



A Study of Tagore's Nationalistic Discourse with Special Reference to *The Home and the World*

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ABSTRACT

*Tagore never shares a positive sentiment towards the idea nationalism in his works. He deems nationalism a recurrent threat to humanity, because with its propensity for the material and the rational, it tramples over the human spirit and human emotion. He is opposed to the idea of the nation; he is even more fiercely opposed to India joining the bandwagon of nationalism. To him, this would compromise India's history and identity as a culture and bring it under the shadow of the West. He is judicious in equating the imperial discourse with the discourse of nationalism. His novel, *The Home and the World*, (1916) vibrates with his idea of nation and nationalism illustrating the battle Tagore has with himself, between the ideas of Western culture and revolution against the Western culture for the sake of Indian nationhood. The novel occupies Tagore's anti-nationalist sentiment conceived against a backdrop of a larger ideology of love, creation and global human fellowship. He never allows his love for his country to stand in the way of his love for truth, justice and humanity. He prefers a world consciousness, a visva bodh to national consciousness.*

KEY WORDS: Nationalism, Post-colonial, Swadeshi, imagined community, multi-dimensional, visva bodh

Nationalism has become one of the most powerful and recognized forces of global politics and almost every ethnic, racial, and other type of "political" movements describe themselves and their efforts in nationalistic terms. Not surprisingly, there is a burgeoning literature attempting to understand and dissect this omnipresent phenomenon permeating every region of the globe and frequently causing brutal conflicts. Despite literature's such active complicity in the formation of the institution and the global acceptance of nationalism as the only legitimate form of political organisation, Rabindranath Tagore did not share a positive sentiment towards the ideology. His foremost objection came from its very nature and purpose as an institution. The very fact that it is a social institution, a mechanical organisation, modelled on certain utilitarian objectives in mind, made it unpalatable to Tagore, who was a champion of creation over construction, imagination over reason and the natural over the artificial and the man-made.

Tagore took the view that since nationalism emerged in the post-religious laboratory of industrial-capitalism, it was only an "organisation of politics and commerce" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 7), that brings "harvests of wealth" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 5) or "carnivals of materialism" (Soares 113), by spreading tentacles of greed, selfishness, power and prosperity, or churning up the baser instincts of mankind, and sacrificing in the process "the moral man, the complete man . . . to make room for the political and commercial man, the man of limited purpose" (Tagore *Nationalism* 9).

Tagore deemed nationalism a recurrent threat to humanity, because with its propensity for the material and the rational, it trampled over the human spirit and human emotion; it upset man's moral balance, "obscuring his human side under the shadow of soul-less organisation" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 9). In his book *Nationalism*, Tagore dismisses the concept nationalism as "the organized self-interest of a people, where it is least human and least spiritual" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 8). Of course, Tagore's critique of nationalism might seem a little lofty and farfetched – 'too pious,' as Pound might have said – but much of it is intellectually valid and some of it is borne out by contemporary post-colonial criticism. Critics, for example, hardly ascribe the nation with any moral authority but emphasise its practical necessity, its legitimacy on the ground that it has laboured on behalf of modernity, an outcome of the overlapping discourses of Reason, Modernity and History that serves as an underpinning to modern civilisation. Leela Gandhi posits, "nationalism is the only form of political organisation which is appropriate to the social and intellectual condition of the modern world" (Gandhi 104). She does not, however, suggest how beneficial it is from a human point of view, how much it contributes to the moral and spiritual fulfilment of human beings. Interestingly, that does not seem to be part of the contemporary discourse, something that Tagore was so preoccupied with; modern discourse is monocular in its acceptance of progress, civilisation and modernity as a

material and intellectual process only, and not both material and moral, or intellectual as well as spiritual – precisely the criticism that Tagore, a multilateral thinker, directed at the current unilineal civilization.

Tagore was opposed to the idea of the nation; he was even more fiercely opposed to India joining the bandwagon of nationalism. This would compromise India's history and identity as a culture and bring it under the shadow of the West. Unlike Gandhi, Tagore believed that political freedom and attainment of a nationalist identity by driving the British out was not the right solution for India's problems and so he said in his characteristic hopefulness: "I am not for thrusting off Western civilization and becoming segregated in our independence. Let us have a deep association" (quoted in Soares 106). Tagore maintained that India's immediate problems were social and cultural and not political. India is the world in miniature, this is where the races and the religions have met; therefore she must constantly strive to resolve her "burden of heterogeneity," by evolving out of "these warring contradictions a great synthesis" (Dutta 239). First and foremost, India must address the caste issue. The caste system has become too rigid and taken a hypnotic hold on the mind of the people; what was once meant to introduce social order by accommodating the various racial groups in India, has now become a gigantic system of cold-blooded repression. India ought to come out of this social stagnation by educating the people out of their trance; only when the immovable walls of society were removed, or made flexible, will India regain her vitality and dynamism as a society and find true freedom. What is the purpose of political freedom when the elites in society are exploiting the lower classes, especially the untouchables so ruthlessly? In his short story, *Purification*, he exposes the absurdity of Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement and the hypocrisy of the Indian nationalists by showing how selfish and superficial the nationalists were in their quest for freedom; they were fervently opposed to the British oppression, but oppressed the poor as well as the untouchables themselves; they wanted dignity and respect but wouldn't allow the same to their less fortunate brethren.

Tagore is astute in equating the imperial discourse with the discourse of nationalism and asserting the process of othering colonised nations by the Lacanian *grande-autre*, the great Other, or the colonising Other, to fulfil its imperial ego. A nation can construct itself only by constructing its others in such a way as to confirm its own reality. Thus every nation is given to an inherent discourse of self and other, each finding its identity by positing itself against the other, thereby making each potentially an enemy of the other. Tagore explains:

The Nation, with all its paraphernalia of power and prosperity, its flags and pious hymns, its blasphemous prayers in the churches, and the literary mock thunders of its patriotic bragging, cannot hide the fact that the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation, that all its precautions are against it, and any new birth of its fellow in the world is always followed in its mind by the dread of a new peril (Tagore, *Nationalism* 17-18).

Tagore's novel, *The Home and the World*, (1916) vibrates with his idea of nation and nationalism. The book illustrates the battle Tagore had with himself, between the ideas of Western culture and revolution against the Western culture for the sake of Indian nationhood. These two ideas are portrayed in two of the main characters, Nikhil, who is rational and opposes violence, and Sandip, who will let nothing stand in his way from reaching his goals. These two opposing ideals are very important in understanding the history of this region and its contemporary problems. There is much controversy over whether or not Tagore was attempting to represent Gandhi in Sandip but many argue that Tagore would not even venture to personify Sandip as Gandhi because Tagore was an admirer of Gandhi and Gandhi was the worshipper of anti-violence while Sandip would use violence to get what he wanted. The book shows "the clash between new and old, realism and idealism, the means and the end, good and evil" (Desai xxiv) within India and southern Asia.

The setting of the novel *The Home and the World* is in early 20th century India. The story line coincides with the National Independence Movement taking place in the country at the time, which was sparked by the Indian National Congress. There were various national and regional campaigns of both militant and non-violent ideas which all had the common goal of ending British colonial rule. Militant nationalism had a strong following in the early part of the 20th century, especially during the World War I period. Some examples of this movement are the Indo-German Pact and *Ghadar Conspiracy*; unfortunately both of these failed. The latter stages of the movement saw a transition to non-violent forms of resistance led by Mahatma Gandhi. India remained a British colony until 1947, when Pakistan (August 14) and India (August 15) gained their freedom. On January 26, 1950, India adopted a constitution and became its own republic. At the time of Indian Independence, the Muslim dominated north-west and eastern parts of the country were separated to form West Pakistan and East Pakistan (which later became Bangladesh). Particularly important to the novel is an understanding of the *swadeshi* movement, as a part of the Indian Nationalist Movement. The *swadeshi* Movement started in response to the Partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon which occurred in 1905. The Swadeshi movement was a successful resistance policy against the British colonization. Indian citizens were encouraged to boycott British goods in order to foster Indian identity and independence. This movement was important in fostering "the new spirit in India," and separating India from Britain, which was largely thought to be responsible for the subsequent widespread poverty.

Tagore's idea of nation becomes multi-dimensional in *The Home and the World*. The novel tells us not only the personal struggles of the three main characters, but also little details of the family structure and how traditional Indian households were like. In the book, Bimala starts off as a traditional, obedient house wife who is faithful to her husband and even forces herself to be respectful towards her nagging sister-in-law. "I would cautiously and silently get up and take the dust of my husband's feet without waking him, how at such moments I could feel the vermilion mark upon my forehead shining out like the morning star" (Tagore 18). However, as she falls "in love" with Sandip, she slowly moves away from her traditional housewife role. She becomes more daring, more confidently brushes off her sister-in-law's criticisms, and crosses outside the women's quarter of the house, and easily converses with another

man, Sandip, who is not her husband. Through her dilemma, the readers are able to learn about the change in the traditional ways of the Indian household.

The plot is set in the estate of the Bengali land lord Nikhil. He marries Bimala, a woman who is both of a lower status and of a darker complexion, which is contradictory to his family traditions. Their love is idyllic and both are dedicated to one another until the appearance of his friend and radical revolutionist, Sandip who is a passionate and active man, and is an opposite of the peace-loving and somewhat passive Nikhil. His charismatic speech, support of the Swadeshi movement, and a renewed appreciation of everything Indian while denying everything British garnered support from local natives across the province. After hearing Sandip speaks at a rally, Bimala insists that Sandip visit Nikhil's estate. While visiting, Sandip's alluring nature easily attracts the innocent and unsuspecting Bimala, and she suggests he make his headquarters at their house. Once empowered by the inside world, knowing only her husband and home, she becomes engaged with the outside world, taking part in the Swadeshi movement by working with Sandip. As the novel develops, Bimala is drawn to Sandip's passion and the attraction between the two becomes inevitable, producing a love triangle. She begins to question her marriage with Nikhil and finds in Sandip what she has always sought after in a man: zeal, ambition, and a hint of danger. She begins to help Sandip by stealing money from Nikhil's treasury, convinced that if it is not equally his money as well as hers, then it belongs to the country. While Bimala claims her national duty as motivation, her true intentions lie in pleasing Sandip. Nikhil subsequently discovers their actions, but grants Bimala freedom to grow and choose what she wants in her life (as their marriage was arranged when she was a young girl). Meanwhile, Bimala experiences love for the first time, which ultimately helps her understand that it is indeed her husband Nikhil who really loves her. The novel ends with a riot, resulting in Sandip fleeing the city. Nikhil is mortally wounded in the head. Amulya, a young follower of Sandip's movement and whom Bimala thinks of as her son (since she has no children) dies by a bullet through his heart.

While the entire novel centres round the *swadeshi* movement, the author of the novel is not advocating it but rather warning his reader of the dangers of such a movement. Tagore knows that it is possible for even a seemingly peaceful movement to turn quickly into aggressive nationalism. Such a change would do the country more harm than good. The character named Sandip is the vivacious and ardent leader of *swadeshi*. He knows that his movement has the potential to turn ugly. He fervently believes however that freedom must be achieved no matter the cost. Sandip cites a story from the *Bhagavad Gita* in support of his own path (Tagore 131). The story tells of the Hindu Lord Krishna advising Arjuna to perform his duty as a warrior regardless of the result. Sandip's use of the Hindu epic poetry to support his movement illustrates the tendency of individuals to use religion as a basis for nationalism. The use of excerpts from the Indian epic poem was indicative of the blending of traditional elements of Indian culture with the ideals and goals of the modern Indian Independence movement. As both have the potential to yield individuals claiming an unshakable fervour for their cause, this can be a rather dangerous combination, a fact clearly acknowledged by the novelist.

Nationalism is also expressed through the rejection of foreign goods, which was a part of the *swadeshi* movement. Sandip was strongly against the sale of foreign goods and stated that all foreign articles, together with the demon of foreign influence, must be driven out of India. Nikhil on the other hand felt the opposite. He was against this bonfire business. Instead of destroying something, he loved to build up something and so he refused to "tyrannize" (Tagore 109). Bimala even pleaded with her husband to "order them to be cleared out!" (Tagore 109). She also stated that banishing foreign goods "would not be tyranny for selfish gain, but for the sake of the country" (Tagore 109).

The title of the novel *The Home and the World* suggests the relationship of the home with the outside world. Nikhil enjoys the modern, western goods and clothing and lavishes Bimala with them. However, Bimala, in the Hindu tradition, never goes outside of the house complex. Her world is a clash of western and traditional Indian life. She enjoys the modern things that Nikhil brings to her, but when Sandip comes and speaks of nationalism with such fire, she sees these things as a threat to her way of life. Bimala's struggle is with identity. She is part of the country, but only knows the home and her home is a mix of cultures. She is torn between supporting the ideal of a country that she knows she should love, or working toward ensuring that her home, her whole world, is free from strife and supporting her husband like a traditional Indian woman should. Bimala is forced to try to understand how her traditional life can mix with a modern world and not be undermined. This theme ties in with the nationalism theme because it is another way that Tagore is warning against the possibility that nationalism can do more harm than good.

To depict his idea of the nation Tagore in this novel intermingles the two contrasting ideas—'religion' and 'nationalism'. In this novel, religion can be seen as the more 'spiritual view' while nationalism can be seen more as the 'worldly view'. Nikhil's main perspective in life is by the moral and intangible while Sandip is more concerned about the tangible things, which to him is reality. Sandip believes that this outlook on life, living in a way where one may follow his or her passions and seek immediate gratification, is what gives strength and portrays reality, which is linked to his strong belief in nationalism. Both Nikhil and Sandip seem to represent two opposing visions for the nation. Nikhil's vision is one of enlightened humanitarian and global perspective, based on a true equality and harmony of individuals and nations. On the other hand, Sandip's radical, parochial and belligerent nationalism, which cultivates an intense sense of patriotism in individuals, threatens to replace their moral sensibility with national bigotry and blind fanaticism. Bimala is caught between the two ideals without knowing what should be her guiding principle signifying Bengal tottering between two possibilities. Seen from this perspective, Nikhil's death at the end of the novel, just when Bimala is turning the corner and returning to her senses after a prolonged infatuation with Sandip and his views, also signals Tagore's pessimism about the future of Bengal.

It is seen that the novel *The Home and the World*—through the lens of the idealistic *zamindar* protagonist Nikhil—excoriates rising Indian nationalism, terrorism, and religious zeal in the *swadeshi* movement; a frank expression of Tagore's conflicted

sentiments, it emerged out of a 1914 bout of depression. The novel ends in Hindu-Muslim violence and Nikhil's (likely mortal) wounding. The matters of self-identity, personal freedom, and religion are developed here in the context of a family story and love triangle. Post-colonial critics such as Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson have pointed out how nationalism cultivates the sentiments of irrationality, prejudice and hatred in people and Leela Gandhi has spoken of its attendant racism and loathing, and the alacrity with which citizens are willing to both kill and die for it. Frantz Fanon has explained that although the objective of nationalism is to create a horizontal relationship and fraternity within its people, in reality the nation never speaks of the hopes and aspirations of the entire 'imagined community', and hierarchy, factional hegemony, inequality and exploitation remain a daily occurrence in its body. In Sandip's actions, Tagore has insightfully and shrewdly anticipated all these pitfalls of nationalism pointed out by later literary-cultural critics (Choudhuri 118-119). So, the novel, *The Home and the World* occupies Tagore's anti-nationalist sentiment conceived against a backdrop of a larger ideology of love, creation and global human fellowship.

Tagore's animosity to nationalism should not make us think that he was not patriotic or that he was anti-West. He believed in a symbiosis of the East and West, a 'deep association' or a living relationship between the two cultures; a creative unity that was possible only when the East had discovered its soul and its separate identity. Moreover, his profound love for Bengal and India is manifest in his many immortal songs and poems. His love and intensity for the land transcended the bounds of a narrow, selfish and self-aggrandising nationalism and carried such depth, generosity and broadness that his compositions were adopted as national anthems in India and Bangladesh. Despite the fervour, Tagore never allowed his love for his country to stand in the way of his love for truth, justice and humanity – he was not given to a national consciousness but a world-consciousness, a *visva bodh* in which every country would keep alight its own lamp of mind as its part in the illumination of the world. As Nikhil says in *The Home and the World* (1916),

I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it (Tagore, *The Home and the World* 29).

Therefore, it is pertinent to say that Tagore's vision might seem idealistic but it is not unattainable. It calls for a humanitarian intervention into present self-seeking and belligerent nationalism, through the introduction of a moral and spiritual dimension in the institution. It also requires us to step out of history to reinvent a new future for ourselves that respects human dignity and sees every individual and nation as equals, in a true democratic spirit.

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