

## **Rabindranath Tagore as a Novelist**

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**Abstract:** *The present paper discusses Tagore's novels which deserve serious notice. They are main classic pictures of the Bengal of Tagore's time. His novel 'Gora' is the greatest novel in Bengal literature. Its fullness and closeness of observation have been followed by his successors. In 'Home and the World', Tagore depicts the meaner side of great anti-partition movement in which he took so prominent a share. "Eye-sore" has a domestic plot, revolving around the hero Mahendra. "Wreck" undertakes psychological analysis of the characters of the novel.*

**Keywords:** Characterisation, narration, plot, time and structure.

Rabindranath Tagore, one of the greatest poets of all time, wrote several novels. But his novels as a whole may not claim to have attained the stature of his best poetry. It is because the plots of the novels are slender. They do not reveal the architectural skill as in the works of his predecessors like Bakinichandra Chattopadhyaya. Tagore's novels are mostly studies in psychology and are concerned with unravelling complexities of the human heart and fathoming the mystery of the human soul.

Of the dozen novels, long and short, that Tagore wrote "*Choker Bali*"(1902) was his notable achievement. Literally 'Choker Bali' means 'Eye-sore'. It was translated by Krishna Kripalani under the title "*Binodini*". It is a realistic novel in which storyvalues are based not simply on the mechanical complexities of plot structure but on characterization and psychological content. This was the earliest work of its kind in any Indian language. In this novel, Tagore takes to introspection and studies the perennial attraction of woman for man but avoids striking incidents and episodes.

In "Eye-Sore", the hero, Mahendra, is the spoilt son of a well-to-do household. His widowed mother Raja Lakshmi loves him very fondly and selfishly. Vihari is a friend of Mahendra, slightly younger and very much at home in the house as a devoted younger brother. There is an aunt, Annapurna in the household, unselfish and childless. Raja Lakshmi desires Mahendra to marry Vinodini, daughter of her friend, Harimathi of her village. But Mahendra refuses to marry Vinodini and again Raja Lakshmi tries for Vihari. Vihari also refuses. The girl is married to someone else and soon becomes a widow. Three years later, Raja Lakshmi proposes her son to marry. Supporting her in the proposal, the aunt gives offence to the mother and is snubbed and accused of envy. Mahendra tries to make it up to the aunt by asking to be shown a niece of hers Asha whom she wished to marry, not for marrying her himself but to marry her to Vihari. The friends go to see the girl and Vihari is willing to marry her but Mahendra likes her looks and proposes to marry her himself. The mother does not like this, but Mahendra is self-willed and overbears opposition and the marriage takes place. Mahendra loves Asha with the intense love of a boy attracted by the delight of the senses. Raja Lakshmi is unhappy at the thought of her son loving the wife so much and herself so little, she nurses a grievance against the aunt and to show her displeasure goes to her village. Mahendra knows she is hurt but does not care; but, Annapurna, the aunt, having left for Benaras so that there might be peace in the house, he is later persuaded to go and ask the mother to come back. Raja Lakshmi has made friends his with Vinodini in the meanwhile and comes with her. Asha and Vinodini become friends and at Vinodini's suggestion call each other by the pet name "Eyesore". Vinodini, obviously with the convenience of Raja Lakshmi, worms her way into the heart of Mahendra. She has really no difficulty in doing this as Mahendra loves Asha only as a toy and Asha is too guileless to see through the game. Indeed, she is so innocent that she helps Vinodini in her plot to trap her easy prey. Vihari sees through Vinodini's trick and warns Mahendra and gives offence and sets Vinodini against himself. Mahendra is too infatuated to see the danger to his household happiness. Vinodini sets Mahendra against Vihari by suggesting that he is in love with Asha. Mahendra first and Asha later goes to Annapurna in Benaras for a short time. When Asha is away, Vinodini has the opportunity of showing Mahendra how much cleverer she is than Asha and how much happier she could make him if he is only would. Now Mahendra plays the ardent lover and elopes with Vinodini, but soon finds her intractable. The situation grows critical and is almost on the brink of tragedy. Vihari's idealism and self-effacement solve the problem. It is the steady Vihari that finally claims Vinodini's consecrated love. Vinodini begs for Vihari's love and is rejected. Mahendra grows jealous of Vihari and forbids him the house. Raja Lakshmi falls ill and Vihari is called and he goes and nurses her. Mahendra comes back repentant to see the mother die. Vinodini is also repentant and sees enough of herself to

refuse to marry Vihari, though he prepared to accept her. But a marriage between them, in an Indian novel that appeared in 1902, would have been artistically too facile a solution, and would besides have shocked the orthodox public. Vihari has established a home of service for the poor when she becomes a sister of Mercy. The theme is the entanglement between the hero and heroine. The great thing about the novel is that it is nearly all dialogues, more like a play than like a novel. The narrator rarely comes on the stage to comment or explain. The narrative grips the reader's attention and flows smooth and full. The impression produced in the very first scene is one of faithfulness to life, with the self-centred mother and the self-centred son; and holding them in relief the selfless aunt and the selfless friend. The persons in the story stand out clever and are definite characters. Indeed the story of the novel gives two to three types of persons which repeat in Tagore's later stories or novels. But the development of the novel is altogether conventional and unconvincing. Vinodini's refusal to allow Vihari to marry her may be true to life but is not made so. For the rest, the narrative should be considered reasonably successful. This novel was the beginning of a new pathway.

The next novel, "*Naukhadubi*" (1905) appeared in Tagore's life-time in an authorised English translation as "*The Wreck*" (1909). In it, Tagore professionally undertakes psychological analysis. The incidents in the novel solely responsible for the complexity of the situation that arises at the very beginning are skilfully arranged. They follow one another in rapid succession without intermission. It led quickly to "*Gora*" the greatest of all Tagore's novels (1909). Kamala, an orphan and dependent girl, was given in marriage to Dr. Nalinaksha, by her maternal uncle. The boat, in which they left the village immediately after marriage, sank after a severe storm at night. The same fate overtook a second boat about the same time with another newly married couple, Ramesh and Sushila. The senseless body of Ramesh was washed ashore. When he regained consciousness, he noticed in the darkness of the night, the inert body of a girl in wedding garments on the sandy bank at a little distance from him. Taking her to be his married wife, he brought her back to life, and she took him to be her husband. When they reached the village home of Ramesh, he came to realize that she was not the girl he had married, but he thought it unwise to disclose his suspicion to anybody. As it was now impossible for him to live with her, he took her to Calcutta and put her in a school hostel. He was trying all the time to find out her husband, but in vain. Ramesh, however, had been engaged to Hemamalini, an educated Brahmo girl of Calcutta, when he was compelled by his father to marry the village girl Sushila belong to an orthodox Hindu family. When the school was closed for the vacation, Kamala refused to stay alone in the hostel and came without previous notice to the Calcutta house of Ramesh where she was noticed by his rival Akshay for the hand of Hemamalini. Jealousy led him to report his suspicion to Hemamalini's father and this was confirmed by Ramesh's request for a postponement of his proposed marriage with his daughter. This introduced complications which also revealed an aspect of social life in Brahmo community. In order to extricate himself from the awkward situation in which Ramesh found himself after Kamala's return from the hostel, he took her on a river-trip to North India in a steamer where he arranged separate cabins for them. At Gazipur he put her in the custody of the ladies of a local family. The attraction of Kamala for Ramesh and of Ramesh for Kamala had naturally been increasing all the time, and Kamala who had come to love him as her husband, often wondered at his seeming indifferences and felt miserable. A letter written by Ramesh to Hemamalini explaining his inability to marry her and his decision to accept Kamala as his wife as a last resort, fell into Kamala's hands, and there was a sudden change in her feelings towards Ramesh- Love gave place to repulsion; and she left him suddenly. Bitter experiences now darkened her life, and she learnt to cherish the thought of her unknown husband. Fortune eventually smiled at her, and accidentally she found refuge in Benaras in the house of Nalinaksha himself who was broadminded enough to forget her past and welcome her as his lawful wife. It is to be inferred that later Ramesh and Hemamalini also married.

"*Wreck*" is considered as one of Tagore's most popular novel and has been translated into many languages. There is neither didacticism nor digression and the action is delightfully simple. The style is attractive and limpid. The portraits of the people of the novel prove Tagore's great knowledge of the world and his acquaintance with people. The total impression left by the narration is one of doubt whether these things could have occurred and of some difficulty in accepting the story. On the whole the story formation is weak. One may consider the improbabilities and coincidences, but there is no denying the fact that the novel is packed with incident and character. The common readers like these good characters of the novel which has a happy ending.

Tagore's most ambitious work of fiction was undoubtedly "*Gora*", written at the height of his powers and attempting a total projection of his vision of the individual's role in reascent India. "*Gora*" is contemporary and yet timeless; it is set in a certain social class, a vivid rendering of their life and mind, and yet it reaches out towards the universal. Two major questions occupied the thoughts of the intelligent of Bengal in those days- The Hindu-Brahmo controversy and the need for political freedom. In his 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'. Its hero, Gour Mohan or Gora, has been created with deep sympathy. He grows up as an orthodox Hindu till he learns that he is but a foundling, his mother being Irish. During the Sepoy Mutiny, she had taken refuge in a Hindu house at Etwa in fear of the Sepoys; her husband had been killed the previous day,

she died after giving birth to the child that grew up as Gora under the care of his foster-parents, Krishnadayal and Anandamayi. The 'secret' is kept up till almost the last pages of the novel. Gora grew up to be a spirited boy, assertive and pugnacious, but at the same an orthodox Hindu and fiery Indian patriot. He did not like that his friend Benoy should be touched with Brahmos; he would have nothing to do with the British bureaucracy. He thumped the table as he fulminated against the injustice of British rule in this country surrounded by the halo of ancient glory village uplift attracted him and this led a British officer to apprehend breach of peace to clap him into prison. In spite of Gora's objection, Benoy become intimate with a Brahmo family. He also married a girl, Lolita, belonging to it against the vigorous protest of Gora to inter communal marital connection as an insult to Hinduism, the ancient religion of India. He had frequently spoken against the Brahmoism as heretical and therefore anti-Indian, and had even violated canons of courtesy by unceremoniously entering the house of Paresch Babu, the father of the girl and trying to thrust his extreme views on the family and an invited guest. Suchitra, the ward of Paresch Babu, felt the attraction of his personality- his patriotism thrilled her and his sincere spirit of self-sacrifice appealed to her imagination. But Gora's violent prejudices not only against Brahmoism but also against the institution or creed that differed from orthodox Hinduism, put a barrier around him and prevented her feelings from developing into love. Gora was apparently indifferent to Suchitra, but it was orthodoxy that had kept his ardour in check. The crisis, however, came suddenly with the death of the orthodox adoptive father of Gora, Krishna Dayal. He had left instructions that his Sradh must not be performed by him (Gora). The truth could no longer be concealed. The truth emerges from the fog of misunderstandings. The way is cleaned for the two marriages, Gora and Suchitra, and, Benoy and Lolita. Gora, by losing all, now gains all. "Today I am really an Indian. In me there is no longer any opposition between Hindu, Mussulmen and Christian. Today every caste is my caste; the food of all is my food". And he salutes his foster-mother, Anandamayi, as the image of Mother India. Gora and Sucharita's love now sought fulfilment in the service of their country.

The political motif of "Gora" repeats itself in a different way in "The Home and the World" (1916). The partition of Bengal, the blaze of national awakening that is meant, makes the background. Some of the unfortunate aspects of the national movement—the angry intolerance, the racial hatred leading to terrorism, the uncritical acceptance of a rigid line of action draw Tagore's condemnation. However, it is the human interest in "The Home and the World" that mainly counts. The story is a total departure from the traditional form. It is built through the awareness of each of the three main characters by the introspection use of the first person singular. Three chief characters—husband (Nikhil), Wife (Bimala) and friend (Sandip) —whose separate autobiographical narratives intertwine to make the novel, There are twelve chapters in the novel, divided into 25 autobiographical narratives out of which are ten Bimala's, Eight Nikhil's and Five Sandip's—and to Bimala also is given the first as well as the concluding piece. The narratives convey a sense of zigzag motion but this merely adds to the frequency of the developing action. The characters are no pawns in the hand of history. But this novel roused a storm of controversy when it was first published in 1916 and harsh pens assailed it not only as "unpatriotic" but "immortal" and "naturalistic". Nikhil is the hero of the novel. He is a champion of truth. He has cultured ideas. Bimala is the devoted wife of Nikhil. She is orthodox. Nikhil's love for her is unfathomable. He tries his best to bring her out of seclusion, characteristic of a woman in those days. He appoints an English tutor for Bimala to make her well-versed not only in the English language but also to make her to learn modern ways of living. Sandip, a friend of Nikhil, comes to preach Swadeshi and Bimala comes out of purdah to meet him. Attracted by her, he stays longer than he intended and she on her side, similarly feeling attracted by him, permits him dubious freedom with her. Sandip takes an advantage of Nikhil's goodness and refined sense of hospitality and talks boldly to Bimala even in his presence. Nikhil is hurt that his wife should be attracted by Sandip's rude strength but does not wish to interfere. Sandip stays on and the relation between him and Bimala gets less and less proper. The elder Rani, widow of Nikhil's brother, tries to intervene but is unsuccessful. Sandip introduces objectionable books and pictures into conversation with Bimala. Bimala knows she is going wrong and struggles but it is powerless against her lower self. When she did not meet him some days, Sandip sends for her. The senior Rani puts Bimala to shame in various ways but Bimala does not care. Sandip almost has Bimala in his hands but does not ruin her because Nikhil is his friend and wonders at his own weakness. He is the extremist leader of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal. He is a gifted orator and so he exercises tremendous influence on Bimala. Bimala secretly supplies funds with Sandip for financing the revolutionary movement which is supported also by collections made by young men through deceit and murders. Sandip's villainy went deeper and his nefarious plan partially succeeded. But soon Bimala discovers the evil traits of Sandip's character, leaves him and is reconciled to her husband, Nikhil. Nikhil nobly takes her back without flinching. Bimala repented of her folly in looking down on her husband as an important idealist and her repentance was sincere. Nikhil is so gentlemanly that he risks his life by trying to save his old enemy, Harish Kundu, when the Mussulmen raid his house. Nikhil was dangerously wounded and Amulya, the young man on whom childless Bimala had lavished her motherly affection, was done to death. Bimala has learnt her lesson, but what a price! The situations, the action, speech, characters and the way in which they are developed

into a narration, show astonishing skill in telling a story. The occurrences in the story flow as in a full stream and the reader is left no time to look this way and that and is carried swiftly forward. “The Home and the World” is a beautiful and powerful narration. The fact that the characters tell the story gives it added beauty. The method is an old one, employed in English by Richardson in the novel. The advantages of the method lies in the opportunity it gives to indicate all the reactions of the characters to the situations. But there is no corresponding danger. To make the description of the same matter of several persons is interesting. But the story would appear to be mererepetition and weary the reader. But Tagore accomplished this task artistically with his powerful imagination in “The Home and the World”. The novel can thus be regarded as ‘a tract of the times’.

**Conclusion:**The novels of Tagore have not been paid due attention as his poetry has been but his novels are remarkable from every point of view. His claim in Bengali fiction is most predominant and now in free India they are being read and revived with great gusto.

Had Rabindranath Tagore written nothing but novels, he would still be the most predominant figures in the literary history of Bengal and English literature.

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