

East versus West: A Reflection of Cultural Conflicts in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*

Dr. Md. Sahidul Islam

Department of English
Aligarh Muslim University
Aligarh-202002, U.P.

India's indigenous culture has great significance so far as the cultural identity of the country in its fiction in English is concerned. It was treated as one of the major themes in Indian fiction in English during the reign of the British Empire in India. Though, there was a hindrance on the part of the writers of the period to deal with the indigenous practices and cultural forms in their literary works due to utter confusion, they had not succumbed to the situation. They tried their best to maintain the Indian values in their works. Rabindranath Tagore is one of the prominent authors of pre-colonial India. Like many other writers, Tagore too had dealt with the theme of indigenous culture during that period. The author's *The Home and the World* (1915; translated into English in 1985) is of major concern in this study. However, his other prominent works like *Gora (Fair-Faced)* and *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)* published in 1910 and 1912 respectively are also remarkable in this regard. He had pursued it and became successful to a great extent in fulfilling his commitment in depicting the Indian values. As a result, the Indian English Literature is sated with nativistic images in the writings of the pre-colonial era. Great affinity of the Indian writers towards Indian value system and their ceaseless attempt of portraying it is evident in their works. Thus, an attempt has been made to show how Rabindranath Tagore has used "the doctrine of innate ideas" (Fowler, Fowler, and Allen 789)—myth and fable as well as legends and oral traditions of his own culture in order to depict nativistic images in his selected text *The Home and the World*. Concurrently, this paper also focuses how such traditional customs of the East are contrary to the outlook of the West that associates itself with awareness, modernity, innovation, evolution and improvement.

A creative man of various talents, Rabindranath Tagore is not only esteemed worldwide for creative writing but also for his role in arousing the feeling of nationality in the minds of Indian people. The Noble prize winner (1913 for *Gitanjali*) Bengali author's national consciousness as reflected through his works has great resemblance with another noble prize winner (1923) Irish poet W.B. Yeats, who too has similar kind of contribution for his country. In fact Tagore's major works replete with nativistic images. His ability in presenting this theme is not only impressive but also surpasses the other contemporary writers of his time. Like many other writers of the pre-colonial period, Tagore has treated India's indigenous culture as one of the major themes in his novel *The Home and the World*. The writer's choice of depicting the indigenous culture in the novel, which led to the East-West conflict, was one of his attempts in this direction with dauntless attitude. It is the outcome of his realization that most of the Indian writers did not discuss this theme extensively during the British reign. In fact, Tagore was very curious about this issue from his early life and handled it rationally. In this context, Swapan Majumdar has aptly said that: "During his formative years Rabindranath was an ardent observer of the debates on the relevant issues and themes of the times in which his elders took part. The East-West often featured in these controversies and discussions" (Majumdar 295).

In *The Home and the World*, Rabindranath Tagore has shown "the beginning of a dynamic interaction between Indian and Western modes of thought" (Basu 219). The novel demonstrates the conflict Tagore had within himself, between the two ideas: one is pertaining to the culture of the West and the other is a revolt against that culture. One of these ideas is

depicted in Nikhil, who is sensible and is against brutality, and the other is in Sandip, who is resolute in resisting anything and everything that comes between himself and his ambitions. Both of them belong to the same nation, share the same environment but differ in their ideologies. In other words these two main characters of *The Home and the World* are the two sides of the same coin. The role of these two contrasting ideals is of great significance so far as the understanding of the history of the nation is concerned.

While talking about the revival of India's indigenous culture and its clash with the Western culture, the themes of tradition and modernity invariably come under discussion. "The moot questions, of course, lay in the dilemma between the attitude[s] to the English on the one hand and love of one's country on the other. For some the English were the harbingers of a new consciousness instilled through English education and modern systems of communication; others came to see in them the image of a selfish giant ransacking India to inflate the British exchequer and doing everything to cut loose the present-day Indian from the roots of his glorious past" (Majumdar 295). So far as these themes are concerned, Nikhil opts for the modernity. He gets pleasure from the Western clothes and commodities and wants that his wife Bimala too should take pleasure in them. Contrarily, Bimala, though for a short period of her lifespan, sticks to the norms of the Hindu tradition and avoids going outside as the other modern women do. With the passage of time, a kind of tension is generated in Bimala as she has to make a choice of the two options. Being an Indian, she tries to lead traditional life. But the Western culture beckons her towards it. Though Bimala seeks pleasure in the modern things given by her husband at times, feels guilty some other times when she thinks in terms of nationalism or anyone like Sandip talks about patriotism. This is how she struggles with identity crisis. As Bimala is part of India, she is familiar with the home where a number of cultures exist. In the beginning of the novel Bimala was extremely devoted to her husband. Their union seemed so strong that could hardly be affected by any temptation. But, with the progress of the story a radical change is seen in Bimala. Despite her effort to stick to the traditions of India that she knows she should love, and lead a life like a traditional Indian woman, Bimala failed. Ultimately, she succumbs to the temptation of the modern culture. She has developed a soft corner for a person other than her husband. That person is none other than Sandip who is a guest at the home of the couple Nikhil and Bimala. Gradually, she deviates from her previous ideology of a traditional Indian woman.

In *The Home and the World*, Tagore has shown the East-West encounter through Bimala's indecisiveness, who is torn between the two cultures—the traditional Indian culture and the Western culture or the modern culture. The two contrary natures of Bimala are apparent in the novel. "To the conventional Hindu women, the husband was not just a person, he was an ideal—a living god on earth whom the scriptures enjoyed her to serve and worship for her own spiritual fulfilment" (Subramanian et al 245). Accordingly, Bimala's trait as the typical Indian housewife is revealed through her calm and composed nature at the initial stage. Like Rukmani in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, Bimala too remains faithful to her husband Nikhil as she claims that:

I distinctly remember after my marriage, when, early in the morning, I would cautiously and silently get up and take the dust of my husband's feet without waking him, how at such moments I could feel the vermilion mark upon my forehead shining out like the morning star. (Tagore 3)

Bimala does so because "it was my woman's heart, which must worship in order to love" (Tagore 3). Moreover, like an Indian God-fearing woman she fears God, which is obvious from her speech:

Everyone says that I resemble my mother. In my childhood I used to resent this. It made me angry with my mirror. I thought that it was God's unfairness which was wrapped round my limbs—that my dark features were not my due, but had come to me by some misunderstanding. All that remained for me to ask of my God in reparation was, that I might grow up to be a model of what woman should be, as one reads it in some epic poem. (Tagore 2)

However, there arises a question mark on Bimala's traditional womanhood as soon as she falls 'in love' with Sandip. She no longer concentrates on her role as a traditional housewife. Bimala's extra-marital affair with Sandip has not only destroyed her happy married life with Nikhil but also shows her rejection of the whole ethos of the Hindu culture. "Tagore depicted here a complete break with the Hindu code by a woman dispirited and disgusted at the hollowness of its pretensions, and no longer prepared to accept the notion that salvation lay in worshipping one's husband as deity" (Subramanian et al 247). She becomes so bold that she hardly cares anybody's intervention while she desires to meet with Sandip. She assertively sweeps off the condemnation of her sister-in-law and straightforwardly converses with Sandip outside the women's quarter of the house. It is the result of dilemma in Bimala that she changes her lifestyle of the traditional ways of the Indian household to become a modern, self-dependent, and an independent woman, the West stands for. Through this love triangle, Tagore tries to test the boundaries of the union of marriage and emphasizes what the sanctity of marriage meant to the traditional Indians.

Moreover, Rabindranath Tagore has hinted at the dogma of inherent idea of dowry in *The Home and the World*. So far as social customs and traditions are concerned the people of India are exceptionally orthodox and conservative. Due to the slowness in the process of social change, the people of India especially in the rural area scrupulously observe the ancient traditions without fail. According to them, baby boys were preferable to baby girls as the boys were able to earn money and support the family. Based on this ground, the more dowries (say money, jewelleries and saris etc) the bride's father would be able to provide, the better would be the status of the bridegroom and vice versa. Moreover, the married women were required to look after the children and involve in household work. This is how the novelist has conveyed the message in *The Home and the World* as to how the age old custom of dowry is responsible in making wide difference in choosing the bridegroom.

In *The Home and the World*, Tagore has also dealt with religion as one of the major theme and highlighted how it is different from nationalism. The novelist has graphically depicted the importance of religion and nationalism in two different perspectives. Religion is viewed in terms of spirituality whereas the importance of nationalism lies in the worldly point of view. This difference is shown through the choice made by the two major characters Nikhil and Sandip, where the former's main perspective in life is governed by moral and intangible things the latter is inclined towards the tangible things. Sandip believes that: "when reality has to meet the unreal, deception is its principal weapon; for its enemies always try to shame Reality by calling it gross, and so it needs must hide itself, or else put on some disguise" (Tagore 49). However, Sandip's choice of such a life-style guided by one's own passions is opposed by Nikhil. Contrarily, Nikhil is of the opinion that one should control one's own passion and should lead a pious life. According to him it is "a part of human nature to try and rise superior to itself" (Tagore 51) rather than living an immoral life.

This passage sums up the powerful message of *The Home and the World*. The above discussion surely explains and justifies the East-West encounter based on India's indigenous culture and postmodern culture of the West in the novel. It is the traditional value-system in

which the people of India rely upon does not suit the Western way of life as depicted in the novel. As a result of such contrasted value-systems there occurs tension between the East and the West. The various aspects of Eastern culture as reflected through a number of characters already mentioned above are irritating for the Westerners or those who imitate the Western culture whereas the Indians observe those with keen interests. Mulk Raj Anand has rightly said that: "He [Rabindranath Tagore] penetrated the delicate sensibility of an Indian woman by daring to evoke the vicarious impulses of Bimala in *The Home and the World*" (Anand 9). Thus Rabindranath Tagore is successful in his incessant effort in depicting Indian values in his work *The Home and the World* and its subsequent clash with the Western culture.

Works Cited

- Anand, Mulk Raj. "Rabindranath Tagore in Retrospect." *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*. Ed. Bhuddeb Chaudhuri, and K.G. Subramanyan. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988. 4-11. Print.
- Basu, Sriparna. "Rabindranath Tagore, Cultural Difference and the Indian Woman's 'Burden'." *On the Road to Baghdad, Or, Traveling Biculturalism: Theorizing a Bicultural Approach to Contemporary World Fiction*. Ed. Gonul Pultar. Washington, DC: New Academia Pub., 2005. 219-48. Print.
- Fowler, H.W., F.G. Fowler, and R.E. Allen, eds. "Nativism". *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, Eighth Edition ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. Print.
- Majumdar, Swapan. "The East-West Colloquy: Tagore's Understanding of the West." *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*. Ed. Bhuddeb Chaudhuri, and K.G. Subramanyan. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988. 294-306. Print.
- Subramanian, Lakshmi, and Rajat Kanta Ray. "Rabindranath Tagore and the Crisis of Personal Identity in Colonial India." *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*. Ed. Bhuddeb Chaudhuri, and K.G. Subramanyan. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988. 238-49. Print.
- Tagore, Rabndranath. *The Home and the World*. N.p.: Forgotten Books, 2008. Web. 25 May 2012. <www.forgottenbooks.org>.