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Traversal of Boundaries in Rabindranath

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ABSTRACT:

*Nationalism defines itself as the glorification or deification of everything that belongs to one's own nation and a naked hatred for anything that belongs to the other. As Tagore believed in individual human dignity and had immense love for humanity, he rejected this venture of Nationalism. While on the one hand he reminded his countrymen of those days of the past when the whole of Eastern Asia was united in the tie of friendship and cooperation, on the other hand he denounced the spirit of violent nationalism and the deification of the country which have the potentiality to break the world into pieces. This paper aims to analyse the concept of Nationalism as revealed in the literary works of Tagore. While in *The Home and the World* and *Four Chapters* Rabindranath denounced the hypocrisies and violence associated with aggressive Nationalism and in the short story "The Patriot" problematises the meaning of patriotism, in *Gora* the very concept of Nationalism itself seems to be problematic and there is a search for an identity crossing the boundaries of religion and nation. His essays and poems reveal that it was his heart's desire to traverse the artificial boundaries and borders that keep human beings apart and his creation "Visva-bharati" is the final transformation of the idea of One World into reality. A qualitative analysis is made in keeping with the aim of this paper, the exploration of the problematic of Nationalism in the works of Rabindranath. The paper seeks to be a part of the ongoing discussions on the problematic of modern Nationalism which is sweeping over the world like a pandemic.*

Keywords: Nationalism, patriotism, humanity, identity, violence, One World.

According to Partha Chatterjee,

In its essential aspects,... nationalism represents the attempt to actualize in political terms the universal urge for liberty and progress. And yet the evidence was undeniable that it could also give rise to mindless chauvinism and xenophobia and serve as the justification for organized violence and tyranny (Chatterjee 2).

Tom Nairn, in *The Break-up of Britain* also "stresses what he calls nationalism's 'Janus-face' – the fact that it is both communal and authoritarian, friendly and bellicose, all at the same time" (in

Brennan 45). Indeed, there is a dichotomy inherent in the very concept of Nationalism as it involves wiping out of all differences among people within a limited boundary while underscoring the difference with other nations. In other words, Nationalism defines itself as the glorification and magnified love for everything that belongs to one's own nation and a stark hatred for anything that belongs to a different nation. Thus, the ideals of nationalism demolish the idea of individualism as well as the cherished concept of a unified world based on friendship and love for humanity. As Tagore believed in individual human dignity and had immense love for humanity, he rejected this venture of nationalism. Rabindranath saw the monstrosity of Nationalism and was no stranger to its disheartening outcome. As mentioned in Prasanto Kumar Pal's *Rabijiboni*, in 1916 on his way to America when Rabindranath landed on the port of Japan he

'realized for the first time ... the terrible suffering with which the whole world was afflicted. [He] saw in Japan the war trophies taken from China publicly exhibited [He] felt humiliated in [his] own mind at this primitive and brutal perpetuation of the defeat of an enemy.... Nationalism, therefore, seemed to [him] to be pure barbarism, based on pride, greed and lust for power, with wealth dominating the disease, and [he] shuddered when [he] saw the result' (Pal 100).

An attempt has been made here to examine the problematic of Nationalism as painted by Rabindranath in his literary works in his attempt to traverse the artificial boundaries and borders that keep human beings apart.

METHODOLOGY:

The central concern of the paper is to probe the problematic of modern Nationalism which is a hindrance to true human relationships across the boundaries. The paper adopts a qualitative research design as it aims at exploring the works of Rabindranath in terms of the problematic of Nationalism. A few fictional as well as non-fictional texts of Rabindranath are selected here, like *Nationalism*, *At the Cross Roads*, "The Patriot", *The Home and the World*, *Gora* and others to analyze the ambiguity of Nationalism. As secondary texts, Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* and the criticisms on Rabindranath's concept of Nationalism are referred to bring home the subject matter of this paper, the paradox of Nationalism. The paper seeks to be a part of the ongoing discussions on the problematic of modern Nationalism that is sweeping over the world like a pandemic.

EMERGENCE OF THE CONCEPT OF NATION IN INDIA:

In the essay "Nation?", Tagore referred to the French philosopher Ernest Renan and said that in Bengali there is no synonym for the word Nation. The concept of Nation as a conglomerated mass with a given geographical identity or the Nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson 15) is an upshot of the Western concept of Nation-state. In India, as a byproduct of the British regime there

was a paradigm shift from the feudal system to Nation-state accompanied by the rise of upper and middle-class who believed in making the best of British education. Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, one of the great thinkers of Bengal, considered it a fatal flaw of Indian civilization that it thinks of culture, but not in terms of Nationality. Again, a contemporary of Tagore, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay invoked the awesome deity, goddess Kali, "... 'as the mediatrix of India's freedom – perhaps to legitimize the violent sacrificial element he sought to introduce into Indian nationalism'" (Nandi 53). This is what Tagore denounced as unveiled in his novel *The Home and the World*. He was dead set against the violence and the deification of the country. To him the country signified the people of the country, not the abstract concept nation.

TAGORE'S CRITICISM OF NATIONALISM:

Tagore defined Nation as "the aspect of a whole people as an organized power" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 120). He says:

This organization incessantly keeps up the insistence of the population on becoming strong and efficient. But this strenuous effort after strength and efficiency drains man's energy from the higher nature where he is self-sacrificing and creative. For thereby man's power of sacrifice is diverted from his ultimate object, which is moral, to the maintenance of this organization, which is mechanical. Yet, in this he feels all the satisfaction of moral exaltation and therefore becomes supremely dangerous to humanity (Tagore, *Nationalism* 120).

Tagore warns us that "this nationalism is a cruel epidemic of evil that is sweeping over the human world of the present age and eating into its moral vitality" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 68). In a nutshell, Rabindranath brings to light the ugly aspects of Nationalism which has hypnotized the people at large making them forget the ideals of humanity once taught by the great thinkers of the East. Rabindranath wanted the world to be united in the tie of friendship and cooperation. While on the one hand he reminds one of those days of the past when the whole of Eastern Asia was united in the tie of friendship, on the other hand he denounces the spirit of violent nationalism and the deification of the country which have the potentiality to break the world into pieces. In *Gitanjali* 35, Rabindranath even dreams of a world which "has not been broken up into/ fragments by narrow domestic walls" (105). Here, the "walls" may be interpreted as the literal as well as metaphorical boundaries and borders of the nations which keep one separated from the other. Tagore's literary works reveal his deep love for humanity and the world as a whole, and because of this immense love for mankind, he dismisses the idea of nationalism as faulty and inadequate, and embraces internationalism. This voice of internationalism must of course be differentiated from the modern day cosmopolitanism which is based on greed for money and power. Tagore always stood for the international relations based on love, mutual understanding and cooperation. It was his heart's desire

to cross all the boundaries and borders that keep human beings and countries apart. While in *The Home and the World* and *Four Chapters* Rabindranath denounces the hypocrisies and violence associated with aggressive Nationalism, in *Gora* the very concept of Nationalism itself is problematised and there is a quest for an identity crossing the boundaries of religion and nation.

TAGORE THE NATIONALIST:

Tagore had the optimistic vision of a day when the whole of humanity will be united in a spiritual bond. He gives the lesson in respecting the differences and find out a bond of unity through them. He even warns us:

The dawn of great Tomorrow is breaking through its bank of clouds and the call of New Lifecomes with its message that man's strength is of the spirit, and not of the machine of organization. It will be the greatest sign of weakness in us, the most abject defeat, if we still cling to the atheistic faith that those nations who thrive upon their victims are great because they are powerful, and that sacrifice have to be brought to the altar of their false gods' (Tagore, *At the Cross Roads* 383).

One should not seek the power which is in killing men and plundering them. One must have the moral power to stand against all injustice and lies, and the moral power to suffer, not merely in passive apathy, but in the enthusiasm of active purpose. Along with Mohit Chakrabarti one might say that "Rabindranath is a nationalist but not of the wrong type. While he loves his country, he does not hate others. His patriotism is compatible with universal love..." (Chakrabarti 127). In the National Anthem, Rabindranath celebrates diversity which is India, while in "Sonar Bangla" he expresses his immense love for the land of his birth. Indeed, Tagore criticized the notion of political nationalism, which is against the true meaning of civilization. A true civilization cannot be confined by the boundaries and barbed wires of politics.

PATRIOTISM:

It was Tagore's conviction that his countrymen would "truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 116). In the short story "The Patriot", Nayanmohan and Kalika's patriotism is confined to the external Khaddar clothes and verbal arguments regarding the welfare of the mass and, therefore, in reality, far removed from the true love for the countrymen, while Girindra, whom Kalika believes to be unpatriotic as he "disdains to don the livery of the brand of nationalism, professed by her own party" (268), truly loves his countrymen, which is particularly evident from the incident on the road where the old man is beaten simply because he is a sweeper and has unintentionally touched something or somebody belonging to the Marwaris. It is Girindra who desires to save the old man by taking him up in their car while Kalika, who proclaims to be a patriot, refuses to travel with a sweeper. In the novel *The Home and the World*, Rabindranath expands the

horizon and it is found that to Nikhil patriotism does not stand for empty slogans, but rather a genuine love for his countrymen. When the so called patriots, like Sandip started oppression in the name of the Goddess Nation, it is Nikhil who gives shelter and protection to the poor helpless people, namely Mirjan and Panchu. Unlike Sandip who deifies the motherland and claims sacrifice, Nikhil believes in self-sacrifice for the cause of his countrymen. To Rabindranath, this is true patriotism which does not need any name to glorify itself, but resides in genuine love, respect, empathy and sacrifice for the fellow countrymen.

HUMANITY:

Tagore was convinced that, “Man in his fullness is not powerful, but perfect” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 91). This perfection can be achieved neither by heaping up of materials nor by systems and policies. This is possible only by the bond of living human relationships. He dreamt of a country and a world based on cooperation and love for humanity. Gora, in Rabindranath’s novel of the same name, finally traverses all the boundaries and embraces the whole of humanity and declares: “Today I am really an Indian! In me there is no longer any opposition between Hindu, Mussalman, and Christian. To-day every caste in India is my caste, the food of all is my food!” (Tagore, *Gora* 863). What Gora realized is the all inclusive heterogeneity of India. Therefore, he could no longer confine himself within the narrowness or orthodoxy of religion, caste or Nationality. Indeed, with the revelation of his true identity, though the doors of many temples will be closed for him now onwards, the inner walls of his heart that kept him confined within the dead shell are shattered, and he becomes one with the rest of humanity.

ONE WORLD:

Tagore was a champion of the One World idea. His creation “Visva-bharati” or “International University” is the transformation of this idea into reality. It was created with the aim of welcoming the whole world to the heart of India. Tagore said:

Let what seems to be a barrier become a path and let us unite, not in spite of differences, but through them. For differences can never be wiped away, and life would be so much the poorer without them. Let all human races keep their own personalities, and yet come together, not in a uniformity that is dead, but in a unity that is living (Tagore, *Talks* 49-50).

The Visva-bharati institution represents the ideals of cooperation, brotherhood and the spiritual unity of man. The purpose of this university is to cultivate the ideals of humanity and to study the vast range of civilizations of the East in order to create the atmosphere of a better understanding between the East and the West, and by means of an exchange of ideas among the people from all parts of the world to bring about peace and harmony in the world. This becomes clear from the motto of this great creation of Tagore: *yatra visvambhavatyekanidam* (“Where the

whole world meets in one place”). “In Santiniketan, therefore”, in the words of Lesny, “the thoughts of Rammohan, Ramkrishna and Vivekananda found a new, purer and profounder expression” (Lesny 219). With the fulfillment of Tagore’s dream, the Visva-bharati University turned out to be a great meeting place for individuals from all countries, where people can come into human touch with one another.

CONCLUSION:

This study examined the problematic of modern Nationalism in the works of Rabindranath. He considered Nationalism as an alien concept, a by-product of the British regime. Unlike Bhudev Mukhopadhyay he was not in favour of the transformation of the country or society into a Nation-state. Again, unlike Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, he was not in support of violence associated with Nationalism. In contrast to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s worldview, he never found glory in the deification of the abstract concept Nation. Rabindranath brings to light the dark realities of Nationalism which has hypnotized the people at large making them forget the ideals of humanity. While on the one hand he reminds one of those days of the past when the whole of Eastern Asia was united in the tie of friendship, on the other hand he denounces the spirit of violent nationalism and the deification of the country which have the potentiality to break the world into pieces. Thus, he dismissed the idea of Nationalism as faulty and inadequate and embraced international relations based on love and cooperation. In his writings Tagore expressed immense love for the land of his birth and celebrated its diversity. But, he could not confine himself within the boundaries and barbed wires. Tagore believed that humanity is greater than the country and that true patriotism is genuine love for the countrymen. In spite of the ugly experiences of hatred and lies in the name of Nationalism, Rabindranath teaches one to move forward and accept the challenges to make the country and the world more beautiful and livable. One has to accept the social responsibilities and obligations as human beings. Even in the midst of dark cloud that Tagore saw all around, he hoped of a rebirth and dreamt of a beautiful transformation of the world. In other words, Rabindranath wanted to free India and the world from the shadow of Nationalism which brought about an ugly transformation of the country and the world. So, Tagore, the champion of the One World idea, created ‘Visva-bharati’ with the aim of welcoming the whole world to the heart of India.

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