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Reading *Swadeshi* Movement in Tagore's *The Home and the World*

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Abstract:

Social and literary movements have been significant in providing food for thought to the authors. The changes in the world outside are reflected in literature and literature in turn impacts individuals, masses and society. One such influential movement in the history of India was *Swadeshi* and Boycott movement. The movement was powerful especially in the state of Bengal. Tagore's *The Home and the World*, set against the backdrop of *Swadeshi* and boycott movement remarkably captures the modern outlook of Nikhilesh towards the freedom movement. The aim of the paper is to examine the concept of *Swadeshi* as presented by Tagore through the character of Nikhil and the repercussions the movement had on the masses and individuals.

Keywords: Bengal, Swadeshi, Boycott, Protest.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a poet, philosopher, playwright, song composer, essayist, novelist and painter. His first poem *Abhilasha* (Desire) was published in 1874 anonymously. He also wrote under the pseudonym of Bhanusingha for some time. Thereafter he shifted to using his real name. He was not an active political figure but was concerned about the state of the country. In 1900s he wrote many patriotic songs and protested against the partition of Bengal. In 1913, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, the first Asian to receive this honour. In 1915, he was awarded a knighthood which he returned in 1919 as a protest against Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. In 1921, he established Vishwabharti University at Shantiniketan, a centre for arts and ideas. He travelled widely to deliver lectures and wrote about religion, civilisation and nationalism in prose. His work took up issues of caste, widow remarriage and revolutionary politics. Tagore's notable works include poetry collection, *The Golden Boat* (1894), *Chitrangada* (1892), *Post-Office* (1912), *Gora* (1910), and *The Home and the World* (1919). In 1920s, Tagore produced paintings which won him

appreciation as one of the leading contemporary artists of the country. He holds a high place in the fields of literature for immaculate verses, plays, charming short stories, novels and though provoking prose pieces; he also left his mark on music and painting.

Tagore's novel *The Home and the World* is a translation of *Ghaire Baire*. It was first serialized in a periodical *Sabuj Patra*. The novel was translated in English by Surendranath Tagore in 1919. The novel broke for the first time the tradition of formal diction and resorted to colloquial prose. It has first-person narratives of the three central characters. *Swadeshi* movement which forms a backdrop to the novel was an anti-British protest. The movement emerged as a response to Lord Curzon's policy of divide and rule. The partition of Bengal was planned by the then Governor General and Viceroy of India Lord Curzon. The government called the partition an administrative move. They showed the difficulty to administer a large estate. However, the real motive behind the partition was to divide the waves of patriotism which emerged in Bengal and were spreading throughout the nation. They believed that to suppress the voice of protest they must eradicate it at the grass root level. The partition of Bengal to weaken the spirit of nationalism happened in 1905. The partition saw strong opposition and huge discontent and agitation amongst people.

Swadeshi was a part of nationalist movement which focused on promoting the Indian handmade goods and boycotting Western goods. Thus it aimed to strengthen the local industries. It was non violent movement. But the movement also turned into an ugly violent movement. *Swadeshi* soon became a weapon in the hands of common way a symbol of protest. According to Jahanbegloo, Gandhi attempted to build a new civilisation in the country to combat the modern civilisation. He relied on *swaraj*, *satyagraha* and *swadeshi*. The concept of *Swadeshi* was self-sufficiency, a method which could improve the economic conditions in the country through indigenous techniques and products. Gandhi believed that there was a significant connection between *Swadeshi* and *swaraj*. His belief later on was supported by the Congressmen (20-21). The followers of *Swadeshi* wore khadi, slept on khadi bed linens and decorated their homes with the cloth. In sometime, khadi became popular and powerful political symbol of protest.

Swadeshi movement disseminated in Bengal between 1905 and 1908. The immediate cause for *Swadeshi* in Bengal was the partition of Bengal in 1905. The reason given by the British government behind partition was the largeness of the estate and the difficulty it posed in administration. Gandhi defined *Swadeshi* movement as hand-spinning of khadi which could

make the people of India independent. It became a way of protest against the British and British policies. The fire of *Swadeshi* and boycott of foreign goods propagated all over the country. Bipan Chandra in his work observes that, students, women and urban and rural population of Bengal and other parts of India actively participated. The day was declared as a day of mourning throughout the state. The period also saw the use of festivals and melas to reach out to the masses. The movement laid great emphasis on self-reliance or *Atmasakti*. This led to set-up of numerous *Swadeshi* factories, textile mills, banks, shops (85). Tagore actively participated in the movement by composing songs, essays and participating in discussion meetings. However, the moment degenerated into violence with youths killing innocent Britishers, exploitation and terrorism. Such incidents of violence led Tagore to withdraw from the movement. Tagore was severely criticised for this. He wrote the novel to defend his position and silence his critics.

The Home and the World is a story of Nikhil who is a modern and educated gentleman married to Bimala. He is a teetotaler and his grandmother adores him. Nikhil's elder brother passed away due to excessive drinking, leaving his wife Bara Rani a widow. Bimala is a dutiful wife who has deep reverence for her husband. She takes the dust of her husband's feet every morning. She feels that she is a queen married in Rajah's house. Bimala is not very beautiful but Nikhil's grandmother loves her because of the favourable stars which didn't give any chance to Nikhil to take a wrong path.

Nikhil is a modern educated man of Bengal who loves his wife and hence gives her full freedom. He brought dresses and ornaments for Bimala from shops selling European goods. He wants Bimala to know the world and therefore engages a tutor Miss Gilby to educate her. He also introduces her to the political developments happening around. The novel is set in the time when *Swadeshi* movement encompassed Bengal. Nikhil's friend Sandip is a handsome revolutionary, *Swadeshi* enthusiast who is devoted to the cause of country. Bimala while first listening to the speech of Sandip is totally bewitched and identifies herself as the women of Bengal who must fight for the country.

“I was utterly unconscious of myself. I was no longer the lady of rajah's house, but the sole representative of Bengal's womanhood. And he was the champion of Bengal.”(28)

On Bimala's suggestion, Nikhil invites Sandip for dinner where Bimala voices her love for the country.

“I have anger. I would be angry for my country's sake. If necessary, I would smite and slay to avenge her insults.”(39)

Bimala who is attracted to the mesmerizing provokingly patriotic speech of Sandip is gradually attracted to him. Her ideas resonate with Sandip who calls her “Queen Bee” and identifies her as the image of Shakti and thus his inspiration. Bimala transforms herself from a traditional wife who attends to her domestic duties to being an active participant in the *Swadeshi* resistance. She shares the ideology of Sandip to be violent and even commit sin in achieving whatever one wishes for. Sandip calls:

“I shall be able to spread the fire of enthusiasm in my country by borrowing it from you. No, do not be ashamed. You are far above all modesty and diddidence. You are the Queen Bee of our hive, and we the workers shall rally around you. You shall be our centre, our inspiration.”

Although Sandip is Nikhil's friend yet both the characters have sharp ideological differences. Sandip looks forward and even resorts to immoral and violent methods to achieve his goals while Nikhil who is the spokesperson of Tagore stresses that *Swadeshi* movement should be non-violent. *Swadeshi* agitators organized boycott of foreign goods, mainly cloth and also made bonfires of them. Nikhil questions the reason behind such methods which affect the minor groups. He suggests Bimala:

“Very well, do not wear them for the rest of your life, then. But why this bonfire business? ... You should not waste even a tenth part of your energies in this destructive excitement” (24).

Tagore was strictly against idolatry or the worship of idols. Bimala agrees with Sandip when he accuses Nikhil of lack of imagination which didn't let him see his country in an image. On the other hand, Nikhil believes that he is willing to serve his country but worshipping the country as a God is like bringing a curse upon it. Sandip worships Bimala by worshipping her as the ‘Queen Bee’. Sandip's worship of Bimala as the nation is actually connected to the Bengali belief in considering women as the embodiment of *sakti*-the motivating power behind nationalism. The author also critiques the image of nation-state through the novel.

Bimala's fascination with Sandip disturbs her equation with Nikhil. She mistakes the ideals of Nikhil as his weakness for not supporting *Swadeshi*. As she becomes an active

participant of *Swadeshi* she becomes estranged to Nikhil. Under the influence of *Swadeshi* she refuses to take any lessons from Miss Gilby. On the other hand Nikhil, who has immense trust and love for Bimala continues to watch how she crosses the threshold of the house to enter a new world. Sandip makes Bimala believe that the whole country is in need of her. Bimala begins to be involved with Sandip in saving the country. Nikhil who has altogether different views from Bimala and Sandip is neglected from their discussions. Being the husband he could have stopped Bimala or would have turned out Sandip from his house. Rather, considering Bimala as her equal he gives freedom of choice to Bimala to choose her ideology and follow her path. It is important to note that Nikhil supported Sandip for his travel, preaching and other activities. It was only that he did not proclaim '*Bande Matarm*' as all the patriots were doing.

Bimala is confused about her love for *Swadeshi* and her love for Sandip. Swayed by Sandip she feels:

“ I was Shakti; also an embodiment of Universal joy... And this hero, this true servant of the country, this devotee of mine,- this flaming intelligence, this burning energy, this shining genius,- him also was I creating from moment to moment. Have I not seen how my presence pours fresh life into him time after time?” (126)

Throughout the course of the novel we find Nikhil vehemently opposing the methods of *Swadeshi* followers. Some of the youth of schools and colleges under the leadership of Sandip demand Nikhil to boycott foreign goods from Suskar market. Nikhil imported Indian mill-made yarn and kept it for sale in Suskar market. He also sent the bales of it to the other markets belonging to rich zamindars. He was of the opinion that boycotting and boycotting foreign goods from Indian market would be a huge loss to the poor traders for whom earning small amount of money is a everyday struggle. An example of this was Panchu a poor man who sold foreign cloth. Harish Kundu the zamindar fines him heavily although he begs him several times. Sandip and his *Swadeshi* supporters burnt the whole bale of cloth and cried

“This is the first funeral pyre lighted by your village in celebration of the last rites of foreign commerce. These are sacred ashes. Smear yourselves with them in token of your *Swadeshi* vow” (136)

Bimala too takes the side of Sandip and urges Nikhil to remove foreign goods from their market. She vehemently proposes to use force if needed to do so. Nikhil calls this as 'tyranny'. He says:

“To tyrannise for the country is to tyrannise over the country.”(142).

Nikhil has his own version of *Swadeshi*. He uses Indian-made pencils, knife and old fashioned castor oil lamps. His version of *Swadeshi* is marked with peaceful methods and self-control. Sandip's show of nationalism is actually a form of self-love. He tries to woo Bimala by talking about his use of *Swadeshi* medicines for healing himself. At this point, Nikhil exposes his true character by pointing out his store of Western medicines in his living room.

Kolijan Kathleen in “Durga- for whom I would redden the earth with sacrificial offerings: Mythology, Nationalism and patriarchal Ambivalence in *The Home and the World*” suggests that her decision to help Sandip by stealing money is her complete surrender to the destructive force of the movement. Her complete rejection of her role as Queen Bee and Sandip happens when she delivers the stolen money back and begins to pray. Her return to Nikhil is her rejection of *Swadeshi* as well as of Sandip(124). Finally, when she is disillusioned she submits herself back to Nikhil. Her sincere repentance is thus expressed:

“Oh forgive me just once, only this time, Lord! All that you gave into my hands as the wealth of my life, I have made into my burden...Nothing save the music of your flute can make whole that which has been broken, and pure that which has been sullied...I threw myself prone on the ground and sobbed aloud. It was for mercy that I prayed,- some little mercy from somewhere, some shelter, some sign of forgiveness...” (254).

Conclusion

Thus, through the novel Tagore cautions us about the dangers of such nationalist movements which were running across the country. Tagore brings in to review the true meaning of the term *Swadeshi*. People like Sandip were only influencing people in the name of *Swadeshi* with no real spirit of the term. The motive was to only make money. In her motive to serve the country Bimala is attracted to this outside 'world' and leaves behind her husband Nikhil her 'home'. Nikhil who represents Tagore's ideology never gives in to the tactics of *Swadeshi* movement. He has the true understanding of the concept and Nikhil who knows the true character of Sandip never forces or stops Bimala from taking the wrong path.

Her journey from ‘home’ to the ‘world’ and back to ‘home’ is a cautionary tale against the dangers of *Swadeshi* movement which was degenerating into a violent movement.

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