

Ghare Baire: A Critique of Violence

Debamitra Kar

Abstract

In *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World), Tagore's representation of the revolutionary movement of Bengal has made many scholars suspect a hidden loyalist and classist agenda. The present essay will show that the debate itself arises from attempts in these readings to dissociate the personal (the home) from the public (the world) and has neglected the fact that both the home and the world are ultimately political. Tagore questions not only the physical manifestation of violence through the Sandip-Nikhlesh debate but has also pointed out the structural violence that was inherent in Indian society on the brink of modernity.

This essay sets Tagore's philosophical query against current theories in peace and conflict studies. Tagore wrote that a peaceful resolution could not be based on the vulnerability of the marginalised but is achieved when the greed of the powerful is controlled. In his essay titled 'Path o Patheyo' (1908) Tagore has shown how the violence of the anti-colonial struggle would not go unaccounted for but would seep into the very fabric of the society it tries to liberate. A similar view is also presented in the novel. Tagore suggests that conflict proposes a forced union and homogenisation which no longer works to keep the society together once the external source of domination is removed. Belonging to the pacifist tradition in thought, though not strictly adhering to the Gandhian notion of non-violence, Tagore proposed that the struggle for liberation should not limit itself to a specific historical instance but should continue as a movement towards the assimilation and realisation of a greater truth that is enshrined in the philosophy of dissensus.

Introduction

'It is a part of morality not to be at home in one's home', Theodor Adorno writes in his *Minima Moralia*,¹ speaking against the self-complacency that personal property could generate. Read in a different context, the quotation is a fitting summary of Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire*, which advocates a similar moral responsibility to question and resist, if not oppose, the claims of one's 'home'. The crux of the argument lies in the multiple reading of the word 'home', which may mean a zone of familiarity and comfort, or the set paradigms that are usually accepted uncritically. It could be Bimala's *andarmahal*, the family and the responsibilities of a dutiful wife; it could be the evolving concepts of nationhood, endorsed by the conflicting viewpoints of Sandeep and Nikhilesh. The home, in this context, functions as a 'floating signifier'² that can simultaneously attach itself to various signifying practices. Thus, neither the home nor its opposite is unilateral or monolithic in its meanings or operations.

In the context of the novel, Tagore, however, posits a clear indication of his interpretation of the word 'home', which he reads against its dialectical opposite, 'the world'. It is a

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London and New York: Verso, 2005) 39.

² Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London and New York: Verso, 2014) 20.

translation or rather a trans-creation of the original Bengali word, *baire*, which loosely refers to the outside—that could be extended to mean beyond the self, a philosophical extension, and beyond the home or the nation, a geopolitical space. Anyone familiar with Tagore’s oeuvre would be able to argue in favour of the philosophical reading of the terms *ghare* and *baire*, arriving at the proposition that both the home and the world are philosophical ideas, where the concept of nationhood is extended from a mere political action to a spiritual exercise.

Ghare Baire was serialised in *Sabuj Patra*, edited by Pramatha Choudhury, in 1915, and published later in 1916. Along with *Gora* (1910) and *Char Adhyay* (*Four Chapters*, 1934), it is one of the three major fictional works on the theme of nationalism. In the present article, the attempt would be to re-read the novel along with Tagore’s essay *Path o Patheyo*, ‘The Way and the Wherewithal’, to show how the poet’s nuanced reading of nationalism is still relevant in the present global political situation. I shall argue that Tagore’s opposition to the concept of nation arose from its exclusivist nature and its tendency to homogenise, both of which are inherently violent processes that enrage a section of the society and ultimately break the unity of the country. Nation, though Tagore criticised the western ideas associated with it, is largely an organic and spontaneous whole, which should be able to contain differences and dissents. Such a socio-political device would be instrumental not only in creating the ideal society, but would be able to establish the practical parameters under which greater humane principles would flourish. This essay attempts to show how Tagore joins private ethical choices with political decisions. Arguably, his rejection of violence and adherence to the notion of *dharma* proposes the concept of a ‘positive peace’, an idea that I borrow from the political philosopher, Johan Galtung, who also shows how inclusive national policies could redress the issues of ‘structural violence’ and its manifestations in national and global politics and ensure a lasting peace.

Political Unrest and Tagore’s Reactions: A Few Historical Facts

The year 1905 was an important landmark in Indian history. British rule had already been officially initiated after the revolt of 1857. The consolidation of British power and the formation of a larger geographical boundary necessitated as well as facilitated the growth of nationalistic feeling among the educated urban middle class. Under such circumstances, the partition of Bengal in 1905 created the scope for intense anti-colonial strife which mobilised the middle class and intellectuals. The country was already experimenting with the methods of its anti-colonial movement, which included both moderate demands of self-government and violent expressions of freedom, creating a cultural condition that favoured the rise of a nationalist agenda. The division within the Congress was becoming more apparent, culminating in the internal split in 1907.

Tagore, already a national figure by this time, reacted to the emerging concept of nationalism that was going to shape the future anti-British struggle in India. In January 1894, in his essay ‘Ingrajer Atanka’ (‘The Englishman’s Fear’), he expressed his concern over the lack of representation of the Muslim community in the Congress-led anti-colonial struggle. He also showed keen interest in the problem of cow-slaughter which was then claiming

attention due to the intense agitation organised by Bal Gangadhar Tilak. In August 1905, in a meeting organised by the editors of *New India*, the English daily published by Bipin Chandra Pal, Tagore read a paper called 'Abostha o Beboatha' ('The Situation and the Solution'), in which he underscored the need to organise the villages, indicating a programme of constructive non-cooperation. In 1908, in his presidential address at the Bengal Provincial (Political) Conference, held in Pabna, he lamented the sad split of Congress. He called upon the young men to form groups of workers who would go around to the villages and bring the estranged communities of Hindus and Muslims together, by engaging in welfare politics, starting schools, making roads and supplying drinking water and so on. His polemical writings published during this period include anthologies like *Raja o Proja* (1908), *Swadesh* (1908), *Samaj* (1908), which dealt with various themes of nationalist politics and clarified Tagore's standpoint.

Interestingly, this was also the period which is regarded as the anti-West phase in Tagore's life. In his articles written for *Bangadarshan*, published around 1900, he had opposed the blind imitation of the West. Along with Okakura, the Japanese scholar of international repute and one of the principal founders of Tokyo School of Fine Arts, who visited India during the years 1901-1902 and spent some time with the Tagore family, he was examining the possibility of forming a Pan-Asian identity as opposed to the identity that West was trying to thrust on the colonies. He had argued in his essay 'Swadeshi Samaj' (which he first read at the Minerva Theatre in 1904) that the Swadeshi movement must cultivate the practices of the common people; their songs and customs and their innate goodwill. He argued that the history of the country had seen many tyrants but the life force has never stopped flowing because of the innate goodness of man. He detested the fact that the British were trying to improve the condition of the countryside and participating in the decisions of local governments. The essay referred to the on-going water crisis, which was deftly solved by the British. But the fact that Indians depended on the foreign rulers and their money disturbed him. He searched for a hero whom the common people could look up to. Tagore emphasised the need for self-government, as well as the cultivation of self-esteem generated by an active cultural life, and an indigenous education system.

No matter how critical Tagore was of western imperialism and British colonial policies, he never considered the possibility of turning the East into a merely religious-political solution. In the essay 'Purbo o Paschim' written in 1908 and interestingly delivered to the meeting of Sadharan Brahma Samaj, Tagore raises his cautionary finger:

if we do not come in contact with what is best in the Englishman, seeking in him only a soldier or a merchant or bureaucrat; if he will not stand on the place where man may communicate with man; if, in short, the Indian and the Englishmen must stand apart they will simply be objects of mutual repugnance.³

³ Quoted in David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: University Press, 1979) 139.

Tagore rejects the simplistic analysis of the East-West divide, unwilling to yield to the claims of one side over those of the other. In all his works, he was critical of such binaries, for he almost instinctively understood how they conceal hegemonic agendas in their functions.

It is the apprehension of the simplistic nature of binaries that compelled Tagore to consider the rising nationalism with a cautious eye. It however must be pointed out that in spite of his reservations regarding the nature and effects of nationalism, which had earned him adverse criticism, Tagore did exhibit a deep admiration towards the self-less sacrifice of the young revolutionaries of Bengal. The character of Amulya, in *Ghare Baire* is a case in point. In fact, in the beginning of the revolutionary movement in Bengal, Tagore felt closer to the philosophy of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Arobindo Ghosh and Bipin Chandra Pal. He did not show much enthusiasm for the moderate politics of the National Congress which he found to be ‘anglicized’. His personal engagement with rural Bengal through the works of his Zamindari (1890-1900) also made him suspicious of their politics. Rathindranath recounts, ‘my father had little faith in their politics, for he realized the futility of holding meetings and passing pious resolutions’.⁴ However, the extent of his participation in the revolutionary struggle has led to many conjectures. Chinmohan Sehanobis in his well-known book, entitled *Rabindranath-o-Biplobisamaj (Tagore and the Revolutionaries)* mentions many such instances which show the poet’s sympathy towards the revolutionaries. For instance, in 1901 Tagore invited Brahmobandhab Upadhyay, a person renowned for his Hindu nationalist feelings, to be the headmaster of his school at Shantiniketan. In 1910 he appointed Hiralal Sen of Khulna a teacher in his ashrama, even though he was once incarcerated on the charge of sedition for publishing an anthology of poems called ‘Hunkar’ (‘The Howl’). Sen was later given another job in Tagore’s estate, when the police started to show keen interest in his activities as they believed that he was a member of the Anushilan Samiti, a political outfit. There are several other such instances which show that Tagore has given shelter and jobs to such revolutionaries in need. Matters worsened to such a great extent that in a government circular the activities of the ashram in Shantiniketan were put under serious scrutiny. Government officials were advised against sending their children to the school, and were threatened that the students of the school would be denied jobs in the government sector in future.⁵

It was thus a shock to the revolutionaries when Tagore, in both his fictional and non-fictional works, started to criticise revolutionary politics. In 1915, Tagore was knighted, and incidentally, the change in his political standpoint was most conspicuous in his post-1915 works. The enraged revolutionary leaders questioned whether Tagore’s recent elevation to imperial honours was behind such transformation. Sehanobis notes that Pundit Ramachandra Bharadwaj, the leader of the Gadar party, was already making scathing criticisms of Tagore and his politics while the poet was visiting America:

⁴ Quoted in Kopf 293.

⁵ Chinmohan Sehanobis, *Rabindranath o Biplobisamaj* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1986) 28-29.

When the title was offered him many eminent Hindus of his principles believed he would refuse the lure but Tagore set aside his nationalistic principles and accepted the gift of the King. Since then he has been on the other side of the fence.⁶

Another revolutionary of the same party, writes, ‘The heart of India is in the anti-British revolutionary movement, which is rapidly transforming India along modern lines. But Mr. Tagore stands aloof from this movement.’⁷

The works that received the most adverse criticism include both the novel under discussion and his essays on *Nationalism* that were published in 1917. The latter publication contains three of Tagore’s essays written during his travels to America and Japan over a period of one year. He had openly criticised the concept of the nation, associating it with western imperialism, and advised that India should move away from such homogenising principles. Naturally, such arguments had enraged his readers, both within and without the country. I have already mentioned the ire of the leaders of the Gadar party; the American dailies also made adverse comments on Tagore’s ideas. The *Detroit Journal* warned the people against ‘such sickly saccharine mental poison with which Tagore would corrupt the mind of the youth of our great United States’.⁸ Commenting on the reactions of the Indians and Americans in the US against *Nationalism*, Kripalani writes:

His lectures on Nationalism were also ill-timed [...] Europe was in the throes of a great calamity and thousands of young men were dying on its battle-fields believing, right or wrong, that they were giving their lives for their hearths and homes; the tide of sympathy for Britain was rising fast in the United States and very soon American lives would be sacrificed. It was hardly the time to condemn what seemed holy and heroic as a vast delusion caused by ‘Evil incarnate’. What would today find an echo in the minds of millions of men and women all over the world who have known the horrors of two wars was then a voice in the wilderness.⁹

In spite of the scathing criticism that Tagore suffered, his political views cannot be altogether rejected. Arguably, in the present post-global period, 100 years after the publication of *Ghare Baire* and *Nationalism*, the horrors of nationhood have become more evident than ever. It has been argued, and argued well, that the solutions he offered for the raging debate on nationalism—for instance the coming of a greater man, or the surge of empathy in man for seeking universal brotherhood—are laced with romantic yearnings. The aim of the present paper is not to comment on the political sagacity of Tagore or his lack thereof, but to see the method of his reading of the complex political movement of nationalism and to examine whether this method of reading could be applied to understand the contemporary political situation existing both at home and in the world.

⁶ Quoted in Sehanobis 97.

⁷ Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1980) 270.

⁸ Kripalani, 269.

⁹ Kripalani 271-72.

Tagore on Nation and Violence

The central argument of *Nationalism* lies in Tagore's rejection of the models of nation which he believed to be a Western import and entirely unfit to address the Indian political experience. The use of the word 'Western' is complicated, for it has to take into account the changing parameters with which the nation has been perceived in the West during its evolution from the pre-national to the post-Westphalian era. Arguably, Tagore's claim, that at every point of its development the nation has maintained an essentially homogenous and exclusivist principle, can be justified if one takes into account both the etymological root of the word and the primordialist and modernist debate on the nature of nationhood.

Etymologically, the word nation is derived from the Latin word *natio* that meant birth or place of birth. It was once used in a derogatory sense to refer to the groups of foreigners from the same place whose status was below that of the Roman citizens. During the Middle Ages, the word was used to designate groups of students from the same geographical locations attending Europe's medieval universities. As the students from the same regions took sides as a group against students from other regions in scholastic debates, the word nation came to mean an elite community of scholars who shared an opinion or had a common purpose. One can safely infer that the concept of nation has always prioritised the formation of a group to survive the threats of extinction. Such group formation takes place only when there is a competition with another such group. Thus, nation in its very essence entails both inclusive and exclusive principles: it includes the similar and excludes the different.

From the primordialist standpoint, the principle of exclusion seems to be more central to the concept of the nation. In such reading, nationalism is a late development of a much older process of ethnicity. The theory underscores the importance of common descent, territorial belonging, shared language and emotional bonds which combined together make the nation evolve from an older ethnic group. This is an organic process.

Contrary to the primordialist claim, the modernists argue that nations and nationalism arose between sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe due to some social and structural transformations, such as the development of industrial and capitalist society, the spread of literacy and the evolution of the modern State and citizenship. However, the implication of the word modernism varies according to the standpoint of the individual philosopher. For instance, it can be identified as a historical process, or a philosophical process with a strong cultural bent, or a sociological process dependent on the evolution of certain institutions. It can be read either as a chronological or an ideological issue. From the former perspective, modernity is concomitant with certain historical events (the Renaissance or the French Revolution), from the latter, to the growth of certain other institutions and ideologies (parliamentary democracy, nationhood, and so on). In this context, Tagore's rejection of the nation becomes more complex. He associates modernity in the Indian context with English rule. He does not reject all the institutions, such as secularisation, mass education, and distribution of power to the grass roots level, but he definitely rejects the capitalist and imperialist tendency of the nation which arguably are important aspects that determine both modernity and nationhood, and many other social institutions associated with the process. It

is to be noted that in a marginal note on Tagore's speech in Japan, Bhagat Singh commented that it was a critique of capitalism and commercialism.¹⁰

Hence, Tagore's concept of the nation has two implications: it rejects homogeneity and the necessarily coercive identity formation; it is also a rejection of untrammelled capitalism which, as a citizen of a colonised country, he had experienced personally. Thus, Tagore's view of India is an alternative to both the principles of nationalism. He argues that, contrary to the method of nation formation in the West, which is based on the development of the *ethnies*¹¹ into geopolitical boundaries, India, as a geopolitical entity was a result of the colonisation process, where people of different races, cultures and ethnicities were put together within a geographical space for administrative reasons. Hence, any political realisation of India must take into consideration the basic feature of diversity. For India, the crisis is social and not political, and thus western nationhood, which is a fundamentally homogenising process, is a 'great menace', and is 'at the bottom of India's trouble'.¹²

Tagore's resistance towards capitalism is a more complicated matter. He launched most virulent attack against imperialism, which he associated with the West. In his lecture on nationalism in Japan, he said: '[the West] is like a glutton, who has not the heart to give up his intemperance in eating, and fondly clings to the hope of curing indigestion by medicine'.¹³ He has also critiqued the commercialisation and greed of Western policies and always projected that the answer should come from the East which would be able to 'instinctively' feel the need to blend spirituality with statecraft: 'We must not vitiate our children's mind with the superstition that business is business, war is war, politics is politics. We must know that man's business has to be more than business, and so should be his war and politics'.¹⁴ It seems apparent from the above argument that Tagore was not seeking the answer to capitalism through the accepted path of communism, or a socialistic revolution. Though in his later life he was influenced by the experiments in Russia, he has maintained a critical distance from class politics. The reason for this reservation is twofold: first, he was always wary of any form of violence and secondly, he believed that the ultimate change must come from the individual's heart—greed must be eliminated if peace is to be restored. His argument has failed to appease the leftist revolutionaries and thinkers. M. N. Roy, in his essay on 'The Philosophy of Property', criticises Tagore, claiming that his impractical and imperfect understanding of capitalism and imperialism was ultimately a result of his own class position. He writes:

comfortable living, normal enjoyment, even debauchery can be tolerated in the fortunate few, who throws alms out of their bounty to the needy; but the desire of the multitude who have toiled from time immemorial to produce the wealth appropriated

¹⁰ Sehanobis 176-77. Tagore's speech in Japan was later published as 'Nationalism in Japan' and included in *Nationalism*.

¹¹ Anthony D Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005) 12-15.

¹² Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2009) 74.

¹³ Tagore, *Nationalism* 26.

¹⁴ Tagore, *Nationalism* 26.

by the few, to share in the enjoyment of that wealth, is deemed to be damnable greed which makes for the collapse of civilisation!

The class character of this philosophy is unmistakable.¹⁵

A rather similar criticism is levelled by Lukacs, who reads *Ghare Baire* as a novel of bourgeois sentiment, where ‘wisdom was put at the intellectual service of the British police.’¹⁶ The problems of Lukacs’ reading have been amply pointed out by Ashis Nandy who showed that Tagore’s treatment of the theme of nationalism was much subtler and nuanced than could be gauged by such simplistic renderings.¹⁷ Tagore himself has ruefully commented how the epithet of ‘unpractical’ has been attached to him: he tries to counter the falsehoods ‘that stalk abroad with proud steps in the name of trade, politics and patriotism,’ but he finds that ‘any protest against their perpetual intrusion into our lives is considered to be sentimentalism, unworthy of true manliness’.¹⁸ By extending the argument to my present thesis, it can be asserted that rejection of a specific political agenda does not prove that the poet lacked in political wisdom. His arguments were not tailored according to the dictates of any specific ideology, for he was able to identify the strains of violence that lie beneath such assumptions and practices.

Tagore’s mistrust of violence has also been interpreted as a result of his spiritual realisation. Since his spirituality is derived from the teachings of Upanishad, an assumption seems to come automatically, that the rejection of violence is a religious stance. This reading gains more credibility since Tagore rejected the West on the grounds of its materialism and greed. In fact, in his book entitled *The Idea of the West*, Alastair Bonnett has read Tagore along with philosophers like Sayyid Qutb, arguing that Tagore’s vision of the nation is ‘transcendental-cultural’.¹⁹ However, Tagore had already cautioned that the rejection of West should not mean an uncritical acceptance of the East:

But while trying to free our minds from the arrogant claims of Europe and to help ourselves out of the quicksands of our infatuation, we may go to the other extreme and bind ourselves with a wholesale suspicion of the West [...] And at this point on which we are in the East have to acknowledge our guilt and own that our sin has been as great, if not greater, when we insulted humanity by treating with utter disdain and cruelty men who belonged to a particular creed, colour or caste.²⁰

Hence, the argument follows that the East is not a mere spiritual solution and religion is not beyond politics. Tagore’s rejection of violence is more political, where ‘political’ means ‘contingent construction of social links.’²¹

¹⁵ Quoted in Kripalini 190-91.

¹⁶ Quoted in Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994) 15-16

¹⁷ Nandy 15-19.

¹⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2009) 31, 27.

¹⁹ Alastair Bonnett, *The Idea of the West: Culture, Politics and History* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004) 82

²⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2009) 27-28

²¹ Laclau 169.

Path o Patheyo

Tagore's mistrust of violence appears to be the central problem in his essay 'Path o Patheyo'. It is interesting to note that the essay was written in 1908, much before Tagore has theorised on the nation and its problems. The paper was read at first at Chaitanya library, touching upon the tragic incident at Muzaffarpore, which witnessed the first incident of bombing in Bengal and the discovery of the bomb factory at Manicktolla, Kolkata, which led to the arrest of Barindra Kumar Ghosh and his associates.²² I have already mentioned that Tagore had deep admiration for the young freedom fighters, but in this specific context he comments on the predilection of the nationalist movement to become unnecessarily violent.

Violence, as Tagore sees it, is associated with both the process of nation formation and the colonial experience. The very first analogy that he draws is between violence and fever, suggesting that just as fever is the affliction of the disease within, though the high temperature is only felt in certain parts of the body, violence is also a reflection of the deeper disease of the society, though it is exhibited only by the activities of a group of young men. Thus the society must not believe that these incidents of violence are separate incidents and have no bearing on the future of the society; rather all should own the responsibility of such acts, for these instances of violence are a reflection of a disease that has already affected the society at large.²³ He further adds that the violence of these youths is not unjustified: it arises from anger and pain caused by State atrocities. He also realises that in such moments of anger, any advice to refrain from violence must sound cowardly.²⁴ Yet, he cautions his readers that the violence exhibited by the State is wrong, and by following the paths of violence, society is imitating principles that are wrong. Thus, in the ultimate instance, the fight is not between good and evil but between two wrong principles, where hatred is posited against animosities, conspiratorial politics against unlawful policies.²⁵

If translated to modern terminologies, Tagore's opposition to violence comes from two distinct sources. First, Tagore rejects the distinction between the law-making and law-breaking violence – violence used by the State to preserve its law; and, in a country under colonial rule, violence used to break those laws. The poet has shown that the law of the State is already violent and the ire of the youth is not unjustified. The problem does not lie in the intention of the actors, but their method of using violence, for when violence is countered with more violence it vitiates the entire social structure. Years later Charles Webel writes:

in the long run, the chronic use of violence for political and/or criminal means turns back on those who deploy it [...] and ultimately decreases both the psychological and political security of those who use violence ostensibly to protect themselves from real

²² 'Rabindranath Tagore: A Chronicle of Eighty Years 1861-1941,' *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette: Tagore Memorial Special Supplement* ed. Amal Home (Calcutta: The Municipal Corporation, 1986) 74.

²³ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Path o Patheyo', *Rabindra Rachanaboli*. Vol 13 (Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, 1990) 231.

²⁴ Tagore, Path o Patheyo 17.

²⁵ Tagore, Path o Patheyo 233.

and/or perceived antagonists or as a means of retaliation to avenge attacks on them, their families and/or their property.²⁶

To analyse the argument further, it may be pointed out that Tagore distinguishes between physical violence, which is easily visible to the naked eye, and structural violence, which is already rooted within social institutions and naturalised and normalised by our regular practices. The term structural violence was used by Johan Galtung in 1969, in his essay on 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research'. He elaborated the term by saying that structures are settings within which individuals may do tremendous amount of harm to other human beings in spite of their best intentions.²⁷ The problem of violence is that physical or visible violence has such an impact on our psyche that we tend to overlook its structural implications. Hence, violence could also be subtle and implicit, requiring no immediate actor or actee (perpetrator or victim), as it is built into the 'patterned relationship among the components of a social system.'²⁸ In the present context, Tagore's argument could be extended to show that once such violent methodology is followed it would become a part of our psyche and gradually be rationalised in our State policies and finally become a part of our social structures. Hence, the violence inflicted at the British is a reflection of the deep-seated violence against the members of other communities. And once any violent means is justified it would cause further instances of violence against the other communities. This problematic aspect of violence is brought forth in *Ghare Baire* in the first Nikilesh-Sandip debate.²⁹ In 'Path o Patheyo', Tagore thus digresses into the discussion of the heterogeneous structure of Indian society, just to ensure that his readers understand that India should remain 'a land without a centre'.³⁰

In spite of his rejection of violence, Tagore does not reject the notion of patriotism or revolution. In this context, it would be interesting to note what Tagore told Bhupendrakishore Rakshit and his friends in a personal meeting. Rakshit writes:

Whether it is violence or non-violence that is not important. What is important is gaining independence – independence that would bring out the greatness and truthfulness in every man, or help men and women of all sections of the society to experience freedom in every sphere of their lives [...] if you tread the difficult path the price would be high [...] I am not anxious whether the revolution is violent or non-violent. But in either of the way it must not be cowardly in its implications, or harbour degrading ideas, for in that case, the result would be suicidal.³¹

²⁶ Charles Webel, 'Toward a Philosophy and Metapsychology of Peace', *Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies* ed. Charles Webel and Johan Galtung (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) 9.

²⁷ Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research,' *Journal of Peace Research* 6.3 (1969): 167-91.

²⁸ Kathleen Maas Weigert, 'Structural Violence,' *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict* ed. Lester Kurtz. Vol 3. (San Diego, London and Boston: Academic Press, 1999) 126.

²⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World* trans. Surendranath Tagore, ed. Dilip Kumar Basu and Debjani Sengupta (Kolkata: Worldview, 2011) 25-29. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text. I have however used the original Bengali title of the novel and chosen 'Nikhil' over 'Nikhil' in my discussion.

³⁰ Ramachandra Guha, Introduction, *Nationalism* (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2009) 1.

³¹ Shehanobis 123-24, translation mine.

In the essay, Tagore delves deeper into the problem by suggesting that revolution itself would not cause any change in society, unless society has the necessary inner qualities to cope with the aftermath of this revolution and internalise its teachings within its structure and move towards a more egalitarian goal. He also suggests that revolution is emotive. Its tremendous energy must be tempered and controlled by wisdom, knowledge and experience. He gives a fantastic analogy of a storm-tossed ship. Only if the ship is properly made it can use the stormy wind to proceed in its course; otherwise the storm would break its loosely-bound structures. The country, he rues, is already suffering from communal disharmony, and under such circumstances whether the gusty winds of *Swaraj* could lead it to the shore of greater humanity is a matter of debate.³²

Tagore concludes his essay by pointing out that simple external opposition would not bring the people together. He has raised this point time and again in many of his writings, *Ghare Baire* being one of them. He believes that once the opposition is removed the people will have no clue as to how to address the inner turmoil which has already afflicted the society and hence end in fighting among themselves. This argument draws its impetus from his concept of violence which, he believes, if left unchecked, will be internalised and systematised. He offers two solutions: structural and developmental work at the grassroots level, and ensuring of communal harmony, so that the systemic discrimination of minority and marginal communities abates, and everyone gets an equal chance to participate in any progressive function undertaken by the country.

Nikhilesh opposes Sandip and his policy of boycott because it would enrage and alienate the Muslim community. For Tagore, boycott is a negative discourse that does not conform to his notion of a progressive revolution that ultimately aims at removing the evils of the mind. Colonisation under the British is ultimately the reflection of the colonisation of the Indian mind. Tagore's position is slightly different from the postcolonial critique which believes that colonisation ultimately affects the mind. Tagore believes in the opposite process: colonisation (read it as the subjugation of the weaker to the powerful) was already a reality in India, even before the British came, for India had never addressed its social issues. Thus, simply removing the external power from the country would not achieve independence; an extensive examination and re-fashioning of the self would be mandatory if the effects of freedom were to be realised in the political scenario of the country.

Bimala's Realisation

Coming out of the boundaries of the home and experiencing the world is not a matter of choice; it is a compulsion for Bimala, because she is the allegorical representation of the unconscious of the country. Her experimentation with her own self, which culminates in her hero-worship of Sandip and her love for Nikhilesh, being torn between the simultaneous contrary expectations, projects the ultimate dilemma of the Indian mind. In this context, both Nikhilesh and Sandip are the two contradictory truths of India's experiment with the nationalist movement.

³² Rabindranath Tagore, 'Path o Patheyo' 235-36.

In spite of such political readings, it can never be denied that *Ghare Baire* is also a story of three human beings and their thwarted love, a kind of argument that Tagore favoured and wrote in his prefatorial comments of *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleanders*): ‘the play is about a girl called Nandini. She reveals herself through suffering and pain’ (translation mine).³³ Arguably then the question arises as to why a novelist would choose a story of love and despair to express his political opinion about an anti-colonial struggle. In this context, a brief study of criticism contemporary with the novel’s publication is revealing.

The critical views can be positioned into broader categories. For the revolutionaries the character of Sandip was a blemish. It is claimed that none of Tagore’s novel has a ‘villain’, except *Ghare Baire*, where Sandip fits the role.³⁴ The argument was whether Tagore was criticising revolutionary politics. I have already referred to various sources that suggest that Tagore might have had issues with the concept of violence, but he was never insensitive towards the honest self-sacrifice of the young. The other criticism of the novel was that Tagore has shown the female protagonist in a poor light: she is not Hindu enough. In his ‘Teeka-tippani’ (Notes and Comments), published in *Sabuj Patra*, in Aghrayan 1322 (November-December 1915), Tagore refers to a letter written by a reader who questioned Tagore’s intention of writing a novel portraying an event which usually does not occur in traditional Hindu families, but only in Western-educated upper class households.³⁵ Interestingly, Nikhilesh’s attempt to educate his wife and introduce her to Western principles (Bimala’s piano lessons, her sartorial choices and sense of beauty) could be interpreted as the root cause of Bimala’s fall. Tagore’s reaction need not be mentioned in detail in the present article,³⁶ but I would like to point out two important aspects: first, how seamlessly Tagore has joined two different subject-positions related to the personal (Bimala’s experience as a woman) and the political (the experience of nationalism) in his text; secondly how he has resisted ideological dominance in both the cases.

Given that literature as its basis draws material from historical reality and follows established linguistic paradigms, it cannot be reduced to ideological simplicity. In his study on the ‘Categories of Materialist Criticism’ Terry Eagleton identifies the six constituents of a literary production.³⁷ Including the text, the other five elements are: General Mode of Production (GMP), or the materialist mode of production which forms the basis of every other ideology in a society at a particular historical instance; Literary Mode of Production

³³ Tagore, Preface. *Raktakarabi*. *Rabindra Rachanaboli*. Vol 6. (Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, 1985) 195.

³⁴ Schanobis, 96.

³⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Grantha porichoy’, *Ghare Baire* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2015): 214-16.

³⁶ Tagore’s reaction is best summarised in the ‘Notes and Comments’ that I have earlier referred to. It is not easy to follow the path of truth, he wrote, and because he loved his country more he could not make his readers happy enough. However, the criticism of *Ghare Baire* went on for quite some time. Tagore once again wrote an article in defence, titled, ‘Sahityabichar’ in *Probashi* in March-April 1919. Here he argued that a work of art should be given an aesthetic space, where a good and a bad character can be portrayed with equal veracity. Both the articles and a few letters relevant to the discussion can be found in *Rabindra Rachanavali*, vol 16, 881-90.

³⁷ Terry Eagleton, ‘Categories of Materialist Criticism,’ *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2012) 44-63.

(LMP), which refers to ‘a unity of certain forces and social relations of literary production in a particular social formation’;³⁸ General Ideology (GI), which relates to the general ideological understanding which is related to the GMP; Authorial Ideology (AuI), which is not simply a writer’s personal ideological make-up but is determined by his or her specific relation to the contemporary production system and ideologies; and Aesthetic Ideology (AI), which is related to the GI and is articulated in various forms such as religious or ethnic ideologies which in their last instance are determined by the GMP. The text is a linguistic space where all these various ideological forces enter into a new equation of power. The text draws its meaning from these other factors, many of which are non-literary, yet once formed the text cannot be reduced to any one of them. Unlike the production of a cloth in a mill, where the production is dependent on all the ingredients and their internal relations of production, the text once produced will always go beyond these ideological specifics. Moreover, it will have the ability to question the very ideological parameters that have formed it. Though Tagore does not use this kind of theoretical language, he makes an interesting comment when he says that if literature yields to the practice of classification of the heroes and heroines into categories as simple as good and bad, then the practice of literature would resemble puppetry; it would no longer remain the story of life.³⁹

Hence, though Tagore has placed Nikhilesh and Sandip at two extreme poles of political practices, the former suggesting a more temperate and non-violent method of protest and the latter an extremely violent one, there are scopes to argue that though their beliefs are different, their method of operation remains the same. In the fourth chapter of the novel, in Nikhilesh’s autobiography, there is mention of this curious aspect of their relationship. After a heated discussion between the two regarding the necessity of burning the foreign merchandise of Panchu in the market, an act which Sandip justifies by saying that ‘man’s goal is not truth but success’, *master-moshai* (translated as master) observes:

‘I believe that Sandip is not irreligious—his religion is obverse side of truth, like the dark moon, which is still moon, for all that its light has gone over to the wrong side.’

‘That is why’, I [Nikhilesh] assented, ‘I have always had an affection for him, though we never been able to agree. I cannot condemn him, even now; though he has hurt me sorely [...]

‘I have begun to realise that,’ said my master. ‘I have long wondered how you could go on putting up with him. I have, at times, suspected you of weakness. I now see that though you two do not rhyme, your rhythm is the same.’ (112-113)

Ashis Nandy observes that Bimala symbolises Bengal: ‘her personality incorporates the contesting selves of the two protagonists and become the battleground on which two forms of patriotism fight for supremacy.’⁴⁰ Extending the argument, the proposition is that both Nikhilesh’s more humble and low-key version of nationalism and Sandeep’s high-strung physical form of nationalism have a great amount of hidden cost to bear. It is Bimala who

³⁸ Eagleton 45.

³⁹ Tagore, *Grantha porichoy*, 216.

⁴⁰ Nandy 14.

realises it. In her love for both of them, she has loved the best; she has loved the powerful and flamboyant nature of Sandip and the quiet, unheroic demeanour of her husband. Hence, she could also criticise the physicality in Sandip's love, his hidden greed for both her and his patriotic programmes, and the lack of practicality in Nikhilesh's Swadeshi ventures.

Criticism of Tagore is more a reflection of his readers' viewpoint than his own. If one believes that either Sandip or Nikhilesh must emerge as the winner and get the booty of the country and the woman, it will reflect the fact that human mind always seeks the comfort of nomological certainty. But conflict is a reality which must be given scope to perform if peace is to be realised. George Simmel argues that no society could be completely peaceful, the elements of conflicts would always remain within it.⁴¹ In his defence of his novel Tagore has said that Valmiki needed to create a Ravan as much as he needed to create a Rama;⁴² similarly both Sandip and Nikhilesh are necessary in society and their presence must therefore be acknowledged in the fictional space.

This argument of course goes against the general assumption that Nikhilesh is Tagore's spokesperson, that his beliefs bear close resemblance to those of Mahatma Gandhi and that Tagore was immensely influenced by him. It is a fact that Mahatma Gandhi visited Shantiniketan in 1915, but it must also be remembered that he was at that time not a very significant figure in Indian politics. Hence, contrary to popular belief, Tagore's idea of non-violence is not borrowed from Gandhi, it is formed from his own judgement and discretion.

Thus, Nikhilesh's opposition to the boycott is not adherence to Gandhi's version of non-violence, it is a decision based on his creator's hands-on experience of working at the grassroot levels, which he also shares in his essay 'Ryot-er Katha' (About Ryots) published in 1926. In the novel, this idea of the downtrodden class (though Tagore never uses the word) is brought forth by his sympathetic portrayal of Panchu. When Harish Kundu, Panchu's Zaminder, decrees that he must burn all his foreign cloth, he blurts out in helpless defiance: 'I can't afford it! You are rich; why not buy it up and burn it?' (110). Sandip, who was present at the time, used the incident as an excuse to indulge his rhetoric on the importance of self-sacrifice of the millions for the cause of *Swadeshi*. Thus, the actions of Sandip and his followers actually create an atmosphere of anger and discontent among the very people, whom they supposedly represent. Their decision is essentially violent, and it is not simply a manifested physical violence but it is an attempt to embed and systemise violence within the structures of society. Nandy writes,

this form of populism combines mob politics with realpolitick. It is this combination that Tagore holds to be responsible for the growth of communalism [...] Sandip precipitates a communal conflagration [...] by imposing on [...] [the Muslims] glaringly unequal suffering and unequal sacrifice for nationalist cause [...] by depending on a

⁴¹ George Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations* trans. K. H. Wolff and E. C. Hughes (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1955) 107.

⁴² Tagore, *Grantha porichoy* 219.

form of political stridency which requires primeval sentiments to be mobilized and acted out.⁴³

In contradiction to Sandip, Nikhilesh's version of the *Swadeshi* is not only quieter and more subdued, it is also an individual enterprise. He promotes the indigenous goods as an alternative, creates situations which would help them to survive the competition in the market. His loneliness proves his difference from Gandhi's policy of non-violence, which is a collective decision. Herbert Marcuse, in his study on 'Repressive Tolerance', observes that 'Non-violence is normally not only preached but extracted from the weak—it is a necessity rather than a virtue, and normally it does not seriously harm the case of the strong.'⁴⁴ However, the case of India must be studied as an exception for here

passive resistance was carried through on a massive scale, which disrupted, or threatened to disrupt, the economic life of the country. Quantity turns into quality: on such a scale, passive resistance is no longer passive—it ceases to be non-violent.⁴⁵

Marcuse was referring to Gandhi's use of non-violence as a political weapon. But for Tagore it is a philosophical solution. Perhaps Nikhilesh's failure lies not in his impractical business ventures, but in his inability to mobilise people and make them understand the necessity of the alternative rhetoric. This also adds to the debate about whether a single individual like Nikhilesh could address such a social issue. He was truly a benevolent zamindar, but Tagore also shows that there are zamindars like Harish Kundu, and Nikhilesh's magnanimous gestures were not successful in saving either Panchu's or his own land from being embroiled in a communal riot.

Conclusion

Arguably, *Ghare Baire* raises more questions than it answers. Like the fate of Bimala which remains largely undecided at the end of the novel, the fate of the land is also kept open to interpretation. Bimala loses her home, she is rudely shocked by the external world, and even when she decides to come back, the home has changed its meaning to her. However, Bimala's success lies in her courage to experiment with herself. Likewise, Tagore knew that the country has left its zone of comfort and come into contact with a foreign power which it must resist in a way most suitable to it. He could not predict which would be the most effective method of resistance. Rather, he chose to show what should be resisted, for resistance is not apolitical; it may compromise the quality of freedom that liberates all minds from every instance of slavery. Till such time as his compatriots discovered the right path, he simply asked them to be brave enough to remain in uncertainties, miseries and doubts, without yearning for an easy, simplistic solution. Perhaps that is what he meant when he wrote to his friend in a letter: 'I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live.'⁴⁶

⁴³ Nandy 14.

⁴⁴ Herbert Marcuse, 'Repressive Tolerance', *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr and Herbert Marcuse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) 102.

⁴⁵ Marcuse 103.

⁴⁶ Guha, Introduction xii.

Tagore's notion of humanity is inextricably bound with his concept of 'positive peace' which can only be effective when the structural violence and traces of exploitation are removed from the social institutions. He writes in a different context:

Just bringing the war to an end would not ensure peace. If peace is to be realised in its greatness then it must be based on truthfulness, not on the vulnerability of the weak. If we are to prove our competence to be at peace then the powerful must let go of their ego and greed, and the weak must learn to be fearless.⁴⁷

Thus peace is not an idealistic notion for Tagore; it is rather a culmination of his philosophy of praxis. It is a *dharma*, which is far removed from the parochial politics of religion. *Dharma* is a concept that stands in the undetermined zone, between duty and belief; it is neither as compulsory as duty nor as restrictive as belief; it is an ethical choice that comes from within and joins man with man and the home with the world. It is a practice and a way of life.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott. 1974. London and New York: Verso, 2005.
- Bonnett, Alastair. *The Idea of the West: Culture, Politics and History*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.
- Eagleton, Terry, 'Categories of Marxist Criticism.' *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2012. 44-63.
- Galtung, Johan. 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research.' *Journal of Peace Research* 6.3 (1969): 167-91.
- Guha, Ramachandra. Introduction. *Nationalism*. Rabindranath Tagore. Gurgaon: Penguin, 2009. Vii-lxviii.
- Kopf, David. *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*. Princeton: University Press, 1979.
- Kripalani, Krishna. *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1980.
- Laclau, Ernesto. *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*. London and New York: Verso, 2014.
- Majumdar, Nepal. *Rabindranatho Kayekti Rajnaitik Prosongo*. Kolkata: Chirayat, 1987.
- Marcuse, Herbert. 'Repressive Tolerance.' *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*. Ed. Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr and Herbert Marcuse. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969. 81-123.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- 'Rabindranath Tagore: A Chronicle of Eighty Years 1861-1941.' *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette: Tagore Memorial Special Supplement*. Ed. Amal Home. [1941]. Calcutta: The Municipal Corporation, 1986. 59-109.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Nepal Majumdar, *Rabindranatho Kayekti Rajnaitik Prosongo* (Kolkata: Chirayat, 1987) 22-23, my translation.

- Sehanobis, Chinmohan. *Rabindranath o Biplobisamaj*. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1392 (1986).
- Simmel, George. *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations*. Trans. K. H. Wolff and E. C. Hughes. Glencoe: The Free Press, 1955.
- Smith, Anthony D. *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Home and the World*. Trans. Surendranath Tagore. Ed. Dilip Kumar Basu and Debjani Sengupta. Kolkata: Worldview, 2011.
- . Ghare Baire. *Rabindra Rachanaboli*. Vol 16. Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, 2001.
- . Grantha porichoy. *Ghare Baire*. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2015.
- . *Nationalism*. Gurgaon: Penguin, 2009.
- . Path o Patheyo. *Rabindra Rachanaboli*. Vol 13. Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, 1990.
- . Preface. Raktakorobi. *Rabindra Rachanaboli*. Vol 6. Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, 1985.
- Webel, Charles. 'Toward a Philosophy and Metapsychology of Peace'. *Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies*. Ed. Charles Webel and Johan Galtung. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. 6-13.
- Weigert, Kathleen Maas. 'Structural Violence'. *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict*. Ed. Lester Kurtz. Vol 3. San Diego, London and Boston: Academic Press, 1999.