

## **From Mother India to Mother Ireland: Objectifying the Worshipped through Nationalist Rhetoric in Satyajit Ray's *Ghare Baire* and Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins***

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**Abstract:** The concept of femininizing the nation has been an all-pervasive theme in the domain of nationalism. This is nowhere more explicitly visible than in the anti-colonial nationalism breeding in the ground of the British colonies like India, Ireland, South Asia and Africa. This paper tries to highlight the limitations of such apparent glorification and idealization of women with the perpetual imagery of a benevolent mother or devout wife. It also tries to systematically unfold the mechanism behind such masculinist creation of capturing the female body within nationalist rhetoric and metaphors. This paper is precisely an exploration of the unsurmountable gap between the masculinist discourse of idealization and the corporeal experiences of the real mothers, wives and daughters *vis-à-vis* Indian and Irish Nationalism. It will also highlight with special reference to Satyajit Ray's *Ghare Baire* and Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* the tendency of delimiting the women characters with a quintessential frigidity and passivity in the cinematic representations while treating the motif of nationalism.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Women, Mother India, Mother Ireland.

The perceptible trend of imagining the nation in terms of a female body or feminine form became an all-pervasive trend especially within the arena of budding nationalism. It can hardly be denied that the glorification of women as the mother of nation or elevating them to the status of goddess or holy icons was predominantly influenced by the political urgency of the time because the idea of gendering nationhood (as feminine figure) mostly emerged during the time of political emergencies and the rising tide of nationalisms. For example, the iconography of *Bharat Mata* or Mother India was formulated by the patriotic zeal of the *Swadeshi* leaders who tried to transform their spirit of nationalism into an image of a benevolent and kind mother during the last decades of the nineteenth century. This symbolic configuration of the nation or the veneration of women as a nationalist symbol was not at all an uncommon

phenomenon in the West. This highly gendered discourse of the nation was prevalent all over the world, for instance we have the image of *Moder Svea* in Sweden, *Mayr Hayastan* in Armenia, *Mother Eire* in Ireland, *Matushka Rossija* in Russia. The personification of the country was not only limited within the discourse of motherhood or maternal body, in some countries women were also relegated to the stereotypes of wife, daughter, beloved and even temptress by the nationalist rhetoric which includes the figure of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in Ireland, *Britannia* in England and *Marianne* in France (Sharma, 2018)

It is pertinent to note that the notions of sovereignty, legal subjectivity, the idea of duty and rationality are fundamentally based on the principles of paternity and the process of 'nation building' has been a part of the public domain from which women are deliberately excluded and denied any access to. They have always been treated as a subject of frigid reception, as passive victim of this chauvinistic, megalomaniac constitution of patriarchy and a passive symbol of different totalities. Why then femininity is invoked to express patriotic sentiments? Is this nationalist formulation of 'motherland' merely a masculinist device to objectify the female body? Is there a gap between the deification of women as the mother of nation and the experiences associated with the reality of women's lives? Are the qualities of self-sacrifice, wifely devotion and stoicism forcibly imposed upon women to

eradicate their individual identities? These questions turn the nexus between women and nationalism into an ambiguous and problematic one. This paper tries to make a comparative analysis of gendered symbolism in the context of Indian and Irish Nationalism by chiefly focusing on the characters of Bimala in Satyajit Ray's 1984 cinematic adaptation of Tagore's dense and elaborate novel *Ghare Baire* and the character of Kitty or Cathleen Kiernan in Neil Jordan's 1996 film *Michael Collins*.

The most crucial basis for understanding the bridge between India and Ireland is Britain. The fact that both these countries have been a subject of excruciating torture and oppression by the British empire for a long period of time invoked almost similar kind of retaliation, anti-colonial movements and nationalist resurgence. Both in India and Ireland diversified cultural, political and religious opinions resulted in massive internal political quagmire and communal complexity. To quote Thapar-Bjorkert and Ryan (2002), "In Ireland, the largely Protestant, unionist minority opposed nationalism and sought to remain in the union with Britain, while in India, the Muslim League, representing the minority Muslim population, sought a separate state. In both cases independence was achieved at the cost of partition... Thus, in both Ireland and India religion played a key role in shaping national identity". National identity on the other hand plays a crucial role in shaping sexual identity. As Meaney

(1991) suggests while discussing the relation between sex and nationalism in the context of Irish nationalist discourse that the images of suffering motherland and self-sacrificing mother are almost inseparable, both try to idealize women's lives in reality and portray an image which is far removed from experience. The gendered notion of rendering valorization to masculinity and reinforcing inferiority to femininity is a tradition exercised for centuries by the colonizer country. Quite naturally the colonized male subjects have imbibed this colonial construct as 'natural ones' practiced by the British colonial masters.

Ray's transcreation of Rabindranath Tagore's political novel *Ghare Baire* is set against the backdrop of the *Swadeshi* movement of 1905 Bengal where the gendered image of the nation is delineated through the portrayal of *Mokshi Rani* or Bimala. The entire film has been projected in a retrospective manner with Bimala occupying the central role. The film begins with glaring fire image denoting the political turmoil of the outward world i.e. *Bahir* and Bimala's voice emerging from the gradual regression of the blazing fire with her soliloquy – "I have passed through fire. What was impure in me has been burned to ashes. What remains, I dedicate to him... Now I know there is no one like him" (Ray, 1984). This passing statement of Bimala resonates the image of *Sita* who had to undergo a fire ordeal to prove her wifely fidelity. The very next shot shifts the focus onto 'him'

(Nikhilesh's face) which well evinces Bimala's wifely devotion and genuflection to patriarchy. Though Ray makes certain obvious departure from the way Tagore begins his novel, both Ray and Tagore project Bimala at first as a docile, submissive wife, a devout follower of patriarchal hegemony. Ray's close-up at distraught and disheveled Bimala on the beginning sequence staring with blank eyes drenched with tears of frustration and anxiety invokes on the outset an image of a suffering mother or the symbolic bearer of nation concerned for the safety of her endangered sons due to the premonition of ensuing hostilities in the *Bahir* or the public domain. On the other hand, it also echoes an image of a distressed wife anxious for the complexities involving her *Ghar* or private sphere.

The representation of Ireland through female imagery is also something explicitly noticeable in Jordan's dramatically compelling historical film *Michael Collins*. The film is replete with the imagery of women as Ireland and Ireland as women. The metaphoric relation of Irish landscape with Irish femininity also occupies a large body of the filmmaking. The film captures the most critical and crucial period in the history of Ireland, the birth of Ireland as a modern nation and the political unrest followed by the signing of the treaty in 1921. Although there has been plethora of political controversy for portraying "the British as Machiavellian evil oppressors and IRA as good intentioned

freedom fighters” (Villar-Argaiz, 2007), the film adeptly visualizes the intermingling of political domain with personal sphere through the triad relationship of Michael Collins, Kitty Kiernan and Harry Boland. Besides being the traditional metaphor of suffering and nurturing mother, here the female body appears as a territory of male intervention for the possession of which Collins and Boland fight over. At the opening scene Kitty is displayed in a black suit lying on bed as a poor destitute, pale, colorless, indifferent to her own suffering. She almost acquires the image of a sorrowful mother Ireland lamenting the death of her sons. Next time we see Kitty in a white blouse, nursing wounded Collins with utmost care like benign mother. She becomes an embodiment of typically inert feminine vulnerability, helplessness, fragility and culpability. The conversation between Collins and Kitty in the following scene is something interesting to observe.

Collins – You’re a nurse Kitty?

Kitty – I’m nothing. I’m my father’s daughter.

Collins- And who’s your father?

Kitty – He’s dead. (Jordan, 1996)

Thus, Kitty reduces herself to a thing of nothing and mingles her identity with her dead father’s identity as if she doesn’t have a bodily authority or control over her own self, she is merely the product of hegemonic patriarchy. As Villar-Argaiz (2007) suggests “later in the film, the figure of the omnipresent father is replaced by that of the protective

‘husband’ and Kitty subsequently becomes, as Michael defines her, “Harry’s girl”. It is particularly relevant that both Ray and Jordan at the opening sequences visualize the distinctive nature of suffering and selflessness associated with motherhood through the characterization of Bimala and Kitty respectively. In fact, etymologically the names of these two protagonists are deeply rooted to the notion of purity, innocence and chastity.

The symbolic significance of Kitty and Bimala’s garments is particularly intriguing. Bimala wearing sari with wide red border, a vermilion mark at the parting of her hair and a red *bindi* on her forehead appears as a quasi-mythical figure of *Savitri* or like goddess *Laxmi*. Here to be mentioned shortly Bimala’s appearance bears more resemblance with the sketch of *Bharat Mata* painted by Abanindranath Tagore than the conventional image of *Bharat Mata* sitting on lion with a *Trisul* in hand because this image carries a masculinist aspect of capture and control. The *Sindoor* or vermilion mark on the forehead of a Hindu woman is considered as a mark of chastity or fidelity towards her husband. It is fundamentally a heteropatriarchal creation to keep the woman within bodily boundaries so that she remains unavailable to other men. The red *Bindi* similarly is a mark of sanctity. However, in case of Bimala the red vermilion mark of chastity fails to constrain her within the limitation of wifely fidelity. When Bimala wants to

transgress herself from the tradition-bound discourse of Hindu womanhood to a rebel against the tradition, she falls into the trap of Sandip who again renders her the abstraction of 'Queen Bee', an incarnation of 'Shakti'. In his vision Bimala becomes the tangible form of *Bharat Mata* through whom he tends to achieve his nationalist project and satisfy his personal and parochial means. But the first time Sandip meets Bimala in the *Zenana* his gaze as Ray visualizes is that of wonder blended with lust. As Joyjit Ghose (n.d.) suggests Sandip is a "perfect lady-killer" who hypnotizes women to fulfil his selfish ends. Bimala gets simply enthralled by Sandip's verbosity and charming appearance. He urges Bimala to utter the two magical words "Vande Mataram" or "Hail Motherland" and she replies "when you all shouted the mantra, I felt a shiver down my spine" (Ray, 1984), but as the film gradually proceeds Sandip's mantra "Vande Mataram" turns into "Vande Priyam, Vande Mohinim". Ray's presentation of the kissing sequence between Bimala and Sandip indicates Bimala's transgression from the iconography of mother goddess to an enchantress, a woman of flesh and blood, an object of male desire. The concept of nationalism gets intertwined with a scandalized form of eroticism and Bimala falls a victim of 'sexual politic'. Ray's presentation of Bimala can be seen in the following figure (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Sarbjaya To Bimala: The FEMINIST WOMEN in Satyajit Ray's Films*, 2020. (*Times of India*).

Neil Jordan confines Kitty in a straitjacket of passivity, visualizes her as a 'virginal heroine', a locale charming girl with lack of agency in the nationalist project. In the first half of the film Kitty appears as an extremely apolitical person, disinterested in the matters of the external world. Kitty's appearance in most of the scenes in white blouse signifies her feminine chastity and fragility. She in fact invokes the mighty religious figure of Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. The silent, suffering, self-sacrificing figure of mother Mary bears resemblances with Mother Ireland as nationalism and Catholicism became increasingly intertwined in the context of Irish politics. In fact, Collin's emergence as Christ figure, as a fallen hero completes the metaphor. It is interesting to look at Kitty's appearance in a black suit in the brief scene of gunplay where she puts a gun to the head of an anti-treatyite, shouting "Now let the man speak". Kitty's garment at this threshold location may signify her approaching widowhood and also her outstripping of the feminine whiteness and purity and entering into the domain of masculine rigidity. But her

political belief is acutely influenced and manipulated by Mick just like Bimala is deeply moved by Sandip's ideology.

While critiquing Nation as a Goddess Joyjit Ghose (n.d.) quotes Tanika Sarkar who suggests that the notion of goddess is predominantly publicized through the medium of modern prose and refers to Sri Aurobindo's concept of Bhawani, "She is Durga. She is Kali. She is Radha the Beloved. She is Lakshmi. She is our Mother...She is pure Shakti". Ray tries to exhibit Bimala in all these mythical incarnations. With red vermilion and Bindi on her forehead Bimala appears as Goddess of harvest *Laxmi*, in her wifely devotion to Nikhil she becomes *Savitri*, her affectionate treatment towards Amulya configures her as a caring, indulgent mother and during her rendezvous with Sandip she appears in 'dual personification' like a seductive 'Queen Bee' and the divine, powerful *Bharat Mata*. Ray's utilization of Jyotirindranath Tagore's patriotic song in one such scene on the voice of Sandip playing on piano – "Onward, sons of India/The Motherland calls/ The strong, the brave, the proud/ To serve the Nation" (Ray, 1984) and Bimala's resplendent appearance in the immediate scene affirms her veneration as mother-nation.

In *Michael Collins* Neil Jordan fashions Kitty sometime in the form of Virgin Mary, sometime as Mother Eire and sometime as the mystical mother *Kathleen ni Houlihan*. With her caring,

silent, passive and frivolous prominence she appears like Virgin Mary. In the Bloody Sunday sequence Jordan presents Kitty as an unearthly, mystical figure. The use of grey and gloomy light with the consistent use of color blue enhances the air of mysticism. Kitty lying on the bed with entrancing posture and Collins kissing her at the back of her hair define her almost like a temptress, 'a terrible beauty'. However, Villar-Argaiz (2007) connects Kitty's iconic status to the figure of defeated mother Ireland "waiting for the courageous protection of Irishmen to restore her dignity and purity". Towards the end of the film Kitty's spectral presence wearing a white silk dress and tiara adorned with white flowers recalls the image of Goddess Danu who is thought to be the goddess of the Tuath De Danann. This pictorial resemblance can be seen in the following figures (See Figure 2, 3).



Figure 2. *Danu: Mother Goddess and Earth Goddess*, 2010. (Silentowl)



Figure 3. Kitty in Bridal Veil in the posture of Goddess Danu (*Michael Collins*, 1996).

Kitty is further displayed on a green coat signifying her absorption in the beautiful landscape of Ireland. This scene escalates the possibility of Kitty's projection as the mourning mother Ireland lamenting the death of her sons Harry and Mick since the scene prepares the burial of 'the big fellow'. Although Ray doesn't fashion Bimala with the canopy of Bengal landscape, Tagore's Bimala describes her body in the metaphor of a river – "So long I had been like a small river at the border of a village...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." (Tagore, 2002).

The basic assumption operative in the anti-colonial nationalist discourse is that the colonized nation is articulated as an all-suffering mother under the threat of foreign invasion who needs her 'sons' to unite and rescue her from the grip of the daemonic colonial force. It suggests that a group identity is constructed within the 'sons' of the nation from which the 'daughters' are deliberately secluded and subsided into the domain of the 'other' (Inside other) while the intruders or the enemies are the Outside other. The relation between nationalism and women can be analyzed in multiple layers. While the colonizer country constructs itself as male, the colonized nation is rendered with effeminacy and the dominant, virile

colonizers configure the 'colonized male' as inferior and effeminate creatures lacking male aggression. The 'colonized women' are thereby doubly otherized, ostracized both by the 'manly' imperial patriarchy and the 'effeminate' native patriarchy. In the name of 'remasculinization' the colonized men emulate the stereotypical notion of westernized masculinity and follow the same hierarchized gender binary. The celebration of the selflessness of motherhood and self-containment of widowhood can be seen as an act of recuperation of the lost colonized manhood. This policy of segregation worsens the lives of the 'colonized' mothers. Here to be mentioned shortly, the feminine aspect in colonized men is projected through the placid temperament of Nikhilesh in Ray's cinematic adaptation and the vulnerable personality of Harry Boland in *Michael Collins*.

All the four males in these two filmic texts try to shape and reshape Bimala and Kitty in accordance with their imaginative construction. While Sandip casts Bimala in the form of Mother India or *Bharat Mata*, Nikhil tries to sculpt her as the statue of an 'enlightened wife'. Both in a way idolize Bimala either as an abstract form of 'Shakti' or as an ideal companion. On the surface, Nikhil appears as a modern, liberal humanist who wants his wife to step out of the territory of *Antahpur* but in reality Bimala turns into a puppet of Nikhil's project of 'westernization'. Thus, Bimala is constantly configured and reconfigured

by her husband and her lover like the way Pygmalion dressed and decorated Galatea according to his voyeuristic male *gaze*. Kitty on the other hand moves like a shuttlecock from Boland's court to Collins'. While leaving for America Harry says Mick that "She'll need looking after while I am gone". Twice in the film Collins mentions about his duty to protect Kitty and thus her subjectivity is repeatedly eradicated, drowned; she has been reduced to an object having no authority, independence and self-sufficiency (See Figure 4).



Figure 4. Kitty as an Object of Protection (*Michael Collins*, 1996).

Despite having multiple levels of differences regarding the geographical location, cultural, racial and linguistic dichotomies, nationalism both in India and Ireland shared a similar configuration regarding the object positioning of women. There has always been a tendency to sideline and subordinate women *exclusively* into the domain of passivity and domesticity, within the private sphere. They are excluded from the public domain of active participation in nationalist cause, yet symbolically and metaphorically relegated into an object positioning and restricted within the boundary of national body politic.

Both Bimala and Kitty tries to transcend the rigid boundaries of public and private but it is the sons of the nation who in the name of unleashing the motherland from the clutch of the alien force, fasten her tightly into the domain of the private by ascribing her either the glorified status of mother or a devout, compliant wife. It is not only the colonizers who identify the colonized women as retrograde, passive and subordinate, the colonized men also see them as the symbolic repositories of the tradition who is in need of protection and guidance. The conversation between Bimala and Sandip in the sitting room needs a special mention in this context –

Bimala – I don't believe you would hurt the poor. You'll try to persuade them. That's all.

Sandip – But the persuasion doesn't always work. You need something more.

Bimala – What do you need?

Sandip – Let's not talk about that.

Bimala – I want to know.

Sandip - I don't want to talk about mundane things with you. (Ray, 1984)

Thus, Bimala is deprived of information of the 'mundane' world i.e. what is happening beyond the *Zenana*. In this context of Indian nationalist discourse Partha Chatterjee (1990) divides the domain of culture in two parts – material and spiritual. He suggests that the outer world, the *Bahir* is the world of materiality, the domain of men, and "the home in its essence must remain



unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and women is its representation”. This is partly because womanhood is represented as the preserver of the traditional order and indigenous culture which if they step outside the threshold of the *Ghar* will get contaminated by foreign influence. Irish nationalism also treated women as the custodian of national culture and tradition. Kitty receives similar treatment from Collins when she asks why does he want her to leave Vaughan’s Hotel and he simply replies – “Don’t ask questions”. Kitty is further denied any access to the masculinized world of politics when in the Gresham hotel scene, she asks Collins, “What’s happening tonight, Mick?”, and gets an outright rejection with his straightforward reply “You don’t want to know”. Thus, her voice is always kept under the veil of silence; unheard, unacknowledged.

Quite interestingly, both Ray and Jordan conclude their films on a tragic note, portraying Bimala and Kitty in the attire of widow. On several contexts Ray thoroughly changes Bimala’s characterization, especially on the conclusion Ray’s deviation from Tagore’s novel is particularly relevant. While Tagore keeps it vague whether Nikhil dies on the communal riot or not, Ray inscribes widowhood as Bimala’s inevitable fate. The filmic text ends with a close-up shot of Bimala metamorphosing from an auspiciously decorated *Stree* to a widow in white sari, small chopped hair and robbed off her

material adornments, she becomes the mirror-image of *Bouthan* (Nikhil’s widowed sister-in-law) destined therefore to be a staunch observer. While Tagore tries to create Bimala on the light of a New Woman, Ray seems to punish Bimala for violating the discourse of chastity, for leaving the seclusion of the *Zenana*, for jeopardizing the intrinsic values of *Ghar*. Similarly, when Kitty starts interfering in political matters, a chasm is found in the homosocial relationship of Mick and Harry. Their attempt to dismantle the existing gender stereotypes turns them from the ‘breeder of the nation’ to the symbol of infertility, barrenness. So far as Bimala and Kitty remain obedient wife or asexual mother, the ‘sons of the nation’ remain unharmed, secured. However, the only point of dissimilarity between Kitty and Bimala is that while Bimala tries to transgress herself from the embellishment of the males, first from the image of devout wife, then from the pedestal of ‘Queen Bee’, Kitty happens to be wholly submissive and passive like the typical ‘angle in the house’.

This complicated relation between nationalism and women somehow justifies Virginia Woolf’s statement “As a woman I have no country”, she simply exists in the symbols, signifiers and metaphors of mother, daughter, sister and beloved. She is nothing but a baby producing machine to incubate the male homunculus of the country. There happens to be an unsurmountable gap between her ideological representation as

a glorified nationalist icon and her real imprisonment in the kitchens and sickbeds. This deification of motherhood is simply a colonial exercise of containment which is again constrained within the domain of ideology and such an ideology is diametrically opposed to what treatment women receive in the world of practice. However, to generalize the entire Indian and Irish womanhood in the name of Bimala and Kitty would be inappropriate and incompatible since many women in the coming days in both countries tried to go beyond the nationalist rhetoric and blur the threshold between *Ghar* and *Bahir*. Many of them actively participated in the anti-colonial nationalist movements and blatantly criticized and questioned the dominant male hegemony. However, despite being a subject of malicious criticism, both these films with their cinematographic excellence and directorial creativity effectively convey the defamiliarization of the familiar by a spiritual halo and the position of colonized women as an unstable dew drop upon a lotus leaf.

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