

A Research on Ravindra Nath Tagore's Novel 'Home and the World': A Powerful Political Novel

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Abstract – Indian writing in English is essentially a product of the colonial period flowered after Independence. But the fact remains that writing in English is not the only Indian writing. Writing in other languages of India cannot be written off as purely regional. Novels written in native languages have been being translated into English. Many of these accommodate the geographical and cultural diversity of our sub-continent. Born of a political storm that swept Bengal in the wake of its partition by British rulers in 1905, Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* remains, more than half a century after the end of colonial rule, astonishingly relevant to India today when political fanaticism, religious prejudice and terrorism-the issues dealt with in Tagore's book-poses serious questions about her integrity. This research work proves that *The Home and the World* is a powerful political novel with a message that contains the complexity and tragic dimensions of Tagore's own times, and ours.

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INTRODUCTION

The Home and the World (in the original Bengali, *Ghare Baire*) was one of the last (1984) in a long line of extraordinary films by the Bengali director Satyajit Ray, who died in April 1992. The film recapitulates many of the central themes in Ray's cinematic worldview as well as in that of the work of Rabindranath Tagore, Ray's frequent source of stories and inspiration. *The Home and the World* contains many echoes from Ray's earlier *Charulata*; both films are based on stories by Tagore. *The Home and the World* by Rabindranath Tagore. In this novel, Tagore brings about the nationalist topic related to the *swadeshi* movement which was popular in that era. Rabindranath Tagore, like Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, rejected Gandhi's vision on modernity. Gandhi saw modernity as a threat for the nation and culture, yet Tagore saw it as a provider of the ideological basis for the critique of foreign domination.

The novel *The Home and the World* focuses on the narrative of three different characters: Nikhil, a wealthy landlord, Bimala, Nikhil's wife, and Sandip, a radical nationalist leader. At the beginning of the novel, the story is told from Bimala's point of view. In the novel, we can see that the narration is given alternately by those three main characters. This novel tells about how Bimala and Nikhil have so many different views of gender, relationship between husband and wife, education, freedom, and national identities. The conflict between this couple emerges after the arrival of Sandip. Bimala is impressed by his

charisma and support his view on nationalism and the *swadeshi* movement. This novel ends tragically, in which Nikhil is shot in the head.

Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* (1915) is usually read in terms of an allegory, either on the historical event of partition of Bengal in 1905 or on the nationalist worship of Mother India around the turn of the twentieth century. Such allegorical readings are possible for obvious reasons: the novel is set at the time of the *Swadeshi* movement, which emerged as the radically nationalist response to the Act of Partition, engineered by the British colonial administration, at a time when "Bande Mataram" (a song composed by Tagore's senior contemporary in Bengali literature, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay) had become a much used rallying cry among the nationalists. *The Home and the World* challenges the notion of India as an exclusive Hindu nation. It questions the validity of a nationalism that focuses on emotion rather than on economic self-sufficiency and social justice. It takes exception to the aggressive masculinity of the nationalist project.

As an intense literary text, *The Home and the World* could be read in yet other ways, in terms of other allegories. This paper offers an alternative reading, inspired by comparing the novel with early twentieth century Vietnamese novels. *The Home and the World* is a novel that reads like an allegory on the failure of the Indian nationalist projects, circling around the issues of "Home" versus "World," tradition versus modernity, created by the

active involvement of the colonisers in the cultural, economic and administrative life of the colonised. It could be read as an allegory on the failure of Indian nationalism to accept tradition and modernity, home and the world, together. In addition, the novel offers an alternative nationalist project that could free India from its obsession with the colonising powers: true freedom of the nationalist imagination will be gained by going beyond every form of ideological prejudice and separation and by synthesising every conceivable value that could be useful for the development and maintenance of the nation. And as a concrete implementation of his alternative nationalist project, Tagore founded Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan in 1921.

The Home and the World was published ten years after the vexing partition of Bengal and the beginning of the magic incantation of "Bande Mataram," first in Bengali (1915), and then in English (1919). The *Swadeshi* movement, which emerged in the wake of the Partition, did not only mobilise Bengal but also spread throughout India as the "beginning of a truly national movement and a struggle between the men and methods that were to lead it" (Rege 39). "Bande Mataram" became the "war cry" of the opposition against the Partition; just like the *Swadeshi* movement, it spread "over the entire subcontinent" (Iyengar 366). Conflicts within the Indian Congress about the role and function of *Swadeshi* led to divisions within the movement: the extremists adopted the *Swadeshi*, claiming the superiority of the Indian economy, politics and arts while the moderates wanted to dedicate themselves to social reform. After a decade of challenging and fighting each other, the conflicting nationalist projects seemed to be neutralised when the so-called 1917 Declaration made India a more directly ruled colony in terms of administration and economy. However, once Mahatma Gandhi gained control over the Indian National Congress in the early 1920s, the movement of non-cooperation gained strong footholds all over India again; the ideas of *Swadeshi* were revived; the economic system was reorganised; and government schools and colleges were boycotted. By January 1921 when virtually all the colleges in Calcutta, the administrative and intellectual centre of Bengal, were closed, Tagore, unhappy with Gandhi's "narrowness of aims," complained in a letter to Charles Freer Andrews, a professor at Santiniketan, that the non-cooperation movement was opposed to his own notions of the nation which, in his opinion, should be based on cooperation:

What irony of fate is this, which I should be preaching cooperation of cultures between East and West on this side of the sea just at the moment when the doctrine of Non-Cooperation is preached on the other side?

Tagore argued that the radicalism of nationalist self-reliance, based on the principle of boycott, the central idea of the *Swadeshi* movement, "uprooted

students" and "tempted them away from their career before any real provision was made"; his *The Home and the World* should be read as an alternative to the spirit of non-cooperation which was "electrical," "the spirit of sacrifice [that] was in the very air we breathed".

The Home and the World has not received especially kind treatment from the critics; perhaps most damning is George Lukacs's characterization of the novel as "a petit bourgeois yarn of the shoddiest kind." It is true the novel has its shortcomings: it gets dangerously close at times to political allegory, and its characters, especially the radical leader Sandip, are exaggerated and one-dimensional. At the same time, the novel has a staunch defender in Anita Desai, who, while admitting that it is too often weighed down with ponderous rhetoric, praises its "flashes of light and colour" and its "touches of tenderness and childishness."

Despite the literary shortcomings of *77K Home and the World*, it is an important work for understanding Tagore's views on the dangers of political extremism. The novel focuses on the *swadeshi* movement in Bengal, which demanded an exclusive reliance on Indian-made goods, and a rejection of all foreign-made products. Tagore's representation of *swadeshi* typifies his attitude towards any sort of organized political activity as something over which one has little, if any, control. *Swadeshi* is described in *The Home and the World* as "a flood, breaking down the dykes and sweeping all our prudence and fear before it."

The novel focuses on three characters, each of whom speaks in the first-person in recounting how they interact with one another. Nikhil is Bimala's husband; Sandip is Bimala's would-be lover. Nikhil epitomizes the unselfish, progressive husband who wishes to free his wife from the oppressiveness of a traditional Indian marriage. In contrast, Sandip is a man who thinks only of himself, and who reduces man-woman relationships to brazen sexuality; he is interested in "blunt things, bluntly put, without any finicking niceness" (85). Bimala is represented as an innocent who, at least initially, is completely subservient to her husband. But Bimala is also much more than this. She is referred to as *Durga*, the female goddess of creation and destruction, and as *Shakli*, the ultimate female principle underpinning reality. In being so described, she represents the beauty, vitality, and glory of Bengal.

The Home and the World is pivotal in Tagore's rejection of mass action as a force destructive to freedom and individuality. As well, the novel clearly anticipates his eventual rejection of nationalism as a frightening expression of this mass action. Finally, the book is important in laying the groundwork for Tagore's call for a new international order, which allows for the mutual interaction of all people. The message of *The Home and the World*

is clear: to deny distinctiveness and individuality is to deny diversity, and to ignore the fundamental nature of the world. Political boundaries presume to limit and define a world that is fundamentally limitless and beyond definition. Political boundaries confirm exclusivity, and they hinder sharing and oneness in the face of difference.

Tagore is firmly rooted in the Indian philosophical tradition; he is concerned with *darsana*, with "seeing" truth. He views the human desire to define the world as a dogmatic assertion of ignorance. Virtually everything we do is an expression of this dogmatism, a manifestation of the ego-centeredness that drives it. So it is that in *The Home and the World*, Tagore issues a call to return to sanity. He recognizes that the pride that comes with nationhood can only lead to arrogance and to the repression of others. His message was true for his time, and it is still true today.

THE HOME AND THE WORLD: AESTHETICS IN COMMAND

The two Bengals have separately produced rich harvests of Tagoreana over the last five decades. Neither is Tagore study confined to Bengal; through translation a considerable part of his voluminous work has reached readers in other states of India and abroad; and Tagore studies have been increasingly gaining ground in the various academies of India and abroad, even after almost six decades of his death. This is an evidence of Tagore's continuing relevance and appeal in our times.

Tagore was born in a family, which spearheaded the upward movement of the new Bengali elite in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in various commercial, cultural and intellectual fields. Ravindranath's grandfather Dwarakanath Tagore (1794-1846) was an early Bengali entrepreneur who had established a sort of business empire in his times. He was also involved with all progressive causes of the period, including education, culture, and religious reformation. Dwarkanath was daringly unorthodox in his views and lifestyle.

Ravindranath was against formal schooling on British lines, and loathed learning under pressure. He did not have formal education, but had a thorough training at home, and abroad, in language, literature, and various other disciplines. Tagore had started an early literary career under the active help and inspiration of a congenial family atmosphere, while also looking after the family estates. The enlarged Tagore family gave him "the environment of a university and an arts center rolled into one." (In *Your Blossoming Garden* 11)

As a writer, again, Ravindranath was a prolific and multifaceted genius, whose dynamic mind and work ever continued to blossom and sprout in fresh directions till the end. Besides being a great poet, he

was also a great writer of short stories, novels, drama (both prose and verse), essays on wide-ranging subjects, literary criticism, fine polemics, travelogues, memoirs, letters, children's literature, original textbooks on language and other disciplines for children. He wrote mainly in Bengali; but he could also write elegant English.

As Ravindranath continually evolved in perception and technique through reflection, invocation and experimentation, and achieved spectacular success in all the literary genres and forms he tried his hand at, he has left a monumental heritage behind. Tagore's contribution to the development of the Bengali literature and language is immense; in his hands, it had achieved its final leap into modernity. Tagore's works as writer and person have indelibly marked Bengali culture, literature and art; even in our silent thoughts or articulated feelings of everyday, we automatically carry on this mark, often without being conscious of it.

Tagore's message of love, truth, beauty, and harmony of life may have perennial appeal across time and space. With time, he has been increasingly emerging as an artist, thinker and educationist of perpetual significance for posterity.

Among Tagore's major fictional works, *Ghare Baire* (1916), translated by Surendranath Tagore as *The Home and the World* in 1919, was the seventh in the chronological order, and evidenced the maturity of the middle-aged writer in its subtle handling of certain controversial themes and an innovative narrational mode. At the same time, it carries on some of Tagore's major preoccupations and convictions—the value of truth, freedom, and dignity of the individual, for example—which remained with him all along as an operative force behind his creative and critical works.

Tagore had given an extraordinary imaginative dimension to the concept of *Swadesh*. He had paid wonderful tributes to the empirical beauty and spiritual heritage of the country, which he had envisaged as 'Bhuban-mana-mohini,' 'Bharattirtha.' In his poems and songs, he had repeatedly projected this sublime vision of *Swadesh* and expressed his great admiration for it. At the same time, he carefully kept himself above all narrow parochialism and chauvinism. Indeed, Tagore's nationalism may be traced back to the influence of Raja Rammohun Roy's broad humanitarian perceptions. His basic values were truth, humanity, justice; his patriotism was founded on these basic values. He was incapable of accepting anything demeaning, disgraceful, or dishonourable in the name of the country or the people. Whatever was false or wrong had to be rejected, even if it was of one's own country. His love for the country was governed by another transcendental system or wisdom. As he was not prepared to accept injustice of any sort, he protested against the

injustice that had been perpetrated on his country by the foreign rule. As he was against exploration, he rejected the British exploitation of India. However, as he felt for his own country and the compatriots, so he felt for the world and its citizens. His patriotism had risen above all sorts of sectarianism. Tagore's contemporaries in their excited involvement in the moment often failed to understand the broad nature of his nationalism, which embraced the values of internationalism, and basic humanism he believed that if the good of man was sacrificed in the name of nationalism, then nationalism would also be surrendered for the sake of personal benefits. Hence his unhesitant rejection of those who would destroy good and increase evil, whose misdirected minds would promote injustice and divisiveness in the name of nationalism.

THE HOME AND THE WORLD: MAKING OF THE INDIAN POLITICAL NOVEL

With the rise of political consciousness in India, political ideas were put forth in the novels. So far, these were termed as social or historical novels. Indulekha, a significant Malayalam novel by Chandu Menon, is a typical example in this regard. Menon concluded his novel with a chapter containing conversation on the political situation of India after the first session of the Indian National Congress. In the preface to the novel, Chandu Menon admitted that inclusion of the last chapter was redundant but unavoidable. It happened so because of the political consciousness that was gradually gaining ground in public mind.

Since the birth of Indian novel in the second half of the nineteenth century, national consciousness was reflected in the novels. Three distinctive ways of depicting national heroes or fleeting national awareness are discernible in the nineteenth century novels namely, historical novels, depicting national heroes, semi-historical novels depicting socio-political upheaval and satirical novels giving humorous portraits of pseudo-patriots. Rajsingha by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay exemplifies the first category. More examples of the type are Harinarayan Apte's Marathi novel Rupe Nagarci Rajkanya and Ushakal, Chandi Charan Sen's Jhansir Rani, Rajanikanta Bardoloi's Assamese novel Manomati etc. As regards semi-historical novels depicting political upheaval in regional setting, there is a host of examples such as Anand Math by Bankim Chandra, Padum Kuani by Lakshminath Bezbarua, or V. Pattawardhan's Hambir Rao ani putlibai (Marathi) etc. In the third category, we find a few satirical novels such as Model Bhagini by Jogendranath Basu or Khudiram by Indranath Banerjee and so on.

If we minutely examine these three basic types of novels, we find three diverse motivations. In the first place, the writers of historical novel presented some

role models of national heroes. In this way of presentation, role models are what may be called trickster heroes. All such heroes with their tricky as well as powerful means of defying their political opponents are portrayed as undaunted and invincible personalities. The portraits of Raj Singh, Jhansi Rani and Shivaji in various historical novels in Bengali, Marathi and other Indian languages are typical examples.

Tagore took up a historical character, Raja Pratapaditya of Jassore (now in Bangladesh) as the central character of his novel Bou Thakuranir Hat. It was his avowed intention not to depict Pratapaditya as a national hero and hence there is no trace of a trickster hero in this novel. Moreover, there is a note of sarcasm added to it. Pratap, as Tagore depicted him, was a loveless man blinded by his own might and folly. Pratap was a self-centred political character. This type of character is recast in The Home and the World's as Sandip. Here the central character changes according to the need of the day, and one glimpses a political novel in the making.

The Home and the World is a major political novel of considerable importance. It is not an exciting political novel like, for example, Sarat Chandra's Pather Dabi. Sandip, the activist hero of this novel, cannot be compared with Sabyasachi, an extraordinary revolutionary hero of Pather Dabi. Sandip is unable to restrain his lust for money and woman. Of course he is gifted with flamboyance and casts a magic spell on his audience and thus wins the heart of Bimala, the heroine Nikhilesh, the husband of Bimala, accepts the challenge hurled upon him by his dear friend Sandip, and readily agrees to give Bimala the freedom to develop in her own way. Sandip wanted her to rebel against not only the foreign rule but also the domestic bond. Bimala stands confused between the two friends and for a time she seems to be on the verge of an emotional surrender to Sandip. Eventually, however, she gets disillusioned with Sandip. Her sense of value prevails and self-realization breaks the magic spell that Sandip cast over her. When Bimala returns to her patient and waiting husband, the spell has been over. Sandip stands exposed. He is no more a Swadeshi hero, but merely a villain with all his unbridled hedonistic activities, under the garb of patriotic postures.

Tagore himself tried to offer an answer to these questions in a subtle manner. Tagore did not apply in The Home and the World the methods of creating a role model as available in Indian historical novels of the nineteenth century, though he had applied this in Bau Thakuranir Hat. Pratapaditya and Sandip are equally blinded by the selfish hedonistic impulse. Yet there is a mark of difference. Pratapaditya is apolitical, but Sandip is a deeply political man, an organizer and activist, who is quite involved in contemporary politics.

Hence, the novel is very much related to the political atmosphere that prevailed in the country during the first decade of the twentieth century.

THE HOME AND THE WORLD AS FICTION AND FILM

Home is the resort Of love, of joy, of peace and plenty, where, Supporting and supported, polish'd friends And dear relations mingle into bliss.

On the pleasant banks of the Garonne, in the province of Gascony, stood, in the year 1584, the chateau of Monsieur St. Aubert. From its windows were seen the pastoral landscapes of Guienne and Gascony stretching along the river, gay with luxuriant woods and vine, and plantations of olives. To the south, the view was bounded by the majestic Pyrenees, whose summits, veiled in clouds, or exhibiting awful forms, seen, and lost again, as the partial vapours rolled along, were sometimes barren, and gleamed through the blue tinge of air, and sometimes frowned with forests of gloomy pine, that swept downward to their base. These tremendous precipices were contrasted by the soft green of the pastures and woods that hung upon their skirts; among whose flocks, and herds, and simple cottages, the eye, after having scaled the cliffs above, delighted to repose. To the north, and to the east, the plains of Guienne and Languedoc were lost in the mist of distance; on the west, Gascony was bounded by the waters of Biscay.

M. St. Aubert loved to wander, with his wife and daughter, on the margin of the Garonne, and to listen to the music that floated on its waves. He had known life in other forms than those of pastoral simplicity, having mingled in the gay and in the busy scenes of the world; but the flattering portrait of mankind, which his heart had delineated in early youth, his experience had too sorrowfully corrected. Yet, amidst the changing visions of life, his principles remained unshaken, his benevolence unchilled; and he retired from the multitude 'more in PITY than in anger,' to scenes of simple nature, to the pure delights of literature, and to the exercise of domestic virtues.

He was a descendant from the younger branch of an illustrious family, and it was designed, that the deficiency of his patrimonial wealth should be supplied either by a splendid alliance in marriage, or by success in the intrigues of public affairs. But St. Aubert had too nice a sense of honour to fulfil the latter hope, and too small a portion of ambition to sacrifice what he called happiness, to the attainment of wealth. After the death of his father he married a very amiable woman, his equal in birth, and not his superior in fortune. The late Monsieur St. Aubert's liberality, or extravagance, had so much involved his affairs, that his son found it necessary to dispose of a part of the family domain, and, some years after his marriage, he sold it to Monsieur Quesnel, the brother of his wife, and retired to a small estate in Gascony,

where conjugal felicity, and parental duties, divided his attention with the treasures of knowledge and the illuminations of genius.

CONCLUSION

There are three distinctive views upon nationalism presented in this novel through the key characters, Nikhil, Bimala and Sandip. Nikhil represents the moderate view on nationalism. He represents the ideology of Rabindranath Tagore. He carries the most perception of the nation in Tagore's point of view. On the other hand, Sandip represents the extreme nationalist view. Between these two distinctive views, Bimala represents the dilemmatic view on nationalism. Tagore also depicts India in the form of a woman, Bimala. Bimala is portrayed as the physiological and psychological resemblance of the nation. This novel reveals several aspects of the conflict of ideologies including the conflict of gender and nationalism.

This novel represents Tagore's perspective in seeing the effect of *swadeshi* to India. Furthermore, we can conclude that this novel reveals the ideological conflicts which are happening in the society as the result of modernization and British colonization. This revelation can be seen in the way Tagore contrasts the views of western ideology and eastern ideology through the characters Nikhil, Sandip and Bimala. It signifies that ideological conflicts could happen everywhere, even in the inside of a house.

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