

Re-reading Tagore's *The Home and the World*: A Study of Contesting Modernities

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to focus the model of contesting modernities dealing with conceptual problems rather than the importance of logic and science. *The Home and the World* (1916), written by Rabindranath Tagore, a fictional autobiographical novel can be read as the model of contesting modernities. In the research article, it is an attempt to explore the textual responses to contesting forms of modernity in abstract ideas about the issues of nation and gender in the context of Swadeshi Bengal in the early decades of twentieth century. After re-reading the text, it can be applied to the larger question of formation of nation and true nationalist and liberty of women. The novel grows out of the anti-partition Swadeshi movement, the issues of the home and the world, the tradition and the modern approach of life. The novel focuses the battle of ideas between western culture and revolution against the western culture in colonial period. Two protagonists of the novel such as Nikhilesh and Sandip in the novel represents two kinds of ideas in the light of the spirit of the Modern age as revealed in *Sabuj Patra*. From their ideas reveal two types of nationalists' project. Nationalism always can be viewed as a process of cultural invention. Nikhilesh is a logical man and supports for non-violence. He likes true mental freedom that can be achieved by the projects of nationalism full of humanism. At the other hand, Sandip prefers to aggressive political freedom and power after grabbing over other nations and national resources. Bimala, third protagonist, is ultimately disillusioned to the nationalist project of Sandip about the emancipation of gender. So Modernity, the recreated form of culture can be viewed with humanistic features such as love, co-operation, sympathy, sacrifice etc.

Keywords: Modernity, Nationalism, Freedom, Humanism, Disillusionment

Contesting modernities talk about the re-interpretation of tradition to show the cultural difference. Tradition and Modernity are subject to reinterpretation within nationalist movements, both are highly politicized and both are central to the processes by which cultural differences and identities are

constructed in the present. In the novel *The Home and the World* (1916), published in the *Sabuj Patra* there is neither any definition of modernity existing in the early twentieth-century Bengal nor any exploration of the issue of innovation. The paper examines the textual responses to contesting forms of modernity regarding the issues of nation and gender in the context of Swadeshi Bengal. Actually in one of the essays of *Sabuj Patra* Tagore answered regarding the disputes of modernity expressed in the novel *The Home and the World*. He says that the “spirit of the modern age had influenced the author....but the influence belongs to the purely artistic plane... (the writer) is concerned only with art, and if the reader chooses to invest him with some other concerns, it is really the reader’s own and the writer should not be saddled with its responsibility.” (Sengupta, Sasswati, 117)

Here Tagore never means to say the modernity in general sense. But what is modernity? Plainly speaking modernity is a subject in the humanities and social sciences. It refers to a historical period which is called Renaissance or the Age of Reason. Under the impact of science a new trend to change the old for the particular socio-cultural norms, attitudes and practices flourished in the 17th –century thought and 18th century ‘Enlightenment’. Some critics opine that modernity lasted till 1930 or 1945. Rabindranth Tagore illustrates the modernity viewpoint of two protagonists from the sense of art, not by science. The most significant thing that Tagore reveals in the novel is the battle of ideas. The battle is between the western ideas and the eastern ideas. The conflict of both ideas goes on in the mind of Tagore. So he develops the battle that he had fought with himself, between western culture and revolution against the western culture through the character portrayal of two protagonists.

After reading the novel we see that Nikhilesh and Sandip belong to common cultural class. It is bhadralok cultural class. Their education also significantly touches this shared background. They are discriminated for their social rank and financial status but their difference got ignored under the common identity of bhadralok. It is significant that they are the products of new education and social reforms. With knowledge they experience, they participate in a new and shared modernity. They are interested in the question of emancipation of woman and country’s freedom according to perception of contemporary bhadralok for nationalism and gender. So their differences and affinities can be read in terms of bhadralok identity within the active axis of modernity rather than morality and modernity premised on a common cultural class, as expressed by Purkayastha.

There is no denying the fact that bhadralok identity generally relies on internal discrimination of occupation, class origins, rank and nature of modernity. This is not alike but characterized by contradictions and competitions. In the society this gives rise to multiple- class character of the bhadralok due to the difference of ideology without direct fight or conflicts. Consensus is needed to produce common shared uniformity on the issues of religion, caste and rejection of manual labour. The bhadralok uniformity is needed to raise a common class reaction for the matters related to social and economic conflicts. In a general sense bhadralok means upper caste and Hindu. Therefore the bhadralok identity reveals only the aspirations of upper caste people. Religious identity is also a matter. According to Rafiuddin Ahmed, the historian, ‘the relative absence of Muslims from higher education, the consequences of the permanent Settlement on upper-class Muslim families, the question of identity and “backwardness”, hindered the growth of a similar section of bhadraloks within the Muslim community’. (Rafiuddin Ahmed)

So far as the theme of the novel, *The Home and the World* (1916) is concerned, the discourse of modernity revolves around two men, Nikhilesh and Sandip which Tagore's text depicts as the mapping of the 'contradiction and consensus' as used by Sharmila Purkayastha, between them specially on the issues of nation-making, nature of Swadeshi leaders and gender emancipation. The 'home' and the 'world' come on the surface as differently in a clash where two kinds of masculinities (reformist and revolutionary), and two notions of political freedom (self-development and boycott) are interpreted. Actually their contradictions can be read as differences within a shared understanding of modernity. For instance, their views on woman emancipation are beyond tradition on their ideas. For instance, Sandip appears before Bimala as a charismatic Swadeshi leader and convinces her by his magical spell of speech about the liberty of women. He wants to educate her on Western art and poetry. Actually he tries to attract Bimala sexually by his apparently glamorous attractive look and voice. At the other hand, Nikhilesh allows his wife to experience the world and he builds on his conjugality by teaching his wife the finer points of political economy. Nikhilesh desires his wife to dress in the latest fashions and take her out of purdah. This reveals his choice in the matters of femininity. Sandip encourages Bimala to discover herself likewise with the different notion of female subjectivity. They have expressed their views on nation which is remarkable. Nikhilesh believes in an anti-imperialist model of nation, whereas Sandip is concerned with internal fragmentation within the same model as mentioned by Sharmila Purkayastha. Actually both Nikhilesh and Sandip have expressed on nation, family, female subjectivity, sexuality and education in different ideological spaces within a common experience of modernity.

However both Nikhilesh and Sandip reveal their ideas about caste and religion, which can be viewed as common. In this respect, certain traditional attitudes are made intact in the journey to modernity. Sandip remains happy and glorious in his relationship with open worship of Hindu God and Goddess and his memory of Hindu past. But Nikhilesh disapproves Sandip's ideas about the model of Hindu glory because Nikhilesh believes in secular identity which is preoccupied in his own model of India. Here Sandip's model of India neither save nor change the conditions of Mirjan, the poor Muslim boatman who is harassed and whose livelihood is destroyed by Sandip and his followers. Moreover there was no any constructive programmer for the lowest caste people like Panchu of the world. According to Sumit Sarkar, the noted Historian talks about the 'class character of the Swadeshi movement wherein rich zamindars and educated but unemployed youth (naturally upper caste) joined hands, and the mass of the agrarian or urban poor were not sufficiently mobilized to participate in the struggle for freedom. Also, the failure to include either the rich muslim landlords or the poor peasants reveals the communal nature of the movement, and the riots of 1907 are themselves a product of this politics.' (Sumit Sarkar)

Apart from the issue of caste and religion, there is another area of contestation and consensus in the novel. This is about gender. Growing western education felt the need to spread female education. The conservative section of the society raises complete antagonism. In the stagnant society, Sati, child marriage, the incongruous age difference between bride and groom, the condition of widows, polygamy...etc are considered critical social issues. The question of equal right to education for men and women never arose in the nineteenth century. Towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the emerging belief is that women should not only acquire the required education but also become able companions. The newly enlightened women became far more

confident and aware, though initially their numbers, too, were few. For example, the principal character, Mrinal of *Stir Patra* (The Letter from a Wife), can be viewed as a product of twentieth century. In educating his wife, he participates in the wider contemporary ideas of female reforms and yet leads a secluded life within his state. The social progress was occurring very slowly. Nikhilesh represents this idea in the novel *Ghare Baire*. He wishes that Bimala should step out of the confined world of the antahpur. He says this because “I want that you should find me, and I find you, in the world outside. Our exchange in the world outside remains.” Nikhilesh’s argument for not confining his wife within the antahpur is that she should, “... Come out into the world for once and understand it for yourself. You were not meant to be confined to the chores of a deceiving notion of the home, any more than I am. Our love can be fulfilled only if our identities mature amidst truth.” (Tagore, Rabindra Upanyas Sangraha, 852).

The concept of modernity provides, no doubt, enough spaces to women. Both two protagonists show new ideas of womanhood. That is conjugal equality and sexual liberty. But so far as the theme of the text is concerned, there is also patriarchal dominance in society that inserts orthodox customs. These can be viewed as new modernities which create new inequalities and new confusions. Nikhilesh as the head of the household and emancipated husband brings welcome changes. It is seen that his authority is not underestimated as the male householder. So he usually bears financial supervision and decision because Bimala cannot take economical decision. So she has to steal money from her husband. Here female liberty is questioned within new ideas of womanhood. But Sandip assures Bimala of sexual emancipation that gives her a new identity as a woman. In some cases she is consulted by Sandip about political matters. Actually man like Sandip controls the new world and rules. Here Bimala has to agree with the attitude of Sandip behind him and speak the voice of “common sense”.

Apart from the issues of caste, religion and gender emancipation, the title of the novel reveals a major theme. It is the relationship of the home with the outside world. Nikhil is western oriented, modern and he wants his wife Bimala to be modified by western education. Bimala follows Hindu rituals and so she does not go outside her house. Her world is the blend of conflict of western ideas and traditional Indian life. But she imitates her husband Nikhil and so she tries to grip modern ideas and things that Nikhil provides her. With the advent of Sandip, turn of events occur in the life of Bimala. She is illusioned by the magical speech of Sandip about nationalism. Being motivated by the fire of Sandip’s speech, Bimala considers these things as a threat to her way of life. Bimala struggles for identity. The identity of overcoming of the conflict of old ideas makes her think that the modern ideas can bring true freedom of mind. She is a part of the country. But she comes across only her home which is the blend of culture. She is torn between two ideas. She cannot decide whether she should support her country or support her husband like a traditional Indian woman. She is forced to understand how her traditional Indian life can associate with a modern world. This theme is tied in with nationalism theme. So Tagore warns the readers in this matter that forceful nationalism can do more harm than good.

However, contesting modernities lay emphasis on the conflict of ideas. Nikhil and Sandip express different ideas for the growth of the nation. Nikhil actually exposes his point of view of growth of the nation through his wife Bimala. He explains that a woman is considered unattractive if her skin color is dark. Nikhil contradicts the popular idea of a patriotic nation, “use force? But for what? Can force prevail

against Truth?" (45) At other hand, Sandip talks about different idea about the growth of the nation, believing in power and force, "My country does not become mine simply because it is the country of my birth. It becomes mine on the day when I am able to win it by force." The contradicting ideas of Nikhil and Sandip form the story of the novel and create confusing ideas for Bimala. Since the beginning of the novel, he tried to show Bimala outside world and stir her emotion in the matter but ultimately failed. Sandip possesses some sort of magical spell of speech that attracts Bimala because of his passion and ferocity. Perhaps Nikhil lacks this.

Illusion plays an important factor in the novel. Sandip produces an atmosphere of illusion that creates negative effects on his followers and on the nation of Bengal. The illusory beliefs created by Sandip, sucks the people of Bengal into a sort of cult. He creates an illusion that talks about sovereignty, free of all other worlds, and an endless supply of wealth and self-enjoyment. This illusion in the end, produces baseless and a lie. Actually on the basis of fake ideas, the entire nation is ultimately fragmented and fall into chaos and civil war between people with different beliefs may emerge. Sandip motivates Bimala with illusory ideas, saying that she is the future, women are the future, and they are the chosen path to salvation. Bimala is completely illusioned. She considers herself as an active supporter of "Bande Mataram". I now fear nothing-neither myself, nor anybody else. I have passed through fire. What was inflammable has been burnt to ashes; what is left is deathless. I have dedicated myself to the feet of him, who has received all my sin into the depths of his own pain". One of the significant aspects of Sandip is that he has worn mask of care and passion, while he hides his own selfishness and desire for the world. Sandip realizes that Nikhil's view of the world is inferior to the real, raw world in which he lives as a radical leader. Moreover Sandip's understanding of the man-woman relationship is based on male aggression and female passivity.

Nikhilesh's journey from youth to maturity moves round a society which undergoes rapid changes and political upheavals. The society was not neither static nor stable. Actually decaying aristocracy is contrasted with the new world of enlightenment, learning, and reforms. There are new definitions of conjugal happiness of those women who have access to this world through men and marriage. Nikhilesh is imagined as a new hero of this world. His youth and yearnings create experiences and new structures of feelings. To him, respect and equality are two basic things for happiness. It is a feeling that the traditional Bimala is not ready to adjust. Nikhilesh intends Bimala to share his world completely. He suggests that they should go away to Calcutta after his grandmother dies. His new world is shaped by bedroom, the dressing table, cupboard. Books give him new experiences. Here in the new atmosphere, he has his self-reflexivity which creates in him a sense of consciousness and concern for female oppression. He sees this world needed new reforms. In this world, Nikhilesh can adorn his wife with the latest fashions, political economy and take her out of purdah, experiment with his eccentric ideas of Swadeshi, and also care for and support for his widowed sister-in-law, as mentioned by Sharmila Purkayastha.

In conclusion, it can be said that caste, religion and gender can be read as the matrix for bhadrakalok outlook and help in holding contradictions without threatening the entire experience of modernity. But differences in social rank and opportunities are real and equally important in understanding why the two men cannot share a common social and political future; their journeys are

different and they cannot quite agree on mutual sharing. Through Amulya's death, it is confirmed that the destructive nature of Swadeshi politics leads to the death of innocence and idealism. Amulya and Bimala, two disciples of Sandip, recognize him through his game. Tagore's presentation of a damaging form of politics and destructive men is convincing. Contesting modernities manifest two culturally different ideas.

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