

Does Digital Humanities Perceive Rabindranath Tagore More of a Social Reformer than Just a Nobel Laureate?

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Abstract—Rabindranath Tagore was the harbinger of some of our current societal crisis like blind nationalism, toxic religious preaching, dismissed feminism and neglected education system. Through his works like *Home and the World*, *Gora* and *Four Chapters* he brought forth the ideas of feminism, nationalism, progressive religion and importance of education which has been the pivotal points of our societal development. Amidst all the brouhaha caused by Rabindranath's rejection of the knighthood, people overlooked how he brought about the most sustainable societal development i.e., education by establishing Visva-Bharati. In this paper I would like to revisit the works of Tagore and justify through digital humanities how his works can be discerned as futuristic. The delineation of Tagore's ideas on progressive society will be explained through his idiosyncratic characterisation of his leading ladies as Bimala, Sucharita and Ela.

Rabindranath Tagore has been known as a Nobel laureate down the generations yet his works were not perceived as the epitome of societal development. I would refrain from discussing the controversial perception of Tagore's novels as he was a sage ahead of his times. Tagore recognised the problems of our current society during the colonial times of India. An understanding of the societal problems is itself a huge step taken towards the sustainable development of our society. I am compelled to question whether Tagore was perceived as a social reformer or just a Nobel laureate because the problems recognised by him in the 19th and 20th century still persists. Aided by the novel, *Gora*, *Char Adhyay* (Four Chapters) and *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World) I would present the idea of Rabindranath Tagore being the utmost social reformer our nation possesses because of his capability to display a grey space of co-existence between the black and white region of orthodoxy and progression. *Four Chapter* was his final novel written in 1934 yet it resonates the same ideas of a developed society portrayed in *Gora* and *Home and the World* which was published in 1910 and 1916 respectively. The continuous coherence of Tagore's thought

about a developed society is what intrigues me to analyse his works as the manual to a developed society.

There is a plethora of adaptations of Tagore's works be it Naresh Mitra's *Gora* in 1938 or Anurag Basu's *Stories* by Rabindranath Tagore made in 2015 currently available on Netflix. Through generations digital humanities like films, short films have focused on Tagore's novels from a societal perspective. In Naresh Mitra's adaptation of *Gora* from the onset of the film they showed how a man with orthodox religious ideas can be progressive when it comes to the treatment of women. Rabindranath Tagore features in most of the academic syllabus of Indian schools yet his novels are not read from a feminist point of view rather it is mostly read as love stories.

To answer the question about digital humanities' perception of Rabindranath Tagore, I would at first look into the adaptation of *Gora* by Naresh Mitra. In his film Naresh Mitra looks into the essential problems of our society like casteism, blind nationalism and oblivious feminism. While Satyajit Ray in his adaptation of *Home and the World* has depicted the complicated idea of women empowerment. On the other hand, if you look into Kumar Shahani's adaptation of *Char Adhyay* he shows how women do not need empowerment as they are "power incarnate". All these adaptations of Tagore's novels depicting different aspects of feminism are made in the 20th century. But sadly, none of these movies or novels is addressed as a feminist piece of work.

In Satyajit Ray's *Ghare Baire* he shows how certain women were only given the illusion of being empowered because they were primarily possessions of men. Nikhil was persistent in teaching Bimala western songs and western manners to make her look more civilised and not to educate her. The idea that anything western qualifies to be more civilised also shows how orientalism flawed the portrayal of Indians on a global platform. Bimala who dared to step out of the "andarmahal" and have a political conversation with Sandip eventually

succumbed to the patriarchal notions. The multi-layered depiction of Tagore's *Bimala* by Satyajit Ray throws some light on how digital humanities thought of Rabindranath Tagore as someone more than just a literary virtuoso.

The recent adaptation of *Char Adhyay* by Bappaditya Bandhopadhyaya titled "Elar Char Adhyay" depicted the importance of education on the onset of the film. The title of the film itself shows how Bappaditya perceived the entire novel from a feminist vantage point. Through the scene of a social gathering organised for the British, Bappaditya shows how feminism does not only mean allowing women to come out from the "andarmahal" and socialize with other men. Instead, real implementation of feminism would be thinking about women beyond the idea of their marriage. The film has a song sequence of *Ela* as a headmistress of all girls' school where the students are exposed to extra-curricular activities and education. This thought is not exclusive to Bappaditya rather this is the original thought instigated by Tagore through his novels. Naresh Mitra in his depiction of *Gora* reiterates the same notion through the progressive character of Paresh Babu which was aired in the year 1938.

In *Gora* *Sucharita* and *Lolita* are not only presented as educated women like *Ela* but they also had their own point of view in life. *Lolita* has been portrayed as a character who is ahead of her times. She transitions from a docile confused girl to a pragmatic person who is not apprehensive to accept her feelings for *Binoy*. Pitted against *Lolita* is *Sucharita* who contrary to *Lolita* maintains her demeanour all throughout the novel even when she is tormented for being attracted to *Gora*, who believes in a conflicting culture and possesses a divergent mindset.

Rabindranath Tagore along with the filmmaker Naresh Mitra vociferously voices against the culture of embellishing women with benevolent and mother like statures with the motive of alienating them from partaking in other vital social issues. Both of them successfully painted their heroines as genuine human beings possessing natural emotions, sensibilities and responsibilities regarding society. Instead of lending them the image of obedient dolls mind-cuffed by regressive thoughts *Sucharita* and *Lolita* are characterized as women with self-confidence and individualistic thinking.

The two major crisis in our current society deals with our identification in terms of religion and our blind nationalism. Tagore meticulously writes about the flawed concept of nationalism which prevails in India since the colonial times along with the regression of society caused by blind nationalism. Through the novel, *Gora* Rabindranath Tagore perspicuously promulgates that there is no similarity between someone's religion and love for the country. Tagore expresses these views through the lead character of *Gora* who was portrayed as an orthodox Hindu throughout the novel only to know that he is originally the son of an Irishman. The problem of blind nationalism has been ubiquitous in India since forever. Tagore addressed that problem and through the

complicated character of *Gora* voiced how an Indian is not compelled to love their country solely because of their birthplace but because they choose to do so. In simple words it is not imperative to fight for the country rather it is a choice made out of respect and love. In all the adaptations of *Gora* digital humanities portrayed this message without a fail and refrained from delineating this story as a mere romantic novel. The character of Paresh Babu meanwhile explains how the orthodox religious practices are someone's choice and it is not a marker of one's love for the nation. This character delineates the co-existence of both the orthodox preaching of religion and the progressive idea of "samaj" (society). The representation of *Gora* by digital media lends the understanding that Tagore was more of a social reformer than just a Nobel Laureate.

In a discussion on blind nationalism, the depiction of *Char Adhyay* cannot be neglected. Sadly, it is mostly known as Tagore's last novel instead of a highly esteemed political novel. In the digital depiction of *Char Adhyay* by Kumar Shahani at the beginning of the film, he presents a montage of incidents that took place during the colonial times. Followed by this montage he presents *Ela* who goes on to say "Nasha hota jaa raha hain humara maksaat" which translates into "our goal has become our obsession". This one line can summarise the entire novel or the film. It is the unhealthy obsession with our nation without any reasoning that has given birth to the deadly idea of blind nationalism. The word deadly is a befitting adjective of this situation because "the lie that by killing a country's soul its life can be sustained is going around the world today in many places," (p. 504). This saying of Atin reminds me of Raskolnikov from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* who justified the killing of a woman for the betterment of hundreds of youths thus marking the beginning of his "punishment".

In a conclusive note Rabindranath recognised the crimes of our society through his novels warning us against the punishments. Unfortunately, people titled Tagore's novels only as the prodigious work of literature ignoring the societal crises addressed by him. It is through digital humanities that we are made to look at Tagore as the biggest social reformer this country could ever possess.

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