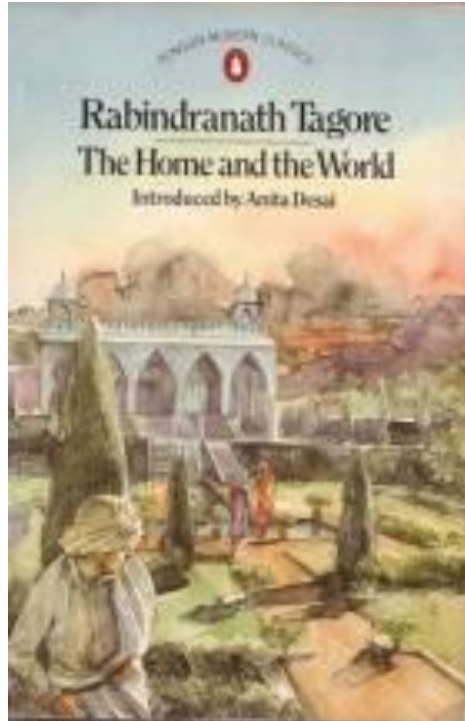


Nationalism and India - A Recurring Theme in the Works of Tagore

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Courtesy: <http://www.ebooksread.com/authors-eng/rabindranath-tagore/the-home-and-the-world-01d.shtml>

Abstract

Nation and Nationalism are concepts drawing in admittedly both negative and positive literary reflections. The idea of nation has the observable outcome that is supplemented strongly with the nation's people. It could be, collectively, or individually grasped as one's love for the country. Nationalism can also be acknowledged with patriotism. Both signify the love for one's nation. Nationalism is denoted in terms of Individualistic, collective, political or cultural congeniality. Tagore, the renowned Indian writer applying his reflection particularly in the Indian context acknowledges the destructive effects around the cognitive content of nation and nationalism. The association of culture, religion, gender discrimination and other social set up like caste, with nationalism and its deleterious effects on individual and society are some philosophical and realistic themes presented in some of his writings. Tagore's steadfast view on freedom indulges in culture within the strata of nation at the same time draws out his disenchantment for violence. He preached and practiced humanity drawing upon his travel exposure and rich education compounded in the rich fabric of Indian culture.

Keywords: nation, nationalism, Tagore, humanity, culture

Introduction

Diverse cultures, religions and languages that comprised the Indian subcontinent is in direct contrast to the European model of nationalism, which acknowledged the existence of one religion, one language or one ethnicity. It is evident that individuals relate themselves with the piece of land that they live and revere the same tangible proposition by putting it on the high pedestal. This sense of identity ushered in beginning of the nineteenth century vitalized the Indian writers of literature to imagine cultural state through prevalent contemporary nationalist fervor in their fictional and poetic works. In the writings of Tagore an attempt to connect nation, nationalism, culture and humanity is reverberated. By connecting the different ideas like culture, religion and nation, Tagore displays the intricacies existing among social group that has resulted in the man-made institutions like religion, caste, nation and culture. Within the complexity of the social pattern attempts to uphold individual identity and freedom is depicted in the works of Tagore.

Understanding Culture

Defining culture is a major process that ensues from within the society. An inevitable part of human life since the conception the word culture it has been allied with different kinds of growing things and mostly associated with nurturing non-human living entities. Gradually with the evolution of human civilization in different parts of world, the term came to be understood as concomitant of human life, where different races, communities, cultures created a niche to identify themselves sometimes by clubbing or by condescending attitude towards each other. Culture has been used to define the element of identity. This process of shaping different recognition generated several hostile and disagreeable actions, ideas, thoughts and attitudes in society. Discussion on cultural forms, a wealth of material from a variety of sources and societies explores the ways in which cultural forms of knowledge and expression shape and are shaped by human practices and experiences. Throughout the world we have history recording innumerable pages of treacherous contents, all striving to seek supremacy of some cultural content. It is evident that individuals relate themselves with the piece of land that they live and revere the same tangible proposition by putting it on the high pedestal. Europe has been the best example of such attitude. Nazi's attack on Jews, Whites ill- treatment over the Black, West's superior attitude over east and also much religious sectarianism across the world are the sweltering samples of how culture has held a predominant sway in way of commoner's life. Explore different models for understanding culture can be initiated through literary writings from across the world. An immense realm of prodigious writers and a significant number of works in English literary writings are forthcoming from India. The opulent cultural past of India has been commemorated by many versatile writers and in their exemplary writings.

Tagore and Nationalism



Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

Courtesy: https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1913/tagore-bio.html

This paper is focused primarily upon Tagore usage of style and language, which throws light to contemplate upon people in the Indian society and their rendition of culture and element of nationalism of the period of time. Subjects and themes in his writings are fused in the real life, hence mirror the Indian society succinctly. Most of the works dealt the local realistic issues that reflect the general vulnerability of his times rife in the larger context of the country.

Indian nationalism manifested the search for identity, the admiration of the past, the cultural and reformative zeal, the nationalistic passion and the political view of the struggle for freedom. Nationalism is one of those key issues that Tagore has aptly portrayed in his writing indulging in culture within the strata of national context.

The characters in the writings are strong enough to manifest constrains and imperfections of society. The writings throw light on the usual developments and customary musing of the society. Subjects and themes are fused in real life, through Nationalism which is one of the key issues that is aptly portrayed in his writings.

The Home and The World (Ghare Bhaire)

Tagore writings illustrate the realistic portions of ordinary life meticulously and exhaustively. His *The Home and The World (Ghare Bhaire)* is an exemplary work that showcases the transformation of a woman, Bimala who was content to confine herself to a family to get along as a propagator of patriotism. This characterization is a wonderful illustration of the element on nationalism through her portrayal in the novel. In his other work, *Gora*, believed to be an influential novel on nationalism, presents the female characters as a mature and poised person. Even if Sucharita and Lolita, the major women characters of the novel, are socialized in the same set up where *Gora* was, they become the synonyms for maturity drawing in the high opinion on nationalism and showing extraordinary thoughts within the established social institutions like nationalism.

Through his writings, Tagore fiercely criticizes the practices that derogate people with a tag of nationalism. His characters are depicted compactly and come across deftly to manifest the constraints and imperfections within the context of its set up. His works majorly explores the sense of humanity and empowers the ostracized sections and their rights in family and society.

What Should Nationalism Do?

Tagore opined that nationalism should fetch good to people. It is always possible when patriotism drives along with the national economy and spreading humanity for fellow person in society. Tagore strongly held an opinion that India's half of the social problems, could it be sectarianism, violence, hatred, religious issues, is resulted from lack of education. The impact of hegemony of nationalism and nationalistic ideology was widespread and overpowering in contemporary period when Tagore evolved as a writer. The established practice of nationalism affected Tagore intensely in span of time. The prevailing tendency compelled him to pen down his thoughts and spread out the message of humanity over any other man made social-political institutions. The mercurial nature of Tagore visiting the several places and meeting people shaped his outlook of nationalism. Exploring to many cultures during his visits made him a fierce critic of nationalism and jingoism that polarize people and keep them in a restricted shell.

Personal to Political, Political to Personal

Tagore changed the trends in selecting subjects ranging from personal to political in his compositions. These changed patterns are frequently evident in his novels, stories, songs, dance-dramas, and essays. Tagore, known for his songs, had written eight novels and four novella and many essays. His writings are reflective and forceful. Treatment of literature to empower the marginalized sections of the society is an evident characteristic of his writings. Tagore traveled numerous places across the world and his thoughts are fascinated by the world he explored. His works majorly advocate the sense of humanity and explores and empowers the ostracized sections and their rights in family and society. Being brought up in an affluent educated family, Tagore was socialized with the elite lifestyle. His early education and ambiances fundamentally stimulated him. Tagore's less priority to the formal classroom education, unfastened him the new horizon. His education was highly accomplished by traveling, acquaintances, and private tutors. His exposures to the different cultures, religions and classes had been immense. His recurrent visit to the different places, inside or outside India, broadened his views and made him a world citizen. He preached and practiced humanity. Though he associated himself with different cultures, it did not cease him from loving and embracing 'others' ideas and ideologies. Amartya Sen, emphasizing acceptance of Tagore by people of other region and religion, writes

“Muslim citizens of Bangladesh (had) a deep sense of identity with Tagore and his ideas. Nor from choosing one of Tagore's songs ... Tagore's own description of his Bengali family as the product of "a confluence of three cultures: Hindu, Mohammedan, and British". (Tagore and His India 2001.)

Pacifism

Tagore, who promulgated compassion, held the outlook in inconsistency of nationalism. His traveling to the different places including UK, the US, Iraq and Iran not just brought the vicissitudes in his beliefs, it also brought him to the contacts of Romain Roland and other pacifists. In an interview with Einstein, Tagore relates human emotions and science. He while relating the human tendency of dominating others and the same phenomenon in science, he states

‘Our passions and desires are unruly...And is there a principle in the physical world which dominates them and puts them into an orderly organization?’ (Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, Appendix II 222-225)

Binding Cultures

Tagore heralded the new thinking in literature of binding cultures, communities, celebrating ideas and gulping countries and communities. Though he denounced nationalism, he believed in the strength of the country. Just like any other common citizen of a country, he too coveted the progress and prosperity of a country. He, while on a visit to Iran in 1932, wrote

“... Asia will solve its own historical problems...but the lamp they will each carry on their path to progress will [become] converge to illuminate the common ray of knowledge.” (Tagore, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore 1932*)

It’s baffling in the kind of world where people are reserved by different illusions like region, region, caste, creed, race and communities. Amidst this Tagore was accepted by people with different practices. Deep understanding of Sanskrit and Persian helped to strengthen the root of his philosophy. This also helped to fuse the different ideas of binary opposition and learn and propagate the message of humanity.

Nationalism: Gandhi vs Tagore

When it comes to Nationalism, two renowned personalities Mahatma Gandhi and Tagore whose ideas and ideologies were compared and contrasted profoundly in India. It was Tagore who popularized the title ‘Mahatma’ that describes Gandhi, still both of them acutely critical of many things. In one of the efforts to do so, Amartya Sen throws light upon the major belief of Tagore that can also be reflected as one of the differences that Tagore had with Gandhi pertaining to a few issues. Tagore had broader outlook of life. Rather being a person of constrained attitude, he believed in life of reasoning. Amartya Sen claiming the same writes,

“Tagore greatly admired Gandhi but he had many disagreements ...including nationalism, the role of rationality and of science, and the nature of economic and social development. These differences ... with Tagore pressing for more room for reasoning, and for a less traditionalist view” (*Tagore and His India 2001*).

Tagore was disenchanted about the developments in India during the Independence movement. He resented the political inefficiency to eradicate the problems of poverty and hunger in India. It exacerbated when the social conditions were fueled by different religious matters. This was perceptible during the Partition of India where hundreds of people belonged to the two major communities Hindu and Muslim being harassed and killed. In a letter he wrote to Leonard Elmhirst in 1939, Tagore noticed the communal and sectarian violence that builds the wall between people. Tagore writes in the letter,

“It does not need a defeatist to feel deeply anxious about the future of millions who...are being simultaneously subjected...the seething discontents of communalism.” (Tagore, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore 1932*, p 515)

On Religion

Tagore's beliefs on religion are enthralling and mystique. His thoughts were not fanatical, but he believed in god and had striking contemplations about birth and death. The essence of religiosity can be abundantly seen in his writings. *Gitanjali* could be an epitome of his religious beliefs where he fuses direct connections with god and freedom to attain it with pure love and joyousness. Exposure to varied sets of practices and religion could be a swaying factor that not just moulded his thoughts, but also facilitated in his writings. His beliefs are simple just like his writings where there was focus on charity, comradeship and human love,

“Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship ...?! He is there where the tiller is tilling ...He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust”. (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 2013)

Being one of the highly invited recourse persons in the world, there had been many instances where Tagore not just disheartened the audience but many of them were resentful. Due to his straightforwardness and plain explanation of the ideas and things around common lifestyle, many were dismayed. Amartya Sen writes, “Some of the ideas he tried to present were directly political...People came to his public lectures ..., expecting ruminations on grand, transcendental themes; when they heard instead his views on the way public leaders should behave, there was some resentment...” (*Tagore and His India* 2001).

Freedom

Tagore had firm belief in freedom. His thoughts and his ideas wherewith were based on proper reasoning. *Gitanjali* is the best known work for demonstrating Tagore's idea on how freedom brings light to life and empowers life, he also urges nation to be heaven for freedom. His reserved views on patriotism and cultures also stemmed out from the same belief. Tagore's propagation of same view is clearly expressed in *Gitanjali*'s verse,

“Where the mind is without fear
and the head is held high....;
.....Into that heaven of freedom,
my Father, let my country awake.”(Tagore, *Gitanjali* 2013)

Due to his steadfast view on freedom, Tagore disallowed all types of violence that would mortify civilization. He resented any of the fanatic view or irrational thinking that could deliberately bring mutilation to fellow citizen. Nationalism too was not an exception. His stances against nationalism or sectarian violence in the name of religion were crystal clear. This could be possibly resulted from association of country's past. According to Tagore blind association of any country with its past is meaningless and treacherous. Handing over power to a person could it be higher caste person or Brits, could welcome bad consequences. Isaiah Berlin writes,

“but against cosmopolitanism English stood on their own feet, and so must Indians. ...he denounced the danger of 'leaving everything to the unalterable will of the Master,' be he brahmin or Englishman.” (Berlin 265)

A Universal Citizen

Many a time, it's proven that Tagore was a universal citizen. His countrymen rather live in a constrained wall of narrow-mindedness, he desired them to explore the different ways of life. Familiarization of different cultures, according to Tagore, not just benefits people to bridge a gap but also admit varied cultures and celebrate it. In Tagore's letter to his son-in-law Nagendranath Gangulee, who went to the U.S for further studies in 1907, he stresses the blending cultures and tradition,

“...you must know America too..., one begins to lose one's identity and falls into the trap of becoming an Americanised person contemptuous of everything Indian” (Tagore, Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore 1932)

In spite of the fact that Tagore was against viciousness in the name of nationalism and sectarian violence, he always loved his country. In an interview with Einstein he hoped that country like India needs its own time and course for attaining growth, thus stood by the opulence of the nation. The incident of Amritsar in April 13, 1919 where about 379 people were brutally massacred by British, Tagore openly writes a letter to C.F. Andrews to express his resentment. He even relieved the knighthood to protest against 1919 incident. (Tagore, Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore 1932)

Tagore's Patriotism and Nationalism

Tagore had dissimilar beliefs on nationalism compared to Gandhi. Gandhi propagated Swarajya, thus influencing people to be part of Indian freedom movement. The rejection of the West was the core of Gandhi's ideology, whereas Tagore had the different stance. Tagore though was against British administration, he kept a safe distance from the idea of rejection of the West. This, he believed might build a wall of denunciation and abhorrence. Focusing on Indigenous could narrow down the ideas and the people in their rationale. He was afraid that rebuff of the West or grandeur of one's own past could result in detestation towards other religions like Christianity, Parsi, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism. In 1908 in a letter replying to Abala Bose, the wife of a great Indian scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose Tagore writes,

“Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. ...and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live.”(Tagore, Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore 1932)

Tagore stood by the patriotism that becomes ladder to the subjugated and he considers patriotism should enable the marginalized in society to progress along with the nation. Whenever Tagore pondered over such issues, he admired the great effort of Japan, a country once admired for its true spirit for its land which decreed people of Japan to grow. The outlook of Japanese also sculpted the nation as the strongest economy. But the same admiration vanished when Tagore witnessed Japanese spirit turning into ominous for its citizens as well for the rest of the world. Japan, a country once Tagore considered as an epitome for true patriotism, became the thing of rejection due to its blind sentiments.

In a reply to a letter written to Japan domiciled Indian revolutionary, Rash Behari Bose, Tagore writes,

“...that Japan's new strength would be consecrated in safeguarding the culture of the East against alien interests. But Japan has ... has now become itself a worse menace to the

defenseless peoples of the East.” (Tagore, Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore 1932)

Tagore opined that nationalism should fetch good to people. It is always possible when patriotism drives along with the national economy and spreading humanity for fellow persons in society. But Japan’s nationalism was questioned by Tagore when it demonstrated the vigorous role in the wars with China and its participation in World Wars. Tagore intensely believed the intolerance for others has instigated violence in Japan. On the other hand, he admired Russia for its growth and development.

It is the rapid growth of education that Tagore believed is the true sign of a country’s growth. Though he opposed the terror against freedom in Russia, that the spread of education eventually led to freedom of mind fascinated him. Tagore strongly held an opinion that India’s half of the social problems, could be sectarianism, violence, hatred, religious issues, which resulted from lack of education. Education results in freedom of mind, a strong idea that Tagore had been propagating in his works. Santiniketan, a school that Tagore started, led an example on this. Having being different from the traditional school set up, Santiniketan was a fresh breeze of the time. Tagore, breaking the traditional education system, introduced a complete new setup creating new waves in the field of education. Different topics that uncover a pupil to the world were taught. It included the cultures, practices of other nations like Russia, China, Japan and other Western ideas, which could opened anew a window to the other world and life, thus spreading love.

As it has already been noted the proliferation of Tagore’s freedom of Mind through his deeds and words, it is evident that Tagore allied the same freedom with education in India. The narrow constrained thoughts due to the lack of education might lead to sectarian and other form of intolerance in society. Tagore even was disappointed to see a large number of people especially women in India failed to attain education. The laxity of British Raj, and societal obligations in the name of tradition destined women to domestic purposes. This also had led to the cultural separatism in India. It was witnessed that fundamentalists are not just seen only in India, but in many countries across the world. He believed India as a nest for different cultures and religions. It is also true when the number of Muslims is considered. India is the second or third largest Muslim populated nation. It can also be seen as a sign of celebrating diversity. Tagore in response to the cultural nationalism which believes in ostracizing the other nations as danger to their own existence, Tagore writes,

“Whatever we understand and enjoy inbecomes ours... it hurts me deeply when the cry of rejection rings loud against the West in my country with the clamor that Western education can only injure us.” (R. T. Kumar 113)

Tagore believed that India does not need to be insecure, and that it doesn’t have to protect itself against any force from outside. He was not blind to accept and believe only in the nation’s heritage and past. He reciprocated the western culture as he believed that it would also be helpful in India’s growth.

Conclusion

Tagore has specifically explored the rich tradition of our country through his themes and characters. Tagore is a very prolific writer who enriched our literature with numerous poems, plays, short stories, novels and other prose writings. Tagore locates his characters in the Indian culture and spiritual heritage which presents a panorama of Indian life and culture to the Western world. Tagore

was basically a humanist and according to him the goal of Indian society should be to accomplish the spiritual ideals and not to enhance the motive of power and material craze of the Western society. His themes strengthened Indian identity in his works. His veiled message is aligned on spiritual humanism. Tagore's nationalism sought to accomplish the spiritual ideals and not intensify power and material craze revered by the Western society, even as he supported the West and its culture.

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