

A CRITIQUE OF DESTRUCTIVE NATIONALISM: TAGORE'S *THE HOME AND THE WORLD*

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Abstract

*The paper will examine the critique of destructive nationalism in the novel *The Home and the World* written by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. The novel is set in Bengal in the background of Swadeshi Movement. Tagore through his three protagonists Nikhil, Bimala and Sandip explores the theme of nationalism in the novel. Through the character of Sandip, Tagore criticises the blind patriotism of the time. Sandip's nationalism is destructive which can only lead to war and violence while Nikhil is in opposition to it and wants to build the nation from the inside. He emphasizes on nation building. Sandip justifies his use of violence in the Swadeshi Movement, while Nikhil is completely against it. The novel also highlights how the poor and needy are crushed in the nationalistic movements.*

Key Words: *Violence, Destructive Nationalism, Patriotism, Swadeshi Movement, Country*

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The *Home and the World* is a phenomenal work of Indian literature by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. It takes a global view of the concept of nationalism and patriotism. The novel is set in Bengal, during the pre-independence era of Indian political and domestic life in the background of the *Swadeshi* movement. The *Swadeshi* movement began in 1905 and gained major force against the decision of division of Bengal. It is a story of three separate individuals Bimala, Nikhil and Sandip, whose home as well as the world gets involved in the contemporary political atmosphere due to their involvement in the *Swadeshi* movement. Nikhil is a land owner and Sandip a zealous nationalist if one can call him so, fighting for the nation's independence, Bimala who while initially content with her house wife status, is later entangled in Sandip's nationalism present before her. Her choice for Sandip's cause puts before us the consequences of the furore of Sandip's nationalism. Tagore uses his characters in the present novel to not only put forward his views on nationalism but also to criticize destructive nationalism which seems to break not only the nation but also the whole world. Nationalism has been a constant theme in Tagore's work throughout his career from prose to fiction, in novels like *The Home and the World*, *Gora* and in essays like "Nationalism in India", "Nationalism in Japan", etc.

Milica Bookman describes two types of nationalism on the basis of its nature as constructive and destructive nationalism. She describes destructive nationalism:

which suppresses human rights in the quest of aggrandizement of one peoples, adopts undemocratic forms of political expression and is ultimately counter-productive for the establishment of long term inter-ethnic harmony (10).

She also highlights that the concept is highly subjective.

Tagore in the present novel presents two ways of working for one's nation. Sandip's nationalism seems to have great analogy to Bookman's description. Through Sandip, Tagore delineates his criticism of destructive nationalism. Sandip is an unscrupulous man, who boasts of his love for the country. He is a major propagator of the *Swadeshi* movement and wants to arouse the common people in support of the *Swadeshi*'s cause. He holds meetings and with his fiery speeches fills the country men with patriotic fervour. In order to achieve freedom he does not hesitate to adopt unscrupulous practices. Theft and robbery are not out of his purview and he and his disciples do not hesitate even before killing anyone. In the name of the nation Sandip takes a large sum of money from Bimala. His rampant corruption knows no bounds and he uses the sum thus acquired through theft for personal gains and comfort. The lust of money and selfishness of the movement activists is critiqued here by the author.

Sandip's nationalism is a facade of the rich and well to do people. The poor are only crushed beneath the weight of demands by the nationalists for the country's sake. The poor like Panchu and Mirjan in the novel are ample proof of how the downtrodden are merely doubly exploited in the wake of all the destruction in the name of nationalism. Panchu a poor pedlar, who in order to make ends meet sells cloth, when found selling foreign cloths is asked to give it up, and is fined hundred rupees. Even his whole bale of cloth is burnt and he is threatened with social ostracism. Similar is the case with Mirjan a boatman who is asked by activists to denounce the trade of carrying foreign cloth and is made to suffer the loss of means of livelihood by the deliberate sinking of his boat by Sandip's men. Both the incidents pointedly present before the reader's mind the inhumanity and lack of sympathy for the poor. The activists can only ask for the indiscreet participation to boycott foreign clothes and are unmindful of how this fanaticism in the name of nation would affect the poor and downtrodden. Everyone who goes against the so called principles of the movement is branded as the enemy of the nation.

Only the rich like Harish Kundu are able to participate in this show of patriotism. These people are oblivious of the condition of common man and just go on asking for contribution and support to the *Swadeshi* movement. The patriotic zeal of the rich hides within itself the exploitation that they do of the poor. These rich landowners resort to the meanest action in pursuit of their wants. When Harish Kundu is unable to get his rent he sells away the wife of one

of his poor tenants in order to extract the rent from him. Nikhil says in the course of the novel 'A band of young fellows of the locality attached themselves to him [Sandip], some even who had been known as disgrace to the village.' (*The Home and the World* 113) The common man is motivated by the rhetoric of the activists and does not judge things in the proper light. The young enthusiastic students are highly motivated by the passionate speeches of the activists and idealise these landowners. Bimala too gets ensnared in the trap of Sandip's talent of rhetoric.

The activists of the movement do not even hesitate before resorting to the use of violence. Everywhere there's robbery, loot and murders. Murdering for compliance to the cause or for extraction of money is their first resort. Here Sandip's words might illuminate their belief 'we shall simply steal or rob, for we must live' (*The Home and the World* 51). This type of destructive nationalism only breeds hatred between various ethnic communities in the nation. They are unmindful of their feelings. In the novel, Sandip and other activists start to see Muslims as their enemy because of their denial in participation of the boycott of foreign articles. Amidst the movement there are frequent instances of Muslim and Hindu riots. These narrow minded activists fail to see the importance of communal harmony for a Nation's development. Sandip idolizes Ravana, and sees him as the real hero of the epic. He believes:

My theory of life makes me certain that the Great is cruel. To be just is for ordinary men,- it is reserved for the great to be unjust... successful injustice and genuine cruelty have been the only forces by which individual or nation has become millionaire or monarch... Whenever an individual or nation becomes incapable of perpetrating injustice it is swept into the dust-bin of the world. (*The Home and the World* 93)

What other outcome can be expected of a leader following such a theory, the only thing that can be assured is mere anarchy and lack of inter-ethnic harmony, which will prove disastrous in near future. Not only did Sandip justify his use of violence and unscrupulousness but he also exults in its feeling. Tagore says in his essay "Nationalism in India" that when "man's power of sacrifice is diverted from his ultimate object, which is moral, to the maintenance of this organization [nation], which is mechanical. Yet in this he feels all the satisfaction of moral exaltation and therefore becomes supremely dangerous to humanity" (111).

His words can be equally applied to the danger imbibed in the lack of morality which is visible in Sandip's character in his nationalist fight.

Nikhil on the other hand is on the whole opposite of Sandip. Through the character of Nikhil, Tagore highlights his concept of working for the nation. A positive and more vibrant endeavour for the country's development is presented through the portrayal of the character of Nikhil. Nikhil who belongs to rich landowning class is in no way similar to other exploitative landowners like Harish Kundu. Nikhil too wants to work for the nation and is enthusiastic for country's development. His way of nation building is by working for the country's development. His belief is 'Let us dedicate our lives to removing the root of this sorrow in our country.' (*The Home and the World* 106) He helps the tenants under his area in every possible way. He knows the bad consequences of violence, used in the name of the nationalist movement by Sandip and his fellow workers. Where Sandip believes in division and violence Nikhil believes in the doctrine of love and freedom of choice.

Tagore, through the portrayal of Nikhil and his master Chandranath babu, puts before us a critique of Sandip's ideology as well as his idea about working for the nation's cause. Nikhil helps the poor and downtrodden people of his estate. When Panchu is threatened by Sandip he finds solace from Nikhil. In order to help the impoverished he lends them money. It is this generosity that causes him at times great financial damage. They both aim to make the countrymen self-reliant. It is keeping this object in view that Chandranath Babu did not give Panchu money as gift but as a loan to be repaid, when the latter was threatened by Sandip and his gang. Nikhil is critical of the extensive use of violence by the movement leaders. There's hardly a conversation of Sandip and Nikhil, in which there is no clash of opinion between them, and when the latter doesn't condemn Sandip's methods and violent activities. He is against the destructive elements in the movement. He is of view that one need not burn the foreign articles on pretext of boycott as he says to Bimala; one should simply stop using them. He says 'You should not waste even a tenth of your energies in this destructive excitement.' (*The Home and the World* 24) Nikhil who is branded as traitor to the nation's cause, himself has been all this while a true practitioner of *Swadeshi*. Bimala also acknowledges the fact that when *Swadeshi* had not become as popular as it was then, Nikhil used to import Indian artefacts. He uses Indian pencils, soaps, oil lamps and other merchandises in spite of the fact that he can easily afford the

western articles which are much more convenient than these Indian articles. Still Nikhil disavows his support to Sandip's movement, which asks him to clear off all the foreign articles from his estate. Nikhil is against this coercion, he sees it against his ideals as it means dictating others who cannot afford to do so. He compares it to tyranny, 'To tyrannize for the country is to tyrannize over the country.' (The Home and the World 132) He in turn is lampooned and suspected by police as well as countrymen. Nikhil has with him what Tagore defines as 'the strength of moral power' ("Nationalism in India", 113) which he gains by adhering to truth, morality and self-denial. Sharmita Lahiri sees Nikhil's stance to Swadeshi as constructive, "Nikhilesh's 'constructive' Swadeshi, devoid of inflammatory rhetoric and paraphernalia, remains unappreciated...Nikhilesh's Swadeshi and by extension Tagore's Swadeshi failed to capture popular imagination as it did not evoke excitement" (239).

It is Nikhil who brings forward the cordial and harmonious atmosphere that prevailed before the distrust because of Sandip's fanaticism. Previously Hindus and Muslims in his tenancy lived cordially. As he brings forward 'The Mussulmans in my territory had come to have almost as much of an aversion to the killing of cows as the Hindus' (The Home and the World 204) but nowadays the riots are rampant. He believes in communal harmony and 'If the idea of a United India is a true one... Mussulmans are a necessary part of it' (*The Home and the World* 148).

Here one might bring in Ashis Nandy's powerful critique of nationalism. According to Nandy, Tagore ascribed the concept of nationalism to the west. He says to Tagore, 'the idea of nationalism is intrinsically non-Indian or anti-Indian, an offense against Indian civilization and its principles of religious and cultural plurality.' (3) Nandy elucidates his views on the difference between nationalism and patriotism. Nationalism according to him is a modern concept, "an ardent form of 'love of one's own kind' that is highly ego defensive and overlies some degree of fearful dislike or positive hostility to 'outsiders.'" (6) Whereas patriotism 'presumes the existence of community other than the country and gives them due recognition' (6). He classifies Tagore as a patriot, against the 'idea of territoriality grounded in the idea of nation state' (3).

Nikhil can be seen as Tagore's alter ego. He is made the author's mouthpiece to voice his concern for the contemporary time. Nikhil, like Tagore, is aware of his country's shortcomings like the rigid caste system and exploitation by Brahmins. As Tagore in his famous essay

“Nationalism in India”, says ‘...from the earliest beginning of history, India has had her own problem constantly before her- it is the race problem’ (98). Tagore was highly critical of idolization of one’s country in his work “Nationalism in India”. He says:

I had been taught that idolatry of Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will gain truly their India by fighting against that education which teaches them that country is greater than the ideals of humanity.

The educated Indian at present is trying to absorb some lessons from history contrary to the lessons of our ancestors. (107)

These views of Tagore echo Nikhil’s who denies worshipping one’s country. Nikhil is aware of the danger that results from nation worship and says ‘To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it.’ (*The Home and the World* 26) Worship of one’s country makes one turn a blind eye to its fault which hinders a nation’s progress. In Nikhil one can see an amalgamation of Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. Nikhil’s abstinence from any type of force and violence reflects Gandhi’s ideology of Non- violence. Nikhil is against the then prevalent feeling of hatred towards every Englishmen. He employs Miss Gilby in order to teach Bimala against the resentment of friends and family. Later when *Swadeshi* is all boosted up, he declines the request to make Miss Gilby leave on the pretext of her being European. He even dismisses Noren who insults Miss Gilby, which calls great resentment from all. Here Nikhil’s action seems to echo what Gandhi says in his seminal work *Hind Swaraj* that ‘I can never subscribe to the statement that all Englishmen are bad.’ (19) Gandhi was aware of the role that Englishmen would play in the acquirement of freedom for the nation.

Between Sandip and Nikhil stands Bimala. Vibhuti Wadhawan sees *The Home and the World* as an allegorical work in which Bimala can be seen as ‘India caught between two different kinds of modernity. Nikhil being the humane and the liberal aspect of nationalism, with Sandip defining the militant and aggressive form of nationalism that sways the country with idealism.’ (316) Bimala here can be likened to common people who are at first highly pleased by the eloquent rhetoric of the leaders like Sandip and see Nikhil and his ways as mere cowardice as compared to aggression of Sandip. She is swayed by the charismatic personality and speech making of Sandip. She saw in him ‘the champion of Bengal’ (*The Home and the World* 28). He addresses her with laudatory epithets such as ‘goddess’, ‘Shakti’, etc. She is moved by the glory

Sandip has attached to her. Bimala says that Sandip made her believe that the country required her, 'I [Bimala] was acclaimed with a chorus of praise by all our patriot workers.' (*The Home and the World* 55) She and Anmol at last become disillusioned by Sandip and his nationalism. What previously appealed to Bimala and filled her with passion now appears to be mere babbling as she says in context of a conversation that 'So Sandip has lost his aspect of the hero; a tone of low quarrelsomeness has come into his words.' (*The Home and the World* 198) She starts seeing things clearly and it dawns upon her that theft was never a right alternative 'Had I died begging for my country, even unsuccessfully, that would have been worship, acceptable to the gods. But theft is never worship' (*The Home and the World* 181).

Though the novel ends with grief of Nikhil's impending death but through Bimala's disillusionment, *The Home and the World* presents before the readers a slight hope of optimism that people cannot long be ensnared by the devil of destructive nationalism and will look forward to the power of love and humanity.

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