



Locating Similarities in Indian and Irish Nationalism through Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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Abstract— *Nationalism has always been a thought-provoking topic of discussion. Both Indian literature and Irish literature have numerous texts that trace the idea of nationalism. This paper intends to locate similarities in the understanding of nationalism in India and Ireland, through the craftsmanship of Rabindranath Tagore and James Joyce.*

Keywords— *Nationalism, Rabindranath Tagore, James Joyce, Nation-Building, Political Opinion*

Apart from their names starting with the alphabet 'I,' having similar shades on the national flags, and being under the rule of the British, India and Ireland do have a lot more in common. If we are to draw a Venn diagram of Indian literature and Irish literature, at the intersection would be the concept of nationalism. I propose to study the struggle for freedom and the ideals of nationalism through intercolonial references in Indian and Irish postcolonial literature. What is known to us is how Rabindranath Tagore and William Butler Yeats had their fair share of 'unpopular' reputations among anti-colonial nationalists for having an opinion of nationalism that is not extreme, but is rather a cosmopolitan approach that caters to global politics. James Joyce too, like Rabindranath Tagore, laid his faith in the understanding of nationalism that is liberal and cosmopolitan, promoting peace and welfare. In Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus rejects extreme nationalism, whilst looking at nationalism as a catalyst of nation-building. Similarly, Nikhilesh, in Tagore's *The Home and the World*, was against any form of militant nationalism. Both the texts, that is *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *The Home and the World* were written, quite coincidentally perhaps, in 1916, and both these texts do have a lot to say about how their authors view nationalism. An observation I want to put forward is how the character trajectory of Stephen is a growth from innocence to experience, from Sandip to Nikhilesh.

One aspect that Tagore made clear was that nationalism is not a mere political justification for the sake of it. In his essay titled *Nationalism in the West*, Tagore writes that "A nation in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose." Joyce's nationalism, similarly, was without 'nationalism.' What I mean is that he vehemently criticised the construct of a nation-state and explored nationality through the realisation and celebration of art. For Tagore, nationalism is a tussle between the home and the world, where Bimala, the citizen, must choose between the chaos of Sandip's destructive nationalism and the calm of Nikhilesh's constructive nationalism. Bimala perhaps is the personification of a Bengal which is unsure which nationalism to support. Tagore viewed nationalism as a social reform, rather than a political one. Nation-building is a common ideal in both Tagore's and Joyce's understanding of nationalism. Joyce's Stephen faces double consciousness while struggling to understand the chauvinistic perspective of nationalism. He sees nationalism as constructive, just like art, proclaiming how "The object of the artist is the creation of the beautiful. What the beautiful is is another question," (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). We may decipher the 'beautiful' to be a piece of literature or even a nation. Although Stephen feels committed to his nation politically, he rejects conservative nationalism. Regressive nationalism

was practiced by the Irish Catholics of the early twentieth century. Thus, we see that Stephen's struggle for enlightenment is not just personal but also political. In order to understand Joyce's idea of nationalism, we need to recognise that "Stephen is seeking the imagined future, not the re-imagined past of Ireland," (Franz 2). This was the proposed ideology of nationalism, where rejuvenation and development of the nation were the concerns, which also sat right with Tagore.

"This race and this country and this life produced me I Shall express myself as I am;"- Stephen validates his nationality while he is in search of the artist in himself. Through Stephen, Joyce wanted to establish his political stance that a new, developed Ireland can neither be built from a position of subordination, nor from extreme conservatism or nationalism. In choosing not to affirm the Irish identity through the Celtic myth, Joyce, through Stephen, lays down the argument that "Ireland is the old sow that eats her own farrow," (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). He hoped that someday Ireland would break free from its ancestral conservatism, and step into a free future. Stephen's mission as an artist is political. "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can," (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). Stephen's art pushes him towards the obligation of starting afresh, and it is this realisation that he situates with nationalism: a new and imagined future for Ireland that is not burdened by the conservatism of the past. What is brilliant about this novel is how James Joyce used stream of consciousness to bring to light ideological-political conflicts, that too, his personal insights. Towards the end of the novel, Stephen, in his diary, writes, that he leaves everything in a quest "to forge in the smithy of his (my) soul the uncreated conscience of his (my) race," (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). We may decipher this as a manifestation towards building an Ireland that is open to viewing nationalism from a global and progressive perspective.

In his novel *The Home and the World*, Rabindranath Tagore criticises destructive nationalism through the character of Sandip whose understanding of nationalism went to the extent of burning foreign goods and other forms of violence. The conflict at home, between Nikhilesh and Sandip, is a microcosm of the conflict with respect to the understanding of nationalism in India. "You should not waste even a tenth of your energy in this destructive excitement" (*The Home and the World*) - Tagore, through Nikhilesh, attempts to explain to his readers how extreme nationalism is futile, and in turn, may result in more controversy. This 'destructive excitement' initially attracts Bimala, who later realises its inefficacy.

Sandip's understanding of nationalism and the Swadeshi movement is burning foreign goods, whereas Nikhilesh, who believed in a non-violent approach, asserts that "To tyrannize for the country is to tyrannize over the country," (*The Home and the World*). This novel is no less than a political commentary, and with the death of Nikhilesh, Tagore perhaps portrayed that he is skeptical about the future of India when nationalism is concerned. Sandeep, on the other hand, flees when riots begin, showing the feeble nature of extreme nationalism. Sandeep is like an empty vessel that makes the most noise but does nothing for the greater good. The character of Bimala becomes crucial when we attempt to understand Tagore's perspective of nationalism. Bimala is confused, and this confusion reflects India's unsurety about how to adjust to the new age. Bimala's character reflects conflicts in gender and nationality. Tagore hoped that Bimala's understanding of Nikhilesh's genuineness would transcend into India accepting inclusive cosmopolitanism. Cielo G. Festino writes:

"Bimala stands at the center of the tale. She represents Bengal at a crossroad: through her dilemma, Tagore allegorizes the conflict of the nation. On the one hand, Nikhil, echoing Westernized ideas on the role of women in society, wants to bring her out of *purdah* into the world, at the peak of the Swadeshi movement. He wants her to become her own independent self; therefore, his aim is not only to bedeck her with all the riches money can buy but also to educate her," (Festino 4).

Owing to this very understanding, the pertinent question with regard to the stature of women comes up, debating if women, here, represent the nation in general and Bengal in particular. The dynamics of the home and the world are correlated; the home is a microcosm of the world, and in this particular text, what happens at home reflects the reaction towards the world. Bimala's understanding and re-understanding of nationalism happened within the periphery of the four walls of her home, and this understanding is what Tagore wants to reflect upon the world. Bimala is thus Tagore's idea of a new woman who relocates the world in her home.

Nikhilesh and Stephen serve a similar purpose- both are alter-egos of their respective writers, and both choose the ideals of nation-building over conservative nationalism. Nikhilesh is against the extremeness of the Swadeshi movement, while Stephen stands against the Gaelic Revival. The argument at the Christmas dinner table, that is nationalism through Charles Parnell versus the role of the Catholic Church, was a source of development for

young Stephan, who was invited to dine at the adults' table for the first time. This invitation, metaphorically, was not just extended to dinner, but to evoke an understanding of nationalism and form an opinion about the same. To some extent, this heated argument may seem to be gendered, with Mr. Casey showing political activism by supporting nationalism while Dante defended the Catholic church. This dinner table politics has a wider significance, for Mrs. Dedalus's inability to eat amidst the chaos may stand as an allegory for the Great Famine of Ireland. This dinner table experience made Stephen realise how the outer world is as flawed as the inner home, and that there is an urgent need to frame a political opinion. On the other hand, Nihilish's political opinion is largely based on progressive politics in times of crisis and transition in Bengal. Tagore's nationalism was beyond the markings of the map. His fundamental idea of a nation was a social space, so much so that in his essay called *Nationalism in India*, Tagore opined that:

“During the evolution of the Nation the moral culture of brotherhood was limited by geographical boundaries, because at that time those boundaries were true. Now they have become imaginary lines of tradition divested of the qualities of real obstacles. So the time has come when man's moral nature must deal with this great fact with all seriousness or perish.”

Some may say that Tagore's take on nationalism is ambivalent. But the truth is that Tagore did not want the anti-colonial resistance to transcend into chauvinistic nationalism that is regressive and conservative.

One of the lesser-known facts about Tagore's relationship with Ireland is his interest in Irish music, and that his song “*Aha aji e Basante*” was inspired by the Irish song “Go where glory waits thee.” The growth of a nation is very similar to that of an individual. Both go through stages of discovery and development to build into their final selves. Patience and perseverance are required in both cases. Keeping this in mind, Tagore in *Nationalism in the West*, criticises how “Men..., came out of the National manufactory in huge numbers as war-making and money-making puppets, ludicrously vain of their pitiful perfection of mechanism.” This disappointment is asserted both by Tagore and Joyce, and they write in the hope to establish a more inclusive and mature understanding of nationalism.

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