



---

## Truth beyond Orthodoxy: Identity and Universalism in Rabindranath Tagore's 'Gora'

---

Mr. Sanjay Sahebrao Jagadale

Assistant Professor,

Department of English, Dahiwadi College Dahiwadi

Corresponding Author – Mr. Sanjay Sahebrao Jagadale

DOI - 10.5281/zenodo.15544141

---

### Abstract:

*This paper examines Rabindranath Tagore's magnum opus, Gora, as a profound critique of rigid religious and social orthodoxy in colonial Bengal. It argues that through the narrative, particularly the protagonist Gora's ideological journey, Tagore dismantles identities built primarily on birth right, dogma, and exclusionary practices. Through the interplay of characters representing staunch Hindu revivalism, dogmatic Brahmanism, liberal spirituality, and unconditional love, the novel champions an experiential, inclusive, and universal understanding of truth. The climactic revelation of Gora's parentage serves as a catalyst, forcing a confrontation with the limitations of doctrinaire systems and culminating in his liberation into a broader identity rooted in shared humanity and service to India, which transcends caste and creed. Tagore's work ultimately posits that true identity and spiritual realization lie not in adherence to external doctrines but in embracing universal human values informed by lived experience.*

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, Gora, Truth, Orthodoxy, Identity, Universalism, Humanism, Nationalism, Colonial India, Brahmo Samaj, Dogma, Social Reform, The Bengali Renaissance.

---

### Introduction:

Rabindranath Tagore, Asia's first Nobel laureate, stands as a towering figure in world literature, renowned for his humanistic vision that sought to bridge divides and champion universal values. His epic novel *Gora* (1910) remains one of his most ambitious and relevant works. Set against the vibrant yet turbulent backdrop of colonial Calcutta during a period of intense social, religious, and political ferment, it grapples with complex questions of identity, nationalism, religious reform, and the very nature of truth in a society caught between tradition and modernity, revivalism and reform. This paper will explore how Tagore, through *Gora*, interrogates the constraints of religious and social orthodoxy – both Hindu

and Brahmo – and details a path towards a conception of truth lying beyond dogmatic boundaries. The novel contends that authentic truth and identity are not merely inherited through birth or conferred by strict adherence to rituals and doctrines, but emerge from lived experience, genuine human connection, critical self-reflection, and the affirmation of universal human values. The ideological pilgrimage of the protagonist, Gourmohan (Gora), from a fiercely orthodox Hindu nationalist to an individual liberated from sectarian identity, serves as the central axis for this exploration, ultimately advocating for an inclusive humanism. This paper will analyze the depiction of various forms of inflexible belief systems, the role of liberal thought

and human relationships in challenging dogma, and the transformative impact of the revelation of Gora's identity, culminating in his acceptance of a universal truth rooted in service to humanity within the specific context of India.

### **Sketching the Confines: Orthodoxy in Hindu and Brahmo Worlds:**

In *Gora*, Rabindranath Tagore examines the stifling atmosphere created by religious and social orthodoxy, carefully dissecting its grip on both mainstream Hindu society and the nascent Brahmo Samaj reform movement in colonial Bengal. Initially, the novel presents the formidable figure of Gourmohan (Gora) as the embodiment of an assertive, revivalist Hinduism. His sense of self is profoundly anchored in strict adherence to tradition, the meticulous observance of caste hierarchy, notions of ritual purity, and a fervent nationalism deeply interwoven with his Hindu faith. Tagore illustrates how Gora's intense conviction, while compelling, often hardens into intolerance, evident in his interactions with his more flexible friend Binoy and his initial rejection of the Brahmo community. His is a worldview built on exclusion, defining belonging through inherited practices and perceived external threats. Tagore expands this critique through Gora's adoptive father, Krishnadaya, whose retreat into complex rituals illustrates how conventional piety can become a hollow shell, disconnected from genuine spiritual life or social empathy.

Yet, Tagore skillfully avoids presenting orthodoxy as an exclusively Hindu concern. He draws sharp parallels between the rigidities of traditional Hinduism and similar tendencies emerging within the Brahmo Samaj itself, particularly through the character of Haran (Panu Babu). Haran represents a faction within the reform movement that adopts its own brand of dogmatism, insisting on strict conformity to

Brahmo tenets and displaying an intolerance echoing Gora's own. His judgmental stance towards Sucharita and Lolita reveals that the impulse towards doctrinal inflexibility and drawing exclusionary boundaries is not limited to one tradition. Through this careful juxtaposition, Tagore suggests a broader point: the real obstacle to human growth and understanding often lies less in the specifics of any doctrine and more in the nature of orthodoxy itself – its resistance to doubt, its prioritization of external conformity over internal conviction, and its inherent tendency to divide rather than unite.

### **Countercurrents: Liberal Thought and the Search for Inner Truth:**

While Tagore meticulously portrays the constraints of orthodoxy, he simultaneously introduces powerful countercurrents through characters who champion a more liberal, questioning, and deeply personal approach to faith and truth. Foremost among them is Paresh Babu, a respected Brahmo elder whose quiet wisdom embodies Tagore's humanistic vision. Paresh Babu consistently elevates inner conscience, reasoned inquiry, tolerance, and a universal sense of love above the strictures of dogma or ritual. He presents spirituality as something lived and searched for, rather than merely accepted, offering a vital alternative to both Gora's revivalist fervor and Haran's doctrinaire Brahmoism. His emphasis on 'satya' (truth) as an inner realization, discovered through experience and ethical living, directly challenges the foundations of inflexible belief systems.

Paresh Babu's gentle yet firm influence proves particularly formative for Sucharita and Lolita. He cultivates an atmosphere where their intellectual curiosity thrives, encouraging them to question societal norms and religious dictates rather than passively accept them. This nurturing allows them to develop their own moral compasses and resist pressures toward

conformity, whether from Hindu society or from within the Brahmo fold represented by Haran. Moreover, Paresh Babu's interactions, even with those holding vastly different views like Gora, are marked by a patient desire for understanding, prioritizing shared humanity over doctrinal dispute. In Paresh Babu, Tagore crafts more than just a character; he presents a philosophical standpoint where truth is pursued through individual conscience, intellectual honesty, and ethical engagement with the world – a perspective that steadily undermines the certainties upon which orthodoxy depends.

### **The Human Element: How Connection Unsettles Conviction:**

Tagore powerfully argues that beyond intellectual debate, it is the undeniable force of human connection and lived emotional experience that most effectively dissolves the rigid boundaries erected by inflexible ideologies. Perhaps nowhere is the inadequacy of dogma more apparent than in the figure of Anandamoyi, Gora's adoptive mother. She seems to exist in a realm untouched by conventional judgment, her identity defined solely by a profound, unconditional maternal love that instinctively transcends the artificial lines of caste, creed, and even blood relation. Her quiet knowledge of Gora's true origins, coupled with her unwavering affection, embodies a fundamental, experiential truth – one rooted in pure compassion that rituals and doctrines simply cannot contain. Her presence provides Gora with a constant, implicit counter-narrative to the exclusionary rules he fiercely defends.

This theme resonates through the relationships developing among the younger generation. The evolving intellectual and emotional engagement between Gora and Sucharita becomes a critical space for challenging assumptions. Drawn to Gora's passion yet guided by her own intellect and Paresh Babu's influence, Sucharita interacts

with Gora in ways that compel him to confront the human cost of his ideology, introducing emotional nuance into his previously rigid framework. Simultaneously, the relationship between the adaptable Binoy and the independent Lolita represents a direct challenge to social constraints. Their decision to pursue their connection despite objections from both Hindu and Brahmo camps highlights how authentic feeling can motivate defiance against restrictive codes. Through these interwoven lives, Tagore vividly demonstrates that lived realities – love, friendship, empathy, the meeting of minds – possess the power to reveal the insufficiency of identities built merely on abstract principles and social labels, fostering instead a more humane understanding of oneself and others.

### **Breaking Point: When Revelation Shatters Orthodoxy:**

The narrative arc of *Gora* hinges on a dramatic climax: the revelation of the protagonist's true parentage. Learning he is the biological son of Irish Christians, orphaned during the 1857 Mutiny, detonates the very foundations upon which Gora has constructed his entire identity. His fervent pride in his Brahmin lineage, his meticulous observance of caste rules, and his potent Hindu nationalism are instantly invalidated by the exclusionary logic he himself championed. The accident of his birth renders him, within that framework, an outsider, an 'untouchable' – fundamentally excluded from the community he sought to purify and lead.

This discovery precipitates a profound existential crisis. His former belief system offers no recourse, no way to reconcile Gora's lived experience—his deep emotional and intellectual commitment to India and what he perceived as Hinduism—with the "polluting" reality of his non-Hindu birth. The system demands his negation. The revelation thus exposes the fragility of

identities built solely on the circumstances of birth and adherence to external codes. It forces Gora—and the reader—to confront the chasm between an individual's inner reality and the identity conferred by rigid social and religious structures. In this moment, orthodoxy is shown not merely as exclusionary, but as incapable of encompassing the complex truth of human existence, forcing the search for a more authentic and resilient sense of self.

### **Finding New Ground: Liberation into a Universal 'Indian' Identity:**

What emerges from Gora's crisis is not despair or conversion to another dogma, but a profound rebirth—a liberation into a broader, more inclusive understanding of truth and belonging. His final, impassioned declaration – "Today I am free... I am Bharatiya [Indian]. In me there is no conflict of communities – the Hindu, the Muslim, the Christian. Today all the castes of India are my caste..." – marks a movement beyond all sectarian labels. His identity is radically reframed, no longer dependent on inherited creed or caste, but rooted in a shared humanity situated within the diverse reality of India itself. It is an identity claimed through participation, empathy, and service, not through exclusion.

This transformation is powerfully symbolized by his full embrace of Anandamoyi: "Mother, you are my only mother! ...You have no caste... you make no distinction... you are only the image of blessings. You are my India!" He recognizes her unconditional love, which defied all orthodox boundaries, as the true, nurturing spirit of the India he now vows to serve. This represents not mere negation of his past beliefs, but the discovery of a positive, active, and encompassing humanism. His liberation finds tangible expression in his commitment to work for all people of India, irrespective of their background. Ultimately, Gora arrives at a truth discovered beyond

doctrinal constraints – a universal truth forged through struggle, grounded in human connection, and dedicated to service, finally free from the divisive nature of dogma.

### **Conclusion:**

Tagore's *Gora* remains a significant testament to the limitations of orthodoxy and the liberating potential of a truth grounded in universal human values. By carefully dismantling an identity built on the fragile foundations of dogma and birthright, Tagore, through Gora's transformative journey, advocates for an experiential understanding of truth discovered via empathy, love, reason, and self-realization. The novel interrogates the exclusionary nature inherent in rigid religious and social systems, whether revivalist Hindu or reformist Brahmo, proposing instead an inclusive identity rooted in shared humanity.

### **Bibliography:**

1. Howladar, Sumit. "Contextualizing Gora: Caste, Politics and the Nation", *The Clarion*:
2. Multidisciplinary International Journal. vol. 3, no. 1, 2014, pp. 77-83.
3. <http://theclarion.in/index.php/clarion/article/view/145/161>.
4. Kopf, David. *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*. Princeton UP, 2015.
5. Sarkar, Tanika. *Hindu Nation, Hindu Wife: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*. Permanent Black, 2005.
6. Tagore, Rabindranath. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: A Miscellany*. Edited by Nityapriya Ghosh, vol. 4, Sahtiya Akademi, 2011.
7. Gora. Translated by Radha Chakravarty. *Classic Rabindranath Tagore*, Penguin Books, 2011.