

Sexual/Textual Insurgence: The Politics of the Body in *Ghare Baire*

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Abstract

The novel *Ghare Baire* by Rabindranath Tagore, given its political context vis-à-vis the Swadeshi movement has largely been analysed and critiqued through notions of nationalism and nationalist politics. Within the plethora of criticism, the idea or embodiment of Bimala as ‘Shakti’ has been fairly significant in understanding the gendered aspect of said politics.

In an attempt to explore the notion of the ‘body’ in the novel, this paper will concentrate on the physicality of the body as the discursive pivot, which informs the sexual/textual politics in the novel. Further, it will investigate the negotiation of spaces and experiences through a ‘performative’ politics of the body, especially in its changing configurations within the public and the private. The *fleshing* out of the semiotic and the performance of a theoretical *écriture* will lay the scaffolding with which to analyse the complexities of conceptual and physical contact that is central to the thematic concerns of the novel. The paper will explore in nuance the gendered implications of the same, vis-à-vis the politics of occupying physical space in the home, the world, and the threshold.

I

I can change my-
self more easily
than I can change you

I could grow bark and
become a shrub

or switch back in time
to the woman image left
in cave rubble, the drowned
stomach bulbed with fertility,
face a tiny bead, a
lump, queen of the termites

or (better) speed myself up,
disguise myself in the knuckles
and purple- veined veils of old ladies,
become arthritic and genteel

or one twist further:
collapse across your
bed clutching my heart

and pull the nostalgic sheet up over
my waxed farewell smile

which would be inconvenient
but final.

– Margaret Atwood, ‘She Considers Evading Him’¹

Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price, in their formulation of a feminist theory of the body, write that ‘whilst all [...] marginalized bodies are potentially unsettling, what is at issue for women specifically is that, supposedly, the female body is intrinsically unpredictable, leaky and disruptive.’² In the novel *Ghare Baire* by Rabindranath Tagore, the protagonist Bimala becomes the ‘disruptive’, ‘leaky’ pivot around which the action unfolds, although considerable space is given to the three main characters to define and delineate themselves through the confessional mode, especially in their ideological ambivalence. Bimala occupies more space in the textual figuration of the novel; the reader begins with her and ends with her as she deals with herself and her many images. Along with this, what legitimises her status as the protagonist is perhaps succinctly described by Ajanta Dutt in her introduction to the novel: she writes that ‘*Ghare Baire* is not Nikhil’s tragedy and neither is it Sandip’s. However, it is certainly Bimala’s’ (10).³

Set against the backdrop of the *Swadeshi* Movement, *Ghare Baire* has often been viewed and analysed via the lens of nationalism or nationalist politics, its variegations and its impact on the world and of course, the home. The embodiment of Bimala as ‘Shakti’, as the ‘Goddess’ is perhaps central to this narrative. This notion forms and informs a lot of critical or analytical stratagems that surround this novel: the national or feminine body as a repository of sorts for the panning out of political ploys. This paper will explore the notion of the ‘body’ in *Ghare Baire*, in its more immediate aspect, that is, the body as the physical body and the ramifications of its tangible mobility from *Ghare* to *Baire* and back. It will look at the sexual and textual politics played out amongst the characters as the foundation for a theory of the body to emerge in the novel. Be it in the joyous or sordid introspective reflections of the characters or the tense moments of rendezvous, whether ‘allowed’ or not, the body and especially the *female body* occupies a space that is both vulnerable and defiant. The positioning of the female body and its continual recasting in public and private spaces, or in the presence of other such ‘bodies’, then becomes significant in understanding the complexities of each character and the way in which they physically and thus conceptually negotiate with different spaces, people, and situations. Essentially, the female body performs

¹Margaret Atwood, *Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965-1995* (London: Virago Press, 2010) 105.

²Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price, ‘Openings on the Body: A Critical Introduction’, *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999) 2.

³Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World* translated by Surendranath Tagore, edited by Ajanta Dutt (New Delhi: Doaba Publications, 2002) 31. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

in more than one way and continually remoulds itself as the novel progresses to a climax. Each remoulding becomes the site for the nuances of contact or conversation to be *fleshed* out, for an *écriture*⁴ to be able to perform itself. The paper will analyse this *écriture* in the context of *Ghare Baire* and delve into the notion of socio-political, bodily ‘performativity’ in the home, the world, and the threshold.

II

[...] And carved in Ivory such a Maid, so fair,
As Nature could not with his Art compare,
Were she to work; but in her own Defence,
Must take her Pattern here, and copy hence.
Pleased with his Idol, he commends, admires,
Adores; and last, the Thing adored, desires.

– Ovid, ‘Pygmalion and the Statue’⁵

Bimala’s relations with the two men suggest, on the surface, a battle of ideologies woven within a plethora of words, symbols and metaphors. As Nikhil and Sandip continually accuse each other of theoretical ‘abstractions’, Bimala’s reactions to these moments of ‘cerebral’ debates and discussions are primarily bodily, although her relationship with both remains unconsummated: with Sandip, the physical aspect is most manifest but never reaches a conclusion or climax, while with Nikhil, there is a deep sense of discontentment for both of them, even though it has been hinted at that the marriage might have been physically consummated. This occurs because both men try unsuccessfully to fashion her into an idealised figure. While critics of the novel have focused on these images that Nikhil and Sandip idolise, the focus has primarily been on the *idea* of Shakti or Goddess or enlightened wife or companion. The undercurrent of the novel, however, suggests that Bimala’s fantasies are fundamentally physical and performative, veiled under the flurry of metaphors and the lexical expounding of the Cause,⁶ that is, *Swadeshi* for Sandip and its shortcomings for Nikhil. Nikhil’s attempts at creating an ‘enlightened’ wife are fraught with issues; in his distaste for rituals like Bimala touching his feet, Nikhil often evades Bimala qua Bimala. She describes the preparation of her encounters with her husband in the language of her sari, vermilion, hair etc. that is, in the more immediate material and bodily aspects. Nikhil, on the other hand, invests himself in finding her beyond the *antahpur*. Thus, while he attempts to make Bimala traverse the threshold from *Ghare* to *Baire*, he himself gets excluded from the interiority of her experience: the floundering Bimala of the sitting room has almost no time for devotion to the husband, something that Nikhil comes to accept, even if a little patronisingly. In the very beginning, Bimala reminisces that Nikhil ‘loved my [her] body as if

⁴ The notion of ‘women’s writing’ which is informed and shaped by psycho-social, physical, and linguistic structures of women’s experiences, as theorised by the French Feminists Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray among others, in the 1970s.

⁵ From Ovid’s *Metamorphoses Book X* translated by John Dryden (London: Sir Samuel Garth, 1826).

⁶ In the text, the *Swadeshi* movement (and the larger national struggle) is often referred to as the ‘Cause’.

it were a flower from paradise' (6), thereby, ensuring that much like the reflections of each character that are cloaked in metaphors and symbols, the body qua body, especially Bimala's body, remains inaccessible in its nakedness. He confesses that Bimala's choices beyond the threshold had been unanticipated and disturbing. It is yet again, the stark nudity of that very choice that Nikhil can't tolerate. He reflects that he was 'vain enough to think that I had the power in me to bear the sight of truth in its awful nakedness' (24). Thus, along with Sandip, Nikhil too puts Bimala on a pedestal, oblivious to her desires and discontent. She is compelled to inhabit this image that she is physically and mentally unsuited for: it is larger than life and hence impossible to achieve. Nikhil goes on to say that,

I had magnified her so, leaving her such a large place, that when I lost her, my whole life became narrow and confined. I had thrust aside all other objects into a corner to make room for Bimala – taken up as I was with decorating her and dressing her and educating her and moving round her day and night. (65)

It is significant that Bimala is visualised as a project that is to be sculpted by Nikhil, which is to be *dressed* and *decorated* by him. Thus, what Nikhil believes to be mental emancipation for his companion, is often a process that requires a material makeover. For instance, he orders 'western' clothes for her even when he stresses the importance of education. In one of his reflections, he compares the pettiness of women's minds to the feet of Chinese women; while he concludes that both are results of societal burdens on women, it is interesting to note that he uses a bodily image to explain what is essentially a mental shortcoming. In that sense, the woman's mental capacity is comprehended through the corporeal.

Sandip's exaltation of Bimala is perhaps more physical at one level but he too renders the materiality of the body into the abstraction of 'Queen Bee' or 'Goddess' or 'Shakti'. In his coercion of Bimala, he attributes a fierce nakedness to himself, to his desire to snatch and loot. For her, he reserves a metaphorical nakedness: it is scandalous and bestowed upon the 'Goddess' by a worshipper. In that, Sandip, like Nikhil, is unable to stand Bimala in her naked ferocity, in naked agency. He claims that,

What I desire, I desire positively, superlatively. I want to knead it with both my hands and both my feet; I want to smear it all over my body; I want to gorge myself with it to the full. The scannel pipes of those who have worn themselves out by their moral fastings, till they have become flat and pale like starved vermin infesting a long-deserted bed, will never reach my ear. (28)

Yet, throughout the novel, he is unable to cover the physical distance between him and Bimala; the moment he tries, Bimala rejects the embrace, an action that Sandip is unable to comprehend. Bimala in control of her body, however temporary, is the point of rupture that leads Sandip to believe that the sculpture he had been working on is capable of agentive action and desire and is thus a failed endeavour. Bimala can be foil or companion but she can't be the sculptor of her own self. In the moments of rendezvous, the sitting room or the outer apartment, which is the locale or the relationships to pan out, is witness to three bodies in disarray. Rarely are the meetings, whether between two or three of these characters, a source for comfort. They are tense and always at the brink of rupture. At any point, it is

usually Nikhil who leaves so as to preserve the façade of stability and perhaps evade the dangerous possibility of Bimala rushing to Sandip's side; his continued presence triggers that very possibility. The physical distance between Nikhil and Bimala grows in the novel; in the end when it seems to reach a resolution, the imminent danger of Nikhil's death ensures that the distance remains, strong and irrevocable. With Sandip, Bimala is unable to traverse the threshold completely; the relationship that begins with Sandip's oratory and 'handsome face' and Bimala's frantic unveiling of her own face in public, remains without closure. In her liminal and ambivalent state, Bimala attempts to figure and refigure her own relationship with the guest, ultimately finding solace in the role of a mother or sister to Amulya.

Thus, in and beyond the *zenana*,⁷ Bimala remains a veiled figure whose dissent reaches no veritable conclusion. Her 'emancipation' remains a question mark as she straddles the threshold between the home and the world, between the 'east' and the 'west', between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. Carolyn Pedwell writes about the diverse and often polar connotations that feminism can have in various cultural contexts.

Both embodied practices [in the 'east' and the 'west'] function as forms of problem solving which, in the absence of real power or control, help women cope with the competing demands of ambitious professional goals and pressure to maintain a traditional female identity [...] they call attention to the similar gendered dilemmas and inequalities that girls and women face across cultural and geopolitical domains, and to the ways in which these struggles are so often played out through forms of bodily management and control.⁸

In the context of Bimala's case, it is conspicuous that along with mental control, Bimala's liberation is also situated in bodily control. Of course, within the rigid patriarchal matrices of Bengali society during that period, the first form of control emerges in the very thwarting of mobility. While she is free to roam around in the inner quarters, it is important to note that each escape or fantasy of flight remains unfulfilled, by Bimala herself or others around her. Her journey to the outer world is nonetheless limited to the sitting room. The outer world then is what Sandip chooses to tell her. In the course of the novel, Bimala's physical body is seen in three places other than the *antahpur*. During Sandip's speech, she is found sitting behind a screen in the temple pavilion, and she hastily exposes her face. Other than that, she is seen lying on the floor of the balcony in despondence twice and once in the garden. In all three cases, Bimala's encounters are strained: she can only uncover her face during the speech; in the balcony she can only *gaze* at the world outside and in the garden there is no solace to be found surrounded by high walls. Especially in the last two encounters, which occur between Bimala and Nikhil, Bimala either exits the scene in grief or falls down crying at his feet. In all these cases, she is unable to have any bodily authority or control over the situation; instead, she is shackled by physical impediments in the very contact zones that

⁷ A part of the household for the seclusion of women from the public spaces of the household.

⁸ Carolyn Pedwell, *Feminism, Culture and Embodied Practice: The Rhetorics of Comparison* (New York: Routledge, 2010) 85-86.

provide her with the fantastical idea of escape. In the text, Bimala is often seen framed next to windows, looking out onto the world, attempting to control it. In the last climactic scene too, she can only venture as far as the window, unable to regulate her own fate. In that sense, Bimala's travails are governed by structures of patriarchal and marital authority. Her journey to Calcutta, desired by Nikhil, remains unfulfilled. The body is subject to biopolitical⁹ control and regulation. She is always already physically and psychologically in the service of the familial unit and the larger State. Even as the symbol of an insurgency against that State, she is inscribed with and by the body as the Goddess that represents the Cause and all of 'Bengal's womanhood'. This 'power' of the symbol and thus, Bimala, is then continually configured and reconfigured by the men as they see fit.

III

Galatea, whom his furious chisel
 From Parian stone had by greed enchanted
 Fulfilled, they say, Pygmalion's longings:
 Stepped from the pedestal on which she stood,
 Bare in his bed laid her down, lubricious.
 With low responses to his drunken raptures,
 Enroyalled his body with her demon blood.

Alas, Pygmalion had so well plotted
 The art-perfection of his woman monster
 That schools of eager connoisseurs beset
 Her famous person with perennial suit;
 Whom she (a judgement on the jealous artist)
 Admitted rankly to a comprehension
 Of themes that crowned her own, not his repute.

– Robert Graves, 'Galatea and Pygmalion'¹⁰

While describing Bimala's encounter with the outer world and her association with Sandip, Nikhil says that 'from the tip of her tongue to the pit of her stomach, she must tingle with red pepper, to enjoy the simple fare of life' (24); he thus, posits that Bimala's excursion is akin to an *agni-pariksha*¹¹ or trial by fire at the end of which she should ideally be able to come full circle to Nikhil, having attained maturity and discerning powers. The trial is of course the test of Bimala's mental strength insofar it involves an evolution of her ideological praxis, but it is

⁹ The concept that investigates the various ways in which structures of governance, power, and knowledge control and configure human life and bodies through surveillance and control, as theorised by Michel Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics* ed. Michel Senellart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹⁰ Quoted in *New Perspectives on Robert Graves* edited by Patrick J. Quinn (London: Associated University Presses, 1999) 92.

¹¹ The trial by fire is a motif that occurs across epics, poems, and stories in Hindu mythology, the most significant of which is that of *Sita* who had to undergo the trial to prove her fidelity to Rama in *The Ramayana* by Valmiki.

also, significantly, a trial that involves her body. If she is to reject Sandip, the rejection has to be both mental and physical. Her repudiation of the outer world that threatens her own interiority must occur physically: she does finally reject his physical advances and supports Nikhil's command for Sandip to leave the estate. The moment she realises Sandip's stronghold on her she attempts to reject it, even though *she feels physically attracted to him*. She later describes the encounter as follows,

Once or twice he fidgeted with his feet, as though to leave his seat, as if to spring right on me. My whole body seemed to swim, my veins throbbed, the hot blood surged up to my ears; I felt that if I remained there, I should never get up at all. With a supreme effort I tore myself off the chair, and hastened towards the door. (121)

Bimala's encounter with *Swadeshi* is without a doubt an ideological one, especially in her belief that she embodies the symbol that can and should catalyse the youth of the country into action. Yet, this very embodiment is an exercise in the erotic: it occurs with Bimala coalescing her untapped erotic self with that of the goddess she inhabits. Sandip, in one of his impassioned speeches, tells her that 'you have suckled reality at your breasts' (37). P.K. Datta claims that for Sandip 'the erotic is indeed the test of reality'¹² for that is the only method through which he can present his desire for Bimala as the carnal facet of a higher, more noble cause. Bimala is also aware of the erotic facet of the Cause, in all its connotations and repercussions. When asked to procure money for the movement, she justifies the need by reflecting that 'in this desperate orgy, that gift of five thousand shall be as the foam of wine – and then for the riotous revel!' (109). Tanika Sarkar claims that the

novel suggests discarding the posture of obedience and subjection which is far more resonant with the image of the woman who claims and flaunts her sexuality and independence over domestic discipline. Nationalist energies – given this reading – could have far more of a sexual charge than allowed by the tropes of filial duty which mask their self-representation.¹³

It is precisely this 'sexual charge', often reduced to the carnal by Sandip, that Bimala increasingly comes to embody.

Although there are moments when Bimala attempts to trace the cause of her own actions through profound introspection, she attempts to sculpt her own self, her own body in these interactions. The deliberate loose hair and golden-bordered jacket that she wears, the continual appearance of the red ribbon etc. are attempts towards Sandip's attentions and thus, his exaltation. On the day she first meets him, her preparations are elaborate; she contemplates in retrospect that,

¹² P.K. Datta, Introduction, *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World: A Critical Companion* (Kolkata: Permanent Black, 2002) 13.

¹³ Tanika Sarkar, 'Many Faces of Love: Country, Woman, and God in *The Home and the World*', *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World: A Critical Companion* edited by P.K. Datta (Kolkata: Permanent Black, 2002) 35.

That morning I scented my flowing hair and tied it in a loose knot, bound by a cunningly intertwined red silk ribbon [...] I put on a gold-bordered white *sari*, and my short-sleeve muslin jacket was also gold-bordered. (16)

It is conspicuous that Bimala continually fashions and refashions herself according to the spectator. She makes it a point to tie her hair in a top bun according to Nikhil's preference at the beginning of the novel but later lets her hair loose for Sandip. Her initial resolution to not meet Sandip in the outer apartments is broken when her body almost transports her to the place beyond her own mental will. She reflects, 'I felt myself waiting- from the crown of my head to the tips of my toes – waiting for something, somebody: my blood tingling with some expectation' (48). Bimala shifts from image to image, from symbol to symbol without her own agency being foregrounded. Her reactions, primarily those of grief, are deeply entrenched in bodily reactions. She weeps into her sari, the garment that marks her Hindu womanhood. Moreover, she clutches Amulya's pistol to her chest and hides it in her clothes; the stolen money too remains close to her, tied in a knot at the end of her sari. In both these cases, she physically takes the sin of the deeds onto herself and inflicts the repercussions on her body, in a twisted and curious form of self-flagellation. The guilt of the thievery almost makes her faint at the *threshold* of her husband's door. She then meets Sandip, completely unadorned, almost in a sort of penance of widowhood, which is symbolically preemptive of the end of the novel where Nikhil is fatally wounded and her widowhood is imminent. In that penance, she also invents her birthday, as a symbol of a cleansing and thus a new birth, and makes cakes for the household and Amulya. At the very beginning, Bimala foresees this catastrophe, albeit symbolically, in very physical terms: she describes her very body as the potent site and instrument for the catastrophe to occur:

So long I had been like a small river at the border of a village. My rhythm and my language were different from what they are now. But the tide came up from the sea, and my breast heaved; my banks gave way and the great drum-beats of the sea waves echoed in my mad current. I could not understand the meaning of that sound in my blood. (31)

She continuously negotiates as embodied *ego* with the pull of the *id* that is Sandip and the *superego* that is Nikhil.¹⁴ In this context, Bimala's agency is simultaneously *erotic* and *thanatotic*:¹⁵ her passion culminates with a death drive that finally pushes her and her life into the abyss. Tanika Sarkar further comments on the sort of political and sexual will that Bimala portrays and states that,

In a strange irony, both Nikhil and Sandip think at different times that they are creating their perfect partner, a creature of their desires. Bimala often expresses herself in terms that are typical of feminine vulnerability, helplessness, weakness, and culpability. Yet,

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud theorised that the mind, as a psychical apparatus is divided, but not compartmentalised, into three: the *id* which is the chaotic, carnal and instinctual in man, the *superego* which is the moral and ethical controller and the realistic *ego* which mediates between the desires of the *id* and the *superego*.

¹⁵ Freud expounds the concept of the death drive and the life instinct as invariably linked with each other and always already invoking the other in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

she decides always on courses of action that strain against and overturn plans of men far stronger than she is. She pulls the narrative out of joint, she opens up violent trajectories.¹⁶

In that sense, like Luce Irigaray's woman of the 'red earth', she potentially disrupts the very nature of patriarchal homosocial relations between Nikhil and Sandip and temporarily manages to rise above the role of the symbolic commodity that has come to a market that is controlled by the power of the phallus.¹⁷

IV

When she refused to come, Duhshasana dragged her into the hall. There she stood weeping, but with fury she asked the question again. With shouts that talking was useless, the Kaurava men started pulling off Draupadi's sari. As each sari was pulled off another appeared in its place. Meanwhile the discussion continued.

– Irawati Karve, *Yuganta, The End of an Epoch* (53)¹⁸

During the course of the novel, Bimala is subjected to a curious but obvious process of robing and disrobing. Akin to Draupadi's predicament and humiliation in *The Mahabharata*, Bimala is literally and figuratively clothed and unclothed, often publicly, that is, in the domain of the outer world. In a startling parallel to Draupadi's story, Bimala recounts the pull of the Cause and the stranger who brings that Cause to her. She says, 'And, through it all, there burned a passion which in its violence made as though it would tear me up by the roots, and drag me along by the hair' (46). While Draupadi was forced into public nakedness and exhibitionism, Bimala almost against her better judgment, *chooses* to be pulled into the whirlpool of the erotico-political. She makes the *choice* to venture into the outer apartments and seek the companionship and physical proximity of a man who is not her husband. Draupadi lets her hair loose after the public humiliation, as a challenge to the men in power; Bimala too lets her tresses loose in what is posited as both a challenge and a temptation to the men in power. It is important to note that traditionally, hair that was let loose was considered a sign of sexual abandon. Yet, Bimala suffers through a series of robing and disrobing in the novel that result in her shuttling from image to image and embodied symbol to symbol. Right at the beginning, the process of disrobing of Bimala's 'real' self begins: although, she is married into a Rajah's house with great prospects, her husband compels her to shed the impetus of tradition and wear the garb of modernity for which Bimala is far from ready. His need to find her, mentally and physically, on that plane creates and exacerbates the discontent that Bimala exhibits both as a child and as an adult. Her body is disrobed of all her ideological moorings,

¹⁶ Sarkar 38.

¹⁷ In 'When the goods get together' from *The Sex that is not One*, Luce Irigaray theorises that society is primarily structured homosocially wherein women are reduced to goods that are exchanged in the phallogocentric marketplace between men as objects of male, heteronormative desire. She further formulates that by women *refusing* to take part in this exchange, these oppressive patriarchal structures can be challenged.

¹⁸ Irawati Karve, *Yuganta, The End of an Epoch* (Telangana: Orient BlackSwan, 2007) 53. A collection of essays, this work is a mythical, historical, and political reading of *The Mahabharata*. It provides diverse and at times 'against the grain' interpretations of the episodes and characters in the epic.

a condition that worsens with Sandip's entry. Sandip perpetuates two kinds of disrobing: he clothes her in the lexical garb of *Swadeshi* but also attempts to dislodge her from her marital moorings. He visualises in her 'a triumphal progress of Truth [...] which, gradually but persistently, thrust[s] aside veil after veil of obscuring custom, till at length Nature herself was laid bare' (35) and describes her as having 'burnt her wings in the blaze of the full strength of my unhesitating manliness' (59). He attacks her with his emphasis on the importance of nakedness, which is the 'real' site for two people to comprehend each other. For instance, he deliberately leaves a book that delves into questions of sex for her to read. In the semblance of the pedestal of the 'Queen Bee', Bimala is yet again ideologically unclad and forced to choose from the ensemble of *Swadeshi* and nationalism. The stealing of the money, the very act of *untying the knot of the sari* in which the money is kept renders her naked, in front of her own self and especially in front of Amulya, who is the only person in the novel who lets Bimala assume the role that she wants. She also loses face when she confesses to the theft that allows her to understand Sandip for what he is. That is not to say that she doesn't retain her own political and sexual views: in the end, she does find some strength to go back to them, to reject the attire that she is coerced into.

Thus, the fetishisation of the body occurs in multifarious ways, both by the men in their embellishment of Bimala and by Bimala herself, in her attempts at moulding herself into unachievable quasi-mythical images or symbols. A running motif in the novel is that of Bimala aspiring to be a protagonist in an epic, a woman par excellence in all possible ways: mentally, physically, privately and publicly, which acts as the ultimate *aporia* for Bimala and her aspirations. Post Sandip's first speech, Bimala's excitement is palpable and perhaps a bit fantastical; she states that,

Like the Greek maidens of old, I fain would cut off my long, resplendent tresses to make a bowstring for my hero. Had my outward ornaments been connected with my inner feelings, then my necklet, my armlets, my bracelets, would all have burst their bonds and flung themselves over that assembly like a shower of meteors. Only some personal sacrifice, I felt, could help me to bear the tumult of my exaltation. (15)

She continually attempts to mould herself into a *Galatea* or an *Ahalya* but is unable to do so, caught in the fray of agency and duty. At the very outset, the novel poignantly captures her notions about marriage and Hindu womanhood or wifehood. It begins with one of the most oft-quoted passages in the novel where Bimala contemplates,

Mother, today there comes back to mind the vermilion mark at the parting of your hair, the *sari* which you used to wear, with its wide red border, and those wonderful eyes of yours, full of depth and peace [...] Everyone says that I resemble my mother. In my childhood I used to resent this. It made me angry with my mirror. I thought it was God's unfairness wrapped round my limbs – my dark features were not my due [...] All that remained for me to ask of my God in reparation was, that I might grow up to be a model of what woman should be, as one reads it in some epic poem. (3)

In the larger narratives of nationalism, colonialism, matrimony and gender which form and refresh the novel and its criticism in diverse and conflicting ways, this passage deftly and

subtly compels the *body*, and a *woman's body* at that, to take discursive centre stage. In the very memory that Bimala recounts, the *physical* or *bodily* ideal is given more importance; the refuge of virtuous womanhood is secondary, almost a compromise. The memory of the mother and her subservience as the epitome of sacrificial and relentless service is primarily understood through symbols and the ornamentation of the body. P.K. Datta states that Bimala 'evaluates her mother's devotion not for its actual presence [...] but as a series of visible rituals [...] Bimala's preoccupation with public images makes her reprocess the belief in devotion as an aesthetic spectacle.'¹⁹ What inspires Bimala is the hue of the sari, the vermillion, the *performance*; what disappoints her is her own dark skin. Through this memory, a volley of images springs forth, both mental and corporeal, which Bimala attempts to inhabit in the course of the novel. The anger aroused by *the image that does not exist* plagues her in the entire novel. In that sense, Bimala portrays both psychologically and thus physically the classic discontent associated with continual *meconnaissance*,²⁰ which is always already the precondition for that discontent. She recasts herself into images that are conceptually and physically tangible, *real* even, but fails to fashion herself authentically in these multifarious remouldings. Supriya Chaudhari writes that,

Bimala's emotional history, within the novel, is predicated upon this sense of lack, it may be read as a history of desire; but a desire returning upon the self, not (despite all appearances) directed towards husband or lover.²¹

She continues,

But what she projects onto these objects is herself: she wants to become something that they constitute or represent. This too is a kind of love: a love that, impelled by lack, seeks to identify itself with the object of its desire.²²

Tanika Sarkar too talks about the various bodily and conceptual configurations or images that Bimala attempts to inhabit. She writes that

Bimala possesses sexual and political will and autonomy, but she cannot imagine a form or identity that can adequately hold and express them. She moves between bodies that are dressed by the desires of her men [...] When she moves away from both, she can only imagine herself back in the past, mimicking the gestures of her mother, almost returning to inhabit her body.²³

Hence, Bimala's sexual and textual subversion is never fulfilled in a series of substitutable *absent* images that are never completely her own; her ideations of herself, especially in her

¹⁹ Datta 16.

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, in *Ecrits*, theorised about the notion of continual 'misrecognition' in the Mirror Stage wherein the infant sees a reflection of him or herself in the mirror, which is nevertheless not an authentic one and is the condition for the possibility of entry into the Symbolic Order of socio-linguistic structures.

²¹ Supriya Chaudhari, 'A Sentimental Education: Love and Marriage in *The Home and the World*', *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World: A Critical Companion* edited by P.K. Datta (Kolkata: Permanent Black, 2002) 21.

²² Chaudhari 61.

²³ Sarkar 38.

material and corporeal reality are lost in a chain of significations²⁴ that lead to her doom and alienation. In that sense, her bodily performance, in the home and in the world, is always already *prosthetic*²⁵ insofar it is unattainable. She embodies the dissent of sexual and ontological difference that splits the ideal of *Dasein*²⁶ and compels it to take the presence of the body into a discursive and corporeal encounter. The disrobing of the body, especially a *woman's* body, thus lays bare the arcana of the institutions and structures that are foundational to civil society. The body in *Ghare Baire* thus, emerges as a site wherein power, governance and knowledge straddle each other, publicly and privately, in a continual ideological robing and disrobing of its stark corporeality.

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²⁴ The ever differing, deferring chain of substitution and meaning-creation in which no absolute signified can be reached, as posited by Jacques Derrida in 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', *Writing and Difference*.

²⁵ The notion that linguistic and thus, by extension other markers of identity can never be *one's own* and are always already prosthetic or artificial insofar as meaning is always derived from the Other, as theorised by Jacques Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other; Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*.

²⁶ The idea that *Dasein* as fundamental ontology can be deconstructed into and as sexual and ontological difference, as theorised by Jacques Derrida in 'Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference'.

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