

The Woman Question: Politics of Gender and Space in Rabindranath Tagore's *Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire*, 1916)

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Abstract:

The focus of this essay is on Tagore's portrayal of the emerging educated woman of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century India, as illustrated through Bimala in *Home and the World*. Bimala is the product of the new patriarchy, who is in the process of 'becoming' the new woman without ever quite succeeding. In this emerging patriarchy, the nationalist agenda had incorporated the woman question and the reality of women was constructed by a nationalist discourse. Women were reminded of a structure embedded in the traditional past which also happened to be a nationalist invention and as such very selective and even exclusionary. The power structure of this discourse and the control it exercised can be traced in Tagore's text. Of course one has to note here that Indian nationalist discourse, like any other discourse, was never a homogeneous one, and it kept evolving as it does even today. In the Indian nationalist discourse, especially in the extremist versions, many women like Bimala became pawns in the overarching nationalist scheme that tapped into the traditional idea of 'Shakti' or 'The Mother' to address the 'woman question'. The failure of Bimala to become the 'new woman' reflects Tagore's reservations regarding the construction of this ideal by the new patriarchy and the nationalist movement.

The Socio-Historic Background and the Text

In late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, in spite of educational opportunities among certain sections of women, the patriarchal discourse was never really challenged. Educated women were made to believe that all their endeavours were ultimately directed towards the greater good of the husband, or the male counterpart, or the society, or the country in general. Education was not seen as a means for women to achieve independence, to express their individuality, to question patriarchal authority or to acquire self-awareness. If we look back into the history of women's struggle for education and empowerment, we will find that the effort was contained within the parameters of certain traditional gender roles. Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), had argued that if women are to be held morally and legally responsible, then their rational faculty must be developed, and better educated women will become improved mothers, interesting wives and companions, and more responsible citizens. Wollstonecraft's defence was a starting point, but gender roles were still defined, keeping in mind the benefits of a society that was patriarchal in nature. The 'woman question' was further raised in nineteenth-century Britain by eminent intellectuals like John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), and the ideas travelled to the British colonies like India, where 'modernisation' had begun.

The infiltration of western ideas in the early nineteenth century had given a jolt to India's traditional way of life, shocking people into a new kind of awareness and a sense of urgency. As Radha Kumar points out in *The History of Doing*, the Indian bourgeois society that was

developing under Western domination, 'sought to reform itself, initiating campaigns against caste, polytheism, idolatry, animism, purdah, child-marriage, sati and more, seeing them as elements of a "pre-modern" or primitive identity.'¹ Eminent figures like Rammohan Roy, and Henry Derozio, and, later on, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, were passionately executing social and educational reforms, particularly for women. However, issues related to women suddenly disappeared from the agenda of the public debate towards the end of nineteenth century and the discourse of nationalism seemed to take precedence. In his essay, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question,' Partha Chatterjee mentions that from the late nineteenth century onwards, 'questions regarding the position of women in society do not arouse the same degree of passion and acrimony as they did only a few decades before' and 'the overwhelming issues now are directly political ones – concerning the politics of nationalism'.² The politics of nationalism 'glorified' the traditions of India and 'fostered conservative attitude towards social beliefs and practices,' thus stalling the movement towards modernisation.³ A large number of women got involved in the nationalist movements. The nationalist movement had given the women the task of becoming 'the Mothers of the Nation' and for many young nationalists, 'the worship of Kali, Durga, and Chandi became incumbent' as they thought that the 'mother' would help smooth their 'path to nationalist martyrdom'.⁴ Chatterjee argues that the 'woman's question' was not ignored by the ideology of the nationalist politics and instead was resolved in 'complete accordance with its preferred goals'.⁵ These preferred goals were to incorporate the women's struggle for emancipation into the nationalist struggle for independence. The new woman, in the ideological configuration of nationalist politics, now became a product of a new patriarchy.

The reform movements had already set in motion the process of redefining the spheres of the public and the private. A new set of patriarchal gender-based relations were being constructed. Thus late nineteenth-century India witnessed the emergence of the new woman in bourgeois society, and she also became a part of the nationalist movement. This kind of thought and action gave rise to a body of literature that portrayed liberal and educated women characters at the end of the century, but they needed the agency of a patriarchal discourse. While some literature produced during the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century was explicitly political, the style adopted by Rabindranath Tagore was subtle. His idea of the 'new woman' or the 'modern woman' was explored in both domestic and national contexts. Malashri Lal, in her introduction to *Tagore and the Feminine*, comments that Tagore was 'to express as well as subvert the equations assumed in the Mother-Nation parallel, especially in his fiction' but the lyrics of his patriotic songs seem to convince many that the 'feminine principle is the aura under which the loyal sons of the

¹ Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 1993) 7-8.

² Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Zubaan, 1989) 233.

³ Chatterjee 234.

⁴ Kumar 45.

⁵ Chatterjee 237.

nation would pursue the path of sacrifice in honour of the Mother'.⁶ Chandrava Chakravarty and Sneha Kar Chaudhury, in *Tagore's Idea of New Women*, further argue that 'Tagore was deeply confused in his understanding and hence representations of women' and thus, in his works, women become 'the site of conflicting positioning and perceptions, a battleground of the discursive and the real, the sensual and the sublime, the gross and the ideal.'⁷ However, one must note that Tagore's works spanned several decades and his ideas and views about women also underwent significant changes. As Rajasri Basu concludes in her introduction to *Women and Tagore*, 'A more conservative, stereo-typed image of women in his earlier writings led to a "modern woman" in the middle period finally paving the way for a mature, autonomous, independent woman in the later years.'⁸

In this essay, I will focus on Tagore's portrayal of the emerging educated woman of late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century India, as illustrated through Bimala in *Home and the World*. I will analyse, along the lines of Partha Chatterjee's argument, that Bimala is the product of the new patriarchy, who is in the process of 'becoming' the new woman but never quite succeeds. In this emerging patriarchy, the nationalist agenda had incorporated the woman question and had developed another way of viewing the reality of women. This reality was constructed by a nationalist discourse, where a set of new ideas was not imposed on women and instead women were reminded of the structure embedded in the traditional past. This past also happened to be a nationalist invention and as such very selective and even exclusionary. In his essay 'The Order of Discourse,' Michel Foucault argues that in every society, 'the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.'⁹ Employing Foucault's observation, I will also show that the power structure of the discourse and the control it exercises can be traced in Tagore's text through the ideas propagated by the character, Sandip, a representative of the new patriarchy. Of course one has to note here that Indian nationalist discourse like any other discourse was never a homogeneous one, and it kept evolving as it does even today. Sandip tempts Bimala to follow the ideas generated by the new patriarchy, but Bimala fails to do so. In the Indian nationalist discourse, especially in the extremist ones, many women like Bimala become pawns in the overarching nationalist scheme that taps into the traditional idea of 'Shakti' or 'The Mother' to address the 'woman question'. The failure of Bimala reflects Tagore's reservations regarding the construction of the 'new woman' by the new patriarchy and the nationalist movement.

⁶ Malashri Lal, Introduction, *Tagore and the Feminine: A Journey in Translation* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2015) xxx.

⁷ Chandrava Chakravarty and Sneha Kar Chaudhuri, *Tagore's Idea of New Women: The Making and Unmaking of Female Subjectivity* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2017) 7.

⁸ Rajasri Basu, *Women and Tagore: Recreating the Space in New Millennium* (New Delhi: Abhijeet Publications, 2012) 11.

⁹ Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', *Untying the Text: A Post-structuralist Reader* edited by Robert J. C. Young (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) 52.

Home and the World was published serially in a journal called ‘Sabuj Patra’ (green leaf) from April 1915 to March 1916. It is a novel that portrays a tumultuous period in the history of Bengal during the anti-partition movement in 1905 – a protest condemning the action of the British Raj in dividing Bengal into two sections with Hindu and Muslim majorities in each section. This soon led to the Boycott and *Swadeshi* movements in Bengal. Tagore’s narrative revolves around three main characters: Bimala, Nikhilesh, and Sandip. While Nikhilesh belongs to the educated upper-class landed gentry, Sandip, Nikhilesh’s college friend, is a *swadeshi* extremist, an ardent activist of the nationalist movement. Nikhilesh’s wife Bimala, unlike most women of her time, has received a western education. Bimala, with her husband’s encouragement and support, decides to enter the public world. She gets swept off her feet by the passion and intensity of Sandip, and she is almost hypnotised by him. The narrative is told from the point of view of these characters, and highlights the process of intense self-examination that they go through. As a result, we get a composite, multi-dimensional perspective of each character and event in the narrative as opposed to a third person linear narrative where one has to depend on the narrator’s perspective. Tagore provides an innovative way of doing justice to the complexity of the human relationships in the novel where the female protagonist gets a voice too. It helps us to trace the evolution of each of the characters, and provides a platform for the interaction of the public and the private worlds. Chatterjee points out that unlike women of Europe, for Indian women, ‘the new idea of womanhood was sought to be actualized’ in the private sphere instead of the public, and this ‘change can be constructed only out of evidence left behind in autobiographies, family histories, religious tracts, literature, theatre, songs, paintings and such other cultural artefacts’ that depict life at home.¹⁰ In this context, it is interesting to note that Tagore gives Bimala the autobiographical voice that shows her struggle, which in turn, becomes symbolic of the dilemma of a certain section of women of Bengal who like Bimala felt trapped into the perplexity of tradition and modernity. Both Nikhilesh and Sandip try to construct Bimala’s identity in their own ways, but ultimately both remain unsuccessful.

The Public and the Private: Politics of Freedom, Space and Boundary

The Indian nationalist ideology, while trying to break away from colonial dominance, had included certain notions of what constituted the material and spiritual, in its nationalist project. During the late nineteenth century, the Indian nationalists had argued that it was ‘not desirable to imitate the West in anything other than the material aspects of life’ as the East was quite rich in its spiritual domain.¹¹ As Chatterjee points out, the material/spiritual dichotomy, in the discourse of nationalism, now became analogous to the outer/inner polarity, which finally led to the separation of the social space into ‘*ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world’.¹² While the ‘world’ was associated with the male, the external and practical or material interests, the ‘home’ became associated with the female, the internal and spiritual

¹⁰ Chatterjee 250.

¹¹ Chatterjee 237.

¹² Chatterjee 238.

interests. Thus, adhering to the traditional patriarchy, the social roles were identified according to gender to ‘correspond with the separation of the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*’.¹³ Chatterjee argues that one needs to look beyond the apparent conservatism of these roles and instead focus on the transformation of these notions that were taking place under the nationalist ideology. The colonisers had subjugated the Indians by their ‘superior material culture’ but had failed to colonise ‘the inner, essential identity [...] the spiritual culture’.¹⁴ According to Chatterjee, the nationalist paradigm did not dismiss modernity but attempted ‘to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project’ within which the women’s question is answered.¹⁵ Tagore in *The Home and the World* seems to show that the nationalist project may attempt to resolve the ‘women’s question’, but true emancipation needs a different channel.

The Home and the World explores a quest for freedom, the domains being both the public and the private worlds. While Nikhilesh seeks freedom from ignorance and rigid orthodox ideas, Sandip’s quest is for freedom of his country from British rule. Bimala, on other hand, has been granted freedom by her husband to participate in the public sphere, so that she gets an opportunity to utilise her education for the service of the nation. But she is not fully prepared to deal with the complexities of the outside world. She says, ‘My husband had a great wish that I would step outside the inner chambers. One day I said to him, “I don’t need the world outside.” He said, “The world outside may be in need of you.”’¹⁶

Bimala’s struggle, therefore, was to find freedom from her own inner inhibitions, which no doubt were fostered by her upbringing in the rigid orthodoxy of a traditional patriarchal society. Bimala also shows a deep attachment to her traditional role as the ‘ultimate’ authority in the private sphere. She even refuses to go to Calcutta with Nikhilesh, because she is afraid of losing her current position of authority in the household. As she wonders whether she will ever get back her rightful place if she returns from Calcutta, Nikhilesh assures her that she might not even want it as life will have other things to offer. But Bimala is not ready to let go and tells herself: ‘Men really don’t understand these things very well. They don’t know how significant the positions in the inner-chambers are since they live and breathe the air outside’ (224). In this sense, she is also in need of freedom from her attachment to the private sphere. Her awareness of the public life, and her journey to self-knowledge, was not initiated by a desire to contribute to the nationalist movement; rather it was initially fuelled by her infatuation with Sandip’s eloquence, and his grand ideas and visions for the country. As a result, she finds herself disillusioned when Sandip’s true motives become known to her. The novel begins and ends with Bimala’s autobiographical entries, and by contrasting the two sections, the readers can locate the kind of transformation that Bimala undergoes.

¹³ Chatterjee 239.

¹⁴ Chatterjee 239.

¹⁵ Chatterjee 240.

¹⁶ Rabindranath Tagore’s *Ghare Baire* 1916; *The Home and the World* translated by Sreejata Guha, *The Tagore Omnibus* Volume 1 (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005) 221. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

Bimala's first account reflects her idea of beauty, chastity, tradition, and modernity. She describes her mother, who, without questioning her position in the society, happily catered to the gender role that was pre-assigned to her. Her mother's generation seemed to be unconcerned with the state of the outside world, and they did not desire any role beyond the private sphere. Bimala's questioning begins with her entry into her husband's household:

The family I married into was very orthodox. Here, some rules were as old as the Mughals and some were even older, set by Manu and Parashar. But my husband was very modern in his outlook. He was the first in his family to be highly educated [...] He dared to transgress the bounds of conformity. So, when he appointed Miss Gilby as my companion and tutor, tongues started wagging at home and outside, and yet, my husband's will won in the end. (214-15)

Bimala is critical of the traditional rules and welcomes change in the attitudes of people. She appreciates her husband's modern outlook, but she herself is still quite grounded in tradition. At the beginning of the novel she says: 'I was his princess and my place was beside him; but it was a greater joy to take my place at his feet' (215). This shows her subservience to her husband's wishes, and her desire to serve him, out of the ideas of devotion and love ingrained within her. In spite of her education, what seems to be lacking is the willingness to break away from the traditionally defined roles.

Westernisation of Bengali women threatened the traditional way of life in the nineteenth century. It was taken up virtually in every form of communication and 'to ridicule the idea of a Bengali woman trying to imitate the way of a European woman or *memsahib* [...] was a sure recipe to evoke raucous laughter and moral condemnation in both male and female audiences.'¹⁷ In the later part of the century, the criticism of manners, that is, of new forms of clothing like blouses, jackets, petticoats and shoes, and use of western cosmetics and jewellery, is something that we see in Tagore's novel as well, when the sister-in-law of Bimala condemns her: 'It is shameful how you have gone and decked your body up like it's a novelty shop!' (218). Even when we see that some women may be supportive of these fashionable trends in traditional households, it should be noted that such support is guided by an agenda of keeping the men of the house happy. Bimala's grandmother-in-law didn't like the clothes that Nikhilesh bought for Bimala from the foreign stores but did not oppose:

But she felt that men were bound to have some such idiosyncrasies that were quite silly and a mere waste. There was no way of restraining them, but it was important to see that it didn't lead them to total destruction. If my Nikhilesh didn't deck up his wife, he'd have done the same to another woman. So, every time a new dress arrived for me, she called my husband and riled and teased him merrily. Gradually her taste changed too. Thanks to this unholy age of modernism, a day came when her evenings would be incomplete unless her granddaughter-in-law read her stories from English books. (223)

For Bimala's grandmother-in-law, what seemed more important was keeping Nikhilesh interested in Bimala, so that his fancies would not waver away towards courtesans like the other men in the family. Bimala's education and fashion were perceived by the other women

¹⁷ Chatterjee 240.

in the house as merely Nikhilesh's passing fancy. His noble intentions did not hold any significance for them.

In the novel, Tagore portrays Nikhilesh as an almost unreal character, who has highly liberal and elevated ideas regarding women's role in the private and public world. Nikhilesh gives Bimala the freedom to participate in the outer world, because he wanted her to be his equal in the public sphere. He says, as Bimala recounts, 'I would like you to be mine in the world out there. We need to settle our accounts in that space' (221). Even when Nikhilesh becomes aware of the growing attraction between Bimala and Sandip, he does not put a stop to it because 'he values love only when given out of free will and is open to competition with the outside world and not as an obligation or under duress'.¹⁸ He was even prepared to walk away from his marriage, if Bimala's life in the public world did not include him:

I shall not lose faith; I will wait [...] when Bimala has left the home behind, the rules binding her to those boundaries no longer operate. Once she reconciles with the unfamiliar world, and comes to an agreement with it, I shall see where my place lies. If [...] there is no room for me, then I will know that everything I lived with it for all these years was a lie [...] If that day comes, I will not protest; slowly and silently I will move away. (244)

Nikhilesh is supportive not only of women's education and their entry into the public sphere, but he is also prepared for the consequences of their free choices, and independent decisions. Although Mary Wollstonecraft had identified virtue and morality as one of the outcomes of women's education, Tagore shows that Nikhilesh does not want to impose any standards of virtue on Bimala. Nikhilesh is portrayed as a person who would allow his wife to search for her own identity, without any moral boundaries.

Late nineteenth-century Bengali society suffered from the ideological confusion regarding what to accept and what not from the West. However, along with the formation of the discourse of nationalism in the latter half of the century, 'an attempt was made to define the social and moral principles for locating the position of women in the "modern" world of the nation'.¹⁹ Chatterjee quotes Bhudev Mukhopadhyay's nationalist answer to the problem, which was keeping women separated in the society because if they continuously eat, drink, converse and travel with men outside their home, their manners may become 'coarse' and be devoid of any 'spiritual' qualities.²⁰ The point was hammered home that in the Arya system, 'the wife is a goddess', whereas, in the European system, she is a 'partner and companion'.²¹ In the new norm for organising family life and determining conduct for women of the 'modern' world, the 'home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality' and they must not lose their 'essentially spiritual' virtues.²²

¹⁸ Krishna Kripalani, *Tagore: A Life* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1985) 149.

¹⁹ Chatterjee 241.

²⁰ Chatterjee 242.

²¹ Chatterjee 243.

²² Chatterjee 243.

In *Personality* (1917), which is a structured exposition of Tagore's spiritual thoughts, he provides an answer to the confusion of the society regarding the role and position of the modern women through his piece on 'Woman'. Here Tagore is critical of the western woman's 'restlessness' and instead advocates the 'passive' and 'self-sacrificing' qualities of women as naturally nurturing 'mothers' of their race.²³ He clearly states that 'domestic life' should not be the only option for women and their lives should be full of concrete 'human activities' and not merely 'abstract efforts to organize'.²⁴ Tagore's objective is unambiguous: 'Woman should use her power to break through the surface and go to the centre of things.'²⁵ He further invokes a call for action: 'She must restore the lost social balance [...] The time has come when woman's responsibility has become greater than ever before, when her field of work has far transcended the domestic sphere of life.'²⁶ In his short story 'Apachirita' or 'Woman Unknown' (published in 1914), Tagore had portrayed, in Kalyani, a character who is not only liberal minded, independent and educated, but has also decided not to marry and confine herself in the domestic space, and instead respond to a greater mission, which she calls 'my mother's command', the reference being to her motherland.²⁷ She has decided to dedicate her life to a noble project – women's education in her country.

In *Home and the World*, Tagore shows that the involvement in the public sphere should not induce women to neglect the private world. Bimala, misguided under the spell of Sandip, takes her private life for granted, and almost like a thief, she steals from her husband's treasury. For the perceived good of the public world, she betrays her private world. She realises her mistake when it is already too late and her journey towards self-awareness has taken an irreversible course:

I had failed to separate my home from the world. Today I have robbed my home, and therefore robbed the land; for this sin, my home was lost to me in the same instant that my land slipped away from me. Had I gone begging in order to serve the country, and even lost my life before completing my service, that incomplete service would have been accepted by God as obeisance. But theft was no worship – how would I hand this to my country? (342-43)

Eventually, Bimala acquires self-knowledge and breaks out of the spell of the words that Sandip casts on her. She sees beyond the façade that Sandip had created, and during that process, she gets assistance from Amulya, another activist of the nationalist movement, who was also manipulated by Sandip. The novel highlights the necessity and importance of striking the right balance between the private and public sphere, a message that is pertinent even today.

²³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Essays* (Kolkata: Rupa, 2004) 226-27.

²⁴ Tagore, *Selected Essays* 228-29.

²⁵ Tagore, *Selected Essays* 229.

²⁶ Tagore, *Selected Essays* 232.

²⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Woman Unknown'; *Aparichita* 1914, translated Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Selected Short Stories* edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) 230.

Gender, Myth and Nation

The nationalist project, while trying to resolve the women's question, had created the idea of the 'new' woman which was a product of the 'new' patriarchy that had started defining the role of the modern Indian woman. Keeping Foucault's argument in mind, we can see that during this time in India, the construction of the 'new woman' was controlled, organised and distributed through several channels by the powerful nationalist discourse. Nationalism had incorporated several elements from the tradition, but they were reconstructed to suit the changing modern world. As Chatterjee points out, 'the new woman of nationalist ideology was accorded a status of cultural superiority to the westernised women of the wealthy parvenu families' and the new woman was expected to attain 'a superior national culture' through her own efforts and 'newly acquired freedom'.²⁸ One goal of the nationalist ideology was to make women culturally refined through formal education. According to Chatterjee, it is this particular nationalist construction of 'both emancipation and self-emancipation of women' that explained why 'the early generation of educated women themselves so keenly propagated the nationalist idea of the "new woman"'.²⁹ Women now had a new social responsibility that at the same time moved them both towards emancipation and legitimate subordination under the new patriarchy. Chatterjee argues that this patriarchy, like any other hegemonic force, combined authority and subtle persuasion that was 'expressed most generally in an inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes: the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother'.³⁰ This ideological form along with 'mythological inspiration' became an overriding trait of femininity in the new woman, highlighting the 'spiritual' qualities of 'self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, etc.'³¹

Bengali nationalism, by the turn of the century, had started embracing extremism, and during the *swadeshi* movement in Bengal, women's participation in nationalist activities had increased. Revolutionary groups had started developing a 'goddess-centred nationalist rhetoric' where 'anti-British feeling was imbued with a Hindu nationalism in which Kali was repeatedly invoked'.³² Worshipping of Durga and Kali was one way of emphasising the 'energy, nature and action: prakriti and the martial aspects of shakti, which can be both protective, as in Durga, and erotically destructive, as in Kali'.³³ This led to the creation of new mother images that became influential in the mainstream discourse and started defining 'new spaces for women'.³⁴ Thus women's role in nationalist struggles was determined by the mother image and power of 'Shakti.' Myths related to Shakti were reconstructed into the idea of Mother India, and this rebuilding of the image also facilitated the women's space as a safe one in the public domain. Twentieth century had witnessed a major change in the role of

²⁸ Chatterjee 245.

²⁹ Chatterjee 246.

³⁰ Chatterjee 248.

³¹ Chatterjee 249.

³² Kumar 44.

³³ Kumar 45.

³⁴ Kumar 47.

women across the world. Western women had started participating actively in domestic and international politics, and they had begun to enter the work force in various capacities, especially later during the two world wars, as air-raid wardens, spies, decoders, etc. The scenario in India was different. In India, participation in the nationalist movement seemed to pave the way for women to attain a space in the public realm. The movement gave them a chance to be a part of something greater and more meaningful than their everyday ordinary domestic existence.

In *The Home and the World*, by the turn of the century, Tagore shows that true emancipation for women needs to come from within, and women must learn to choose what to incorporate into their identity. The novel identifies the idealistic and opportunistic overtones of the nationalist movement. Not everyone involved in the movement was guided by a desire to serve the nation; some were in it for their own vested interests. Sandip is portrayed as a person who is more interested in projecting a glamorous persona, and impressing people with his vision and eloquence, which added to the delusional aspect of the movement. To this end, his involvement in the movement was self-serving. Sandip does not shy away from espousing the concept of ‘free love’, and of the necessity of women to let go of their attachments to their husbands and their chastity, in order to be able to serve the nation more effectively. As Mihaela Gligor points out, Tagore in this novel ‘dramatizes how exploitation, violence and killing become ritual acts when the individual sacrifices his/her self to an abstraction, and nationalism is put on a pedestal, sacrificing righteousness and conscience’.³⁵ The evidence is in Tagore’s other writings as well. In his essay on ‘Nationalism,’ Tagore writes that the ideals that take form in social institutions must regulate ‘passions and appetites for the harmonious development’ of humans and help them ‘cultivate disinterested love’ for fellow creatures.³⁶ He argues that if ideologies and revolutions drift away from the everyday realities, then they tend to become empty, dangerous and problematic. Sandip, although he begins as a captivating revolutionary figure, soon loses his way. Instead of continuing dispassionate and disinterested action, as Krishna advises Arjuna to follow in *The Bhagavat Gita*, Sandip stoops to personal gains.

Towards the end of the first autobiographical entry of Bimala, there is mention of a debate between Nikhilesh and Sandip. While Nikhilesh argues in favour of truth, knowledge, and clarity, Sandip promotes emotion, impulse, and imagination. When Sandip defends the *Vande Mataram* mantra identifying the nation with mother goddess, he identifies men with dry logic and intellect, and women with elemental passion and intuition (235-36). Bimala falls prey to this masculine-feminine stereotype, even to the extent of accepting the mystifying ‘*shakti*’, that is an almost divine power of a woman in the images of ‘Mother Nature, Mother Shakti and Mother Mahamaya’ and ‘Kali’ (282, 285). It appears that Bimala’s deep-seated yearning for power, and her admiration for Sandip’s rugged manliness, makes her accept the mythical

³⁵ Mihaela Gligor, ‘The Woman, the Country, and the World in Rabindranath Tagore’s View’, *Women and Tagore: Recreating the Space in New Millennium* edited by Rajasri Basu (New Delhi: Abhijeet Publications, 2012) 90.

³⁶ Tagore, *Selected Essays* 251.

shakti stereotype, renamed as ‘Queen Bee’ by Sandip (249). Bimala felt that she needed to prove to Sandip how powerful she was:

In his eyes I was Shakti – the goddess of power! With his powers of articulation, he had explained to me time and again that the supreme Shakti revealed itself to different people in the form of a special person. (301)

Sandip plays on her inherent weaknesses and lack of awareness, and temporarily gains her unwavering faith, which subsequently induces Bimala to steal from her husband’s treasury.

In the novel we find a lot of intertextuality that draws attention to the goal that the new patriarchy intended for women. Bimala not only reads English novels, but also has convinced the aged grandmother-in-law into enjoying their translated versions. Sandip also gives some Western novels to Bimala which contained ‘advanced’ views on gender relations, and certainly Sandip’s intention is not inspired by his love of literature, as he discusses ‘exchange of English and Vaishnav poetry’, but by his desire of seduction, and of moulding and initiating Bimala to ‘free love’ (271). One has to wonder why Bimala feels the need to suddenly hide the ‘modern’ book within a volume of the nineteenth-century American poet, Longfellow, when Sandip enters the room (256). Had the patriarchal discourse decided which books were recommended reading for women, and had some books been identified as clearly dangerous for the female mind and thus forbidden? Sandip tells Bimala not to shy away from reading such books, but that advice means to serve his end only. Sandip also draws arguments from the ancient Indian epic, *The Ramayana*. He claims that Sita could not have maintained her chastity and would have succumbed to passion if a virile character like Ravana had kept her in close proximity and not in the distant woods (284). This brings to mind how Satyajit Ray adapted the novel for his film *Ghare Baire* in 1985, where the title of the film blazes on the screen and fire rages all around the title signifying burning in the home as well as outside. Ray reworks the myth of Sita emerging from fire as a proof of her chastity through the emergence of Bimala on the screen for the first time. He shows the receding of fire followed by Bimala’s voice stating that she has just stepped out of the fire.

Bimala’s journey from the private world into the public sphere reflects a departure from the traditional gender roles. The novel highlights the need for women to overcome their inner inhibitions and participate in the outer world, but at the same time suggests that a balance between the private and the public sphere is necessary for women’s growth and emancipation. Blind adherence to either tradition, represented by the ‘home’, or to revolution, represented by the ‘world’, is seen as problematic by Tagore. Nationalism, no doubt, had played an important role in women’s emancipation in India as it drew women out of their homes into the world outside. Tagore seems to have been troubled by the exploitative, and often reckless, nature of the nationalist movement, and wanted to caution women about the pitfalls of becoming seduced by the glamour and apparent promise of the movement. Tagore positions the two male protagonists in stark contrast to each other. While Nikhilesh is contemplative, philosophical, non-aggressive, and respectful of others’ autonomy, Sandip is exactly the opposite. Sandip’s character represents the masculine stereotype whereas Nikhilesh’s character seems to suggest an alternative form of masculinity. Both Sandip and

Nikhilesh desire Bimala to come out in the public sphere as each try to construct the new woman. But neither is able to bring about the required emancipation in her. Bimala never quite becomes the ‘new woman’.

The novel ends with Nikhilesh severely injured but not yet dead. There is an amusing story about a juvenile reader who had written to Tagore enquiring about the fate of Nikhilesh, to which he had replied: ‘There is no doubt that the condition of Nikhilesh is extremely critical. But he might still be saved if he is treated by a really good doctor such as Nilratan Sarkar’.³⁷ In the novel, Tagore describes the scene in evocative language:

‘A palanquin and a doolie drew into the gates. Doctor Mathur walked beside the palanquin. The estate manager asked, ‘Doctor, what do you think?’

The doctor said, ‘Can’t say for sure. Serious head injury.’

‘And Amulyababu?’

‘He took a bullet in the chest. He is no more.’ (394)

Tagore had deliberately left the novel open-ended, perhaps to let the readers decide whether Bimala gets a second chance or not. Ray, in his film, gets rid of the ambivalent ending and shows the death of Nikhilesh with certainty. The film ends with Bimala’s image transforming from wearing a coloured sari to a white one, signifying widowhood. The widowhood that Ray casts on Bimala is perhaps her inevitable fate like that of the other women in the family. In the novel, Tagore does not show Bimala having any children of her own. The closest she comes to being a mother is when Amulya refers to her as elder sister. Symbolically, she loses her child at the end of the novel and is on her way to becoming a widow. Her life becomes no different than that of her sister-in-law, regarding whom she had expressed antagonistic feelings throughout. Under the new patriarchy, she was on her way to becoming the ‘new woman’ but her progress is hindered by the false essentialisms of the ideology imposed upon her by both Sandip and Nikhilesh, that had put her initiation in process. She is trapped within the power structure of the patriarchal nationalistic discourse.

Tagore argued for women’s autonomy through his works and constructed new female images to inspire the future generations. In his works, he portrayed different women characters who actively participate in the public sphere. They acquire education, but still need to make the transition from naivety to maturity. I have argued elsewhere that Tagore has shown a reversal of the culturally constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity in the context of his story ‘Woman Unknown’ which was published two years before *Home and the World*. In that story, Tagore shows the female protagonist Kalyani as beautiful and charming, but lacking ‘the other feminine tags such as coyness, quietude, delicacy, timidity, and so on’; while the male protagonist in the story is shown as ‘obedient, anxious, indecisive, and

³⁷ Sanjukta Dasgupta, Sudeshna Chakravarti, and Mary Mathew, *Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family and Gender in Tagore’s Fiction and Films* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2013) 149. Sir Nilratan Sarkar (1861-1943) was a famous Indian doctor who was also a philanthropist and a supporter of the *swadeshi* movement.

fantasy-prone,' Kalyani is 'rebellious, fearless, resolute, and practical'.³⁸ Kalyani is encouraged by her father, whereas Bimala is encouraged by her husband and also by her husband's friend. Just like Bimala, Ela in Tagore's last novel *Four Chapters (Char Adhyay)*, 1934), is a victim of manipulation and exploitation in the name of love, freedom, and nationalism. While Tagore shows active participation of women in the political sphere in some of his other works, we do not see the complete materialisation of a female political voice in *Home and the World*. His objective seems to be to highlight the exploitation of naive women who were being drawn into the glamour and prospects of the public sphere for the first time. These ideas are pertinent even for the modern Indian woman of the twenty-first century. As the gender roles continue to evolve, and the traditional and patriarchal notions of what constitutes 'masculine' or 'feminine' undergo transformation, these ideas assume more significance. What Tagore seemed to stress, which is as valid now as it was a hundred years ago, is that the entry of women into the public sphere should be guided by education, information and clear judgement, and not be dictated solely by passions or emotions. The case of Bimala serves to remind us that all the participants of any revolutionary movement may not necessarily have the best interests of the country or its people at heart, and certain self-serving, corrupt people may take advantage of unsuspecting newcomers.

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³⁸ Paromita Mukherjee, 'The Strangeness Within: Gender and Identity in Tagore's Short Story, "Woman Unknown"', *Women and Tagore: Recreating the Space in New Millennium* edited by Rajasri Basu (New Delhi: Abhijeet Publications, 2012) 18.

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