



Contextualizing Gora: caste, politics and the nation

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Abstract

This study by using the New Historicist method will look at the novel 'Gora' as a product of its time and not in isolation. The various characters of the novel will be studied including the protagonist Gora to unravel the larger historical context rather than dealing with the text from a literary perspective. Keeping in view the importance of the novel both from the point of view of societal and political perception, the present study will deal with the ideas of caste prejudices, nationalism, women's issues, etc. with which Tagore was concerned in very many ways. The novel will be viewed as a narrative of intellectual awareness which uncovers an interface between the notions of orthodox Hinduism and the Brahma Samaj. The study will try and look at the idea of negotiations and reconciliations in relation to the idea of the nation vis-à-vis caste and the aspiration of the outcastes for self-determination.

Keywords: New Historicism; Historicity; Orthodoxy; Brahma; Caste; Political; Nationalism.

1. Introduction

"Gora" is surely one of the most thought provoking works of Rabindranath Tagore. There is an effective and strong grip, which Tagore has on each of the characters in this novel. "Gora" is closest in terms of Tagore's treatment of caste. It is very often and correctly taken to be Tagore's critique of the Brahminical ideology. The reason of taking up "Gora" for examination is precisely this. The immense importance that the novel holds both from the point of view of societal and political perception propels one to revisit it.

In this novel Tagore has portrayed the various meanings and connotations which people attach to societal norms and regulations in a very detailed manner and it is through these meanings and connotations that many a times the novel gets a new dimension and in the due process further human emotions and their implications are analysed. Here every single character is in some way or the other a representation of certain individual or societal patterns and features. In addition

to these in "Gora" certain characters can be grouped into two opposite camps that are in many respects diametrically opposite to each other and who also represent two contending forces in the society. Here certain characters portray the dominating trends of the Hindu societal structures and how that these typical characteristics entirely transform the life of many. The opposite trend that is the tendencies of modernisation is also taken forward in the novel by Tagore with the help of certain characters.

2. Methodology (The new historicists perspective)

The scrutiny of Gora stems out of an opposition to the New Critical precept which considers texts to be autonomous units to be seen and examined without bringing in what the New Critics term as "intentional fallacy" or the "historical fallacy". Here, rather the New Historicists' perspective is endorsed which considers texts to be intrinsically connected to their social and historical contexts. The New Historicism,

argues for the contextuality of all human thought and activities. It claims no non-historical vantage point for judging such thought or activity. Instead there are changing concepts of value peculiar to separate societies (Hoover, 1992). Methodologically, this study adopts French historian, Michel Foucault's understanding of history. Foucault brought together incidents and phenomena from areas which normally seemed to be unconnected; which redefined the boundaries of historical inquiry. Foucault refused to see history as an evolutionary process, a continuous development from cause to effect, from past to present, towards the end. No historical event, according to Foucault, has a single cause; rather every event is tied into a vast web of economic, political, and social factors. Hence, to go by the New Historicist logic, texts and contexts are not mutually exclusive categories. Any literary piece, even if at the first glance, might look transcendental, it is, in some way definitely connected and influenced by the social and political milieu of that time. This study sees certain virtues in the New Historicist argument that all texts (including literary texts) can be put under examination for their historicity. In the due course, this study along with examining the text, will also try to look at the issues and forces of containment and at the process of the consolidation of status quo by the dominant forces in the novel. Another interesting element which this study will look into is the way in which power is circulated for the maintenance of the existing, dominant power structures. This study, instead of talking of the autonomous "individual", will focus on "subject positions" that are created by various discourses of a particular culture as revealed in the narrative and its historical hinterland. From a New Historicist perspective, this study will specifically concern itself with questions of power and culture.

3. Character analysis

Somewhere down the line the character 'Gora' seems to be the ideas of Tagore himself regarding the situation prevailing in the country at that time especially in relation to religion and society. Some of the rhetorical assaults on the caste system in Gora seem to be in consistence with Tagore's own Brahma inheritance. That Gora grows up as a strong advocate of Hindu orthodoxy was a reaction to the increasing

challenges from Christian missionary establishments and the Hindu reformist movements including the Brahma Samaj. Gora's strident defence of his faith represents a colonial anxiety of influence, an anxiety that makes one aggressively deny the values that might have once conditioned one's perception and thinking (Mukherjee, 1997).

The relationship which Gora shares with Anandamoyi is not something to be considered at the individual level. The implication of the state of this relationship is far more than this figurative level. Tagore shows as to how the influence of orthodoxy can reshape even the most sacred and intimate relationships. Here it is found that traditions take priority over human emotions. Human beings, for whom traditions are invented, become subservient to them or in other words, human beings turn out to be cogs in the wheel of tradition. Gora's forcing Binoy not to have meal in Anandamoyi's room is a burning example of this. All these activities of Gora are motivated by the ideological strand which is adopted by him.

Gora's conceptualization of India is devoid of many vital elements and is full of contradictions. He does take into account, the important contribution of the women of the 'nation in the making'. Moreover, he insists on the 'proper' implementation of the scriptures but in this process he remains unaware of the fact that, instead of uniting the people he divides them on the lines of caste and religion. His spiritual idea about India appears only to be a representation of orthodox Hinduism; he seems not to be in a position to accept even the positive aspects of the other religions present in India. At the surface level, Gora's argument, that one need not be ashamed of one's country seems to be very patriotic and positive. But in this noble mission of making his fellow countrymen proud of their country, Gora adopts conservatively parochial ways and decides to abide by scriptural norms unquestionably- which threaten to disrupt the social fabric of the country. In this connection Gora puts forward the argument that the sense of shame and pride should not be governed by comparisons with foreign standards. But this effort of Gora, to set the parameters of a specific set of shame and pride, which, for him is specifically Indian in essence, does not make it pure and right. On the contrary, Gora unknowingly invites a set of problems which beset the entire exercise.

The very contradictions in his nature are evident innumerable times. On many occasions Gora says that he wants to be with the common masses of the country. But the path he adopts to fulfil this wish, is of strict observance of the orthodox traditions. That, in its turn, acts as a hurdle in the path of realising this wish. To cite an example, Gora's decision to bathe at Tribeni itself is an exercise which separates him from the commoners who are barred from bathing there according to Brahminical rulebooks. These people who would be termed as Dalits later, do not seem to figure among the people that Gora's imagined India comprise of. Even in the later part of the novel, this sense of belonging to a particular caste overshadows the entire possibility of his union with Sucharita. In their first meeting Gora tries to uphold caste as a creation of society and he emphasises the fact that the maintenance of the caste structure is inevitable for the preservation of the society. Tagore perhaps uses Gora here to bring to light the fact that this very structure acts as the cause of destruction of the society and divides it into various sects and entities. Thereafter, during his argument with Haran, Gora raises the issue of the country's attainment of a particular position. Gora's entire idea of the nation and the ensuing process of its strengthening are based on a narrow-minded logic, that is, strict maintenance of a set of particular religious rituals. The resultant effect of this is the exclusion of a huge chunk of people who are not in a position either to take part or maintain the so called sanctity of this particular exercise. But the formation of this entire idea by Gora is not his exclusive brain-child. He basically acts as an ideological subject. The interesting thing here is that Gora is not choosing when in reality he has choice. Another very interesting aspect of religion has been portrayed in this novel. The very argument of Gora that to know the infinite one needs to have a finite representation echoes the very essence of the time during which this novel is written. The time which saw this novel, bears testimony to a lot of conflicting ideas regarding religion. The very same argument has earlier been expressed by Swami Vivekananda. This argument between Gora and Haran is employed by Tagore to put forward the sense of disagreement which prevailed between various sects in those times. But one thing which is to be taken note of is that Gora, on certain occasions, do not completely rule out the possibility of reform in the Hindu religion.

But he supports a reform from within, being a part of that structure. He is in total opposition to any kind of external advice or forceful attempt of reform. It can be said that Gora's intention is surely a noble one from the very beginning but the fault lies in his rationale to achieve his goal.

Binoy on the other hand represents the Indian youth who are basically in a state of dilemma, as to which way to choose. Throughout the entire novel Binoy does not use the people who are acquainted to him only as a means to achieve a particular goal. Instead he always gives priority to human agency and to the emotions attached with it. The importance which he attaches to the relationship he shares with Anandamoyi is a proof of this. His attaching importance to this relation on many instances puts him in a polar opposite position to Gora. His accepting a cup of tea at Paresh Babu's house is simply a token of respect for people's sentiments and emotions. But the act of his, places him in just the opposite camp to which Gora belongs. For Gora preservation of the society is much more important than paying respect to human emotions. But often Gora's stubborn convictions overpower Binoy's reason-so much that he deviates from the path of realisation of his real self. His not taking food in Anandmoyi's room on Gora's insistence is a burning example of this. Lolita's allegation that Binoy just acts as the spokesperson of Gora and that he does not have any view of his own act as a booster for Binoy and thereafter, many a times he expresses opinions which do not reflect Gora's views. More importantly, his assertiveness is the true outcome of his own thought process. One incident which undoubtedly points towards this phenomenon is the conversation he has with Sucharita on the issue of social code of conducts for women. Here Binoy expresses the opinion that conventions are really at the bottom, and the justifications or arguments which are made in their defence are only an excuse. Binoy's unquestioned acceptance of Gora's opinions is misunderstood by many from time to time, but the entire episode needs to be looked at from a different angle. That Binoy used to adhere to Gora's ideas is, many a times, just the outcome of his habit of giving importance and priority to human emotions and relationships. This, however, does not amount to say that Binoy never unknowingly allowed Gora's opinion

to overshadow his identity. As the story progresses and various twists and turns take place in the narrative, a noticeable and profound change is found in Binoy's outlook towards life in general and relationships in particular. But up to a considerable extent it is found that he is not completely free from the invisible and invincible dictates of Gora's opinion. Here Binoy undergoes a severe inner conflict. He finds himself on the cross-roads of two forces; one is his old friendship with Gora and importance he attaches to it and the other is his constant and conscious effort to gain a sense of individuality and distinct identity. His effort to carve a niche for himself leads to certain situations in which Gora feels that Binoy is undermining their old friendship. Paresh Babu's house, where Binoy visits alone, gives him an exclusive platform to voice his own views and in this process he is able to create an identity of his own.

In this novel Tagore uses Anandamoyi as a symbol of progressive thinking. She embodies the real essence of human understanding and the sense of compassion that every human being is supposed to possess. From the very beginning of the novel it is found that Anandamoyi is free of any kind of caste prejudices- be it in the form of raising an orphan boy as her own child or be it her enthusiasm regarding Binoy's marriage with Lolita. Anandamoyi exhibits, throughout the novel, a deep sense of empathy and love for the people around her, transcending all caste prejudices. A notable virtue in her character is that she cohabits with two diametrically opposite values side by side in her everyday life. On the one hand she nurtures respect for the family ties to which she is bound and on the other she constantly fights against seclusions based on the idea of caste. She seems to have total knowledge and command over everything happening around her. Anandamoyi's suggestion to Gora in the early part of the narrative that it is a useless exercise to derail Binoy from his way of thinking; that God has created various kinds of people and that God does not want all of them to tread the same path are indicators of her progressive mind. But since each character speaks for certain ideas of the prevalent times in which the novel is written, Anandamoyi's thoughts also resonate the one of the many trends of, the then, contemporary liberal-intellectual thinking. Her acceptance of the existence of the various paths is in

unison with the various ways which were being propagated at those times and the changing outlook of the society. On further scrutiny, what is found in the character of Anandamoyi is a fine-blend of both (common) sense and sensibility. Even in the most trying times she seems to be fully capable of taking the right decisions – be it arranging for a house for Binoy's wedding ceremony or be it writing a letter seeking permission of Harimohini, to make Sucharita's stay acceptable. Tagore seems to have etched the character of Anandamoyi also as a symbol of one's moral strength. She displays this strength through her actions many a times. She maintains a very cordial relationship with Paresh Babu's family and also helps and supports Binoy in his stride in whatever ways she can. It is worth recalling the conversation between Harimohini and Anandamoyi, in which she tells Harimohini that her life is not merely dedicated to please her husband and children and that there is something beyond it. This is a good pointer to Anandamoyi's strength. But still she does not turn out to be a flag-bearer of any social message. Anandamoyi's characteristic features indicate towards the changing trends in the Indian society in the wake of the 20th Century. She, throughout the novel, acts as a bridge between various other characters, like for instance: between Binoy and Gora or between Gora and Sucharita. In due course of time she becomes like a mirror and makes many characters look at their real faces; subsequently making them realise their shortcomings and helping them to rectify their mistakes. On the relational front, time and again she acts as the catalyst by diffusing tensions and preventing situations from taking any ugly turn.

On many occasions such mediating roles await the character of Paresh Babu. Although the very religious path, Brahmoism, he endorses, promises to broaden his horizon but he is much more progressive by default only. Paresh Babu's character is free from all the orthodox views prevalent even among the followers of his creed. Paresh Babu represents the new age thinking which was getting shape those days. With the progress of the novel various dimensions of Paresh Babu's personality gets unfolded. The warm welcome which he extends to Binoy and Gora and afterwards to Anandamoyi reveals the refined, modest sides of his personality. As far as the question of giving

freedom to the woman folk, is concerned, Paresh Babu is the ideal one. Throughout the novel, even in hard times he gives and also recognises the individual spaces of his family members and friends. The very act of providing shelter to Harimohini shows his equal feelings to people outside the Brahmo sect. At the same time he is honest towards the sect he belongs to. And this quality in him puts him in certain difficult situations at times. On the one hand he is pressurised by the people of the Brahmo Samaj for Binoy's induction into the Samaj and on the other hand his nature of providing people with their freedom and not enforcing his viewpoint stops him from persuading Binoy to get inducted into the Samaj. His situation is quite like Anandamoyi's. Both these characters, free from prejudices, are pricked by prevalent orthodox forces. The psycho-analytical part of his character is the most fascinating one. Throughout the story he exhibits his capacity to read and judge people's mind correctly. Tagore, through this character, portrays a person who is broad-minded and in many respects ahead of his time. The inter clashes between various sects and the intra contradictions within themselves is showcased with the help of this character of Paresh Babu.

Talking about this concept of inter clash and intra clash, another character which naturally comes to mind is that of Sucharita. Through the depiction of her growing closeness with Harimohini despite her distinctive Brahmo upbringing Tagore seems to have disentangled the conflict and porous values within the Samaj itself. The interesting thing is that while studying this character of Sucharita, certain specific aspects of Tagore's literary worldview gets discerned in the due process. Here Tagore has used this particular character to focus on the conflicting sides of both orthodox Hinduism and the Brahmoism. As the story moves on, certain interesting changes are noticed in this character. With the beginning of her association with Gora, Sucharita begins to protest certain traits and qualities of Harimohini and she comes closer to Anandamoyi. This change in Sucharita has to be seen in the light of a larger social context. Tagore seems to point towards the herald of a new age. In the case of Sucharita also, human emotions find a superior place as compared to the set of pre-eminent rules and obligations. In due course of time these emotions get far stronger and the ensuing effect is such that the set

of rules which she imbibes before gets swept away and she becomes strong and confident enough to chart out the direction of the course of her life. Hence, the very intrinsic relation between women and the freedom from caste prejudices has been beautifully dealt with by Tagore. The decision taken by Sucharita is the outcome of her own realisation.

The overwhelming power of orthodoxy on a person's life has been beautifully portrayed through the character of Harimohini. Keeping in view the immense sorrow which she undergoes in her life from the very beginning, the logically obvious and natural result should have been her loss of faith on the entire structure of the majoritarian Hindu society. But in the novel the very contrary tendency emerges as far as her conduct is concerned. Her faith in the entire religious structure of the Hindu society gets stronger and stronger. Even after witnessing all the ups and downs which Sucharita faced on an emotional level, she finds Kailash a prospective match for Sucharita and more importantly deems him fit for the purpose. The cause of this behaviour of Harimohini can be traced back to the societal set up in which she grew up since her childhood and the kind of training and education which she has been initiated to. On analysing the different implications of the caste structure on the lives of the various characters, certain striking differences are found in some of them. On one hand both Krishnadayal and Harimohini through their growing orthodox tendencies create a huge gulf between themselves and the people close to them. Their over-emphasis on the caste distinction leads them into a kind of seclusion which they invite consciously almost disavowing its ill effects. On the other hand as the story develops, Paresh Babu and Lolita, through their actions try to break the unnecessary shackles of social regulations. This remains a proven fact at various junctures in the narrative. Paresh Babu's refusal to perform Binoy's initiation ceremony and his further acceptance of Binoy as his would-be son-in-law are proofs of this. Similarly Lolita's endless struggle against the orthodox tendencies of the Brahmo Samaj and her falling in love with Binoy and, most importantly attempt at sustaining it is an indication of her desire to usher in a liberal regime at least on the personal front.

To come back to the protagonist Gora again, that

Tagore was aware of the inconsistencies within the Hindu fold and also the comparative sense of unity in other religions is evident from the fact that Gora at a certain point in the novel has to reconcile with the superficial differences as he ventures out in the countryside. The base of Gora's conviction (or rather stubbornness) itself seems to be standing on shaky grounds because even after he is shaken by the distortions he holds on to his faith and also tries to justify it with his idea of nationalism. He says that he wants to share the seat of dishonour which Bharatvarsha occupies at present, forsaken by the rest of the world, humiliated. He further adds that this is his Bharatvarsha (land) of caste discrimination, of blind superstition, of idol worship. When Gora makes the sensational discovery of his hybrid identity he is prompted to have a recantation of his previous worldview. Addressing Anandamoyi, he gushes:

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 own Bharatvarsha.

4. The unresolved questions

This study comes across a certain set of unresolved and uncomfortable questions, as the novel ends. The first question which comes to mind is concerning Gora. In the last part of the novel Gora comes to know that he was born of Irish parents who had died and that Krishnadayal Babu and Anandamoyi reared him up as their child. After this shocking discovery of his real identity Gora goes to Paresh Babu's house and states that now he has gained actual freedom and from now onwards he has no fear of any kind of contamination or being declared an outcaste. But the intriguing question here is that, what if Gora were a child of lower caste parents brought up by a Brahmin couple? How would he have reacted to that? Would his political imagination get turned upside down or would he take the refuge of the Brahmo Samaj to create a different identity of his own? What would have been his political and social take on the issue of the preservation and expansion of the Hindu religion and the subsequent structuring of the country at both political and social levels? Would his not being a

Brahmin but a 'mleccha' actually free him from the clutches of the orthodox tendencies? Does his present state elevate him to the position of an observer who has basically nothing to do with the socio-religious structure of the would-be-nation? Regarding Krishnadayal certain questions do come to mind. Had Gora been a Dalit, what would have been Krishnadayal's attitude towards Gora after he began to follow the orthodox set of norms and regulations regarding contamination and purity? Does Gora's foreign origin give him an edge over a Dalit as far as Krishnadayal's behaviour towards him is concerned? Why did Krishnadayal have to reveal Gora's real identity only before death? Is it merely Tagore's poetic justice? This contention grows stronger as an attempt is made to compare Gora with a minor, subaltern character 'Panchu' in *Ghare Baire*.

5. The idea of the nation

In Tagore there is an idea of a nation which is based on the development of the self and the unshackling of the self from the societal and religious bonds. Though Indian patriotism had already become a pervasive word, especially during the Swadeshi movement it had not conceptually separated itself out from Hindu nationalism and that the movement remained mortgaged to the symbols of Hindu nationalism. 'Gora' in this sense fashions a significantly new political imaginary and in a contrapuntal mode offers a radically new way of being an Indian patriot (Sarkar, 2009). But interestingly there is also an element of 'submissiveness' in the subaltern characters of Tagore. One of the prominent examples is Panchu in *Ghare Baire* (1915/1916). Panchu does not rebel because he cannot. Panchu is basically a passive and placid character, weak and vulnerable (Bandyopadhyay, 2007). Interestingly this vulnerability and weakness is also seen in Gora more overtly as the novel progresses. Although at first instance Gora might seem to be a rebellious character but on deeper examination we find that he is actually extremely submissive to the established norms of religion and society. Even after he discovers his real identity he does not 'rebel' in the strict of the term, instead he tries to find solace and relevance in a reformulated and restructured idea of the nation by

¹ Pearson, W.W. Gora. London: Macmillan, p. 407

exemplifying Anandamoyi as the ideal representation of that idea of the nation. It seems that Tagore on his part was unable to recognise (or rather imagine) the very fact that the outcastes are capable of having agency. The sanctity of the nation as an object is highlighted which demands allegiance in a degree higher than the contesting claims of the various parts which constitute it. Here Tagore's uncharacteristic affirmation seems to be almost in unison with Gandhi. Like Gandhi, he subscribed to the idea of caste as the basic principle which informed the harmonious co-existence of the diverse constituencies that comprised Hindu society in India. He focused on the divisive and destructive potential of the caste hierarchy. This perspective was rooted in his perception of the degeneration of Indian society from its original Vedic conception. For he felt that Vedic caste had promoted social integration, but over time caste had mutated into a structure of rigid, immutable gradations segregating entire categories of the population from one another (Basu, 2012). The basic premise of his opinion is based on the idea of 'segregation', but the element which seems to be missing is the acknowledgement of the fact that the outcastes also possess the aspiration for self-determination. What is seen in the novel is the idea of 'negotiation' and 'renegotiation'. The sanctity of the idea of the nation is upheld at every point, the maintenance of which is the responsibility of the characters including Gora. The characters indulge themselves in 'negotiation' and 'renegotiation' to maintain that inviolability of the idea of the 'nation'.

6. Conclusion

Though some of the important questions do remain unanswered in the novel but it can be said that "Gora" is surely a milestone in the literary career of Rabindranath Tagore both from the point of view of his quality and content of presentation. Gora as a novel brings forth a world where ideas are contested and reformulated. It is a literary piece which is surely thought provoking and a mirror to the society at large. In Rabindranath Tagore's novel Gora (1910), a fable of nativity is used to test notions of home, place, family, and above all the magical or accidental liaisons of narrative. What is witnessed in the novel is a radical dissolution or disintegration of the categories of nation and narrative at the very site of their inscription (Chaudhuri, 2012). In this novel one gets a panoramic view of Tagore's literary capabilities, wherein he deals with various issues like spirituality, caste issue, nationalism, woman empowerment, etc. 'Gora' constitutes Tagore's vision of a Greater India which transcends the barriers of caste and race and postulates an openness or receptivity of mind that makes for a resilience and vitality responsible for its survival through shifts of history (Raj, 1983). Gora can surely be termed as an epic of intellectual awareness wherein an interface between the notions of orthodox Hinduism and the Brahmo Samaj is witnessed. It can be said without an iota of doubt that the issues raised by Tagore in the novel is surely of immense importance even in the contemporary society albeit in a slightly reformulated version.

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