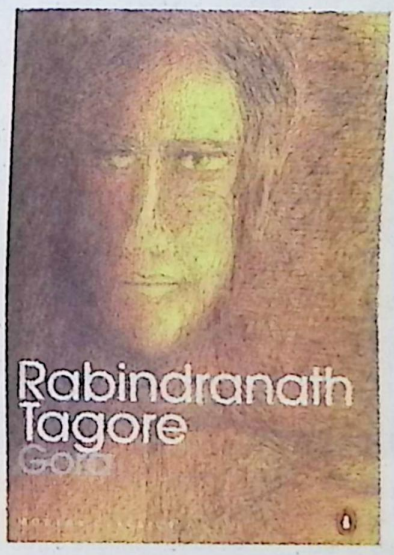
The Brown Man's Burden

AHMEDE HUSSAIN

Kaiser Haq, poet and translator, once famously said that it was impossible to translate Rabindranath Tagore. Haq later went on to do the impossible, translating Tagore that is. His 'Quartet' (Translation of Tagore's 'Chaturanga'; 1916) has earned Haq critical acclaim. The latest work of translation of Tagore to hit the bookstores is Radha Chakravarty's translation of Tagore's post-colonial text 'Gora' (1907-1909). In the broadest sense of the word Gora is thematically linked with 'Ghare-Baire' (The Home and the World; 1916). Gora's social setting is late 19th century Bengal, a colony in turmoil. But unlike Rudyard Kipling's 'Kim' (1900-1901), which is the journey of an Irish soldier's orphaned son into the heart of colonial India, Gora is a political novel and a scathing criticism of the Hindu revivalist movement of the late 19th century that novelists like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838 - 1894) propagated.

While 'Kim' ("A poor white, the poorest of the poor") searches for his spiritual soul, Gora, also the son of an Irishman delves deep into the heart of the colonial man to portray the society and politics of its time. Tagore, with his masterful prose, aloof yet engaging, depicts a time that was both violent and polemical. The time, on one hand, offered bigotry to the frustrated colonised youth: on the other there was the glorious Bengali Renaissance. Europe was abuzz with anarchism; nihilist and anarchic thoughts regularly filtered into the drawing rooms of Calcutta. With the advent of Brahmo Samaj and Brahmoism, the soul of Bengal was also in turmoil. Even though through social reforms, it liberated millions from the clutches of social tyranny, the spiritual solace that Brahmoism offered was limited to the petit bourgeoisies of the Bengal and was heavily swayed by the European liberalism.

A master social observer that he is, Tagore portrays beliefs and dogmas of many strands as Radha Chakravarty in her introduction says, "The elite Hindu group is not homogenized: from the rigid, unworldly orthodoxy of Krishnadayal to Abinash's naïve celebration of ritual and Harimohini's growing inflexibility about Sucharita's habits, the narrative represents varying facets of religious conservatism." Radha's introduction is full of such eloquent critique of the novel, and one wishes that had it been a little longer, it would have given the reader a better guide to such a complex and complicated text, which with the rise of religious conservatism in the Indian subcontinent is becoming even more relevant.



Gora
Rabindranath Tagore
Translated by: Radha Chakravarty
Penguin Books; Rs 399

Tagore makes use of all the tools that he has had as a modernist--Gora is filled with double and paired characters and its narrative is imbued with contradictions and paradoxes. It culminates when Gora, brought up a Hindu, is told about his true birth; his world falls apart, along with it, it shatters his concept of identity. Couple with it the fact that Gora was born in 1987, the year in which Indian sepoys, irrespective of their casts and creeds, rose in unison to liberate India from the clutches of the Empire. An Irishman's son, Ireland, Irish Nationalism--an allusion to another colony. Gora looses all identities and all his identities become one-- he embodies the secular spirit of modern India.

One of the leading intellectuals of her time, Radha Chakravarty has translated two more important Tagore novels--'Chokher Bali' and 'Farewell Song: Shesher Kabita'. Gora indeed shows her maturity as a translator. Her incorporation of certain Bengali words in her translation, in the era of chutneyfication of English, is a surprising change from the translations one is familiar with. Words like 'bon' and 'champa' are retained, which have added a new dimension to the text that was first published about a hundred years ago. Radha's prose is seductive, which reminds the reader that while translating, the translator, even though she is transplanting reality into a different language, has to read the pulse of the text that she is translating. Radha's is one of the best Tagore translations so far; Tagore would have approved.

Essentially, Gora is the spiritual and political dilemma of the post-colonial man and his quest for his true self. At the end of 'Kim', Teshoo Lama's search for the River of Arrow ends and he is blessed with nirvana, our post-colonial Gora for his turn toils in the labyrinth of Bengal's murky history.

Ahmede Hussain has edited 'Brown Writing', an anthology of fiction from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, which is going to be published by Tranquebar Press/Westland Books, India in June.