

Critiquing Nation as a Goddess: A Study of the Representation of Nationalism in *The Home and the World*

Joyjit Ghosh

Abstract

In Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* (1882) one sees the emergence of a new goddess – a goddess with a political identity. The hymn 'Vande Mataram' which is at the centre of nationalist discourse in the novel became a rallying cry of the patriots during the freedom movement. Rabindranath Tagore did not subscribe to Bankim's ideology. In *Ghare Baire* (1916), translated as *The Home and the World*, Tagore interrogates the dominant Hindu Nationalism embodied in *Anandamath* through the lively debate between Nikhilesh and Sandip. Nikhil, the liberal-minded zamindar, never imagines the nation as a goddess, and he believes that only by disinterested work one can achieve the welfare of the nation. Sandip, the demagogue, however, believes in an eloquent idolatry, and in his magical vision, Bimala is at the same time a goddess and the nation. Through the worship of Bimala, Sandip wants to spread the word of her homage all over the country, and he is initially successful in casting a spell over Bimala. But his hypocrisy becomes palpable when he engages in a sexual politics, and changes his mantra from 'Vande Mataram' to 'Vande Mohinim'.

The Home and the World critiques the dominant nationalist ideology which strategically combines the elements of politics and religion and thereby propagates the idolatry of the nation. The country was never greater than the humanitarian cause to Tagore, and being a champion of truth and idealism he always resisted that form of patriotism which trampled on the ideals of humanity. This essay explores Tagore's views on nation, nationalism and patriotism as reflected in the novel, and discusses their relevance in the socio-political context of the present day.

'I am the Infinite Energy which streams forth from the Eternal in the world and the Eternal in yourselves. I am the Mother of the Universe, the Mother of the Worlds, and for you who are children of the Sacred Land, Aryabhumi, made of her clay and reared by her sun and winds, I am Bhawani Bharati, Mother of India.'

Sri Aurobindo, 'Bhawani Mandir'¹

In the nationalist imagination the country was always a mother. The idea of worshipping the nation in the form of a goddess was to impart a spiritual dimension to the freedom movement. During the struggle for independence the patriots, therefore, were greatly inspired by 'Vande Mataram', the hymn which is at the heart of nationalist discourse in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya's *Anandamath* (1882). In Bankim Chandra's novel one sees the emergence

¹ Sri Aurobindo, 'Bhawani Mandir', *Nineteenth Century Indian English Prose: A Selection*, edited with an Introduction by Mohan Ramanan (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2010) 246.

of a new goddess who is identified with the nation. The worshippers of this new goddess are called *Santans*, and they are dedicated to free their mother (the country) from the clutches of her enemies. In *Ghare Baire* (1916) Tagore interrogates the dominant Hindu Nationalism embodied in *Anandamath* largely through the debate between Nikhilesh and Sandip. To Nikhil (who to a fair extent voices Tagore's ideology), 'the nation is not a goddess,' and he staunchly believes, 'The day we will work for the welfare of the nation, is the day we will get our reward from the true deity.'² Sandip, 'the magician of Ideas' (168), however, differs from Nikhil by visualising a goddess with a political identity. And he believes that the Bengali will win the world by chanting the mesmerising hymn of 'Vande Mataram' to this goddess. In the vision of Sandip, Bimala is a goddess as well as the nation. It is a point of irony that towards the end of the narrative the rhetoric of Sandip undergoes a paradigm shift as he engages in a sexual politics and changes his mantra from 'Vande Mataram' (Hail Motherland) to 'Vande Mohinim' (Hail Temptress). The relation between Sandip and Bimala thus becomes the site where the issues of love, religion and politics are conflated. With the help of certain theoretical perspectives, I will explore how *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*) critiques the dominant nationalist ideology which deliberately combines the elements of politics and religion and thereby represents the nation in the form of a goddess.

In an influential essay titled 'The Birth of a Goddess: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya's *Anandamath*', Tanika Sarkar writes,

The goddess was produced and publicised through entirely modern means: prose. Prose had never earlier been deployed as the medium for sacred literature. Now, the novel, the medium of print, and the market for literature were being used in the service of a goddess.³

Tanika Sarkar thus brings home the point how prose, particularly novel as a literary form, helped in producing and publicising a new goddess. The argument of Sarkar has an obvious reference to Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath*. But it is worthwhile to note that non-fictional prose as well was used in 'the service of a goddess' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. One may in this context refer to Sri Aurobindo's 'Bhawani Mandir' written in 1903. The essay begins in the following way:

Om Namas Chandikayai

A temple is to be erected and consecrated to Bhawani, the Mother, among the hills. to all the children of the Mother the call is sent forth to help in the sacred work.

Who is *Bhawani*?

Who is Bhawani, the Mother, and why should we erect a temple to her?

² Rabindranath Tagore, *Home and the World: Ghare Baire*, translated from the Bengali by Sreejata Guha, Introduction and Notes by Swagato Ganguly (Penguin Books India, 2005) 130. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

³ Tanika Sarkar, 'The Birth of a Goddess: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya's *Anandamath*', *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times* (New Delhi: permanent black, 2009) 193.

As we proceed through the essay we see how Sri Aurobindo clarifies the concept of Bhawani. 'Bhawani is the Infinite Energy'. She is Durga. She is Kali. She is Radha the Beloved. She is Lakshmi. She is our Mother. And in the present age, 'the Mother is manifested as the mother of strength. She is pure Shakti'. In the imagination of Sri Aurobindo the nation and the mother become one: 'The Shakti we call India, Bhawani Bharati, is the living unity of the Shaktis of three hundred million people'. The Shakti, however, is 'inactive'. She is 'imprisoned in the magic circle of Tamas'. To get rid of Tamas the self-indulgent sons must wake the Brahma within. The Mother 'demands that men shall arise to institute Her worship and make it universal'. They should build a temple to 'the white Bhawani, the Mother of Strength, the Mother of India'.⁴

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is charged with a spiritual fervour. But it has a political dimension as well. In 'Whose Imagined Community?' Partha Chatterjee succinctly argues that 'anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power'. In this context, Chatterjee draws our attention to two domains – the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the 'outside' including economy, statecraft, science and technology; and the spiritual is an 'inner' domain bearing the 'essential' marks of cultural identity including language, literature and other things. According to Chatterjee, nationalism refuses to allow the colonial power to intervene in the spiritual domain.⁵ In my view, the temple of 'Bhawani Bharati' – the 'Mother of Strength', at one level of interpretation, represents the inner domain of sovereignty. For in the vision of Aurobindo, the temple would be built 'in a place far from the contamination of modern cities' and will act as a centre 'from which Her worship is to flow over the whole country'. The expression 'the contamination of modern cities' is highly suggestive: it suggests that the temple would be a symbol of cultural resistance to the baneful influence of western civilisation. Aurobindo's essay 'Bhawani Mandir' speaks volumes about his mythopoeic imagination which is at the centre of his nationalist discourse.

In 'Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal' Jasodhara Bagchi writes, 'It was the political need of the hour that made the nationalists take up the myth. It was the compulsions of that brand of politics again that helped to unify the religious, the social and the aesthetic domain.'⁶ The observation compels conviction. Thus when Sandip in *The Home and the World* gives his formulation, 'The people of our land won't wake up to her [the country] unless they can actually see her. They need a goddess with a form to denote the country' (128), we understand 'the political need of the hour'. In Sandip's 'miraculous vision' Bimala is the Mother of India. Sandip is determined to spread 'the word of her homage to the entire land' and he even takes an oath, 'It is your form that I build in every temple' (131). Sandip thus consciously blends politics with religion but mostly for

⁴ Sri Aurobindo, 'Bhawani Mandir', 236-245.

⁵ Partha Chatterjee, 'Whose Imagined Community? The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories,' *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1999) 6-7.

⁶ Jasodhara Bagchi, 'Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 25.42/43 (20-27 October 1990) WS71.

personal and parochial gains. In a review of the novel in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the reviewer comments, ‘European teaching has robbed Sandip of formal belief in his country’s gods’, and it is ‘no longer gods or goddesses that he worships but instincts and passions, and these he worships entirely for their strength.’⁷ The comment is partially true. While it is difficult to agree with the first part of the observation that European teaching has robbed Sandip of formal belief in his country’s gods it is largely true that he worships gods and goddesses in order to fulfil his own agenda. Sandip wanted to ‘give the old gods new colours’, and not only that, he believed, ‘he was the salvation for the gods’ (168).⁸

Idolatry of the nation was an anathema to Tagore. In ‘Nationalism in India’ (a chapter in his book *Nationalism*), Tagore wrote, ‘Even though from childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and 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.’⁹ In the novel it is Chandranath Babu, the teacher of Nikhil, who upholds ‘the ideals of humanity’ above everything whether it is politics or religion or anything that may make a man prejudiced and distract him from the path of Truth. About his teacher Nikhil’s assessment is that he is an amazing human being: ‘I call him amazing because there is a great difference between him and the age and the times in which we live’ (92). *The Home and the World* is set against the backdrop of anti-partition movement. By ‘the age and the times’ Nikhil obviously refers to the excitement of *Swadeshi* which reached its peak in 1905 when the British rulers divided Bengal in separate provinces. In a letter to Rothenstein dated 26 October 1917 Tagore described how he was caught in ‘a dust storm of our politics’ alluding to the aforementioned excitement and eventually came out of it ‘nearly choked to death’.¹⁰ We read in the novel that nothing on earth distracts Chandranath Babu for he believes that ‘the great Truth within us all is the root of everything’ (111). To a fair extent, this is true of Nikhil. Being a champion of truth and idealism he always resists that form of patriotism ‘which can ride roughshod over the higher ideals of humanity’.¹¹ Nikhil staunchly believes, ‘Those who sacrificed for the country, are the great souls. But those who troubled others in the name of the nation, are the enemies’ (99). Michael Sprinker in ‘Homeboys: Nationalism, Colonialism and Gender in *The Home and the World*’ comments:

⁷ ‘Idolatry, Old and New’ [A Review in *The Times Literary Supplement* 29 May 1919], reprinted in Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*, translated by Surendranath Tagore, ed. Ajanta Dutt (Delhi: Doaba Publications, 2002) 269.

⁸ Swagato Ganguly in his Introduction to *The Home and the World* writes in this connection: ‘When Sandip conceives a new political goddess, along the lines of the one worshipped by santans in *Anandamath*, the idea amounts to the creation of a Frankenstein’s monster and carries the force of blasphemy for Nikhilesh and Chandranath as Sandip, in post-modern fashion, “creates the deity” and claims to be “salvation for the gods”’ (xi).

⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1976) 106-107.

¹⁰ See the letter in *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson with a foreword by Amartya Sen (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 188-189.

¹¹ See Tagore’s letter to Woodrow Wilson in *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, 199.

By 1915, when *The Home and the World* was first published, Rabindranath Tagore had become a staunch opponent of the Indian nationalist movement. Only two years later, he would denounce nationalism globally in a famous series of lectures, arguing that only a universal humanism could possibly solve the social problems that lay at the heart of his country's misery, or indeed any political problem pitting one group of people against another.¹²

Sprinker is indeed right in his observation. In 'Nationalism in India' Tagore emphatically argues, 'Our social ideals create the human world, but when our mind is diverted from them to greed of power then in that state of intoxication we live in a world of abnormality where our strength is not health and our liberty is not freedom.'¹³

The path of Sandip is that of 'intoxication' and 'abnormality'. His rhetoric is: 'Who said Truth wins the day? Victory to illusion!' (132). Sandip's words are full of allusions to Hindu gods and goddesses, particularly goddesses including Durga, Kali, Jagaddhatri. He candidly confesses, 'I have been born in India; the toxin of religiosity permeates my blood' (80). By appealing to their religious sentiments he wants to captivate the masses. And in the private sphere, his worship of the country wonderfully mingles with his adulation for Bimala, 'Geography is not a Truth. One can't lay down one's life for a map. Only when I see you before me I realize how beautiful the country is [...] I will know that I have received my country's command only when you anoint my brow yourself and wish me luck' (71). But a careful reader cannot afford to miss the point that these are all the strategies on the part of a perfect lady-killer to hypnotise a woman and use her for his selfish ends. Sandip's address to Bimala, 'You are the Queen Bee of our beehive' (35), at the initial stage of their relation, speaks volumes about the sexual politics to which the latter unknowingly falls a victim. This sexual politics reaches a climax when Sandip's mantra changes from 'Vande Mataram' to 'Vande Priyam, Vande Mohinim' (185). In 'Many faces of Love: Country, Woman, and God in *The Home and the World*' Tanika Sarkar aptly comments that this transgressive eroticising of the nationalist impulse was perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the novel for contemporary Bengalis.¹⁴ Sandip's words, 'The mother protects us, the lover destroys – and there is beauty in this destruction' (185) evoke an image of a morally corrupt *Swadeshi* leader with whom the contemporary readers could scarcely identify, and they were obviously scandalised. Even when we read the novel more than one hundred years after its publication, the image of Sandip, as drawn by the author, creates in us unpleasant sensations.

In 'Nation, Politics and Gender in Colonial India: *Ghare Baire*, *Char Adhyay* and *Gora*' Sanjukta Dasgupta et al draw our attention to the fact that like Sandip, Indranath, the

¹² Michael Sprinker, 'Homeboys: Nationalism, Colonialism and Gender in *The Home and the World*', *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World: A Critical Companion* edited by P. K. Datta (New Delhi: permanent black, 2002) 110.

¹³ Tagore, *Nationalism*, 120-121.

¹⁴ Tanika Sarkar, 'Many faces of Love: Country, Woman, and God in *The Home and the World*', *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World: A Critical Companion*, edited by P. K. Datta (New Delhi: permanent black, 2008) 35.

revolutionary leader of *Char Adhyay* (*Four Chapters*) is also painted in negative colours. Interestingly, here we have the picture of the nation as *Ardhanariswar*, the Hindu concept of divinity, half masculine, half feminine.¹⁵ One may in this context quote the words of Indranath, ‘Only the incurably immature revel in calling their country Mother. Our country is not the Mother of senile infants. She is half God and half Goddess.’¹⁶ The question may rise: Who are the ‘senile infants’? Are they *Santans* of Bankim’s novel? Is Tagore critiquing Bankim’s revolutionary doctrines through the portrayal of Indranath? We have no easy answer to this question. From the ‘Author’s Note’ to *Four Chapters* we come to know, that in the course of the story, the different characters have voiced their views about the revolutionary movement but these views and opinions serve only to support the characterisation of the speakers and nobody should suspect that they tally with the author’s own views.¹⁷ Whatever be the case, like Sandip, Indranath consciously mixes up Hindu myths and politics and thereby offers a gendered discourse on nation.

Carole Boyce Davies in *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) insightfully observes that the concept of nation is largely ‘a male formulation’ and continues,

nationalism [...] seems to exist primarily as a male activity with women distinctly left out or peripheralized in the various national constructs. Thus, the feminine was deployed at the symbolic level, as in ‘Mother Africa’ or ‘Mother India’ and women functioned as primary workers for a number of nationalist struggles but ended up not being empowered political figures or equal partners.¹⁸

To a fair extent, this is true of the representation of nationalism in *The Home and the World*. Nationalism is largely ‘a male formulation’ here. Being deployed by Sandip at a symbolic level, Bimala imagines herself as a tangible form of the goddess of India. Bimala is not merely convinced but swayed by the rhetoric of Sandip, and she starts believing that she is the motherland’s message to Sandip and his followers. We listen to her intimate words:

Did God create me anew today? Did He make up for his neglect of so many years? The one who was plain suddenly blossomed into a beauty. The one who was ordinary suddenly perceived the glory of the entire land within herself. Sandip Babu wasn’t just one man. He alone embodied the overflowing hearts of millions in the nation. (42)

Bimala thus is moulded in the cast of a goddess at the hands of Sandip. She is led to believe by the latter’s ‘excellent histrionics’ (29) that the entire nation needs her. At the core of her heart she feels that she is blessed by a divine strength, and she can do everything for

¹⁵ Sanjukta Dasgupta, Sudeshna Chakravarti, and Mary Mathew, ‘Nation, Politics and Gender in Colonial India: Ghare Baire, Char Adhyay and Gora’, *Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family and Gender in Tagore’s Fiction and Films* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2013) 152.

¹⁶ See *Four Chapters* (translated by Surendranath Tagore) in *The Oxford India Tagore: Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism*, edited by Uma Dasgupta, (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2009) 370.

¹⁷ The ‘Author’s Note’ (translated by Somnath Maitra and Kanti Chandra Sen) is available in *The Oxford India Tagore*, 362-363.

¹⁸ Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994; Taylor & Francis e-Library 2003) 12.

the country if the country summons her to do so. But one may raise a question: Does she emerge as an empowered political figure like Sandip? The answer is in the negative. The fact is, Bimala's concept of *Swadeshi* remains largely confined within the domestic sphere and does not reach the masses. Moreover, Bimala is not aware of her lover's political strategy, and so she readily accepts the role of 'mokshirani' given to her by Sandip. At an early stage of the narrative Bimala even honestly confesses, 'My husband had no place in all these discussions that we had' (43). The use of the word 'we' suggests that she puts herself in the same bracket with Sandip while consciously excluding her husband from the realm of discussion on nationalism because Nikhilesh's 'colourless brand of swadeshi' never inspires them (100).

But we have to remember that the issue regarding nation as a goddess forms an important part of the debate/discussion between Nikhil and Sandip and the debate continues throughout the narrative. The debate starts when Sandip by alluding to 'Vande Mataram' throws a question to Nikhil whether 'there is a space for the imagination in the act of serving the country'. Let us quote a relevant portion from the debate in this context:

'I agree there is a space, but it isn't all of it. I intend to know that thing called "my country" in a more heartfelt, genuine fashion and that's how I'd like to have others know it. I feel quite nervous and ashamed to use some kind of entertaining hocus-pocus mantra in relation to such a profound concept.'

'That thing which you call an entertaining mantra is precisely what I call the Truth. I truly believe my country is my God. I believe God resides in man – He truly reveals Himself through men and their land.'

'If you truly believe this, then you wouldn't discriminate between two men or between two countries.'

'That's true. But I am a man of limited strengths and so I fulfil my duties towards God through the worship of my *own* land.' (25-26)

The passage quoted above is loaded with significance. It reveals that in spite of powerful rhetoric, Sandip's ideas and beliefs are narrow and even sectarian. In a letter to Woodrow Wilson on 9 May 1918 Tagore wrote, 'I consider it to be an act of impiety against one's own country when any service is offered to her which is loaded with secret lies and dishonest deeds of violence'.¹⁹ Sandip calls 'Vande Mataram' the Truth and desires to fulfil his duties towards God 'through the worship of my *own* land'. But the land of his vision never represents the entire nation, and he is aggressive towards the Muslims when they refuse to take part in the *Swadeshi* movement: 'They'd have to be subdued and shown who was the boss in no uncertain terms. Today they bare their fangs at us; but one day we'll make them dance to our tune.' Sandip thus speaks for the Hindu nationalism, and Nikhil's utterance, 'If India is a true entity, then Muslims are a part of it' (127) has no relevance to his political ideology.

¹⁹ See Tagore's letter to Woodrow Wilson in *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, 199.

The passage quoted above is significant for another reason. It subtly critiques the hymn which became the rallying cry of nationalists during the freedom movement. Tagore in a letter (dated 19 October 1937) to Subhas Chandra Bose (when the latter consulted the former regarding his opinion on ‘Vande Mataram’) gave his views on the subject in unequivocal terms:

The core of ‘Bande Mataram’ is a hymn to the goddess Durga; this is so plain that there can be no debate about it. Of course Bankim does show Durga to be inseparably united with Bengal in the song, but no Mussulman can be expected patriotically to worship the ten-handed deity as ‘Swadesh’. [...]The novel *Anandamath* is a work of literature, and so the song is appropriate in it. But parliament is a place of union for all religious groups, and there the song cannot be appropriate.²⁰

Tagore, therefore, did not subscribe to a dominant Hindu myth of ‘the ten-handed deity’ in terms of imagining the nation. The background of his family certainly played a vital role in this regard because Tagore’s father Maharshi Debendranath was one of the founding members of the Brahmo Samaj that believed in monotheism. In response to Jawaharlal Nehru’s request regarding the controversy over ‘Vande Mataram’ as a national song, Tagore made a statement (dated 26 October 1937) which is worth quoting at this point:

To me, the spirit of tenderness and devotion expressed in its first portion and the emphasis it gave to the beautiful and beneficent aspects of our Motherland made a special appeal, so much so that I found no difficulty in dissociating it from the rest of the poem and from those portions of the book of which it is part, with all the sentiments of which, brought up as I was in this monotheistic ideals of my father, I could have no sympathy.

Tagore, in fact, had no problem with the first two stanzas of Bankim’s poem, and in his statement he laid emphasis on the significance of ‘Vande Mataram’ as a National Anthem. But he was categorical in stating that ‘the whole of Bankim’s Vande Mataram poem, read together with its context, is liable to be interpreted in ways that might wound Muslim susceptibilities’.²¹ Tagore’s concern for the Muslims was not unfounded. A majority of the Muslims of the Working Committee of the Congress found the song idolatrous, and a group of Hindus also shared their perception.²²

Sandip, as our reading of the novel shows, never attaches importance to ‘Muslim susceptibilities’. For he only passionately believes in a Hindu iconography of the nation. In his vision, the Bengalis who worship the goddess with ten hands ‘will build another goddess today and win the world with mesmerism’ (132). This ‘another goddess’ is obviously a

²⁰ See Tagore’s letter to Subhas Chandra Bose in *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, 487.

²¹ See ‘Vande Mataram’ in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Three, A Miscellany*, ed. Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996) 824-825.

²² See the Notes to ‘Vande Mataram’ in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Three, A Miscellany*, 1004.

political construct that fired the imagination of the nationalist leaders (particularly those who treaded the path of militant nationalism) during the anticolonial movement.

In a letter to C. F. Andrews dated 7 July 1915 Tagore wrote, ‘Only a moral tyrant can think that he has the dreadful power to make his thoughts prevail by means of subjection’.²³ Sandip makes idols of his ideas and like ‘a moral tyrant’ believes that others irrespective of caste and creed would accept his doctrines without question. Ironically, Bimala, in the early pages of the novel, comes under the spell of Sandip and extends a moral support to Sandip’s ideas of nation as a goddess stating, ‘I have illusions and I shall be bewitched by my country: I need a tangible form for her – which shall be Mother, a goddess or Durga to me – for whom I’ll sacrifice an animal and let loose a bloodbath. I am human. I am not a god’ (27-28). A close examination of Bimala’s words reveals that idolatry of the nation and self-idolatry become one in her ideology. Inspired by Sandip’s rhetoric that the nation’s blessings are best received from the lips of its goddess, Bimala starts believing that she is the ‘tangible form’ of the Mother-goddess (23). Only when she comes to experience a maternal tenderness for Amulya, Bimala renounces the politics of passion.²⁴ Nikhil in his retort to Bimala’s statement observes, ‘Neither am I a god; I too am human and that’s why I will not, at any cost thrust all my imperfections upon the country’ (28). One may ask what Nikhil suggests by ‘imperfections’ here. I think Nikhil at this point critiques the strange blend of politics and religion in the imagination of a nation, thereby decrying the political fanaticism of Sandip. Nikhil can very well sense that a kind of arrant addiction in Sandip’s nature makes him weave myths around religion and go into a frenzy over serving the country (34). And this is what he staunchly resists. Tagore once wrote, ‘We must firmly remember that our country is not a god and therefore we cannot substitute it for God’.²⁵ Nikhil does not substitute his country for God. And he has no political purpose to deify his country. He only wants to ‘bring together the entire human community to find God’, to echo the words of Mohammad A. Quayum.²⁶ Nikhil, therefore, vehemently opposes Sandip’s brand of nationalism which is not only chauvinistic but suicidal as well.

The debate between Nikhil and Sandip on the issue of nation as a goddess has some other interesting dimensions. At one level, the debate is between Truth and Illusion. According to Nikhil, illusion has no place in the service to a nation. Only one has to ensure that his/her task is ‘true’ and ‘genuine’. Sandip contradicts his friend arguing, ‘the common man has to have his illusions and three-fourths of this world is made up of common men. It is to keep these illusions alive that every country has formulated its own gods’. Nikhil gives a sharp retort to Sandip’s argument, emphasising that since he has lost ‘the capacity to strive

²³ See *Letters to a Friend: Rabindranath Tagore’s Letters to C.F. Andrews*, (New Delhi: Rupa, 2002) 40

²⁴ I am in this context indebted to Tanika Sarkar’s observation in ‘Many faces of Love: Country, Woman, and God in *The Home and the World*’, in *Rabindranath Tagore’s The Home and the World: A Critical Companion*, ed. P. K. Datta, (New Delhi: permanent black, 2008) 35.

²⁵ See Tagore’s letter to Aurobindo Mohan Bose on 19 November, 1908 in *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, 72.

²⁶ Mohammad A. Quayum, ‘Tagore’s Political Imagination in *The Home and the World: A Textual and Contextual Reading*’, *The Poet and His World* edited by Mohammad A. Quayum (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2011) 241-242.

for the Truth' he wants 'an instant reward'. Nikhil sounds caustic as he argues, 'when all the work is left undone, you have turned the nation into a goddess and sat in front of her praying for a boon'. Sandip, however, remains rigid to his point and continues to claim that 'this is the truth'. In Sandip's words, 'Millions of people all over the country are waiting to hear these words from my lips and that is why it is the truth. If I can successfully spread my own message, you'll see the miraculous results for yourself' (128-130).

Through the portrayal of Sandip, Tagore warns us against the demagogues who by following the path of rhetoric and passion mislead the masses. Sandip being a crafty politician believes that 'the common man has to have his illusions'. He staunchly believes that Durga or Jagadhatri is 'a political being' (130). He, therefore, joins up with Harish Kundu, an influential zamindar and a *Swadeshi* leader, to host a puja of Mahishasurmardini Durga (who is an embodiment of Shakti) with pomp and grandeur, thereby encouraging the Hindus to tread the path of militant nationalism and alienating the Muslim community of the locality.

While speaking about the Extremists of the Indian Congress Party Tagore wrote in 'Nationalism in India' that 'their ideals were based on Western history' and they 'had no sympathy with the special problems of India'.²⁷ Tagore always believed, 'Our real problem in India is not political. It is social'(97).²⁸ Sandip has little sympathy with the country's 'special problems'. He, being a representative of the upper-caste Hindu *Bhadralok*, never thinks of the welfare of the common men – the lower caste Hindus and Muslims.²⁹ Apart from this, Sandip is a hard-boiled politician, and possessed by 'the lure of lucre' (161). Nikhil's idealistic argument that by working for the welfare of the nation one will get reward from the true deity, therefore, never appeals to his sensibility. He encourages his followers to resort to extremist methods like boycotting/picketing foreign goods, and thereby creates a tension among the subjects of Nikhil. Tagore was opposed to boycotting through 'unjust, untruthful and unrighteous methods'. In an early letter (19 November 1908) Tagore wrote, 'Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter, my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds'.³⁰ These words seem to constitute the philosophy of Nikhil, a liberal-minded zamindar, who draws the attention of the readers to the menace of Nationalism throughout the novel. In *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self* (1994) Ashis Nandy observes:

The novel suggests that a nationalism which steam-rollers society into making a uniform stand against colonialism, ignoring the unequal sacrifices imposed thereby on the poorer and the weaker, will tear apart the social fabric of the country, even if it helps to formally decolonize the country.³¹

²⁷ Tagore, *Nationalism* 113.

²⁸ Tagore, *Nationalism* 97.

²⁹ The idea is partly borrowed from Sumit Sarkar, 'Ghare Baire in its Times', in *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World: A Critical Companion*, edited by P. K. Datta (New Delhi: permanent black, 2002) 146.

³⁰ See Tagore's letter to Aurobindo Mohan Bose in *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, 72.

³¹ Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1994) 19.

Nandy is absolutely right because the domination of the upper-caste *Swadeshi* leaders like Sandip and Harish Kundu over the subaltern group of the society shatters ‘the social fabric’ causing a riot at the end of the novel. Sandip is able to escape but Amulya dies. And Nikhil receives a fatal head injury.

The critique of nationalism in *The Home and the World* and in other pieces of writing by Tagore alienated him and made him unpopular with the national enthusiasts. It is important to note that Tagore was aware of the aversion of his countrymen to the ideas and beliefs he cherished. In 1921 we see him write to Andrews from New York,

I am afraid I shall be rejected by my own people when I go back to India. My solitary cell is awaiting me in my motherland. In their present state of mind, my countrymen will have no patience with me, who believe God to be higher than my country.³²

Tagore knew that *Swadeshi* produced intense excitement in the minds of his countrymen. He confessed that even he was touched by the heat of the movement. But he never accepted the heat and passion as final objects.³³

Tagore, among other things, was sensitive to the dangers of Hinduising the *Swadeshi* movement. It is true that his patriotic songs composed during the *Swadeshi* movement sometimes image Bengal even India as a mother-goddess. One may refer to his song *Aji Bangla deserhriday hate* (‘Suddenly out of the heart of Bengal’) and quote the opening lines of it in this context:

Suddenly out of the heart of Bengal
You stepped out, amazingly beautiful, Mother
O Mother, I can’t turn my eyes away from you
Your open doors lead today to the golden temple.³⁴

But this ‘amazingly beautiful’ goddess is not imagined to be a political entity. Tagore’s patriotic songs do not reflect a nationalist obsession with the image of a goddess. This is because he never accepted an idol or a deity as the symbol of the country. The song ‘O Alluring Universal Mother’ (*Ai Bhuvanamanomohini*) thus does not depict a goddess but the Universal Mother who, in the artist’s imagination, becomes one with ‘the blue sea waters’, ‘the blue skies’ and ‘the shimmering green’. There are references to ‘vedic hymns’ and ‘dharma’ that serve as cultural markers of the nation but finally the devotee in the song hails the Universal Mother and prays to her to scatter her ‘alms to lands at home and the world’.³⁵

Tagore believed, ‘If a body – be it an individual or a whole race – defiles its own character in pursuit of short-term goals, it thereby consumes its capital and puts itself on the path to

³² See Tagore’s letter to C. F. Andrews in *Letters to a Friend*, 98.

³³ See Tagore’s letter to C. F. Andrews in *Letters to a Friend*, p. 91. Tagore in this letter sharply critiques the concept of *Swadeshi*: ‘Swadeshi, Swarajism, ordinarily produce intense excitement in the minds of my countrymen, because they carry in them some fervour of passion generated by the exclusiveness of their range.’

³⁴ *Swades: Rabindranath Tagore’s Patriotic Songs*, translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta, (Kolkata: Visva Bharati, 2013) 51.

³⁵ *Swades*, 54.

bankruptcy.’³⁶ Worshipping the nation as a goddess, in Tagore’s vision, is never a path of truth, but a path of achieving a ‘short-term’ goal that involves sectarianism, intolerance and violence. In the socio-political context of the present day, the message of *The Home and the World* seems to be that religious bigotry and fanaticism should have no place in nationalist imagination for they lead a nation to the brink of spiritual bankruptcy.

Works Cited

- Aurobindo, Sri. ‘Bhawani Mandir.’ *Nineteenth Century Indian English Prose: A Selection*. Edited with an Introduction by Mohan Ramanan. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2010. Print.
- Bagchi, Jasodhara. ‘Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal.’ *Economic and Political Weekly*. 25. 42/43 (20-27 October 1990). WS65-WS71. Web. 9 August 2017. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4396894>>
- Chatterjee, Partha. ‘Whose Imagined Community?: The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories.’ *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.
- Dasgupta, Sanjukta, Sudeshna Chakravarti, and Mary Mathew. ‘Nation, Politics and Gender in Colonial India: *Ghare Baire*, *Char Adhyay* and *Gora*.’ *Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family and Gender in Tagore’s Fiction and Films*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2013. Print.
- Davies, Carole Boyce. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994; Taylor & Francis e-Library 2003.
- Ganguly, Swagata. Introduction. Rabindranath Tagore. *Home and the World (Ghare Bhaire)*. Translated by Sreejata Guha. Penguin Books India, 2005. Print.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.
- Quayum, Mohammad A. ‘Tagore’s Political Imagination in *The Home and the World: A Textual and Contextual Reading*.’ *The Poet and His World*, edited by Mohammad A. Quayum. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2011. Print.
- Sarkar, Sumit. ‘*Ghare Baire* in its Times.’ *Rabindranath Tagore’s The Home and the World: A Critical Companion* edited by P. K. Datta. New Delhi: permanent black, 2002. Print.
- Sarkar, Tanika. ‘Many faces of Love: Country, Woman, and God in *The Home and the World*.’ *Rabindranath Tagore’s The Home and the World: A Critical Companion*, edited by P. K. Datta. New Delhi: permanent black, 2002. Print.
- . ‘The Birth of a Goddess: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya’s *Anandamath*.’ *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*. New Delhi: permanent black, 2009. Print.
- Sprinker, Michael. ‘Homeboys: Nationalism, Colonialism and Gender in *The Home and the World*.’ *Rabindranath Tagore’s The Home and the World: A Critical Companion*, edited by P. K. Datta. New Delhi: permanent black, 2002. Print.

³⁶ See Tagore’s letter to Aurobindo Mohan Bose in *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, 72.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Nationalism*. New Delhi: Macmillan Tagore Pocket Edition, 1976. Print.

---. *Four Chapters*. Trans. Surendranath Tagore. *Oxford India Tagore: Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism*. Ed. Uma Dasgupta. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.

---. *Letters to a Friend: Rabindranath Tagore's Letters to C.F. Andrews*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2002. Print.

---. *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson with a Foreword by Amartya Sen. New Delhi: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.

---. 'Vande Mataram.' *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume Three, A Miscellany*. Edited by Sisir Kumar Das. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996. Print.

---. *Swades: Rabindranath Tagore's Patriotic Songs*. Trans. Sanjukta Dasgupta. Kolkata: Visva Bharati, 2013. Print.