

## Gora (Tagore's novel 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.