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## **Conflicting Identities in *Gora*: Contemporary Possibilities of Authenticity**

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### **Abstract:**

In my paper, I will attempt to read *Gora* as a contemporary text. Though chronologically placed in the first decade of twentieth-century pre-independence India, the text explores issues like national belonging, the identity of modern India versus the imagined Hindu Bharat, loyalties to caste identities as opposed to selfhood at peace with an educated conscience. Also, the text comes up as a saga of compromised personal beliefs leading to an inauthentic and suppressed existence for a character like Anandmoyi. Soon she breaks free and chooses a conscientious life in the face of social disapproval and even familial estrangement. Social morality appears as an oppressor of free will and gives rise to situations of anxiety.

**Keywords:** religion, identity, morality.

*Gora* is a novel of epic dimensions. It brings to the fore debates about individuality, society, Indianness, purity, and impurity. Amid such conflicting views is the practice of individual authenticity. Authenticity is a desire to exist in a society with maximum self-conviction and self-control. In the contemporary context, religious and national authenticity are of vital importance. Therefore, it becomes imminent to read the novel in a contemporary context. The *bhadralok samaj* represented in the novel is a microcosm of the Indian society with its sectarian beliefs. Western education did not come to be of much use to close-minded individuals like Mosin who understand only the utilitarian and materialistic purposes of education. They end up becoming mere cogs in the mire. A major portion of middle-class Indian society is till date following such mechanical lives with minimum possibilities of individual freedom and authenticity. Tagore is a

social reformer, and yet the nature of the reforms that he proposes is not merely moralistic. His reforms have a subjective nature that modifies his readers at the core of their being. Such a reform would never be possible unless the characters that Tagore presents in the novel show capabilities of such revolutionary transformation. Both Gora and Binoy, the rough and the soft side of the same human personality undergo changes in the course of the novel. The novel is an appeal to the humane qualities in the human being which have become suppressed under the burden of societal norms. This is what necessitates an existential revolt at the level of the individual to reinstate authenticity.

At the outset, I will focus on the character of Gourmohan. Gora appears for the first time with his bright shiny fair forehead and caste-mark tilak, smeared with Ganga clay. The bright hope and desire that Gora nourishes day and night is to become one with the lost Bharatwarsha of the ancient past. A lot of what Gora practices as brahman dharma is actually a defense mechanism on behalf of the Hindu community. His support of the malicious caste system comes more out of a desire to protect his motherland and tradition than out of a selfish will of his own. Yet, Gora's case states clearly that an unwarranted bend towards an ideology, however idealistic it may be, creates and is prone to weaknesses of its own. One such weakness is the inability of Gora to realize in the initial stages of the novel, the fact that women form a very important part of even the imaginary Bharatvarsha.

Another major change in the thinking of Gora is the shift from a Brahmanical understanding of Bharatvarsha to a more inclusive and interdependent understanding. It is the later understanding bereft of the notions of caste and creed, purity and impurity that should be held as an ideal. Gora's true identity is hidden from him until the very end of the novel. He swerves between extremes of revolt and acceptance in search of a true and lasting purpose of his life. Being a benevolent individual at heart, he considers it the purpose of his life to be of service to the people of his community. The later maturity that Gora gains develops him beyond the notions of rooted understanding of religion, community, and society. While initially, Gora feels pressing meaninglessness upon coming face to face with the truth that he is not a Brahmin, but a child born to an Irish soldier in the sepoy revolution of 1857, this very fact sets him free from the pretensions of the 'heavenly ordained' duties of a Brahman. While on the one hand, he perceives

both his past and the imagined future as mere caricatures in the air and feels anxious about it, on the other he becomes free to serve his country without taking into consideration the limitations of the stagnancy of the caste system, while still holding in high regard the basic virtues that a human individual should possess. In contrast, I look upon Krisnadayal's attempts at salvation as a dogmatic and selfish attempt at self-preservation- the kind of bogus religiosity that has kept the larger image of Indian society stagnant. Krisnadayal with all his religious practices and yoga mudras fails to be kind and considerate to both his wife and Gora. Gora is merely a burden to Krishnadayal until at the moment of his death when his fear of missing out on moksha makes him confess his guilt of not having revealed to Gora his real identity. Such existence for the sake of maintaining the rhythm of society which imposes dehumanizing limitations and barriers on the human personality is what I call an inauthentic existence and it is against such a synthetic life that we must stand even in the contemporary age. Societal sanction has a major role to play in the way we go about religion and individual identity. India, which has been a society in transition right from the time of the publication of the text till date has not gone to any of the opposing sides between tradition and modernity. However, in the present context, it helps to look at these two terms, not in opposition but in some sort of an awkward mix. One of the grave dangers that an attempt at simulated modernity faces is that of falling prey to the worst parts of these seemingly opposing sides. The receiving culture that bears the impact often has to bear the brunt of ill-formed men and women. Thoughtless adherence to societal norms defeats the very purpose of society. It makes inauthentic existence the norm and the rebel is comfortably considered an individual not worth the protection and support of the society. Giorgio Agamben's concept of the state of exception as described in his book *Homo-sacer* helps to understand the kind of plight that individuals ousted from the community feel. It is ousted individuals like Anandmoyee who are forced to suffer in a state of communal disapproval. Tagore states that not only the untouchables who are perpetual exiles to the social system but also women and the truly 'progressive' like Poresh Babu face the burden and the grudge of thinking ahead of time and society. Authentic choices enable the individual to stay in touch with the subjective pinings of fellow human beings thus creating a sense of compassion in the mind of the individual. On the other hand, a blind and slavish intimation of any culture or ideology creates perverted simulations of the original noble idea. Tagore's vision of Bharat is an inclusive one. Women play a major role in this picture. They are far more than the stereotypes of 'the honor of the family' or

'the angel in the house'. They are the very blood and marrow of civilization. Tagore's vision of his country is highly sophisticated. He has the ability to sift out the useful from the useless, the real from the pretentious. Gora who many a time becomes Tagore's messenger to the world is aware of the pious nature of Islam, the other major religion in India. He is appreciative of the power of unification that Islam possesses. Though Gora's zeal for reform is limited to the Hindu society he is not oblivious of all its shortcomings. The stand of Gora should be that of any truly devoted religious person within the limits of society. He criticizes insiders like Abhinash to the point of abuse when he attempts to pedestalize Gora and distance him from his own fellow beings. In my view, Tagore has offered here what is still today the condition of India divided along the lines of organized religion. Interestingly, the two sectarian camps in the religious tussle are the Hindus and the Brahmos- the later a 'progressive' group as a gesture of revolt against the stratified caste society. However, the Brahmos as a society are also at fault in moments when society stands against the individual in eccentricity. The crazy insistence of Bhadrasundari and Pannu Babu on initiation into the Brahmo Samaj leaves the so-called progressive community no less orthodox than Hinduism with its needless ritual of Upnayan Sanskar. On supporting Binoy's marriage to his daughter Lolita who is a Brahmo, Poresh is served a show cause or quit community notice. When Poresh saves his integrity as an individual and a true devotee, the price he is forced to pay is excommunication. On the contrary, a pretentious individual like Panu Babu who lacks civility and compassion is seen in the outside world as one of the leading lights of the Brahmo Samaj. One of the vital messages that Tagore is imparting here is that a society must change its rules in order to accommodate more and more individuals with varying viewpoints.

It is interesting to note that religion and custom are often used as a pretext to hide selfish activities in the garb of Dharma. The age-old norms of the 'hindu-shastras' (the contents and constituents of which are highly debatable) are used as excuses to gratify pride and hurt the other. For instance, the dress up of Gora in itself is an act of affront, an act of stating a difference from the Brahmo Samaj when he enters Poresh Babu's home for the first time. It increases in several other instances when Gora refuses food at their home. On the contrary, Binoy's conduct in this regard in the earlier phase of the novel is that of a blind follower under the spell of a more committed individual- yet committed to an unreal vision of happy India thriving despite the caste structure. Poresh Babu's criticism of Hinduism stating that it does not allow entry except the

backdoor is not completely devoid of truth. But, in my contention, the very structure of the Hindu society, the emphasis on endogamy and intercommunity limited interaction in times of need is at the back of much of contemporary India's plight. Influential lobbies of powerful people have taken control of the material resources. Wealth is distributed along caste lines in India. In the novel, the Bengali bhadralok individual has the privilege to stand with the Britisher and mock compatriot pilgrims. This is an appalling situation. City-bred westernized Indians today have the responsibility to look upon their fellow countrymen, the comparatively less wealthy with dignity and must not act patronizingly. The economic class must not become the shield to get away with unruly behavior. Reform comes best when the reformer becomes a part of the process, a part of the people's lives first. Reform from the outside is not helping the contemporary world much today. This is perhaps because the harbingers of change have not taken the reform process subjectively and on the level of humanity. The limited success of tribal reforms in several parts of India is a case in point. Mere economic support fails to reach the core of the structurally different society. Sectarian and divisive thought is good for none. When Gora slowly becomes a Hindu fanatic- we find him losing friends and family, to the extent that he becomes distanced from his life-long best friend Binoy and his very own mother. It is only when Gora is free of the burden of communal obligations that he is able to discharge his human functions as a son, a friend and a lover. My point is not that an individual should shun all social responsibility. Rather one must strive to be part of the improvement of society in whatever form possible. My contention based on existentialist ethics is simply that when obsolete and redundant customs take primacy in the mind of the individual then he is prone to committing more errors as an individual. Also, such an individual often feels stifled and undecided. Sucharita's example fits aptly here. Sucharita who is otherwise a bold and free individual feels constricted once she is presented with frustrating possibilities of getting married to unworthy men like Pannu Babu and later Kailash. Also, Sucharita voices one of the libertarian desires of Indian women- a desire to marry only after consent has been sought. In societies like India, till date, marriage is considered a universal necessity, rather than a choice. Women who chose to stay out of this universal given are looked upon as oddities. Even staying unmarried until a woman gains financial stability is looked at with a raised brow. This is the reason why women are often forced into marriages in which they have very little say. A life of compromise is all that is available in such a situation. Gora is a text that is a marked satire on the custom of dowry. The custom of dowry which has led

to some of the most horrific crimes in the history of India is till date very much a reality in India, especially so and more vigorously in Brahmanism dominated northern and central India. Shashimukhi, Moshin's daughter is a character who has been mentioned only in relation to her marriage in the entire novel. An ossified custom becomes so strong that women themselves become dehumanized and internalize their inferior position in a social contract like marriage. Even in the mind of a relatively free-spirited Sucharita, marriage is something which she has to become a part of, almost unconsciously. Tagore wishes to look at marriage as a contract between individuals at first. While the earlier self of Sucharita has no complaints regarding marrying Pannu Babu merely because he happens to be the first person in the community to come up with a proposal, later on, when she develops love and admiration for Gora- a human desire wins over societal morality and she defies the limitations of the so-called Hindu womanhood- she refuses to cater to the society as the '*abla nari*'. Such a self-willed revolt to raise oneself above a Nietzschean sort of 'herd morality' is the need of the hour if women have to achieve an authentic life. Woman as a mother, on the other hand, is equivalent to God in Tagore's vision. Also, he is not oblivious to the fact that mothers are also human beings. Anandmoyi is an individual who has crossed the sectarian limitations of caste, religion and even gender. Anandmoyi plays the role of the rational father and also a compassionate mother to both Gora and Binoy. Her state of mind is nearest to spiritual fulfillment. Another character in the male camp who comes closest to realizing a meaningful purpose in life is Poreshe Babu. Both these characters have become humanists in the true sense of the word. They have accepted human limitations thus doing away with the ontological-existential anxiety. This is perhaps the reason why we find these individuals busy making the lives of people around them easier. They have been able to deconstruct the Maya of 'I' to become one with the larger purpose of life. On the other hand, Baradsundari and Krishnadayal both extremities of their own communal faiths fail to realize authenticity in worldly life. It is my contention in keeping with innumerable rationalists that an undue emphasis on the afterlife is another reason for stagnancy in Indian society. For contrast let us look at the character of Satish. His conscience as a child is free of years of conditioning which has somewhat frozen the belief- systems of most of the major characters in the novel. At the same time, a cautious reader must not miss out that the real conflicts take place fuelled by the primal human instincts of lust (for power and wealth), greed and societal validation in other forms. One question that every conscious individual must ask is whether societal validation is so important

that we can put our human values ingrained in nature at stake to keep such validation intact. In my view, it is such a fanatic urge for societal validation that leads individuals on the paths of inauthenticity. Only the dissenters get to see the true meaning of life and to enjoy it. Towards the end of the novel, Gora and Binoy both follow the paths shown by Anandmoyi and Poresh Babu, individuals who have become the leading lights in the yearning for authenticity.

It is also noteworthy that the existentialist strain in Tagore's novel is not the nihilist variety of existentialism that came to the fore in the west. In the novel an existential yearning for authenticity enables the individuals to progress towards the larger purposes of their lives through definitive acts of authenticity towards the end of the novel. Anandmoyi breaks away from the dictates of his son and blesses Binoy and Lolita on the day of their marriage. She is the one who is able to go beyond the warring factions of Hindu, Brahma, Christian, and Muslim. Perhaps this is the reason why Tagore chooses to speak through Gora stating that she is true Bharatvarsha- the Bharatvarsha of Tagore's imagination which is a distant image till date. Binoy grows out of the shadow of Gora, holds steadfastly to his faith in Hinduism, making both, the Brahmos and the caste Hindus uncomfortable and is met halfway by Lolita who in keeping with her nature revolts against her society, bears the brunt of social ostracisation and marries Binoy. Gora is shocked out of the fold of Hindu Brahmanism and after some anxiety feels free to involve himself in not only the construction of a prosperous Bharatvarsha but is also offered a peep into human nature through his love for Sucharita which, freed from the shackles of constructed social morality, he is able to express.

## **Conclusion**

Tagore's dream for India as depicted in the novel is way beyond the constricting limits of sectarian communalism and identity politics. To my great dismay, it is such sectarian views, mindsets, and policies that have created a situation where we see religious fundamentalism on the rise. A lust for power has blinded the conscience of people in power. Meaning in life has become rooted in social acceptability thus making it very difficult for individuals to choose the authentic road not taken. It is therefore vitally important to rekindle the ability of the human heart to think beyond oneself, to suffer without complaining and to heal by self-diagnosis. Poresh Babu and Anandmoyi are characters who show the right path for societal change. At the end of



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my assessment of the novel, I infer that *Gora* is a text more relevant in the divided world of today than it was ever before.

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