

# Nationalism And Rabindranath Tagore

Nitish Bhooshetty  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Government Women's First Grade College, Kalaburagi

**ABSTRACT:** Nation and Nationalism are two emotionally rooted themes of Literature. Both of them have encouraged writers to explore literature as a medium to convey ideas and messages related to Nation, Nationalism vis a vis Individual identity. Rabindranath Tagore has explored these issues both theoretically as well as creatively in his works. This article seeks to present some of the basic ideas and issues portrayed by Tagore in relation to Nation and Nationalism in his works.

**KEYWORDS:** Nation, Nationalism, Individual Identity, Tagore, Gora, Home and the World

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) hailed from an affluent Bengali family. He holds the distinction of being the first non-European to be awarded the Nobel Prize for his renowned work "Geetanjali." Between 1879 and 1880, Tagore pursued his education at University College in London, an experience that profoundly influenced him. During his time in England, he engaged with distinguished professors and was deeply inspired by Western authors. The romantic poetry of Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth, as well as the works of eminent Victorians like Tennyson and Browning, left a lasting imprint on Tagore's literary sensibilities. He avidly explored the literary creations of Shakespeare and Thomas Browne. This exposure to eminent authors significantly shaped Tagore's poetic style, especially when he wrote in English. Tagore authored seven novels, several of which were translated into English.

The term 'nation' carries a multitude of meanings, and its connotation has evolved significantly over time. Etymologically, it finds its roots in the Old French word 'nacion', which traces back to the Latin 'natio', meaning "that which has been born." French Orientalist Ernest Renan, in his 1882 lecture titled "What is a Nation?" at the Sorbonne, highlights that the concept of the nation is relatively recent and has historical origins. Renan elucidates:

"Nations...are something fairly new in history. Antiquity was unfamiliar with them; Egypt, China, and ancient Chaldea were not nations. They were governed by rulers considered as divine figures. Neither Egypt nor China had citizens in the modern sense. Classical antiquity had various forms of governance such as republics, municipal kingdoms, confederations, and empires, yet the concept of nations as we understand it today did not exist." (quoted in Bhabha 9)

Johann Herder, a German thinker, was among the first to employ the term 'nation'. Through his perspective on nationalism, Herder instilled a sense of pride among Germans. By defining nationalism and disseminating nationalistic messages, he fostered sentiments of patriotism and love for nation and culture within society. Herder asserted: "He who has lost his patriotic spirit has lost himself and the whole world around him," while also emphasizing that "in a certain sense, every human perfection is national" (T. C. W. Blanning 259).

"Nationalism is a belief or political ideology that involves an individual identifying with, or becoming attached to, one's nation," according to the Merriam- Webster Dictionary. "Nationalism is a political ideology that has its roots in nationalism." A love of one's own country as well as all things associated to it, such as the national flag, music, tales, monuments, and history, is what is meant when the word "nationalism" is used. Additionally, it refers to a feeling of pride in all that is connected to one's nation. This type of dedication is sometimes referred to as "patriotism," and for good reason. There is no distinction between the love that we have for our own family and the love that we have for our own nation when it comes to how deeply we feel those feelings. It is thought that the first person to utilize this statement was Johan Herder, a prophet who resided in Germany at the time. Through the implementation of his nationalist beliefs, Herder was successful in instilling Germans with a strong feeling of patriotic pride in their country. He was able to instill a feeling of patriotism and nationalism in the populace as well as assist the people in creating a love for their own country and culture by using his notion of nationalism and many other national themes. He also assisted the people in establishing a love for their own country and culture. Herder provides evidence that "in a certain sense, every human perfection is national," while simultaneously drawing attention to the fact that "he that has lost his patriotic spirit has lost himself and the whole worlds about himself." Herder makes the point that "he that has lost his patriotic spirit has lost himself and the whole worlds about himself."

The novels- "The Home & the World", "Kavita", "Shesher" and "Four Chapters" were initially written in Bengali but Tagore himself translated the "The Home and the World" into English. The Four Chapters was published in English in 1950 posthumously. The songs of "Gitanjali" were first published in English while Rabindranath Tagore was residing in England. A master of poetry, Tagore had already composed over a thousand lines of verse before reaching the age of eighteen. His contributions to both English and Bengali literature are widely acknowledged, with his works bringing delight to the people of Bengal. Even the translated versions of his novels garnered admiration. Esteemed authors such as W.B. Yeats, C.F. Andrews, Henry Newman, and others praised Tagore's mastery of the English language.

Rabindranath Tagore lived and experienced the British colonial rule in India, and the societal circumstances and national movements he witnessed left a lasting impression on his literary works. This era coincided with the peak of the Indian national movement, during which various revolutionary factions endeavored to instill a sense of national pride among the populace. Tagore epitomizes this epoch marked by the fluctuating tides of nationalistic fervor and the struggle for independence. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel, Pandit Nehru, and Sarojini Naidu sought to ignite the flame of nationalism in the hearts of every Indian. Literature is often regarded as a reflection of society, and Tagore's literary works serve as a vivid portrayal of this notion. His creative expressions are influenced by elements such as nationalism, colonialism, and spirituality. For those seeking insight into the Indian freedom movement and the myriad social, political, and economic issues of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, exploring Tagore's literary repertoire provides a comprehensive understanding. Through his writings, one can delve into the complexities of Indian society, its struggles, aspirations, and the relentless pursuit of freedom.

Rabindranath Tagore, the first Nobel laureate in Asia, stands as a towering figure known for his immense range and unparalleled variety of talents. Though renowned primarily for his poetry, Tagore's

proress extended to the realm of short stories, some of which are regarded as among the finest ever written. Additionally, his enigmatic paintings initiated a new modernist trend in Indian art. Tagore's songs, popularly known as Rabindra Sangeet, have become an integral aspect of Bengali culture. Beyond his creative endeavours, Tagore made significant contributions to public life. He championed social, religious, and educational reforms, establishing the Shantiniketan school, which later evolved into Visva-Bharati University. He advocated for rural development through initiatives such as cooperatives, small-scale industries, and microfinance. Tagore's concern for political freedom was evident throughout his life, though he remained more of a philosopher than a political activist.

Tagore grew up amidst the burgeoning forces of the Indian Renaissance. His upbringing, characterized by a household steeped in music and piety, cultivated his sensibilities and shaped his creative outlook. Tagore's novels serve as imaginative reflections of the tumultuous times he lived in, presenting ideals of Indian national consciousness and the enlightened soul. Tagore's legacy lies in his infusion of liberal humanism into the cultural landscape of his era. Rejecting the notion of irreconcilable differences between East and West, he advocated for a creative fusion of old and new, paving the way for a vibrant cultural synthesis. Throughout his life, Tagore remained committed to fostering a harmonious coexistence between tradition and progress, leaving an indelible mark on Indian literature and thought. Tagore's father Debendranath Tagore in his letter to Max Müller in 1884 wrote:

While the East was deficient in certain branches of knowledge which she must learn from the West, there were 'other things all her own' which even the Western scholar might turn to it with pleasure and profit. (Müller, 1884)

In the same likeness to his father we can see that even Rabindranath Tagore had similar views in concern to the West, he believed that the East and the West could learn from each other. He maintained that human values were fundamentally universal, regardless of geographical boundaries, and advocated for increased mutual understanding to bridge apparent divides.

Tagore's novels, such as "Gora," "The Home and the World," "Chaturanga," and "Four Chapters," intricately explore various facets of colonial India. Themes of nationalism and spirituality permeate his literary works, with "Gora" particularly brimming with national pride. The eponymous protagonist, Gora, is portrayed as a devout Hindu raised in an orthodox family, displaying admirable devotion to his nation and religion. "Gora," Tagore's longest and most acclaimed novel, offers a vivid portrayal of the social, political, and cultural milieu of the educated Bengali middle class. Set in Calcutta, the novel delves into the conflicts between the Brahmo Samaj and Hindu and Christian missionaries in colonial India, shedding light on the divergent ideologies of these groups. While "Gora" is deeply rooted in Indian history and society, Tagore infuses elements of his imagination and observations, lending the work autobiographical undertones. Nationalism serves as a central theme, with Gora initially embodying a fervent Hindu nationalist before transitioning towards internationalism. Despite his nationalist convictions, Gora's character reflects a nuanced perspective influenced by rich Indian traditions and culture. In contrast to contemporary trends, Gora embodies a steadfast commitment to Indian culture and traditions, proudly donning traditional attire and rejecting blind imitation of Western lifestyles. Tagore portrays Gora as a true patriot, emphasizing the importance of genuine adherence to one's cultural heritage over superficial displays of nationalism.

The author Ashis Nandy, in his work titled "The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self," discusses the distinctions that exist between anti-colonialism and nationalism. Nandy believes that Tagore in the beginning "rejected the idea of nationalism but practiced anti-imperialist politics all his life... at a time when nationalism, patriotism, and anti-imperialism were a single concept for most Indians." Tagore and Gandhi have the same moral sensibilities, and Gandhi endorses the viewpoint that Tagore takes.

The most important nationalist novel of Tagore is "Gora", which serves as a profound reflection of the socio-political and cultural landscape prevalent among educated Bengalis during its time. Through its intricate narrative and rich character development, the novel provides a comprehensive portrayal of the complexities within Bengali society, capturing the essence of Tagore's vision for a harmonious and inclusive India. By depicting characters from diverse backgrounds and ideologies, Tagore highlights the interconnectedness of individuals regardless of caste or creed, emphasizing the importance of unity amidst diversity.

Moreover, "Gora" marks a significant evolution in Tagore's own ideological journey, symbolizing his transition from a narrow nationalist perspective to a broader internationalist outlook. Through the character of Gora and his experiences, Tagore advocates for a world free from the constraints of nationalism, where the bonds of humanity supersede geographical and cultural divides. This vision aligns with Tagore's belief in the universal brotherhood of mankind, rooted in the principle of universal kinship. "Gora" stands as a timeless testament to Tagore's philosophical depth and literary prowess, offering readers a profound exploration of identity, society, and the human condition. In its exploration of nationalism, internationalism, and the quest for universal harmony, the novel continues to resonate with audiences worldwide, inspiring contemplation and dialogue on the values that unite us as a global community.

Tagore asserts that India, with its diverse races, religions, and languages, does not fit the Western concept of nationhood. Instead, India's mission has been to accommodate its diverse quests and integrate different cultures into its social fabric. Despite a history marked by invasions and conquests, India's social history focuses on assimilation and unity. The assimilative capacity of Indian civilization was so vast that earlier invaders, such as the Greeks, Sakas, and Huns, were absorbed into Indian society and lost their distinct identities. Therefore, India's social history prioritizes the unity of its people, irrespective of their origins.

“To India has been her problem from the beginning of history – it is the race problem. Races, ethnologically different, have in this country come into close contact. This fact has been and still continues to be the most important one in our history” (Nationalism 11)

Tagore advocated for Western nations to break free from their narrow perspectives and foster a global community grounded in harmony and cooperation. He believed that only through such unity could lasting peace be achieved. Tagore dismissed the notion that organizations like the League of Nations or the United Nations, which prioritize the interests of powerful nations, could bring about true peace. Instead, he emphasized the importance of bridging the gap between the East and the West to foster mutual understanding. He envisioned a world where the East's creative ideals and the West's scientific



advancements could coalesce, allowing humanity to thrive and progress equally. Tagore's nationalism, he asserted, promotes love for one's own country without harboring animosity towards others. It acknowledges the need for collaboration among nations while respecting and preserving differences, allowing for the free development and expression of virtues in all.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World. A Derivative Discourse?* London: Zed Books Ltd., 1986.
- Fanon, Franz. "National Culture." Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2003. 153-57.
- Ghose, Sisirkumar. *Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1986, rpt.1994), 12.
- Gobinda Prasad Sarma, *Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1978)
- Guha, Ramachandra. *India After Gandhi*. Noida: Picador, 2008.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *Early Novels in India*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2002.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Roy, Rahul. *Third World Protest: Between Home and the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010
- Roy, Dipankar. Representation of the 'National Self'- Novelistic Portrayal of a New Cultural Identity in Gora". *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*. 2.4. (2010): 385-404
- Tagore, Ravindranath. *Gora*. Transl. Pearson, W.W. from *Gora* (1910). London: Macmillan, 1924;rpt. Madras: Macmillan, 1976.
- . *Greater India*. Madras : S. Ganesan, 1921. (Authorised translation of papers read by the author in connection with the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, circa 1905-1910).
- . *Nationalism*. London: Macmillan, 1917.
- . *Rabindranath Tagore Selected Essays*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2004.
- Wright, Julia M. *Ireland, India, and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.