



Research Paper

Nationalism in the Home and the World

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Abstract

Tagore's novel *The Home and the World* deals with two themes, the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal (1903-08) and the extra marital love affair. The former theme forms the backdrop for the story wherein Tagore depicts how unscrupulous politicians, by their glib talk on patriotism, mislead the people to satisfy their greed and lust. While the first theme has political overtones, the second exposes the murky morality of high society. Through this "Rabindranath threw a veritable bombshell on the conservative society" (Majumdar, 1968, 246) and it created such a shattering impact that for "three long years after its publication the critics continued to tear the novel to pieces." (Kripalani, Krishna, 1962, 252.) On the basis of the first theme the novel may be viewed in the nationalist perspective.

I. Introduction

Depicting the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal along with the portrayal of an impressionable, young housewives' traumatic passage into the world outside the home and back, the novel carries the spirit of nationalism and humanism. Set against the stormy days of the revolutionary background of 1905 Bengal chocked with the war cries of "Swadeshi" and "Bandemataram," the novel depicts the autobiographical sketches of three principal characters-Nikhil, his wife Bimala and Sandip, his friend. Bimala, who has lived sheltered life of a Hindu wife, suddenly hears the call of the outside world and thus she is torn between the pull of the "home" and the pun of "world," Here Tagore points out how "love could come in conflict more narrowly, more fiercely with politics also." (Srinivasa Iyengar, 1965, 84.) He narrates the poignant story of a woman undergoing a terrible mental tension and turmoil by tiling part in the Swadeshi Movement and being torn asunder by the conflicting loyalties to the house and the outside world. In this simple story of a love triangle, he makes Nikhil and Sandip represent the conflict between idealism and realism, or truth and illusion. In fact, this novel is strongly ideological because of the implications of the critical debate between Gandhism and terrorist politics.

In this novel Tagore portrays the conflict between nationalism and universal manhood vividly and gives the most profound expression to his faith in the perfect independence and freedom for an individual irrespective of any particular nationality. He makes Sandip represent the pugnacious nationalism and narrow-minded patriotism of the politically conscious Indians during the Swadeshi Movement. Sandip is as typical Machiavellian patriot who exhorts the people recklessly to burn British goods and resort to violence when opposed.

In fact, the novel unfolds the trials and tribulations of a home, caught up in the convulsions of a political struggle, with profound implications for the individual and the nation alike. The action of the novel is predicated on two movements—one, an inward movement towards the projection of the home as a world in miniature and the other, an outward movement towards the perspectivisation of the world as a larger home, a greater home as it were. The novel seeks to define the inter-relatedness between the home and the world, between family life and life outside with a view to emphasising the dangers of the outside world to immature and impetuous minds. In a review of the novel E.M. Forster has commented that "He (Tagore) meant the wife to be seduced by the world, which is, with all its sins, a tremendous lover; she is actually seduced by a West Kensington Babu" and also underrated the novel as "a boarding-house flirtation that masks itself in mystic or patriotic talk." (Forster, E.M., 1953, 366.) This flawed perception of the Indian society in the

turbulent Swadeshi Movement days makes Forster interpret Tagore on the superllcial plane and lose sight of the dialectical interplay of the essential values symbolised in the novel under the stress of the upheaval.

The novel raises problems of profound significance: the meaning of true patriotism, the correlation of ends and means in any struggle for human emancipation, the pulls and counterpulls of home and the world in women's consciousness and the perils inherent in their attempts at apprehending the truth of their very being. In his examination of these issues Tagore persuasively argues in favour of the essential human values of love, loyalty, and truth in both the private and the public spheres of contemporary Indian life. It is through a reconciliation of home with the world with their symbolic connotations that one could hope for self-fulfilment. Love and loyalty, which sustain the home are not incompatible with love and loyalty to the country. There is no need to break the one in order to build the other. The novel's distinction lies in identifying the outer world of political strife and the internal world of domestic tension with the quest for a creative equilibrium between the two.

The novel's dominant theme is the triangular relationship involving Nikhil, Bimla and Sandip. The Swadeshi Movement activates and complicates this relationship highlighting the tension and conflict between the home and the world. Starting as a broadbased and united protest against the partition of Bengal (1905), the Movement was conceived, as the expression "Swadeshi" actively supported the Movement by starting a Swadeshi Bhandar in Calcutta for the promotion of indigenous goods as early as 1897 and by composing a number of national song, leading processions and raising funds for funding National Schools. But he withdrew from it when the Swadeshi Movement assumed the form of a mere political agitation producing extreme reactions. From the serene surroundings of Santiniketan, he watched with anguish the havoc being wrought by intemperate nationalism: the burning of much-needed cloth in the Harne of boycott of foreign goods and the alienating of Muslims by introducing Hindu religious motifs in the struggle.

Tagore explained the reasons for his withdrawal from the Swadeshi agitation which appeared to him to have degenerated into a negative campaign of hatred and exclusiveness, in one of his letters to C.F. Andrews, as: "the anarchy of emptiness never tempts me, even when it is resorted to as temporary measure." (Rathindranath Tagore, 1958, 72.) So, in a sense, *The Home and the World* may be regarded as Tagore's assessment of the Movement in fictional form. As Samit Sarkar, one of the historians of the Movement writes:

...the complexities of the Swadeshi Age—its grandeur and its pettiness, its triumphs and problems and tragedies—have indeed been immortalised in the writings of the greatest literary figure of the times." (Sarkar, Samit, 1973, 91.)

Though the novel records faithfully certain aspects of the political struggle in Bengal, it transcends the purely historical situation and acquires a larger significance, as Niharranjan Ray observes in the following words:

...because of its vivid and ironic indictment of unscrupulous politicians, of its denunciation of violence, aggressive intents and methods, and chauvinistic nationalism, and of the humanist logic of good ends being the product of good means, and equally humanist ideals of love and truth and any given situation. (Ray, Niharranjan, 1967, 233.)

Though the novel evolved much interest abroad because of the relevance of its perspectives to situations in other countries as well, it is not an investigation of the Swadeshi Movement in toto but only a dramatisation of its implications for individuals and their relations with one another in the hectic days of the struggle. As Bhabani Bhattacharya writes:

...it is the human interest in *The Home and the World* that mainly counts. The characters are no pawns in the hands of history, even if they are good symbols. (Bhattacharya, Bhabani, 1961, 99.)

Nikhil and Sandip, the two male protagonists, exemplify the parameters of approach to the problem of Indian emancipation; the former's a rationalistic, constructive approach with emphasis on self-reliance and righteous means, and the latter's that of emotional extremism, questionable means, crude nationalism, and brute force. Tagore's own vision of the struggle for independence seems to be reflected in Nikhil's concept of freedom, self-government, and constructive leadership. Like Nikhil in the novel, Tagore had to face unpopularity, isolation and even hostility due to his apposition to coercive and frenzied patriotism. As Krishna Kripalani observes:

Not even in his fiercest outburst of patriotism would Tagore be jingoistic which may partly explain why among his own people he was never popular whatever the praises sung after his death. (Kripalani, Krishna, 178.)

Long before the advent of the Swadeshi Movement, Nikhil, a patriot to the core had done his best to encourage indigenous manufacture in his estates, though without much success. A rich Zamindar, he could afford the luxury of imported goods but preferred native ones. When the boycott of foreign goods had become a fashionable slogan, his wife Bimala recounts:

.....And yet, some time ago, when my husband began to import country-made articles into our village, he had been secretly and openly twitted for his folly, by old and young alike. When Swadeshi had not yet become a boast, we had despised it with all our hearts. (The Home and the World, 1976, 122.)

Contrary to Nikhil's genuine patriotism, Sandip's is opportunistic and a means for achieving personal power. He is, in fact the prototype of a "populist" demagogue-hypocritical and unscrupulous, capable of sweeping along everyone with his magnetism, sophistry, and rhetoric. His braggadocio is illustrated by the passage from his diary as given below:

Am I not born to rule? to bestride my proper steed, the crowd and drive it as I will, the reins in my hand, the destination known only to me, and for it the thorns, the mire, on the road? This steed now awaits me at the door, pawing and champing its bit, its neighing filling the skies.

Sandip is not only inculcating the Swadeshi spirit among the people but also inflaming them with the cult of *Bande Mataram* and the concept of freedom by force. Through this game of Sandip Nikhil sees the kind of man "...who needs must shout and deify their country in order to keep up their excitement, these love excitement more than their country", but also realises that his restraint and moral stance would have no appeal to the mass mind. He, nevertheless, does not flinch from his stand however unpopular it is and so he remarks:

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.

He further declares:

So long as we are impervious to truth and have to be moved by some hypnotic stimulus, we must know that we lack the capacity for self-government.

Thus the main conflict of the novelist based on the antithetical postures of the two friends-Nikhil and Sandip.

Anchored in the love of her husband, the modern-minded Nikhil, who arranges for her English education and introduces her to modern ways of life Bimala has led a happy married life for nine years. Nikhil longs to find her blossom fully in the knowledge of herself in the wide world outside. So he urges her to step into it by saying:

What I want is, that I should have you and you should have me more fully in the outside world,.....I would have you come into the heart of the outer world and meet reality.....If we meet and recognise each other, in the real world, then only win our love be true.

But she declines to come out of the *Zenana* as she keeps regard for the conventions of the Rajah's house where she is perfectly content with her life. Recalling this life she remarks:

I have read in books that we are called "caged birds." I cannot speak for others, but I had so much in this cage of mine that then was not room for it in the universe, at least that is what I then felt.

The impact of the eruption of the Swadeshi Movement is felt even in the innermost recesses of every home in Bengal. It also breaks down the barriers between the home and the world for Bimala. She recounts the situation as:

One day there came the new era of Swadeshi in Bengal: but as to how it happened we have no distinct vision. There was no gradual slope connecting the past with the present. For that reason, I imagine, the new epoch came like a flood, breaking down the dykes and sweeping all our prudence and fear before it. We had no time even to think about, or understand, what had happened, or what was about to happen.

My sight and my mind, my hopes and my desires, became red with the passion of this news age. Though, up to this time, the walls of the horne-which was the ultimate world to my

mind-remained unbroken, yet I stood looking over into the distance, and I heard a voice from the far horizon, whose meaning was not perfectly clear to me, but whose call went straight to my heart.

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