

Tagore's Vision of New, Syncretistic India In His Novel Gora

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Abstract

Gora, the longest and the most widely acclaimed novel of Rabindranath Tagore, has the theme of nationalism needed in a multi-racial and multi-religious community like India. It exemplifies Tagore's vision of new, syncretistic India, rising above the considerations of caste, community and race. At the beginning the central character Gora seemed to be a bigoted and xenophobic Hindu nationalist. But, he undergoes a process of realisation of his ideals and achieves a liberal humanistic ethics at the end. So the novel has contemporary relevance. It is really a strong political and patriotic novel voicing the aspirations of the resurgent India.

I. Introduction

The central theme of the novel has a political undercurrent. The novel reflects the patriotic zeal of Gora and also projects all the important political questions, the conflict of the ideals and aspiration between the East and the West. In the character of Gora "Tagore has tried to bring about the fusion of the East and the West." (Mehta, P.P., 1979, 28) The novel, covering a wide canvas, marks Tagore's "search for national identity." (Ghose, Sisirkumar, 1994, p.72) It also represents his efforts "at projecting an image of India which is, at once, historical and a historical." (Raj, G.V., 1983, p.40) It is, "perhaps the most complete picture of the life of Bengal towards the end of the last century." (Kabir, Humayun, 1968, p.41)

The novel has an epical sweep which has tempted more than one critic to compare or equate it with the Indian Mahabharata or Tolstoy's War and Peace. Niharranjan Ray feels that "Gora has the amplitude of the ancient epic," (Ray, Niharranjan, 1961, p. 170) and Sukumar Sen has viewed it "as...something like a Mahabharata of modern India." (Sen, Sukumar, 1960, p.313) Annada Sankar Ray considers it "the greatest novel ever written in India." (Ray, Annada Sankar, 1961, p.77.) Krishna Kripalani designates it as "the epic of India in transition" (Kripalani, Krishna, 1971, p. 1180) and, with some qualifications, equates it with "War and Peace." (Kripalani, Krishna, 1962, p. 207.) Bhabani Bhattacharya finds that "Gora is contemporary and yet timeless" as is the case with many great literary works of the world and "it reaches out towards the universal." (Bhattacharya, Bhabani, 1961. p. 97.)

Various factors contribute to make Gora a popular novel of grand scale. Firstly, it is "the only novel in Bengali which mirrors faithfully the social, political and cultural life of the entire educated Bengali middle Class." (Ray, Niharranjan, p.172.) Secondly, it does not suffer from the poetic excesses of Tagore's other novels. Thirdly, the whole novel is filled with polemics which are not found in his other novels. As Krishna Kripalani feels, the presence of polemics in such a book is "Inevitable in view of its very theme, the author does not lose the thread of the main narrative whose interest is sustained to the end." (Kripalani, Krishna, p.208.) Fourthly, it is the only work of Tagore where the life of the city of Calcutta forms an integral part of the story. Fifthly, the novel reveals to us Tagore's transition from nationalism to internationalism. Sixthly, nowhere else does Tagore use such a wide canvas, massive design, number of episodes and big galaxy of life-like characters. The most interesting factor is that for the first time in the novels of Tagore, a male character dominates the action. Nowhere else do we find a character like Gora "so masculine in the whole of Tagore's writings." (Kabir, Humayun, The Bengali Novel, 45.) In no other novel does Tagore describe the Brahma-Hindu conflicts and their fanaticism. No wonder then, Gora, is given the highest place in literature not only for its intellectual content or debates or its historical association but for its "skilful disposition of events, its masterly delineation of characters, the solid nature of its content and craft." (Ray, Niharranjan, IV, p. 172.)

In spite of the above claims and comparisons, Gora lacks the awesome background and titanic struggle which could lend it an epic dimension. However, it depicts a momentous period in Indian history when Hindu society was desperately striving to prevent its own disintegration in the face of challenges from within and without. What the novel brings out is the predicament of an active consciousness, exemplified in the protagonist, Gora who is driven to desperate straits in responding to the stimulus of orthodox revivalism on the one hand, and liberal reformism on the other; a predicament which seems inevitable in the case of any nation or society caught up in the march of historical evolution.

The tensions generated among the Bengali middle-class, the Hindu-Brahmo controversy and the stirrings of national consciousness towards the end of the last century have created the historical and social setting for *Gora*. In the first half of the nineteenth century, under the impact of Western thought and education, some young men in Bengal joined the Christian missionaries in an outright condemnation and ridicule of Hinduism. Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded the Brahmo Samaj (1828) which renounced all meaningless superstitions and taboos and aimed at a synthesis of the best in all faiths. In the course of time the Brahmo Samaj acquired a rigid anti-Hindu bias, trying to demolish as it were the foundations of Hindu faith. Alarmed by the attacks of Christian missionaries and Brahmo Samajists on their faith, orthodox Hindus started organising themselves into such revivalist groups as Dharma Sabha (1830), the Arya Samaj (1875), and the Ramakrishna Mission (1898). The Hindu revivalist upsurge acted as stimulus for the nascent nationalism with its emphasis on self-respect and preservation of tradition. *Gora* dramatises the built-in conflict, in the dialectal relationship between the reformist and the revivalist movements. However, Tagore steers clear of the extremism represented by the obscurantism of the Hindus and the sectarianism of the Brahmos thereby dealing out an “even-handed justice” (Mukherjee, Sujit, *Passage to America*, Calcutta 1964, Calcutt, p. 181.) to both these ill-conceived forces.

Gora—the foundling child of an Irish-English couple murdered in the Indian Sepoy Mutiny—is portrayed as the passionate advocate of Hindu revivalist nationalism. Though *Gora*'s identity is hidden from him till the very end, it is revealed to the reader at the very beginning of the novel. Hence, the quality of irony gets built into the narrative, right at the start, thus presenting an ironic perspective in which the protagonist's mistaken identity and the resultant confusions and embarrassments define the very absurdity of the premises on which the purity of Hinduism is sought to be asserted. It's evident that Tagore got the idea for the novel from his meeting with sister Nivedita, formerly Margaret Noble who was a fervent disciple of Swami Vivekananda. In this regard, Krishna Kripalani remarks:

Those who have read her books knew what a passionate advocate she was of everything Hindu. Tagore who liked and admired her for her sincerity and courage must often have smiled when she preached Hinduism to him—more Hindu than the Hindu: Once when she was staying as his guest at his Shelidah estate, she would insist, when they sat out on the deck of the house-boat in the evening, that he tell her a story. So he began telling the story of *Gora* and later wrote down. (Kripalani, Krishna, *Tagore: A Life*, 118.)

The name “*Gora*” serves as a metaphor for the dubieties, anomalies and ironies, stemming from the ambiguity of his identity. It is conceived ironically for it means “white” which symbolises purity and light and is given to one, who, in orthodox Hindu terms, would be deemed most impure as a European *mleccha*. *Gora*'s growth is depicted through a deepening perspective which highlights his growing uneasiness about his life's mission to revive Hindu society in its pristine purity, culminating in the revelation of his true identity, which, with the impact of a shattering seizure, affords him a knowledge of his hitherto blundering consciousness, naive idealism and blind faith. In his early years *Gora* symbolises the fate of an individual or society that becomes a prey to obscurantism and fanaticism, obfuscating whatever chances there are of finding a true direction in life.

The main plot of the novel concerns with *Gora*'s attitudes, beliefs and conceptions and with his attempts at upholding them against disillusioning experiences and the final discovery of truth about himself whereas the Binoy-Lolita sub-plot brings into focus the Hindu-Brahmo conflicts. The main incidents of the plot serve as landmarks in the protagonist's journey of self-discovery. Early in the narrative, we are provided with insights into *Gora*'s nature that he is addicted to extremisms, never doing anything half-heartedly. As “the acknowledged leader of a band of little revolutionaries,” he always felt “too delighted if he got a chance in the street of quarrelling with an Englishman.” (W.W. Pearson, 1976, p.22) Later, as an enthusiast of the Brahmo Samaj, he was in the habit of harrying the Brahmin Pundits who gathered round his father whose newly cultivated orthodoxy prompts him to nearly cut off all relations with *Gora*. The Brahmin baiter is transformed, at the beginning of the story, into a Brahmo baiter by the learned pundit Vidyavagish and *Gora* plunges headlong into a fervent defence of “the blameless excellence of Hindu religion and society” it is significant that in his writings and debates, he ends up, as the text records “.....by succumbing to his own advocacy”. Thus, it is possible to detect a certain ambiguity—though he himself is not aware of it—about his stand which obviously concerns more with the ceremonial purity to be observed than with the realisation of inner purity, enjoined by the scriptures.

With a strong pollution complex *Gora* becomes most punctilious about ritual, bathing regularly in the Ganges, performing ceremonial worship in the morning and evening and taking particular care of what he touches and eats. He stops even taking water in his mother's room, as she keeps a Christian maid and does not also permit his friend and fellow crusader Binoy, to eat in her room. In dress, he becomes “an incarnate image of revolt against modernity”, with a “tiki,” coarse dhoti, and a castemark of Ganges clay, Taunting him his brother Mohim says:

Many a bigot have I seen in my day, but this beats them all. You are going one better than even the Benares or Nadia pandits.

Gora's nationalism is seen in *Gora*'s opinion that foreign and native criticism of Hinduism can best be rebutted by holding firmly to our own customs and beliefs. He strongly opines:

.....We must not feel apologetic about the country of our birth-whether it be about its traditions, faith, or its scriptures neither to others nor even to ourselves. We must save our country and ourselves from insult by manfully bearing the burden of our motherland with all our strength and all our pride.

When Hinduism is in the beleaguered state, he considers it his mission to defend casteism, rituals and superstitions to the point of being an unthinking fundamentalist. He proclaims to Binoy:

...Gourmohan is such an incorrigible fellow that he never apologises for his superstitions to anyone at all.

By preparing that ground, as it were, Tagore now introduces the first of the many incidents that shake the self-complacency of this incorrigible neo-Hindu nationalist and sets him on the path of self-introspection.

As Gora cannot dissuade Binoy from visiting the Brahmo Samajists who are regarded as renegades, he himself pays a visit to the house of Paresch Babu where he stoutly defends Hindu rituals and rather rudely declines their hospitality. Despite his dislike for them, he cannot but be touched by Paresch Babu's saintliness and his foster daughter, Sucharita's tender beauty and keen intelligence. A strange restlessness overtakes Gora-partly due to the widening gulf between him and Binoy and partly due to the impact of his visits to Paresch Babu's family—to escape which he undertakes a rural jaunt that turns out ultimately to be a journey into his innerself itself.

The novelist vividly records how Gora sees for himself the manner Hindu religion with its innumerable proscriptions and restrictions has kept the people divided and ignorant in the following words:

.....to Gora it was a constant agony to be brought face to face with this terrible load of ignorance, apathy and suffering, which had overwhelmed rich and poor, learned and ignorant alike, and clogged their advance at every step.

Gora becomes aware that Hinduism, reduced in popular practice to "Prohibition, prohibition nothing but prohibition", has proved more a hindrance than a help for national regeneration. The novelist records:

.....He could see nowhere any trace of that religion which through service, love, compassion, self-respect and respect for humanity as a whole gives power and life and happiness to all. The tradition which merely divided men into classes and separated class from class, driving to a distance love itself, did not want to carry into effect the results of man's intelligent thinking, and only put obstacles at every step in the way of man's coming and going. In these villages the cruel and evil results of this blind bondage were so clearly seen by Gora in all kinds of ways..., that was no longer possible for him to delude himself by the web of delusion which his own mind had woven.

Reference

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