

A study of self-identity as described by Rabindranath Tagore in his novels

Raham Ali, Dr Shailendra Kumar Mishra

Research Scholar, Maharishi University of Information Technology, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Abstract

Set against the backdrop of the *swadeshi* (home rule) movement in Bengal, following its sudden and arbitrary partition by the then British viceroy in India, Lord Curzon, in 1905, *The Home and the World* was originally published in Bengali (as *Ghare Baire*) in 1915. Later, it was translated and published in English by the author's nephew, Surendranath Tagore (with active cooperation from the author himself), in 1919.

The Bengali original was published two years after the author was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and the same year in which he received a knighthood from King George V of England, an accolade he came to renounce in 1919 in protest against the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Punjab, by the notorious General Dyer.

Keywords: Nobel, Bengal, English translation

Introduction

The controversial nature of the subject matter, in which Tagore takes the opportunity to launch his fiercest attack yet against the ideology of nationalism, contrary to its rising popularity both in India and the West, was also a reason it drew much attention, mostly in the form of reprobation and scorn, from readers both in and outside Bengal. A third reason for the novel's reputation is the successful movie made of it, in 1984, by another gifted scion of Bengal, and a student of Tagore's university, Visva-Bharati, Satyajit Ray.

It is perhaps the best known of Tagore's novels outside Bengal, and received a lot of attention in Europe, particularly following the publication of its English translation, mainly due to the wide readership Tagore had gained in the wake of his Nobel award [1].

Upon its publication, the novel was praised by Tagore's friends William Rothenstein and W.B. Yeats, and a friend of Einstein's advised him in an upbeat tone, Hermann Hesse, reviewing it, spoke of its purity and grandeur and Bertolt Brecht observed in his diary, A wonderful book, strong and gentle.

However, E.M. Forster and George Lukcs did not find much positive in the novel. In a condescending tone, Forster dismissed the book as a tragedy about nothing; a roman trios with all the hackneyed situations from which novelists are trying to emancipate themselves in the West.

Lukcs proved more vitriolic; he condemned the novel as a libellous pamphlet and petty bourgeoisie yarn of the shoddiest kind. He added that Tagore was but an intellectual agent [of the empire, acting] against the Indian freedom movement in the novel a view that a Russian scholar of Tagore, Alexander P. Danielschuk, later spurned as an example of vulgar Marxism.

Tagore never had a political temperament and found politics wasteful and morally debilitating; it is politics, he said, which in every country has lowered the standard of morality, [and] given rise to a perpetual contest of lies and deception, cruelties and hypocrisies.

A poet, he sought to keep his mind above politics. However his destiny determined otherwise: I have been chosen by destiny to ply my boat there where the current is against me. Politics is wholly against my nature; and yet, belonging to an unfortunate country, born to an abnormal situation, we find it so difficult to avoid their [sic] outbursts [2].

Research Study

When the *swadeshi* movement broke out in Bengal, in the wake of its partition in 1905, Tagore soon found himself at its vortex: writing songs, giving speeches, and taking part in mass rallies. He also set up a match factory, a local bank, and a weaving centre as his way of giving leadership to the movement. Ironically, he even set the movement's theme song, *Bande Mataram*, or Hail to three Mother, to music himself. The song was composed by another Bengali writer, Bankim Chatterjee, and is used as a potent fetish by the manipulative Sandip in the novel.

Swadeshi literally means of our own country. It was a nationalist movement meant to boycott British goods and buy homemade products, so that the British would suffer economically for their dark designs of divide and rule policy, while the local industries grew, with less competition from imported goods. But what was conceived as a non-violent non-cooperation movement soon turned violent and ugly, owing to the heavy handed policies of the government, and wilful meddling by self-seeking and sinister *bhadroloks*.

Tagore felt mortified by many of the nationalist leaders behaving like terrorists and traumatising innocent people for their indifference to the cause, and impassioned youths turning to the cult of the bomb to liberate their homeland from the foreign yoke. Thus, especially after Khudiram Bose, a radical youth who is still widely regarded as a hero in the annals of Bengal, hurled a bomb in 1908, killing two innocent British civilians, Tagore decided not to participate in the movement any more, nor associate with a nationalist uprising again, in spite of the recurrent charges of pusillanimity and insincerity by his detractors. His response came, instead, in the form of *The Home and the World*, seven years later [3].

Tagore's Works

The novel deals with the experiences of three characters during the volatile period of *swadeshi*: Nikhil, a benevolent, enlightened and progressive *zamindar* (landlord); his childhood friend and a voluble, selfish but charismatic nationalist leader, Sandip; and Nikhil's wife, Bimala, who is happy at the outset in her traditional role as a *zamindar's* wife but who, encouraged by her husband, steps out of home to better acquaint herself with the world and find a new identity for the Indian woman.

At the sight of Sandip, she emotionally trips, vacillates between him and her husband, until she returns home bruised and humiliated but with a more mature understanding of both the home/self and the world. The narrative is structured in the form of diary entries written by the three characters. This technique allows the reader to see the events in multiple perspectives, and comprehend their relative effects on the mind of these characters, but the psychological probing in these extended diary monologues also slows down the novel's progress, making it somewhat repetitive and static, with fewer real incidents and dramatic actions featuring in the narrative^[4]. This method of telling also gives rise to long, confessional/descriptive passages, often effusive, sentimental and strung on a high moral key, which might sound false and tedious to the western ear but which was an integral part of the Bengali style, particularly for Tagore who was at once a poet, philosopher and novelist.

As his biographer, Krishna Kripalani has aptly pointed out, Tagore was no Tolstoy or Balzac [a myriad-minded writer] the poet, the singer and the teacher constantly meddled with the novelist.

The novel has a certain allegorical quality in that Nikhil and Sandip seem to represent two opposing visions for the nation with Bimala, torn between the two, not knowing for sure what should be her guiding principle signifying Bengal tottering between the two possibilities. Nikhil's vision is one of enlightened humanitarian and global perspective, based on a true equality and harmony of individuals and nations.

On the other hand, Sandip's radical, parochial and belligerent nationalism, which cultivates an intense sense of patriotism in individuals, threatens to replace their moral sensibility with national bigotry and blind fanaticism. Seen from this perspective, Nikhil's death at the end of the novel, just when Bimala is turning the corner and returning to her senses after a prolonged infatuation with Sandip and his views, also signals Tagore's pessimism about the future of Bengal.

In the absence of truly benevolent leaders like Nikhil, she would be mutilated, divided in two (currently Bangladesh and West Bengal), with millions of her children paying with their lives to meet the apocalyptic wishes of self-seeking, immoral, power-hungry politicians, determined to carve out her body on religious communal lines^[5].

The embodiment of ideas by the characters is a weakness in the novel, but perhaps a necessary compromise by the writer. It makes the characters flat and one-dimensional: Nikhil, who has too much of Tagore in him, is emblematic of all good; and Sandip, who is Nikhil's polar opposite, is all unscrupulousness and evil. Neither of these characters seems to change in the course of the narrative.

Nikhil remains calm, gentle, understanding, forgiving, liberal, rational and altruistic throughout the novel, while Sandip is selfish, manipulative, irrational, oppressive, and tyrannical.

Nikhil is so tranquil that he does not lose his poise even when his wife flirts with his friend in his own house, in front of his very eyes.

His logic is: Perfect gain is the best of all; but if that is impossible, then the next best gain is perfect losing. This is extraordinary indeed considering that, in the Indian patriarchal system, men take their wives for granted, hardly allowing any complex emotions to occur in their relationships with women, especially in marriage.

Post-colonial critics such as Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Tom Nairn have pointed out how nationalism cultivates the sentiments of irrationality, prejudice and hatred in people, and Leela Gandhi has spoken of its attendant racism and loathing, and the alacrity with which citizens are willing to both kill and die for it.

Frantz Fanon has explained that although the objective of nationalism is to create a horizontal relationship and fraternity within its people, in reality the nation never speaks of the hopes and aspirations of the entire imagined community and hierarchy, factional hegemony, inequality and exploitation remain a daily occurrence in its body^[6].

Minto's mischievous manifesto that the strong hand carries more respect in India than even the recognition of British justice led to widespread atrocities against the participants of the movement; university students were harassed, persecuted and oppressed, while those at lower levels were flogged, fined and expelled.

Police were advised to beat up marchers with their long, metal-tipped *lathis*, and leaders who were found guilty were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment. After the Khudiram incident, the British reaction was predictably strident, declaring that ten of them would be shot for every life sacrificed.

Significance of the Study

By extension, it also shows Tagore's despondent thoughts about the future of humanity at large, who, forgetting their human potential for truth, equality, fellowship and justice, would espouse a vision that would lock them in a binary of self and other.

The consequences of such thinking, Tagore warns, is a recurrent logic of greed, selfishness, violence, hatred and war a dark prediction also made in an earlier poem, *The Sunset of the Century*, written on the last day of the nineteenth century: The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a violence of fury from its shameless feeding.

In Sandip's actions, Tagore has insightfully and shrewdly anticipated all these pitfalls of nationalism pointed out by later literary-cultural critics.

Tagore is not perhaps entirely historically accurate in his portrait of the *swaraj*. He has not, for example, incorporated in his narrative the extreme policies of brutality adopted by the Raj to crack the movement.

For it has made the world its food. And licking it, crunching it and swallowing it in big morsels, It swells and swells till in the midst of its unholy feast descends the sudden shaft of heaven piercing its heart of grossness^[7].

Conclusion

However, although the writer has advertently left out this side of the story, his portrait of Sandip seems typical of the activities of the New Party, the revolutionary wing of

Congress, under the leadership of Bipin Chandra Pal, who led a group of radical youths and edited a popular journal called *Bande Mataram*, and of Aurobindo Ghosh's younger brother, Barindra Kumar, who was the leader of a group of young terrorists who were inspired by Russian anarchist activities and apotheosised violence.

Tagore was so deeply frustrated by *swadeshi* turning into a terrorist movement that he would spurn even Gandhi's *swaraj* in later years. He was not to participate in a nationalist movement again because he came to believe that radical nationalism, like religious orthodoxy, breeds divisiveness and blind fanaticism: Formalism in religion is like nationalism in politics: it breeds sectarian arrogance, mutual misunderstanding and a spirit of persecution, he wrote in a letter to his friend C.F. Andrews.

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