
Collapsing the Boundaries of the 'Home' and 'World': Tagore's Visionary Humanism

Paramita Dutta*

Brought up under the vigilance of domestic workers, Tagore was introduced to the idea of the *Lakshmanrekha* not only through the stories of the *Ramayana* but also by the action of a servant who drew a boundary of chalk around the young boy. Tagore would stay inside the chalk boundary all day and stare through a window at a pool outside. That pool, according to Tagore, was a microcosmic image of the world and its daily chores. The situation of the boy in this context is obviously equated with the protective boundary around Sita, to whom the 'world', in the figure of Ravana, would arrive with disastrous consequences. Similarly, in his novel *The Home and The World*, written many years later, the drawing room in Nikhil's house is a window through which Bimala meets the world as she discards the *purdah*. To her, that small space was to become a microcosm of the outside world. The colours and complexities, the cacophony and the subtleties, which Bimala experienced there, became for her innocent soul 'the world'. In my reading of *The Home and The World* I perceived Bimala as a reflection of Tagore as a child. Sandip is obviously the mirror image of Ravana and Nikhilesh, cannot but be taken as the great Lord Rama, inspite of the flaws in his character. Tagore's earlier experiences of confinement definitely played their part in the conception of the novel, which deals with the idea of thresholds.

Tagore's childhood helped him to empathise with the world of

women who remained confined to the *andarmahal*, or the inner chambers of aristocratic households. For Tagore the comparative security of such a confined existence made the transition to the world outside fraught with anxieties and hazards equivalent to the crossing of the *lakshmanrekha* in *Ramayana*.

The connotations of the title *The Home and The World* go beyond simple binaries. The novel takes up intersecting issues of the personal versus the ideological; the nationalistic versus the humanitarian; the traditional versus the modern. But the overarching world-view that is manifest in the novel is one that arises from Tagore's conviction regarding the supremacy of human values over all other allegiances. It is this which leads him to question the conception of *Swadeshi* which forms the backdrop of the work. The term literally means 'of our country' and refers to a phase of the Nationalist movement which sought to boycott British goods and buy homemade products so that the British would suffer economically. The movement strove against the 'foreign' and espoused the indigenous. In terms of the cartography of the *Swadeshi* self, the 'home' particularly its inner chamber where the women resided, was the bastion of tradition and expressed the cultural core of a colonised nation endangered by the onslaught of an alien cultural tradition.

The 'world' on the other hand represented a space in which so-called notions of cultural authenticity were compromised. The challenge for Indians at the beginning of the century was how to balance the pulls of the two domains. Nikhilesh, a western educated modern young man was also an idealistic nationalist. His life, as depicted in the novel was an attempt at negotiating the contrasting spaces, both physically and psychologically. When he had important guests over he made it a point to decorate his drawing room with *Swadeshi*-made objects, preferring a common brass pot over an expensive European vase. In keeping with the *Swadeshi* logic the indigenous is equated

with the spontaneous, the organic and the homely, while the foreign vase represents showy, mechanical artifice.

The same man, however, adorned his wife in the latest fashions and hired a British woman to teach his wife English as well as modern manners. His actions were deemed transgressive by the other women in the household. Yet such transgressions were overlooked even by Nikhilesh's grandmother because of the affectionate bonds which triumphed over social prejudices. Tagore here seems to be implying that in a recent past which was less complicated by ideological complications, it was possible to accommodate the foreign even within the confines of the home. The advent of self-conscious ideological positions disrupted such possibilities by substituting human relations with abstract notions.

Bimala was not satisfied with Nikhilesh's quiet, dull, assertion of *Swadeshi*. She herself said,

“this colourless brand of *Swadeshi* didn't inspire us. On the contrary I always felt ashamed of the lack-lustre furniture in his living room, especially when the magistrate or any other foreigner came to visit.”

The self-proclaimed champion of the *Swadeshi* cause shows here a remarkable tendency to compromise her fidelity to the cause because of her attraction for anything that is glamorous *and charismatic*. Probably this is the reason why she was swayed by Sandip's feigning *Swadeshi* rather than Nikhilesh's sombre devotion to the country and its people. In the portrayal of aggressive nationalism by both Bimala and Sandip, Tagore challenges the very notion of the nation as formulated in the course of political activism.

Ostensibly we see that Nikhil and Sandip shared the same goal - freedom from oppression. But while Nikhilesh's vision was one of enlightened humanitarianism seeking equality among all men and all nations, Sandip's ideas were parochial, belligerent and ultimately

self-serving. In this novel, 'home' does not refer only to the four walls of a house; it also stands for the nation, the homeland. Sandip proclaimed himself as the crusader for its emancipation, yet, the irony, as Tagore points out, lay in the arbitrary and repressive methods he adopted. His bands of devoted followers, as well as Bimala, the queen bee of the hive, had no real acquaintance with the grass-root reality of a colonised nation grappling with poverty. The Zamindars who burnt down markets in the name of *Swadeshi*, were no less repressive than the Raj that they were trying to overthrow. Tagore felt mortified when he saw many of the nationalist leaders turning to violence and ignoring the plight of the common people in following *Swadeshi* diktat. The economic exploitation of small landholders by the landlords which Tagore mentions in the novel also collapses the convenient shorthand of seeing the colonisers as the exploitative outsider and the colonised as one homogenous group. Nikhilesh insisted on seeing the country in its people, whereas for the likes of Sandip and Bimala the country was an iconic mother figure, more mythical than real. The essential difference between the husband and wife was in their conceptions of 'home' and 'world'. For Bimala, the home was bound by the *lakshmanrekha* of the women's quarters, the *andarmahal*, with its age old practices and prejudices, while for Nikhilesh it was in the wide world of nature and humanity. Bimala's transition into the 'world' is signified by her emergence from the inner chambers to the drawing room where the 'world' comes to meet her. Nikhilesh on the other hand realises that the 'world' is not just a mystical conception, it comes with all the complications of human nature, its greed, jealousies, inconsistencies, as well as its occasional nobility. The binaries of inner and outer, suggested by the title, therefore collapses in such a reading of the novel.

The idea of a national tradition and history is also problematized in this novel with the presence of the minor characters like Panchu,

Mirjan and the Bararani. While the problems of the first two represent the plight of the poor as they are caught in the crossfire between *Swadeshi* activism and harsh economic reality, the Bararani is a symbol of how the conception of the 'home' itself is compromised by the long history of injustice towards women. The widow of Nikhilesh's elder brother, with whom he shared a tender bond born out of a shared childhood, comes to Nikhilesh in his darkest hour with the 'voice of my home'. Yet, when he wishes that even in another birth he should have her as his sister-in-law, she answers that she did not want to be born a woman again. A whole history of lifelong suffering and deprivation is captured in this answer; a history of which Nikhilesh, as a man, could have no idea. It is this shared female history which, on the other hand, finally brings Bimala and her sister-in-law closer to each other towards the close of the novel. The home therefore, is not only spatially segregated into the men's quarters and the women's, it is also a terrain on which almost parallel histories are played out.

Finally, Nikhilesh's project of emancipating Bimala is also questioned by the hero himself. His desire to set Bimala free from domestic chores and take her to the outside world, establishing western ideas of companionship in marriage, reflects his desire to 'make' Bimala as he wished her to be, never asking her if she wanted to participate in such a project. In the end, he himself realises the tyranny of desire he had inflicted on her. The home too, therefore, is shown by Tagore to be a site of colonisation where the men exercised the authority they did not have outside. Even a liberal and idealised character like Nikhilesh cannot be completely exempted from this charge.

In conclusion, therefore, the very idea of the *lakshmanrekha*, as a protective boundary may be questioned. It may also have been a line that constricted the freedom of women and therefore created a

microcosmic reflection of all the injustices of the world outside, with the women deprived of almost all agency. If the 'home' was the last bastion of traditional values, the question arises: whose traditions? The answer in the Indian context can only be problematic.

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**Paper supervised by Dr. Suchandra Chakravarty, Associate Professor, Department of English, The Bhowanipur Education Society College.*