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Navigating the Inner Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity in Rabindranath Tagore's 'Home and the World'

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ABSTRACT :

Colonisation has always left a deep impact on the countries from both sides, be it shaping the histories or carving futures. The colonists often resort to violating people's morality by forcing control, whereas the colonised in turn experience a trauma of inner conflict imposed by the colonial rule. Rabindranath Tagore, in his novel "Home and the World", attempts to highlight the very issue that the colonized India faced in light of extreme measures which resulted in a divide among their own people: Tradition and Modernity.

And while many scholars would advocate for either one, this paper aims to propagate the harmonious coexistence of both these values that can prevail parallel to each other in Indian society.

Keywords: Tradition and Modernity, Rabindranath Tagore, Home and the World

INTRODUCTION:

Rabindranath Tagore, born on 7th May, 1961, is a widely acclaimed Indian author and poet in the literature world. He is versatile in his approach towards art, be it painting, composing, poetry or even philosophy. Tagore comes from a well-known rich background of intellectuals, such as his father Debendranath Tagore, or his other siblings who were political activists, painters, or novelists. He has carved a name for himself in Indian literature as he has won the Nobel Prize for literature for his collection of poems, titled Gitanjali.

Tagore's novel, Ghair Baire or Home and the World is one of his famous Bengali works exploring issues of tradition and modernity in the 20th century. Home and the World written in 1916, is a story about three character's love triangle, Bimala, Nikhil and Sandip, at the backdrop of nationalism. He wrote this novel as a potential critique to the moral dilemma that the Indians faced during the Non-Cooperation Movement. During nationalism, two opposing ideas were formulated, one bought by the Britishers themselves regarding modernity and the other which resided within Indians, the love for their culture and religion. The stark contrast in ideas, led to various violent riots between people, resulting in a divide fulfilling what the Britishers wanted.

In the novel, Ghair Baire, Tagore propagates his ideas of nationalism through the character of Nikhil. He does not support the extremist ideas of Sandip who in the name of 'Bande Mataram' resorts to creating violent propaganda. Tagore's only concern was for people to come together and fight against a cause through cooperation instead of competition.

Thus, throughout the novel, 'Home and the World', one can see how during nationalism, the Indians were divided in their approach towards freedom into two ideas; Tradition and Modernity. The effect of which will result in the creation of deep rooted wounds towards the end of the novel.

Nationalism in India: A Long Struggle

According to Rabindranath Tagore, in his essay Nationalism in India, what India needed was "constructive work coming from within herself" (29). He wanted a nation where people fail and win through suffering to finally achieve moral power. Before the Britishers arrived in India, it was already flourishing in its different colors, inhabiting in itself people of different cultures and traditions. Many people believe that India would never have achieved what it has when it comes to development if it wasn't for the arrival of the East India Company. As said by Winston Churchill in his speech at the Constitutional Club in London in 1931, "India is a geographical term. It is no more a united nation than the equator."

The blatant dismissal of the history of India has been made on various accounts by European thinkers. One such is Hegel, a German philosopher who puts Western Civilization on a pedestal praising its development as a model for the eastern countries. He justifies colonization and the acts committed to achieve it as a necessary step towards the evolution of history. This idea comes from a preconceived notion of his that India has never had a history. And

so he presents, “The British, or rather the East India Company, are the masters of India because it is the fatal destiny of Asian empires to subject themselves to the Europeans.” (Hoffmeister, 1962)

These errors in understanding Indian history, puts India as an uncivilized country in the minds of its people itself, creating the sense of loss of identity and pride.

At one point, one can agree that India did benefit a lot from the English but was it necessary to use militant control to achieve that goal? India was divided into two nations, blamed for its backwardness, stolen of its rich traditions and then stripped bare of any identity. Perhaps what India did need at that time was to emerge as one of the strongest nations with a reliable identity through a civil transaction rather than being cornered and beaten to it.

Karl Marx one of the well known thinkers in his essay ‘The British Rule in India’, talks about ‘Hindustan’,

“England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.” (Marx)

Tagore in his essay, ‘Bharatbharsher Ithihas’ published in 1905, puts forward that the history of India has not always been known to be brutal and bloodstained. Even before the arrival of the colonizers, India was a country that had its own states and its own current of life which is often left off in history textbooks. When such an inferiority complex sets in, we do not hesitate to borrow the ways of living from what the foreigners have been trying to teach us as their ‘white man’s burden’. This is a term that was coined by Rudyard Kipling in his poem titled the same in 1899. This concept justifies the ordeals that the white man has to go through to civilize the eastern countries. But this ignorance towards the rich heritage of India is baseless, as India before the East India Company, inhabited a rich culture, the vast empires of Mughals who lived in squalor, had women dancing on their fingers, the most decadent food at their service and soldiers ready to die for their kings.

Because of all this history that has been told by an outside view, one can find it difficult to develop a sense of security within their own country and look for imitation in the West.

In such a scenario, Nationalism in India had to be developed from its very core which is when our eminent leaders gathered together to fight against an external force that was leaving the Nation hollow every second. It can roughly be said that nationalism in India, began from the Bengal Renaissance. This period, in the late 19th century and 20th century is a period of great social and intellectual reform. People realized the importance of their traditional values as well as the light of the western education, and then emerged a new body of literature that was bent on preserving their tradition as well as respectful towards the knowledge that English brought with themselves.

The idea was simple; it was a fight against the age old ideals of the Indian society. Rabindranath Tagore wanted India to develop its ideals from within, “it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity.” (27) So why was then his positive idea, perceived as a threat by many Indians?

Tradition Vs. Modernity

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, Tradition literally means “an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action or behavior”. In simpler words, tradition is the passing down of cultural practices from one generation to another. These traditions vary differently in every country. India has always been a traditionally rich country with various well known dance forms, diverse religions, festivals, cultural practices and so much more that has been passed down through generations either orally through stories or by written epics.

Modernity on the other hand is reflective of the ideas brought by the European society that are advocated by elite educated classes who do not agree with certain traditions in the Indian society like the rigid caste systems, certain practices tailored against women and so on. Modernity is associated with rapidly developing science and technology and its adaptation in the ever changing world. When it comes to modernity in India, it is very specific. Unlike modernization in various European countries which was largely on democracy, industrialization and capitalism, India had its own modernization because of its diverse group of traditions, castes and religions. Each social order has its own fight against the traditional systems that lowered them. For example, the Dalits and the tribals had their own struggle of achieving rights and better treatment in the India society, women in India had their fight against rigid systems like child marriages and sati etc.

It is common for tradition and modernity to contradict in developing countries, in fact the conflict arises in the first place when the country is on its way towards development. When it comes to India, the whole reason for holding on to tradition was to mainly preserve the ideals of Hindu customs that the colonials challenged. This creates a sense of loss of identity in the minds of the colonized. “The raj was intended to increase Indian participation in governance, but the powerlessness of Indians to determine their own future without the consent of the British led to an increasingly adamant national independence movement.” (Wolpert, 4)

Yogendra Singh, an Indian sociologist, in his book Modernization of Indian Tradition, defines traditions in the Indian society into three major groups- Hindu, Muslim and Tribal. When it comes to Hinduism, he mentions that four components that exists- hierarchy, holism, karma and transcendence. When modernity interacts with tradition in the Indian society, it threatens to dismantle these four rigid values in the social structure. With modernization, these values break down to equality, individualism, historicity, and this worldliness. For the Indian society, hierarchy is this system of control that is asserted through caste systems and a gender, breaking down of this to equality pierces a bullet to the ones in power. Holism brings itself ‘The whole is greater than the sum of its parts’ (Aristotle), which reflects the traditional view of an Indian joint families where the togetherness is cherished and individuality is looked down upon as selfish. The values of continuity believe that the same pattern of behavior and personality traits be continued as on did in their previous years and does not what any change. For transcendence, the act of something that takes us beyond life becomes a part of everyday modern life through modernity.

Thus, while tradition claims to maintain a country’s identity, modernism wanted to create changes of growth towards a better direction. This conflict of tradition and modernity was one of the core ideas that fueled the Swadeshi Movement in India.

The Swadeshi Movement was one of the most prominent movements in India’s history that drove her towards its independence. The movement advocated for self sufficiency and the boycott of foreign goods that had taken up the Indian markets and minds. The aim was to achieve economic independence as

a response to the harsh partition of Bengal taken up by Lord Curzon. The movement saw the rise of various freedom fighters who held strikes in their states, and as well as the rise of the famous slogan 'Vande Mataram'.

The movement was initiated in a peaceful manner by the Moderates, but took a violent turn when the Britishers started using violence to silence the voices. The youth in Bengal was mostly the frontiers of this movement, when repressed; the youth fueled by the passion of nationalism took extreme measures in hopes to put an end to British rule.

Nevertheless, the tension during the Swadeshi movement was an all time high and in one 1906 Calcutta session of Indian National Congress, Bal Gangadhar Tilak stated, "You will have observed the word 'boycott' attached to the word 'movement'. It means that it shall move, move from point to point, move from city to city, move from division to division, move from province to province till we realize the highest destiny of our people as a nation in the comity of nations. I mean Swaraj." He was a strong supporter of India's self-rule and one that followed the radicalism approach.

The Swadeshi movement was divided in its attitude, while Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi emphasized humanitarian grounds; freedom fighters like Sri Aurobindo encouraged armed resistance to protect the country. He justified political violence as a sanctioned holy act in the service of divine Shakti. He emphasized that some sacrifices in the name of the country were essential to liberate it from the cycle of colonial atrocities. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in his book 'Anandamath' writes, "Invoke the Mother Kali... the mother asks for sacrificial offerings. What does the mother want? A fowl or sheep or buffalo? No. She wants many white Asuras... The Feringhee empire draws to an end... Kali rises in the East" (Chapter 10). The goddess Kali, symbolizing shakti 'feminine power', was associated with the spiritual act of resistance.

On the other hand Rabindranath Tagore believed that the use of violence goes against the spirit of freedom. He writes a series of letters to Gandhi, showing his growing distaste towards the path that Non Cooperation movement was taking. "We, in India, shall have to show to the world, what is that truth, which not only makes disarmament possible but turns it into strength. That moral force is a higher power than brute force, will be proved by the people who are unarmed." (Part I)

The Swadeshi Movement portrayed in the novel 'Home and the World' is a reflection of the Indian history of struggle when it comes to traditional and modern ideals. Tagore presents a picture of the movement, where two characters representing the radical and moderate views on the movement lock horns resulting in a confused state of a third character, that can said to represent colonial India, a country that grappled with the effects of the clash and its internal conflict with traditional and modern views towards the movement.

Tradition vs. Modernity in 'The Home and the World'

"Home and the World", is a famous novel in Bengali Literature, one that depicts the working of a traditional Indian household which shifts its ideologies with the tides of the impending Swadeshi movement. The novel deals with issues of the traditional Indian thinking that resorts to extremist methods to not accept the upcoming modernist ideas while creating dangerous repercussions for its own people. Tagore in the novel raises his concern for the blind faith of people towards their nationality which he calls a "naked passion of self-love of Nations" (line 2), leads to violent strikes, blind ideologies and lemming mentality.

The three characters in the novel hold their own weight in propagating the ideas that existed in history. Nikhil, is the main protagonist that can be described as a faithful husband to his traditional wife Bimala. Nikhil is forward in his thinking and wants his wife to be learned about various issues existing in the country. Another character Sandip, is an extremist in his political ideology and frequently locks horns with Nikhil on his passive way of thinking. Sandip is extremely passionate about his country and goes on to even use his manly charm to woo Bimala into following his footsteps. Bimala is also referred to as Durga or even Shakti by Sandip, making her belief that it is her duty to guide the citizens towards the 'right' way to the Swadeshi movement.

The concept of 'Tradition and Modernity' can be viewed in the novel from a dual perspective, firstly from the characters point of view. Bimala in the novel is seen as a traditional woman who dresses traditionally, worships her husband, and does all the household chores. However, her husband Nikhil wishes that Bimala gets some education so that she can be aware of worldly affairs and have opinions of her own. Slowly she steps out of her 'zenana', inner home to the outer world with the help of Nikhil signifying her entrance to modernity. She says, "My husband was very eager to take me out of purdah. One day I said to him: What do I want with the outside world? The outside world may want you, he replies." (Tagore par.6)

This ambition that Nikhil has for Bimala coincides with the Swadeshi movement, resulting in Bimala tilting towards Sandip, a person with an extremist ideology in mind. Bimala in a true sense, can be called a Bhadramahila, a term which refers to the Bengali women who were from respectable households in the 19th and 20th century Bengal. She began with being a traditional woman but with Nikhil's intervention, she began to adopt more modern views of thinking in terms of fully embracing her individuality. Bimala goes on to dismiss some of her traditional ways of thinking, as she starts formulating an affair with Sandip, often ignoring her husband's feelings. She begins talking about modern topics, like sex with Sandip.

"It was my first entry into the outer world, and I felt that a new glory had been added to my life." (Tagore, par.34)

On the contrary, characters like Nikhil's sister-in-law, Bara Rani is an advocate of pure traditionalism, as she is often seen mocking Bimala, "In our days, we poor women were kept hidden behind the veil, but now the ladies of the house rule over all-over men and country alike!" (Tagore, par.173). She disliked Bimala's new position in the household as she did not spend time in the kitchen much, she claims that this new way of thinking of Bimala's would eventually lead to Nikhil's downfall. The marks of Bimala transforming into a modern woman were very evident as the change of women in a society marks the ideals of growth and progress towards modernity.

Germaine Greer in her famous book 'The Female Eunuch', highlights that "Women have very little idea of how much men hate them. And they have even less idea of how much women hate each other" (Greer, par.275). Women like the Bara Rani, that have internalized misogyny fail to recognize this as internal hatred because they have been conditioned to accept this as normal. Partly to compete for male validation, partly to project their failure to break free, women like Bara Rani mistakenly stunt their own gender's growth towards modernization.

The character of Sandip is one that embodies both the values of tradition and modernity. He acts as if he is a staunch supporter of Bimala stepping out of her household to fight for the country's cause at the same time his views are contradictory. He says, "A woman's beauty is the best offering to the cause of her country. She must stand as the goddess of sacrifice" (Tagore, par.105). This idea reflects the common traditional view that women are always the

one ready to sacrifice for her household rather than becoming the one with agency of their own. He views Bimala as a symbol, calling her a ‘Goddess’ and ‘Mother’ rather than an equal who when needed can equally fight for the freedom struggle.

The novel is written in a first person narrative, allowing the readers to be able to learn the inner monologues of each of the characters. Nikhil represents a learned citizen that wants his country’s freedom, but not at the cost of blind worship and false truth. Sandip on the other hand, believes that Nikhil is a coward and that through manipulating what is happening can one truly achieve success in liberating the country, “but the fruit of true success ripens only by cultivating the field of untruth, after tearing up the soil and pounding it into dust. Truth grows up by itself like weeds and thorns, and only worms can expect to get fruit from it!” (Tagore, par.89)

The second perspective of ‘Tradition vs. Modernity’ in the novel can be seen from the ideologies of Sandip and Nikhil towards the Swadeshi Movement. Sandip does not hesitate to get what he wants and is brutal towards his approach. He and his followers are described as “the flesh-eaters of the world; we have teeth and nails; we pursue and grab and tear” (Tagore, par.30). For Nikhil the passion for the country is present but only when it comes with control, “I accept the truth of passion, only when I recognize the truth of the restraint” (Tagore, par.44), whereas Sandip does not hold back from his intent, he says “There is no room for scruples in patriotism. If I can bring my country victory by deceit, by injustice, or by breaking my word, I shall not hesitate” (Tagore, par.103). If Nikhil’s belief is to achieve freedom for Bengal by not destroying the ones that fight for it, ‘its own men’, Sandip’s fight for freedom does not hesitate to sacrifice lives that do not matter in the longer run.

Nikhil in the novel, “Home and the World” is reflective of the ideas that Rabindranath Tagore himself carries regarding the excessive use of violence for the cause of nation. Nikhil says, “I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country” (Tagore, par.13), he shows his concern for the careless actions committed by Sandip which was putting the local people in distress regarding the boycott of foreign goods. Blind nationalism according to Rabindranath Tagore leads to moral corruption of the minds of young people pushing them to take the wrong steps. The crazy fanaticism towards the slogan ‘Bande Mataram’ (Hail Mother), a beautiful song by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya that stands for Patriotism is twisted by Sandip to lead the masses towards destructive nationalism in the novel

Bimala’s transition from a woman whose entire world revolved around her husband, to her country with the help of Sandip portrays the modernization of a traditional woman in the wrong direction. Sandip uses his manipulative tactics to lure Bimala calling her ‘Mother’, aligning her image with that of the nation, “You are the embodiment of Shakti, the power of the nation” (Tagore, par. 80). He pacifies her by telling her that the country needs her, fueling her passion for the political movement. He blatantly disregards Nikhil and pits his wife against him not simple for the political movement but also for his personal gain.

Bimala is easily convinced with the fiery passion that Sandip brings with himself and is disappointed with Nikhil’s lack of commitment towards the movement. This shift in her character marks her acceptance of modernity and drives her to commit acts that her previous self would never dream of. However, she soon realizes the path that she had been following on, one that was of modernity without morality. Characters like Sandip, lack moral values and so although his aim for ‘Swaraj’ is for a good cause, his downfall is a result of the lack of empathy towards people. Modernity advocates for advancement of ideas, but if not paired with ethics, it leads to destruction. Nikhil is a prime example of modernity towards a correct direction.

The inner conflict of tradition vs. modernity from the perspective of the character of Bimala resulted in her loss of identity. She chose a completely different path from what she had always known and fell slowly into despair as she learned its repercussions. “My house is on fire, and I have set the flame with my own hands” (Tagore, par.160). These words were said by Bimala herself when she realized the extreme consequences of her blind nationalism for selfish gains. Towards the end, she faces an extreme consequence of her actions, as both her husband and her beloved boy Amulya dies in the crossfire of a violent riot.

From the second perspective, the inner conflict of tradition vs. modernity resulted in the conflict between the people of Bengal in itself. The people betrayed by their own became divided and resolved to violence against each other. Many homes were destroyed and people like Nikhil who wanted to pacify the violence, got caught in its crossfire and lost his life.

A Peaceful Coexistence: Tradition and Modernity

Rabindranath Tagore in his letters aimed towards Mahatma Gandhi suggested a peaceful method of accepting the modern ideas that the colonizers brought with themselves while also staying grounded to our roots of traditionalism. He said:

“Our present struggle to alienate our heart and mind from those of the West is an attempt at spiritual suicide. If in the spirit of national vain-gloriousness we shout from our house-tops that the West has produced nothing that has an infinite value for man, then we but create a serious cause of doubt about the worth of any product of the Eastern mind. For it is the mind of Man in the East and West which is ever approaching Truth in her different aspects from different angles of vision; and if it can be true that the standpoint of the West has betrayed it into an utter misdirection, then we can never be sure of the standpoint of the East. Let us be rid of all false pride and rejoice at any lamp being lit at any corner of the world, knowing that it is a part of the common illumination of our house.” (Part III)

Tagore observes that India’s ability to evolve in terms of knowledge will be hindered if the country goes to extremes lengths to reject the western ideas. He calls on for an open-minded modernization, one that does not stay blind to the obvious wisdom that is coming its way.

However, Tradition and Modernity cannot simply be attributed to the East and West. Modernization does not mean westernization; rather it is the evolvement of a society from its deep rooted evil traditions to ones that are more accommodating towards its people. The practices of Sati Pratha and child marriage were evils in India, that with the influence of the West have been altered to benefit the women society. Women in India have been in a better situation than they were in the name of tradition in the 90s. In the novel, the modernization of Bimala to a woman where she has her own thoughts and voice is a constructive one as she is able to actively participate and learn from her wrongdoings in the movement. “Development must be seen as an expansion of freedoms, not just as Western-style economic growth.” Amartya Sen in his book *Development as Freedom* articulates that true development only occurs when the individuals are given freedom rather than simply adopting the western style of living.

Tradition does not have to be uprooted to replace it with new formulated practices. India’s culture of family tradition is one that is solely its specialty,

because it promotes a culture that focuses on togetherness rather than the concept of individuality that modernity speaks of. This is an instance of maintaining one's cultural identity rather than completely giving up to modernity. The novel 'Ghaire Baire' is a prime example of the consequences that a society can face when tradition and modernity collide rather than coexist. The complete refusal of foreign goods in the Indian market during the Non Cooperation movement led to violent measures taken up by Sandip to burn these goods, which were the only means of livelihood of some people in the village. "The weakling who hesitates and counts the cost is as much an enemy of the country as the foreigner himself" (Tagore, par.112)

The idea to reject modernization to maintain India's own identity in this scenario was correct, but the extreme radicalist approach towards preserving tradition was not. Thus, through the point of view of Nikhil, Rabindranath Tagore propagates his own views and calls for a more passive approach "Freedom won through hatred is not freedom. It is the chaining of the free spirit" (Tagore, par.96).

In conclusion, history in India saw modernity through the extreme imperialism and colonization by the west and thus strongly opposed it to preserve its own identity, leading to various repercussions. Traditions are not merely customs that can change overnight, they are these long existing values that have been followed for generations, and so a change in them can evoke a strong opposition. The novel 'Home and the world', which can be called a critique of tradition vs. modernity, the ending mirrors the result of wanting to preserve only traditionalism while blindly rejecting modernity.

The India we see today is a nation that has peacefully accepted the coexistence of tradition and modernity. Various traditions like the ones of caste system have evolved for the betterment of the society once again demonstrating the positive effects of accepting modernization. As Winston Churchill said in his speech to the Royal Academy, London in 1953, "Without tradition, art is a flock of sheep without a shepherd. Without innovation, it is a corpse."

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