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**A Rasa-Critical Enquiry into Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* (1910): Nationalism,
Identity and Bengali Selfhood**

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Abstract

Rasa theory teaches us to fully understand the inherent interplay of the nine elemental sentiments that are present in any critical text or a socio-cultural phenomenon. RN Tagore's Gora (1910) is a minute study of the economic milieu, cultural landscape and the political ambitions of the nineteenth century urban Bengali population. The novel's eponymous protagonist, Gora, is a restless young man with an intellectual bent towards social justice, political fulfillment, strong ethno-linguistic pride and a constant urge to maximize his potential. These ambitions and inclinations play out against the backdrop of great social change in the city of Kolkata and a greater personal crisis of faith. Gora's love interest, Sucharita, constantly challenges his world view; a facet that can be analyzed using the concepts of veer rasa & shringara rasa . Tagore highlights the unequal nature of the contemporary society by showing how Gora finds the exploitative feudal structure morally repugnant, a facet that will yield rich results if put through the lens of bivatsa rasa , thereby expanding our understanding of how the political subjugation of a marginalized population fits into the category of Rasa theory. The scenes involving the verbal duel between the genteel members of the society are prone to analysis and interpretation through the concepts of hasya rasa & karuna rasa . The final passages involving Gora's discovery of his true parentage and his subsequent despondency, are emblematic features of the Shanta rasa & karuna rasa . The scenes highlighting the fear and self-loathing that the protagonist experiences are examples of the bhayanka rasa & the adbhuta rasa ; as his whole world comes crumbling down, something that he fails to explain to himself, thereby acquiring the

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traits of wonder and surprise i.e. adbhut. Amidst all such changes, Gora's love for Sucharita remains constant, a feature that Tagore incorporated to suggest that love is akin to world-making, which the highest possible manifestation of the political self. Identity here is closely related to the protagonist's need to politically free himself of the clutches of superstition, ignorance, casteist malpractices and colonialism. Indians Aesthetics accords us the opportunity to appreciate the variegated traits that are concurrent within a post colonial reading of the novel Gora and this paper aims to that and thereby expanding our understanding of literature's ability to effect social justice and increase public consciousness regarding the unjust nature of our society. Theoretical framework would include Rasa theory, postcolonial notions of a the importance of situating the Self within a broader political structure, Benedict Anderson's concept of Imagined Community, its application to Gora's thought and Indian Aesthetic reading of a bifurcated self, oscillating between the personal and the political. Critical attention would be paid to a close reading of the text and an effective conceptualization of the Rasa theory.

Keywords: *Rasa Theory, Indian Aesthetics, Identity, Nationalism, Ethno-linguistic Pride,*

Introduction:

The application of Indian rasa theory to the analysis and understanding is an emerging field in the domain of literary studies; one that is still in a nascent stage and needs critical enquiry into the deeper recesses Indian thought. This paper aims to enquire into the variegated representation of the human self as is evident in Rabindranath Tagore's seminal novel *Gora* (1910). This novel by Tagore is one of his many forays into the loved realities of the emergence of Indian nationalism; *Yogayog* (1929), *The home and the World* (1916) & *Char Adhay* (1934) being the other notable works along a similar vein, *Gora* being the most exalted of them due to its perennial popularity and relevance to the Bengali nationalistic thought.

A major source of the Indian system of classification of emotional states comes from the *Natyasastra*, the ancient Indian treatise on the performing arts, which dates back to the 2nd

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Century AD. According to ancient Indian aesthetics; especially in the context of Bharata's Natyasastra, Anandavardhana's Dhvanyaloka and Abhiav Gupta's Abhinavabharati, Rasa is the relishable state of elemental human emotions called 'Bhavas'. Bharata's Natyasastra originally speaks of eight Rasas. The confluence of the nine Rasas in Tagore's *Gora* makes it the ideal text for a Rasa-Critical intervention, one that bestows the reader with a renewed appreciation for Tagore's masterpiece and endows him with a greater awareness for Indian Rasa Theory.

Research Methodology:

The crux of the arguments made in this paper will stem from a close reading of Tagore's *Gora* and a conscious understanding of the social, historical and cultural milieu of the time when this novel was written, thereby helping us realize the political idioms, issues and cultural contexts that Tagore had to work around to enrich his novel. This will be done by getting to know the social ills and evils that Tagore's protagonist rebels against; such as casteism, Indian dependence on foreign. The eponymous protagonist also finds in a flux regarding the emergence of the Bramho movement, which had a lasting impact upon the urbane Calcutta society. This would be useful for better analyzing the politicization of the self of Gora, the protagonist and how it becomes necessary for him to break the petty bourgeoisie that everyone around him not just upholds, but also revels in.

The Nine Rasas in Tagore's Gora:

As is evident from a reading of the Natyasastra of Bharata, there are nine elemental Rasas, which are- *shanta*, *adhvut*, *veer*, *shringar*, *karuna*, *bivatsa*, *hasya*, *bhayanaka* and *raudra*. These nine are enmeshed throughout the novel and are intelligible only when we do a close reading of the novel; they inhabit the latent aspects of the narrative and are instrumental in driving home the author's point of creating a protagonist who is at once a protector and upholder of tradition and a rebel against all sorts of injustices.

The novel can also be understood as the bildungsroman of the eponymous protagonist who provides the narrative with its living pulse, at once emblematic of the project that Tagore undertakes and indicative of the arc of the character that the novelist had meant for his protagonist to follow. This is achieved by Gora having moments of truth and recognition that

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draw out the strongest possible emotions from him, that are often corresponding to the nine different categories of Rasa theory. A brief cataloguing of such emotional episodes are fertile for a Rasa-Critical intervention, which is as follows:

- a) The love episodes between the two couples – Gora and Sucharita and Binoy and Lolita are prime examples of romance and affection gushing out of young protagonists; which is a notable example of the Shringar Rasa.
- b) The scenes involving Gora's discovery of brutal casteism and his emotional reaction to it are examples of horror manifesting through individual subjectivity and are examples of Bhayanka Rasa.
- c) Towards the fag end of the novel, Gora finds out that he's infact the log lost child of white European settlers and is of European descent. A discovery that calls into questions his parentage and lineage. This scene can be understood as an example of Karuna Rasa .
- d) This same scene also captures Gora experience huge self-loathing and disgust; an emotional outburst that can be classified as under the category of Bivatsa Rasa, as it inspires a horrific self sabotaging impulse within him.
- e) There are many scenes throughout the novel that focus on Gora's confidant and comrade Binoy making a fool of himself in the most ridiculous manners. These scenes are meant to provide comic relief in a novel heavy with nationalistic fervor and cultural changes and can rightly be understood as manifesting traits of Hasya Rasa.
- f) Gora stands shoulder to shoulder with the persecuted farmers who are oppressed by the tyrannical feudal landlord, Madhab Choudhry and fights for their rights. The scenes involving his rebellion against absentee landlordism can be classified under the category of Veer Rasa.
- g) Tagore takes great pains to amply describe the tranquil petty bourgeoisie drawing rooms and polite social norms of the upper echelons of his contemporary Calcutta. These interludes and scenes do not move the narrative much but make it possible for the reader to get a feel of the social background of the characters that are delineated. So these scenes can be classified under the category of Shanta Rasa.

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- h) Throughout the novel, Gora experiences countless moments of agony, doubts and premonition regarding his romance with Sucharita and the role that he has to play in the struggle for self governance. These scenes that leave him perplexed can be classified under the category of Adbhuta Rasa.
- i) Gora as a novel is replete with scenes involving the terrific outbursts of rages and fury from its male protagonist and these scenes highlight the protagonist's emotional turpitude and anger at being confronted with social ills and personal crises; which is why they can be classified under the category of Raudra Rasa.

The Nationalistic Fervour of the novel:

Rabindranath Tagore's pre-independence novels, *Gora* and *Home and the World*, emphasize the significance of history in shaping the narrative of a nation. Both novels are situated during the era of the Swadeshi movements and reflect Tagore's political concerns. They delve into themes of nationalism, patriotism, identity, and self-discovery. Tagore utilizes history as a means to portray and reconstruct the nation. *Gora* and *Home and the World* are deeply rooted in the historical context of India's national movement. Tagore's views on nationalism, which advocate for a civilizational approach rather than a purely political one, are highlighted in these novels. They promote a search for identity within the colonized space through introspection and self-questioning, instead of an aggressive nationalism based on religious, social, and gender identity.

In India, both Gandhi and Tagore consistently attempted to transcend political and cultural boundaries, seeking to create a space where the two overlapped. Gandhi's vision of Ram Rajya and Tagore's universalism find resonance in Frantz Fanon's revolutionary credo: "National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension" (Bhabha 4). Tagore can be aptly described as a preeminent poet and writer of decolonization, as he extensively wrote about the "nation" and nationalist issues. According to him, India's wretched state is due to the fact that "This abstract being, the Nation, is ruling India" (Das, 2008, 422). Tagore contrasts the mechanized and dehumanized Western civilization and its notion of the nation with the local, indigenous, and diverse living traditions of India. His message is a clear call to the East, a warning not to be enchanted by

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the allure of “an applied science” (Das, 2008, 424) that sparkles but ultimately brings death and destruction.

He urges the world, "not merely the subject races, but you who live under the delusion that you are free, are everyday sacrificing your freedom and humanity to this fetish of nationalism, living in the dense poisonous atmosphere of worldwide suspicion and greed and panic” (Das, 2008, 427). Tagore admires Japan’s ascent as an Asian powerhouse, shattering the myth of racial backwardness. However, he proceeds to criticize the rise of strong nationalism that ultimately led to Japan’s imperialistic expansion, resulting in disastrous consequences for its Asian neighbors.

The Conflicting Notions regarding Bengali Selfhood:

The tensions that arose within the Bengali middle class, the Hindu-Brahmo controversy, and the emergence of national consciousness towards the late 19th century have laid the social and historical backdrop for Gora. In the early decades of the 19th century, some ambitious young men in Bengal, influenced by Western thought and education, embraced Christianity, openly condemning and ridiculing Hinduism. As a reform movement within Hinduism, Raja Ram Mohan Roy established the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, denouncing superstitions and taboos and aiming to synthesize the best aspects of all religions. Over time, the Brahmo Samaj developed a strong anti-Hindu bias. In response to the attacks of Christian missionaries and Brahmo Samajists, orthodox Hindus began organizing revivalist organizations such as the Dharma Sabha (1830), the Arya Samaj (1875), and the Ramakrishna Mission (1898). The Hindu revivalist movement served as a catalyst for the nascent nationalism that emphasized self-respect and the preservation of tradition.

Gora, as a novel, dramatizes and analyzes the conflict between the reformist and revivalist movements within this dialectical relationship. Tagore wrote Gora to address the extremism represented by the obscurantism of the Hindus and the sectarianism of the Brahmos, aiming to provide an impartial treatment of these misguided forces in his epic novel. Gora, the protagonist, is the offspring of an Irish-English couple who were murdered during the Indian Sepoy Mutiny. He passionately advocates for revivalist nationalism, although his true identity remains hidden from him until the end of the novel, but is revealed

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to the reader from the very beginning. This establishes a foundation of irony within the narrative right from the start. The name “Gora” serves as a metaphor for the uncertainties.

Among all of Tagore’s novels, Gora is the one that comes closest to dealing with historical events. Following the significant Indian Mutiny of 1857, English victory firmly established British rule on Indian soil. Naturally, this led to a state of tension and emotional instability, making normal action and reaction impossible. Tagore connects this discordant and unnatural behavioral pattern, characterized by violence dehumanizing the social fabric, to the “spirit of repression and coercion.” Gour Mohan, a tall, broad-shouldered, fair-skinned young “Brahmin,” becomes the symbol of disharmony and violent force, compelled to act against his own nature. Gora, as he is known among his friends, takes up traditionalism as a weapon against the English, who are perceived as the enemy.

The Protagonist’s Identity and Ambition:

Gora defends Hinduism with the passion and zeal of a fanatic and is not willing to budge from orthodox self. As an educated young man he is perturbed by the fact that his country and society are attacked by two distinct enemies – foreign power and the hopeless superstition of his own countrymen. He does not know how to reconcile these two contradictions within his self. It presents a paradox to him. At the same time his friend Binoy, an academically inclined youth makes it possible for Gora to confront his fragmented self through renewed understanding of the Bramho Samaj.

Gora’s ambitions are juxtaposed with his respect towards life as a Bengali hero, albeit in the eyes of Sucharita. Gora is the first Indian novel to fully articulate a full blown dialectic of ideas; one that lends the narrative much of its vigour and virtue. The hero shines forth in a supreme fashion, one that helps Tagore establish Gora as the archetypal Bengali Renaissance man.

Even though Gora is heartbroken after finding out that his father had lied to him about Gora’s true parentage, he takes heart in the fact that redemption is still possible for him if he stays right and honest to his beloved, Sucharita. This is Tagore’s way of emphasizing that loving each other is a potent way of world-making.

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The most ironic part of Gora's moral character is that he tries to fight foreign influences upon the Bengali society by adhering to religious orthodoxy; which comes crumbling down when his father reveals to Gora that he was in fact born a Christian. This shocking revelation brings Gora down to his knees and he becomes sympathetic to the Bramho Samaj cause, championed by Paresch Babu.

Sucharita and Binoy act as foils to Gora's fragmented self, providing the novel with much needed temperance and meditative quality. Binoy also performs the duty of a benevolent confidant, helping Gora to mold and finesse himself. Gora's love for Sucharita ennobles both parties and accelerates the process of shading their cognitive biases off.

The need for unifying and negotiating with the different moral assumptions and biases of the self is felt by Gora with ever increasing intensity as the novel progresses to its denouement; bringing forward a crucial moment in the novel when Gora realizes that there has to be a limit and end to the idealization of the self, otherwise one sets himself up only for heartbreak and disappointment. The dark side of unbridled ambition and how that affects one's identity is masterfully portrayed by Tagore.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it must be said that Tagore's Gora is an absolute triumph, blending Indian Rasa Theory with the Enlightenment ideals of its spirited and conflicted protagonist. The novel makes a significant commentary upon the need for emotional temperance and the inter-subjective nature of social bonds. It should be evident to the discerning reader that Gora is an account of the fragmented human self, reeling under the pressures of colonization, superstitious ignorance and religious orthodoxy; thereby creating a forceful impression on the reader's mind and Rasa-Critical interventions are the surest ways to appreciate such a rich and rewarding text.

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