was also difficult for Indian women to challenge male ideology in such a pervasive patriarchal society. At the beginning of the 20th century, the spreading of education, the entrance of women into the public arena and their gradual participation in the struggle for independence could not be stopped. Yet, women participating in the independence struggle, had constantly to confront themselves with a gender ideology, which relegated them to a subordinate role, or identified them as embodiment of communal superiority.

In Bengal, women's militant participation in the national cause, started with the involvement in the armed struggle launched by the extremists during *svadesi*. Still confined to seclusion, initially women gave their support to the terrorists providing them shelter within the female quarters, looking after them or sometimes giving them monetary help.

At the same time, some women belonging to the liberal upper class families of Calcutta, openly exhorted Bengali men to rebel and sacrifice their lives for the motherland. Amongst them Sarala Debi Chaudhurani of the Tagore family was the most famous. In Calcutta, Sarala Debi opened an academy of martial arts for instructing young Bengali men in the defence of their country and their women. She organised popular festivals for the celebration of the mythical Hindu heroes, and as the editor of the monthly journal *Bharati*, exalted the cult of *Bharat Mata*. In the following decades the support for terrorism continued with the recruitment of a few women by revolutionary associations and with their sporadic participation to terrorist actions. The Bengali women's support for armed struggle was emphasised in the forties by the formation of Subhas Chandra Bose's women's wing of the Indian National Army. This reflected a desire for a radical individual freedom and implied an attempt to subvert stereotyped gender roles. Nevertheless, stressing the superiority of Hinduism and championing the cause of an aggressive nationalism, they were trapped in the hypermasculinity of communal ideology.

In the following decades the attitude of nationalism towards the issue of women remained unaltered, even though Gandhi's ideology refused an aggressive concept of nation and stressed the importance of feminine values in his ethical discourse. In Bengal, the cosmopolitan tradition of Tagore was rejected. The influence of extremism on the Congress, the limited success of Gandhism and the marginalisation of

Bengal within the nationalist movement in the third decade together with the Muslim challenge and the strengthening of the communal forces, again created favourable conditions for the definition of women as repositories of communal tradition. When Hindus and Muslims went their separate ways, independence was celebrated with a carnage, where women, as symbols of purity and honour, became the first targets. As Urvashi Butalia reminds us, during partition women's bodies were cruelly used, with rape and abduction, with the cutting of breasts and the tattooing of their bodies (25). In the aftermath of partition, these victims were rejected by their communities and families and were condemned to loneliness or destitution.

In Bengali literature, women's answer to the monstrous carnage of partition came several years later with the publication of *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga (The River Churning)* by Jyotirmoyee Devi in 1968 (26). The novel was first published with the title *The Woman Chapter in History (Itihasey Streeparva)* which implies an analogy with the « *Stree Parva* » of the *Mahabharata*, a tale of tragedy describing the anarchy which occurred after the destruction of the Yadu clan. Over the centuries history repeats itself and women remain voiceless victims, explains Jyotirmoyee Devi. Even in the *Stree Parva* the poet Vyasdev lets the reader imagine the violence perpetrated against women, because « The writer of the epic was a male, after all. He could not possibly describe the savage acts of barbarism, the exploitation of the female body by a group of cowards.... » (27).

Sutara Dutta, a lecturer in a Delhi college, in a flashback describes the communal horrors which took place in Bengal in 1946. Such is her agony that, even after years, she can't recall what happened to her that night, when she lost consciousness with her family house on fire and her entire family wiped out.

What she remembers now, are the humiliations she had to suffer in the following years. Rescued by her Muslim friends and neighbours, she moved to Calcutta to her brothers' family. But as she had lost her caste and honour, she had to face the cruel behaviour of her relatives, rigid Hindus, who considered her polluted, ostracised her and sent her to a hostel.

Now in Delhi, life is not easier. She lives in loneliness as love and marriage are precluded to her. It is only Promode, her brother's

(25) U. BUTALIA, *Muslims and Hindus Men and Women-Communal Stereotypes and the Partition of India* in T. SARKAR, U. BUTALIA (eds.), *Women and the Hindu Right*, New Delhi 1996, pp. 58-81.

(26) J. DEVI, *The River Churning*, New Delhi 1998.

(27) J. DEVI, *op. cit.*, p. XXXV.

nephew, who understands the wrongs she has had to bear. He visits her in Delhi, and asks her to marry him. For the first time, after many years she dares to accept love again « Her body, which had been weighed down with all heaviness of the earth, suddenly lifted, and she felt as light as air » (28).

Jyotirmoyee Devi's work reflects her quiet rebellion against patriarchy, whose rules relegated her to the margin of society (29). In her lonely life, she realised that the identification of male honour with the female body structured women's life completely. Education was neglected as girls were forced to marry at an early age; seclusion circumscribed women's world offering little opportunity for female friendship and excluding friendship with men; widowhood caused personal annihilation through strictures required for the control of sexual purity. Communal violence against women was based on the same logic.

In the novel the writer denounces the ideology of purity, on which the patriarchal structure of community and state is based. In the background of Sutara's story, she contrasts the obscurantism of the community and the hypocrisy of the secular nation-state with the message of Gandhi and his final sacrifice for it. Sutara is a victim of this male ideology, which has estranged her from her own tradition and has alienated her from the new Indian nation. Her identity has been destroyed, she feels a sense of painful emptiness which makes her life insignificant. The acceptance of the marriage proposal is her first step towards the re-appropriation of her own body as positive symbol of female sexuality.

While nationalists were fighting their last struggle against British rule, in Bengal the Communist Party of India, which in the 30's tried to establish close links with radical Congress members, attacked the dominant position of the feudal classes and fought for the rights of the downtrodden. It is within the movement of the left that writers, describing the life of the deprived, portray a different image of woman, connecting, the gender issue with the class struggle.

Manik Bandyopadhyay (30), who became an active member of the Communist Party in 1944, explores the individual in his relation with society with merciless realism. In this framework, gender and

(28) J. DEVI, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

(29) Jyotirmoyee Devi was the daughter of the dewan of the Maharaja of Jaipur. She was married at an early age and became the mother of six children. Having lost her husband, at the age of twenty-six, she had to return to her paternal house.

(30) Manik Bandyopadhyay (1908-1956), the famous Bengali author, was a member of the Progressive Writers Association. A prolific writer, he published numerous novels and short stories.

sexuality are expressions of power relations as they appear in his novel *Padma nadir majhi (Boatman of the Padma)* (31).

The novel tells the story of Kuber, who lives in a fishermen's village on the delta of the Gange. His life is a desperate and hopeless struggle against those merciless forces, which dominate the life of the oppressed. Mala, his wife, is lame. Kuber falls in love with Kapila, the young sister of Mala. Kuber decides to work for Hosen Mia, a rich opium smuggler, who owns a remote and mysterious isle, the isle of Moyna. There he deports the families who have contracted debts with him or others who to make a new life clearing the virgin jungle of the island. After several vicissitudes, Kuber decides to leave his family and to depart for Myona together with Kapila because... he could not possibly survive without her.

The novel's plot is a fairytale, but the characters are real people. Even if Kuber is the protagonist, female characters are both complex and decisive in resolving his fate. They show the tyranny of tradition (caste, patriarchy, feudalism), but at the same time they represent the dream of a better life.

Mala, Kuber's wife, who has been an invalid for her whole life, is a helpless victim: her parents have never attempted to cure her and they have married her off to Kuber in order to get rid of her. Kuber looks at her infirmity either with fatalistic compassion or with anger. Also it is inferred that Mala has been abused by the landowner, who considers the female villagers as part of his harem.

On the contrary, Kapila is the dream of redemption and of romantic love. She combines lightness and strength. She is seductive, capricious and aware of her charm. But also she has the courage to overcome the end of an unhappy marriage and to show her attraction for Kuber, because she is not a passive victim and because she still has expectations.

Manik Bandhyopadhyay tells us that poverty creates chaos and subverts social values. Therefore, in the struggle for survival, difference between the sexes disappears and love becomes the expression of an individual rebellion. It will be interesting to compare Bandhyopadhyay's work with Mahasweti Devi's (32) work where again gender issue and women identity are considered within a more general discourse on the deprived. In Mahasweta Devi's work the body of the tribal woman becomes the symbol of purity, whose strength helps the downtrodden to fight against injustice.

(31) M. BANERJEE, *Le Batelier de la Padma*, Paris 1986.

(32) Mahasweta Devi (1926 -), journalist, writer and teacher, for a certain period lived with tribals and outcastes in West Bengal and Bihar. During the 60's she was close to Naxalite activists.

Riassunto — L'ideologia di genere costituisce un aspetto di rilevante importanza all'interno del discorso nazionalista, di cui esprime le profonde contraddizioni. Tale ideologia viene analizzata attraverso la definizione della femminilità (ed indirettamente della mascolinità), che traspare nelle opere di tre famosi scrittori bengalesi, ovvero Pyaricamd Mitra, Rabindranath Tagore e Saratchandra Chatterjee.

Tagore, critico nei confronti del nazionalismo hindu estremista, si oppone allo stereotipo femminile imposto dalla cultura conservatrice. Al contrario, Mitra e Chatterjee, che pure denunciano la difficile condizione femminile, ripropongono un'immagine classica della donna, considerata come simbolo della purezza comu-

nitaria. Alla spartizione dell'India Britannica, proprio questa logica comunitaria trasformerà le donne in bersagli inermi durante i sanguinosi scontri, che contrappongono hindu e musulmani.

Nella letteratura bengalese solo alcune scrittrici (e fra queste Jyotirmoyee Devi, che nella sua opera principale descrive il massacro comunitario dalla parte delle donne) descrivono la sofferenza delle donne indiane dando una immagine realistica della società patriarcale locale. Alle voci femminili si aggiunge quella dello scrittore progressista Manik Bandyopadhyay, che collega l'emarginazione femminile alla oppressione di caste e classi diseredate.