

Gora (Whitey, 1909)

Story *Gora*, Tagore's fifth and his longest novel, is set in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Bengal was undergoing a period of intellectual, religious and social reform. It tells the story of two male friends, Binoy and Gora. Gora (a shortened form of Gourmohan), or 'pale-face' or 'whitey', is so-called because of his light complexion. To understand the story, we need to know a little of the social and political context. Gora was once a follower of Brahmo Samaj, a reform sect of Hinduism that eschewed ritual and external forms of religion in favour of more rational, even somewhat Christianised practices. It also campaigned against child-marriage and *sati* (burning of widows) and in favour of widow remarriage, English-language education and the eating of meat. However, when Gora discovers how some sections of the British Raj mock Indian culture, he changes his mind and begins to embrace traditional Hinduism with a vengeance.

The other main character, Binoy, is an orphan boy, highly educated and intelligent. Binoy becomes friends with his neighbour, Paresh Babu, who belongs to the liberal-thinking Brahmo Samaj sect. Binoy is attracted to Paresh's god-daughter, Sucharita, who Paresh wishes him to marry. Later, Gora, too falls in love with her, but being an orthodox Hindu, cannot admit his feelings even to himself.

Much of the novel then involves arguments between Gora, the orthodox Hindu, and Paresh, the reformist Brahmo, with Binoy somewhat in the middle. Gora's dislike of the British is stoked by a British magistrate who refuses to listen to his complaints of racism. When Gora helps some villagers resist police aggression, he is put in prison. Upset by this, Binoy leaves and returns to Calcutta, where he falls in love with Lolitha (one of Paresh's daughters). Later Binoy marries Lolitha, even though there is great opposition to it (because Binoy does not agree to convert to the Brahmo sect), including Gora, who ends his friendship with Binoy. Gora, still in love with Sucharita, is ultimately rejected (again because of differences in religious beliefs) and persuades her to accept the suitor chosen for her by her parents. In the end, Gora discovers that he is the son of an Irishman and an Indian woman. Confused about his identity, he seeks out Paresh and asks him to guide him toward finding his true identity.

Characters

Gora Gora is the main character of this sprawling epic of a novel, with a dozen important characters, simply because he undergoes the character transformation that is the spine of the story. At first, he appears to be a bigoted, orthodox Hindu, but he later gains a greater understanding and tolerance, not least because he makes a startling discovery at the end of the book. He is told, by a man he believes is his father, that he is the son of an Irishman. Processing this fact of his true ethnic identity leads him toward a moderation of his orthodoxy.

Binoy Binoy is the polar opposite to Gora. A cool-headed, secular rationalist, he is more elusive than Gora and tries to avoid debate, preferring to hide in his intellectual pursuit. In this respect, he represents the political timidity of a certain section of upper-class Bengali society at the time. He falls in love with Lolitha, a rebellious daughter of Paresh, and marries her.

Paresh Paresh is the personification of reformist views of the Brahmo Samaj sect. However, he also has the personal courage to stand by his daughter when she breaks away from the sect. He is the moral centre of the story, choosing loyalty to his daughter over adherence to an abstract set of ideals.

Sucharita Sucharita is Paresh's god-daughter. She is both beautiful and intelligent, enabling her to transcend the narrow confines of the Brahmo Samaj sect into which she was born. She has a big heart, too, and although she doesn't love Gora, she listens to him and learns to respect him. Unable to marry him, she takes his advice when he persuades her to accept the man chosen for her husband.

Lolitha Lolitha is very different to Sucharita. Independent-minded, secular and rebellious from the beginning, she rejects tradition and its restrictive gender roles. She is nevertheless pragmatic and

reliable. If she has a flaw, it is her fierce belief in her self that sometimes overrides generosity to others. In the end, she finds happiness by marrying the similarly-independent minded Binoy.

Themes

Reform Much of the novel is a dramatisation of the conflict between orthodox Hindus and reformist Brahmo Samaj members. Of the major characters, only Binoy has no formal allegiance to either of these warring camps, although even he tends to support the reformists. Tagore's own father and grandfather played key roles in establishing and developing the reformist group, and it is not surprising that they are portrayed in more sympathetic terms. As a novelist, however, Tagore does not idealise the reformists and shows that some of them are as blind and rigid as the orthodox Hindus they oppose.

Identity *Gora* as both a novel and a character symbolises the search for identity that dominated Indian society and politics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. *Gora* the character regards himself as an orthodox Hindu and thus the repository of Indian values. He falls in love with a girl from a reformist family, however, which makes him doubt himself. Later, he discovers that he is not fully Indian, but instead the son of an Irishman and an Indian woman. In the same way, India as a country was discovering that it had absorbed many attitudes and values from the British Raj. The true identity of India, the goal of the Independence movement, was elusive.

Women At the heart of the reform debate was the place of women in Indian society. Orthodox Hindus believed that they should remain in the domestic sphere, where they were thought to represent the spiritual core of Hinduism, which would be protected from the external changes brought about by nationalism. Brahmo Samaj groups, on the other hand, wanted women to take part in the outside world alongside men. These contesting views are played out in the complex relationship between men and women, fathers and daughters, as well as lovers and friends.