

WHITEY

Rabindranath Tagore

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 Brahma 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 Brahma 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 Brahma, 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 Brahma 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.

Themes

Reform Much of the novel is a dramatisation of the conflict between orthodox Hindus and reformist Brahma 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.

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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

GORA (Orthodox)

Character Gora is the main character in this long and somewhat rambling novel that dramatises a fierce debate about cultural identity in late nineteenth-century Bengal. Gora ('whitey') comes across as an unsympathetic, rigid follower of a conservative brand of Hinduism that is tainted by casteism and misogyny. Slowly, however, we realise that he is capable of change as a sensitive and reflective man with a complex inner life. For example, Gora's affection for Sucharita causes him pain because she belongs to a reform sect, to which he is vehemently opposed. In the course of this epic novel, however, Gora achieves greater self-awareness and a deeper understanding of religion. He decides he can no longer belong to a 'tradition which merely divided men into classes and then separated those classes, driving love to a distance.' In the end, he rejects this 'web of delusion which his own mind had woven.' Throughout the novel, he suffers from unrequited love, from disillusionment with his friends and finally from the revelation that he is not who he thought he was. He discovers that he is not a 'true' Hindu, and not even fully Indian, but the result of the union between an Irishman and an Indian woman, who were slaughtered in the Indian Mutiny (1857-58). Gora's discovery of his true identity is symbolic of what Tagore believes would be salutary for India as a whole: that she is heterodox and the richer for it.

Activities Gora spends a lot of time performing traditional Hindu ceremonies. He bathes in the Ganges every day, he prays and meditates and is careful about what he eats and drinks. He also likes to take long walks in the countryside.

Illustrative moments

Orthodox The extent of Gora's orthodox Hinduism is demonstrated when he refuses to use the water in his mother's house because she has a Christian servant. His fanatical pollution phobia demands that he use only water from the Ganges. He adheres strictly to this behaviour even though it causes friction with his mother.

Self-reflective One key incident that stimulates Gora's self-reflection and change of heart occurs when he visits a rural village. The predominately Muslim population are fighting against the exploitation of British indigo planters. When the single Hindu resident in the village gives refuge to a young Muslim boy fleeing the police, Gora questions this act as 'un-Hindu.' The Hindu, a poor barber, says, 'What is the difference, sir? We call him Hari, they call him Allah.' Reflecting on this, Gora begins to question his rigid orthodoxy.

Conflicted Gora is a conflicted man, unable to reconcile his orthodox Hindu beliefs with the exigencies of everyday life. He is unable to accept his feelings for Sucharita, who should be 'out of bounds' for him as an orthodox Hindu. This conflict is dramatised in a scene when he writes to Sucharita, whom he has loved and wanted to marry for a long time. In the letter, he tries to persuade her to marry a man chosen for her by her family but whom she does not love.

BINOY

(Thoughtful)

Character Binoy is one of the most interesting minor characters in Tagore's fiction. After losing his father (through death) and his mother (through desertion), he is brought up in childhood by an uncle and in later life lives by himself. This history is significant because it underlines the fact that Binoy, although from an orthodox Brahmin family, is an independent man. Without the ties of kin, the expectations and conventions of a joint-family, he develops into a free-thinking, rationalist. Tagore describes him as a mild-mannered young man: 'The delicacy of his nature and the keenness of his intellect combined to give a special quality to the expression of his face.' His freedom from blood-ties means that as a young man he is able to change, and a fundamental change comes when he adopts another family (that of Paresh Babu) as his own. His involvement with that family is controversial because they belong to the Brahmo Samaj, a reformist and liberal-minded wing of Hinduism. The controversy boils over when he falls in love with Paresh Babu's daughter (Lolita) and prepares to marry her. His friend, Gora, a staunch traditionalist, is horrified and their friendship is stretched to breaking point. After enduring doubt and disapproval, the quiet and unassertive Binoy emerges at the end as a confident and assured character.

Activities In the past, as a schoolboy, Binoy was best friends with Gora and used to go to his house after lessons, where they would play on the veranda or pretend to read their school books. In his uncle's house, Binoy lives a privileged life, his bath prepared by servants and his meals cooked by them. Soon, he visits the house of Paresh Babu, where he becomes friends with his daughters and wife. Left to himself, Binoy reads Bengali poetry and English novels. He also goes to poetry and musical recitals.

Illustrative moments

Thoughtful The evolution of Binoy's character is a gradual process, stimulated and expressed by various incidents in this long (and somewhat rambling) novel. However, a good illustration of his thoughtfulness occurs at a critical point, when Binoy speaks to his life-long friend Gora. Binoy has decided to marry Lolita even though her family belongs to the Brahmo sect, which traditionalists like Gora (and previously Binoy) had vigorously opposed. Now, he faces the dilemma of marrying the woman he loves or keeping his best friend. Gora makes all the arguments against mixing with 'half-baked' Hindus, but Binoy replies that it is only by overcoming barriers that human progress is possible. 'It may be hard for you to accept what I say, but you know it is true,' Binoy tells him. 'You know as well as I do how meaningless are the bonds with which our society tries to fetter us in matters of eating, and touching, and sitting, when in fact man has a natural freedom based on religion.' The novel is called 'Gora', but it is clear that Binoy is the character with whom we (and probably Tagore) have the most empathy.

Loyal Binoy also has the admirable quality of loyalty, even to someone who has opposed the most important decision of his life (his marriage). The fixity of Binoy's loyalty to Gora is dramatised in a scene that happens toward the end of the story when Gora has been put in prison (for his anti-British activities). At the moment he is imprisoned, his sisters, accompanied by Binoy, are listening to a western classical music recital in the home of a British government official. When the news of his imprisonment reaches the recital, Binoy immediately makes his excuses and rushes to the prison, where he attempts to have Gora released on bail. When Gora refuses any bail attempt, Binoy tries to find a lawyer to represent him. All his efforts fail and Binoy is crestfallen. He never enquires about the nature of Gora's alleged 'crime', and he does not ask Gora if he is innocent or not. He acts out of friendship, a bond that, paradoxically, has been deepened by the ideological differences that separate them.

Transformed Steadfast in his loyalties to friends, Binoy is also someone capable of changing himself. We observe this process over the course of this long novel, but it is summed up by Binoy himself when he reflects on how Lolita has influenced him. She has had the courage of her convictions to stand up for the personal freedoms of the Brahmo movement, as well as the depth of understanding to accept the values of her detractors, such as Gora (who represents orthodox Hinduism). Binoy remembers 'how often had he failed to be his own true self for fear of displeasing Gora, or lest Gora should think him weak, and then had deceived himself, by subtle argument, into the belief that Gora's view was his own!' The more Binoy thinks about it, the greater is his admiration for Lolita's courage and determination. He decides that, whatever happens in the future, he will do his best to help and support her in the difficulties that follow. Through the love of Lolita, and his own resources, the shy and orthodox Binoy is transformed into a bold and sophisticated man.

PARESH BABU

(Wise)

Character Paresh Babu is a minor character who nevertheless plays a major role in this novel as the representative of a religious reform movement in nineteenth-century Calcutta (the Brahmo Samaj). He is a man in his sixties or seventies, a husband and the father of three daughters, all of whom get involved with the important male characters in the book. However, the most significant element of his characters is that he is an ardent member of the Brahmo sect of liberal-minded Hinduism and an admirer of British culture and its modernity. As a man who rejects superstition, image worship, caste and any kind of prejudice, he is a saintly sage and rational thinker (and more or less a self-portrait of the author). He and his family are pitted against orthodox Hinduism, especially in the character of the protagonist, Gora. He is further distinguished from other Brahmo members, such as Panu Babu, who is vain and pedantic. Unlike him, Paresh Babu is said to 'be a man of few words, who did not urge people against their will.' On the domestic level, he is kind hearted and remains serene and unflustered despite the social scandals and malicious gossip swirling around him and his daughters. On the philosophical level, he represents the ideal of the Universal Man, transcending religious categories and national borders.

Activities Paresh Babu presides over a large household, augmented by the friends who regularly visit. He takes tea on his veranda, goes into the garden for prayers, reads in the sitting room and then goes on long walk, leaning on his cane. On Sunday morning, he goes to the Brahmo Samaj worship service (this imitation of Christianity made the Brahmos susceptible to accusations of adopting a foreign religion). In these activities, he is accompanied by his family and often a group of young men who admire him.

Illustrative moments

Wise Paresh Babu shows the wisdom and serenity of old age during many of the family crises that erupt during the novel. But perhaps the most dramatic occurs when his daughter Sucharita tells him that she is leaving the Brahmo sect and becoming a Hindu. This should be a moment for Paresh Babu to give her a long lecture—after all, he is the personification of the reformist beliefs of the Brahmo sect and has devoted his entire life to spreading its truths—but instead he speaks calmly to her, saying that she must choose her own way, that she should consider such decisions over a period of time and that she should not be swayed by what others (including himself) might think of her decision. It takes enormous personal courage to allow someone we love to reject our way of life and choose the opposite path (the Hindu vs Brahmo dispute was as acrimonious as the Catholic vs

Protestant dispute in parts of Europe, or Shia vs Sunni in parts of the Middle East). However, Paresh Babu is the moral core of the entire story and is able to discard his abstract ideals in favour of love for his daughter.

Rationalist As a rationalist (the term used in India to describe someone who objects to the worship of images), Paresh Babu believed that social progress is achieved through the mind rather than emotions. Throughout his life, he attempts to think about problems and find solutions. Since the most serious problem of Indian society is caste, it is fitting that Paresh Babu speaks about the caste system. A particularly good example of his rationalist thinking is illustrated when his daughter Sucharita comes to him and asks for him to explain his objections to this social institution. At first he demurs, saying that he has always taught his daughters to think for themselves. 'To give answers to a question that has not yet arisen in the mind is like giving food when one is not really hungry,' he says to her. 'It causes indigestion of the mind.' But Sucharita points out that she is asking the question in her own mind and wants him to explain it. Then Paresh Babu provides this analogy, which refers to the caste distinctions made in food preparation and eating: 'There is no harm in a cat sitting right beside you and eating while you eat. But if certain men [Harijans and low caste] so much as enter the room, the food has to be thrown away! One must condemn a system that results in this contempt of man by man.' It may appear easy for someone to hold these 'rationalist' views, but in India in the nineteenth-century, they were nothing short of revolutionary.