

INTERROGATING NATIONALISM IN *THE HOME AND THE WORLD*

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Abstract

This paper explores the interrogating tendency of Tagore towards Nationalism in his novel *The Home and the World*. It also focuses on how nationalism in Gellner's words "engenders nations." This paper traces the liking of Tagore towards the global nationalism which would join us all as one in this human history of ours. Highlighting the critique of Tagore towards the categorization of nation on religious bases, this paper makes us rethink on the idea of "unity in diversity". Within the theoretical framework of Partha Chatterjee, this paper explores the woman's question vis-a-vis nationalism.

Keywords: Global Nationalism, Human History, Nation, Tagore, Women and Nationalism.

Nivedita Sen traces the interrogating tendency of Tagore vis-à-vis Nationalism in the very introduction to her translated version of *The Home and the World*. She says:

The novel refers to events taking place in the wake of Curzon's attempted division of Bengal in 1905, when the Extremists had started resorting to coercive methods targeting the masses for quick results. Politically, the novel is a critique of Swadeshi endeavors that had such short-sighted objectives, road roughshod over the common man's meager means of subsistence, used a communal ceremony to harness an adulation of the nation and ultimately lined the pockets of its charismatic leaders. It virtually prefigures the present day historians who have, in their revisionary mode, questioned the idea of the nation either as a theoretical construct or as a xenophobic exercise. (8)

Tagore's *The Home and The World* was published in 1919, which is much before the contemporary perspectives of Gellner, Anderson, and Bhaba. Ernest Gellner believes that "nationalism invents nations where they do not exist" (qtd. in Sen 15). Gellner further argues in his essay Nations and Narration (1983) that "nationalism engenders nations" and it "uses "the pre-existing, historically inherited proliferations of cultures ... very selectively, and it often transforms them radically" (306). Benedict Anderson calls the nation "an imagined community"

(Anderson 315). Homi Bhaba says that “nations lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye” (qtd. in Sen 15). Nikhil who is the voice of Tagore in the novel has same kind of reservations with the historically constructed truth/untruth about Nationalism.

Edward Said points out in his *Culture and Imperialism* that “appeals to the past are among the commonest strategies in the interpretations of the present”¹. But how is it that we can make “appeals” to that past when there is a “crisis”² between reality and the historicity of it. The aim of this paper is to explore and engage with the idea of national imagination. What do we mean by a nation? Is it our “collective consciousness”³ that makes us “imagine” ourselves as nation? Or is it just a slogan of the few? The paper analyzes Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World* (1919) and try to explore nationalism related problems in it. Some main issues particularly the woman’s question viz-a-viz nationalism are explored within the theoretical framework of Partha Chatterjee’s *The Nationalist Resolutions to Women’s Question* (1987). Moreover this paper would mainly focus on some problems as highlighted by C. Vijayasree in her Introduction to *Nation in Imagination: Essays on Nationalism, Sub-Nationalisms and Narration*: “Is nation a mere figment of imagination” in *The Home and the World*? It is necessitated by the character of Sandip who has a limited view of India and Indian nationalism; who fantasizes it as the nation only of Hindus and not Muslims. He does not agree with Nikhil that “Mussulmans are a necessary part of the “United India” as a nation. He argues, “Though we have shouted ... the Mussalmans to be our brethren” but “they must be suppressed ...and made understood that we are the masters. ...One day they shall dance to the tune we play” (Tagore 128). It is because of this religious bigotry and casteism that “India has never had a real sense of Nationalism” (qtd. in Kapadia 327).

Tagore’s idea of nation sounds somehow similar to that of Qurratulain Hyder in *The River of Fire* (1998):

There was yet another aspect of the new nationalistic moment that was making its presence felt-- some people had openly talking of Ancient Hindu Culture and the Glory-that-was-Islam. How was Indian culture to be defined? Was it ruse for Hindus to enslave the Muslims? Could real Indians only be Hindus? Were Muslims unholy intruders who should be treated as such? (Hyder 202-203)

Tagore seems to be echoing Qurratulain Hyder’s stand against the individualistic understanding of history. We can rather say that his understanding of civilizational history is more encapsulating than that of Hyder. He has a very holistic understanding of history which would celebrate different ‘national’ histories as part of the larger history of man. He argues in his book on *Nationalism* (1917) that, “there is only one history- the history of man. All national histories are merely the chapters in the larger one.”(Tagore 78). Tagore wants to point out that the nationalistic endeavours of the so called national heroes were just to satisfy their self motives. Tagore points out Sandip’s selfishness in Nikhil story and thus involves all the all three principle characters to emphasise that, “Sandip’s love of the country is but a different phase of his covetous self-love” (Tagore 34). Sandip confesses about himself in one of his stories saying:

¹ This argument of Said has also been quoted by the author in a different article titled “Blooming Orchards in a Burning Valley: Kashmiri Identity Politics”

² “Crisis” is a chapter in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*

³ “Collective Consciousness” is a term by Karl Jung which

“yes, I am gross ... I am flesh. I am passion. I am hunger, unashamed and cruel” (48). Sandip is the representative of the Swadeshi movement which was not a positive move before Tagore. Professor Shirshendu Chakrabati rightly points out:

“The Swadeshi call for boycott of all English products – salt, sugar, clothes, woollens — did not find support among the poor because these were substantially cheaper than Indian products. The retail trade was often handled by Muslims, who were amongst the poorest in Bengali society.”(310)

If nationalism works in this way it would rather bifurcate people more than lending them any unique identity. Tagore’s the whole humanity to be united. His idea of freedom is that, “if we could free even one village from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole India would be established” (qtd. in Sengupta 20). There is the lack of this sort of freedom to the weaker sections of the society what problematizes the notions of nation. Bimla too rejects the ‘offered’ freedom to her by Sandip. She says:

And then, the other day in the garden, how easily my husband found it to tell me that he set me free! But can freedom –empty freedom—be given and taken so easily at all that? It is like setting a fish free in the sky—how can I move or live outside the atmosphere of loving care which has always sustained me?

(Tagore 149)

Freedom as per Tagore should be enlightening which helps us to live together in harmony as a nation irrespective of differences like that of cast, gender or religion. It could not be a freedom for Bimila that she would end her relationship. Later in the novel when she enters her room her husband was not there. Instead of him “there was freedom, only freedom, mere emptiness! A dried-up watercourse⁴ with all its rocks and pebbles laid bare.” No feeling only furniture! ... Then “I happened to meet Sandip again. Then life struck against life, and the sparks flew in the same old way” (Tagore 149). In Tagore’s view we are together a part of nation and it is this togetherness of Hindus, Muslims, men, women, different other identities which nation. So he wants the holistic overview of humanity to be larger history of man. These different national histories are connected as a river. The image of water recurs throughout the novel. In his first story Sandip talking about his “masterful passion” which attracts women towards him. He says that this “full-blooded passion” ... roars on like a flood, with the cry: *I want I want I want*⁵(Tagore 39).

Earnest Renan in his 1892 speech “What is Nationalism?” had suggested that a nation was constituted by a common remembrance of a glorious past and by a common will to live together and maintain that memory (qtd. in Vijaysaree 10). Hyder highlighting the glorious past of Muslims in a holistic overview of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam may have something to do her subjectivity as a writer to “impart the narratives of nation” with a

Both the writers view India as a nation in its holistic totality. In *The Home and the World* Tagore seems to be “privileging” ... “the humanitarian concerns over the nationalist ones” for he “reveals the shortcoming” of the “Swadeshi movement” (Sing) positive movement for the poor masses. This is pertinent here to discuss the place marginal sections particularly women within the discourses of Nationalism. The paper after locating *The Home and the World* within the discourses of Nationalism would see the women within these discourses.

⁴ Image of water recurring through the whole novel

⁵ The Bengali translation of this line onomatopoeic—it brings the sound of the raging flood-water.

Just as Edward Said observes “Orient is not the Orient as it is, but the Orient as it has been Orientalized” (483) we have these historical constructions of countries like Africa and India. In African context Chinua Achebe responded to such colonial constructions with his own version of history as *Things Fall Apart* (1958) which highlights the igbo traditions and way of living and critiques the British intervention as it is this intervention which has caused the fall of this society. It is these writings which help us to regain the “cultural originality” which has been lost due to the “inferiority complex that has been created by the death and burial of ... local cultural identity” (qtd. in Pecora 30). As far as India is concerned, the history written by colonial historians tended to depict Indian as weak, divided, and dependent on the British. These histories could not satisfy the taste of the new Indian administrators and intellectuals. Nor did the traditional Puranic stories of the past, peopled by gods and demons seem convincing to those educated and working under the English system. The need of the hour was have a new view of the past that could show that Indians could be independent minded and had been so in the history. The novel provided the solution. In it, the nation could be imagined in a past that has featured historical characters, places, events and dates.

The imagined nation of the novel was so powerful that it could inspire so many actual political movements. Bankim’s *Anandamath* (1882) is a novel about a secret Hindu militia that fights Muslims to establish a Hindu kingdom. Rabindranath developed the Bangali novel after Bankim’s death. His early novels were historical; he later shifted to writing stories about domestic relationships. He was mainly preoccupied with the condition of women and nationalism. Both concerns are featured in *The Home and The World* (1919). “The Swadeshi movement refers to the banning of foreign goods and the desire to create the motherland in the mould of Hindu goddess” (Kapadia 326). But Tagore does not celebrate this kind nationals; he is rather critiquing as we find his voice in Nikhil than in Sandip. Sandip’s image gets fully denigrated towards the close of the novel, and it is Nikhil resurfaces to be the true hero of novel. This novel also throws some light on the problems of women’s imagination of her home—the smallest unit of community on the one hand and ‘the larger community called the nation’ which must to be “imagined” ‘for it to become real’ (qtd. in Mukherjee). Meenakshi Mukherjee points out that, “Sandip in *Ghare Baire* (1916) verbalizes the cold-blooded political strategy concealed behind the cult of motherland nationalism: True patriotism will never be roused in our countrymen unless they visualize the motherland. We must make a goddess of her” (qtd. in Mukherjee 139). Sandip’s followers along with along with Bimla get attracted to Sandip’s rhetoric of *Bande Mataram*. But Sandip couldn’t lure Nikhil though he was able win the heart of his wife. Sandip calls Bimla as Queen Bee who would be the source of imagination for the worshippers of the motherland. Caught between the *home* of her husband Nikhil, and the outside *world* of Sandip who indoctrinates her so much with his ‘magical’ *mantras* that she commits a *theft* from her own home, “Bimila comes out to be the crucial negotiating presence” It is she who is “working out the ideologies of Nikhilesh and Sandip” (Mukherjee 149). Bimla was first just upholding the ‘home/spiritual/ feminine’ side so that she may not “become *essentially* westernized” and it was this aspect of her life that would act as a cultural safeguard against the “westernization of women, as different from men in the modern world of the nation” but she latter gets lured to Sandip/world as well.(Chatterjee 331). Chatterjee further points out that the home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine dichotomies were questioned in the middle of the nineteenth century giving birth to the idea of “new” woman. Bimla keeps oscillating between the world of her husband, and the world of her *husband’s* friend Sandip. It is this

oscillating position of Bimla as a “new’ woman” that was connecting her home and the world. Partha Chatterjee further argues:

In fact, the social order connecting the home and the world in which nationalism placed the new woman was contrasted not only with that of modern society; it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous tradition.”(331)

Hence the “attainment by her own efforts of a superior national culture was the mark *Bimla’s* newly acquired freedom. This was the central ideological strength of the nationalist resolution of the women’s question” (Chatterjee 332). Her character has been portrayed very artistically. Though she commits the *theft*, she still *confesses* her crime but was it really a theft that she committed in her *own* home. What motivated her to commit the *crime* is in itself important in understanding women’s in the *nationalist* movements like that of Swadeshi. She does not take the money for self interests. She is rather manipulated and, used by Sandip to get the money and it is for this only that Sandip valorizes her. She thinks that the goddess is “crying: ‘give me drink. I am thirsty.’ She says I will give her my own hearts blood and with that five thousand rupees” (Tagore 156).

Tagore points out in his essay “Nationalism in India” that the problems in India are more of social than political in nature. Apart from the political problems of nationalism, the social dimension could be traced out in other countries, which include America as well. Comparing the caste distinctions in India with the racial biases of America amongst its own inhabitants as “Red Indian” and “Negro”, India has a history of a harmony with no racial biases. Tagore argues:

“In finding solution to our problems we shall have helped to solve the world problems as well. What India has been, the whole world is now. The whole world is becoming one country through scientific facility. And the moment is arriving when you also must find a basis of unity which is not political. If India can offer her solution, it would be contribution to humanity. There is only one history—the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one. And we can content in India to suffer for such a great cause.”(qtd. In Das 453)

Tagore further argues his essay Nationalism In India:

“Each individual has his self-love. Therefore his brute instinct leads him to fight with others in the sole pursuit of his self-interest. But man has also his higher instincts of sympathy and mutual help... Only those people have survived and achieved civilization who have this spirit of cooperation strong in them”. (qtd. in Das 454)

In *The Home and world*, Tagore portrayed/demonstrated this “self-love” and the “mutual instinct” in Sandip which “leads him to fight with others in the sole pursuit of his self-interest”, and in Nikhil, Tagore highlights the “higher instincts” of sympathy and mutual help.”

To conclude it could be said that *The Home and the World* is a story about Bimla, the wife of Nikhil, a liberal landlord who believes that he can save his country by patiently battering the condition of its poor and marginal sections. But Bimla is attracted to Sandip her husband’s friend and a firebrand extremist. Sandip is so completely dedicated of throwing out the British that he does not mind if the poor ‘low’ suffer and the Muslims are made to feel like outsiders. By becoming a part of Sandip’s group, Bimla gets a sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Tagore also shows the contradictory effects of nationalist involvement for women. Bimla may be admired by

young males of the group but she cannot influence their decisions. This novel is striking because this makes us rethink the man-woman relationship and nationalism.

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