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Locating the Nationalistic Fetishism in Rabindranath Tagore's *Home and the World*

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore wrote *GhareBaire*(1916), later translated as *Home and the World* (1919), towards the turn of the new century giving pace for the *Swadeshi* movement as the immediate historical offshoots. Earlier discussions have interpreted the text from the theoretical frameworks like colonial/post-colonial, nationalistic and gender issues, and many more. In this paper, I try to re-read the text from the psychoanalytic point of view using 'fetishism' as an important hermeneutic tool. In this short paper, I will try to locate how the nationalistic feeling in Bimala and Sandip serves as a kind of site through which personal fulfillment is attained, although, of course, for a certain period of time. In the character of Bimala this transformation can largely be identified.

Keywords: Nationalism, psychoanalysis, fetishism, Freud, desire.

“Our problem is India is not political. It is social”

Rabindranath Tagore in *Nationalism in India*

Though *Home and the World* externalizes Tagore's understanding of the socio-political situations towards the early nineteenth century, the novel's treatment of human relationship in context of a conservative Indian familial structure its new interpretation can be relevant to us. Bimala, the female protagonist, undergoes the utmost transformation in the course of the novel. She is the embodiment of a woman who is trying to break the codes/ the invisible *walls* of the society on the one hand, and also succumbs to be faithful to it on the other. Tagore's treatment of both the female character and the nation as a symbol of mother/goddess/*devi* affirms his deeper essentialism in understanding human relationship and the political extremism.

The structure of the novel explicitly engages in exposing the internal structures—the so-called *andarmahol*—of the traditional Indian upper-middle class society as well as of the interior part Bimala's psyche. The novel sharply deals with the problems that come in the way of breaking an age-old tradition. The social and psychological aspects of the novel can at once be

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grasped in Bimala's statement when she first turns herself from the internal to the external side of the society, "At that moment I was no longer the daughter-in-law of this aristocratic household: I was the sole representative of all women in Bengal..." (Tagore, 20). Sandip, at once, represents a heroic figure to her—'a prince', something that she has been cherishing so long in the secret part of her mind. That surely was the condition of most of the women living in seclusion at that point of time.

The word 'home' and 'world' in the title can be seen respectively as the metaphors of the unconscious as the repertoire of all unsatiated desires and of the conscious as the observable part of human psyche. However, when Bimala looks at another man, her audacity in expressing her judgement becomes less direct, "He wasn't unattractive, in fact quite the opposite" (19). Here, Tagore's uniqueness can be seen in his portrayal of the uneasiness of a Bengali wife while she is to praise the attractiveness of a man other than her husband. That she has a repressed desire for the 'prince' of her dream is confirmed by her statement at the beginning of the novel, "...his body would be like chameli petals; his face would be shaped as a result of long and fervent prayers...! His slim, newly emerged moustache would be as dark and delicate as the wings of a bumble bee" (2). And such inhibited desires have found a channel as soon as she sees Sandip, and that forces her to fix her eyes on him parting the screen slightly. The act of separating the obstacle of the screen and fixing her eyes out of the inclusion is linked with her unconscious desires that has long been subdued under the 'screen' of her conscious mind. And Sandip's words act as mere instigator to stir up the repressive elements in Bimala's psyche.

However, Bimala's position in the novel becomes one of the representative features of an emerging generation of women towards the mid-nineteenth century what Partha Chatterjee termed as the "new woman". Chatterjee also talks about the problems that these women had to face as they were trying reconstruct, modernize and reform their attitude towards the outer world, which previously was precisely the domain of *men*. Chatterjee further observes:

The new woman defined in this way was subjected to a new patriarchy. In fact, the social order connecting to the home and the world in which nationalist placed the new woman [here Bimala] was contrasted not only with that of modern Western society; it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous tradition, the same tradition that has been put on the dock by the colonial interrogators. (627)

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One of the latent problems that Bimala fearfully faces in the novel is about her being faithful to her husband, yet in breaking some specific rules that the home or the family or the society had imposed upon the women.

In this paper, I will discuss the relationship between Bimala and Sandip, and show how nationalistic mission, to both of them, becomes a kind of fetish or how nationalism becomes a kind of trope in the novel. The concept of fetishism is not at all a new in cultural studies and social science. Marx in the tenth chapter of his *Das Kapital* (1967) uses the term as ‘commodity fetishism’ –a kind of oppressive economic strategy in which “a human being transforms other human beings, with their own enigmatic energies and vitalities, into things that are material and tangibly real. Through the process of providing surplus labour for the capitalist, the worker is transmogrified into a commodity” (Kaplan,6). But Jacques Lacan has popularized the notion of fetishism from psychoanalytic point of view. Lacan reinterpreted Freud’s idea of fetishism and applied the term largely in social studies as well as in his analysis of the structure of language. Freud clarifies his idea of fetishism in an essay called “Fetishism” that he published in 1927. Freud’s notion of fetishism has three phases in which he “gradually shifts focus from the study of the object of fetishism to the study of the subject in fetishism” (Hendrickx, 19). To put it simply in Freud’s own words, fetish is precisely linked with a special feeling for something “that had been extremely important” but “had later been lost” (Freud, 153). Here in Bimala’s psyche the longing desire for a prince-like husband is her lost object. Later, Lacan has reformulated the notion and invested a metacritical dimension to the earlier ideas of fetishism. In Lacan’s opinion “fetishism is one of the possible positions of the subject in relation to privation” (Hendrickx, 21). The point of Lacanian notion that can be useful here to interpret Bimala’s subject position is the portion where Lacan thinks “of the fetish as a metonymy, in which the value of one signifier is transposed onto another. While *the fetish functions as a sign, it has the form of an image, which is like a screen that protects the subject in fetishism* from castration anxiety. As image, it is non-dialectic and stays petrified” [italics to emphasize my point] (21).

In *Home and the World*, nationalism or the purpose of the tendency to serve as a nationalist leader, both on the part of Bimala and Sandip, is being worked out as a fetishistic site. For them, the nationalism functions as a kind of veil or a safe shelter under the surface of which lies the signified. The adorable feelings of the relationship between Sandip and Bimala grow deeper but in a different level. Sandip is a nationalist leader doing a greater work for country’s freedom. He equates the figure of Bimala with the motherland, with the notion of the Shakti. He says, “...at present I’ll merge Bimala with my country” (Tagore, 84). And they engaged in discussing the political turmoil of the *Swadeshi* movement. She completely supports Sandip’s

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nationalistic approaches to the movement, though she knows very well that there is massive gap between the views of Sandip and her husband Nikhilesh. Under the guise of this nationalistic agenda they fulfil their (personal) suppressed desires. Sandip becomes an outlet for Bimala, who concretizes her long suppressed desires for an imaginary (princely) figure using nationalism as an egotistic falsifier. Nationalism works as a political fetish. Bimala is caught into the world where there is no threshold to return back to *home*. This is how the novel becomes in part Tagore's a critique of nationalism—a kind of nationalism that is embodied in the character of Sandip. Initially, it was not on work, but as soon as Bimala sees Sandip for the first time and their desires for each other encounter with equal yearning, all other works related to nationalism turns out to be the fetishistic site of fulfilling desires:

I sensed very clearly that after he looked at my face, his words took on a new fire. It was as if the divine chariot could no longer be reined in—it was like thunderbolt upon thunderbolt, lighting flash upon lighting flash. My heart said it was the flames in my heart that lit this fire; we aren't merely Lakshmi, we are also Bharati, the goddess of speech" (Tagore, 20).

Bimala now finds the meaning of her existence, of her beauty, of her value in society and for the nation, and of her life in flow. Perhaps, nobody in the world can portray the deeper psychology of women as finely as Tagore does in this novel:

Perhaps this is a woman's nature. When our heart is involved in one arena, we lose all our senses of other spaces. This is why we are devastating; we cause havoc through our innate nature and not through logic. We are like flowing water – when we flow between two shores, we nurture with all our might and when we overflow the banks, we destroy with equal vehemence (44).

Bimala feels the uncontrollable force to break all obstacles and go fly into the vastness of the world, without knowing whether to lose herself entirely or, to find out her true self, her inner Shakti. But the outcomes of her unsuccessful attempts of becoming the object of worship ultimately lead her to return to the 'home' at the end of the novel.

In a traditional household like Nikhilesh, the marriage takes an insignificant hold, and here lies the novel's contemporaneity. Bimala's love for Sandip is much more original and true than the love of Sandip or Nikhilesh for her. The unexpected ending of the novel can be contested with Tagore's representation of the inability of the two principle characters to digest the extremities of the consequence. About the ending, Paranjape asks a question that may be

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relevant here, "...the central question of the novel is who will espouse her. In the end it turns out that neither Nikhil nor Sandip can. Both offer her something, but neither is enough, even sufficient" (91). The unexpected ending of the novel, perhaps, upholds Tagore's interrogating position to represent the culmination of the so-called 'new woman' in a wretchedly helpless manner, and this can be an unoptimistic message for the others like Bimala.

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