Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*: Story of the Failure of the Nationalist Project[1]

Chi P. Pham[2]
Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences
&
University of California, Riverside, USA

Abstract

As an intense literary text, *The Home and the World* could be read in more than one way, and through different interpretations. This paper attempts to compare the novel with early twentieth century Vietnamese novels. *The Home and the World* is a novel that reads like an allegory on the failure of the Indian nationalist projects,[3] circling around the issues of "Home" versus "World," tradition versus modernity, created by the active involvement of the colonisers in the cultural, economic and administrative life of the colonised. It could be read as an allegory on the failure of Indian nationalism to accept tradition and modernity, home and the world, concurrently. In addition, the novel offers an alternative nationalist project that could free India from its obsession with the colonising powers: true freedom of the nationalist imagination will be gained by going beyond every form of ideological prejudice and separation, and by synthesising every conceivable value that could be useful for the development and maintenance of the nation. And as a concrete example of his alternative nationalist project, Tagore founded Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan in 1921.

Keywords

Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and The World*, Indian nationalism, Indian literature in English, women and nationalism, Vietnamese nationalism

Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* (1915) is usually read in terms of an allegory, either on the historical event of partition of Bengal in 1905 or on the nationalist worship of Mother India around the turn of the twentieth century. Such allegorical readings are possible for obvious reasons: the novel is set at the time of the *Swadeshi* movement, which emerged as the radically

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[2] Chi P. Pham works as a researcher at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. Her research interests include Indian literature in English and Indian presence (literature and immigrants) in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

[3] The notion of "nationalist project" is taken from Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments*.

nationalist response to the Act of Partition, engineered by the British colonial administration, at a time when "Bande Mataram" (a song composed by Tagore's senior contemporary in Bengali literature, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay) had become a much used rallying cry among the nationalists. *The Home and the World* challenges the notion of India as an exclusive Hindu nation. It questions the validity of a nationalism that focuses on emotion rather than on economic self-sufficiency and social justice. It takes exception to the aggressive masculinity of the nationalist project (Mukherjee 618-19; Rege 50).

As an intense literary text, *The Home and the World* could be read in yet other ways, in terms of other allegories. This paper offers an alternative reading, inspired by comparing the novel with early twentieth century Vietnamese novels. *The Home and the World* is a novel that reads like an allegory on the failure of the Indian nationalist projects, circling around the issues of "Home" versus "World," tradition versus modernity, created by the active involvement of the colonisers in the cultural, economic and administrative life of the colonised. It could be read as an allegory on the failure of Indian nationalism to accept tradition and modernity, home and the world, together. In addition, the novel offers an alternative nationalist project that could free India from its obsession with the colonising powers: true freedom of the nationalist imagination will be gained by going beyond every form of ideological prejudice and separation and by synthesising every conceivable value that could be useful for the development and maintenance of the nation. And as a concrete implementation of his alternative nationalist project, Tagore founded Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan in 1921.

The Home and the World was published ten years after the vexing partition of Bengal and the beginning of the magic incantation of "Bande Mataram," first in Bengali (1915), and then in English (1919). The *Swadeshi* movement, which emerged in the wake of the Partition, did not only mobilise Bengal but also spread throughout India as the "beginning of a truly national movement and a struggle between the men and methods that were to lead it" (Rege 39). "Bande Mataram" (Hail to Thee Mother) became the "war cry" of the opposition against the Partition; just like the *Swadeshi* movement, it spread "over the entire subcontinent" (Iyengar 366). Conflicts within the Indian Congress about the role and function of *Swadeshi* led to divisions within the movement: the extremists adopted the *Swadeshi*, claiming the superiority of the Indian economy, politics and arts while the moderates wanted to dedicate themselves to social reform. After a decade of challenging and fighting each other, the conflicting nationalist projects seemed to be neutralised when the so-called 1917 Declaration made India a more directly ruled colony in terms of administration and economy. However, once Mahatma Gandhi gained control over the Indian National Congress in the early 1920s, the movement of non-cooperation gained strong footholds all over India again; the ideas of *Swadeshi* were revived; the

economic system was reorganised; and government schools and colleges were boycotted. By January 1921 when virtually all the colleges in Calcutta, the administrative and intellectual centre of Bengal, were closed, Tagore, unhappy with Gandhi's "narrowness of aims," complained in a letter to Charles Freer Andrews, a professor at Santiniketan, that the non-cooperation movement was opposed to his own notions of the nation which, in his opinion, should be based on cooperation:

> What irony of fate is this, that I should be preaching cooperation of cultures between East and West on this side of the sea just at the moment when the doctrine of Non-Cooperation is preached on the other side? (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 258)

Tagore argued that the radicalism of nationalist self-reliance, based on the principle of boycott, the central idea of the *Swadeshi* movement, "uprooted students" and "tempted them away from their career before any real provision was made" (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 260)[4]; his *The Home and the World* should be read as an alternative to the spirit of non-cooperation which was "electrical," "the spirit of sacrifice [that] was in the very air we breathed" (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 258).

Women: The Core of the Home

Indian nationalist projects in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century revolved around the issue of "Home" versus "World," tradition versus modernity, culture (humanities) versus technology. Prior to 1885, Indian intellectuals thought that the imitation of British ideas about society and culture should lead to a better, more correct India. After 1885, resistance grew against colonial involvements in the cultural dynamics of India, and more than that, the Home – Indian culture – was thought to be sovereign from the "the West" and should keep a distance from Western control. In the domain of modernity, the World, India "… has no option but to choose its form from the gallery of 'models' offered by European and American nation-states" (Chatterjee 9).

The Home and the World could be read as a representation of the nationalist projects that were formulated around the "Home" and the "World" in late nineteenth century in India. The novel's main female character, Bimala, performs the role as a conveyor of such a project. She judges Nikhil's ideas of the position of the woman in the outside world as being ideologically false:

[4] When all the colleges in Calcutta were closed, Santiniketan had to bear most of the students who wanted to continue with their studies. These students stayed at the large house of Tagore and "most succumbed to a virulent local form of malaria" (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 258).

> Men never understand these things. They have their nests in the outside; they little know about the whole of what the household stands for. In these matters, they ought to follow womanly guidance.… I felt the real point was, that one ought to stand up for one's rights. To go away, and leave everything in the hands of the enemy, would be nothing short of owning defeat. (25)

The voice of Bimala seems to be a mixture of individuality ("I felt") and collectivity (mandatory "ought to" and plural "men"). However, in a closer reading it is obvious that she does not speak for herself; the mixture does not present her introspective conflicts of values[5] and her sentences run like a machine, recycling late nineteenth century nationalist discourses about the virtue of women – the Home – in British India and other colonies. It is easy to find voices of nineteenth century nationalists about "women's respectability" (Reed 200) in Bimala's words, terms and arguments of the Indian nationalist projects that are abundantly repeated in the quoted paragraph: "the outside," "these matters," "womanly guidance," "what the household stand for." Even Bimala's speech is the repetition of the nationalist rhetoric: "leaving everything in the hands of the enemy – nothing short of owing defeat." It is also easy to find in Bimila's narrative the imitation of nationalist projects of womanly virtues – in the way she decorates her domestic services with light flowers, supreme powers and feeling of happiness, for instance:

> I know from my childhood's experience, *how devotion is beauty* itself, in its inner aspect. When my mother… gently waved her fan to dry away the flies while my father sat down to his meals, *her service would lose itself in a beauty* which passed beyond outward forms. Even in my infancy, I would feel its *power*. It *transcends all debates, or doubts, or calculation: it was pure music*. I would cautiously and silently get up and take the dust of my husband's feet without walking him, how at such moments I could *feel the vermilion mark upon my forehead shining out like the morning star*. (18)[6]

Although the paragraph is full of notions of femininity and womanliness – domesticity, restraint, discipline and purity – they do not present Bimala as a wife but as a politician whose discourse echoes or repeats the discourse of

[5] In his essay, "The Form of The Home and The World," Tapobrata Ghosh considers *The Home and the World* as narrative success in terms of "personal pronouns," "self-analysis," "continual introspection." However, the figure of Bimala does not always use the first person "I" to refer to herself. Moreover, the three characters of the novel speak in terms of Indian nationalist discourses; those voices "do not refer to the speaker but to someone else, then outwardness becomes more important than introspection, and once this happens, a crucial element of the autobiographical form becomes a casualty" (Ghosh 67).

[6] Italics in quotations of this paper are mine.

female respectability that was used in Indian nationalist writings. In the early Nineteenth Century, Indian nationalisms had built a new image of women who were encouraged to absorb Western education and culture. From the middle of the Nineteenth Century onwards, Indian nationalisms imagined Indian women in a superior position and urged them to withdraw from the world and come back home – the national tradition[7] – and that is how at the end of the Nineteenth Century Bengali writers glorified specific women's virtues in many ways. For example, Kundamala Debi advised women:

> If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to *memsaheb*-like behavior. That is not becoming in a Bengali housewife. See how an educated woman can do housework thoughtfully and systematically in a way unknown to an ignorant, uneducated woman. And see how if *God had not appointed us to this place in the home, how unhappy a place the world would be*. (qtd. in Chatterjee 129)

That advice is a good summary of the terms and ideas that dominate the voice of Bimala in *The Home and the World*.

"Female virtue," connected with "home" became a central point in nationalist thinking in the colonised world around the turn of the twentieth century, and not only in India. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the nationalist rhetoric addressed the domestic position of woman as "[a] symbol of nation's greatness" (Reed 200); Sri Lanka women were thought of in terms of Singhala Buddhist womanhood which embodies piety, domesticity and submissiveness; as Reed pointed out, any threat to women's morality is considered a threat to the cultural survival of the nation.

Also during early Twentieth Century Vietnam, various movements emerged that foregrounded discussions about the role of women in the nation.[8]

[7] "Attainment by her own efforts of a superior national culture was the mark of woman's newly acquired freedom. This was the central ideological strength of the nationalist resolution of the women's question" (Chatterjee 127).

[8] In Vietnam, the "women question" playeds a prominent part in nationalist projects in the 1920s. Bùi Quang Chiêu, Pham Quynh, Nguyen Phan Long – prominent nationalists - stimulated women to go back home. In an interview with the *Phụ nữ Tân văn*'(*Journal of New Woman*), Bùi Quang Chiêu (1873-1945) criticised so-called feminism: "I think it is time to bring education to woman; the most necessary thing is to educate them about morality" (10; my translation). The core of the morality, in Bùi Quang Chiêu 's view, is the awareness of domesticity: "I think it is necessary to teach women about their rights and obligations; to show them that they should respect their husband, who is the (main) member not only of the family but also of society and of organizations" (30; my translation). Nguyễn Phan Long, the deputy leader of the Parti Constitutionnaliste Indochinois, discussed the social and moral dangers of Vietnamese females who are Westernised and left their place at home: "I am not happy with the present day morality and behaviour of women. They imitate the Western lifestyle while they do not understand Western concepts of family and society. They are just trying to destroy the traditions of Vietnamese family life…. Women compete with men for jobs. Women no longer need men. Currently, *more and*

The romantic novels by Western-educated writers in the so-called Literary Association of Self-Reliance, led by Khai Hung (1896-1947) and Nhat Linh (1905-63), focused on the prominent position of women in family life. For example, the character Tuyết in Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng's novel *Đời mưa gió* (Life of Storm and Rain)[9] was seen as female virtue personified, symbol of the nation in early twentieth Vietnamese nationalist thinking. At first she is attracted to sexual pleasures and a luxurious life, but then she goes through a radical transformation: she learns how to save money for her lover, Chương; she does not allow Chương to buy new clothes and mends old clothes for him, instead. She washes clothes by herself instead of sending them to the laundry. She begins to bargain at the market. She encourages Chương to open a private school to make more money. To Chương, all this shows that Tuyết is becoming a virtuous woman. Seeing Tuyết collect the left-over coffee powder for a second cup, Chương happily thinks to himself that education has had its effects: Tuyết has become a thrifty woman.

This image of female "respectability" and "virtue" finds its way into Phan Bội Châu's official textbook *Nữ quốc dân tư tri* (Education for National Females) of the Association of Female Tasks (1926); the practice of taking care of the household and the economy in a responsible way made an essential contribution to national prosperity:

> The economy is the most important thing in life. A family is the origin of the economy. A family in which the man is a technician and the woman is lazy cannot have a good economic life. Every woman needs to eat, to dress, to spend money. But where does her food, her money, her dress come from? Of course, they all are on the man's account. However, the demands of a woman are always higher than those of a man…. If a woman just sits down and eats heaps of food for years, her man will eventually be exhausted, and if hundreds of families break down because of this pattern, they are useless for society and nation. To improve the family economy,

more women leave their Home to work outside; thus, the family will to be destroyed. Many women cannot get married. No man wants to marry a woman who does not know how to do housework, how to feed children, how to take care of her husband… *The inborn or inherent task of a woman is to look after the house, to educate children and to support her husband. Remember those things*" (10; my translation).

[9] The novel, published in 1935 by Nhà xuất bản Ngày nay, is about the relationship between Tuyết, a modern girl, and the French-educated teacher Chương. Tuyết is influenced by the philosophy of sex and individualism as taught in Women's College of Elementary Education. Being unable to accept her husband, retarded by birth, she leaves Home and follows her lover to the World. She becomes a prostitute. Chương falls in love with Tuyết and tries to teach Tuyết the virtues of a traditional woman and wife. However, Tuyết cannot stop her life as a prostitute because she is obsessed with the pleasures of makeup, drugs and sex. She leaves Chương many times. The final image of Tuyết is her struggle with a serious disease – and nobody cares whether she is dead or alive.

> the most practical thing is to teach women certain techniques: weaving, spading, and stewing. If there is anything that men cannot do, please, sisters, you do it, carefully and intently. If women do just as I say, they become *financial gods*. Hundreds and thousands of women performing labor tasks make the family economy stable. And as a result, the prosperity of the nation, of society is guaranteed. Therefore, women are the ones who take care of the family economy which, in its turn, produces a national economy. (Phan Bội Châu, *Nữ quốc* 26; my translation)

Both Tuyết and Bimala, so it seems, are aware of their domestic position. Their activities are manifestations of the contemporary nationalist projects, in which women are supposed to be domesticated.

The Woman: Failure in the Home and in the World

In practice, the nationalist projects of the Home and the World are meant to be alternatives to the colonialist project of culture. It is the British policy to barbarise Indian culture and decorate it with Western techniques and modernity – and this is the policy that shapes the emergence of the Home and the World's projects (Chatterjee 10-13). Those who carry these nationalist projects are the colonial middle class in Calcutta, economically and politically dominated by the British colonial elite: the subordination of the middle class of Calcutta to the colonial system "was to be premised upon its cultural leadership of the indigenous colonized people" (Chatterjee 36) – an ambivalent position, of subordination and of dominance.

"The nationalist project was in principle a hegemonic project," according to Chatterjee (35). As he points out, our task is to identify what makes nationalisms hegemonic by tracing their history and assessing their historical possibilities and impossibilities. In *The Home and the World*, the nationalisms of the Home and the World are hegemonic because they are obsessed with colonialism and, the other way around, colonialism is actively engaged with nationalisms. In other words, *The Home and the World* shows that the nationalisms of the Home and the World fail in creating national subjects who have a free mind and free speech – and this uneasy situation is the result of the colonial legacy in which divisions in caste, religion, gender and race had become facts of life.

In *The Home and the World*, women fail in making their voice heard and their body seen in the process of nation building. Cultural terms such as "modern," "old tradition" and "I have been educated and introduced to the modern age in its own language"; economic terms such as "bank," "the rate of interest," "political economy" and "industries"; and political terms such as "enemy," the "world" and "the home," seem to evoke a raw mixture of notions that Bimala's mind is unable to digest. Her knowledge of so-called modernity is

the homemade product. She loses her voice and presence as a passive, obsessed entity:

> I felt that my resplendent womanhood made me indeed a goddess. Why should not its glory flash from my forehead with *visual brilliance*? Why does *not my voice find a word*, some audible cry, which would be like a sacred spell to my country for its fire initiation? (74)

It seems that the more Bimala talks, the more invisible she becomes, as she just mimics vocabularies and thoughts of others. Figuratively, such a state shows that the body and mentality of Indian women are occupied by the nationalist rhetoric of modernity and tradition at once; they talk and think in terms and points of nationalisms and not as beings with individual authority and agency. Mimicking vocabularies and thoughts of others, Bimala suggests that she acts like the passive receiver of the nationalist projects and naively accepts the separate order of the World, on the one hand, and the Home, on the other, as the distinct truth. Following the nationalist projects is like being pushed ahead by the wind: "She has been drawn forth from her home corner by a sudden call of *some Unknown*. She has no time to pause or ponder" (93). Her knowledge is completely based on intangible powers – God and sacred *sastras*:

> All that remained for me to ask of *my God* in reparation was, that I might grow up to be a model of what woman should be, as one reads it is *some epic poem*.… I should know, quite naturally, that just as my being born a woman is not *in my own hands*. (17, 19)

The sources of God and sacred texts are superficial and speculative: "some epic poems," "some future creation," "I have read in books that we are called 'bird cage.'" Which poems, what kind of books does Bimala read? She does not give any details about them. Instead, she acts as a puppet controlled by amorphous and enigmatic powers.

In addition, it is the lack of education and wisdom that drives the "illusionary" way Bimala sees the outside world. She deifies nationalist terms and ideologies like a religious follower deifies her God. Her state of mind is demonstrated in the wide range of images of destruction, radical change and threat: fire, flood and rising sun move her. The image "fire" appears one hundred times in the novel, most often to describe Bimala. It is the fire of enthusiasm, the high emotion, and the blind and passive reception, as Bimala just realises big changes in herself but does not know the nature and the causes of these changes. She enjoys her feelings of change and, romantically, she lets her mind melt together with the imagination of the so-called national changes rather than questioning what these changes are:

> There is at present no room in her mind for the question 'why.' So I must not deprive Bimala, who is one of those creatures, for whom *illusion* is necessary, of her full supply of it. (119)

The lack of comprehensive knowledge and the inability to analyse experiences cause ideological turmoil and moral corruption in the woman, Bimala. She is uprooted from family and thrown into the desert; she gets lost in the World:

> She is no mother…. I likewise have lost my home and also lost my way. Both the end and the means have become equally shadowy for me. (94)

In the end, all virtues that Bimala has developed to identify herself as a respectable woman collapse, as she takes her husband's money to give it to her lover. The collapse shows the dilemma of the nationalist projects in the sense that they created an inappropriate hybridity of so-called modernity and flimsy intellectual abilities in uneducated women. Consequently, the nationalist projects fail to protect the Home – the inner, the essence and the identity of the nation, which is occupied by a double hegemonic power: "tradition" (women's virtues built by the nationalist projects) and "colonialism" (the echo of modernity). Concurrently, the project of carrying women to the World – the outside – becomes unrealistic, romantic and emotional, excluded from knowledge and wisdom. Women's thoughts and activities remain stuck in the shadow of tradition, also in the new nationalist projects.

The national body and mentality of Vietnamese women which the nationalist projects of Bui Quang Chieu, Pham Quynh and Nguyen Phan Long (see footnote 8) expected to build was to find themselves in the same situation. The nationalist slogans of feminism[10] were unable to make Vietnamese females aware of their being subjects in terms of body and thinking. "New women"[11] in

[10] Feminism as defined by Phan Bội Châu is the right to go outside of the Home: "Women have the right to listen to what men listen to; women have the right to see what men see; women could disagree just like men do; women have the right to say what men say; women can think what men think. It is reasonable to say that being human is having certain rights, proper rights. There is no limitation to these rights, but they must be appropriate, that is: the right of performing national tasks, taking revenge on invaders. If men can perform certain tasks, there is no reason women could not perform them"(Phan Bội Châu, *Một số vấn đề* 48; my translation).

[11] In 1908, the French government set up the first female school in Hanoi, followed by similar schools in Hue and Saigon. They gave Vietnamese women the opportunity to be educated about feminism and to take outside jobs and become teachers, nurses, journalists and writers. The statistics of female students in Vietnam (1918-31) are as follows:

Vietnam were passive receptors of feminism, including freedom in love and social equality with men. However, in trying to concretise these utopian ideologies, Vietnamese women immediately faced angry disagreements from those who held to Confucian ideas; they lost their ideological direction and were pushed into physical and mental death.[12] Tuyết was, so to speak, the incomplete product of the new education. What attracted her in modernity were French songs and dances; going to school meant seeing men coming to her and expressing their romantic love for her. However, effectively moving from the Home to the World, Tuyết only finds individualism, romanticism and sexism – and she becomes a prostitute. Falling in love with Chương, Tuyết tries to play the role of a good wife by repeating the moral lessons Chương teaches her. Chương considers it his task to teach Tuyết about morality, philosophy,

Period 1918-1921	**Number of students**		
	Male	**Female**	**Total**
Annam	31,240	760	32,000
Cochinchine	62,730	9,220	71,950
Tonkin	47,200	2,700	49,900

French Education - Native (1918-1921)

Period 1930-1931 (until January 1931)	**Number of students in elementary schools**		
	Male	**Female**	**Total**
Annam	9,404	750	10,154
Cochinchine	72,032	20,012	92,044
Tonkin	44,667	2,587	47,254

Statistics 2: French Education- Native at elementary level 1930-1931 (Nguyễn Nam)

However, as Phan Bội Châu points out, because they have lived in a patriarchal hegemony for a long time and because modernity is such a vague idea, Vietnamese females are historically ignorant, they "have been in the shadow for thousands of years, their legs and hands have been tied and they have been taught how to be a horse and a buffalo…. In all their lives, they have been like passive machines, without any agency. Because their eyes have been shadowed for such a long time, they have become blind; because their ears have been plugged for such a long time, they have become deaf. Therefore, how can Vietnamese women get more knowledge? Some Vietnamese females may have studied but they have never learnt the right to be human. Has there been any program that teaches women to be citizens of the nation? Have there been any teachers or instructors who have told them about their tasks in society? What is new in the education these days are only some bottles of fragrant soap and some boxes of make-up powder, and they make females artificially dignified. Other new things are just some a, b, c's; "bonjour" and merci, and they could be of help to maintain a relationship" (Phan Bội Châu, *Một số vấn đề* 51; my translation).

[12] There was an ever widening social movement of modern young females who committed suicide in the early twentieth century in Vietnam (Nguyễn Nam).

psychology – and thus Tuyết becomes a hypocrite, a perfect hypocrite. The rude implantation of modernity and morality into Tuyết – a half-educated girl – makes her a hybrid entity without a self.[13] Eventually Tuyết gets a disease and secretly disappears in prostitution: her life could be read as emblematic for the nationalist project of feminism, as articulated by the Literary Association of Self-Reliance and other nationalists in the early twentieth century. On the other side, the facts that Tuyết leaves Chương and has a series of short relationships with other men suggest perpetual female ignorance: the nationalist moralisation of the female is a failure.

It is not so hard to explain this failure: the nationalist projects function as alternatives to the colonial cultural project. British policy meant to picture Indian culture as barbaric and then embellish it with Western techniques and modernity, a policy that can be found represented in the emergence of the nationalist projects of the Home and the World (Chatterjee10-13). Those who took to the nationalist projects are, as Chatterjee points out, the Calcutta middle class, subordinate to the colonial state in economic and political terms, claiming cultural leadership over the colonised people. Its nationalisms could not escape involvement with and of colonialism.

This colonial oppression and its effects on local nationalisms can be found in pre-revolutionary Vietnam as well. Phạm Quỳnh, the editor of the French sponsored *Tạp chí Nam Phong* (*Nam Phong Journal*), did not choose strong-willed female heroes such as Trưng Trắc, Trưng Nhị, Bùi Thị Xuân as the model for Vietnamese identity, but instead foregrounded the passive and obedient Thúy Kiều, the heroine in the *The Tale of Kieu*[14]; in his view, the mentality of Vietnamese women included abeyance, conservatism, innermost feelings, sadness and pessimism. This obsession, if not dialogue, with the colonial master was also implemented in the nationalist ideology that was developed by anti-French intellectuals such as Phan Bội Châu, whose description of the economic role of women is similar to the description of Tonkin women by Sir James George Scott (1851-1935), a British journalist:

> The Tonkinese is particularly fond of making themselves conspicuous in some way, if it is only as desperate pirate. They have, however, more the spirit of commerce than their neighbors to the south. They work harder and do some amount of huckstering, but they squander the money as soon as it is made. It is the women, who do most of the work. They keep the house, so far as it can be said to be kept; they look after the little shop which every other house in the village has; they prepare the cotton, weave

[13] Sometimes, Tuyết asks herself who she is, and she realises that her life is in the infinite dark space ahead.

[14] *Tạp chí Nam Phong*, the periodical of the French colonial regime, during 1920s, in volumes 34, 35, 36, 38, 133, 287, 308, 344, 351, 383, made *The Tale of Kieu* into a national cult.

> the clothes, thrash and husk the rice, work in the fields, and row the boat while the husband lolls about, smokes opium pipe if he can, or a water pipe if he cannot. (Scott 262)[15]

With the image of Bimala as the woman who belongs to the Home and not to the World, the novel *The Home and the World* shows the problematic paradigm of early twentieth century nationalisms in India in particular and in colonised Asia in general: steered by colonial discourse and ideologies, the nationalist imagination did not create a free and independent nation but, instead, offered alternative colonisation of the nation in which the woman is supposed to stay at home and take care of the economic well-being of her family.

The Men: Failures in the Home and in the World

Tagore chose Bengal as the setting for his novel[16] not only because Bengal was his home, but also because it was the centre of the colonial administration which, in 1905, initiated the so-called *Act of Partition*, dividing Bengal into a Muslim part and a Hindu part. This division was to create hate and distrust between the two parts – and hate and distrust have lasted until the present day, becoming one of the traumas of Indian nationalisms.[17] It is this colonial legacy which frustrates the nationalisms that are invoked in *The Home and the World*; building the Home – tradition, morality, culture – or developing the World – the West, modernity, technology, economy, administration: the nationalist projects of the Home and the World were bound to fail, due to lasting colonialist involvement with nationalisms as much as, conversely, the nationalist obsession with the coloniser.

The two main male characters, Nikhil and Sandip, function as two possibilities of *The Home and the World*'s nationalist projects; they act as core agents of the World by offering utopianism and rationalism, respectively. Whereas the mixed voice of Bimala presents the lack of wisdom and freedom of the colonised mind, the voices of the myth-breaking Sandip and the utopian

[15] This idea is different from David Marr, who considers Phan Bội Châu as the protector of the "subtle merging of traditional and modern values, a selective appreciation of Eastern and Western concepts of female behavior" (Marr 215). However, by deeply looking at Phan Bội Châu's text, it is easy to find that he focuses on the ignorance of Vietnamese women rather than the hope to change them; the patriarchal order in society and family is still dominant.

[16] In fact, the novel's engagement with the boycott of foreign goods, *Swadeshi*, reads like the effective use of a literary technique. In a response to Sarat Chandra Chatterji (Chattopadhyay), Bengal's most popular novelist at the time, Tagore wrote, "Had you expressed anti-British ideas in a newspaper, the effect would have been limited and temporary, but a writer like you, who uses the story form, has a much wider impact, unlimited in space and time, captivating everyone from immature boys and girls to people of the older generation" (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 347).

[17] Anxiety about the Bengal partition has remained a central theme in modern Indian literature (Mukherjee 621).

Nikhil suggest the unfeasibility of both rationalist nationalism and utopian nationalism. Whereas Sandip bases his nationalism on an extremist belief in individual wisdom, science and passion, Nikhil devotes his life to the ultimate truth, a complete freedom of mind and voice. These imaginations, however, cannot unlock themselves from colonial knowledge and the "traditions" of India.[18]

Both characters are haunted by Western technology and philosophy. Both belong to the Western educated elite. Both are attached to the colonial in terms of education, administrative expertise and economic privileges and detached from the barbarian and subaltern "supposed tradition" (Chatterjee 119). It seems that in their efforts to imagine the nation, neither of them is able to distance himself from colonial knowledge: if they alienated themselves from colonial ideology and knowledge, their minds would be empty:

> What I really feel is this, that those who *cannot find food for their enthusiasm* in a *knowledge of their country* as it actually is, or those who cannot love men just because they are men – who must shout and *deify their country* in order to keep up their excitement.… *Where our minds are free, we find ourselves lost*. Our moribund vitality must have for its rider either *some fantasy*…. Whatever may be out condition, we shall either need some *imaginary ghost* or some actual medicine-man to terrorize over us. (42)

Given the fact that "the home is the original site on which the nationalist project was launched" (Chatterjee 148) and, secondly, that the survival of the nation depends on the attachment of women, both Nikhil's and Sandip's nationalist projects are "tributes" to the colonial ideology of colonised culture and society; their projects concur with the ideological justification of British colonial rule, circling around the "degenerate and barbaric" social customs of the Indian population. In this justification, Indian tradition is "classicized" in the sense that all scriptural canons and ritual practices are interpreted as indicators of a patriarchy which perpetuates female inferiority and submission (Chatterjee 118).

In their acts and thinking, both Nikhil and Sandip express male mastery over females in that they both take their relationship with Bimala as an

[18] Tanika Sarkar analyses the difference in the way Sandip and Nikhil embody national love. The nation, as imagined by Sandip, "is War itself. I can compel worship only in this incarnation" (Sarkar 42-43). Nikhil, the literary personification of Tagore, offers a very different form of patriotism, universally justifiable, moral and good. However, neither Nikhil nor Sandip appears as the complete and perfect manifestation of the nation, as indicated in *The Home and the World*: both are losers. It is better to read these characters as two possibilities or fragments of the correct image of the nation, a concept that does not find an ultimate and perfect form in *The Home and the World*.

experiment with their national ideologies.[19] Nikhil encourages Bimala to live in the outer world. He sees her living in the World as a test for her true love for him, the concretisation of the highest Truth, the ground of his own imagination of the nation – and, obviously, Bimala fails to be the representation of this ideal woman, of the national tradition. Sandip experiences victory when he is attracted to Bimala's beauty; she is an "agent" who makes him aware of his supreme masculinity and his dictatorship, leading his imagined nation that is driven by men: whether a woman is the Home or the World is decided by man:

> We are men, we are kings, we must have our tribute. Ever since we have come upon the Earth, we have been plundering her; and the more we claimed, the more she submitted…. The one delight of this Earth is to fulfill the claims of those who are men. She has been made fertile and beautiful and complete through her endless sacrifice to them… by sheer force of our claims, we men have opened up all the latent possibilities of women. In the process of surrendering themselves to us, they have ever gained their true greatness. (11)

The fact that "the nationalist emancipation is necessarily a story of betrayal" (Chatterjee 157) is another paradox of the national project as evoked by Sandip: he represents betrayal by breaking national myths. In Bimala's eyes, Sandip is not an ordinary individual but a Master of Life, the concrete form in which the Supreme Being realises his edification of the world order:

> I saw him wonderfully transformed. Especially when his features were suddenly lit up by a shaft of light from the slowly setting sun, as it sunk below the roof-line of the pavilion, he seemed to me to be marked out by the gods as their messenger to mortal men and women…. The fire in his words had flamed up more fiercely. Indra's steed refused to be reined in, and there came the roar of thunder and the flash of lightning. I said within myself that his language had caught fire from my eyes. (31)

It is Sandip who breaks myths. He utilises statements of miracles to show his superiority and to neutralise every possible doubt about his convictions. For example, to prevent Bimala from misunderstanding his glorious task, he assures her, "I am your Country. I am your Sandip. I am more to you than anything else of yours. *Bande Mataram*" (141). The magical words "your country," "Bande Mataram," "Ravana… the real hero of the *Ramayana,*" "Arjuna," "the Truth," the "Universal Aspect," "the Ganges," and "the Brahmaputra" are implanted to silence the voices that could challenge his project. However, it is Sandip who,

[19] Anita Desai emphasises the difference rather than the similarity between Nikhil and Sandip: "Nikhil was by no means conservative, being led by ideas that were rational and progressive, Sandip was not only immoral but also attractive virile and charismatic" (10).

ranked as a national hero with "the unique spiritual experiences and visions" of Rama, Krisna, the Buddha, Jesus, Sankara and Caitainya (Chatterjee 47), breaks the sacred usage of myth. The context in which he refers to the term *Bande Mataram* is secular and worldly. The image of the Divine Mother is utilised to persuade Bimala to take (or rather: steal) money for him. *Bande Mataram,* a war cry taken from the novel *Ananda Math*[20] by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, is made into a mantra, used in spaces of violence, in bathrooms, in love affairs, in flirting and in financial cheating. *Bande Mataram* functions as a magical mantra in order to evoke violence in the community; together with the acts of burning foreign goods, the loud repetition of *Bande Mataram* forces others to join the cause of the nation, as imagined and evoked by men.

Tagore's description here parodies the discourses of the late Nineteenth Century nationalist project of the mythical model Ramakrishna who helped to evoke the belief in the nation: the East finds its dictatorship in the spiritual domain, which the West is unable to reach. In the parody-like portrayal of Sandip, Tagore challenges the belief that India can build a pure culture based on myths of "the Indian tradition" alone.

Another model of nationalism, evoked by Nikhil, appears to be an ideal one, as it is free from obsessions with colonial knowledge, ghosts and internal fears:

> Our country… has been brought to death's door through sheer fear – from fear of the gods down to fear of the police; and if you set up, in the name of freedom, the fear of some other bogey…. Fear is to regulate how people are to dress, where they shall trade, or what they must eat, then is man's freedom of will utterly ignored, and manhood destroyed at the root. (129)

According to Nikhil, the evidence of freedom is the fact that people's voices are based on their personal inner desires; they are the product of internal motivation rather than of the external preaching about the colonial and about the tradition:

> Industry may lead to the country's prosperity… but a mere desire for its prosperity will not make for success in industry. Even when your head were cool, our industry did not flourish. Why should we suppose that they will do so just because we have become frantic? (162)

[20] Although composed in 1875, the song in the novel by Bankim Chandra Chatterji did not get popular attention until on August 7, 1905, "thousands of students drawn from all communities gathered at noon at the College Square in Calcutta and made a processionary march to the Town Hall, filling the air all the way with the cry of Bande Mataram and other slogans" (Iyengar 367).

It is tragic that the rhetoric calling for freedom of the mind is full of terms of colonial knowledge: "country," "police," "freedom," "manhood," "trade," "will," etc. Nikhil's concept of the "frantic" and "desire" remains vague and abstract; it is not attached to any subject or agent. As he does not give an explanation of how the individual desire functions in the imagined nation, his concept tends to be of psychological rather than of political character, and the fact that he eventually gets injured should be read as symbolic for the failure of his utopian desire for cooperation between Muslims and Hindus.

The unsolvable practical tensions between Muslims and Hindus in Bengal are the result of colonial involvement – and no doubt Tagore was aware of this. Under British rule in India, the Hindu-Muslim antagonism became the "great curse of the national movement of India," the result of the colonial policy of "divide and rule" as stated by Lieutenant Colonel John Coke, the Commandant at Moradabad, as early as 1857: "Our endeavor should be to uphold, in full force, the separation which exists between the different religions and races, not to endeavor to amalgamate them" (Aggarwala 11). The utopianism of Nikhil, his belief in religious tolerance and ethnic unification, is ineffective whenever he has to deal with the political, economic and religious animosities that are created and strengthened by colonial involvement with local issues. This situation summarises the miserable fate of colonies, whose imagination of "a nation" is, generally speaking, hard to judge on its validity because of colonial legacies.

The novel *The Home and the World* does not offer a concrete form of "the nation" but only a possibility.[21] This imaginative alternative, as suggested,[22] might be the model that makes colonised India come closer to its colonisers, to understand them, to "curse" them (Jose 21), and to call for their support in implementing national projects.[23] Tagore was actively involved in the translation of his novel *The Home and the World* and of his other works into English, and he tried to use Western concepts and explain Indian concepts by way of Western concepts. He might have been aware of the range of possibilities of "the nation" that are available for the colonised. In the particular case of *The Home and the World*, Tagore translated the novel about "the nation" alongside his calls for support and help from Europe for his project of an international university,

[21] Tanika Sarka sees *The Home and the World* as imagining a transgressive nation, in which "the Muslim must not be made to accept the burden because of a Hindu landed leadership commands it in the name of a Hindu goddess. The nation cannot be elevated above poverty and ignorance…. The nation is not above universal laws of morality and justice… the nation cannot humiliate the Miss Gilbys, nor impose the burning of cheap foreign clothes" (Sarka 43). However, Sarkar's burdensome use of the adverbials "must not," "cannot," "is not above," is indicative of the fact that the novel does not solve the question of what nationalism should be about.

[22] The term "suggests" refers to the traditional Indian aesthetic concept of *dhvani*, which is usually translated as "suggestion," "implication," "denotation."

[23] In his letters to American scholars in 1920s, Tagore expressed his anti-non-cooperation and his desire for cooperation among different cultures for his project of a universal university.

Visva Bharati. Visva Bharati, he imagined, was to be the embodiment of a future India as a harmonious unity of West and East. The new university, Tagore wrote in his letter to his son during his stay in the USA (1916), was:

> [to] be the connecting thread between India and the world…. I want to make that place *somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography* – the first flag of victorious universal humanism will be planted here. To rid the world of the suffocating coils of national pride will be the task of my remaining years. (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 179)

And in a letter to his friend William Rothenstein, the principal of the Royal College of Art, he expressed his ambition to build a university – the embodiment of India – as "some oriental society… can be persuaded to represent us in France with the cooperation of European teachers, students and a library, the product of print-capitalism" (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 263-264).

In addition, starting in 1917, Tagore struggled with the British government to get permission to invite professors from Germany and other enemy countries to come and teach at his newly established school at Santiniketan. He knew that he and his institution were treated with suspicion by civil servants, intellectuals and the police in India, and that he could not count on an official sponsorship by the British government. The fact that Tagore himself translated *The Home and the World* and other fragments of his Bengali work into English, therefore, could also be seen as a way of challenging British suspicions and to make a more or less direct appeal to Western readers and intellectuals to support his project of an international school, the universal model of nation, the concrete embodiment of his "national project." By way of his translations as well as his activities to secure intellectual and financial support from the world for this very concrete nationalist project, Tagore, in Fanon's words, created his own imagination of a nation and kept it in existence.

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