

Discovering Tagore & The 'Self' through Gora

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ABSTRACT

The essence of Tagore's ideas lies in the basic belief that the notion of a country/nation is not greater than the ideals of humanity. Being a prolific writer, he produced many novels which were considered to be an allegory on Indian nationalism and reverberated his beliefs. Each character of his writings stands for a different ideology and it is within this discourse that a conflict is produced, where ultimately Tagore's voice emerges most appealing and most rationally overpowering. This paper attempts to study Tagore's novel Gora in which he problematizes the case of Indian nationalism. Tagore rejects the idea of commitment to conservative Hinduism as a prerequisite to Indian nationalism paving the way for India to be born as a multicultural independent state.

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Tagore was a multifaceted genius who penned down a lot of literary gems which reverberated his ideas on caste, gender, spirituality and nation. A staunch critic of nationalism and upholder of humanity, Tagore wrote many novels which evocatively presented Tagore's philosophical and political ruminations. To Tagore, when love for one's country gives way to blind worship, or becomes a 'sacred obligation', then disaster is the inevitable outcome.

Nationalism is a hotly debated topic with no singular definition of the term. Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an 'imagined community' but acknowledges that it is notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse 'nation, nationality and nationalism.' Criticism to Anderson's 'theory came from Partha Chatterjee who challenged Anderson's idea of modular forms of nationalism developed in the West as providing the framework for various anti-colonial nationalisms. Chatterjee further argued that in many colonised nations, an anti-colonial nationalism had already developed and remained within the non-colonized, traditional inner domain where the coloniser had been able to assert little power. After a point, it was externalized or became public through novels and public schools and this articulation of nationalism, embedded in the distinctness of the traditional or the spiritual, became the foundation of many anti-colonial nationalisms. Such articulations of an 'inner' nationalism were further found in popular novels like GhareBhaire.²

Qayum Muhamad³ points out about Tagore's view that since nationalism emerged in the post-religious laboratory of industrial-capitalism so it was only an "organization of politics and commerce" that brings "harvest of wealth", or "carnivals of materialism", by spreading tentacles of greed, selfishness, power and prosperity, or churning up the baser instincts of mankind and sacrificing in the process that the moral man, the complete man to make room for the political and commercial man, the man of limited purpose. Nationalism for Tagore is not an spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being where human relationships are naturally regulated so that men can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another rather than a political and commercial union of a group of people in which they congregate to maximize their profit, progress and power. It is the organized self-interest of a people where it is least humane and spiritual.

According to Tagore nationalism was a recurrent threat to humanity because of its propensity for the material and the rational it trampled over the human spirit and emotion. It upsets man's moral balance and

¹ Benedict Anderson in his 'Imagined Communities' depicts a nation as socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. He talks of print capitalism as responsible for rise of nationalism.

² Ghore Bhaire, another novel by Tagore depicts the relation of home and family in a situation of social outbreak. It illustrates Tagore's views on nationalism and his critique of the Swadeshi movement.

³ Mohammad A. Quayum, 'Imagining One World': Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism. Inter disciplinary Literary Studies, Volume7, No.2.Penn State University Press. 2006

obscures his human side under the shadow of soul-less organization. So Tagore questioned both the constructed aspect of nationalism which stifled the innate and instinctive qualities of the human individual and its overemphasis on the commercial and political aspects at the expense of man's moral and spiritual qualities. These limitations reduced nationalism to an incomplete monolithic and uni ideology essentially inadequate for human beings given to an inherent multiplicity and seeming contraries that needed to be unified and synthesized through a process of soulful negotiation and striking of an axial line between opposites to create the Whole and whole some person. Again Qayum Muhamad points out that Tagore believed in an interactive, dialogic world, given to a deep sense of sympathy, generosity and mutuality and in which nations would not be parochial, xenophobic and centripetal or guided by mere selfishness and self-aggrandizement but poised towards a morally and politically enlightened community of nations through the espousal of centrifugal outlook, multilateral imagination, principal of universality and reciprocal recognition.

As we are going to talk about a literary piece/novel by Tagore, it would be quite interesting to assess how the novel itself led to the development of nationalism. Timothy Brennan⁴ examines the role of literature, especially the novel, in the formation of national consciousness during its early period, i.e, the end of the 18th c and the beginning of the 19th c. The novel, as Timothy Brennan⁴ demonstrates, has historically played a central role in this construction because the novel objectified the multiple and unified nature of national life. He maintains:

“It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structures of the nation...But it did more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that the nation was.”

Despite literature's such active complicity in the formation of the institution and the global acceptance of nationalism as the only legitimate form of political organization, Tagore was critical towards the ideology. His foremost objection came from its very nature and purpose as an institution. The very fact that it is a social institution, a mechanical organization, modelled on certain utilitarian objectives in mind, made it implausible to Tagore, who was a champion of creation over construction, imagination over reason and the natural over the artificial and the man-made.

The focus of this paper will be on Tagore's novel *Gora*, which was published in 1910. In *Gora*, Tagore has provided the longest and most widely acclaimed canvass with the theme of nationalism considered to be a direct necessity in a multi-caste, religious and cultural India. It continues to help us comprehend the role of the intellectual within the 'collectivity' of nation-building. AshisNandy⁵ comments on *Gora* that it gives a powerful, psychological definition of nationalism in which that ideology becomes a defense against recognizing the permeability of the boundaries of one's self, a porousness that the cultures in his part of the world sanction. He in effect argues that the idea of nationalism is intrinsically non-Indian or anti-Indian, an offense against Indian civilization and its principles of religious and cultural plurality.

Set in the era of late 19 th c., this novel deals with the inner conflict of man as he strives to distinguish between right and wrong. Tagore brings forth his ideas through the words of the protagonists Binoy and Gora. Tagore speaks through Gora, as if trying to justify, that though Hinduism was riddled by count less orthodox and superstitions, people had faith in it out of respect for society. To Gora, society was above everything and all that he did, he did out of regard for society and religion. The hostility between Hinduism and the BrahmoSamaj are clearly demonstrated throughout the book. Binoy, although a Hindu is in fact quite much of a liberal and this is evident by his non-reluctance in visiting the Brahmos house or through his opinions on confinement of women. Binoy asserts that as long as women are confined behind the purdah, the country will be a half truth to the people and will not be able to win their full love and devotion. Gora, on the contrary, draws an analogy between man and woman, and night and day. He states that in a natural condition of society, women remain unseen. The societies where her becomes conspicuous become unnatural. He Says:

“..if we try to drag our women out into the field of outside duty, then their characteristic quiet work will be interfered with, the peace and happiness of society will be destroyed, and frenzy will prevail in their stead.”⁶

⁴ Timothy Brennan is a Professor of comparative literature, cultural studies and literature at the University of Minnesota. He believes that the novel/ literature was responsible for the rise of nations. This idea is very similar to Anderson's idea of print capitalism.

⁵ Nationalism, Genuine and Spurious

⁶ Page 83, *Gora*

Through the characters of Binoy and Gora, Tagore is thus portraying the views on giving agency to women in the late 19thc. It's not only the male characters that have powerful voices but also the female characters are equally expressive and important. Tagore has created five women characters in Gora. Sucharita and Lolita are the products of Western education. They oppose conservative views of Gora that women should be confined in home. Anandomoyi is the most ideal character among Tagore's women. Harimohini and Baroda Sundari represent the average women of the middle class of Bengal. Talking about the figure of the mother, Tagore depicts Anandomoyi as the 'face of motherland' who desires to develop human beings without encountering the terrible attitude of religions, customs and societies. However, the identification of motherhood emerges in Tagore's Gora when the icon of motherhood has an enormous importance in the cultural life of India.

Tagore brings the nature of motherland as a symbol with an idea of the nation in the cultural life of India. Thus, the concept of motherhood and motherland are closely linked in Tagore's novels. Here, the mother Anandomoyi is torn between the conflicting nature of Binoy and Gora. Gora is a conservative Hindu whereas Binoy is quite liberal and more practical. However, the male attitude of preserving the sanctity of the female is quite evident in Gora, when Gora forbids Binoy from eating with Anandomoyi, who offers him food cooked by Lachmi, their Christian maid. Gora warns them of going against scriptures and wants his mother to avoid committing the sin of feeding the food cooked by a foreigner. In the epilogue of the book, Gora announces Anandomoyi as a personification of the image of his Bharatvarsha who as a mother figure embraces everybody, all and sundry, with her love and affection. This is the multicultural image of India that Tagore presents.

For Gora, Hinduism was synonymous with India. His aggressive nationalism is directed particularly against the BrahmoSamaj and English colonizers. However, the central paradox is Gora's birth which is hidden from him but not from the readers. And therein lies the inherent irony of Gora's speech and actions. The Revelation that he is a European comes to him at the end of the novel- the news that he is Irish- born and not a Brahmin. He is at once lost and found. He is so taken aback by this discovery that he now realizes how subjective the question of nationalism really is and how it is nothing more than an abstract emotion. Being of a foreign descent, he had developed a fake sense of 'belongingness' for a religion and a country which were never his. In the end, he asks to be taught the mantra of "that deity who belongs to all- Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Brahmo, the doors of whose temples are never closed to any person of any caste or race- the deity not only of the Hindu but of Bharatvarsha."

The novel thus is not just a search for self-identity but for secularism that is inclusive and indigenous' at the same time. Gora's movement from a Hindu militant to inclusiveness echoes Tagore's critique of militant Swadeshi, Hindutva and nationalism. Tagore looks at the traditions and values of Indian civilization, to work with difference and seek unity in diversity. A nationalism circumscribed by an amoral universe brings Gora closer to his mother, and by implication, his motherland. Gora, who is both centre and circumference of the novel, is the oppositional voice which resolves tensions and conflicts and brings out the unity of the novel. Throughout the novel, Gora seems to live in a virtual-real world that doesn't 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'. Bengal or the Indian subcontinent and the protagonist in general are the epitomes of hybridity 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.

Dipankar Roy in his paper on representation cultural identity in Gora writes,

"Colonization can never be merely viewed as the unleashing processes of economic exploitation. It has cultural aggression as it's necessary corollary.....the loss of 'self' under colonialism- when humanity reduced to a monologue- results the colonization of minds."8

This is a brilliant summation of Tagore's ideas who supports conditions where the mind is free. This is shown clearly in the novel when Haran, an active member of the BrahmoSamaj is conversing with a British magistrate and tells him that the inability of Indians to absorb the best aspects of English education and to consider the British rule as a divine dispensation is because 'they have learnt their lessons by heart while their moral training remains incomplete.' The magistrate remarks on it that their moral training will never be complete until they accept Christ. Roy argues that here, Haran Babu is simply 'mimicking' whereas the British magistrate is trying to establish European 'hegemony' (Gramsci). It refers to the teaching of English in India as a kind of politics for the construction and sustenance of the British colonies.

7Hybridity refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization.
8D.Roy,Representation of the'National Self'-NovelisticPortrayal of New Cultural Identity In Gora

Tagore clearly brings out his stand on Muslims and universalism through the novel. Tagore himself grew up in a family in which deep knowledge of Sanskrit and ancient Hindu texts was combined with an understanding of Islamic traditions as well as Persian literature. This is one of the reasons behind Tagore's Universalistic approach. Gora reminds the old Muslim man, who has been whipped in the face by a British, of the Prophet's message, "Because he who submits to injustice is also guilty- he causes wrong-doing to grow. You may not understand but take it from me, being meek and tolerant is no dharma. It only encourages the wrongdoers." Gora praised the Prophet of Islam for his vehement fight against injustice. Tagore also shows that there is unity among the Muslims because they don't have a caste system like the Hindus.

Krishna Kriplanai, Tagore's biographer has speculated that the theme of Gora is formulated by the inevitable circumstances of pre-independent India. He draws similarities between the character of Gora and Sister Nivedita, who was a fervent disciple of Swami Vivekananda. Under Vivekananda's tutelage, Sister Nivedita Developed unwavering devotion to Hinduism. Tagore developed a penchant for Sister Nivedita's ideas and it is in their religious discourses, Kriplanai believes the story of Gora is born. Tagore has used Vivekananda and Nivedita as role models for etching Gora's character. B.J Majumdar makes a close comparison between the thoughts of Vivekananda and the thoughts of Gora depicted in the novel. Gora's wanderings in rural areas and his empathy for the poor is paralleled with Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita's wanderings, spiritual quest and social concerns. In creating Gora's character Tagore has derived inspiration from the spiritual and socio-political activism of the spiritual leaders of India. But disenchanted with the Swadeshi and Non-cooperation movements led by Gandhi, scholars have accused Tagore of failing to realize the relevance of Gora India's political milieu.

Tanika Sarkar in 'Rabindranath's Gora and the Intractable Problem of Indian Patriotism' writes that Gora, unlike Anandamath, is not based upon "the image of a freshly coined Goddess of the Motherland" and "an act of violence against Muslims of India." The novel "rejects the identification of the country with Hindu Disciplinary institutions and it refuses to transvalue the land as a goddess. With these two moves, it breaks open the lock between Hindu nationalism and Indian patriotism and it creates a space that belongs to patriotism alone". For Tagore, she views that "nationalism was invariably a project of power and self-aggrandizement, of exclusion and incipient imperialism." It is not as easy and simple to open the lock between Hindu nationalism and Indian patriotism as Sarkar claims to have observed. First and foremost, Sarkar ignores that Gora personifies the land as Mother who, according to him, is "calling" him and he must "go where Annapurna is sitting, where Jagadhatri is waiting". In the ending, Gora discovers that the mother for whom he has looked everywhere, has been at his home all this time in the form of Anandamoyi whom Tagore portrays as Mother India.

Thus we see that the novel Gora is indeed a masterpiece in which Tagore voices his opinions and the views prevalent in the society at that time. The case of Indian nationalism has been problematized and the idea of humanity as superior to the ideals of the nation is beautifully shown. Other themes that the book covers are the search and fluidity of self identity, access of public spaces to women, how humanism transcends borders, how xenophobia is something which regresses growth and retards humanism. All these are in fact representations of Tagore's ideas of universalism. Tagore penned down Gora in 1910. Later writers, like Benedict Anderson carried forth Tagore's views and structuralized them, calling nations an 'imagined community'; Ernest Gellner too believed that nationalism was not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness, it invents nations where they don't exist.

Vast in its scope and rich in thought, Gora is a monumental work in the history of Bengali fiction. The story reflects the social, political and religious scene in Bengal at the turn of the century. The forces that were operating in Bengal at that time were one of intense nationalism and revival of ancient spiritual values and also that of liberal Western thought. What makes for great prose epic is not only its social content but also its brilliant story of soul-searching, of resolution, of conflicts, of self-discovery and espousal of Tagore's ideas. All themes that Tagore felt strongly about are covered in the book making it certain that fiction too can be a mirror to a person's mind. I'd like to end this paper by stating Dipesh Chakrabarty's remarks that Tagore's works including Gora are attempts to identify the defects in the 'nation' for the purpose of reform and improvement and his poetical works are romantic explorations of the sublime and beautiful in the nation.

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