
: STRUCTURE :

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we shall;

- give a summary of the novel *Gora*,
- discuss the social, political and religious backdrop ,
- discuss the novel from the point of view of reflection of Culture in Literature.

On reading this unit you shall be able to;

- understand the plot of the novel,
 - understand the social, political and religious backdrop,
 - appreciate the novel as a reflection of the culture of its time.
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14.1 INTRODUCTION

Gora is a novel set in the 19th century India, when India was still a British colony. The novel presents the conflict and confusion between the orthodox Hindu society and the newly emerging Brahma Samaj which was liberal in its approach to life. The novel highlights the problems prevailing in the Bengali society, as also the inner conflict of man as he strives to understand the distinction between right and wrong. It has been hailed as an epic novel, as it presents the social, political, as well as the religious life of Bengal. Tagore tries to portray the inner struggles a man faces in his efforts to achieve freedom. Written in an almost poetic language, *Gora*

raises some pertinent questions about the Indian identity. The novel was first serialized in the Bangla literary magazine *Probashi* from 1907 to 1909; and later published as a book in 1909 itself.

14.2 SUMMARY OF THE TEXT

Gourmohan (known as Gora, because of his fair skin), is an orthodox Hindu boy and strictly follows all the customs and beliefs of the Hindu religion. Son of the fanatic father Krishna Dayal and the liberal mother Anandmoyi, Gora is an ardent nationalist. His best friend is an orphan Binoy who considers Gora's mother as his own. By a sudden chance, Binoy comes in contact with a Brahmo family—Paresh Babu, his wife Borodashunadari and their adopted daughter Sucharita. Initially Gora does not approve of this association however, much to his disdain he gradually discovers his own attraction to Sucharita who comes across as an intelligent, cultured, and strong woman.

Not willing to nurture his feelings for Sucharita, Gora embarks on a religious trip with his group. Meanwhile Binoy is persuaded by Paresh Babu's family to perform a play for the British Magistrate. During this time, Gora too, comes to the same place in order to complain to the Magistrate about the dismal conditions in a few of the villages he has visited. However, the magistrate refuses to listen. Sometime after this, Gora is put into jail as he helps a few village boys resisting the oppressive police. Binoy wants to bail him out, but Gora wishes to stay. So perturbed by the unsympathetic nature of the Magistrate, Binoy refuses to perform the play and instead catches the first steamer back to Calcutta. To his surprise, Sucharita's sister Lolita too, leaves her family and joins Binoy. Impressed by her act of defiance, Binoy begins to have affectionate feelings for the rebellious Lolita.

On coming back to Calcutta, Binoy and Lolita meet Borodashunadari's orthodox sister, Harimohini, who has come to live with Paresh Babu and his family as well. During this time, Paresh Babu receives severe criticism from the Brahmos for having taken in Harimohini and succumbing to Hindu practices. Meanwhile, rumours are rife about the closeness of Binoy and Lolita, who were seen together on a steamer. Binoy now, sees that the only way to help the family and Lolita, is to marry Lolita. However, Borodashundari insists that Binoy must first become a Brahmo. Binoy grudgingly accepts this clause, but later goes back on it. When Gora comes back from jail and hears about Binoy's situation, he becomes angry and tells Binoy that if he agrees to perform a marriage, they will never speak to each other again. Binoy takes a tough decision, asking Lolita to stick with her faith, while he would stick to his own.

Meanwhile Gora makes one last attempt to stop the marriage, and goes to Sucharita. Harimohini, all this while has looked upon Sucharita with subtle disdain as she is still a Brahmo and not a Hindu. Therefore, she is very pleased when Gora seeks out Sucharita's company and preaches to her about religion. Haran Babu, the dejected suitor of Sucharita, tells her that she is no longer Brahmo but a Hindu, with Gora as her guru, and she refuses to speak to Haran Babu. She goes to Paresh Babu to confess to him about

her plight, and he slowly reassures her that she need not decide whether she is Hindu or not, and that she must consider things when she is calmer.

Binoy meanwhile has settled the date of his marriage with Lolita. He is warned by Paresh Babu that he will be banished from the society if he decides to go ahead with such a marriage. As it turns out, Paresh Babu is right. The only people who attend such an important occasion of Binoy's are Paresh Babu himself, Anandmoyi(Gora's mother) and Sucharita. Thus Binoy gets married and ends his friendship with Gora.

Gora meanwhile has a change of heart. He realizes his love for Sucharita. Meanwhile, in his deathbed Gora's father Krishndayal reveals the secret of Gora being a foundling, the son of an Irishman. This revelation is startling to Gora, and he confesses to Paresh Babu, that he no longer has any identity, and belongs nowhere. In a flash, Gora finds his nation in his mother Anandmoyi, and he feels indebted to protect India.

Tagore's message is loud and clear that Nationalism comes out of choice and not by the fact of one's birth. Gora also makes it clear that the very idea of nation remains incomplete without women. In a way, Gora becomes the exemplar of Tagore's 'Universal Man.'

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : 1

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS. THE FIRST ONE IS DONE FOR YOU.

1. Who is Gora ?

Gora is the nick name of Gourmohan, the eponymous hero of the novel. Gora is the son of Irish parents, but he is brought up by Anandmoyi a Hindu Bengali. He doesn't know the truth about his birth and remains a Hindu fanatic for long. Since the boy is fair skinned, he is known as Gora.

2. What is the relation between Binoy and Gora ?

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3. What is the point of disagreement between Gora and Sucharita ?

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4. What is the main theme of *Gora* ?

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14.3 LITERATURE AS MIRROR OF CULTURE

It has epic dimension and the broad canvas of the social, cultural, middle class Bengal. It unfolds the vast, dynamic backdrop of Bengal under British rule, a divided society struggling to envisage an emerging nation.

The major occurrences prevailing in the 19 century urban Bengal may well be traced in the novel proving there by that true literature presents the most authentic reflection of its times. Most of the characters expose one or the other side of the culture of Bengal. Paresh Babu and Sucharita present the positive side of Brahma culture while Haran Babu, Borodashundari and Harimohini present the negative side. Krishna Dayal and Gora are the representatives of Fanatic Hinduism while Binoy represents the more tolerant Hindu culture. Harimohini's character also reveals the dark side of Hindu society where a widow is ostracized at all levels. Anandmoyi serves as the bridge between all the opposing strands of religion, by representing the humane face of Hinduism where caste barriers don't exist and love for all religions is the key to sustenance. Some of the major issues have been explained for your clear understanding.

1.3.1 Spread of Brahma Samaj :

Gora depicts an important period in the history of India when Hindu society was struggling to prevent its own disintegration in the face of challenges from within and without. The impact of Western education and culture had brought about many changes in the cultural fabric of India. Feeling suffocated in the orthodox folds of Hindu society the intellectuals in Bengal people were inspired by the liberalism of the West and they had started questioning the superstitions and illogical rituals such as idol worship, caste system, practice of cruel social customs like sati, ill-treatment of widows, denial of education to women and child marriage. Since the youth under the impact of Western education had started to prefer conversion; Raj Ram Mohan Roy founded the Brahma Samaj with a view to bringing together the best practices of all religions. Gradually however, there arose another section of Brahmos who were more inclined to Christianity. The old faction came to be known as the Adi Brahma Samaj.

1.3.2 Hindu Nationalism :

Gora is an impassioned patriot, who believes in working for the freedom of his nation from the clutches of the British. At this time, while the Brahmos were busy in their adulations for all things English, there was a section of Hindu youth who followed the path of Hindu nationalism. *Gora* is quite a representative of such Hindu nationalism. Tagore however, does not endorse this view as this could prove to be divisive. The change of heart brought about in *Gora* marks his shift from Hindu nationalism to Indian patriotism.

1.3.3 Controversy between Brahma Samaj and Hinduism :

The novel has been hailed as the mirror of the Indian Renaissance. *Gora* starts as an orthodox Hindu and gradually gets inclined towards Brahma Samaj. During this period, the Bengali society was split into the

Brahmos and the Hindus. Though the faith of the Brahmos was never to discriminate against the individual but to respect all creations, the Brahmos had a deep disregard for the Hindus. Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1828 as a reformist movement. Brahmos renounced all superstitions and taboos and aimed at a synthesis of the best in all religions. During the course of time however, the Brahmo Samaj acquired a strong anti-Hindu bias. Raja Rammohan Roy also preached teachings that had a hint of Christian influence. However, in society at that time, being Christian was regarded as the same as having faith in the English.

1.3.4 Humanism :

Tagore takes up the theme of Nationalism in a big way in *Gora*, however, his nationalism very different from the usual. Gora believes in the supremacy of his Nation, and all his actions are motivated by his spirit of Nationalism. However, it is only towards the end that he realizes that human beings are far more important than nation. Gora's mother Anandmoyi doesn't believe in caste or religion and she epitomizes the philosophy of Humanism. Towards the end, Gora realizes she is the nation. Along with Gora's realization of her humanistic approach comes his self realization and he declares, "You are my Bharatvarsha..."

1.3.5 Partition of Bengal :

In 1905, the Partition of Bengal created a political movement in the state. Gora emerges as a national leader, who goes around the country side of Bengal and works for the betterment of Indian peasants. He remains a patriot through the novel. Tagore creates a picture of freedom struggle and its achievements through the portrayal of the eponymous hero. In a true nationalistic spirit, he takes a vow to serve India as her faithful servant.

1.3.6 Hindu Caste System :

Gora is an ardent Hindu and unlike his mother Anandamoyi, he practices its caste system most zealously. On one hand he uses the youth force from amongst all castes for his nation building ventures, on the other hand he maintains the norms of purity and piety in his own conduct and diet. He does not eat the food at his mother's place because she doesn't believe in caste system and has a maid Lachmiya who is a Christian. It is only towards the end when the truth of his birth dawns upon him, that he realizes the futility of caste and religion.

1.3.7 Quest for Identity :

Gora is an exploration of a young man's search for identity through the quest for harmony and unity of his country in the midst of a struggle between orthodoxy and reformation. At this time in Bengal, there were two major factions making their presence felt in the urban society. On one hand were the Hindu revivalists blindly following all the illogical norms of religion, and on the other were the reformists who embarked on a journey to cleanse Hinduism of all its dogmas, instead became inclined towards Christianity. Gora undertakes a journey which will enable him to find love and trust in diversity, a common symbol which would pinpoint the country's oneness. Gora thus becomes a novel of self realization, of a clearer

understanding of one's goal which can only come through a mature vision. In Anandmoyi's faith in the power of love and acceptance, Gora finally discovers the answers to all his doubts.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 2

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS. THE FIRST ONE IS DONE FOR YOU.

1. How does Tagore represent the point of view of Brahmo Samaj ?
 Paresh Babu and his family are members of the Brahmo Samaj. Haran Babu, the suitor of Sucharita is also a Brahmo. Paresh Babu and Sucharita present the positive side of Brahmo Samaj and as such they do not have any issues in marrying outside their faith. Also, Paresh Babu's daughters are free to mix with men and hold conversations with outsiders, which was not deemed proper in the Hindu society.
2. Make a comment on nationalism as depicted in *Gora* ?

3. What do you know about the great controversy between Hinduism and Brahmo Samaj in Bengal ?

4. What is Tagore's idea of Humanism as expressed in *Gora* ?

5. How did the Partition of Bengal impact the political life of Bengal ?

6. What glimpses of the Caste system do you see in the novel ?

7. How does the theme of quest for identity unravel in the novel ?

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : 3

LET US SEE HOW WELL ACQUAINTED YOU ARE NOW WITH THIS CHAPTER. TRY AND ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS. YOU CAN MATCH YOUR ANSWERS WITH THOSE GIVEN AT THE END OF THIS CHAPTER.

Gora by Rabindranath Tagore from the point of view of reflection of Culture in literature

1. Who founded the Brahmo Samaj ?
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2. What is the major political event that provides the backdrop to the novel ?
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3. What was the point of conflict between Brahmos and Hindus ?
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4. Who, according to Gora, is the nation ?
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5. How would you describe the nationalism presented in the novel ?
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6. Why does Gora get angry with Binoy ?
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7. What are Anandmoyi's religious views ?
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8. How is Tagore's humanism reflected in the novel ?
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9. When did Partition of Bengal take place and how ?
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10. Do you think Gora reflects the culture of its time ?

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14.4 KEY WORDS

Quest for Identity : It is a philosophical concept found and practised in both the Western and the Eastern schools of thought. It looks like a complicated idea, but it's the simplest practice of trying to fulfill the complete potential of one's self. This is like discovering yourself, getting rid of the delusions and understanding yourself as you are. An individual is full of potentials but as long as they do not assess their capabilities they do not understand their real worth. The real identity of an individual is always hidden beneath their lineage, their familial and societal responsibilities as also their religious beliefs. Once they are able to see their real self, beyond all narrow considerations, they become self actualized individuals. In Hindi self realization is known as Atmabodh.

Nationalism : It is a feeling of love and loyalty for one's own nation. It's a system created by people who believe in the superiority of their own nation over others. The desire for political independence is a marked feature of nationalism.

Controversy between Brahma Samaj and Hinduism : It was the centre of polemics in Bengal in Tagore's times. Brahma Samaj was a reformation movement brought about by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, against the Hindu fanaticism of the revivalist.

Humanism : It is a philosophy that believes in the supremacy of human beings more than any religion. It emphasizes the agency of human beings. Dogma and superstitions find no place in the philosophy of humanism. The dignity of human life is more important than any other school of thought. Even the boundaries of nation don't divide the humanists and it's a universality of thought that emerges.

14.5 BOOKS SUGGESTED

Bhabani Bhattacharya. A Centenary Volume – Rabindranath Tagore. 1861–1961, New Delhi : Sahitya Academy.

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K.A.K. Manon, Tagore Lectures : Annamalai University.

Edward Thompson. Rabindranath Tagore, Poet and Dramatist. Oxford University, Press.

Aparna, Mukherjee. The Social Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore. New Delhi : Classical Publishing Company.

Bhatnagar. Vinitadhandiyal. Readings in Indian English Literature : Nation, Culture and Identity, New Delhi : Harman Publishing House.

Bhattacharjee. M.M. Rabindranath Tagore : Poet and Thinker. Allahabad : Kitab Mahal.

Singh K. Kunjo. Humanism and Nationalism in Tagore's Novels. Atlantic : New Delhi.

Gora by Rabindranath Tagore from the point of view of reflection of Culture in literature

ANSWERS

Check your progress 1

- ii. Binoy and Gora are close friends. Binoy is an orphan with an inclination towards Brahmoism, while Gora is a staunch Hindu. Binoy looks upon Gora's mother as his own, and addresses her as mother.
- iii. Sucharita is Paresh Babu's adopted daughter and a member of the Brahmo Samaj. She is educated, intelligent, cultured, and strong while Gora is a fanatic Hindu and believes that women must remain confined to their homes. He does not like strong, vocal women.
- iv. Gora revolves around the great dichotomy that prevailed in Bengal at the time of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. It was the great divide between orthodox Hinduism and Progressive Brahmo Samaj . The story revolves around the divide between nationalism and the revival of traditional Hinduism on the one hand and globalism and progressive reformation on the other.

Check your progress 2

- ii. Gora is an ardent nationalist who keeps his nation on top of all his priorities. Anandmoyi, his mother is a woman, who doesn't believe in caste or religion. All through the novel, Gora remains in disagreement with his mother. He doesn't even eat the food made by his mother. However, in the end he realizes that nation is not important, human beings are. He declares that Anandmoyi is his nation. Thus it's a new concept of nationalism where nation doesn't remain a political entity but becomes human.
- iii. During the early decades of nineteenth century, some bright young men in Bengal embraced Christianity, under the impact of Western thought and education, in an outright condemnation of Hinduism. In response to this, Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, as a reformative movement. Brahmo Samaj renounced all superstitions and taboos and aimed at a synthesis of the best in all religions. Brahmos rejected the authority of the Vedas and Puranas. Some of the Christian practices of worship were also brought into its fold. During the course of time the Brahmo Samaj acquired a strong anti-Hindu bias.
- iv. Tagore believed in, "Man is the measure of all things." Gora's self realization coincides with his realization of the supremacy of Human beings. In granting the status of nation to his mother, Gora grants the most important place to human beings, so much so that his nationalism is humanized.
- v. The disappointment and dissatisfaction in the Bengali youth of the time was increased even more due to the partition. Partition was an attempt to divide the Eastern side populated by Muslim majority and

the Western side populated by Hindus. Gora works with the youth in the country side to oppose this decision of the British. However, it was only in 1911 that this decision was revoked.

- vi. Gora, the protagonist is himself a staunch casteist. He believes in the norms of purity of diet as prescribed in Hinduism. His father Krishna Dayal is another practitioner of this system. Anandamoyi, though a Hindu, is quite liberal and does not believe in a world torn apart by caste.
- vii. Gora's quest for identity runs parallel to the nation's quest for harmony and it is brought to its culmination a little dramatically. Gora wasn't aware of the fact of his birth; the moment he comes to know that he is an Irish foundling by birth; he realizes the truth of his mother Anandamoyi's belief in human beings beyond caste, class and creed. He understands that he is himself not an Indian, and yet he loves India; he is himself not a Hindu and yet he has been a staunch Hindu all his life. He realizes that religion, nation all these divide, while love and mutual respect unite.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1. Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded the Brahma Samaj in 1828.
- 2. The Partition of Bengal.
- 3. Brahmos did not believe in Hindu caste system and superstitions. Hindus considered Brahmos as loyal to the British because of their inclination towards Christianity.
- 4. Anandamoyi.
- 5. Tagore's nationalism is a kind of Internationalism. He believed in Indian patriotism as against Hindu nationalism.
- 6. Initially Binoy's closeness to Sucharita's family annoys Gora because they are Brahmos. Later in the novel, Gora stops talking to Binoy when he marries Lolita, who is Sucharita's sister.
- 7. Anandamoyi is a liberal Hindu who believes in human beings beyond all castes and religions.
- 8. Tagore's humanism is propounded through Anadamoyi who believes in the religion of love. However, Gora's change of heart and ultimate realization of his mother's power strengthens Tagore's viewpoint.
- 9. Partition of Bengal took place in 1905, and it separated the largely Muslim eastern areas from the largely Hindu western areas.
- 10. Yes, it does. The Bengali Middle class society of the late 19 century inhabits the novel. Their dreams, their aspirations, their struggles and their pleasures, all find place in the novel. Gora, Binoy, Sucharita, Anandamoyi all are powerful characters in whom the Bengal of Tagore's time comes to life.

