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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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TAGORE'S HOME AND THE WORLD: A STUDY IN THE CONTEXT OF NATIONALISTIC  
DICHOTOMIES

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ABSTRACT

It is undeniable that nationalism worked as a formidable ideological force against the pernicious effects of colonialism in the Indian subcontinent in the late nineteenth century and, most importantly, in the early phase of the twentieth century. On the contrary, it can never be gainsaid that nationalism, since it is basically a Western ideological formation, caused a serious damage to the traditional Indian culture by bifurcating the domains of culture into two spheres- the material and the spiritual. This material/spiritual dichotomy created further complications in the Indian society for which the nationalists had to modify and revise their projects of nationalism. As Partha Chatterjee writes in his *The Nation and its Fragments*: "The discourse of nationalism shows that the material/spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner"(Chatterjee: 120). The material world or the outer sphere was dominated by the Eurocentric conventions and consequently by the males; whereas the sanctity of the spiritual domain or the inner sphere was preserved essentially by the native cultural traditions, hence by the women. Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) novel *Home and the World* (1916), though set in the context of the *Swadeshi* Movement in India in the early decade of twentieth century, is a formidable critique of this material/spiritual dichotomy of the ideological formulation of nationalism.

**Key words:** Tagore, *The Home and the World*, Postcolonialism, nationalism, dichotomy.

In the chapter entitled as 'The Women's Question in Nationalism' of his celebrated work *The Nation and its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee writes:

...nationalism separated the domain of culture into two spheres—the material and the spiritual. The claims of Western civilization were the most powerful in the material sphere. Science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft—these had given the European countries the strength to subjugate the non-European people and to their dominance over the whole world. To overcome this domination, the colonized people had to learn those superior techniques of organizing material life and incorporate them within their own cultures...But this could not mean the imitation of the West in every aspect of life, for then the very distinction between the West and the West would vanish—the self-identity of national culture would itself be threatened. In fact, as Indian

nationalists in the late nineteenth century argued, not only was it undesirable to imitate the West in anything other than the material aspects of life, it was even unnecessary to do so, because in the spiritual domain, the East was superior to the West. What was necessary was to cultivate the material techniques of modern Western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture. (119-20)

Nationalism, therefore, developed into the form of a political and cultural discourse in the context of Indian subcontinent and posited a contrast with the Eurocentric version of colonialism. Since it was basically a Western ideological formation, Nationalism caused a serious damage to the traditional Indian culture by bifurcating the domains of culture into two spheres—the material and the spiritual. In course of time, this 'material/spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner' (120). Chatterjee argues that the material domain was external and ultimately unimportant. On the other hand, the spiritual, which lay within, was the true self; it was that which was genuinely essential. Consequently, it followed that 'as long as India took care to retain the spiritual distinctiveness of its culture, it could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt itself to the requirements of a modern material world without losing its true identity' (120).

This broad ideological formulation of the material/spiritual dichotomy was applied to the matter of concrete day-to-day life by separating the social space into *ghar* and *bāhir*, the home and the world. Chatterjee argues:

The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuits of the material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world—and woman is its representation. (120)

This material/spiritual dichotomy achieved a special significance in the nationalist mind. The European power with their superior material culture had challenged and subjugated the non-European peoples in the outside world. But the nationalists claimed that the European power had failed to colonize the inner, essential identity of the East, which lay in its spiritual distinctiveness. In this domain of spirituality the East was undominated, sovereign, and supreme. The world was, for the colonized people, a place of oppression and daily humiliation, where they were forced to face defeat before the powerful colonial force due to their material weakness. But the colonized people did not have any alternative, because the world was the place where they had to wage their battle against the colonizers for the national independence.

The colonized people must learn the modern sciences and art of warfare from the West so that they can face the challenges and finally overthrow the colonizers from the country. But in the entire phase of national struggle, the cardinal need was to protect the inner sanctity, the spiritual essence of the home. In the outside world, imitation of and adaptation to the Western norms was a vital necessity; at home, they were synonymous to the annihilation of one's very identity (121).

Taken as a whole, it can fairly be summed up that the unprecedented confrontation of the native colonized countries with the modern European colonial force compelled colonized countries to evolve out of themselves the survival strategies against the alien colonial forces. In the context of the Indian subcontinent, this survival strategy, developed by the nationalists, was to adopt the selective methods of the West to challenge and subjugate the West in the domain of the world as well as to protect and preserve the spiritual sanctity of the home that is the true identity of the East. This material/spiritual dichotomy took many versions within the national, cultural, social, familial and personal spaces in India and its people.

Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) novel *Home and the World* (1916), set at the backdrop of the turbulent phase of the Swadeshi Movement, provides a formidable critique of this material/spiritual dichotomy of the nationalistic ideology. The novel shows the terrible tragic impact of this material/spiritual dichotomy not only on national life but also on societal and personal life. The societal ambience that Tagore takes into consideration is that of Bengal but that ultimately turns out to be the symbol of pre-independent India.

The novel is unfolded through the first-person narratives of the three main characters—Bimala, Nikhilesh and Sandip. From the very beginning of the novel, Tagore takes much care to show how Bimala's orthodox Hindu beliefs is happily engrossed in her domestic life. She upholds and celebrates those values which are traditionally regarded as the marks of sacrosanct Hinduism; she remembers the sindoor on your forehead, the red-bordered sari you used to wear, and your eyes—calm, serene and deep. They touched my heart like the first rays of the sun. My life started out with that golden gift' (Tagore 669). By virtue of being a woman of conservative society Bimala holds chastity to be a highly-valued mark of genuine womanhood: '...I prayed to God with all my heart that, like my mother, I would be blessed with the gift of chastity' (669). She knows that the real purity lies in heart, not in physical countenance: 'My mother was dark-skinned; her glow came from inner goodness' (669). Even the family she was married into was very orthodox. It was a family where 'some rules were as old as the Mughals and some were even older set by Manu and Parashar' (670). Bimala with her orthodox mentality and rigid familial ambience, therefore becomes the embodiment of traditional home with its spiritual essence.

Bimala's orthodoxy came in conflict with Nikhilesh's liberalism at the most personal level, and at the same time, at the familial level when he introduces Miss Gilby as her tutor, as Ashis Nandy writes in his *Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*: "A liberal humanist, he (Nikhilesh) wants her to enter the modern world by learning the English language and English manners and he engages an English governess, Miss Gilby, to instruct her. Gradually, Bimala gains acquaintance with the outer world through Miss Gilby who virtually becomes a member of the household" (Nandy 10). Initially, Bimala came outside the inner chambers mainly due to the insistence of her husband, Nikhilesh. The logic behind Nikhilesh's insistence was that Bimala should comprehend everything by herself in the outside world, in the materialistic world. Nikhilesh said, as Bimala recapitulates: 'Our love will be true only if we really know each other in the midst of truth' (Tagore 675).

Bimala was thrown into the much bigger world when all of a sudden the age of Swadeshi came upon Bengal 'like a deluge' (677). Bimala could not simply resist herself against the tempestuous flow of Sandip's speech and his cunning manner of persuasion when one day Sandip arrived in the temple courtyard to attend a meeting to spread the Swadeshi message: "Every word of his speech, from beginning to end, seemed to carry the gust of storm...It was as if the divine chariot could no longer be reined in—it was like thunderbolt upon thunderbolt, lightning flash upon lightning flash" (681). Bimala was on the verge of losing her distinct personality "At that moment I was no longer the daughter-in-law of this aristocratic household: I was the sole representative of all the women in Bengal..." (681). 'Vande Mataram' was an overwhelming temptation for Bimala. She was so much swayed by the passion of the Swadeshi mantra that she went to the extent of stealing money from Nikhilesh to give to Sandip to show her faith in the holiness of the mantra.

Sandip's role in the novel is ambivalent. In one hand, Sandip behaves like a typical extremist Indian Swadeshi national leader who encourages the people to boycott the foreign goods for strengthening the production of native goods. Bimala became an avid advocate of this celebration of boycott 'The moment the air of the new age brushed past me, I told my husband to burn all the foreign clothes I owned' (679). Boycott of the foreign goods became a powerful mode of resistance against the West and a mark of true patriotism during the Swadeshi Movement in India. But Nikhilesh, Tagore's mouthpiece in the novel, opposed the act of boycott because of his liberal attitude: "Today all our needs are linked to those of the whole world. I believe that this connection is a sign of good fortune for every nation and there is no greatness in rebutting that" (679). Nikhilesh knows it very well that if the colonized people are to fight against the colonizers in the materialistic world they must accept the benefits of the West with the fullest advantage only to overthrow them at the end.

On the other hand, it can never be gainsaid that too much European dross had gone into the making of the character of Sandip. He was coarse, materialistic, avaricious, and a vulgar womanizer. He embodied those faculties which were supposed to be pernicious for the Indians in the context of material/spiritual dichotomy. Sandip embodied the power of physical coarseness; he boldly asserts "Yes I am coarse, because I am Truth, I am corporeal, I am instinct, I am hunger, shameless and heartless..." (699) Sandip advocated one version of Truth—the materialistic Truth—which manifests itself through physical grossness. He celebrates 'the destructive-dance of reality' because he believes that he is materialistic: "The naked reality has broken free of

the prison of sentimentality" (699). Greed was his conspicuous nature; and he is bold enough to confess it candidly "I can conceal many traits, this greed isn't one of them" (699). Like a European he was never tired of pursuing the wealth. Instigating Bimala to steal fifty-thousand rupees from Nikhilesh in the name of Swadeshi Movement he basks in the glory of imaginary comforts: "Just once, I want to have fifty-thousand rupees in my hands and blow it in two days, on my own comforts...I want to shed this poor man's disguise and look at the real me, the rich me, in the mirror just once" (745). Most importantly, he was a hypocritical womanizer who leads Bimala astray by his power of enticement: "Ever since I have seen you, my mantra has changed; no longer Vande Mataram, it's now Vande Priyam, Vande Mohanim...I worship you. My loyalty for you has made me ruthless. My devotion for you has lit the fires of hell within me" (783-4). Bimala falls an easy victim to Sandip's power of hypnosis. So Sandip came to tempt Bimala in the guise of a European materialistic power with all its paraphernalia.

Revival of the Hindu mythology and the classical Indian scriptural texts during the Swadeshi Movement to arouse the patriotic sentiment and national feelings among the Indians was a conscious strategy on the part of the national leaders. The novel is, therefore, scattered with the allusions to the Hindu mythological gods and goddesses like Shiva, the god of destruction; Durga, the goddess of benevolent power; Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth; Bharati, the goddess of speech; Jagaddhatri, the goddess of earth; Kali, the goddess of death and destruction. Not only the gods and goddesses from the Hindu mythology but the ancient Hindu scriptural text like the Gita and the epic like the *Mahabharata* were referred to rampantly to suggest the spiritual basis of the Indians.

What was/were the consequence/s of this material/spiritual dichotomy in the Indian context? What is Tagore's message at the end of the novel? Chatterjee suggested some tentative solutions to the material/spiritual dichotomy in the following words:

In fact, from the middle of the nineteenth century up to the present day, there have been many controversies about the precise application of the home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine dichotomies...The concrete problems arose out of the rapidly changing situation, both external and internal, in which the middle-class family found itself; the specific solutions were drawn from a variety of sources—a reconstructed "classical" tradition, modernized folk forms, the utilitarian logic of bureaucratic and industrial practices, the legal idea of equality in a liberal democratic state. The content of the resolution was neither predetermined nor unchanging, but its form had to be constituent with the system of dichotomies that shaped and contained the nationalist project. (126-7)

It is true that the unprecedented confrontation of the East with the West gave birth to many unusual hazards. To encounter those hazards home had to make many compromises not only in the material sphere but also in the internal sphere. But the crucial necessity was to retain the spiritual distinctiveness of the indigenous social life. The home was the chief site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and woman had to take the prime responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality. No matter what the changes in the material conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual virtues (126). It is obvious in the novel that Bimala's psyche becomes the site where the conflicting forces of materialism and spiritualism came in clash with each other. But she could not successfully withstand this conflict; she surrenders her essential spiritual virtues before the materialistic power losing both the home and the world. Ashis Nandy quite rightly remarks:

Her love for Sandip has, however, a tragic end; Bimala loses both the home and the world, for Sandip runs away once large-scale violence, instigated by his speeches, breaks out and he is shown to be merely a shallow and callous manipulator; and Nikhil dies trying to quell the violence born of Sandip's version of nationalism...It also becomes clear that the tragedy is not merely a personal one, for the social divide brought about by nationalism is more permanent than the political movement it spawns. Bimala's identification with the country becomes a literal one; the destruction of her home and her world foreshadows the destruction of the society. (Nandy 12)

Tagore's novel *Home and the World* is, therefore, a pungent critique of the postcolonial dichotomy between the material and the spiritual forces in the colonized nations.

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