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Dualistic Modernity and the Illegitimacy of Nationalism in Tagore's *The Home and the World*

Vibhuti Wadhawan

Assistant Professor,
University of Delhi.

Tagore's novel, *The Home and the World* (1916), at many levels, expounds how the author conceived modernity vis-à-vis society. Tagore's ideologies stemmed from nationalistic politics that erupted during the Indian renaissance and presented a forked picture of Indian modernity. During the heyday of Indian nationalism, Tagore was among the first to have understood that the values that described European modernity were not necessarily the same that described a modern South Asian, given the idea of separating religion from politics had a western origin. The indigenous tradition was caste based and community-oriented, riddled with bifurcation and disabilities, not to forget oppressive and tyrannical, that had made the infiltration of western modernity almost desirable. The flip side carried the grosser tragedies of imperialist political and economic exploitation obfuscated by the secularism and progress heralded by Western modernity. Nationalism proved to be an important component in understanding the paradox of Indian modernity since it was used to regenerate native Indian tradition and highlight its contradictions. In this view, how Tagore views nationalism? Does he see it as a kind of cultural reassertion as well as a crystallization of identity of syncretic traditions that bred a lack of tolerance of anything un-Indian. Or alternatively, nationalism is ushering in of western modernity that was exploitative and corrosive of the Indian cultural sensibilities?

In his essay *Our Modernity*, Partha Chatterjee asserts that India has inherited a modernity that is not intrinsic to its culture and gestures at the peculiarities of 'our modernity' that is different from that of the West. According to him, we cannot imitate uncritically the forms of western modernity and have to invent a different form of modernity depending upon our specific historical circumstances and social practices to break this "chimera of universal modernity... so that we might become the creators of our own modernity, set apart from the field of universal discourse where the discourse would be modern, and yet national" (Chatterjee,206).

One of the products of India's contact with Western modernity was nationalism, which was a borrowed concept to begin with, but which nevertheless made us aware of the illegitimacy of imperialism and subsequently made us resist subjugation by foreign power and demand independence. While we were the inheritors of Western modernity, it made us simultaneously define ourselves better as a society by compelling us to apply the standards of western inspired nationalism to inaugurate our own decolonization. This borrowed sense of nationalism helped in shaping and defining our aim of constructing our own distinct national identity. However, in the process of bringing our country and Western modernity together, "we risk losing our national cultural identity... when we should revive, retain and strengthen our own spiritual heritage, in which we are second to none"(17).At the same time accept the undercurrent of modernity as "an

unstoppable hand of destiny to sweep away the decadent Hindu society” so as to forge a national popular consciousness(209).

Chatterjee’s argument on nationalism finds resonance in Tagore’s essays on nationalism (1917), in which the latter anticipates the renaissance that modernity would bring in its wake, though he is equally cautious to point out its perils. The ideological sway that nationalism had over the would-be-independent country raised questions regarding the fanaticism that went into the formation of a nation state, though the very concept of a sovereign nationhood unmistakably carried the stamp of the west. Tagore claims that the spirit of nationalism comes with an insidious tendency to divide the “moral nature of man into convenient compartments” called ‘nation’ that undermines the higher ideals of humanity in its “organized selfishness” (Tagore,33). The very concept of nation, as a result, with its ‘paraphernalia of power and prosperity’, makes “the nation as the greatest evil for the nation”(85) .

What he implies is that nationalism is a menace that seeks to define the fractional groups of nationality, guided more by greed and pride than moral sympathy . Seeing a clear divide between the organized selfishness of nations and the higher ideals of humanity, he opines that West in its nationalism, has made itself a curse to the world through its self love and barbarity. Not oblivious to the fact that the cult of nationalism can serve as a unifying factor at one level to bring unity in diversity, he foresees the damage in the eventuality of its moral blindness that would translate into a cult of patriotism to sacrifice other countries as victims (Tagore,7).

Claiming that the third world countries like India never had a sense of nationalism but had derived it from the European arrogance to define themselves better, he believes that nationalism in India will degenerate into the politics of power and race, finally becoming an assertion of supremacy and privilege that will have self interest and utilitarianism at its core. This makes the very concept of nation, attempting to divide people on the basis of nationality or religion, detrimental to the spiritual nature of man, and in every form signifies ‘othering’ to produce a difference between the self and the other. In Tagore’s eyes, nationalism is different from being anti-colonial—the truer way of resisting imperialism that also beckons modernity.

Since India had inherited the concept of nationalism, one of the earliest projects of Indian modernity became determining the distinction between two types of nationalism in an attempt to make a distinction between the western and the non western form of nationalism. Though nationalism was a doctrine invented by Europeans at the beginning of the nineteenth century, “it was totally alien to the non European world...rather an importation from Europe clearly branded with the mark of its origin. For the non European world, nationalist thought does not constitute an autonomous discourse” (Chatterjee, *A Derivative Discourse*,8). Nationalism, as a theory, was intrinsically tarred by the European colonial enterprise before it was adopted by the Indian intelligentsia. The complexity between modernity and nationalism was defined by our nation’s history of struggle between the forces of reaction and those of progress.

Rabindranath Tagore’s novel *The Home and the World* is significant insofar as it presents dualistic ideologies of the modern nation in the context of the depiction of the *swadeshi* movement in Bengal by knitting the idea of ‘modernity’ with nationalism. Tagore’s novel projects the idea of dual modernities in the pre independence nationalist enterprise, telling of the

conflict between two trends. The novel examines the measure of modernity that acquired a historical significance in terms of its two different concept of 'nationalism' that emerged post the partition of Bengal.

As a theorist of nationalism, Tagore sees nationalism as an offshoot of modernity, a stance he chooses to clarify through *The Home and the World* that essays the ritualization of violence on humanity to an abstraction called nationalism. As the nation is put on a pedestal against the backdrop of the *swadeshi*, it is made to sacrifice righteousness and conscience to a fundamental 'othering' of nations mandated by nationalism. Fanaticism and aggression become the pitfalls of nationalism when it separates one nation from the other and refuses to see the underlying humanity, becoming an abused sentiment in turn. Nevertheless, nationalism from the very outset has been a harbinger of modernity that exhorted the masses to direct its impulse in overhauling our nation state's anachronistic structures.

The Home and the World is, in part, an allegorical novel in presenting Bimala as India caught between two different kinds of modernity. Nikhil being the humane and the liberal aspect of nationalism, with Sandip defining the militant and aggressive form of nationalism that sways the country with idealism. The two modernists, as change harbingers, present a fundamental opposition between the two contesting ideologies. As the two men negotiate the demands of the nationalist project through different means, Tagore emphasizes the difference between the two groups of modernist thinkers of his day, led by Raja Ram Mohun Roy and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Both Roy and Chatterjee aimed at nation's liberation from the clutches of England, but had their main point of difference in the means to accomplish the common end. The militant Hindu that Bankim imagined for *Anandamath* turned into a political reality with the extremists of the *swadeshi* movement. In contrast, Ram Mohun Roy believed more in the progress that happened under the British auspices. The only meeting ground between the two obverse camps of revolutionaries being their fervent desire for *swaraj*.

Such a contesting nature of national modernity is exemplified by Tagore through *The Home and the World*. Antagonism between the two main protagonists Nikhil and Sandip lies at the heart of the text, wherein the two protagonists are janus faced in ushering in the concept of the modernity through the divergent ideologies they adhere to. Both men are symbolic of the incomplete nature of the Indian renaissance that was grappling with an inherent split/fragmentation in modernity's failure to determine the direction of nation's change. If Sandip draws his energy from tradition and can be called backward looking and revivalist, Nikhil is progressive and forward looking in terms of the principles he upholds. The two manifest what Partha Chatterjee calls our early modern "history of struggle between the forces of progress and those of reaction" (Chatterjee, 2). According to Chatterjee, the early move towards modernity started out with the revivalist phase that was "marked by an excessive emphasis on religion, a championing of conservative values and sectarian exclusiveness...that led to an uncompromising and militant struggle against the British rule" (14). He also identifies the different phases of modernity, wherein the goal, besides achieving self rule, was also to preserve our national identity vis-a-vis the west. Chatterjee opines that while the west had achieved progress since it had placed reason at the heart of its Renaissance, it could not go far in the Indian context since its progressive phase received a backlash by religious revivalism that did not want to stake its national cultural identity by embracing western inspired 'reason' or ideologies. The project of modernity was problematized by the fact that 'spiritual conception of the nation' was used to evoke powerful sentiments in the

minds of the nationalists. The nation became the mother and was charged with a kind of religious jingoism in a bid to shape its distinct national character. Nation had become hostile to everything 'western' in the nationalistic pursuit that soon became more quixotic than practical.

To trace the difference between the revivalist and the progressive phases of modernity, the novel presents a dichotomous portrayal of Nikhil and Sandip. It is through the eyes of Nikhil that we see a positive assessment of the English education and the emancipation of women—a progressive move but opposite to the tradition. In the specific context of nineteenth century Bengal, Nikhil is modern in his non conformist liberalism that deviates from the traditional even though the modernist and the nationalist in him converge in fundamental ways. Nikhil's movement towards modernity is shown by his desire to free Bimala from the zenana, and in his 'modern' gift of English education. While he tries to revamp the traditional order through the use of reason, Sandip revives a tradition that is somewhat hostile to reason as in the traditional design the "rational attitudes were invariably compromised by scriptural or canonical authority or...by succumbing to the pressures for conformity or to enticements of material advancement"(Chatterjee,14)

Chatterjee contends that this emergent consciousness of nationalism in the Indian context had its limitations with its excessive emphasis on projecting a singular religious identity. This was because in an attempt to separate 'western' from the 'modern' and define a 'national character', the intelligentsia fell back upon the notion of religious difference. The idea of 'nation' drawing its nationalistic energies from a specific religion soon gained momentum, as the nation came to be "charged with a deeply religious semiotic"(18). Though at one level, the reformers tried to uproot the archaic beliefs and normative orthodoxies in an attempt to overhaul the traditional culture, the nationalists simultaneously sought to unite the masses into an uncompromising, militant struggle against the foreign rule. A clear dichotomy thus appeared between the religious and the secular values of our nation, "so that the modern and the national diverge(d) in fundamental ways"(12). Unlike the West, which saw politics as distinct from religion, theology in Indian modernity had an important role to play in the definition of nationalism. The dependence on religious interpretation of nationalism gave birth to ills like factionalism and fundamentalism that over time acquired a sinister meaning in stripping the nation of its moral legitimacy.

Albeit Sandip begins as a revivalist and charismatic nationalist, he gradually becomes self obsessed in his cause, losing sight of his 'dharma', with his nationalism dwindling into a kind of extreme political expediency. Contending that country's needs must be made into "a God," and must "set aside...conscience... by putting the country in its place", he turns the idea of nation into a visual image of idolatry called *Bharat Mata* that would appeal to the minds of the Hindus only and would have no appeal for the Muslims(HTW, 382). Sandip's version of nationalism illustrates the exclusivist and sectarian nature of the movement which excluded the non Hindus and the poor. As critic S. Aikant opines, in *The Home and the World*, *Bande Matarm* evokes in Sandip and his followers the battle cry of the *sanyasis* (Hindu ascetics) as depicted in *Anandmath* when the Hindu nationalists clashed with a Muslim nawab backed by British forces(Aikat,62). The *sanyasis* pledged themselves to the cause of demolishing mosques and constructing temples in their place. Seemingly, Sandip has been modeled after such *sanyasis* when he argues that the

nation must be made into a Goddess and that “true patriotism will never be roused in our countrymen unless they can visualize the motherland” (HTW,330).

Contrary to Sandip’s nationalism charged with religious jargon, Nikhil’s positivism has an ‘objective consciousness’ of the social reality when he becomes a passive revolutionary in educating Bimala to release her from the purdah or helps the poor dealing in foreign goods. Sandip’s nationalism given a secular spin becomes Nikhil’s progressivism. As a nationalist Sandip’s ends of transformation, at heart, becomes mere tradition inspired tokenism. In his nationalism, he degenerates into a kind of brutality towards foreign rule that believes in placing nation above humanity. In stark contrast Nikhil’s progressivism stays inspired by the philosophy of ‘reason’ . His is an understated nationalism that gives him no social consensus and increasingly isolates him, as a result of which he’s unable to unite masses or incite people-- something Sandip successfully does .However, Nikhil’s egalitarian version of modernity becomes Tagore’s own in sympathizing with the plebian. The opposition is all the more stark in Sandip not considering Muslims as a part of the *swadeshi* .This schism in the nationalist movement was what made Tagore retreat from the nationalist movement. Though at first a supporter of the boycott movement, Tagore immediately withdrew seeing the drastic consequences of factionalism and violent confrontationist stand like Sandip’s that the *swadeshi* was likely to take. What disappointed Tagore most was communalism that bred in the name of nationalism.

If Sandip’s version of nationalism makes him assert his Indian identity by identifying the nation with a Goddess, Nikhil’s patriotism isn’t above truth and conscience, when he says: “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 curse upon it” (HTW, 221).Sandip’s version is atavistic and divisive in his burning the cheap foreign goods to hurt the interests of the poor. Wary of Sandip’s divisive play to uphold his lofty ideals, Nikhil points out that “to tyrannize for the country is to tyrannize over the country”, stressing the fact that a country is nothing but its people ,and by harming the interests of the poor and Muslims in the name of nationalism, the *swadeshi* was not doing the country any good(HTW,162). In fact, by focusing on the end and not the means, nationalism was subverting reason and secularism-the very cornerstones of modernity.

The struggle between Sandip and Nikhil exemplifies the contradictions of our modern struggle which saw nationalism as a cultural phenomenon taking on a political form, something that prompted Tagore to make the two protagonists represent two contradictory faces of modernity. Both protagonists are presented as modernists but with a difference .Whereas for Nikhil, the impulse of sovereignty expresses itself in terms of an anti-colonial modernity, Sandip’s version of it is totalitarian in terms of the regimentation that he demands of people for his nationalistic cause. As a nascent modernist, Sandip asserts the autonomous identity of a national culture by forging a seamless national ideal that does not recognize heterogeneity within the masses. The nationalist politics and his need to defend everything traditional shows the limitations of nationalist ideology and its resistance to social change in its reversion to the earlier phase of conservatism with its belief in the sanctity of scriptures. His chauvinism and communal beliefs disregards rationality and looks similar to the western derived concept of nationalism that followed a conservative politics to vindicate its own organized violence and tyranny.

Consequently , the version of nationalism he espouses is of an extremist style that debuted in India in the form of a revivalist and oppressive regime, not to forget populist. This concept of nationalism was inspired from Western modernity but soon translated into a contesting school of thought when interpreted in the Indian context.

Ashish Nandy, in his essay *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*, brings out the fine distinction between nationalism and anti colonialism, writing that “Tagore rejected the idea of nationalism but practiced anti-imperialist politics all his life... at a time when nationalism, patriotism, and anti-imperialism were a single concept for most Indians” (Nandy ,80). Nandy believes that rather than preaching a non violent kind of nationalism like Gandhi, Tagore rejected the idea of nationalism altogether even before Gandhi could embark on his famous Satyagraha, when envisioning the perils of nationalism, Tagore chose to retreat from the political center stage. Instead of supporting nationalism in any form, Tagore decidedly replaced the very sentiment of nationalism with anti colonialism. Denouncing nationalism altogether he called it ‘anti colonialism’ , something that better defined the nationalistic aims through Nikhil who rejects the rabid nationalism that Tagore had himself seen precipitating into fundamentalism. This anti colonial stance was different from nationalism that made people ignore the moral law which Tagore saw as universal and not something within the bounds of narrow sphere called ‘nation’ . Calling nationalism “the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship”, Tagore’s reflections on jingoism and the virulent nationalism were inspired by his spiritual and humanistic concerns that defied the neat category of nation(Tagore,29). Though the complicity between colonial history and modernity helped Indians develop the concept of the ‘nation state’ through the sentiment of nationalism, at the same time, it made us its victims, since the spirit of Western nationalism at its core was self congratulatory that defied the spiritual nature of man.

Though nationalism acted as a force to unite people , Tagore’s objection to nationalism springs from its reliance on the very concept of nation as an ‘imagined community’, that was based on discrimination, hierarchy and prejudice, not to forget the ‘organized self interest of the people’, which was ‘least human and least spiritual’. Nationalism that constructed the concept of nation was rather a coercive one and demanded forced unity, disregarding any heterogeneity or dissimilarity within. Tagore thought that such bracketing of communities on the basis of a shared sense of ‘nationality’ was fundamentally a threat to humanity in its bred intolerance towards other nations than its own.

For essaying the swadeshi movement, Tagore drew from his own personal experience of retreating from a movement that was transformed by the Bengali elites for their vested interest. He saw nationalism a constant threat to humanity and made the protagonist Bimala conflictual in choosing between the two men and their respective visions for India. The two depict a contestation between the two versions of modernity India could adopt. He shows Bimala as obsessively drawn towards Sandip , who, with his flamboyance and rhetorical jingoism appeals to her own sense of patriotism while getting pitted against the modern liberal Nikhilesh. Tagore went on to create his own alter ego in Nikhilesh , a wealthy landlord in *Home and the World* who becomes a true harbinger of modernity in his humanity and anti colonialism. It is through Nikhil that Tagore presents a type of Indian modernity which is both anti colonial and reformist in nature. This also manifests the influence of Brahma Samaj which helped Tagore reconcile the ideology of a modern nation with internationalism to promote a world humanism which would

ultimately transcend all ethnic and religious distinctions. The visionary that he was, Tagore saw clearly that India (Bimala), though temporarily awed and impressed by Western military nationalism (Sandip), would ultimately adopt the non violent sentiment (Nikhil).

Furthermore, Tagore's critique of the nationalist movement by extension becomes that of modernity through a range of characters in *The Home and the World*, bringing to the fore the idea of a divided nation, caught between the twin pulls of tradition and modernity. Tagore points out the fallouts of staunch traditionalism in the form of Amulya— a misled youth placing his trust in the militancy of revolution or at another level, the widowed sister-in-law, condemned to a lonely life of a widow and becoming a casualty of obsolete tradition. The battle of ideologies is played out again with Panchu at the centre, as the exploited peasant becomes a scapegoat of traditional thought and modern nationalism. Caught in the crossfire between the two ideologies, Panchu becomes the 'nationalist subject' who raises pertinent questions on the nature of subaltern allegiance to the cause of nationalism. In believing in elaborate brahmanical customs and subscribing to caste values, Panchu simultaneously belongs and unbelongs to a cul-de-sac nation. He's forced to sell his little land to treat his ailing wife, then perform a penance imposed by Brahmins, and is finally lynched at the behest of an upper caste *swadeshi* zealot Harish Kundu for trading in boycotted foreign goods. Panchu's miseries heighten with nationalists burning his cheap foreign bales of cloth that makes him a scapegoat of modern nationalism. Oppressed by the landlords and *swadeshi* nationalists alike, Panchu is ambivalent towards the nationalistic cause and comes to personify a gap in the project of modernity. Through him, Tagore opposes the myopic nationalism that excluded the subaltern. The author, like modern liberal Nikhil stresses the fact that a country is nothing but its people, and by harming the interests of the poor peasants like Panchu, the *swadeshi* was not doing the country any good.

Moving from the public to the private sphere of modernity, Tagore also defines the complexity of Bimala: a traditional goddess of Hindu revivalism who also embodies the awakening possibilities of modern Indian women. Women question fitted in well with the claims of nationalism, specifically with the nation's attempt to shape its own version of modernity with respect to women's position. There is an awakening sense of autonomy in Bimala who comes out of her traditional role as a Hindu wife : "I saw a country, a woman like myself, standing expectant. She has been drawn forth from her home, by the sudden call of some unknown ...She's no mother...she has left home, forgotten domestic duties, she has nothing but unfathomable yearning which hurries her on"(HTW,93).

Personifying nation itself, Bimala stands on the brink of change and is both defined and impaired by the duality of roles she inherits. Nikhil's progressivism initiates Bimala's transformation— something that equips her with autonomy and freedom. But her emancipated self is at odds with the icon of Goddess that Sandip etches for his nationalistic project. In Sandip's jingoistic iconography, she is nation's mother and his mistress. Like Sandip she's indifferent to the fate of poor and Muslims, and urged by Nikhil, aspires too, to claim the possibilities held out to her. Education compels her to come out in the world and decide her own path. But Bimala's narrative becomes that of self deception and equivocal espousal of modern marriage in her transgression. Tanika Sarcar sees Nikhil's notion of modern companionate marriage strained by Bimala's adultery, and her aberration in keeping nation above morality when she says "I would be angry for my country's sake...I would smite and slay to avenge her

insults...call her mother, goddess, Durga—for whom I'd redden the earth with sacrificial offerings. I'm human, not divine" (Sarcar,39). The confusion regarding women's emancipation was also a byproduct of modernity that nationalism tried to tap in its representation of nation as mother goddess. Tagore opposed the shallow idea of turning the nation into goddess, with a visual appeal that he knew would appeal to Hindus alone. Visionary Tagore saw India (Bimala) fleetingly taken in by fanaticism (Sandip), before embracing larger humanistic values. Tagore recognized the inevitability of this revolution that exposed the holes in tradition, at the same time treated the concept of nationalism as parochial in its positivist rationality and utilitarianism.

It's noteworthy that in his version of nationalism, the Nobel laureate is neither a pseudo-colonialist nor a revivalist. *The Home and the World* came at a time when Tagore saw the aftermath of Bengal's partition that carried the seed of communalism. Skeptical of the idea of modernity from the very beginning, he believed that even with the dream of *swaraj* realized, the tyrannical power would just change hands and the things would remain the same. More often than not, nationalism bred erratic principles and parochialism that offered itself in the guise of modernity. It divided men and made them ignore the moral law which is universal but is adhered to only within the narrow sphere of 'nation'. Not only does his theorization of Indian modernity become anti-colonial, it replaces/uproots/destabilizes the very cultural ideology of nationalism that reinforced differences. As a panacea to the spilt/duality offered by modern nationalism, he instead espouses the idea of internationalism that he believed recognized heterogeneity. Internationalism not only mimicked India's own diversity but also served as a spiritual beacon for the whole world with its underlying humanity. In a letter to Foss Westcott, Tagore wrote, "Believe me, nothing would give me greater happiness than to see the people of the West and the East march in a common crusade against all that robs the human spirit of its significance" (Dutta and Robinson,197). The aim of internationalism meant a symbiosis of east and west that made for an egalitarian worldview by pooling in the best of world and culture. Its remedy is but the boundarylessness of internationalism that had in itself to blur the cultural contradictions to evolve a culture of cosmopolitan empathy.

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