



# Allegories Of Nationalism And Modernity In Rabindranath Tagore's The Home And The World

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## Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* presents a profound exploration of the tension between nationalism and modernity, using allegory to examine the complexities of identity, politics, and social change in colonial India. The novel, set during the Swadeshi movement, reflects Tagore's critique of aggressive nationalism through the characters of Nikhil, Bimala, and Sandip, each symbolizing different facets of the national consciousness. Nikhil embodies rationality, moral responsibility, and a modern, liberal worldview, advocating for peaceful reform and individual freedom. In contrast, Sandip represents a radical, passionate nationalism driven by emotional fervor and self-interest, while Bimala, caught between the two men, illustrates the nation's struggle to reconcile tradition with modernity. Through these characters, Tagore delves into the ethical dilemmas of nationalistic zeal, highlighting the potential dangers of blind patriotism and the erosion of moral values. The allegorical elements of the novel serve to underscore the conflicts between spiritual ideals and political aspirations, tradition and progress, and personal freedom and collective identity, making *The Home and the World* a critical commentary on the challenges of forging a modern nation-state.

**Keywords:** National consciousness, rationality, moral responsibility, ethical dilemmas, personal freedom, collective identity, modern nation-state.

## An Insight into The Home and the World

The *Home and the World* serves as an allegory of the failure of Indian nationalist efforts, focusing on the tension between "Home" and "World," tradition and modernity, and the challenges nationalism faces in reconciling these opposing forces. The novel presents an alternative vision for nationalism, suggesting that true freedom for India can only be achieved by transcending ideological divisions and embracing a synthesis of values that contribute to the nation's development. As a practical realization of this vision, Tagore established

Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan in 1921. The Home and the World was published a decade after the controversial partition of Bengal and the rise of the "Bande Mataram" slogan, first in Bengali (1915) and later in English (1919). The Swadeshi movement, which arose in response to the partition, not only galvanized Bengal but also spread across India, marking the beginning of a truly national movement and a contest over its leadership (Rege 39). "Bande Mataram" became the rallying cry of resistance against the partition and, like Swadeshi, resonated throughout the subcontinent (Iyengar 366). However, divisions within the Indian Congress over the direction of Swadeshi led to a split: extremists championed Swadeshi, asserting the superiority of India's economy, politics, and arts, while moderates focused on social reform.

After years of conflict between nationalist factions, tensions seemed to ease with the 1917 Declaration, which made India a more directly controlled colony in terms of governance and economy. However, once Mahatma Gandhi took leadership of the Indian National Congress in the early 1920s, the non-cooperation movement regained momentum across India. The Swadeshi ideals were revitalized, the economic system was restructured, and government schools and colleges were widely boycotted. By January 1921, when nearly all colleges in Calcutta, Bengal's administrative and intellectual hub, were shut down, Tagore expressed his dissatisfaction with Gandhi's "narrowness of aims." In a letter to Charles Freer Andrews, a professor at Santiniketan, Tagore lamented that the non-cooperation movement contradicted his vision of a nation built on cooperation. He noted the irony of advocating for cultural collaboration between East and West while the doctrine of non-cooperation was being promoted in India. Tagore argued that the radical nationalist push for self-reliance, rooted in the boycott principle central to the Swadeshi movement, had created a "spirit of non-cooperation" that was "electric," driven by a pervasive "spirit of sacrifice."

Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* (1916) offers a complex interplay of nationalism, modernity, and personal relationships, explored through the allegorical dimensions of its central characters and the socio-political movements of the time. Tagore presents a critique of nationalist fervor through a nuanced exploration of the Swadeshi movement, gender roles, and the conflict between tradition and modernity in colonial Bengal. The novel intertwines political allegory with personal drama, making it a profound commentary on India's socio-political landscape during the early 20th century.

### **Allegories of Nationalism**

Nationalism in *The Home and the World* is personified through the character of Sandip, a charismatic and ambitious leader who embodies the aggressive form of Swadeshi. Sandip's rhetoric and actions reflect an allegory of militant nationalism, driven by emotional appeal and the desire for power rather than genuine concern for the nation's welfare. Sandip manipulates Bimala, the wife of Nikhil, to serve his cause, representing how nationalism can exploit personal identities and traditional domestic spaces for political gains. As Tagore critiques through Sandip, nationalism can become a force that undermines ethical principles and humanistic values when divorced from moral integrity (Bagchee, 2010).

Nikhil, in contrast, stands as an allegory for a more philosophical and restrained nationalism, rooted in reason and humanism. His ideals reflect Tagore's vision of nationalism as a concept that should embrace universalism and moral responsibility. Nikhil's refusal to participate in the Swadeshi boycott despite being a landowner affected by foreign trade represents Tagore's critique of narrow, exclusionary nationalism, which, according to the author, often disregards the well-being of individuals for the sake of collective identity (Mukherjee, 1994).

The tension between Sandip's aggressive nationalism and Nikhil's more modern, ethical approach to national identity highlights Tagore's ambivalence toward the Swadeshi movement. Tagore, though sympathetic to the goals of Indian independence, was deeply critical of its potential for violence and the suppression of individual freedom. In this sense, the novel can be read as an allegory for the dangers of unbridled nationalism that sacrifices personal liberty for nationalistic zeal (Sen, 1999).

### Allegories of Modernity

The concept of modernity in *The Home and the World* is explored through the characters' responses to changing societal roles, particularly concerning gender. Bimala's journey of self-discovery is central to the allegory of modernity, as she transitions from the seclusion of the zenana (women's quarters) to the world of political activism. Her attraction to Sandip's nationalist fervor and her subsequent disillusionment represent the struggles of modern Indian women in negotiating the expectations of traditional domesticity and the allure of the public sphere (Chaudhuri, 1984).

Bimala's internal conflict between her devotion to her husband, Nikhil, and her attraction to Sandip's passionate nationalism can be interpreted as an allegory for India's struggle between traditional values and the emerging modern world. While Bimala's initial involvement with Sandip symbolizes the excitement and idealism associated with nationalism and modernity, her eventual return to Nikhil suggests Tagore's advocacy for a balanced approach that respects both tradition and progress. Tagore's portrayal of Bimala's inner turmoil illustrates the broader societal conflicts faced by India as it grappled with the implications of modernity during colonial rule (Dasgupta, 2005).

Tagore uses the private space of the home as a metaphor for the nation itself, with the "world" outside representing the political realm of nationalism and modernity. The interactions between Bimala, Sandip, and Nikhil within the domestic setting reflect the tensions between traditional domesticity and the political forces reshaping India at the time. Tagore allegorizes the home as a site of personal and ideological struggle, where the forces of nationalism and modernity clash, often leading to personal sacrifice and emotional conflict (Chatterjee, 2002).

## Literature Reviews

For a literature review on the allegories of nationalism and modernity in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*, you can draw upon key Indian researchers who have analyzed the themes of this novel. Below are some examples of Indian scholars' contributions:

**(2007, Sen's)** article reflects on the tension between nationalism and Tagore's advocacy for global humanism, evident in the allegorical representations of Nikhil and Sandip. The novel, through its narrative, articulates the conflict between the nation-centric perspective of modernity and the universal ethical ideals that transcend national boundaries. Sen highlights Bimala's journey as a metaphor for the Indian nation, struggling to find its identity between conflicting ideologies of Swadeshi (nationalism) and universalism (modernity).

**(2010, Das)** points out that Tagore's portrayal of nationalism and modernity is nuanced, as he critiques both the Swadeshi movement and the blind acceptance of Western modernity. In *The Home and the World*, Sandip's brand of nationalism is shown as being devoid of ethical grounding, while Nikhil represents a more grounded and humane form of modernity that is compatible with Indian traditions. This negotiation between tradition and modernity reflects Tagore's vision for a modern India that retains its ethical core.

**(2012, Chaudhuri)** explores how Tagore critiques the rise of nationalism and juxtaposes it with the promise of modernity in the novel. He argues that *The Home and the World* reflects Tagore's complex relationship with nationalism, where the freedom struggle is allegorized as both a source of empowerment and conflict. The modernity embodied in characters like Nikhil emphasizes ethical individualism and the personal struggle to navigate evolving societal dynamics, while the nationalism represented by Sandip critiques the growing extremism of the Swadeshi movement.

**(2015, Banerjee)** focuses on how Tagore allegorizes India's internal struggles in the novel, where characters like Nikhil and Sandip represent competing visions for the nation's future. Sandip's aggressive nationalism, while seductive, ultimately leads to chaos and destruction, whereas Nikhil's modernity promotes reason, ethical responsibility, and a cosmopolitan worldview. The novel, Banerjee argues, serves as a cautionary tale for India's political movements, urging the importance of ethical modernity over destructive nationalist fervor.

**(2018, Ghosh)** investigates Bimala's character as an allegory for India itself, caught between the competing ideologies of modernity and nationalism. Her oscillation between Sandip and Nikhil represents the country's struggle with choosing a direction for the future. Ghosh also emphasizes how Tagore critiques male-dominated nationalistic ideologies that marginalize women's roles in society, portraying a modern India that requires both personal and societal change to achieve true freedom.

These reviews show how Indian scholars have critically engaged with *The Home and the World* to understand Tagore's exploration of nationalism and modernity. The novel is seen as a rich text for

understanding the intersections between personal freedom, ethical modernity, and the challenges of political nationalism during India's independence struggle.

**Objective: To analyze the portrayal of competing ideologies of nationalism and modernity in The Home and the World.**

## Research Methodology

The research methodology for examining the allegories of nationalism and modernity in Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World will employ a qualitative, text-based approach. This study will involve a close reading of the novel, analyzing key themes, characters, and narrative structures to uncover the allegorical representations of nationalism and modernity. Literary analysis will be complemented by a review of existing scholarly literature to contextualize Tagore's work within the socio-political landscape of early 20th-century India. Comparative analysis with contemporary nationalist movements and theoretical frameworks on modernity will also be integrated to deepen the understanding of how Tagore critiques and redefines these concepts. Primary sources will include the text of the novel itself, while secondary sources will encompass academic articles, critiques, and historical texts relevant to Tagore's philosophy and the historical context of the Indian independence movement. This multifaceted approach aims to elucidate the complexities of Tagore's narrative and its implications for contemporary discussions on nationalism and modernity.

## Analysis & Discussions

Rabindranath Tagore's novel The Home and the World has not fared well among critics, with George Lukács harshly dismissing it as a "petit bourgeois yarn of the shoddiest kind." While the novel has its flaws—at times veering dangerously close to political allegory and featuring exaggerated, one-dimensional characters, particularly the radical leader Sandip—it remains significant in the context of Tagore's philosophical and political critiques. Anita Desai remains a strong advocate for the novel, acknowledging its flaws, such as the heavy rhetoric, but appreciating its "flashes of light and color" along with its "touches of tenderness and childishness." Despite its literary weaknesses, The Home and the World is crucial for understanding Tagore's concerns about the risks of political extremism. The novel centers on the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, which promoted exclusive use of Indian-made goods while rejecting foreign products. Tagore's portrayal of Swadeshi reflects his broader skepticism of organized political activity, presenting it as a force beyond individual control. In the novel, Swadeshi is described as "a flood, breaking down the dykes and sweeping all our prudence and fear before it." The narrative unfolds through the perspectives of three characters who recount their interactions in the first person. Nikhil is Bimala's husband, while Sandip is her would-be lover. Nikhil represents the progressive, selfless husband who seeks to liberate his wife from the confines of

traditional Indian marriage, while Sandip embodies selfishness and reduces relationships to raw sexuality, favoring "blunt things, bluntly put, without any finicking niceness." Initially, Bimala is depicted as innocent and fully subservient to her husband. However, she is more than just a passive figure; she is associated with Durga, the goddess of creation and destruction, and Shakti, the ultimate female principle of the universe, symbolizing the beauty, vitality, and pride of Bengal.

In *The Home and the World*, Tagore critiques mass action, seeing it as a force that threatens both freedom and individuality. The novel also foreshadows his ultimate rejection of nationalism, which he views as a dangerous manifestation of this collective action. Additionally, it lays the foundation for his vision of a new international order that encourages mutual exchange among all people. Tagore's message in the novel points to a world that is boundless and defies strict definitions. Political borders create division, hindering unity and shared understanding. Rooted in Indian philosophical tradition, Tagore is deeply concerned with darsana—the pursuit of seeing truth. He believes that the human tendency to define the world reflects a dogmatic ignorance, driven by ego. In *The Home and the World*, he calls for a return to reason, recognizing that national pride inevitably leads to arrogance and the oppression of others. His message, relevant in his time, remains significant today.

Tagore does not refer to modernity in the general sense. But what is modernity? Simply put, modernity is a concept in the humanities and social sciences, relating to a historical period marked by the Renaissance and the Age of Reason. It reflects a shift influenced by science that led to changes in long-established socio-cultural norms, attitudes, and practices, especially during the 17th century and the 18th-century Enlightenment. Some critics argue that modernity lasted until around 1930 or 1945. Tagore explores the idea of modernity through the perspectives of two protagonists, focusing on art rather than science. The key theme in his novel is the clash of ideas, specifically between Western and Eastern thought. This conflict mirrors Tagore's own inner struggle, as he portrays the tension between embracing Western culture and resisting it through the development of his two central characters.

After reading the novel, it becomes clear that Nikhilesh and Sandip share a common cultural background, specifically the bhadralok class. Their shared education plays a significant role in this connection. Despite differences in their social rank and financial status, these distinctions are overlooked under the umbrella of their bhadralok identity. Both are products of modern education and social reforms, which enable them to engage with a shared sense of modernity. They are concerned with issues like women's emancipation and the country's freedom, reflecting the contemporary bhadralok views on nationalism and gender. Therefore, their differences and similarities should be understood through the lens of bhadralok identity within the framework of modernity, rather than solely through morality and modernity, as discussed by Purkayastha.

It is undeniable that bhadralok identity often relies on internal divisions related to occupation, class origins, rank, and differing views on modernity. This identity is not homogenous but marked by contradictions and competition. These distinctions create a multi-class character within the bhadralok, driven by ideological

differences rather than direct conflict. A consensus is required to create a unified stance on issues like religion, caste, and the rejection of manual labor. The uniformity within the bhadralok class is crucial in shaping a collective response to social and economic conflicts. Generally, bhadralok refers to the upper-caste Hindu community, meaning the aspirations of the upper castes dominate this identity. Religious identity is also significant. As historian Rafiuddin Ahmed notes, the lack of Muslim representation in higher education, the effects of the Permanent Settlement on upper-class Muslim families, and issues of identity and "backwardness" prevented the formation of a similar bhadralok class within the Muslim community" (Rafiuddin Ahmed)

In *The Home and the World* (1916), the theme of modernity is explored through the contrasting perspectives of two men, Nikhilesh and Sandip. As Sharmila Purkayastha points out, the novel presents a dynamic of 'contradiction and consensus' between the two, especially in their views on nation-building, the nature of Swadeshi leaders, and gender emancipation. The 'home' and the 'world' symbolize a clash between two types of masculinities—reformist and revolutionary—and two approaches to political freedom: self-development versus boycott. Despite their differences, these contradictions reflect variations within a shared understanding of modernity. For instance, their views on women's emancipation go beyond traditional ideas. Sandip, a charismatic Swadeshi leader, captivates Bimala with his eloquent speeches on women's liberty, attempting to draw her in with his charm and allure. He introduces her to Western art and poetry, though his intentions are also sexually motivated. In contrast, Nikhilesh encourages his wife to engage with the world by teaching her about political economy and supporting her independence, including dressing in modern styles and stepping out of purdah, reflecting his progressive views on femininity. While Sandip encourages Bimala to explore a different notion of female subjectivity, Nikhilesh holds an anti-imperialist vision of the nation, whereas Sandip is concerned with internal divisions within the same framework, as noted by Purkayastha. Both characters express their views on nationhood, family, female identity, sexuality, and education from differing ideological perspectives, yet within the shared context of modernity.

Both Nikhilesh and Sandip express their views on caste and religion, which share some commonalities. In this regard, certain traditional perspectives are preserved even as they move toward modernity. Sandip celebrates and glorifies the open worship of Hindu gods and goddesses, as well as the memory of the Hindu past. However, Nikhilesh rejects Sandip's model of Hindu pride, as he believes in a secular identity that aligns with his own vision of India. Sandip's vision neither improves nor alters the conditions for Mirjan, a poor Muslim boatman who is harassed and whose livelihood is destroyed by Sandip and his followers. Additionally, there are no constructive programs for marginalized individuals like Panchu, a member of the lower caste. Historian Sumit Sarkar highlights the class dynamics of the Swadeshi movement, where wealthy zamindars and educated but unemployed upper-caste youth united, but the majority of the rural and urban poor were not effectively mobilized to join the freedom struggle. The exclusion of both wealthy Muslim landowners and poor peasants points to the communal nature of the movement, with the 1907 riots being a consequence of this politics (Sumit Sarkar)

Social progress was gradual, as seen in the character of Nikhilesh in *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World), who encourages Bimala to step beyond the confines of the antahpur (women's quarters). He expresses his desire for their relationship to extend beyond the home, saying, "I want you to find me, and I find you, in the world outside

." Nikhilesh believes that his wife should experience the world for herself, as their love can only be fully realized if their identities grow in the light of truth, rather than being limited to the deceptive notion of homebound duties. (Tagore, Rabindra Upanyas Sangraha, 852).

The concept of modernity undoubtedly offers women greater opportunities. Both protagonists embody new notions of womanhood, emphasizing conjugal equality and sexual freedom. However, the text also highlights the persistence of patriarchal dominance, which reinforces traditional customs. These elements can be interpreted as forms of new modernities that lead to fresh inequalities and confusions. Nikhilesh, as the head of the household and a progressive husband, introduces positive changes, yet his authority remains unchallenged as the male figure. He typically assumes responsibility for financial oversight and decision-making since Bimala is unable to make economic choices herself, resulting in her resorting to stealing money from him. This scenario raises questions about female freedom within the context of evolving ideas of womanhood. Nevertheless, Sandip offers Bimala a sense of sexual emancipation, which provides her with a new identity as a woman. Occasionally, Sandip consults her on political issues, but ultimately, men like Sandip wield control over this new world and its governance. Consequently, Bimala finds herself compelled to align with Sandip's perspective, echoing the sentiments of "common sense."

However, contesting modernities emphasize the clash of ideas. Nikhil and Sandip present contrasting views on national growth. Nikhil conveys his perspective through his wife, Bimala, asserting that women with darker skin are often deemed unattractive. He challenges the conventional notion of patriotism by questioning the efficacy of force:

"Use force? But for what? Can force prevail against Truth?" (45).

In contrast, Sandip advocates a different approach to national development, believing in the necessity of power: "My country does not become mine simply because it is the country of my birth. It becomes mine on the day when I am able to win it by force." The opposing beliefs of Nikhil and Sandip drive the narrative and create confusion for Bimala. Throughout the novel, Nikhil attempts to expose Bimala to the outside world and evoke her emotions but ultimately falls short. Sandip, with his passionate and fervent speech, casts a captivating spell over Bimala, a quality that Nikhil seemingly lacks.

Illusion plays a crucial role in the novel. Sandip cultivates an atmosphere of illusion that negatively impacts both his followers and the people of Bengal. The deceptive beliefs he fosters draw the population into a cult-like following. He promotes a vision of sovereignty free from external influences, promising endless

wealth and self-indulgence. Ultimately, this illusion proves to be unfounded and deceptive. Based on false ideas, it leads to the fragmentation of the nation, resulting in chaos and potential civil conflict among those with differing beliefs. Sandip enchants Bimala with these illusory concepts, asserting that she and women, in general, represent the future and the chosen path to salvation. Under his influence, Bimala becomes completely entranced, viewing herself as an active supporter of "Bande Mataram." She proclaims,

"I now fear nothing—neither myself nor anyone else. I have passed through fire. What was inflammable has turned to ashes; what remains is deathless. I have dedicated myself to the feet of him who has absorbed all my sins into the depths of his own suffering."

A significant aspect of Sandip's character is that he presents a facade of care and passion while concealing his own selfish motives and desires. He believes that Nikhil's worldview is inferior to the harsh reality he inhabits as a radical leader. Additionally, Sandip's perception of the man-woman dynamic is rooted in male dominance and female submissiveness.

In conclusion, caste, religion, and gender serve as a framework for understanding the bhadralok perspective, allowing individuals to navigate contradictions without undermining their experiences of modernity. However, the disparities in social status and opportunities are significant factors that explain why the two men are unable to envision a shared social and political future; their paths diverge, making mutual understanding challenging. Amulya's death illustrates how the destructive nature of Swadeshi politics can obliterate innocence and idealism. Both Amulya and Bimala, as followers of Sandip, perceive his true nature through his manipulative actions. Tagore effectively critiques a harmful political landscape and the destructive influences of certain individuals. This exploration of modernity reveals two culturally distinct viewpoints.

## Conclusion

The Home and the World stands as a rich allegory for nationalism and modernity in colonial India, where Tagore presents a critique of the Swadeshi movement and explores the challenges of integrating modern values with traditional life. Through the characters of Sandip, Nikhil, and Bimala, Tagore constructs a narrative that questions the ethical dimensions of nationalism and highlights the complexities of modernity in both the public and private spheres. His portrayal of these allegorical elements remains relevant in contemporary discussions of national identity and social progress, making The Home and the World a timeless exploration of India's socio-political challenges during its journey toward independence.

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