

## Nationalism and Revolution: A Study of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* and *Red Oleanders*

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### Abstract

The present paper aims to discuss the theme of nationalism and revolution in *Gora* and *Red Oleanders* by Rabindranath Tagore. Nation, national revolution, patriotism, and national identity plays very prominent role in the writings of pre-and post-independence literatures in English. Indian writers like Toru Dutt, Swami Vivekanand, Sri Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu explored the love for nation and soul of India in their works. Tagore is one of the most renowned figures in literary world and a great visionary. In addition to his outstanding contributions to Indian literature, he has made a significant contribution to the international concept of nationalism and national identity. His vision was severely misunderstood and criticized at the time by nationalists. His concerns and views on Indian national identity is reflected in most of his works. This paper attempts to highlight Tagore's concept of nation in the present scenario through his vision which become more appropriate and relevant in today's world of intolerance, vengeance, and revolution.

**Keywords:** Destruction, freedom, exploitation, nationalism, reform, rebellion, slavery, unity

### Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore was born in Bengal in 1861 in an eminent and powerful Brahmin family. His father, Debendranath Tagore led a religious reform organization Brahma Samaj which was established by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Tagore's grandfather was also a prominent landlord, social reformer, and very close associate of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Due to the very close relationship with the head of Brahma Samaj, Tagore's family joins this organization very early. Tagore was a prolific writer, poet, composer, painter and playwright and he was recognized for his artistic works and outstanding writing in both Bengali and English. He became the first non-European who received Nobel Prize in Literature for his work *Gitanjali* in 1913. Tagore is not well known as a philosopher but recognized as a writer who contributed for the development of Indian philosophy in twentieth century. In his works, Tagore argues that India as a nation is not facing any political problems but social. Nationalism was one of the central ideas being discussed and debated by many scholars during Tagore's period. India was governed by the British during that time and Indians were creating a sense of nationalism among themselves. The significance of nationalism was realized by Tagore, who focused his attention to it. Tagore offered a critique of nationalism after doing a thorough analysis of it. However, that does not mean he did not feel a strong bond with India. His sentiments, however, were not restricted to India as a country and its people. He had a holistic view of world unity and peace. He also dealt with the idea of nationalism in several of his novels, short stories, plays, letters, lectures, essays, and articles.

Tagore's *Gora* is a novel set in Calcutta in the 1880s during the British Raj. The story revolves around the four major

characters in the novel viz. *Gora*, Sucharita, Binoy and Lolita and their parallel love stories. The novel explores the conflicts that could arise between love and religion, nationalism, and supporting one's own people. The two prominent movements—the Brahma-Hindu clashes and the emerging nationalism towards the end of the nineteenth century become the social and historical backdrop and setting of the novel *Gora*. Similarly in *Red Oleanders*, Tagore draws attention to the social injustice, flaws, and general environment of the complexities of society during the nineteenth century. The main protagonist Nandini stands out as a strong woman who sets an example through reforming and empowering a dull Yaksha town ruled by a king whose personal greed and personal luxury come before the needs and desires of his citizens. The play's characters, setting, and plot all contain numerous aspects that are connected to India's pre-independence circumstances. Yaksha Town serves as the setting for *Red Oleanders*. The word 'Yaksha' has a negative meaning because it refers to a demonic servant of the deity of prosperity. Here, labourers work like machines. They have blindly accepted the King's dominance and his government's power.

### Concept of Nationalism in Pre-Independence India

The core message of Tagore's writings remains to be his perception that nationalism creates war and conflict, death, destruction, and disintegration rather than universality. He viewed the nation as a completely Western concept. Under the influence of Western philosophy and education, some young men in Bengal adopted Christianity in the first half of the nineteenth century, openly denouncing and criticizing Hinduism. In this context, Raja Ram Mohan Roy established the Brahma Samaj in 1828 as a reformist Hindu movement

that abolished all taboos and superstitions and tried to combine the best parts of all religions.

It is depicted that Gora, the founding child of an Irish-English couple killed in the Indian Sepoy Mutiny, is a staunch supporter of reformist nationalism. The day Anandmoyi adopts Gora; she experiences a crisis in her life. The tension between Anandmoyi's affection for a child and her devotion to her own religion torments her. Anandmoyi opposes the part of her faith that tries to create barriers among individuals based on little, domestic boundaries of caste, race, and religion. As Gora gets older, he adopts a fanatical Hindu perspective and employs it to create his idea of Indian nationalism. He visits the countryside of Bengal and fights for the rights of the farmers, students, and common people of the rural areas. He detained for one month for the defense of common people of village. Gora believes that the stability of Brahmanism is the solution to all these problems. But when he visits the villages, he loses hope. He learns that the Mohammedans' religion brought people together, whereas the Hindus' strict rules could not bring them together. Maybe it was because they had no regard for any caste system. British rule was nothing but a great suppression of the poor people in India. The farmers of Bengal were suffering injustice and political slavery at the hands of British rulers. The novel is a realistic portrayal of the suffering people of Bengal.

The play *Red Oleanders* by Tagore shows a few similarities with the Indian freedom movement and the societal systems that ruled Pre-Independent India at the time. Indians have a long history of living luxurious lives surrounded by luxuries of all kinds and exhibiting a carefree attitude. But situation changed after the British invasion, which gradually forced its Victorian ideals on the Indians and thus turned them into their 'slaves.' Most Indians participated in the establishment of the British Raj by being compelled to work and contribute. Similar circumstances are depicted in *Red Oleanders*, where most of the citizens have shown to have no independent lives and to be devoted to work for the needs and desires of the King. King brutally exploits his people to satisfy his intense hunger for gold. He considers his citizens as simple 'gold production machines,' and views them as nothing more than numbered slaves who already have given up their life's pleasure to dig gold for the king. This is supported by Bishu's statement as, that is why we are not men to them, but only numbers <sup>[1]</sup> this brutality of the King was opposed by a strong character Nandini. She bravely opposes the antagonist, The King on behalf of Yaksha town in order to fight off all negative actions and thoughts that threaten the village. She wears a red oleander as a representation of mental and spiritual independence. When Nandini is closely examined; it becomes apparent that she is representing the 1920s Indian independence movement. At that time, the independence movement was just getting started, and the issues like caste and social stereotypes slowed down the process, which required the cooperation of various classes of society. Nandini break social and cultural stereotypes in order to bring the oppressed together.

As contrast to Nandini, Gora was the strong supporter of orthodox Hindu Samaj whereas Gora's friend Binoy was free from the walls of orthodoxy. The mother of 'fair skinned' Gora, Anandmoyi, who has black smooth skin suppresses the rivalry between the two friends. Binoy, who views Anandmoyi as his mother as well, has a stronger connection to her way of life. Contrary to Gora, who turned her down and left to look for a national unity symbol, Binoy stayed to comfort her. Gora visits Sucharita and Lolita, two Brahmo

girls, in order to keep an eye on his close friend Binoy, who frequently visits their homes. Over time, Gora experiences emotional struggle over his love for a woman of a different faith and his responsibilities to his people, his community, and his country. Binoy's affection for Lolita grows in parallel to the love story of Gora and Sucharita. Tagore uses these two enthralling stories of love to illustrate the fanaticism that both Hindus and Brahmans exhibit. Paresh Babu, who represents Brahmans, and Anandmoyi, who represents Hindus, is depicted as individuals who stand above all the small conflicts and barriers.

Like the novel *Gora*, it is fascinating to note that there are multiple incidents in the play *Red Oleanders* that were reflective of the norms and conflicts that exist in the lower classes of society. For instance, when Phagual accuses Bishu of spying for the king, his actions further disturbed the entire community, preventing them from coming together to fight for their freedom. Nandini is the person who unite all the people of Yaksha Town to revolt against the King. In this play, Tagore presents Nandini as a character who is dynamic and revolutionary. The professor compares Nandini to the sunlight gleaming through the forest thickets surprises nobody, but the light that breaks through a cracked wall is quite a different thing <sup>[2]</sup>

The professor compares Nandini to the light coming through a cracked wall, which is sharp, refined, and forceful, as opposed to the sunlight's impact through a forest, which is scattered and less powerful. This comparison is one of many examples found in the play that supports the professor's statement. Nandini through her revolutionary ideology make the gold diggers to raise their voice against the antagonist of the play. However, the play's true antagonist is the gold diggers' obsessive desire for gold, not the King and his administrators. The play demonstrates how the diggers' greed for gold makes their oppression even more rigid. Bishu correctly highlights as, The dream of gold that lashes you to work, more severely than the foreman's whip... you will fly back here to-morrow, like a caged bird to its cage, hankering for its drugged food <sup>[3]</sup> Gold here represents not just actual wealth but also any perversion of ideals in general and the idea of nationalism. Thus, Yaksha Town can be considered as a symbol for a nation that sacrifices the humanity of its people for personal gain.

Tagore ardently supported individual freedom, which is one of the basic principles of present democracy. He had the opinion that everyone has the right to express themselves freely and to think, believe, and act as they like. He believed that maintaining and fostering the intellect of the mind required individual independence. Even after Gora confesses to himself that he is profoundly in love with Sucharita, he refuses to compromise his religious beliefs. The inner conflict seems permanent, but fortunately the issue is resolved when Gora discovers he is not actually a Hindu but rather the son of Irish parents. Anandmoyi and Krishna Dayal had raised him as their own son after Gora's parents were killed in the mutiny. His thoughts and perspective suddenly undergo a transformation as a result of this revelation. He has transformed into a spiritually liberated man who is no longer bound by any religious dogma. He tells Paresh Babu, To-day I am free, Paresh Babu! I need no longer fear being contaminated or becoming an outcaste-To-day I am really an Indian! In me there is no longer any opposition between Hindu, Mussulman, and Christian. To-day every caste in India is my caste, the food of all is my food <sup>[4]</sup>

If the novel's main theme had been Gora's revolution against the established British Government, it would have been a story of conflict, and its political consequences would have been its only positive aspect. However, *Gora* is an exploration of a young man's quest for national unity and peace. Gora sets off on a journey that will allow him to discover unity in diversity and a common symbol that would signify the nation's harmony. The line in *Gitanjali* that best reflects Tagore's ideas on national freedom as, Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; Where knowledge is free; Where the world has not been broken up by narrow fragments by narrow domestic walls<sup>[5]</sup>

Both the real and mystical notions of freedom and revolution are explored by Tagore. He claims that freedom is not something you can own. It is more like a mental awakening and an internal growth of the spirit. Exploring oneself carefully is the key to freedom. Real freedom only exists on a mental and spiritual level; it never comes to us from outside. It is only possible for an individual to enjoy freedom and be delighted to provide it to others. If someone desires slavery, they must be chained to it.

### Conclusion

To be more precise, Tagore was a traditionalist as well as a reformist when it comes to nationalism. Tagore's work *Gora* and *Red Oleanders* nowadays reads like a book about discovery, the quest for unity that can only be achieved through a more developed vision, and the ultimate rejection of categorization and division.

### References

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2. ---. p.6.
3. ---. p.43.
4. ---. *Gora*. India, Rupa Publications. 2002, 441.
5. ---. *Gitanjali*. India, General Press. 2012, 35.