

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# *The Criterion*

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

June 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-3

**5<sup>th</sup> Year of Open Access**

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

## **The Polemics of Identity and Crisis: Rabindranath Tagore's Ideas of Civilisation and Modernism**

**Payal Dan**

Research Scholar  
Department Of English  
Banaras Hindu University  
Varanasi

The logical and practical conclusions to colonialism as seen by Rabindranath Tagore can be treated as viable discourses for studying the Enlightenment process in India. Being an incorrigible pacifist he could never reconcile with the violent upsurges of the Swadeshi Movement and believed in alternatives like education and liberalism as solutions to the problems of colonialism and capitalism. His ideas of civilization encompass the creation of a non- state civil society where compartmentalization on the basis of caste, creed and colour get blurred. His crucial theorizing of the public and private 'spaces' in terms of gender and in terms of society at large posit his position on civil society oriented sociability. This paper will take up select writings of Tagore to understand the fine nuances of identity and crisis that go into the creation of society at large. This paper shall try to locate the lacunae in contemporary civilization and try to find alternative solutions to the 'problems' of the search of identity and the crisis faced thereof. An attempt shall be made to study Tagore's interpretation of Indian philosophy and his critical views regarding religious practices and social institutions.

1

British Imperialism in India deeply affected attitudes to politics, society, community, nation, and gender and intercommunity relations. This inevitably conditioned the thought process of the then common masses as well as the intelligentsia. Colonialism in India and also elsewhere made it impossible to understand the history of the country and what emerged was deconstructed notions largely conditioned and shaped by the imperialist's missions to 'civilize' the colonized and the broad agenda of the 'white man's burden'. Studying Rabindranath Tagore from this broad rubric shall lead one to understand how Imperialism and colonialism moulded and shaped his entire career as the polymath who ventured into the arenas of literature, art, and politics and into the daily lives of common masses. Tagore's political thoughts, apparently seeming dispassionate, can actually be studied vis-à-vis their dialogical relation with the socio- cultural conditions of India at the macrocosmic level and Bengal at the microcosmic level. He was the hybrid or the cosmopolitan man who took India to the rest of the world in her entire glory as well as agony. Ranajit Guha, the subaltern historian, regards him as "a most accomplished historian", and is of the view that "the Indian past has been thematized in many different ways in his narrative poems, plays and novels" and his essays "stand for an original vision distanced no less from the colonialist historiography propagated by the Raj and the ideologues of imperialism than from the narrowly sectarian Hindu view of the past that had been influential in nationalist thought since its formulation by Bankimchandra Chatterjee in the 1870s." (Guha 75, 76) Colonialism, with its baggage of vices, also ushered in the scientific thought and education in India that left a deep impact in the psyche of the youth of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century

which in turn became one of the tools for ousting the colonizers. In Bengal during the aforementioned period people started raising questions about beliefs and everyday issues and thus the period witnessed an intellectual awakening, deserving in its own right, to be called Renaissance in the European manner. This was indeed a revival of thoughts, a deep inquiry into existing belief systems, an endeavor to do away with the social vices and usher education as the tool for all round development. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, one of the first exponents of this revival, perceived that without the knowledge of science Indians would fail to participate in the social transition of the world. After him the other great thinkers and social reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Swami Vivekananda and so on worked in the directions of opening schools and colleges, making education accessible to women, eradicating the social vices like the sati *pratha* and making widow remarriage a reality amongst several other social and cultural reforms. Rabindranath Tagore, born in 1861, got to witness these changes while he was growing up. The societal changes of the times and the cultural milieu of his home at Jorasanko made him the man that the world knows him to be. However, Tagore never remained confined to any parameters and his horizons remained limitless as he shifted, moulded and created his thoughts with each passing day and with each passing event of his days. When Mahatma Gandhi ushered in the Swadeshi Movement Tagore too was highly inspired and contributed in his own ways through his poems and songs. Realizing the impracticalities of the movement he was quick enough to move away from it. His detachment obviously raised eyebrows but he was clear in his thoughts. In a self referential essay titled 'Rabindranath Rastranaitik Mat' (Tagore's Political Views) he wrote:

“...It should be known about me that no time has any fixed opinion on any subject of politics emerged out of my mind in a fully developed form- rather they have taken shape through various changes along with the experiences of my life. Of course there is a thread of unity in the sequences of those changes. But to retrieve it what should be considered is which parts of my writings are principal, which ones are subsidiary; which ones are ephemeral, and which ones have crossed the limits of particular times to keep flowing”. (Mukhopadhyay viii)

Tagore created a vast plethora of characters and situations in his literature that stood for his thoughts on liberalism and universalism. His characters spoke on his behalf and also echoed his confusions, disillusionments and dilemmas. They also set up for him the agendas that he intended to put forward through his literature. In the vastness of his creation it is an arduous task to fathom his thoughts through individual works. This can be done only when his works are taken in totality and a comprehensive study is done. Never the less I have selected two of his seminal works and will try to understand Tagore's ideas of the notion of identity and how this identity formation leads to the development of a society based on mutual trust and brotherhood. His ideas of identity formation also deal with his study of gendered spaces that is vital for the status of equality to be maintained in society.

## 2

The novel *The Home and the World* (1919) opens up enormous possibilities to understand nationalism on the one hand and family conjugality on the other. It also evokes study on familial ties and the notion of Hindu womanhood. Bimala is the tradition bound Hindu wife tied up in ancestral traditions. The novel is based on Bimala's transition from the tradition bound wife to

the modern companionate wife and the catastrophic consequences to the same. The 'home' is where Bimala has set up her 'world' with Nikhilesh, her husband. Being the modern man brought up on the western models of education Nikhilesh believes in companionate marriage based on mutual trust and friendship. He tries to educate her and make her learn the fine nuances of a modern lady by a European teacher. Bimala, being the tradition bound wife, gaining inspiration from her mother, accepts all this as a token of her submission and respect for her husband. The whole set up is disturbed the moment Sandeep enters the 'home' and brings close to Bimala the 'world' that lied outside her confinements. This is the point of collision in the novel as the Bengali *bhadrolok* is introduced to the world of Panchu and Mirjan, the subalterns. The conflicts rise and clash of thoughts over nationalist agendas bring the lover, husband and wife on crossroads from where there is no way to return back and the resulting conclusion is apocalyptic.

This novel is a sustained critique of devotional nationalism grounded in the politics of desire.

Sandip believes in the divine power to sustain nationalism, a belief corresponding to the sense of insufficiency about his own self and desires. He continuously tries to prove himself by wielding a 'masterful passion' over women and with his force and intensity he tries to master reality and make the nation in his own terms. Bimala inspires him and confirms his belief of being extraordinary and an indispensable part of the country's nationalist movement. She also confirms his possession of the power of manliness which they believe to be fundamentally important for nationalism. Bimala, therefore, becomes his object of desire from the object of inspiration and he seeks for her and craves for her presence by him. Sandip's self assurance collides with the world of the subalterns and thus the crisis emerges. Social differences are taken for granted by the self-absorptive nature of Sandip's nationalism which is nothing but social fantasy. On the personal front Bimala steals money from her 'home' on Sandip's influence and at the public level the riot degenerates the brand of nationality and unitary nation that Sandip worshipped. Nikhilesh, on the other hand, has his own ways to propose his notions on nationhood and love for the country. He tries to find alternative solutions for the peasant class for their degenerating economic means but they fall flat turning Nikhilesh into a butt of ridicule at home and elsewhere. Significantly, however, both men visualize the romantic participation of Bimala as the crucial element of nationalism. Having said that a point of departure might be that Sandip and Nikhilesh, although having similar ideals of nationality, differ in their outlooks; while Sandip's brand of nationalism is highly self-centered and motivated by personal desires, Nikhilesh's idea of the nation is based on unity and togetherness based on economic prosperity and cultural harmony.

Bimala, tied by her domestic duties in the beginning traverses to different possibilities with the movement of the storyline but she is never free from vulnerabilities. Her immense respect and reverence for her husband clash with her attraction towards the charisma of Sandip and the result is the shattering of conjugality and the household. This theme has been explored time and again in his works. Marriage an mutual compatibility were explored from multiple versions by Tagore in works like *Chokher Bali*, *Chaturanga*, *Nastoneer*, *Jogajog*, *Streer Patra* etc.. The notions of nation hood, Hindu familial ties and conjugality were studied and explored in these seminal works and what emerges is vivid pictures of the nineteenth century life both at microcosmic and the macrocosmic levels. The scandal created by Sandip in the home and the world brings the narrative to delve into yet another means of identity formation by the crisis of faith and mutual understanding in the familial set up. In the words of Supriya Chaudhuri:

“Bimala’s relationship with Sandip is based on a confusion of inner with outer, a confusion that is present in his corrupt version of a nationalist ideology. The model of Hindu womanhood with which she seeks to identify herself belongs to the inner realm of cultural practice; in projecting it, as a source of spiritual power, into the outer world of political struggle, she risks its corruption and distortion. In the very act of committing herself to the ideology of the nation, she admits other motives and interests, interests that will eventually transform her as they are bound to transform, in time, the whole of the ‘inner’ world... Even without the physical act of adultery, her marital relationship with Nikhilesh has progressed from innocence to experience. Bimala’s sexual and moral awakening is integral to her new sensibility, a sensibility which, at the end of the novel, is left open to the future.” (Datta 63, 64)

The novel offers the endeavor to acknowledge the nation with its faults, blemishes on one hand and her inherent glory on the other. Poverty and ignorance can be removed only with the light of education and universal ideas of morality. The nation should conform to the laws of morality and justice. The nation which humiliates Miss Gilbys and which burns cheap foreign cloth that the peasants buy and sell cannot claim to elevate itself to the notions of freedom or dignity. The ousting of foreign rule is required to respect and give value to freedom, morality and the dignity of a nation.

## 3

*Red Oleanders* written in 1924 and translated in 1925 is the culmination of Tagore as a creator of symbols that described menacing pictures of reality through intense aestheticizing. *Red Oleanders* can be considered to be a moving parable of contemporary civilization and of the limitless lust for power and the urge to control and dominate. Yakshapuri, the fictitious (in the words of Tagore ‘real’) locale of the action is an exploitative civilization devoid of the joys and the spirit of life. It has vast fields of gold mines and huge reserves of material power yet it dehumanizes its citizens to the extent that they are denied even their existence as they are not called by their names but are reduced to numbers. The tussle between state control and individual freedom gets to the fore on the arrival of Nandini the representative of independence and free spirit. With Nandini’s feminine élan and Ranjan’s boisterousness the long- exploited workers rise from the slumber of humiliation and deprivation and rise against the system to shatter the exploitative fabric of Yakshapuri. Nandini and Ranjan are forced to live in separate places as the custodians of Yakshapuri fear that their union can shatter the very basis of their rule and exploitation. The king of this land is veiled and hidden. He is governed by the acquisitive passion to amass wealth and exploit resources. He extorts strength from nature and refuses to attend to the dormant desires of his own mind which asks him to set free himself and comprehend life’s magic.

Voice: I understand some of it. I know that the difference is between Ranjan and myself. Only strength lies within me, magic lies within Ranjan.

Nandini: What do you call magic?

Voice: Shall I explain? In the earth's lower level are lumps and lumps of stone, iron, gold; therein lies the icon of strength. At the upper level grass grows, flowers blossom on a little bit of fresh turf- therein lies the game of magic. I bring diamonds, rubies, from the impenetrable; but I cannot wrest that bit of life's magic from the accessible.

Nandini: You have plenty, why do you still talk so much like a greedy man?

Voice: All that I have is a burden. Gold hoarded away still doesn't become the touchstone- however much I increase my power it hasn't arrived at youth. So I want to bind you by keeping guard over you; if I had youth like Ranjan's I could have left you free yet bound you. My time's been spent in knotting thus the ropes of your confinement. Ah, but all else may be captured only happiness can't. (Lal 142)

Ranjan flouts norms openly and with his boisterous energy and passionate zeal to bring about change in the society he enrages and infuriates the establishment. On Nandini's insistence the King comes out from his network of darkness and secrecy and reveals himself. On the other hand Sardar, the top official of Yakshapuri, in order to get rid of Ranjan infuriates him with the outrageous slander that Nandini has been made a slave girl by the King and thus forces him to dare the King. The resulting encounter of the King with Ranjan results in the latter's death. Shocked by the sight of Ranjan lying dead inside the room Nandini confronts the King and declares that she will bring victory to Ranjan and his death will awaken the spirits of the people of Yakshapuri who were, up till now, not conscious of their own selves. The King, the man in him now awakened, is distraught with remorse for killing Ranjan, the spirit of youth. Finding that his own system has betrayed him, he joins Nandini in her final fight to demolish the inhuman structure of Yakshapuri. The long exploited workers now seething with fury, and growing rebellious, break open the prison gate and follow Nandini in her struggle to death with soulless defenders of the monstrous prison house. The play is, therefore, the heightening of a contemporary crisis in a mythicized form. The ascendancy of evil and its final dislodgement forms the primary crux of the play where eternal morality is reached with the arrival of Nandini.

The theme of the play is liberation of man from the dehumanizing forces of oppression. It can be read as the angst of the colonized and their reaction against the over industrialized colonizers. As the scenes advance a canvas of symbolic depth is created wherein the actors and the audience/readers engage in dialogism that projects the picture of contemporary relevance and poetic appeal. In the words of Bishweshwar Chakraverty:

*Raktakarabi*, too, dramatizes the process of liberation from bondage. The pervasive irony of man enchained by the greed for ruthless possessiveness, finds here its appropriate dramatic technique. Man makes himself a prisoner in imprisoning others, deprives himself of what he denies to others, isolates himself from the world and forgets that joy is greater than gold and that there is no fullness in power but in love alone. The play's symbolic setting conjures up an archetypal vision of dehumanization with the aberrancy of contemporary industrial order where man has created forces leading to his own enslavement and banishment of the spirit of joy from life. The burden of the play is the

regeneration of man from the state of self- imprisonment, self deprivation and self- isolation contributing to the obscuration of his humanity. (315)

## 4

Being an incorrigible pacifist Tagore always denounced all kinds of violence and war and denounced terrorism even when a large number of young people were giving up their lives in their fight to free the nation from bondage and slavery. In the days when the nationalist discourses resulted in violent upsurges Tagore spoke about internationalism and universalism. He strongly adhered to the notion that the onset of industrialization in the west had disturbed the very basis of peaceful coexistence of nations and the whole world loomed in danger of wars and conflicts. He viewed education as the only holistic device that could do away with social vices and make complete human beings who would strive to make a better world. Tagore's brand of nationalism and his motivations behind nation building through the holistic mechanics of education and moral upbringing can be compared to the ethos of Yeats for his thoughts on Ireland. Both Tagore and Yeats were criticized in their homelands as being passive nationalists but it is now a known fact that they were cosmopolitans and Universalists whose brands of nationalism transgressed their individual nations and took the whole world in their purview. Tagore's secular thoughts can be well understood in his conception of a world university named Visva Bharati where students were encouraged to share rituals and cultures. In this sharing emerged individuals who could rise from the narrow domains of individualism and rise to become world citizens with mutual love, trust and respect. The students in Visva Bharati were encouraged to be creative, to sing, draw, paint, sculpt, dance, act, tell stories, write poetry, cherish open spaces and thereby explore their selves. He firmly believed that education could not be complete without knowing one's cultural roots. It can be surmised that modernist thought got a new definition with Tagore and even when Bengal Renaissance was at its zenith Tagore had brought about a Renaissance in his own ways. The crisis that human civilization has been facing, for Rabindranath, could be sorted out through transparency of thoughts and actions. When ideas flow freely and minds and hearts are open to give and to receive then only can the world reach the state of solitude. This was the chief contention of his essay "Crisis in Civilization" (1941) and is relevant to this day as the world echoes fears of a catastrophe with each passing day. As the world today looks for its Messiah to cure her blemishes Tagore's appeal to the Buddha made through his play *Natir Puja* (The Dancing Girl's Worship) in 1926 seems relevant as never before:

The world today is wild with the delirium of hatred,  
the conflicts are cruel and unceasing in anguish,  
crooked are its paths, tangled its bonds of greed.  
All creatures are crying for a new birth of thine,  
O thou of boundless life,  
save them, raise thine eternal voice of hope,  
let Love's lotus with its inexhaustible treasure of honey  
open its petals in thy light.  
O Serene, O Free,  
in thine immeasurable mercy and goodness  
wipe away all dark stains from the heart of this earth.  
(Kripalani 377, 378)

**Works Cited:**

- Chakraverty, Bishweshwar. *Tagore the Dramatist: A Critical Study*. Vol. 2. B. R. Publishing Corporation: Delhi, 2000. Print.
- Chaudhuri, Supriya. "A Sentimental Education: Love and Marriage in *The Home and the World*." *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World: A Critical Companion*. Ed. P.K. Dutta. Orient Longman Ltd: Delhi, 2003. 45- 65. Print.
- Kripalani, Krishna. *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*. UBS Publishers' Distributors Pvt. Ltd.: Visva Bharati, 2008. Print.
- Lal, Ananda. *Rabindranath Tagore: Three Plays*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2001. Print.
- Mukhopadhyay, Amartya. *Politics, Society and Colonialism: An Alternative Understanding of Tagore's Responses*. Cambridge University: New Delhi, 2010. Print.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Omnibus II*. Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd.: New Delhi, 2011. Print.