

## Tagore's *The Home and the World*: A Call for a New World Order

David W. Atkinson, University of Saskatchewan

While the world has moved away from the brink of nuclear war, the continued instability of the Middle East and the breakup of the Soviet empire have given rise to the ethnic nationalism that has once more become a justification for repression and war. It is with a profound sense of *déjà vu*, then, that one can turn back to Rabindranath Tagore, who, writing on the last day of the nineteenth century, speaks with tremendous resonance to us today concerning the blindness of national ambition: "The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred./The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and the howling verses of vengeance."<sup>1</sup> Tagore's fear of this "naked passion of self-love of Nations" figures in everything he wrote on the dangers of mass action, nationalism, and the modern nation state. This is especially true of his novel, *The Home and the World*, which, set in the context of Lord Curzon's partition of Bengal in 1905, is at once an indictment of the extremist thinking that motivates nationalist sentiments and a celebration of the humanism which constitutes the bedrock for Tagore's new international order.

*The Home and the World* has not received especially kind treatment from the critics; perhaps most damning is George Lukács's characterization of the novel as "a petit bourgeois yarn of the shoddiest kind."<sup>2</sup> It is true the novel has its shortcomings: it gets dangerously close at times to political allegory, and its characters, especially the radical leader Sandip, are exaggerated and one-dimensional. At the same time, the novel has a staunch defender in Anita Desai, who, while admitting that it is too often weighed down with ponderous rhetoric, praises its "flashes of light and colour" and its "touches of tenderness and childishness."<sup>3</sup>

Despite the literary shortcomings of *The Home and the World*, it is an important work for understanding Tagore's views on the dangers of political extremism. The novel focuses on the *swadeshi* movement in Bengal, which demanded an exclusive reliance on Indian-made goods, and a rejection of all foreign-made products. Tagore's representation of *swadeshi* typifies his attitude towards any sort of organized political activity as something over which one has little, if any, control. *Swadeshi* is described in *The Home and the World* as "a flood, breaking down the dykes and sweeping all our prudence and fear before it."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, "The Sunset of the Century," in *Nationalism* (1917; rpt. Westport: Greenwood, 1973) 157.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Anita Desai, "Introduction," *The Home and the World*, trans. Surendranath Tagore (1915; rpt. London: Penguin, 1985), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Desai 12.

<sup>4</sup> Tagore, *The Home and the World*, 26. All subsequent references to this work are inserted parenthetically into the text.

The novel focuses on three characters, each of whom speaks in the first-person in recounting how they interact with one another. Nikhil is Bimala's husband; Sandip is Bimala's would-be lover. Nikhil epitomizes the unselfish, progressive husband who wishes to free his wife from the oppressiveness of a traditional Indian marriage. In contrast, Sandip is a man who thinks only of himself, and who reduces man-woman relationships to brazen sexuality; he is interested in "blunt things, bluntly put, without any finicking niceness" (85). Bimala is represented as an innocent who, at least initially, is completely subservient to her husband. But Bimala is also much more than this. She is referred to as *Durga*, the female goddess of creation and destruction, and as *Shakti*, the ultimate female principle underpinning reality. In being so described, she represents the beauty, vitality, and glory of Bengal.

The struggle between Nikhil and Sandip for Bimala is, then, a battle for the future of Bengal, as they represent two opposing visions for Bengal. Nikhil is the enlightened humanist who asserts that truth cannot be imposed; freedom is necessary for choice, and is critical to individual growth and fulfillment. It is this freedom which he insists is necessary if he and Bimala are truly to know one another. While Nikhil, like Tagore himself, initially supports *swadeshi*, he recognizes the value of the "outside world," and he looks to serve a greater cause than mere national interest. "I am willing," he insists, "to serve my country, but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it" (29).

Sandip represents himself as a realist, one who brutally confronts the world. He criticizes Nikhil for how "he delights in a misty vision of this world" (57). Sandip describes those who share his views as "iconoclasts of metre" (57). He and his fellow iconoclasts are "the flesh-eaters of the world; we have teeth and nails; we pursue and grab and tear" (47). For Sandip, the end justifies the means, and he argues that virtually any human action can be excused if the stakes are sufficiently high. This is the only fundamental principle of existence. "Nature surrenders herself," he indicates, "but only to the robber. For she delights in this forceful desire" (45).

Ostensibly, Nikhil and Sandip share the same goal: freedom from oppression. Where they differ is in their understanding of freedom and in how this freedom is to be realized. For Nikhil, to be motivated by concern for nation is self-destructive. "To tyrannize for the country," he says, "is to tyrannize over the country" (109). By contrast, Sandip stops at nothing to achieve his ends, as he stresses that "whenever an individual or nation becomes incapable of perpetrating injustice it is swept into the dust-bin of the world" (79). The complete irrelevance of moral standards characterizes his relationship with everyone in the novel, including Bimala, whom he reduces to stealing for him from her husband. Sandip finds justification for his actions in history. Life, he says, is "indefinite—a bundle of contradictions," and humankind's aim is to "strive to give it a particular shape" (79). In Sandip's world, there is no place for religious idealism, and there are no higher purposes than those humankind creates.

For Nikhil, however, it is not that the world is chaos; rather, each individual is given the freedom and the opportunity to participate in the limitless creativity of

the world. "Providence," he remarks, "leaves our life moulded in the rough—its object being that we ourselves should put the finishing touches, shaping it into its final form to our taste" (197). This understanding of the world allows one to celebrate the world's possibilities. Sandip, however, sees such idealism as mere "intellectual foppery" motivated by the desire "to mystify things" (60). It ignores the passion that is the true motivating force behind change; passion "is the street lamp which guides us. To call it untrue is as hopeless as to expect to see better by plucking out our natural eyes" (60). But passion uncontrolled is destructive. Nikhil does not reject passion, but he understands that uncontrolled passion destroys everything in its path; as he says, "I accept the truth of passion. . . only when I recognize the truth of restraint" (60). This is obvious in his relationship with Bimala, which is characterized by a strong undertow of sensuality, but never to the extent that it becomes obtrusive. The same can be said of Nikhil's love of country, which is important only as it allows for the freedom and growth of each individual. This contrasts with Sandip, who reduces sensuality to unfeeling sexuality, and love of country to destructive anarchy.

Sandip is not, however, an unintelligent or unaware man, and it is this which makes him especially frightening. Sandip, for example, knows that Nikhil is a man of principle; of their relationship, he says, "Then again there is Nikhil. Crank though he be, laugh at him as I may, I cannot get rid of the idea that he is my friend. At first I gave no thought to his point of view, but of late it has begun to shame and hurt me" (83). Sandip recognizes the flaws in his own thinking. Rather than confront these flaws, however, he perversely chooses to ignore them; the external pressure of mass action thereby sweeps aside any sense of moral consciousness. This single-mindedness is brutally revealed when Sandip equates his intention of seducing Bimala away from her husband with his intention of stripping away all vestiges of the old moral and political order.

What is also frightening about Sandip is his extremism, his belief that everything of the old order must be destroyed for a new order to take its place, and his assumption that the power which he represents is unstoppable. This is reaffirmed by the speed with which events in the novel tumble one on top of the other: the boycotting of schools, the burning of foreign cloth, the destruction of graineries, and the forced participation of Muslims in the Hindu-dominated *swadeshi* movement. Thus Tagore stresses the dangers of mass action: once started, it is impossible to stop. Nikhil, though, represents the very antithesis of Sandip. Nikhil does not wish to coerce anyone, for he respects at all costs the value of the individual.

Bimala is caught between the two men. Initially she is seduced by Sandip's cause, although in her mind the exact nature of the cause is never clear; it remains an ambiguous "fanaticism for truth" (32). Her personal attraction to Sandip feeds and sustains her commitment to his cause, and only late in the novel, when she has been driven to betray and abandon her husband, does she stop to reflect on what Sandip represents. The freedom she thought Sandip represented is reduced to "a dried-up water course with all its rocks and pebbles laid bare" (137). Bimala does not fully understand the consequences of her actions, however, until they bear their destructive fruit. When Bimala asks her servant Amalya to sell her jewels so that she can replace the money she has stolen from her husband, she sets in motion the events that eventually lead to Amalya's death. The psychological and spiritual

nothingness to which she has been reduced has become a physical nothingness. With her husband close to death at the end of the novel, Bimala possesses no sense of certainty about the future.

*The Home and the World* is pivotal in Tagore's rejection of mass action as a force destructive to freedom and individuality. As well, the novel clearly anticipates his eventual rejection of nationalism as a frightening expression of this mass action. Finally, the book is important in laying the groundwork for Tagore's call for a new international order, which allows for the mutual interaction of all people. The message of *The Home and the World* is clear: to deny distinctiveness and individuality is to deny diversity, and to ignore the fundamental nature of the world. Political boundaries presume to limit and define a world that is fundamentally limitless and beyond definition. Political boundaries confirm exclusivity, and they hinder sharing and oneness in the face of difference.

While *The Home and the World* dwells on the dangers of mass action, it also constitutes an early expression of Tagore's "poet's religion" or "religion of man." For Tagore, boundaries, political or otherwise, are symptomatic of the human desire to limit the world to what the self, rooted in ego-centeredness, can comprehend. Humankind struggles to freeze the truth, imagining that by affirming an objective universe one can affirm one's selfhood over and against it. Thus Sandip might claim he is fighting for a cause, but it is also clear that his own ego is what drives him forward. What is necessary is that one must surrender oneself to the "Universal Self,"<sup>5</sup> which is the larger reality connecting and harmonizing all particulars. Tagore celebrates the world because one must turn to the world to experience the infinite manifestations of the divine; only in experiencing the fullness of the world does one experience the divinity that engenders a sense of human completion and makes possible the amelioration of suffering. It is this principle that constitutes the primary motivation behind all Nikhil's actions.

Tagore is firmly rooted in the Indian philosophical tradition; he is concerned with *darsana*, with "seeing" truth. He views the human desire to define the world as a dogmatic assertion of ignorance. Virtually everything we do is an expression of this dogmatism, a manifestation of the ego-centeredness that drives it. So it is that in *The Home and the World*, Tagore issues a call to return to sanity. He recognizes that the pride that comes with nationhood can only lead to arrogance and to the repression of others. His message was true for his time, and it is still true today.

---

<sup>5</sup> Tagore, *Sadhana: The Realization of Life* (London: Macmillan, 1913) 9.