



Decolonising the Narrative: A Comparative Postcolonial Study of William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora*

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Abstract:

This paper offers a comparative postcolonial reading of William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora*, texts separated by nearly three centuries yet united by a shared concern with identity, power, and marginalisation. Drawing on Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among other theorists, the study examines how Christian Venice and colonial India construct the “othered” figures of Shylock and Gora through religious, racial, and nationalist ideologies. It further considers the gendered dimension of power through Portia and Anandamoyi, and asks what it might mean to decolonise the interpretation of two canonical texts. Placing Shakespeare and Tagore in dialogue, the paper argues that both narratives depict oppression while also, in different measures, resisting and reformulating the ideologies that produce it.

Keywords: Decolonisation, Postcolonialism, Othering, Identity, Comparative Literature.

“Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”

— Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (1988)

1. Introduction

Literature has long served as both a vehicle for colonial ideology and a means of resisting it. William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1596–1599) reflects the anxieties and power structures of early modern Europe, while Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* (1910) engages with strikingly similar concerns of exclusion, identity, and oppression within colonial India.¹ Though the two works are separated by roughly three hundred years and by the breadth of a continent, they share a preoccupation with how societies define belonging, and with the human cost of that definition.

Both texts centre on a protagonist who is forced to confront an identity imposed from outside: Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* and Gora in *Gora*. Where Shakespeare's play dramatises early European anxieties about the religious and racial “Other,” Tagore's novel turns a critical eye on the colonial and caste-based divisions structuring Indian society. Read together, the two works illuminate how narrative itself can construct, naturalise, and ultimately challenge social hierarchies. This paper argues that a comparative postcolonial reading of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Gora* not only exposes the mechanisms of religious, racial, and nationalist exclusion at work in each text, but also opens the possibility of a decolonised interpretive practice: one that centres the marginalised rather than the dominant voice.

The comparison undertaken here is deliberately asymmetrical rather than exhaustive. It does not claim that Shakespeare's early modern England and Tagore's colonial Bengal produced identical structures of exclusion; rather, it argues that reading the two texts together illuminates a shared grammar of othering that operates across otherwise distinct historical and geographical contexts.² This comparative method follows a broader tendency in postcolonial criticism that resists confining colonial analysis to a single empire or period, tracing instead how similar discursive strategies recur wherever a dominant culture defines itself against a marginalised other.

The discussion proceeds in five movements. It begins by establishing the theoretical framework of postcolonial criticism that underlies the comparison. It then turns to Shylock and Gora as marginalised protagonists, before examining the religious and cultural hegemonies, Christian Venice and casteist India, that produce their exclusion. A fourth section considers the gendered dimension of power through Portia and Anandamoyi, and a final section asks what it might mean to decolonise the reading of these two canonical texts.

2. Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Criticism and the Politics of Voice

Postcolonial theory, as developed by critics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, provides the conceptual vocabulary for this comparison. Said's foundational study *Orientalism* argues that Western discourse constructs the East as a fixed, inferior object of knowledge in order to justify domination over it. As Said writes, the Orient has functioned as “the stage on which the whole East is confined” (Said, *Orientalism* 63), a formulation that describes not only the East as imagined by the West, but any subject position, Jewish, Hindu, or otherwise, that a dominant culture confines to a narrow, pre-scripted role. Both the Christian majority of Venice and the Hindu orthodoxy that shapes Gora's early worldview perform an

analogous operation, constructing rigid discursive stages on which Shylock and Gora, respectively, are permitted to act only within tightly bounded terms.

Homi Bhabha's concept of ambivalence complicates any simple picture of domination and resistance. For Bhabha, colonial discourse is inherently contradictory, producing subjects who are simultaneously necessary to and excluded from the systems that define them: colonial discourse, he observes, is “complex and contradictory, producing ambivalence in the representation of the colonized Other” (Bhabha 66). This ambivalence is visible in both texts: Shylock is indispensable to Venice's financial system yet reviled for his difference, and Gora is celebrated as a paragon of Hindu nationalist virtue even as the revelation of his Irish parentage threatens to expel him from the very community he championed.

Frantz Fanon's account of the colonial world as irreducibly binary, “the colonial world is a world cut in two” (Fanon 38), offers a useful frame for the structural divisions that organise both narratives: Christian against Jew in Venice, and Hindu orthodoxy against the Westernised or non-Hindu Indian in Gora. Gayatri Spivak's question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and her conclusion that “the subaltern cannot speak” (Spivak 308) sharpen the stakes of this binary structure. Spivak's warning that even sympathetic representation risks “creating another form of silence” (Spivak 292) is especially relevant to Shylock, who is granted a courtroom in which to plead but not one in which he can actually be heard, and to Gora, whose nationalist voice is revealed to rest on an identity not truly his own.

A wider constellation of theorists sharpens this framework. Ania Loomba observes that race has been central to the colonial world and continues to structure contemporary inequality (Loomba 91), a claim that bears directly on Portia's racialised rejection of the Prince of Morocco. Chatterjee

argues that colonial power is invested in creating and maintaining differences in order to preserve the distinction between rulers and ruled (Chatterjee 10), an argument that describes precisely how Venetian law constructs Jewish inferiority and how British rule deepened the religious divisions that shape Gora's nationalism. Michel Foucault's insistence that power is not a fixed institution but “the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society” (Foucault 93) helps explain how the courtroom scene in *The Merchant of Venice* and Gora's gradual disillusionment both dramatise power as something produced and contested rather than simply held. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* reminds us that “language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” accompanying the physical subjugation of the bullet (Ngũgĩ 9), a claim that illuminates Shylock's forced conversion and Gora's early internalisation of Hindu supremacist thought alike. Finally, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin observe that “postcolonial literatures intervene in the formation of dominant cultural practices” (Ashcroft et al. 196), while Walter Mignolo calls for a “delink[ing] from the colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo 9). Stuart Hall similarly describes cultural identity as “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (Hall 225), and Leela Gandhi characterises postcolonialism itself as “a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath” (Gandhi 4). Aimé Césaire's reminder that “no one colonizes innocently” (Césaire 39) and Ranajit Guha's analysis of the structural “failure of colonial dominance” to naturalise its own superiority (Guha 63–65) close this constellation of theorists; together, these positions supply the interpretive vocabulary through which this paper reads Shylock and Gora as figures produced by, and ultimately unsettling, the hegemonic structures that seek to contain them.

Taken together, these theorists suggest that postcolonial reading is not merely an act of identifying oppression within a text, but of interrogating the narrative structures, who is permitted to speak,

whose interiority is rendered legible, whose suffering is narrated with sympathy, through which that oppression is represented. This distinction matters for a comparative study of Shakespeare and Tagore, since the two authors write from opposite sides of the colonial encounter: Shakespeare from within the culture that would go on to become a colonising power, and Tagore from within a society reckoning with the consequences of having been colonised. The asymmetry of vantage point does not diminish the comparison; if anything, it sharpens the paper's central claim that exclusionary logic is transferable across contexts, capable of being wielded by the coloniser and, as Gora's own early nationalism demonstrates, reproduced by the colonised against internal others.

3. The Marginalised Protagonist: Shylock and Gora

3.1 Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*

Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, remains the most contested figure in Shakespeare's play, read variously across critical history as villain and as tragic victim. He represents the economic and racial outsider in a Christian-dominated Venice: indispensable to the city's financial system, yet despised for his religion and his occupation. His most celebrated speech directly challenges the dehumanisation to which he is subjected:

“Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?” (Shakespeare 3.1.58–59)

The speech is an early and powerful articulation of a shared humanity that resists colonial and religious othering. The play, however, does not allow Shylock to hold this ground: his forced conversion at its close enacts the same impulse that would later drive colonisers to impose

Christianity on indigenous populations, the erasure of cultural and religious difference under the guise of mercy.

3.2 Gora in Gora

Tagore's novel stages an analogous struggle within the colonial Indian caste and religious system. Gora is a devout Hindu nationalist convinced of the superiority of Hindu tradition over colonial modernity, yet his identity collapses when he learns that he is, by birth, an Irish orphan rather than a Hindu at all. Where Shylock's crisis is imposed on him by external force, Gora's is produced by the revelation of a truth he did not know about himself, a difference that recalls Stuart Hall's sense of identity as always in the process of "becoming" (Hall 225).

3.3 A Comparative Reading

Read alongside one another, Shylock and Gora reveal both convergence and divergence. Both are shaped by rigid social structures: Shylock by anti-Semitic law, Gora by caste-based Hindu orthodoxy. Both undergo a crisis of identity: Shylock through forced conversion, Gora through the discovery of his foreign origin. Both, in their different ways, come to question the legitimacy of the hierarchies that had defined them, Shylock through his appeal to shared humanity, Gora through his eventual rejection of religious exclusivism.

This comparative reading also underscores a difference in narrative form. Shakespeare's play, bound by the conventions of Renaissance comedy, requires a resolution that restores social order, and Shylock's conversion serves that function precisely, foreclosing further complication of his interiority once the plot's legal crisis is resolved. Tagore's novel, by contrast, has the narrative room of the novel form to trace Gora's psychological unravelling and reconstruction across several

hundred pages, allowing his transformation to be gradual, interior, and ultimately self-authored rather than imposed. The generic difference between comedy and novel is not incidental to the ideological difference between the two endings: form itself shapes how much interpretive agency a marginalised character is permitted to hold.

The two trajectories nonetheless diverge sharply. Gora's transformation is redemptive: he chooses, in the end, to redefine his identity beyond the boundaries of religion and nation. Shylock, by contrast, is stripped of agency by the play's conclusion, his conversion reinforcing rather than challenging European Christian dominance. Ngũgĩ's account of language as an instrument of “spiritual subjugation” (Ngũgĩ 9) captures the difference precisely: Shylock's forced conversion is subjugation imposed from without, while Gora's early nationalism is a form of subjugation that he has, until his self-discovery, internalised and reproduced himself. A decolonial reading of the two texts must therefore attend not only to how identity is imposed, but to how it can be reclaimed.

4. Religious and Cultural Exclusion: Christian Venice and Casteist India

4.1 Venetian Christian Hegemony

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Christian citizens such as Antonio control both the economy and the legal system while marginalising the city's Jewish population. Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh is framed within the play as monstrous, yet his insistence on the letter of the contract is no different in kind from the commercial logic that governs Venice itself. The courtroom scene, in which Shylock is systematically outmanoeuvred, resembles nothing so much as a colonial tribunal in which indigenous claims are set aside in favour of the coloniser's jurisprudence, an instance of what Partha Chatterjee calls the colonial production of difference “in order to maintain control” (Chatterjee 10).

Portia's celebrated speech on mercy, "The quality of mercy is not strain'd... It blesseth him that gives and him that takes" (Shakespeare 4.1.184–87), presents Christian morality as a benevolent, universal good. The speech, however, is immediately followed by an act of considerable injustice: Shylock's forced conversion. The contradiction mirrors the rhetorical structure of colonialism itself, which regularly justified domination in the language of a civilising mission. Michel Foucault's understanding of power as a "complex strategic situation" rather than a fixed possession (Foucault 93) helps explain how mercy and coercion can coexist so seamlessly within a single legal and rhetorical order.

4.2 Hindu Caste and Religious Orthodoxy in Gora

Gora depicts an India in which religious identity likewise determines social standing. The novel is unsparing in its critique of Hindu orthodoxy's exclusionary logic, showing how caste and notions of ritual purity manufacture rigid social division. Gora's own belief in Hindu supremacy mirrors the very colonial attitudes his nationalism claims to oppose: he regards Muslims and Western-educated Indians as inferior in much the way that Christian Venice regards its Jewish population.

Unlike Shakespeare's play, however, Tagore's novel ultimately dismantles this exclusionary logic from within. When Gora discovers his foreign origin, he comes to understand that identity cannot be reduced to religion or caste, but rests instead on shared human values. This self-liberation stands in sharp contrast to Shylock's fate. Gora offers, in Ranajit Guha's terms, an account of colonial and nationalist "dominance" without genuine hegemony, revealing the failure of dominant structures to secure the colonised's consent to their purported superiority (Guha xii). That failure is one the novel treats as an opening for a more radical decolonising of rigid hierarchy than *The Merchant of Venice* allows.

5. Gender and Power: Portia and Anandamoyi

Women in both texts must negotiate patriarchal structures even as they exercise real influence within them. Portia disguises herself as a man in order to intervene in the courtroom, yet her power remains bounded by the patriarchal framework she never fully steps outside. Her rejection of the Prince of Morocco, “Let all of his complexion choose me so” (Shakespeare 2.7.79), exposes an unmistakable racial bias, and demonstrates, in line with Ania Loomba's argument that race has been “central to the emergence of the colonial world” (Loomba 97), how gendered and racial hierarchies operate together rather than separately.

Anandamoyi, Gora's adoptive mother, functions very differently within Tagore's novel. She is the voice of tolerance and humanism in the text; while Portia largely upholds the social order she navigates, Anandamoyi actively challenges religious orthodoxy and models a genuinely inclusive ethics. She emerges, in this sense, as a decolonial feminist figure³ whose quiet authority anticipates the novel's eventual rejection of nationalist exclusivism. A comparative feminist reading of the two texts therefore suggests that *Gora* offers a considerably more progressive vision of female agency than *The Merchant of Venice*. Portia remains, for all her wit, a figure who reinforces the very hierarchies of race and religion that structure the play.

6. Decolonising Shakespeare and Tagore: Shifting the Narrative

To decolonise the reading of these two texts is not to discard them, but to read them against the grain of their own dominant assumptions. Such a reading involves, first, reframing Shylock as a victim of Venetian Christian hegemony rather than as its villain, much as Tagore's novel invites us to interrogate Hindu orthodoxy through Gora's own transformation. It involves, second, a sustained critique of the Eurocentrism embedded in *The Merchant of Venice*, particularly in its

treatment of racial and religious outsiders. Edward Said's later work is instructive here: as he argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, “stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world.” Those same stories, he continues, “also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 24), a reminder that narrative can be reclaimed as readily as it can be weaponised.

A decolonised reading also requires recognising the limits of nationalism itself: just as Venetian Christians oppress the city's Jewish minority, Hindu nationalism in *Gora* replicates the very exclusionary logic of the colonial order it claims to resist. Rabindranath Tagore made this argument directly in his own political writing, warning that “the idea of India is against the intense consciousness of the separateness of one's own people from others” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 22), a critique of exclusivity that applies with equal force to Christian Venice's exclusion of Shylock. Finally, such a reading must reinterpret the female characters of both texts, recognising that Anandamoyi offers a more radical critique of patriarchal and religious authority than Portia ultimately does.

The costs of colonial and nationalist identity-formation that this paper has traced are perhaps best captured in literature beyond these two texts. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* describes with quiet devastation how a community can be undone from within once its members begin to accept the coloniser's terms: “the white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion... Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 176). The line resonates with both *Gora*'s early resistance to Western influence and Shylock's forced assimilation into Christianity, each an instance of a community fractured by an encroaching, more powerful order. Salman Rushdie's observation that “the past is a country from

which we have all emigrated” (Rushdie 12) speaks in turn to Shylock's loss of an intact heritage and to Gora's hard-won recognition that nationalism cannot be built on exclusion. Frantz Fanon's insistence that “each generation must discover its mission, fulfil it or betray it, in relative opacity” (Fanon 145) further frames both Gora's search for an honest identity and Shylock's fight for a justice the play is ultimately unwilling to grant him. Read together, these voices support Walter Mignolo's broader claim that decoloniality means learning to “delink from the colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo 9), a project to which both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Gora*, read against their own grain, can be made to contribute.

Such a reading also carries implications beyond the two texts themselves. Teaching *The Merchant of Venice* and *Gora* comparatively, rather than in isolation, models for students a mode of literary interpretation that treats canon formation itself as a historically contingent and ideologically inflected process, rather than a neutral inheritance. It invites readers to ask not only what a text says about marginalisation, but what interpretive traditions have obscured about that marginalisation over time, a question with consequences for how postcolonial literature is read, taught, and anthologised.

7. Conclusion

A comparative postcolonial study of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Gora* reveals how narrative constructs identity, power, and exclusion, and how it can, in turn, be read against those very constructions. Shakespeare's play reflects the anxieties of early modern Europe about the religious “Other”; Tagore's novel critiques an analogous set of hierarchies within colonial India. To decolonise these texts, in Leela Gandhi's sense of resisting the “mystifying amnesia of the colonial

aftermath” (Gandhi 4), is to move beyond their Eurocentric or narrowly nationalist frames and to centre the voices of the marginalised within them.

Ultimately, *Gora* offers the more transformative vision of the two, rejecting religious orthodoxy in favour of a pluralistic identity. In contrast, *The Merchant of Venice* remains constrained by the colonial worldview it dramatises rather than dismantles. This contrast underscores the value of a decolonial lens for reading canonical literature: it allows us, as Achebe's image of the lion and the hunter suggests, to recover the histories and voices that dominant narratives have long silenced, and to recognise in both Shylock's unanswered plea and Gora's hard-won self-knowledge two versions of the same, still unfinished, struggle for a fuller human recognition.

Endnotes:

1. All references to Tagore's novel are to Radha Chakravarty's 2009 English translation; where translation choices bear on the argument, this is noted in the body of the paper.
2. This comparative framework deliberately foregrounds religious and nationalist exclusion. A fuller study might also incorporate a sustained analysis of caste along the intersectional lines developed by Dalit feminist criticism, which lies beyond the scope of the present paper.
3. The term “decolonial feminist” is used here in a broad sense, denoting a mode of resistance to intersecting religious, patriarchal, and colonial authority, rather than as a reference to any single, delimited theoretical school.

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