THEORETICAL/CRITICAL ESSAY ARTICLE

Promotion of Nationalism through Caste: A Study of Rabindra Nath Tagore's *Gora*

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Abstract

The original idea of caste system was engineering the society on the basis of labor division by providing every sector of society a distinct and important role to make the Hindu society an integrated whole making every group in the society depending on every other or the society was engineered to be completely inter-dependent, but the problem is that it has been misused as a means of social exploitation, oppression that has led the society towards mutual hatred and disintegration. The main objective of this research article is to find out how Gora, the protagonist of Rabindra Nath Tagore's novel Gora, has used the idea of caste division as a means to promote nationalism among the people. Theoretical insights of liberal nationalism are used to analyze the primary text with the help of theoretical insights of Edward Soja's 'Thirdspace'. The article examines and analyzes how one can help strengthen social integration by respecting the others and offering the people justice even though difference is inevitable among the people living in a society. The article concludes that caste system can be exercised as a means of cultural nationalism by celebrating the difference among the people and respecting the jobs done by others.
Keywords: *Caste, Firstspace, integrity, nationalism, Secondspace, Thirdspace*

Introduction

Nationalism is a feeling of belongingness that unites people. It is developed among the people in the form of the citizens of a nation-state, ethnic group, language speaking group, region, culture, or religion. It may also include the ideas like literature, art, sports, etc. It raises questions about the concept of a nation (or national identity) which is often defined in terms of common origin, ethnicity, or cultural ties. It has been more a matter of ethno-cultural concern rather than a nation-state in modern times as it used to be in the past. Nationalism now has been a non-voluntary community of common origin, language, tradition, culture, and customs. Seymor states, "a nation is a cultural group, possibly but not necessarily united by a common descent, endowed with civic
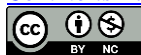
ties" (51). In the same way, William Connor says that a nation-state is a politicized and mobilized ethnic group rather than a state" (41). Thus, the concept of nation and nationalism includes the people connected with the feelings of togetherness more than the territorial boundary.

Nationalism, according to Yael Tamir, is any complex of attitudes, claims and directives for action ascribing a fundamental political, moral and cultural values to nation and nationality and deriving obligations from this ascribed value (2016, 3). She says that nationalism ascribes value to national belonging. For her, nationalism "is feeling that promotes solidarity and solidarity as a means of increased social justice" (2019, 62). She thinks that we can revive the unifying narratives or our nationality without sacrificing liberal inheritance of freedom and rights (68). Emphasizing the idea that nationalism is the feeling among the people that promotes belongingness and identity, MacIntyre states, "We come to be who we are because of the social settings and contexts in which we mature" (13). He further emphasizes that the very identity of each person depends upon his/her participation in communal life (15) because community is the foundation of one's identity.

However, all the people in a society are not treated equally, and they are not allowed to enjoy equal rights and privileges. Kukathas observes:

> Oppression and injustice give the victimized group a just cause and the right to secede. If a minority group is oppressed by the majority to the extent that almost every minority member is worse off than most members of the majority simply in virtue of belonging to the majority, then nationalist claims on behalf of the minority . . . (15)

Thus, nationalism should be a medium for the people to speak, and fighting against oppression and subjugation of certain group of people in the society. According to Kymlicka, "Members of minority group are often disadvantaged in relation to dominant culture because they have to rely on those with same language and culture to conduct the affairs of daily life" (93). Caste in Hindu culture has been a medium of oppression of a certain group of people in the name of the auspicious customs and practices of the system. It is because the downtrodden group of people has been forced to undergo the injustice of untouchability and other inhuman practices. Gora, the protagonist of the novel *Gora* written by Rabindra Nath Tagore follows Hindu caste rituals very strictly, but he wants the oppressed people to be treated to enjoy social freedom and justice.

Thirdspace Created by the Caste System

The theory of *Thirdspace* depends on the triad of perceived, conceived and lived space, and also his translation of this triad into spatial practices, representation of space, and spaces of representation (Lefebure 1). According to Soja, what Lefebvre describes as 'perceived space' or the product of 'spatial practice' is the Firstspace, "the spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space (Lefebure 38). Soja describes it that spatial practice is "the process of producing the material form of social spatiality" and is therefore," both the medium and outcome of human activity, behavior and experience" (Soja 66). The product of spatial practice is Firstspace or "materialized, socially produced, empirical space…. perceived space, directly sensible to open, within limits, to accurate measurement and description" (Soja 66). Materiality and physicality are the major features of Firstspace and the focus of Firstspace epistemologies (Soja 75) since space is created by physical status of the people in the society.

Lefebure's 'representations of space' create "conceived space" or Secondspace. This is mental and conceptual rather than material and physical, about which Soja explains:

> This conceived space is also tied to the relations of production and, especially, to the order or design that they impose. Such order is constituted via control over knowledge, signs and codes; over the means of deciphering spatial practice and hence over the production of spatial knowledge… In these dominating spaces of regularity and 'ruly' discourse, these mental spaces, are thus the representations of power and ideology, of control and surveillance. (67)

Therefore, Secondspace is imposed from above and mediates how people relate to and interact with Firstspace. According to Soja idealistic visions of spaces are part of second space-utopias, nations, artistic creations and visions of charted and uncharted territories (societies) alike, all make up Secondspace. This 'epistemology assumes that "spatial knowledge is primarily produced through discursively devised representations of space, through the spatial workings of the mind. In its purest form, Secondspace is . . . made up of projections into the empirical world from conceived or imagined geographies" (Soja 79). It is important to note that Secondspace is the 'dominating space', not the dominated one, always coming from above rather than below (Soja 67) because it is the conceived space that creates boundaries.

Lefebvre's 'spaces of representation' produce the 'lived space' or Thirdspace as Soja writes "spaces of representation contain all other real and imagined spaces simultaneously" (69). This is the dominated space where physicality and ideology meet and create lived realities:

> These spaces are also vitally filled with politics and ideology, with the real and imagined interwined, and with capitalism, racism, patriarchy and other material spatial practices that concretize the social relations of production, reproduction, exploitation, domination and subjection . . . . The spaces of the peripheries, the margins and marginalized, the 'third worlds' that can be found at all scales, in the corporeality of the body and mind, in sexuality and subjectivity, in individual and collective identities from the most local to the most global. They are the chosen spaces for struggle, liberation, emancipation. (Soja 68)

Thirdspace, for Soja, is the real space where people live their everyday life and it is highly political space; and "a strategic location from which to encompass, understand and potentially transform all spaces simultaneously" (Soja 68). Sometimes it is very difficult to describe what the Thirdspace is but to borrow Lefebvre's, "concrete abstraction" or Soja's "real-and –imagined". It happens since it is defined by one's lived experience alone and it is more evidently experienced in the societies where there is a clear distinction among the people like the social organization in caste-system.

Caste can be better studied through Daine Mine's *Fierce Gods*, Kathinka Froystad's *Blended Boundaries,* and Jeffery Snodgrass' *Casting Kings*. *Fierce Gods,* with assistance of Thirdspace, opens up new interpretative avenues to understand lower caste potential to create lasting changes to village culture. *Blended Boundaries* deals with upper-caste privileges in Hindu society. It provides an understanding of how first and Secondspaces uphold caste hierarchies in Hindu society, especially in urban societies, and Snodgrass has illustrated how urban low caste people can create Thirdspaces that relieve aspects of low caste oppression for their communities.

Mine examines "the production of both domination and subordination" and explores "how the powerless make their voices heard in a village where the social power of some works to silence the discourses of other" (4). In her study, it is found that control over land (means of production) asserts economic and political control over the lower castes through spatial dominance (46). Discrimination is exercised whether one touches the other or not, whether one is allowed to enter a shrine, how the *prasad* is distributed, where the people are supposed to locate themselves during temple rituals, are understood

and exercised according to Soja's Secondspace– the rules of moving and relating spatially are defined from above and represent the ideals of the most powerful members of society. However, this strict observance of caste difference does not work in everyday life, especially with educated, modern, urban people. The gap is narrowing in day-to-day everyday life.

Secondspace ideologies are being challenged in everyday life, which has been diminishing the power exercised by the upper (higher) caste people. The Firstspace is also intrinsically tied to both its Secondspace and Thirdspace. Location of houses (and temples) create a setting for the discrimination created, maintained, and challenged. The public spaces which were strictly used by some certain caste are being let loose for the comparatively lower castes, due to political and economic ascending. Exclusion and discrimination are illegal in the state these days, but in practice, the low caste (scheduled caste) people are not allowed to the innermost part of a temple, even the lower castes than Brahmins, where they are dominant groups. The dominant caste people are still using inversion and subversion in dominating the low caste people. They create the Firstspace and Secondspace for themselves and only Thirdspace for the lower (untouchable) castes, have created an inverted relative rank and centrality by making themselves higher, bigger, and more central. They center themselves through an attractive display of wealth and power, expand their influence. Creating a Thirdspace means being simultaneously central and peripheral, which is more empowering and accurate (Soja 97). While caste performances are usually based on ever contracting ascending levels of exclusion, "Thirdspace is inclusive definition" (Soja 99) in the sense that it is unavoidable.

Caste is expressed differently in different societies and urban and rural settings. The upper caste people, these days, think that due to the special reservation introduced by the state, the lower caste people have begun disregarding social and cultural boundaries. In most of the (cities and villages) settlements, almost all the houses and home compounds are protected by walls or fences, which protect the homes from the streets, the inside from the outside, the familiar from the unknown, and the orderly from the potential unruly (Frostyad 63). It is done to maintain a cultural premium or maintaining proper social boundaries. The people maintain these boundaries when they invite people of lower caste to enter their homes but to clean them, work and perform other domestic tasks. Most of the upper caste families speak about untouchability openly and do not let the lower caste people within certain areas of their homes. It clarifies that common upper-caste tendency is not an innocent habit that contributes to reproducing notions of caste, untouchability, and upper–caste superiority. The upper caste families employ the lower-caste people to perform some degrading tasks like cleaning toilets for which certain castes have been deployed. There are different castes for performing different tasks rather than a person for doing all those tasks. The interior Firstspace of the home is dominated by the owner.

Secondspace rules determine which people of the household may enter certain rooms, may carry certain things in and out of rooms, which ensures that the interior home is a space where upper caste people can assure themselves of their superiority over the other people. It happens in degrees. There are certain rules about which caste can have an access to which (special) place of the home. The upper caste people seek help from lower caste people and call them "a part of the family" but they are not allowed to reach the place they wish. There are certain boundaries created about where the lower-castes people can have an access and how much they can do at their will. Inter-caste relationships and friendships, as Froystad has observed, tend to be "rare, brief and complicated by mutual prejudice" (158), even marriages.

It is not necessary that the acts of everyday privileges and discriminations are verbalized; they are already embedded. Caste hierarchy, in Hindu society, need not be discussed; it is already understood, and it is witnessed in peoples' behaviors and performances. The lower caste people work in the upper-caste homes without crossing the boundaries. They work under the upper caste second spatial control due to their social position. However, the lower-caste government officials become a real nuisance for the upper-caste households, because those officials have gained access and they are advantaged from the government policies, and therefore they must be treated carefully and rather respectfully, who would otherwise have been treated as harshly as any domestic helper of the caste. This kind of relationship is built due to necessity and fear rather than the upper-caste people's belief that lower caste people deserve that treatment as those of upper caste ones. In private homes, the idea of Thirdspace and power dynamics works more clearly than in public places. Upper-caste and second space ideology still dominates the public sphere. The practice of hiring domestic servants from lower-castes seems to retain the dominance of the upper-caste people, but it creates and has created great fear of losing control over the Secondspace.

Caste, as such, is a contracted category and manipulated in various situations to create a social status of higher and lower caste people in the society. It is, however, a "social institution that is inherited and constraining and, at the same time, as an imaginative fiction that can tacitly be deployed to exploit fluctuating historical circumstances (Snodgrass 34-5). Gora believes that the system can be used as a means of social integration, not as a means of injustice, oppression, hatred and social disintegration; it can be used as a means of national integrity.

Hindu Nationalism

Gora has understood that raising the walls and dams and exercising different strict rules and regulations have been the major causes of repulsion of the people away from Hinduism. He has that experience at Ghosepara, how the English people (British Raj) have been exploiting the Hindu idea of caste difference to oppress and torture the natives, and the people have started thinking all negative about Hindu religion in itself. Now-a-days, "He used to leave the house early in the morning after a slight meal, and would not return till late at night. Taking the train from Calcutta, he would get out at some not far distant station, and wander about amongst the villages" (Tagore 510) in order to know the real plight of the people of Hindustan and understand what it is like to live as low-caste and poor Hindus there. The real picture of society cannot be seen in the cities but realized in the villages.

> There he would be the guest of potters, oil-vendors and other low-caste men. These people would not understand why this huge fair-skinned, Brahmin youth should visit them and inquire into their joys and sorrows, in fact they were often quite suspicious as to his motives. But Gora, thrusting aside all their doubts and hesitation, roamed about amongst them at will, and even when he sometimes heard them make unpleasant remarks he was not deterred. (Tagore 511)

This is the situation how it has developed our society now. On the one hand, the high upper-caste people do not let the low-caste people their entry in the community and households, and on the other, that is reciprocated by the low-caste people that they suspect, they doubt if a Brahmin or a high-caste person wishes to join them and share their sorrows and joys. It shows how deeply the Hindu society has been divided and how much of disbelief has developed among each other.

This is what has been observed by Andre Beteille, in his book *Caste, Class, and Power*, in the village called Sripuram, Tanjore District in South India. The Hindu society

there is divided into three special caste groups-Brahmins, Non-Brahmins (Vaisyas etc.), and Adi-Dravidas, in which the idea of purity and pollution plays the most important role.

> The Adi-Dravida, by reasons of the pollution attached to his person, was barred from many of the activities. . . . He had access only to the outer backyard of the Brahmin's house. If the Brahmin needed him urgently, he could not himself go to the Cheri (locality of the Adi-Dravidas) to fetch him. Even today an Adi-Dravida tenant cannot, after harvest, deliver the grain directly to the house of the Brahmin mirasdar (landlord). He has to stand at the head of the agraharam (Brahmin settlement) and call out for his landlord, who then sends somebody to carry the grain in. (197-8)

The concept of purity and pollution has developed so negatively that it is not only the Brahmins who take the presence of an Adi-Dravida as inauspicious at their settlements; the Adi-Dravids also take the presence of a Brahmin at their settlement the same way in turn. What an extreme example of caste distinction between the members of the same community.

> The concept of touchability and untouchability, means the Hindu caste difference is observed more strictly in the villages, where "the social bondage was for greater than it was amongst the educated community" (510). Tagore observes further:

> Night and day without ceasing every act of eating, drinking, social ceremony, and touching, in every home, was under the vigilant eyes of society. Every person had an absolutely simple faith in social custom- it never occurred to them to question such matters. . . . It is in fact doubtful whether in the whole world could be found a species of animal so important to judge what was for their own good, so helpless and so cowardly. (511)

The villagers have been accustomed to live the life worse and more insulted than that of an animal and they have left questioning the reason and logic behind their oppression.

They have been so much habituated with the life-style that "Apart from observing traditional customs their mind was completely unconscious of what was for their welfare, and even if it was explained to them they would not understand" (Tagore 511) or they would refuse to understand. It is another shocking reality of the Hindu caste-based society. They regard prohibitions, by the threat of penalties and in the spirit of sectarianism:

> . . . as greater than anything else in the world- it seemed as if their whole natures had become entangled from head to foot in a network of various penalties for transgressing against rules forbidding them to do this or that at every step. . . . In it there was no unity as could make them stand firmly shoulder to shoulder in times of misfortune or prosperity. (Tagore 512)

It is the major character of Hindu society that there is not only difference and discrimination between the high and low caste people, but there is stronger feeling of difference among themselves, a kind of eternal repulsion, which Gora realizes while wandering around the villages that ". . . by this weapon of tradition and custom man was sucking the blood of man and was reducing him to poverty in a merciless fashion" (Tagore 511). This is the evil truth that in the name of purity and pollution (or touchability and untouchability) the low-caste people are sucked their blood (badly exploited) not by the state or the king as such but the "creditors and money lenders" (Tagore 511) with the help of their reach to the power. In fact, it is not caste as such that exploits the low-caste people but the poverty that has made them exploited and oppressed but in the name of caste. It is class system that is exploitative rather than caste system but the problem is that caste is defined as class here.

Religion should unite the people together, and it should be a medium of help to each other in times of need, but it is just the opposite in Hindu society, which is mainly because caste system and its various layers within itself. What Gora observes in the village and that hurts him, is, as explained by Tagore:

> He had observed that when any misfortune or calamity occurred in a village the Mohammedan stood shoulder to shoulder in a way that Hindus never did . . . it pained him intensely to acknowledge that Mussalmans were united by their religion, and not merely by custom and tradition. One the one hand, just the bondage of custom did not render all their functions useless so on the other the bond of religion made them very intimately one. (513-4)

This is what the interpreters and practitioners of Hindu society should learn from the others. Religion should be a bond of unity even though there are differences in customs and traditions. Different customs are practiced in different communities that are the products of those certain individual communities, but religion should not be brought in the way of unity of the followers of the same religion because religion is not the one that has prescribed different customs and traditions for different communities.

Conclusion

Caste is a real-and-imagined presence in history, society and everyday life. Wealth, power, and space can bring a change in the social status of the lower-castes. They can reinvent them with the help of money, power in government offices and new places. They can break the boundary of the Secondspace and enter into the Firstspace. Power and status are created by people and can be taken away by people, clear from their tradition of praise and insult. Even if the lower-caste people cannot build a political platform of Thirdspace by themselves, they can create new opportunities for social, economic, and spatial growth for their own community. Caste, therefore, should not be practiced as a means of exploitation of the lower-caste people by the people in power and upper strata of the society but it should be exercised as a pure and genuine system of division of labor in which people of every caste and class enjoys equality, freedom and individual and group dignity that leads to social integrity and mutual respect. One should not be judged by one's birth but by one's prowess and expertise. Exchange in professional expertise, mutual respect among all the kinds of jobs and dignity in one's profession helps build a very strong sense of unity among all the groups of people living in a society, making the society a real common garden with various species of flowers blooming together that strengthens nationalism as a whole which helps to mitigate Western or any other influence on the people in a country like Nepal.

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