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Tagore's Vision: Nationalism's Lacuna and the Premise of Vernacular Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract

This paper discusses Tagore's critique of nationalism from a postcolonial cosmopolitan perspective. Although Tagore rejects the idea of cosmopolitanism, his works showcase possibilities of "Vernacular cosmopolitanism" as espoused by Bhabha. While discussing Tagore's idea of nationalism one comes across Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations", which emphasises the centrality of identity, attributing it to cultural homogeneity rather than a solely political construct, tangentially echoing Tagore's arguments in "Nationalism in India". Furthermore, the paper argues that Tagore's stance is not just a rejection of nationalism but also a nuanced critique of cosmopolitanism's "colourless vagueness".

Tagore's scepticism of Eurocentric nationalism and his ambivalence towards the idea of cosmopolitanism are explored through a detailed analysis of his literary works, notably The Home and the World and Gora. Both works highlight a certain conflict between loyalty to the country and universal principles of humanity, ultimately leading to a profound sense of disillusionment and introspection. This also showcases the complicated interplay among cultural, social and political factors as displayed through the analysis of Gora's character using Spivak's idea of 'natural' and 'naturalised' citizens in Nationalism and Imagination. Thus, Tagore's critique here is contextualised within the postcolonial discourse, revealing his foresight in highlighting the dangers of nationalism that have the potential to erode the complex and diverse fabric of local identity.

Keywords: *Rabindranath Tagore, Nationalism, Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism, Vernacular Cosmopolitanism, The Home and the World, Gora.*

Introduction

Julian Go, in his essay concerning Fanon's concept of "postcolonial cosmopolitanism" and its implications, elaborates on Fanon's assertion that "…the cerebral mass of all humanity, whose connections must be increased, whose channels must be diversified and whose messages must be re-humanized" (Go 214). Fanon's call here reflects a particular form of cosmopolitanism as his reference to the "mass of all humanity" transcends any specificities and parochial identities. In its avoidance of regional, racial, and religious attachments, or even the binary identities of coloniser and colonised, a holistic embrace and unity is promoted. As Julian Go aptly articulates, it is about a conception of "'humanity' as a whole" (Go 214).

These sentiments are parallelly conveyed by Rabindranath Tagore in his letter to Aurobindo Mohan Bose. In response to the criticism of his

views on nationalism by Abala Bose, wife of the renowned scientist Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose, Tagore emphasises that "Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live" (Quayum Nationalism, Patriotism, Cosmopolitanism: Tagore's Ambiguities and Paradoxes (Part II)).

It is worth noting that while both scholars, Fanon and Tagore, share a common emphasis on the well-being of humanity and the collective identity of mankind, Tagore's works reveal a fundamental opposition to the ideals of nationalism as well as the ambiguous concept of "cosmopolitanism". His rejection of nationalism is evident in various instances, including his 1917 collection of essays on nationalism, his novel *The Home and the World*, his debates with Mahatma Gandhi, and his 1928 *Letters to a Friend*. In all these contexts, Tagore expresses his strong opposition to both nationalism and fanatical patriotism. Due to this, as Bindu Puri writes, many including critic Martha Nussbaum have consistently positioned Tagore on the side of cosmopolitanism, implying that this perspective serves as the clear and ultimate contrast to nationalism (Puri 157). According to Puri, such arguments often assume that Tagore's rejection of nationalism primarily stems from the idea of universal love and a sense of belonging to the global community. This leads to the contention that Tagore rejected nationalism in favour of primary allegiance to the world community because he realised that 'nationalism and ethnocentric particularism are... akin.' (Nussbaum 5)

However, it's essential to recognise that here the concept of cosmopolitanism cannot be simplistically regarded as just another form of universalism and a sense of belonging to a global family, especially when considering Tagore's perspective. Instead, it should be acknowledged that the same passionate critique that underlies Tagore's arguments against nationalism, also pervades his rejection of cosmopolitanism due to what he perceives as its "colourless vagueness" (Quayum Nationalism, Patriotism, Cosmopolitanism: Tagore's Ambiguities and Paradoxes (Part II)). This perceived "colourless vagueness" indicates that it lacks a concrete and tangible identity that can resonate with individuals. Tagore's critique suggests that cosmopolitanism, while seemingly universal in its outlook, may be disconnected from the individual's sense of belonging and cultural identity.

In this context, Puri's argument should be noted as she reiterates, "Tagore's position against nationalism was not based on a cosmopolitan allegiance to world citizenship but rather on both a love of country and a commitment to individual freedom" (Puri 157). Tagore's stance, therefore, emerges as a nuanced and complex critique of both nationalism and cosmopolitanism, shaped by his profound love for his homeland and dedication to the principles of individual liberty.

Interpreting Vernacular Cosmopolitanism in Tagore's Critique of Nationalism

In his essay "Nationalism in India" (1917), Tagore states that "Nationalism is a great menace" (Tagore *Nationalism* 112). He argues that it is a dangerous ideology that can lead to division and conflict among different communities. His concept of nationalism was deeply rooted in his belief in every individual's inherent dignity and worth. He emphasised that true nationalism should not foster divisions or promote supremacy but rather celebrate diversity, unity, and peaceful coexistence. According to Tagore, a nation's strength lies not in isolation but in its ability to embrace and appreciate the richness of various cultures and civilisations. He envisioned a world where nationalism would be inclusive,

accommodating, and respectful of different identities.

Theoretically, Rabindranath Tagore's conceptualisation of India as a Nation can be interpreted through the lens of structuralism, where the mapping of its borders appears somewhat arbitrary in relation to the all-encompassing yet distinctive components of the land. Tagore's perspective posits that India's rich diversity defies easy confinement within the Western cartographic representation of the nation and should instead rely on the lived experiences of its population to uncover its true essence. Drawing from Saussurean linguistic theory, one can discern how India functions as a sign, represented by its signifier, its people and their collective ethos. It is this ethos that serves as the cohesive force, the substance, and the creator of the nation that India becomes.

From this vantage point, Tagore's antipathy towards the idea of Western nationalism should be read within the context of India by treating the Indian nation as a discursive entity rather than an expression of a uniform structure. Such a perspective necessitates an analytical focus on the points of divergence and tensions that exist between different regions, languages, and cultures, as opposed to the construction of common characteristics that unite them into a singular narrative. It shall be recognised that the strength of the Indian nation lies in its ability to include a wide spectrum of identities and experiences. Consequently, the Western conception of nationalism becomes irrelevant and impractical to apply to India, as it imposes a narrow and homogeneous framework that would not only erode its cultural richness but also undermine its sovereignty and individuality.

Subsequently, the concept of "vernacular cosmopolitanism", put forth by the eminent postcolonial and cultural critic Homi K. Bhabha may be considered in the context of this discussion (Bhabha 145). This notion, while seemingly paradoxical, juxtaposes the contrasting ideas of cultural specificity and globalisation, resulting in the emergence of cultural hybridity. It encourages the acceptance and integration of global influences alongside the preservation of the "vernacular" elements of identity.

The exploration of Rabindranath Tagore's critique of nationalism within his literary works reveals a discernible trend in how this idea permeates the lives and attitudes of his characters, such as Bimala, Gora, and Mini's father from the short story "Kabuliwala". These characters embody a certain rejection of narrow parochialism and a wholehearted embrace of a broader perspective on life. This is exemplified by various instances in Tagore's narratives, including Mini's father permitting Kabuliwala's final meeting with Mini, Nikhil's favourable acknowledgement of Western produce, and Gora's origin story. These instances collectively signify an inclusion, and open-mindedness within the confines of their own culturally defined spaces of existence.

While these characters remain inherently and distinctly Indian, untainted in their vernacular essence, their Indianness becomes enriched by the infusion of cosmopolitan sensibilities. It demonstrates the interplay between the global and the local, illustrating how the adoption of cosmopolitan attitudes complements their local cultural identities without diluting their essential Indianness.

Tagore and Fanon on the flaws of nationalist movements

Tagore's disillusionment with the concept of nationalism began to crystallise following the adverse outcomes he observed from the Swadeshi Movement, which "started as a response to the British policy of partitioning Bengal" in 1905

(Agawane 102). It was evident that the nationalists' burning of foreign goods had a detrimental effect on the lives of the impoverished, for whom the expensive domestic items were unaffordable. Furthermore, when innocent non-participating Indians were hurt and many Muslims were attacked because they insisted on the partition for a variety of political and religious reasons, he realised that the campaign was degenerating into nationalistic violence.

He became hostile to this Eurocentric notion of nationalism as a result of some of these encounters. He observed that the anti-colonial resistance against the British colonialists was transforming into a form of chauvinistic nationalism. Subsequently, Tagore became critical of the aggressive and chauvinistic forms of nationalism prevalent during his time. He believed that his "countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against that education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity". He argued that "certain extreme forms of nationalism espoused and used in India's struggle for independence are ultimately self-defeating". Furthermore, he "perceived nationalism as a purely western construct and warns against the extreme frenzy of nationalism that merely reproduces the Western mould" (Krishma and Dharmani 275). Similar to Tagore, Franz Fanon in the third chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* critiques the idea of nationalism, where he says that "History teaches us clearly that the battle against colonialism does not run straight away along the lines of nationalism" (Fanon 148).

He warned against the dangers of narrow-mindedness, jingoism, and the imposition of one's culture on others. Tagore believed that such exclusivist tendencies could lead to conflicts, animosity, and the suppression of individual liberties. His idea drastically differs from that prevailing in the country today, where the mind is full of fear and the head is held low due to the wave of ultranationalism in Indian politics.

Parallely, Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, while talking about the "objective of nationalist parties" says that their goal is to "mobilise the people with slogans". When "such parties are questioned on the economic program of the state", they are "incapable of replying, because, precisely, they are completely ignorant of the economy of their own country" (Fanon 150). Fanon's ideas, echoing Tagore's, reflect the socio-political reality of Indian politics. Instead of such jingoism, Tagore advocated a nationalism that recognised and respected the rights and dignity of all individuals, irrespective of their nationality.

The Swadeshi Movement and Tagore's Growing Disillusionment with Nationalism

In this context of nationalist politics, Tagore's *The Home and the World* provides a critical examination of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, which was a part of the Indian independence movement. Set against the backdrop of Indian nationalism in the early 20th century, the novel explores the intricacies of Indian society during the period of British colonialism through the characters of Nikhil, Bimala and Sandip. It critiques the rise of narrow nationalism that can be seen as "a vehicle of culture as well as an engine of oppression. It can unify as well as disrupt". This disruption mirrors the exclusionary aspects of colonialism.

In the novel, the character of Sandip, a fanatical nationalist leader, symbolises this disruptive and aggressive nationalism. His nationalistic creed is showcased in his words, "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" (Tagore *The Home and the World*). He is a charismatic and fervent speaker who inspires people to support the boycott of

British products by joining the Swadeshi movement. However, through Sandip's character, Tagore illustrates how nationalism can turn corrupt and self-serving. Sandip's actions and words, masquerading as patriotism, frequently result in violence and moral decay, illustrating how nationalism may spiral out of control and threaten the very values it professes to support. Nikhil, another character in the novel describes him as having a "tyrannical attitude in his patriotism" (Tagore *The Home and the World*).

As opposed to Sandip's chauvinistic and nationalist aggression, Tagore's characterisation of Nikhil represents a subdued appreciation and defence of his country, guided by a sense of moral and ethical cosmopolitanism, advocating for a more inclusive, humane approach that goes beyond borders and ethnic divisions. Nikhil is painted as a more moderate and reflective character who values humanity, ethics, and rationality, and is sceptical of the extreme measures advocated in the name of nationalism. In discussing his wife's displeasure with his non-participation in the Swadeshi movement, he emphasised, "..she is quite angry with me because I am not running amuck crying __Bande Mataram__" (Tagore *The Home and the World*).

He fears that the unquestioning, blind acceptance of nationalist ideology may result in the repression of morality and independent thought, which will ultimately lead to violence. This is evident in the transformation of Bimala, Nikhil's wife, who reiterates, "At first I suspected nothing, feared nothing; I simply felt dedicated to my country. What a stupendous joy there was in this unquestioning surrender". But gradually she realised and accepted that the 'violence' in this nationalistic fervour "would tear me up by the roots, and drag me along by the hair" (Tagore *The Home and the World*). Thus, she initially gets swept up by Sandip's nationalistic rhetoric but ultimately realises the destructive path it leads to.

But parallelly the novel documents a more inclusive and humanistic political framework, offering a significant alternative to traditional views of nationalism as emblematised by Nikhil's character. While Tagore distanced himself from conventional forms of cosmopolitanism, his narratives subtly weave in elements of postcolonial cosmopolitanism. This viewpoint advocates for a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of political and cultural identities, which mirror the complex realities of a postcolonial society.

In Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism, there is often an emphasis on the fluidity of identities and the blending of cultures that arise from post-colonial conditions. Nikhil's character may be seen as possessing tenets of postcolonial cosmopolitanism since he rejects homogenous nationalism and tends to celebrate the crossing of borders and the creation of new, syncretic forms of culture and identity. He reiterates, "I have become unpopular with all my countrymen because I have not joined them in their carousals" (Tagore *The Home and the World*).

In the course of the novel Nikhil discusses that "those who cannot love men just because they are men—who needs must shout and deify their country in order to keep up their excitement—these love excitement more than their country" (Tagore *The Home and the World*). True patriotism, according to Nikhil, is appreciating and loving one's country for what it is, not idealising it. He criticises those who are motivated more by the exhilaration of nationalist ideology than by a sincere appreciation and affection for their nation. Unlike others who are swept up in the zealous nationalism of the time, Nikhil sees value in a more nuanced, realistic understanding of his country. Understanding that blind nationalism might obscure the true problems and diversity of identities in the country, he recognises the complexities and imperfections of India. His

stance aligns with some of the principles of postcolonial cosmopolitanism, which advocates for acknowledging the lingering effects of colonialism, appreciating the various identities and cultures that exist within a country, and placing universal human values ahead of narrow nationalist objectives. Thus, through Nikhil, Tagore emphasises an inclusive approach to patriotism that values the real, authentic nature of the nation rather than its idealised and deified portrayal.

Cultural centrality and national identity

Tagore saw nationalism as an extension of the larger human identity and believed that loyalty to humanity should precede loyalty to any particular nation-state. For Tagore, true patriotism did not entail blind adherence to one's country but an unwavering commitment to justice, compassion, and the welfare of all people.

While talking about the consequences of excessive nationalism, he argues that the constant pursuit of strength and efficiency drains individuals' energy from "his higher nature", which includes qualities like self-sacrifice and creativity (Tagore *Nationalism* 111). As a result, their power of sacrifice is diverted from moral objectives to maintaining the mechanical organisation of nationalism. The responsibilities of maintaining this organisation of nationalism are currently borne by the mainstream Indian media.

Furthermore, Tagore's idea of nationalism transcended the limitations of geographical borders. He reiterated, "I am not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations" (Tagore *Nationalism* 110). In this context, although there exists differences between the ideas of Tagore and Huntington, one can find certain similarities in their opinions. Like Tagore, Samuel Huntington in his essay, "The Clash of Civilizations" emphasises the centrality of identity, attributing it to cultural homogeneity rather than a solely political construct. They underscore the pivotal role of symbols, customs, psychological interpretations, and perceived similarities in shaping identity, relegating the geopolitical aspects of ethnicity to a secondary position. As Huntington articulates, "culture counts, and cultural identity is what is most meaningful to most people." (Huntington 72).

Tagore's own exploration of this can be found in his work "Path o Patheyo," where he points out the diverse structure of Indian society (Tagore *Raja Praja* 107). This sentiment is echoed in Ramachandra Guha's introduction to Tagore's "Nationalism", as he quotes historian Tanika Sarkar, characterising India as a "land without a centre" (Tagore and Guha 50). In this essay, Tagore passionately argues that nationalism, in its essence, is a Western construct tailored to fit Western narratives. India being the fostering ground for assorted conformity in regard to language, cuisine and culture is bound to disintegrate if faced with an inept imposition of such a foreign narrative. Tagore contends that the pursuit of nationalistic ideals, such as Swaraj, will exacerbate India's existing issues. Thus, the poet envisioned and recognised the need for an inner, emotional, cultural, philosophical, and subdued sanctuary that is inherently Indian. This, he believed, would constitute the true essence of the Indian nation-state.

Therefore, in Tagore's *The Home and the World*, a clear division emerges between the visions of Nikhilesh and Sandip. Nikhilesh advocates peaceful critique and constructivism in his nurturing of Indian pride and identity, while Sandip champions the radical jingoism of Swadeshi ideals. This dichotomy is the focal point of Tagore's "Path o Pathayo", wherein he argues that revolutionary nationalism should not be the primal reflex against external advances; considering the consequences of nationalism are

of greater significance. Tagore posits that understanding the aftermath of radicalism is crucial for achieving genuine independence since "The English governance is not our subordination; rather, it is merely an indicator of our deeper subordination" (Tagore 133 *Raja Praja,* own translation). To challenge this, the development of a national ideology becomes imperative contrary to the Western sense of nationalism which is mechanistic and ill-suited for the diverse landscape of India, where each constituent part maintains its distinctiveness while being part of the whole. Consequently, any attempt to impose a uniform organisational outlook may oversimplify the multifaceted differences within India, resulting in increased fragmentation of the imagined homogeneity.

Thus, Tagore's vision calls for the development of Indian national consciousness rooted in cultural sensibilities, transcending the mechanical, topographical and Western-centric notion of nationalism.

Nationalism and Imagination

In Gayatri Spivak's "Nationalism and Imagination", she raises a concern regarding the prevalent perspective on nationalism, particularly how it tends to be viewed through a lens of nativism and homogeneity. A parallel is drawn between the principles of nationalism and what she describes as "reproductive heteronormativity". This, in essence, suggests how the claims of nationalism frequently hint on the notion of a "shared ancestry", implying that being a part of the idea of 'nation' is largely reliant upon being born on the land it encompasses (Spivak 76).

Expanding on this idea within the context of this paper, one can see that this concept of nationalism and the claims of its naturalness raise several questions. In the case of a diverse and multifaceted nation like India, this perspective becomes problematic. The country's vast regional variations, both in terms of culture and individuality, often conflict with the notion of a monolithic national identity. Regionalism, in such a context, can be seen as counter to nationalism.

Furthermore, the contemporary political landscape in India reveals a notable issue: the dominance and imposition of North Indian cultural and linguistic norms on the rest of the country. This situation highlights the complexities of linguistic and cultural diversity in India, as well as the tensions arising from a North Indian political hegemony. When one considers the linguistic and cultural differences, as well as the distinctions in culinary practices and customary traditions across the country, the dominance of Hindi-speaking North India can be seen as a means of inculcating the process of "naturalisation" on the rest of the nation.

Interestingly Dipankar Roy's reading of the "Uncanny" within "Hungry Stones" through a Freudian lens, may be equated with the Spivakian discourse (Roy 197- 210). What Roy points out as the repression of India's Muslim past and the uncanny in the short story, may be interpreted as stemming from a process of denaturalisation or a fundamental lack of attempted naturalisation from the outset of the Mughal empire. Historically, the Mughals didn't merely invade and exploit India, but integrated into the lived experience in India. The process was reciprocal, with India being influenced by the Mughals, and the Mughals, in turn, undergoing a profound assimilation. The lack of any imposed naturalisation was further backed by the pre-independence era of communal conflict aided by the British divide-and-rule policy, a period which may have initiated a form of denaturalisation.

As the constant interplay between vastly different authorities continues to shape and reshape India's identity, it further challenges any simplistic notion of a unified national narrative. This contributes to a complex social and cultural fabric that negates

the establishment of a naturalised, homogenised sense of nationalism in India.

Here, Spivak's insights shed light on the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach to nationalism, particularly in a country as diverse as India. It becomes apparent why the Western model of nationalism, with its emphasis on a core national identity, may not effectively function in the Indian context. The problems with "naturalised" national identity for the sake of cohesiveness may be evaluated and alternative models that better accommodate the intricacies of India's internal diversity considered.

Questioning Ancestry and Allegiance: 'Gora's' Path in Spivak's Ideological Landscape

Spivak, while talking about nationalism and critiquing it as something that is "tied to the circumstances of one's birth" discusses the idea of a 'natural' and a 'naturalised' citizen, "George Bush or Madeline Albright?" (Spivak 80). This dichotomy of being a 'natural' and a 'naturalised' citizen is particularly relevant in Tagore's novel titled *Gora*. In Gora, the title character, who is initially portrayed as a staunch Hindu nationalist, discovers at the end of the novel that he is actually the son of an Irish man and does not have Indian ancestry. This realisation significantly alters his perspective on nationalism and identity.

Gora, throughout most of the novel, represents a 'natural' citizen, strongly identifying with the land and culture of his assumed birth. His fervent support of Hindu customs and contempt for foreign influences are indicative of someone who feels he is a natural member of the country. His dogmatism towards Hindu traditions can be seen in these lines, "A Brahmin should…stay away, separate…a Brahmin who, greedy for money, puts a sudra's noose around his neck and dies on the gallows, was despised by Gora" (Tagore *Gora*). Furthermore, he "performed the prescribed devotional exercises and ritual expenses according to the holy books every day" (Tagore *Gora*), which showcases his strong religious sentiments that he had believed to be a part of his lineage.

However, the revelation of his true parentage shifts him to the realm of a 'naturalised' citizen. This was revealed to Gora through Krishnadajal's words, "While we were in Etava. Your mother, fearing rebel soldiers, fled to our house. Your father had died the day before in battle…He was Irish. Your mother died the same night after giving birth to you. Since that day you have been raised in our house" (Tagore *Gora*). It was seen that despite his deep emotional and cultural ties to India, he lacked the lineage that is generally associated with natural citizenship. His Irish heritage revealed his true identity. Hence, when his true parentage is revealed, he becomes what Spivak calls a 'naturalised' citizen. Consequently, Gora is forced to renegotiate his views on nationalism and identity in light of this revelation. It implies that a person's national identity can be formed via cultural immersion, shared values, and personal belief systems rather than being only based on lineage or place of birth.

The conclusion of the novel *Gora* can therefore be interpreted as a critique of dogmatic and exclusionary ideas of nationalism. It highlights the fact that a country's common experiences and ideals, rather than its physical location or ancestry, are what truly defines it. In the context of Spivak, Gora's transition from a 'natural' to a 'naturalised' citizen shows the fluidity of identity while questioning the traditional notion of belonging to a nation. Hence, the fragility of the claims of a national identity based on a "shared ancestry" can be seen through the turmoil in Gora's life. Through this, Tagore critiques what Spivak defines as the "... ancient claims to things becoming nationalism by virtue of a shared ancestry…" (Spivak 80).

Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore offers a complex viewpoint on identity, belonging, and cultural integrity through his investigation of nationalism and postcolonial cosmopolitanism. His support of a more inclusive, humanistic view of national identity and his criticism of exclusive nationalism are especially pertinent today. Tagore's works, especially *The Home and the World* and *Gora*, emphasise the dangers of blind nationalism. Tagore's belief in the significance of preserving a strong sense of cultural identity and individual freedom is highlighted by his opposition to Eurocentric nationalism and his criticism of the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism. His depictions of characters in his literary works, who frequently negotiate the complexities of their identities within the larger context of national and global influences, are especially noteworthy examples of this. In addition to offering a helpful framework for addressing the issues brought on by globalisation and cultural homogenisation, his ideas promote an inclusive nationalism founded on a commitment to humanity.

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