

# India and its outcasts with special reference to Tagore's *Gora*

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**Abstract:** Tagore was an ardent critic of Western nationalism and the nation-state. According to Tagore Western concepts of nationalism were associated with conflict and conquest, but he was not either convinced with the notion of India as an inclusive nation, the reason being the persistent problem of untouchability, manifest in the caste system in Indian society. The unease of the social discrimination is reflected in his writings in general. This paper analyzes the theme of caste and Untouchability in *Gora* through Mary Louise Pratt's "Contact Zone".

**Key word:** Untouchability, Contact Zone Nationalism, Hinduism and Brahminism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: Nationalism in *Gora*

Nationalism is the most widely and exhaustive themes that have been dealt by various scholars in their papers. The review indicates a fairly good amount of study that has been dedicated to it for instance "Imagining the Indian nationalist movement: Revolutionary metaphors in imagery of the freedom struggle" by Kama Maclean published in Sage Journal. (Web) and "Imagining the Indian Nation: The Role of Literature in the Nationalist Movement: 1920-1947" by Ulka Anjaria, Stanford University (Web). "Rabindranath Tagore, Indian Nation and its outcasts" published by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in Academia.edu in this particular paper by Upadhyay the theme of caste and untouchability is there but it is treated as a subtheme within the main theme Nationalism. In the novel explored in this paper it is analyzed that nationalism in *Gora* too has been discussed by scholars at large. To quote K.R.S. Iyengar remarks from paper "Gora - A Mirror of Social, Political and Cultural Life of India by Vikramsinh Jadeja and Digvijaysinh

"Gora reveals Tagore's liberal humanistic views. It is the longest and most widely acclaimed novel of Tagore. The novel reflects the patriotic zeal of Gora or Indian-Bengali youth. Commenting on Gora's technique remarks: Notwithstanding the wide canvas and moving multiplicity of character, incident and dialogue, the novel is a unity, and this comes from Gora himself, who is both the centre of the action and the circumference of the play of ideas. The rest serve largely to explain him, or are explained by his relations with him" The theme of caste and untouchability is included in the theme of nationalism in itself and has been rarely discussed giving caste as the centre stage.(web) Rabindranath Tagore in his essay Nationalism in India in 1916 has already discussed that it is social rather than political dimension of Indian Subcontinent that is problematic. To quote him "Our real problem in India is not political .It is social," Elaborating upon his statement one reaches the age old social exclusion that is imposed on some communities who are within and without Hinduism. To make it lucid they are 'Untouchables or Indian Outcasts'.(web)

In this regard Sharan Kumar Limbale's thought provoking idea of Dalit literature hints at the same. "Most Dalit writers work in their first language, and are only now beginning to be translated. A bigger reason, I suggest, is that their work not only does not fit into neat binaries, in fact, it complicates them by exposing how a subjugated society such as that of pre-independence India could, simultaneously, be a subjugating society and how, in postcolonial India, that subjugation could continue"(Limbale 17)

The term 'Contact Zone' in this paper is used to explore Contact Zone between Outcasts and their dominant others. The aim of the study is to dwell upon the attempt of writer and translator to engage in representing exclusion of India's outcaste through creating a Contact Zone of the dominant and dominated in socio-cultural as well politico-economical domains of the pre-independent India. Therefore in this paper implications of Caste are analyzed through Pratt's "Arts of the Contact Zone"<sup>iii</sup>. The term "Contact Zone"<sup>iii</sup>; can be traced to the 1991 MLA conference held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where Mary Louise Pratt<sup>iv</sup> delivered a lecture, titled, "Arts of the Contact Zone".

In her keynote address to the association, she introduced "Contact Zone" as a concept. The term "Contact Zone" is examined in detail in the introduction to the *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* published in 1992. To quote Mary Louise Pratt from the second edition of the text as she articulates, "I use to refer to the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. Pratt borrows the term "contact" from linguistics, where the term contact language refers to an improvised language that develops among speakers of different tongues who need to communicate with each other consistently, usually in the context of trade. Such languages begin as pidgins, and are called creoles when they come to have native speakers of

their own. Like the societies of the contact zone, such languages are commonly regarded as chaotic, barbarous and lacking in structure. (Ron Carter has suggested the term “contact literatures” to refer to literatures written in European languages from outside Europe.) “Contact zone” in her discussion is often synonymous with “colonial frontier.” But while the latter term is grounded within a European expansionist perspective (the frontier is a frontier only with respect to Europe), “contact zone” shifts the center of gravity and the point of view. It invokes the space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect. The term “contact” foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions of imperial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by accounts of conquest and domination told from the invader’s perspective. A “contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and “travelees,” not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (Pratt 08)

Pratt’s concept of Contact Zone emphasizes the presence of multiple discourse communities and that too in relation of unequal power. This unequal division of power among communities not only creates the difficulties of assimilation but rather conflicting negotiations are at work. Mary Louise Pratt has used the concept of Contact Zone in relation to the colonizer and the colonized. Obviously, this definition, while facilitating Pratt's useful and enlightening investigation of the workings of asymmetrical power-relations in colonial Africa and America, does not theorize the complex processes that make a contact zone in Indian context which is hierarchised in terms of not race but caste. This is where we must dig deeper in order to stabilize and differentiate our social and cultural observations concerning intercultural encounters. (Web)

*Gora* is a novel written by Rabindranath Tagore about Calcutta now Kolkata depicting India of the 1880’s under the British Colonialism. It is the fifth in order of writing and the longest of Tagore’s twelve novels. First, it's important to note that the word "gora" means "fair-skinned." That being said, the story is set within the Indian society of the Bengali at a time when there was a great dichotomy within. It was basically the orthodox Hindus vs. the progressive Brahmos. Therefore, through the book, Tagore raises all of the pertinent concerns of the society spoken through one or more of his characters.

The text is translated into English by W.W Pearson in 1924. The translation of *Gora* from Bengali into English creates a language contact as Pratt says writing and translation are creations of practice which meet at some point. This coming in contact of two languages creates a Contact Zone besides the Contact Zone contained within the Novel. *Gora* is a Bengali word which in English means ‘White person’. Pearson has retained the title ‘Gora’ into the English translation. Thus translator of this novel acts as a mediator to shape the culture in the Contact Zone. By translating the text into English and retaining the words from source Pearson brings the unknown culture to the foreign reader.

The novel focuses on caste and untouchability through the representation of the Protagonist Gora as an orthodox Hindu Brahmin. He is a fanatic Hindu and believes in the institution of caste system. He with Krishna Dayal his father discusses the merits of a Brahmin family. He thinks that caste system is the wisest method of division and labor and intellectual world.

According to *Gora* Brahmin is devoted to the highest ideals of spiritual knowledge. He believed in Hindu Culture, traditions rites and rituals. After his release from the jail to cleanse himself of the impurity he performed the ceremony of penance on the banks of holy Ganges. The other character Binoy is an intelligent young man who lives in the shadow of his best friend Gora. Gora is an orphan who is raised in an orthodox Brahman family but is unaware of it. He is intensely patriotic but does heed caste rules. Around this time, a reformist movement is established “Brahmo Samaj” to counteract orthodox Hinduism as well as Christian attacks against polytheism and idol worship. Although Hindus and Brahmos lived side by side they observed different traditions. Brahmo women had more liberty than Hindu women. Binoy, being a good Samaritan, helps an injured neighbor (Poreshbabu) find a doctor. Poreshbabu is a moderate Brahmo, who philosophically advocates the middle road. Thus begins his acquaintance with a Brahmo family. He becomes a frequent visitor to their household

Their two elder daughters Lalita and Sucharita captivate his intellectual curiosity. In return they get an earful about his friend Gora. Gora become acquainted with the Brahmo household. After encountering Binoy and Gora, Sucharita rejects her predetermined suitor: Haribabu. The Brahmo family is invited to an English magistrate party. Gora visits villages outside of Kolkata and rebels against English tyranny. Lalita realizing the misdeeds of the British rebels by leaving her family and escaping the party with Binoy. Her action is scandalous by any standard. Her image and her family’s image are tarnished. Binoy protects Lalita, and eventually marries her. Both of them are abandoned by their respective communities. Gora’s mother (Anandamoyi) and Lalita father supports both the bride and groom. Gora mother considers Binoy her son. Eventually Sucharita is facing another suitor picked by her cunning aunt. Gora realizes his true identity and marries Sucharita. At the end of the novel true identity of Gora is revealed that he is not a Brahmin Hindu but a descendent of Irish Parents. He was born at the time of Sepoy mutiny of 1857 when his father was stabbed to death and his mother died while giving him birth. He was raised by a Bengali Brahmin Couple Anandmoi and Krishna Dayal. This secret was not known to anyone except the couple. In the end his true identity is revealed. Now he transcends the

reality that he is neither Hindu nor Brahmos nor a Christian (as a caste) but a man of universal and that is what Tagore urges the people to come out of the huge well of Casteism and to consider ourselves as the men of humanity .

On the analysis of novel Gora through Contact Zone it is observed that the Gora in the novel represents the dominant exercising the caste power and considers the importance of caste system in India where as the recessive in this novel are represented by the outcaste or the so called untouchables.

Contact Zone is formed between the so called dominants and the untouchables because of disparate cultures and languages. “Tagore has dealt with the caste system in the chapter twenty three through a dialogue between sucharita and Binoy. Gora, the protagonist, is quite orthodox in the institution of caste-system. He with Krishna Dayal, discusses the merit of a Brahmin family. He thinks that caste-system is the wisest method of division and labour and intellectual world. A Brahmin is devoted to the highest ideals of spiritual knowledge. According to Gora, ‘*The Brahmin class is the class of the superman*’. He believed in Hindu culture, tradition, rites, and ritual. There he performs the ceremony of penance after releases from jail on the banks of the holy Ganges.”(Web)

## 2. CONCLUSION:

The present novel exemplifies Tagore’s vision of new India rising above the considerations of caste, community and race. It projects all the important political questions, the conflicts of the ideals between the east and the west. Tagore was primarily a poet but he too found that the medium of the novel was the fittest vehicle for expressing thoughts as well as undercurrents of human mind. That is why the central theme of the novel has a political undercurrent. It is really a strong political novel voicing the aspirations of the resurgent India. But the problem of social discrimination within the India itself for centuries that has been overshadowed. The novel throws light on the caste and untouchability as a social evil and a hurdle in the direction of inclusive India. Thus the caste issue needs to be addressed. From Tagore’s ideas we might look for an alternative solution to India’s continuing problem of social exclusion not based on caste per say but class and gender also. So the Tagore’s dream of Inclusive nationhood which he envisioned century back can be realized today.

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### End notes:

<sup>i</sup> Gora’ - A Mirror of Social, Political and Cultural Life of India Vikramsinh Jadeja, Digvijaysinh.

<sup>ii</sup> Arts of the Contact Zone since its first publication in 1991 is anthologized largely to model interactions between hegemonic cultures and the cultures they subordinate.

<sup>iii</sup> I came across the term “Contact Zone” after reading the paper entitled “The Contact Zone” Translation and Transmission of Folk Narratives in the book *Culture, Nature and Literature* by Usha Bhande. She has used the idea of Contact Zone by Mary Louise Pratt to explore translation and transmission of Folk Narratives. .Bande states that Pratt in her seminal text on travel writing i.e. *Imperial Eyes Travel Writing and Transculturation* has defined Contact Zone. “According to her writing and translations are practices of creation and they meet at some point which can aptly be called Contact Zone”. (Bande,213)

<sup>iv</sup> Mary Louise Pratt is a Silver Professor in the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis, and the Department of Iberian and Latin American Studies at New York University, where she is affiliated with the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, and the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics.

She has published a number of books the prominent among them are *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge 1992; 2nd ed. 2007; trans. to Spanish by Quilmes (1997) and FCE (2010) and to Portuguese by EDUSC (1999); *Women, Politics, and Culture in Latin America*, co-authored with the Seminar for Feminism and Culture in Latin America (UC Press 1990); *Amor brujo: cultura e imagen del amor en los Andes* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos), co-authored with Luis Millones; *Critical Passions: Collected Essays of Jean Franco*, co-edited with Kathleen Newman (Duke 1999). Her articles have appeared

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