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TAGORE'S GORA : AN EXPLORATION OF THE IMAGES OF INDIA

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Abstract:

Gora is a complex epic novel written around the turn of the 20th century by Rabindranath Tagore. It is a love story laced with complex subplots. The characters engage in intricate debates, reflections and arguments. The ideas that Tagore address are all the issues that were fermenting in India in the late 1800s and early 1900s: the exclusion of women from the main ranks of society and culture; religious rituals and practices that appeared to some as primitive; the caste system; India's place in a political world; religious ideas opposed to Hinduism; Indian identity. The hero is Gora, an energetic Hindu who practices his religion in the highest manner. He falls in love with Sucharita yet tries to deny his feelings. Her friend Lolita falls in love with Gora's friend, Binoy. When Binoy, who is also a Hindu, renounces Hinduism to become a Brahmos and embrace the new religion of Brahma Samaj, Gora is devastated. Brahmos are opposed to the oppression of India's traditions and religious practices and seek to establish a new India that is embracing of all people equally and liberated as well as liberating for all.

Keywords: *Identity and Individuality, Nation and Nationalism, Humanism and Feminism, etc.*

Gora (1909) is the fifth in order of writing and the largest of Tagore's twelve novels. It was serialised in a literary magazine Probasi from 1907 to 1909. Being a complex novel, it can be studied and interpreted at different levels. The various themes like friendship, motherhood, love, caste discrimination, woman-emancipation, the play of destiny, nation and nationalism, religion, spirituality, time and space provide a panoramic view of Tagore's vision. It is rightly said by Krishna Kriplani, "Gora is more than a mere novel; it is an epic of India in transition at a crucial period of modern history, when the social conscience and intellectual awareness of the new intelligentsia were in the throes of a great churning. No other book gives so masterly an analysis of the complex of Indian social life with its teeming contradictions, or of the character of Indian nationalism which draws its roots from renascent Hinduism and stretches out its arms towards universal humanism" (Kriplani, 118).

Identity and Individuality:

The novel is a fascinating tale of Gora (literally, 'gora' means a white man), set in Bengal- a land of the dark-skinned people of 'the Indian subcontinent'. From the very beginning to the almost end in the novel, this pivotal character advocates the practices of Hinduism; but, his observance of rituals appears discordant because of his Irish lineage. Even he does not know that he is not a Brahmin by birth. His assertion of identity as a Brahmin stands questionable in the end of the novel, when he comes to know the truth about his descent. Throughout the novel, he seems to live in a virtual-real world that does not actually belong to him. The microcosm of his identity crisis can be viewed on the larger canvas of the native land, which is 'the white man's burden' (Rudyard Kipling). Bengal (or, 'the

Indian subcontinent') and the protagonist are the epitomes of Hybridity (Homi K. Bhabha) in the colonial era. Thus, the novel is a journey in search of identity at individual and national levels. First, it is about the unfolding of the true self of Gora. Secondly, it is an attempt to concretize the Indianness of the motherland, afflicted by the foreign rule.

Nation and Nationalism:

In Gora, the idea of nation and nationalism swings between the two poles (apart ?) – Hinduism and the BrahmoSamaj in the colonial setting. Gora, once a follower of the Samaj, suddenly becomes a practicing Brahmin because he feels that the conventional attitude to the religion gives him a sense of belongingness to his land. Expressing his concern, he says, "You call these customs evil only because the English books you have read and memorized call them so. You know nothing about these customs on your own" (54). It reminds of Macaulay's oft quoted statement- "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay, 314). Perhaps, this is what Gora hates the most.

It is clear that the British colonization did not affect 'the Indian subcontinent' only economically, politically, and geographically, but culturally and psychologically also. In this regard, Dipankar Roy in his paper "Representation of the National Self- Novelistic Portrayal of a New Cultural Identity in Gora" writes, "Colonization can never be merely viewed as the unleashing of processes of economic exploitation. It has cultural aggression as its necessary corollary. It destroys civilizations. It empties the colonized subjects of all their traditional belief systems, cultural practices, and ritualistic moorings. It undermines their very sense of self. The loss of 'self' under colonialism – when humanity reduced to a monologue- results in the colonization of minds" (Roy, 386).

When Gora raises his voice against the misfortune of the villagers of Ghoshpara, Haran Babu, an active member of the Samaj, tells the British magistrate, "Most people are not yet able to absorb the best aspects of English education. And some are so ungrateful that they are not willing to concede that the British rule is a matter of divine dispensation. The sole reason for this is, they have learnt their lessons by heart while their moral training remains incomplete." The magistrate remarks on it, "Their moral training will never be complete until they accept Christ" (180). In this case, Haran Babu is simply 'mimicing' (Homhi K. Bhabha) whereas the British magistrate is striking the lash of 'hegemony' (Antonio Gramsci). It also alludes to the teaching of English in India as a kind of politics for the construction and sustenance of the British colonies. Simultaneously, it deconstructs the original idea of Bharartvarsha, or, in other words, the contemporary condition makes the idea 'hybrid'. Hinduism appears to be at stake because of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's the BrahmoSamaj and the English Missionaries' evangelization.

Interestingly, Gora converts to Hinduism only when he feels bad about the humiliation of 'his' land and its people by the British. This shift is noticeable for its motive- it is not religion itself but the idea of a united nation that motivates him to go for Hinduism. Thus, he finds traditional customs and rituals as a means of national unity. When "a British missionary wrote a newspaper article attacking the Hindu community and its ancient texts, and challenged Hindus to engage in debate with him, Gora flared up as soon as he read this. He himself was given to condemning the shastras and popular Hindu customs whenever he found an opportunity to do so. But when it came to a foreigner denigrating the Hindu community, Gora felt goaded to retaliate" (Tagore, 27).

Colonialism and Nationalism are the two important aspects of the novel. All the characters except a few, who are the followers of the BrahmoSamaj, have the feelings of antagonism towards the British rulers. Only people like Pannubabu and BorodaSundori are very fond of the English way of living and consider the British rule as a blessing of God. On the other hand, some people like Mohim and Karishandayal show a lot of respect to the English officials because of the petty selfish reasons. Simultaneously, one cannot deny that the novelist has also carved a soothing niche for the liberal attitude of the Western mind. The characters of PoreshBabu and Anandmoyi give testimony to it.

In general, Gurudev has portrayed the anti-British motion in Bengal under the veil of Hinduism. He shows that the Muslims also hate the British Rulers. Tagore's famous song in Gitanjali- 'Where the mind is without fear' switches light on his ideal vision of India. In "The Religion of Man", Tagore says, "Freedom in the mere sense of independence has no content and therefore no meaning". He is of

the view that "freedom would have no meaning, if one oppressive power was replaced by another, replicating the structures of hierarchy. The issues of caste and gender discrimination had to be tackled first, to promote social and religious harmony among the various sections of Indian society" (Aikant). The novelist points out the secular character of Bharatvarsha, who has the capacity to embrace all the people irrespective of their caste, color, and creed. The novel ends on a positive note. Gora's 'freedom' helps him to see beyond the narrow vision of sectarianism or any kind of religious groupism. In the end, Gora says, "Today I am Bharatiya. Within me there is no conflict between communities, whether Hindu or Muslim or Krishtan. Today all the castes of Bharat are my castes" (Tagore, 475). And, this is 'the truth' (476) of the Creator.

Though Rabindranath Tagore was never actively involved in politics, he never detached himself from current events either. On the contrary, he was unique in his attitude towards nationalism. He inaugurated the meeting of the Congress party that took place in Kolkata in 1896 by singing "VandeMatram" to his own tune. Nevertheless, he does not favour nationalism in its narrow sense[ii]; in fact, he has been cosmopolitan and universalistic in his approach towards humanism. He writes in Nationalism, "India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity" (83). Satish C. Aikant remarks, "For Tagore, humanity is indivisible and societies such as India's could redeem themselves by adopting the principles of 'sarvadharmasamabhava' (deference to all religions) or the Upanishadic dictum of 'vasudhevkutumbakam' (the entire world as one family) which can be extended to political domain for a state of peaceful coexistence among all nations, and also within the national boundaries. It is in this spirit that he envisions a world "which has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls" (Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 27). This is one lesson that India can teach the world: "If India can offer to the world her solution, it will be a contribution to humanity" (Tagore, Nationalism 78). Tagore is more interested in the demolition of internal social evils of the country[iii], and global unity. In spite of his patriotism and love of his race and people, he, for one moment, cannot forget to emphasise universal love and fraternity as essential to our growth.

Religious Conflicts and Tagore's Humanism:

In the novel, there are Hindu-Muslim, Hindu-Christian, and Muslim-Christian conflicts. The Christians in the novel have two faces; they are not only Christians but they are also the English colonizers. The setting of the novel pin points the disruptive time when the Bengali society in Kolkata was mainly divided into the traditional orthodox Hindus and the modernized, liberal thinking Brahmos instructed by the BrahmoSamaj. The Brahmos criticized Hindu orthodoxy, idol-worshipping, caste system etc. On the other hand, the Hindus denounced the Christian ways of the Samaj. About the interconnectivity of the BrahmoSamaj and Hinduism, Rabindranath said, 'I was born in a Hindu family, but accepted Brahmo religion. … The religion we accepted is universal in nature; however, it is basically the religion of the Hindus. We accepted this universal religion with the heart of Hindus" (Azad, Abul Kalam).

Some of the opportunistic characters like Mohim, Krishnadayal, Horimohini, and PannuBabu compromise with the ideologies of their sect or religion for their personal benefits. They follow their religion/sect in a very mechanical way; they basically kill its foundation. Tagore criticizes this kind of ritualistic attitude, which shuns away the basic philosophy of any religion. Going against any kind of sectarianism, Tagore takes the side of humanism. PoreshBabu, his mouthpiece, remarks, "Sectarianism makes one forget the simple fact that human beings are human beings first. It sets up an entirely society-made distinction between Brahmo and Hindu and blows up the distinction into something larger than universal truth" (Tagore, 295). Undoubtedly, Tagore was religious. His concept of religion was spiritual and universal. Tagore, himself, had stated, "My religion is a poet's religion…Its touch comes to me through the same unseen and trackless channel as does the inspiration of my songs" (Tagore, A Poet's Religion 25). In his essay *Rajbhakti*(1906), he says, "O my nation…in front of your seat Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, are waiting for a long time, being attracted by the call of the Almighty" (Roy). Woman Questions the portrayal of women characters which reflect Tagore's

idea of woman as a complete being. He was aware that, "We see Bharat only as a country of men. We don't see the Women at all" (Tagore, 106).

The heroines in the novel- Sucharita and Lolita are the liberated young women with a strong mind of their own. Lolita even approves Gora's refusal of any legal help as a protest against the British magistrate (187). Perhaps, it is the fault of characterization that these two girls appear elder and mature for their age. Anandmoyi has been viewed as the symbolic representation of Mother India. Gora, full of emotions, finds Bharatvarsha within his foster mother- "Ma, you are my only mother. The mother for whom I have looked everywhere all this time she was sitting in my house. You have no caste, you do not discriminate against people, you do not hate- you are the image of benediction. You are my Bharatvarsha…." (477). Tagore glorifies her belief that people are above religion or caste.

India Today:

At the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence, the reckoning of what India had or had not achieved in this half century was a subject of considerable interest: "What has been the story of those first fifty years?" (as Shashi Tharoor asked in his balanced, informative, and highly readable account of *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*). If Tagore were to see the India of today, more than half a century after independence, nothing perhaps would shock him so much as the continued illiteracy of the masses. He would see this as a total betrayal of what the nationalist leaders had promised during the struggle for independence - a promise that had figured even in Nehru's rousing speech on the eve of independence in August 1947 (on India's "tryst with destiny").

In view of his interest in childhood education, Tagore would not be consoled by the extraordinary expansion of university education, in which India sends to its universities six times as many people per unit of population as does China. Rather, he would be stunned that, in contrast to East and Southeast Asia, including China, half the adult population and two thirds of Indian women remain unable to read or write. Statistically reliable surveys indicate that even in the late 1980s, nearly half of the rural girls between the ages of twelve and fourteen did not attend any school for a single day of their lives.

This state of affairs is the result of the continuation of British imperial neglect of mass education, which has been reinforced by India's traditional elitism, as well as upper-class-dominated contemporary politics (except in parts of India such as Kerala, where anti-upper-caste movements have tended to concentrate on education as a great leveller). Tagore would see illiteracy and the neglect of education not only as the main source of India's continued social backwardness, but also as a great constraint that restricts the possibility and reach of economic development in India (as his writings on rural development forcefully make clear). Tagore would also have strongly felt the need for a greater commitment - and a greater sense of urgency - in removing endemic poverty.

At the same time, Tagore would undoubtedly find some satisfaction in the survival of democracy in India, in its relatively free press, and in general from the "freedom of mind" that post-independence Indian politics has, on the whole, managed to maintain. He would also be pleased by the fact noted by the historian E.P. Thompson (whose father Edward Thompson had written one of the first major biographies of Tagore.

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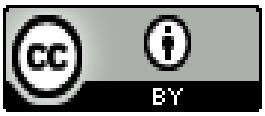

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