

A Study of 'GORA'

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Tagore's creativity makes one think of the Himalayan range stretching its immense bulk wall above the snow-line and, from that elevation, thrusting peak after peak. As in poetry, so in fiction also Tagore's creativity reached great tall peaks. Gora is a novel of ideas. A good pool of it, is filled with Polemics. The polemics in GORA seems inevitable in view of the time of its composition.

The Partition of Bengal in 1905 was a historical event in more than one sense. That event stirred the national consciousness of the country and gave rise to the first great political movement in India on a mass scale and it also brought about an intellectual ferment as an inevitable corollary. Tagore played a leading role in the Swadeshi movement, and helped establish national schools and colleges and to organize co-operative societies; and as the back drop of all these activities there came many of his political and social essays and addresses. The polemical pre-occupation in a novel written amidst these vital stirrings is therefore, understandable.

As a creative writing Gora has secured and assured a indelible place in literature. Its real purpose lies not in the pages of brilliant dialectic, but in the penetrating projection of ideas in the form of living images. Gora is contemporary and yet timelss; it is set in certain social class, a picturesque rendering of their life and mind, and yet it reaches out towards the Universal. Two prominent questions occupied the thoughts of the intellectual and enlightened citizens of Bengal in those days - the Hindu - Brahmo controversy and the need for political freedom. In his presentation and portrayal of the characters Tagore exposes whatever was ridiculous or false not only in the old religious system but also in the orthodoxy of the new the enlightened.

The Plot of Gora

Like all other Tagore's novels the plot of Gora is very simple. But in GORA, Tagore used a larger canvas. It revolves and evolves around the love theme of the four major characters. Gora, Sucharita, Binoy and Lalita. The novel reveals how love and religion, patriotism, service to one's own country and people and religion would come into conflict with each other. Gora centres around the two major movements, the Brahmo - Hindu conflicts and the incipient nationalism of the latter half of the nineteenth century.

A crisis develops in the life of Anandamoyi on the day she adopts Gora. Anandamoyi is tormented by the conflict between the love of a child and loyalty towards her own religion. Being childless, the mother's instinct in her asserts, itself and Anandamoyi rejects that part of her religion which tries to raise barriers between human beings, based on petty narrow domestic walls of caste, race and religion.

Gora grows up, and becomes a fanatic Hindu and builds his view of Indidan nationalism on that basis. To keep a vigil over his intimate friend Binoy, who frequently visits the housed of

Brahmo girls, Sucharita and Lalita, Gora also goes to their homes. In due course, Gora is in emotional conflict, his country and to the people vis-à-vis his love for a woman of another faith. Parallel to the love story of Gora and Sucharita Biony's love for Lalita is developed. These two romantic love stories are utilised by Tagore to reveal the fanatic behaviour of both Hindus and Brahmas. Anandamoyi as a representative of Hindus and Paresh Babu as a representative of Brahmos, are shown as people who stand above petty conflicts and barriers.

The Social and Political Background

The tensions generated among the Bengali Middle class, the Hindu-Brahmo controversy and the stirrings of national consciousness towards the end of the 19th Century have created the social and historical background and setting for Gora. During the early decades of nineteenth century, some bright young men in Bengal embraced Christianity, under the impact of Western thought and education, in an outright condemnation and ridicule of Hinduism. In this context as a reformative movement of Hinduism, Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, which renounced all superstitions and taboos and aimed at a synthesis of the best in all religions. During the course of time the Brahmo Samaj acquired a strong anti-Hindu bias. Alerted by the attacks of Christian missionaries and Brahmo Samajists, Orthodox Hindus started organizing revivalist organizations like Dharma Sabha (1830), the Arya Samaj (1875), and the Ramakrishna Mission (1898).

The Hindu revivalist acted as stimulus for the Nascent nationalism with its emphasis on self-respect and preservation of tradition. Gora dramatizes and analyses the conflict in the dialectical relationship between the reformist and revivalist movements. In this contact Tagore wrote Gora to correct the extremism represented by the obscurantism of the Hindus and the Sectarianism of the Brahmos by doing an even -handed justice to both these ill conceived forces, in his epic novel Gora.

Gora – the founding child of an Irish-English couple murdered in the Indian Sepoy Mutiny is portrayed as the passionate advocate of revivalist nationalism. Even though Gora's identity is hidden from him till the end, it is revealed to the reader at the very outset of the novel. Hence the quality of irony gets built into the narrative, right at the start. The name 'Gora' serves as a metaphor for the dubieties.

Of all Tagore's novels, *Gora* comes closest in dealing with historical events. The momentous Indian Mutiny of 1857 over, the English victory had established the British rule firmly on the Indian soil.

This naturally had led to a state of tension and emotional instability when normal action and reaction became impossible. Tagore connected the discordant unnatural behaviour pattern when violence dehumanized the social pattern to the "spirit of repression and coercion." Gour Mohan, tall, broad-shouldered, fair skinned young 'brahmin' becomes the symbol of disharmony and violent force, compelled to act against the grain of his being. *Gora*, as he is called by his friends, takes up traditionalism as a cudgel against the enemy which is the Englishman. Thus he uses his caste and religion as a righteous entity to establish his identity, a symbol of his Indianism

which is anti-English. He accepts his religion as a cult and his faith as a ritual to denote his break with the West and all that is Western.

Tagore himself notes the problem of the writer when he creates under the pressure of disharmonious environments. "...when some storm of feeling sweeps across the country, art is under disadvantage. In such an atmosphere the boisterous passion breaks through the Cordon of harmony and thrusts itself forward as the subject, which with its bulk and pressure dethrones the unity of creation."

If *Gora's* rebellion against the established British Government had been the theme of the novel, then it would be a tale of disharmony and its political overtones would be its sole merit. But *Gora* is an exploration of a young man's search for harmony and unity of his country. *Gora* undertakes a journey which will enable him to find union in diversity, a common symbol which would pinpoint the country's oneness. *Gora* thus becomes a novel of discovery, of a search for unification which can only come through a maturer vision, of final rejection of categories and divisions. The novel acquires allegorical significance, for its meaning cannot be comprehended only in terms of narration. The actual acts and incidents, important as they are, bear a deeper investigation because they are deliberately conveyed by certain imagistic symbols.

Anandamoyi, the truly blissful one, *Gora*, the fair complexioned, Sucharita, the noble one, Fadharani, the consort of Krishna, by their names alone symbolize certain character-traits which are implicitly involved with acts and events. The entire novel is structured to the exploration of truth and its final significance in the lives of the main characters. *Gora* yields to Tagore's attempt to investigate the principle of unity which functions in the consciousness of a person. Tagore was too much of an artist not to be aware that all art, like all poetry, is "ideal" and therefore must be "representative of a class." Gour Mohan, the protagonist thus, does represent the violence and its attendant ferocity. His entrance in the story is violent, "dressed in his warpaint." He symbolises the disunity and disruption he is struggling to overcome. *Gora's* journey into his own inner hell, runs parallel to the saga of journey he undertakes. The agony and insult he heaps on those he loves and cherishes only proclaim the darkness of his soul. He admonishes his mother's indifference to her brahmanic caste and is incapable of comprehension when she answers :

But do you know that it was when I first took you in my arms that I said goodbye to my convention ? When you hold a little child to your breast then you feel certain that no one is born into this world with caste. From that very day the understanding came to me that if I looked down upon any one for being of low caste, or a Christian, then God would snatch you away from me. Only stay in my arms as the light of my home. I prayed, and I will accept water from the hands of any one in the world

Anandomoyi, the "dark smooth skinned" mother of "fair skinned" *Gora*, counterpoises the conflict in the minds and hearts of the two friends. Binoy, who too considers Anandomoyi as his mother, finds a greater affinity in her way of life. Unlike *Gora* who has rejected her, to go away and search for a symbol of union of his country, Binoy has stayed at home to offer her solace. *Gora* considers Binoy a failure. So does Binoy. According to *Gora*, he must be ostracized

from society for falling in love with a woman who is a Brahma Samajist and thus a non-Hindu. *Gora's* anger at his mother, his strictures of Binoy only emphasize his own dilemma. *Gora* is no longer sure. His faith in his caste is crumbling, he is no longer able to dismiss his interest in Sucharita as altruistic. His own limitations, the canker of corruption in his soul, make him inflict pain on others, which is also a manifestation of the anguish of a spiritually proud person. But he is not yet able for enounce his belief is capable of discerning his error. So he eloquently argues his view - point.

If we had something in our skins by which we change our religious views as a chameleon change its colour that would have been another matter - but I cannot make light of a thing that belongs to the heart. If no kind of opposition existed, and if you did not have to give toll in some form of punishment, then why, in such serious matter as accepting or charging religious opinions, does a man rouse his whole intelligence? We must undergo some test as to whether we accept truth genuinely or not. Its consequences and penalties must be accepted. In the commerce of truth you cannot obtain the jewel and avoid the price. The main characters do not avoid "the price." They arrogate to themselves a certain right even when the consequences are destructive to those they love Binoy is bent upon marrying Lolita. Paresh Babu gives them their consent and blessings in the teeth of all opposition, regardless of the consequences. Anandomoyi performs the marriage and makes all preparations and leaves her house to do it. *Gora* not only refuses to attend the marriage but forbids his mother from attending it. Both Anandomoyi and Sucharita disobey him. Thus there is an open disharmony, and disunity. The author at no point minimizes their struggles or lessens the intensity of their dilemmas. He projects them directly relating to and emanating from the novel's social context. But their disunion also arises from their own beings, their incapability to commune with others. Their conflict provides a dramatic dimension without making them juxtaposed one against the other. They are at no time studies in contrast *Gora* is not an antithesis of Binoy or even Haran Babu. Nor is Sucharita transposed against Lolita or Anandomoyi against Harimohni. They are complete persons, all of them who come together and fall apart by the conflict of wills and beliefs, providing an intensely complex world of human relationships.

Binoy protests against the bonds of society

You know as well as I do how meaningless are the bonds with which our society tries to fetter us in matters of eating, and touching, and sitting, where man has a natural freedom based on religion. But you want to admit this high handedness by being high-handed yourself. Let me tell you though that in this matter, I will not submit to any one's tyranny :I will admit the claims of society upon me only so long as society admits my claim upon it.

Gora himself has been gradually - incident by incident, moving towards a more realistic understanding of the social bondage of the community.

He saw that amongst these village people the social bondage was far greater ... Night and day without ceasing every act of eating, drinking in every home, was under the vigilant eyes of society. Every person had an absolutely simple faith in social custom - it never occurred to

them to question such matters. But this implicit faith tradition and the bondage of society did not give them least bit of strength for the tasks of their daily life. It seemed as if their whole natures had become entangled from head to foot in a network of various penalties for transgressing against rules forbidding them to do this or that at every step.... *Gora* could not help seeing that this weapon of tradition and custom was sucking the blood of man and was reducing him to poverty in a merciless fashion ... *Gora* saw that society offers no help to a man at the time of his misfortune, it merely afflicts him with penalties and humbles him to the dust."

But he believes that a complete break with established social pattern will disrupt the sense of belonging to the community. *Gora's* essence of struggle, his quarrel with Binoy, emerges from the urge to unify the community, the society and then the nation, to discover the mother that is India. *Gora* is scared of reformation as progress because he associates it with the West and the West for him means alienation from his own people, the land of his faith.

Even in the most impossible places he would stand erect and flaunt this faith of his with pride, holding it firmly in his hand like a flag of victory, in the face of opposing party.

Gora therefore rejects Sucharita's plea for social reform, as he refuses to accept Binoy's marriage with Lolita. His rejection is not of Brahmo-Samaj but an all-out attempt to preserve the identity of his people even if it entails a belief in ritualism. This leads *Gora* from blunder to blunder, towards a void and nihilism from which he cannot pull himself back. *Gora* is seeking a golden formula which will restore the traditional glory of true India. His search leads him to the dark night of loneliness, of violence, where the evil of disintegration and disruption is rampant. He discovers the mediocre, the petty, the mean, the violent. He discovers Haren and Abinash and those who shout 'Victory to Gourmohan'. But it takes him away from those he loves and cherishes. The novel thus acquires a new dimension as it symbolises the intense involvement of all the major characters in their attempts at reconciliation between their ideals and the reality of life.

These characters are adults, fully developed, mature but in the process of "becoming" which though not exactly against the grain of their "being" is forceful enough to denote the agony of their experience. So each incident which ordinarily would work towards a final denouement, contributes to the process of growth, of their "becoming" the final beings they have been striving to become. The structural pattern of the book is therefore more in the nature of a process of reconciliation and, adjustment of opposites, not in the nature of final solutions, but in the discovery of truth as a way of life. Binoy and Lolita go ahead and get married, difficult as it is. Anandomoi leaves her home to go and live with the young couple. Sucharita goes back to her foster father Paresh Babu till *Gora* stumbles upon his truth. The journey towards truth of life is never easy not quick. The main characters make their slow and painfully torturous journey which constitutes the main theme of *Gora*. The novelist brings it to an appropriate close when *Gora* achieves the realization :

"Mother, you are my mother! The mother whom I have been wandering about in search of was all the time sitting in my room at home. You have no caste, you make

no distinctions, and you have no hatred - you are only the image of our welfare ! It is you who are India !"

To misread *Gora* as a social document of late nineties and early twenties would be to underestimate its literary merit. It is not a tale of clash between Hinduism and Brahmo-Samaj, nor is it a tale of British tyranny in India. It is a study of life depicted with a discipline necessary to the form of the novel. Its proportions indicate a careful balance between plot structure and character development. Tagore in his *Creative Unity* commented. "The logical relationship indicated in the proportions of a work of art, both... affirm that truth consists not in facts, but in harmony of facts." These harmonious facts presented in *Gora* create a balance between structural development and character analysis. They become inter-dependent. The characters are beings in the process of becoming and this is underscored by the events of the tale. Binoy falls in love and marries Lolita, *Gora* meets Sucharita and discovers the significance of new relationship Sucharita finds her harmony between Hinduism and Brahmo-Samaj *Gora's* reference of the villagers, his arrest, his release, even the discovery he makes of his birth are none of them sensationally or crudely dramatized. These incidents acquire significance to the extent the characters discover their truth through them. The special quality of *Gora* is thus its balance between events and characters between evaluation and their perfection and the process which turns them into fuller beings. Tagore between :1973 KPK, Menon : Annamalai University 1976.

The most famous of his novels *Gora* (1907-1909) weaves together very felicitously two strands - the story of the romantic love of two pairs of lovers and the predicament in which Indian society found itself as a result of the impact of western ideas. The hero is Gourmohan Babu or *Gora*. He embodies the spirit of Hindu orthodoxy as well as the new national spirit of a resurgent India. He and his friend (and follower) Binoy happens to be introduced to a Brahmo Samaj family of which the head is Paresh Babu. *Gora* and Binoy are attracted to two attractive girls of the family, Sucharita and Lalitha respectively. Though the fascination is mutual in both couples, *Gora* is not prepared to admit that he is touched, because as an orthodox Brahmin he could not entertain an alliance with a Brahmo family. He would not also entertain an alliance with a Brahmo family. He would not also countenance his friend Binoy committing a similar breach of propriety. Even when *Gora* realizes, and acknowledges to himself, that he is deeply in love with Sucharita, he is not prepared to sacrifice his religious principles. The conflict looks incapable of being resolved, but luckily the problem gets solved by *Gora's* discovery that he is not really a Hindu but the child of Irish parents. They had been killed in the mutiny and the baby had brought him up as their own son.

This discovery affects a sudden revolution in his views and outlook. He is no longer the fanatical orthodox Hindu, intolerant of the slightest breath of religious reform, but a spiritually emancipated man free from the bondage of all religious dogmas. He tells Paresh Babu :

Today I am free, Paresh Babu! I need no longer fear being contaminated or becoming an outcaste ...

Today I am really an Indian ! In me there is no longer any opposition between Hindu, Mussalman and Christian. Today every caste in India is my caste, the food of all is my food.

He becomes the disciple of Paresh Babu and he is ready to worship the Deity who is the God of no particular sect but the God of Indian herself.

The novel is thus brought to a happy consummation with two weddings and the triumph of the Brahmo creed. But every reader will echo the view of Dr. S.C. Sen Gupta :

If *Gora* had been able to resolve the contradiction through a spiritual struggle, the story would have made a great novel. But Rabindranath betrays here an indolence about fundamentals ; rather than portray the intricate spiritual struggle that is aroused in *Gora's* heart, he ends it mechanically almost as soon as it begins.

One might say of *Gora* as of Shakespeare's Prince Hal, "Never did reformation come in such a sudden flood."

This fundamental flaw apart, *Gora* is a fine novel. Tagore has made proper use of the principle that much more is gained than lost by taking the readers into his confidence. Thus while *Gora* himself makes the discovery of his British parentage only at the end of story, the reader is taken into the secret at the very beginning. This produces the delicious effect of dramatic irony - an Irishman born of Christian parents becoming the uncompromising champion of Hindu orthodoxy and Indian nationalism.

Another merit of the novel is the skillful way in which Tagore has made his story vibrate to the reverberations of the political scene - the commotion's caused by the Swadeshi movement, the conflict between the white rulers and the coloured subjects, police repression, imprisonment for political offences etc.

Nor is the novel lacking in some excellent characterisation. The excesses of the Brahmo and orthodox Hindu are portrayed in Haran and Mahim, Mistress Baroda and Haramohini.

Whatever criticism may be levelled against Rabindra Nath Tagore's novels, there can be no two opinions about it that *Gora* is a masterpiece. Here is what an English critic thinks of *Gora* : "Between 1901 and 1907 he (Tagore) wrote most of his novels. The first two, *Eyesore* and *The Wreck* are incredibly bad. A charming style and fine description are not enough in a novel ; and the stories are botched. *Gora* came at the end of this period of novel writing. It is a book, which has greatly influenced Bengali novelists, and by some it is held to be the best of the Bengali novels." It seems that Thompson is somewhat hasty in his denunciation of the first two novels, but his opinion about *Gora* is perfectly authentic and candid. In this novel it is not the intricacy of the plot and the rapid change-over from climax to anti-climax, as in *The Wreck*, but the clash of characters and their ideologies, and the final emergence and triumph of truth that holds the reader spell-bound.

Gora, Binoy, Paresh Babu, Sucharita, Lolita and Anandamoyi are not important for themselves alone, but for the ideals they uphold, the ideas they adhere to, and the truths they want to establish. The clash of the high-caste and the low-caste, the Brahmin and the Brahmo, is not the central theme of the novel. It is just for convenience's sake, for want of something better. It serves a secondary purpose, that of an accessory to the principal problem, which is of a spiritual as well as philosophical nature. What is truth ? How to realize it ? What is the real problem facing British India ? How is it possible to raise the Indians above their petty complexities ? These are the

questions that come to the minds of the main characters again and again. *Gora* thinks that his faith in the stability of Brahminism is the answer to all these questions. But he is disillusioned when he goes to the villages. He discovers that the strict regulations of his religion fail to unite the Hindus, whereas the Mohammedans were united by their religion. They stood shoulder to shoulder in a way that the Hindus never did. Perhaps it was due to their disregard of any caste system. It is not easy to define what is Paresh Babu's idea of Truth, in spite of his daily meditations according to the Brahmo ritual and the peace of mind that he derives from them, he himself does not seem to be quite sure about it. It is only by accident, while discussing with Sucharita the prospects of Binoy's marriage with his daughter, Lolita, that he hits at the truth. "Sectarianism is a thing which makes people entirely forget the simple and obvious truth that man is man - it creates a kind of whirlpool in which the society-made distinction between Hindu and Brahmo assumes greater importance than universal truth." Sucharita, with her unshakable faith in Paresh Babu, is drawn towards *Gora*. His beaming forehead and the force of conviction with which he speaks make her ponder over ideas which she has up to that time rejected as utterly unreasonable. Lolita believes in the inherent good qualities of Binoy, and tries to wean him from the destructive hold that *Gora* has over him. Binoy wavers between his adherence to *Gora's* views and the reverence that he feels for Paresh Babu. As he thinks that the sisterly affection of Sucharita and the love of Lolita is the truth, he gradually leaves *Gora's* circle and joins the group of Paresh Babu's admirers. Anandamoyi is an open-hearted and sincere old lady, who does not believe in the outward show of religion that her husband makes rather late in his life. She has absolute faith in her adopted son, *Gora*, who is the child of an Irish lady who came to their house one night in the troubled year of 1857, and died soon after giving birth to the child.

At first, it appears that *Gora* and Sucharita will never be united. But as soon as the mystery of *Gora's* birth is revealed to him, and he comes to know that he is not a Hindu, the effect is astonishing. "In a single moment *Gora's* whole life seemed to him like some extraordinary dream. The foundations upon which, from childhood, all his life had been raised had suddenly crumbled into dust, and he was unable to understand who he was or where he stood ... He felt as though he were like the dewdrop on the lotus leaf which comes into existence for a moment only. He had no mother, no father, no country, no nationality, no lineage, no God even." He at once rushed to Paresh Babu's house with the cry that he has no more ties : "That which day and night I have been longing for but which could not be, to-day at last I have become. To-day I am really an Indian ! In me there is no longer any opposition between Hindu, Mussalman and Christian. To-day every caste in India is my caste, the food of all is my food !. Today I have become so pure that I can never be afraid of contamination even in the house of the lowest of castes. Paresh Babu, this morning with my heart absolutely bare, I have prostrated myself wholly at the knees of my India - after so long I have at length fully experienced what is meant by the mother's lap." What a moving conclusion to a great novel !

The rest of the characters are of meagre importance. They are taken up with their own problems. Mohim, *Gora's* elder step-brother is keen to see his daughter married to a youngman who would not insist on a dowry. Krishnadayal Babu is in search of some hidden short-cut to

salvation. Baroda Sundari, Paresh Babu's wife, is on the lookout for eligible youngman who would marry her daughters. Harimohini is intent on seeing her plans to marry her niece, Sucharita, to her own brother-in-law come true. Satish is just a child with a child's problems and interests. Of these characters, only Haran Chandra draws some special attention from the reader. That also, because he is the villain of the piece, and serves as a butt for *Gora* to sharpen his argumentative faculties.

Rabindra Nath Tagore filled the whole of our literacy horizon with his personality during his life-time, and continues to do so even after his passing away. In conclusion, I may add what one of his admirers thinks of him : "Judged by any standards whatsoever, Tagore's many-sided achievements must compact recognition, and he is not of Bengal alone, but India's and the world's"

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