

# Understanding Nationalism through Tagore's Novel *The Home and the World*

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## Abstract

The paper will examine the nationalist perspective 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 his nationalist perspective in the novel. This paper also presents the issues in India regarding the nation's instability in facing the new era of modernism and independence. This paper aims to analyze the representation of Indian Nationalism, by focusing on the ideological conflict and how the resolution of the conflicts represents the idea of nationalism.

**Key Words:** Tagore, Indian Nationalism, Swadeshi Movement, Nationalist Perspective, Modernism and independence.

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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 on division of Bengal. Swadeshi Movement was started as a protest against the partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905. Swadeshi is the activity of the country in which all people take part. Any action, any product or, service produced domestically in the country qualifies to be called Swadeshi if in its production people and their communities are directly involved. And a rejection of all foreign – made products. Swadeshi Movement can be seen as the attempt to boycott British commodities

as a protest against the British government. The famous figure of Swadeshi Mahatma Gandhi. He proposes the Swadeshi as a form of passive resistance and non-violent movement.

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, 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 landowner and Sandip a zealous nationalistic one can call him so fighting for the nation's independence, Bimala who, while initially content with her housewife status is later entangled in Sandip's nationalism present before her. Her choice for Sandip's causes to put before us the consequences of the furore of Sandip's

nationalism. Tagore uses his character 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.

This study aims to analyze the representation of Indian Nationalism, by focusing on the ideological conflict and how the resolutions of the conflicts represent the idea of nationalism. It is believed that this novel presents a criticism of the Indian tradition and nationalism. And Tagore's defines his nationalist perspective through this novel. Tagore presents his view through the conflict between the characters that represent different attitudes. In the novel *The Home and the World*, there is a clear representation of the clash between East and West. This novel also presents the issues in India regarding the nation's instability in facing the new era of modernism and independence. In India, there are two distinctive views on nationalism. The first view of nationalism is reflected through the advancement of Indian industry. The constructive nationalist tends to build things to make betterment of the country. On the other hand, there were extreme nationalists who tend to do brutal things such as burning foreign goods as they think that using foreign goods is a reflection of support towards British colonizers. The novel *The Home and the World* portray this issue and reflects it through the conflicts inside The home as a representation of the conflicts of the nationalist movement in India in the early twentieth century.

The novel focuses on three characters, each of whom speaks in the first person in recounting

how they interact with one another Nikhil are 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." (Tagore 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 Shakti, the ultimate female principle underpinning reality. In being so described, she represents the beauty, vitality, and glory of Bengal.

The struggle between Nikhil and Sandip for Bimala is, then, a battle for Sandip future of Bengal, as they represent two opposing visions for Bengal. Sandip's nationalism is a façade 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 peddler, who in order to make ends meet sells cloth, when found selling foreign, clothes are 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 minds 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 the 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 to the condition of the common man and just go on asking for contribution and support to the Swadeshi Movement. The patriotic zeal of the rich hides itself the exploitation that they do about the poor. These rich and owners 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 disgracing the village." (Tagore 51)

The national anthem, the nation is considered as a mother that must be protected as she nurtures her children. Tagore makes Bimala as the female symbol of the nation. The symbolization of India in the figure of Bimala can be seen in several aspects. The first aspect is of her physical appearance. In the first chapter, she is described as a woman who has dark features. This can be seen as the symbolization of India in the way that it is perceived as dark which signifies the dark times in the early twentieth century which happened in India caused by the colonization.

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 endeavor for the country's development

is presented through the portrayal of the character of Nikhil. Nikhil who belongs to a 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 the 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." (Tagore 106)

Tagore, through the portrayal of Nikhil and his master Chandranath Babu, puts before us a critique of Sandip's ideology as well as his ideas 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 a 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 methods and violent activities. He is against the destructive elements in the movement. He is the view that one need not burn the foreign articles on the 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 energy in this destructive excitement." (Tagore 24)

Nikhil who is branded a 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 artifacts. He uses Indian pencils, soaps, oil lamps and other merchandise 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 ideal 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." (Tagore 132)

Bimala represents Bengal, who is torn between Nikhil and Sandip's ideologies. While the forms are emblematic of western values, while the latter is symbolic of his passion and dedication to the Swadeshi movement. Although this novel has political implications, my focus will be on Bimala's agency throughout the novel. Therefore, I will examine the novel to show the shifting role of the women during this time period:

"The new woman was to be an educated and brave wife as an appropriate partner of an English-educated nationalist man, able to run an 'efficient' and 'orderly home' like her Western counterpart, be high-minded and spiritual like the women of the 'golden' age, become 'grahalakshmi' like the Divine Lakshmi and fulfill her primary role as a courageous mother producing heroic children for the service of the nation. If the model was absurd, and inimitable, and indeed full of contradictions, no one was bothered. That was the new woman the nation needed, and it was the women's duty to live up to it." (Tolstoy 41)

Although the women's duty as a householder and the wife was necessary, the Bengali middle class was becoming strongly influenced by

the Victorian England, which allowed the "re-ordering of women into new models."

Nikhil and Sandip are portrayed as flat characters, different from Bimala who is portrayed as round character. Sandip and Nikhil represent different ideologies existing in India in the early twentieth century. They have the tendency to be flat characters as they symbolized ideologies which do not change throughout time. The existence of these two characters brings different insights for Bimala and changes her mind, molding her into a round character. Nikhil and Sandip represent the moderate nationalist ideology and extreme nationalist ideology, and those ideologies are portrayed as contradictory. This contradiction shows Tagore's objection on the issue of extreme nationalism.

If we relate this case to the ending of the story, we can see that Tagore tries to open the minds of the readers by presenting his ideology through the character of Nikhil. Yet, at the end of the story, he makes a twisted plot which seems to undermine and doubt his own ideas of freedom. The tragic death of Nikhil signifies Tagore's skepticism towards the future of India. He was anxious that India's future will be ideal as dreamed by many people inside the country. Bimala's fate can be seen as the representation of India's fate readers cannot predict Bimala's fate because of the tragic accident that happens to her husband. This event raises many questions about the continuity of her life, which symbolizes the future of India. India still does not have certain future. The crossroad of her life makes the story more complicated. We can see that Bimala's confusion upon the choice is India's hesitation in facing a new era.

There are three distinctive views on 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 hand, Sandip represents the extreme nationalist view. Between these two distinctive views, Bimala represents the diplomatic view on nationalism. Tagore also depicts Indian in the form of a woman, Bimala. Bimala is portrayed as the physiological and psychological resemblance to the nation. This novel reveals several aspects of the conflict of ideologies, including the conflict of gender and nationalism. The novel is deliberately left open-ended because the discourses of gender and nation are continuously evolving.

Along the story, Tagore proposes new insights to the readers, yet in the end, he metaphorically kills his own ideology. This is shown as the signifies that in the struggle of infusing modernity, Tagore has found hard times to make people understand. Therefore, he exposed the tragic ending to his own ideology in this novel. By giving this ending, indirectly, he also drags the readers into wondering what is going to happen to Bimala and India.

In *The 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.

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 inside of a house.

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