

# Tagore Creates Nation Through Purusha and Prakriti Synthesis

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper is an essay in miniature proposing to illuminate on the debate about the cultural identity of India, the place of religion, caste, class and gender in it, initiated by Rabindranath Tagore in his novel ‘Gora’ (1909) at the beginning of the twentieth century. Situated within the larger conflict between modernisation and the Hindu tradition – inevitable in a British-occupied India further complicated the question of freedom, gender’s role in nation-building and selfhood. The author here goes on to explode the fallacy of the supposedly inclusive western ideals which alienate a few from the millions of Indians as also the negative social consequences of accepting uncritically a monolithic Hindu tradition. Thus *Gora* as a novel attacks the absurdity of looking at cultural options with characters possessing contesting ideologies and aims not at individual, static utterances, but at dialogic negotiations in understanding the creation of a new revived nation free of confronting socio-political ideologies and the role of gender in it. That the main protagonist Gora recognizes the intellectual woman and thinking human being in Sucharita is indicative of accepting prakriti– the feminine principle of creation as well. Thus prakriti, the feminine principle of creation in Sucharita affects Gora’s ideology of defensive orthodoxy, subtly and indirectly, propelling him towards sympathy and understanding of Bharatvarsha, the gendered way.

## INTRODUCTION

Tagore, apart from being a poet and lyricist, has left behind a rich legacy of dramas, essays, short stories, novels, letters, diaries, sketches, memoirs, biographies, and last but not the least, paintings.

Furthermore, he was a socio-political thinker of significance whose thoughts impacted the contemporary milieu to the extent that the otherwise conservative mindset of the Brahmo Samaj thinkers became more Catholic in outlook and the anti-partition or Swadeshi fervour between 1905 and 1909 was impacted by his patriotic writings rooted in practical idealism and preaching the essence of brotherhood across social stratifications.

Thus Tagore at times supported as also differed at times as a political ideologue with Gandhi in the arena of politics, nationalist feeling and social reform.

Though Tagore’s critics were perplexed in comprehending his point of view, he championed the cause of nation, nationalism and the role of women in realizing the nation from a vantage point of transnational inclusiveness that appeared rather radical, almost reactionary at a time in history when India was under British subjugation.

It is at this vantage point that Tagore’s *Gora* was etched out as a natural culmination of the cultural reawakening of India, ignited partly by contact with the West, to effect consciousness about societal evils, exploitative nationalism, religious conservatism, and conservative gender relations. Tagore actually

emphasized the importance of a confluence of diverse cultures and mutual harmony between people of all races and classes.

Gora propagates this message of syncretism mirroring the socio-cultural tensions of the late 1870s and early 1880s with confrontations between casteist Hindu practices and liberal Brahmo beliefs in the backdrop of Bengal Renaissance, as a quest for a reformed religious doctrine.

### **TAGORE: RELIGION, NATION AND OTHER MODERN THINKERS**

Tagore predominantly views Hindu religion and culture bearing close affinity to the liberal face of contemporary Hinduism. Tagore understood religion to be mental, moral, spiritual liberation of the whole mankind. Tagore gave a clarion call to liberation from all sorts of claustrophobia in the novel Gora and he searched for a Bharatvarsha beyond the confines of caste, creed, religion, gender and nationality.

In Gora, as it is in his two other political novels '**Ghare Baire**' (**Home and the World**) and '**Char Adhyay**' (**Four Chapters**), Tagore preaches his doctrine of harmonious, inclusive, humanistic, cosmopolitan '**Nation**' with women playing a meaningful role in '**Nation- building**'.

Some of the contemporary modern thinkers, such as, Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Timothy Brennan defined nation, nationality and nationalism in diverse ways, though in consonance with Tagore that nationalism broods prejudice and hatred, and hence we should seek a synthesis between these warring contradictions.

Gora is a reflection of India's casteist politics and the anomalies it carries with itself. Tagore found the caste system repressive and opined that India should resurrect herself from such a social anathema, educating and liberating people to rise above social inequality of casteism.

Gora was thus penned in the backdrop of a social and even intellectually sterile wasteland of conservative, exclusive and disharmonious India where Tagore initiates a debate about India's cultural identity, place of religion, caste, class and even the location of gender against an imperialist regime, lacking self-determination. The debate is initiated through the principal male characters, Gora and Binoy, and other prominent male and female characters of radical outlook seeking Tagore's syncretic Bharatvarsha.

Anandamoyee, etched after Ma Sarada, is placed on a pedestal by Tagore, far above the stature of learned, outgoing but conservative men, to the level of a deity, who should appropriately be eulogised.

Such radical humanistic outlook of the mother in Anandamoyee is naturally an inspiration to other nineteenth century women portrayed as prominent characters in Gora. Tagore's own observation about the most enlightened of women characters in Gora reads, Sucharita had begun the conversation so naturally and without reservation that Binoy did not know how to join in.

About Sucharita's enriching interaction with Gora Tagore observes, Sucharita's modern outlook opens her up in an interaction with the protagonist Gora, when she disagrees with the latter on social and religious issues but reciprocates her feelings of oneness with the country and her common folk.

Anandamoyee rebels questioning the efficacy of conventional issues, religious practices and dogmas at the cost of humanity and the other women march behind her socializing with educated men without reservation and social taboo.

Gora is enlightened by Sucharita's adherence to Gora's vision of Bharatvarsha and instantly shrugs off his conservative disposition about women's education by realizing the truth of man-woman emotional attachment and one's emotional attachment towards one's own country.

Here the affair of educating women for a greater role in the affairs of the world shakes Gora's consciousness considerably. Tagore is seen smoothly chiselling out Gora into an intricate shape from a traditional one to be liberal enough in his willingness to closely interact with the modern, progressive and emancipated Sucharita.

Being inspired thus Gora invites Sucharita in his effort towards nation-building when Gora says,

**[...] "You must realise that Bharat possesses a special nature, a special power, a special truth – and only by the fullest manifestation of all these will Bharat be preserved and achieve its fulfilment. If we have not learnt this lesson by reading the history of the English people, then we have learnt the wrong lesson."**

### **From Hindu Bharatvarsha to Humanistic Bharatvarsha**

Gora reacts when Haran alias Panu Babu, a Brahmo loyalist, compares Bengali civil servants to the British ones and condemns Bengalees of indulging in meaningless customs.

Gora's face reddened increasingly as he listened. Controlling his leonine voice as well as he could, he broke into Haran's tirade: **"If that is truly what you think, aren't you ashamed to sit here comfortably munching bread?"**<sup>1</sup>

To Haran's indictment of Bengalees for practising meaningless customs.

Gora said, **"You call these customs evil Only because the English books you have read and memorised call them so. You know nothing about these customs on your own. You will earn the right to talk like this only when you are able to condemn the evil customs of the English in the same way."**<sup>2</sup>

Out on a pilgrimage tour to Tribeni on the Ganga, Gora meets the much humiliated and victimized common folk in the backdrop of the British Raj. Touring on a steamer on a day of solar eclipse Gora experienced the plight of common folk, men and women, pushed and shoved like animals by Khalasis into the lower chambers of the steamer, much to the entertainment of an Englishman and a sycophant middle-class Bengali individual, enjoying the luxury of the first-class chamber.

Despite Gora's conservative, class and caste-ridden Hindu vision of India, his pilgrimage outside the bookish, virtual India, gave him the acquaintance of a harmonious, inclusive India. Notwithstanding Gora's rigid beliefs, his attacking Haran Babu reveals his nationalistic outlook. In response to Haran Babu's criticism of Hindu religious customs as meaningless and an indication of regressive Bengali attitude, Gora upholds the customs as an identity of the Hindu culture. Attacking Haran Babu scathingly, Gora exposes the former's ignorance of his own customs and conviction as well as his servility towards Westernized education. Though Tagore places Gora, here, on an elevated pedestal as a champion of the cause of India's cultural heritage, Gora's frequent criticism of Western education and the British hegemony speaks of Tagore's own ambivalence. Tagore, in an essay written before Gora, in the early years of the twentieth century, had reflected on the waning of the euphoria that the first flush of English education had created in Bengal, emphasizing the need for introspection at this juncture.<sup>3</sup>

The time has come now to discuss the change because an element of doubt has certainly crept in. We seem to be sitting undecided at the crossroads of ancient India and modern civilization. Even a few years ago our educated people had no genuine hesitation. Whatever the rationalists might have professed verbally, their faith in Western values was unshakable.

[...] We were spellbound by Europe. We contrasted the generosity of that civilization with the narrow-mindedness of our own, and applauded the West.<sup>4</sup>

The following arguments in the essay, by Tagore, are conspicuous about his end-century disillusionment of Western inclusivity, despite our inheritance of Western values of equality, which Tagore himself confronts in Gora's pilgrimage tour on a steamer to Tribeni. Tagore actually exposes the fallacy of fantastic expectation and the ludicrousness of gazing at the cultural alternatives, being too hopeful about English education with its unavoidable consequence – alienation of a few Indians from the multitude – could be as much threatening as accepting uncritically a monolithic Hindu tradition with its stratified social divisions and frozen customs.

Thus, Gora's outside venture somewhat affects his inflexible vision of the country and his analysis of the reality of woman's love, as he interacts with Binoy,

[...] **“This must be why Ishwar has given man limited sight that cannot see distant objects too well, and confused him by making all truths apparent. We must opt for one particular perspective-and give up the desire to see everything – or else we shall never find the truth.”**<sup>5</sup>

On Binoy's particular experience of the truth of love for a woman and his particular love for the country, Gora says,

[...] **“So far you were quite content with what You read in books about love for a woman- I too know about love for one's country only From reading books. When you actually experienced such love, you know immediately how much more real it is than what the books had told you. It occupies your entire world; there is no place where you can escape from it. Similarly, once love for my country becomes so overwhelmingly evident to me, I too will not to be able to escape.”**<sup>6</sup>

Gora's interaction with Binoy here revealing more about his analysis of the reality of a woman's love and the reality of patriotism; one complementing the other, is an outcome of his sojourn, physically and intellectually, both within and outside his domestic periphery. The outcome affects his inflexible vision of the country as a whole, which cannot be ignored. This is also a clear reflection of Tagore's own vision of the reality of woman's love inspiring man in his venture as also of the reality of national consciousness. This logical vision of Tagore of the **‘Nation and Gender’** is seen here gradually percolating the psyche of Gora.

The long interaction between Gora and Binoy, on the terrace of the former's house, comes as a revelation to Gora as the ray of light from the east at early dawn

pierced the top of his head and sprang up like a slender lotus-stem from which a radiant lotus bloomed and spread to cover the entire sky. His sense of being alive, his whole consciousness, the power of all his faculties, exhausted themselves in the supreme bliss of this vision.<sup>7</sup>

We really do not know if Tagore referring to the phrase **‘the ray of light from the east at early dawn’** signified Eastern Upanishadic wisdom to be cemented with liberal Western scientific thought for the realisation of Nation or not. However, **‘the ray of light from the east at early dawn’** might have truly dawned upon Gora’s otherwise conservative intellect that has assisted him to come out of his domestic **‘periphery’** and proceed gradually towards the **‘centre’** of real India, as he reached out to liberal Brahmo Poresh Babu and his Western – educated, liberal daughters. This outreach comes as such a revelation to Gora that it furthers graphically his realization of Bharatvarsha to a pan - India vision. Gora’s outreach from **‘periphery’** to **‘centre’** is actually a quest, a sojourn within.

In the backdrop of Gora’s ambivalence, a sojourn from without to within, Brahmo Poresh Babu shares his religious consciousness with his adopted, progressive Hindu daughter Sucharita, as he reflects,

**“I have already told you these are not serious reasons, only the external ones. These obstacles could be ignored. But there is a deep inner reason. There is no way of entering the Hindu community. At least there is no main entrance: there may be a backdoor. This community is not for all mankind-it is only for those who happen to be born as Hindus.”<sup>8</sup>**

Sucharita said,

**“All communities are like that.”<sup>9</sup>**

Poresh Babu said,

**“No. No major community is like that. The main doors of the Muslim community is open to every human being. The Khristian community also welcomes everybody. If I want to become British,\* that is not entirely impossible. I could Become part of British society by living in England And by adhering to its customs – I wouldn’t Even have to become a Khristan for this.”<sup>10</sup>**

The above-mentioned extracts refer to a liberal-minded, interactive discussion between the enlightened Brahmo Poresh Babu and his progressive, Western-educated, adopted Hindu daughter Sucharita. Poresh Babu’s enlightened observation reflects on the casteist Hindu tradition, as against other liberal, inclusive communal beliefs. Though his observation is very blunt, it appears in the backdrop of aggressive, conservative, and fanatical Gora’s refusal to accept Poresh Babu’s invitation on the occasion of Binoy’s marriage to Lolita.

At this juncture, Krisnadayal, Gora’s father reveals Gora’s real identity as an orphan child of Irish parents shattering the latter’s casteist vision of the Nation and when Gora meets Anandamoyee, finally in the Epilogue, Tagore hints at real India as Gora tells Anandamoyee

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...<sup>11</sup>

Here, a devastated Gora in his conservative Hindu belief meets Anandamoyee, his ‘**real mother**’, accepting here as the real mother and the woman in Lachmiya, the Christian maid of the house, as an intrinsic part of ideal, true India.

It is on this historic revelation that the following extracts from ‘Gora’, connecting Tagore’s vision of Nation with Gender needs to be examined.

Through interplay of characters and introspective observations of various characters, Tagore, from the very beginning of the novel Gora guides us to his intellectual by-lanes that may ultimately lead us to his dialectics of the Nation – Gender discourse.

It is actually Anandamoyee the woman and the mother of Gora, acting as a catalyst, so gently poised even at Gora’s gender-specific attack laced with communalism, that she confronts her husband Krishnadayal on the subject of their own relatives throwing communal barbs at her catholicity towards humans across religious denominations when, according to her, humans are humans after all. Anadamoyee, the woman and the mother, resembling Ma Sarada, is Anandamoyee, etched after Ma Sarada, is placed on a pedestal by Tagore, far above the stature of learned, outgoing but conservative men, to the level of a deity, who should appropriately be eulogised.

Such radical humanistic outlook of the mother in Anandamoyee is naturally an inspiration to other nineteenth century women portrayed as prominent characters in Gora reads, Sucharita had begun the conversation so naturally and without reservation that Binoy did not know how to join in.

Sucharita’s modern outlook opens her up in an interaction with the protagonist Gora, when she disagrees with the latter on social and religious issues but reciprocates her feelings of oneness with the country and her common folk.<sup>12</sup>

Despite Binoy’s reference to a Bharatvarsha of men and not women, and enlightenment shown by Anandamoyee as well as Sucharita, Gora’s idea of women remains illusory, unaltered.

However, despite Gora being still ambivalent in matters of women’s role outside domesticity, the following conversation and Gora’s reflection is very significant here.

Binoy: [...] “You may think otherwise, Gora, but I am convinced that if we restrict our women like the way Chinese women constrict their feet, then we cannot make any progress.”<sup>13</sup>

Gora: “I have never said that women should not be given education.”<sup>14</sup>

Binoy: “Should their education stop with Book Three of Charupath\*?”<sup>15</sup>

Gora: “All right. We can let them start on the

First book of Binoy bodh.\*”16

Here the affair of educating women for a greater role in the affairs of the world shakes Gora’s consciousness considerably. Tagore smoothly chisels out Gora into an intricate shape from a traditional one to be liberal enough in his willingness to closely interact with the modern, progressive and emancipated Sucharita as well as other daughters of Poresh Babu. Tagore’s Upanishadic view of inclusivity speaks here. Tagore’s Gora mellows and agrees to meet Poresh Babu’s daughters, especially Sucharita.

Sucharita’s approval of Gora’s sentiments for the nation inspires Gora to invite Sucharita in his effort towards nation-building. Gora says to Sucharita,

[...] “You must realise that Bharat possesses a special nature, a special power, a special truth – and only by the fullest manifestation of all these will Bharat be preserved and achieve its fulfilment. If we have not learnt this lesson by reading the history of the English people, then we have learnt the wrong lesson. My request to you is only this – come into Bharatvarsha and take your stand amidst all its faults and merits. Where there is distortion, correct it from within. See Bharat with your own eyes, think about It, understand it, turn your face towards It and become one with it.”<sup>17</sup>

Tagore, the master craftsman, further chisels out Gora’s conservative, casteist consciousness to such a liberal platform that Gora’s invite to Sucharita to join hands with him in his effort to build Bharatvarsha speaks of a seismic shift in Gora’s consciousness.

## Conclusion

Tagore’s inheritance of this Upanishadic **‘double consciousness’**, calling for a recurrent synthesis of body and soul, is Tagore’s vision of **‘Life’** as a **‘continual process of synthesis’**, a prayer for his synthetic humanity, as to be seen in his **‘Where the Mind is Without Fear’**.

The prayer revitalizes our inherent bond with God. A corpus of Tagore’s oeuvre, outside the genre of fiction, may be further explored by future researchers, as they sift through the Indian bard’s three plays **‘Chandalika’**, **‘Chitrangada’** and **‘Tasher Desh’ (Land of Cards)**, to add to the existing body of knowledge.

## GLOSSARY

P. 47 Khalasi is a man who does odd jobs on a large boat or steamer.

P. 419 The original has the word Ingrej, which would normally be regarded as ‘English’ as has been done by the earlier translator.

p. 48 The original has “Gora said making his face red.”

p. 128 Charupath and Binoybodh are popular textbooks of the time.

## NOTES AND REFERENCE

**Tagore: Religion, Nation and Other Modern Thinkers**

**Notes**

See Benedict Anderson, ‘**Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism**’, pgs. 16 – 17.

See Ernest Gellner, ‘**Nations and Nationalism**’, pgs. 29 – 30.

See Timothy Brennan, “**The National Longing for Form**”, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (Eds.) ‘**The Post-Colonial Studies Reader**’, pg. 173.

See Anthony X. Soares (Ed.), ‘**Rabindranath Tagore: Lectures and Addresses**’, pg. 59. See Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (Eds.), ‘**Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology**’, pg. 241. **From Hindu Bharatvarsha to Humanistic Bharatvarsha.**

See ‘**Gora**’, Trans. Sujit Mukherjee, pg. 53.

Ibid. pg. 54.

See Introduction, Meenakshi Mukherjee, ‘**Gora**’, Trans. Sujit Mukherjee, Page – IX. ‘**Gora**’, op.cit. pgs. 86 – 87.

Ibid., pg. 87.

Ibid., pgs. 87 – 88.

Ibid., pg. 419.

Lop.cit Lop. Cit Ibid., pg. 477.

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6. Tagore, Rabindranath. 1910. **Gora. India: Sahitya Akademi, 1997.**