

WHEN THE HOME ENDANGERS THE WORLD: A STUDY OF TAGORE'S CRITIQUE OF NATIONALISM IN *GORA AND HOME AND THE WORLD*

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Abstract

Tagore can be aptly described as a pre-eminent writer of decolonization who wrote extensively on the 'nation' and nationalist issues. As a writer his aim was to reflect and project a civilization that was organically intact and inherently different from the west. For Tagore, as for Gandhi, the Western Nation was a product of Western Civilization. Tagore contrasts the mechanical and dehumanized western civilization and the notion of the nation with the local, the indigenous and the diverse living traditions of India. This paper studies Tagore's movement away from Swadeshi and nationalist prejudice and shows how from his writings and utterances on nationalism we see an anti-national Tagore emerging. One who disengages himself from power structures and power struggles and one whose distaste for the 'nation' arises from the belief that it would crush individual freedom. In Gora and Home and the World we hear Tagore's dissenting voice on nationalism.

Key words: Decolonization, Nation, Nationalism, Indigenous, Swadeshi, Traditions

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The rise and growth of the novel in India lies in the encounter between colonizer and the colonized. While the novel might date back to as early as 1800, 1857 marks the turning point, both in the history of colonial India as well as the history of the novel. It marks on one hand the setting up of the three universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras and on the other the Mutiny which ended the rule of the East India Company. India came under the crown to become a British colony.

In the late nineteenth century English education and European influence created an unprecedented interest in Indian history among the educated class especially in cities. Meenakshi Mukherjee states that “this newly awakened interest in the past could not have been unrelated to a nascent nationalism among the reading public.....which the novelist could exploit” (Mukherjee, 2000, 40) Thus the writing of fiction based on history became one of the chosen modes of literary production. Harking back to the glories of the remote past afforded the novelists a means of coming to terms with present servitude. It was a useful tool to link the pre-colonial past to a yet nebulous postcolonial future.

It is in this context that Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Anandmath* (1882) assumes significance. Sisir Kumar Das states that *Anandmath* “is the first Indian novel, where the dominant political trends of the time merged and were transfused into a myth, and it continued to inspire a large section of the people for more than half a century in its struggle against an imperial power,” (Das, 1991, 214) But it is Rabindranath Tagore who has been hailed as “the first visionary to create a national consciousness of India in literature” (Mukherjee, 1985, 56).

Rabindranath Tagore's pre-independence novels *Gora* and *Home and the World* highlight the role of history in the narrative of the nation. Both the novels are set in the era of the Swadeshi movements and echo Tagore's political concerns. The novels revolve around issues of nationalism, patriotism, identity and self-discovery. Tagore uses history to depict and reconstruct the nation. Both *Gora* and *Home and the World* are closely embedded in the history of the national movement in India. Tagore's views on nationalism and his advocacy of a civilizational approach to nationalism rather than a political one is highlighted in the novels. A search for identity in the colonized space through introspection and self questioning is propagated rather than an aggressive nationalism based on religious, social and gender identity.

In India, Gandhi and Tagore constantly tried to push against political and cultural boundaries to create a space where both overlap. Gandhi's dream of Ram Rajya and Tagore's universalism are echoed in Frantz Fanon's revolutionary credo; "National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension" (Bhabha 4).

Tagore can be aptly described as a pre eminent poet and writer of decolonization who wrote extensively on the 'nation' and nationalist issues. According to him the reason for India's abject condition is because, "This abstract being, the Nation, is ruling India" (Das, 2008, 422). Tagore contrasts the mechanical and dehumanized Western civilization and notion of the nation with the local, the indigenous and the diverse living traditions of India.

His is a clarion call to the east, a warning, to not be mesmerized by the lure of "an applied science," (Das, 2008, 424). that glittered but brought death and destruction in its wake. He calls upon the world "not merely the subject races, but you who live under the delusion that you are free, are everyday sacrificing your freedom and humanity to this fetish of nationalism, living in the dense poisonous atmosphere of worldwide suspicion and greed and panic." (Das, 2008, 427). He admired Japan's rise as an Asian giant breaking the myth of racial backwardness but went on to criticize the rise of strong nationalism that finally resulted in Japan's imperialistic expansion with disastrous consequences for its Asian neighbours.

After playing an inspirational role during the protests against the partition of Bengal where his songs and poems were sung by the protesters, Tagore withdrew, unhappy with the strongly nationalist form of the independence movement. He was particularly critical of the

Swadeshi movement and the spinning of the charkha. He felt that there was no rationale behind the mass burning of foreign cloth. “But if there be anything wrong in wearing a particular kind of cloth, that would be an offence against economics, or hygiene or aesthetics, but certainly not against morality” (Homer 225). The reason to use or not use foreign cloth or spin the charkha for yarn should, according to Tagore, be left to economic science. He denounces the mass fervor, blind obedience and intolerance of dissent as dangerous for the future of India

This line of thinking is reflected in his novel *Ghare Baire*, where he warns against “the corruptibility of nationalism, since it is not even handed. Hatred of one group can lead to hatred of others, no matter how far such feeling may be from the minds of large hearted nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi” (Silvers, Epstein 88).

Gora (1909-10) is Rabindranath Tagore’s longest novel and considered “One of the most important novels ever written in British India, for it is an allegory of Indian nationalism, partaking in a large measure Tagore’s own view of it whereby religious division is replaced by worship of India’s natural and cultural diversity” (Chatterjee 185).

The novel has as its backdrop the period after the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, a period of rising discontent against oppressive British rule. Nationalism and the idea of freedom fired the imagination of Indians across all social classes. It was these “stirrings of national consciousness towards the end of the last century” that “created the historical and social setting for *Gora*” (Ray 23).

“The idea of the modern nation – state entered Indian society in the second half of the nineteenth century, riding piggy – back on western ideology of nationalism” (Nandy IX). But some thinkers like Tagore were ambivalent towards the western notions of the nation, particularly the “idea of a mono-cultural nation-state, and towards nationalism itself.” (Nandy X) Instead in *Gora* Tagore dwells on the civilizational aspects of nationalism, one that is needed in a multi – cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious country like India.

Gora exemplifies this “vision of a new syncretic India, rising above the considerations of caste, community and race” (Ray 22). What we see is how “the themes of nation, nationalism and their problematics” (Ramakrishnan 76). are depicted very clearly in *Gora*. It is

“almost a complete allegory of this theme that circumvents not only the modern interest but also pushes the debate to post-modern or post-national borders” (Ramakrishnan 76).

The idea of India, or the concept of Bharatvarsha is a key concept in *Gora*. It is more than a geographical area. It is identified with faith, religion, tradition, customs and all manner of indigenous values and ideas. Bharatvarsha, has to “manifest itself through the materiality of a specific culture,” (Barucha 62). hence, Bharatvarsha is identified with the Hindu nation. We see Gora articulating an ideology grounded on a religious community as a weapon of anti-colonial resistance. Gora’s embrace of Hinduism is because it is the only acceptable indigenous identity. For Gora, Hinduism was synonymous with India. At the beginning of the novel Gora is presented as a militant Hindu whose nationalism becomes more pronounced and aggressive as the novel progresses. However, the turning point comes with the knowledge of his birth. The revelation that he is white, a mlechha, comes to him at the end of the novel. He discovers the he is Irish, not a Brahmin. He loses his caste but finds himself as an Indian, above caste, creed and religion.

At the end of the novel Gora asks to be taught the mantra of “that deity who belongs to all – Hindu, Muslim, Khrishtan, Brahmo – the doors of whose temple are never closed to any person of any caste or race – the deity not only of the Hindus but of Bharatvarsha.” (G 470) The novel then is not just a search for self-identity but for secularism that is “inclusive and indigenous at the same time” (Datta 57). In *Gora* we see Tagore’s search for a national identity that rejected caste, class, religions and gender barriers. Gora’s movement from being exclusivist to inclusiveness echoes Tagore’s critique of militant Swadeshi, Hindutva and Nationalism.

Tagore’s *Ghare Baire (Home and the World)* is a product of the crisis of that time, and as a colonial artifact it echoes through its narration a large number of attitudes, not always compatible with the colonial experience. The novel deals with the experience of modernity and the price one has to pay for it. *Home and the World* is a mirror of its time. That the colonial project fashioned a new woman strikes us when we encounter Bimala’s speaking voice in the opening pages of the novel. By beginning with Bimala’s story Tagore not only puts her at par with the male protagonists but actually privileges her story over theirs. Tagore gives her more space because she undertakes the longest journey of self discovery. She alone traverses from inner to outer and then back to the inner world. Her narrative is the longest not only because the

plot revolves around her journey from innocence to experience, but also because she is constituted and reconstituted by the gaze of the other just as the nation is.

Bimala's failure to redefine her role within the liberated space of her home is emblematic of Tagore's apprehension about the new power equations between the sexes in a modernizing world and hints at the problematics of castes and religious equation in the emerging nation. All the three protagonists have been influenced by the west, but only in Nikhilesh is there a balance between tradition and modernity.

Sandip too has supped from the high table of the west but has partaken the fascist doctrine of might is right, of the Nietzschean doctrine of will for power. Behind Sandip's brand of narrow chauvinistic nationalism was the dreaded shadow of the West on the East. Nikhilesh too is a product of western education but Tagore makes him the representative of all that is good in both east and west. He combines a love of freedom, rational thought and restrained behavior. As landlord, he is trustee of family property as well as that of his tenants. He is benevolent and generous to a fault. Nikhilesh is believed to be Tagore's alter ego. Both were zamindars, subservient to the British government, yet both were genuine swadeshis. Both had tried their best to promote indigenous industry long before the upsurge of Swadeshi hit the country. Both had to face hostility and were much misunderstood. In *Home and the World* Tagore, through the political dynamics created, articulates a nationalism that is humane and in which all Indians could participate as equals, where men and women would be tied together by trust, truth and love.

Modernity and nationalism are key components in the ideological matrix based on which Tagore explores the idea of the 'nation' and national identity. *Gora* and *Home and the World* were written after Tagore became disillusioned with the violent and exclusivist nature of Swadeshi nationalism. Both can be read as critiques of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal in the early twentieth century. Though he may be considered as one of the major builders of national identity, he was also a dissenter. He was not only a critic of Hindu orthodoxy but also questioned a nationalism that thrived on violence, real politik and exclusion of Muslims and lower castes.

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