

Tradition, Modernity, and the Crisis of Identity in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*

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Abstract— Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare-Baire* (*The Home and the World*, 1916) stages a sustained interrogation of the encounter between tradition and modernity in colonial Bengal. Using a tripartite narrative—Bimala, Nikhil and Sandip—Tagore maps competing ethical systems and political imaginations during the Swadeshi movement and shows how the collision of home (private, moral, domestic life) and world (public, political, modern) precipitates a crisis of identity at personal and national levels. This article argues that Tagore neither valorises a simple return to tradition nor endorses an uncritical modern nationalism; instead, through ambivalent characterization, ironic narrative placement, and symbolic motifs (the house, vermilion, letters, the verandah), he exposes how both an aggressive, instrumental modernity (Sandip's nationalism) and an inward-looking domesticity (a static conception of tradition) can damage individual agency—most visibly in Bimala—and fracture moral responsibility. Close reading of key episodes shows Tagore's commitment to an ethical cosmopolitanism that refuses absolutist identities while insisting on the moral duties that link home to world.

Keywords— ambivalent characterization, ironic narrative placement, and symbolic motifs, inward-looking domesticity, conception of tradition, moral duties

I. INTRODUCTION

The Home and the World is set during the Swadeshi agitation that followed the 1905 partition of Bengal, a historical moment when new political identities were being forged rapidly. Tagore's novel centers on three figures who personify competing responses to colonial modernity. Nikhil embodies liberal humanism and ethical restraint; Sandip, the charismatic demagogue, channels militant nationalism and rhetorical persuasion; Bimala, the novel's moral and emotional centre, is drawn between these poles, first enthralled by Sandip and then confronting the consequences of political action on the home. Tagore's central problem is the ethical

meaning of modern political engagement: how does an individual—particularly a woman, historically confined to the domestic sphere—reconcile private duties and public passion? The narrative's political urgency thus channels questions about the formation of selfhood in modern India.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on *Ghare-Baire* typically clusters around Tagore's critique of nationalism, feminist readings of Bimala, and comparative studies that set the novel against other Swadeshi literature. Contemporary critics reaffirm Tagore's suspicion of mass mobilization and ideological absolutism: recent readings emphasize his search for a "political community" grounded in relational ethics rather than the exclusivist nation-state model. Rinku Lamba (2022) revisits Tagore's critique as neither simply anti-political nor reactionary, but as an articulation of a "samaj" rooted in moral relationships rather than homogenizing national identity. Feminist critics focus on Bimala's uncertain agency: she becomes both the site of nationalist appropriation and of a limited but significant feminist awakening. Comparative and adaptation studies also ask how cinematic and later readings (notably Satyajit Ray's film) recast Tagore's tensions for new publics.

III. DISCUSSION

3.1. The Home and the World: Narrative Method and Ideological Personae

Tagore's choice of a tripartite narrator—Bimala's intimate confessional voice, Nikhil's reflective first-person narrative, and Sandip's fiery proclamations—creates a dialogic architecture that refuses single-voiced closure. The novel's form is itself an argument: multiple perspectives expose the partiality and rhetorical function of ideology. The "home" is not merely a setting but a moral language; the "world" is not only geography but a force field of

competing modernities. By giving voice to each pole, Tagore dramatizes how language constructs identity: Sandip’s rhetoric manufactures belonging and martyrdom; Nikhil’s language attempts to moralize politics; and Bimala’s narration charts interior shifts as she negotiates, often painfully, new selfhood. The polyphonic form renders transparent the colonizing effects not only of empire but of any monological political program.

3.2. Tradition as Ethical Frame (the “Home”)

Tagore’s “tradition” in *Ghare-Baire* is not an unthinking conservatism. Rather, the home stands for a set of ethical practices, rituals, and intersubjective duties that sustain a moral imagination. Bimala’s opening recollection of her mother’s vermilion and the sari’s red border is a moment of ethical inheritance: it is through domestic rites that she first learns identity and value. The novel’s opening lines emphasise the formative moral effect of the home: “MOTHER, today there comes back to mind the vermilion mark at the parting of your hair, the sari which you used to wear, with its wide red border...” (p. 3). This image indexes tradition as embodied memory and relational responsibility. research.gold.ac.uk

But Tagore complicates the home. Nikhil, though himself a modernized zamindar, treats the home as an ethical laboratory: he wants Bimala to be free morally and intellectually, not merely ornamentally confined. His liberalism refuses the patriarchal instrumentalization of tradition; yet he also underestimates the seductive power of political modernity. Tagore thus distinguishes between oppressive tradition and an ethics that arises within the domestic—an ethics of care, humility, and relational responsibility that resists the militarization of love by political fervour.

3.3. Modernity as Passion and Instrument (the “World”)

Modernity in the novel is double-edged. On the one hand, it provides new possibilities for political participation and an urgency to contest colonial domination. On the other, modern political techniques—mass mobilization, rhetorical manipulation, and instrumental rationality—can convert identity into a cause and persons into instruments. Sandip’s rhetoric embodies the aggressive, populist modernity that reduces ethics to utility. He insists on strength and despises “the

sayings of theirs [that] only find a place in the hiding corners of the weak. They are despised by those who are strong, the rulers of the world” (p. 170). Sandip’s modernity celebrates power, theatre and macho leadership; it transforms belonging into exclusionary belonging and moral judgment into rhetorical triumph. research.gold.ac.uk

Tagore is particularly attuned to modernity’s spectacle: mass meetings, symbolic gestures (boycotts, burning foreign cloth), and the theatricality of sacrifice delude the public into thinking that political intensity equals moral rightness. The novel shows how these forms can be co-opted by demagoguery—how modern means bereft of ethical ends produce social fragmentation rather than emancipation. Cambridge University Press & Assessment

3.4. Bimala as Site of Identity Crisis

Bimala’s trajectory is the novel’s ethical axis. Initially a traditional Bhadra Mahila (cultured woman), she is gradually drawn into public politics by Sandip’s charm and by an emergent desire to be more than a domestic existence. Her movement is instructive: it is not simply a conversion to modernity but an identity in crisis—caught between the moral demands of love and the seduction of public valour. Her inner monologues show the oscillation between desire for self-assertion and guilt: the private feelings of love (and jealousy) become political when Sandip instrumentalizes her devotion as national loyalty. Tagore stages this to show how nationalist rhetoric can appropriate and distort feminine subjectivity. research.gold.ac.uk+1

A representative passage: Bimala, speaking of Nikhil and the outer world, pleads—“I would have you come into the heart of the outer world and meet reality. Merely going on with your household duties, living all your life in the world of household conventions and the drudgery of household work—this is not life” (p. 40). The passage reveals Bimala’s initial longing for an expanded identity; yet Tagore’s narrative irony later reveals how Sandip’s “world” actually constrains—by substituting national spectacle for genuine autonomy. research.gold.ac.uk

3.5. The Ethics of Leadership: Sandip vs. Nikhil

The Nikhil–Sandip binary is often read allegorically as two political philosophies. Sandip’s politics is voluntarist and rhetorical: he valorises will, myth and

violence as nation-building tools. Nikhil's politics rests on moral restraint, individual conscience and social reform. Tagore is sceptical of both extremes: Nikhil's ethical purity risks political paralysis and paternalism; Sandip's militant rhetoric instruments people and erases difference. The novel thereby proposes that ethical leadership requires both moral imagination and political effectiveness without sacrificing human dignity. Nikhil recognizes the emancipatory potential of modernity (education, reform), but insists these must be realized within constraints that respect human persons. Sandip's famous maxim, about the "rulers of the world" and the contempt for weak sentiments (p. 170), marks the novel's critique: politics divorced from ethics becomes domination. research.gold.ac.uk+1

3.6. Symbolic Resources: Objects, Space and Language

Tagore uses objects (vermilion, shawls, letters), spaces (verandah, house, public square), and language (rhetoric vs. quiet reflection) as symbolic resources to dramatize the tradition/modernity divide.

- Vermilion and the sari signify inherited identity and relational continuity. Bimala's memory of her mother's vermilion (p. 3) ties her subjectivity to ritual continuity—an ethical inheritance that shapes how she values home and persons. research.gold.ac.uk
- The shawl and the foreign cloth become political tokens in the Swadeshi economy: boycotts turn cloth into identity markers. Tagore shows how material modernity (consumer goods) acquires symbolic political meaning and how possession or loss of objects (gifts, shawls) becomes a test of loyalty.
- Letters and private notes mediate interiority; their disclosure functions as an ethics test. The exposure of letters dramatizes the collapse of private trust under political pressure.
- Space (verandah vs. public square) stages the female threshold: the verandah is a literal and symbolic threshold between home and world. Bimala's crossing of the threshold is not purely geographic—it is existential. Tagore uses spatial metaphors to show how modern public spaces can both empower and expose. research.gold.ac.uk

3.7. Irony and Narrative Distance: Tagore's Moral Stance

Tagore's irony is a central aesthetic device: the narrator often lets characters speak for themselves—Sandip's rhetoric included—in order to expose contradictions between speech and deed. The narrative distance permits readers to perceive Sandip's manipulations and Nikhil's limits without a simple authorial judgment. Yet the cumulative moral pressure of the text is unmistakable: by the novel's end, the reader is led to see how aggressive nationalism corrodes personal relations and moral responsibility. Modern critics read this as Tagore's appeal for an ethical cosmopolitanism—an insistence that political identity must be tempered by universal human obligations. Rinku Lamba and others argue that Tagore's alternative is not anti-modern but proposes a "samaj" grounded in relational norms rather than an exclusionary nation-state.

3.8. Crisis of Identity: The Novel's Denouement

The crisis culminates when private misdeeds and public passions collide. Bimala's disillusionment, Nikhil's anguished self-reflection, and Sandip's rhetorical triumphs show that identity forged solely by allegiance—whether to home or nation—fails to hold. The novel's tragedy is moral rather than merely political: persons suffer when they become instruments of ideology. Tagore's final scenes insist on moral repair rather than political victory: the recovery of ethical relation (however fragile) matters more than the triumph of any political creed. Readers are left with a sober vision: modern identity must be reflexive and ethically grounded, capable of negotiating home and world without subsuming persons to either.

3.9. Feminist Readings and Bimala's Agency

Contemporary feminist critics have read Bimala ambiguously—as both agent and object. Bimala initially gains new moral deliberation; her involvement in Swadeshi is a form of political subjectification. But Tagore also shows how that involvement is mediated by male actors: Sandip's seduction is rhetorical and manipulative; Nikhil's liberalism can be patronizing. Bimala's agency, then, is constrained—she is given choices, but within a structure that often makes those choices self-destructive. The text thereby stages early feminist dilemmas: how does a woman assert herself in a modern public sphere that is still patriarchal? The answer, for Tagore, seems to be ethical self-formation

rather than mimicry of male models of power. Recent essays locate Bimala's final stance as a partial reclamation of subjectivity—she is neither the premodern wife nor a fully modern political actor, but someone who learns the cost of ideological appropriation and the value of moral autonomy. [Rupkatha+1](#)

3.10. Tagore's Political Ethics: Toward a Cosmopolitan Samaj

The novel's political thrust is an implicit ethics: Tagore wants a political order that respects plurality, human dignity, and moral accountability. His critique of nationalism is not a call to apolitical retreat; rather, he wants political engagement that preserves ethical relations. Scholars like Rinku Lamba have argued that Tagore's alternative is neither naive pacifism nor nostalgic localism; it is a vision of political community—samaj—based on relational duties and moral imagination. Tagore's ideal figures are those who can connect home and world without sacrificing persons to slogans. The novel thus anticipates later debates about the ethics of political modernity, populist mobilization, and the uses of rhetoric in mass politics. [Cambridge University Press & Assessment+1](#)

3.11. Comparative and Adaptation Perspectives

Satyajit Ray's 1984 film adaptation of *Ghare-Baire* recasts some narrative emphases: Ray's visual grammar intensifies the erotic and political magnetism of Sandip, while also foregrounding Bimala's interior conflict through cinematic devices. Adaptation studies underscore how form shapes ideological reception: the film's visual immediacy renders Sandip more menacing; cinematic condensation can make Tagore's irony less ambiguous and the political critique starker. Comparative readings help us see how Tagore's concerns about modernity translate across media and time—confirming the novel's continued relevance.

IV. FINDINGS

This article finds that Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* offers a nuanced exploration of the conflict between tradition and modernity in colonial Bengal, especially during the Swadeshi movement. Rather than endorsing a return to traditional values or a wholesale embrace of modern nationalism, Tagore critically examines both through his complex characters—Bimala, Nikhil, and

Sandip—who embody competing ethical and political visions. The novel reveals how tradition can provide moral grounding but may also restrict personal freedom, while modernity can inspire liberation yet risk devolving into manipulation and violence.

A key finding is Tagore's use of narrative form, symbolism, and irony to dramatize the dangers of both aggressive nationalism and static domesticity. Bimala's crisis of identity illustrates the costs of ideological appropriation, especially for women negotiating new roles in public and private spheres. Tagore advocates for an "ethics of relationality," suggesting that true modern engagement demands moral accountability and respect for human dignity, not just political fervour or rhetorical power.

V. CONCLUSION

Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* masterfully stages the tension and interplay between tradition and modernity, refusing to present them as mutually exclusive or simple opposites. Through the intricate lives of its central characters—Bimala, Nikhil, and Sandip—the novel explores how tradition can serve as both a source of ethical grounding and a force of stagnation, while modernity, though often associated with progress and liberation, can just as easily become a tool of domination and manipulation.

Tagore's genius lies in his nuanced approach: rather than advocating for a wholesale rejection of either tradition or modernity, he proposes an "ethics of relationality." This central achievement of the novel is a call to judge political and social change not by the loudness of rhetoric or short-term effectiveness, but by its capacity to uphold human dignity and moral responsibility. For Tagore, modernity is not automatically virtuous; its real test is whether it enhances or diminishes the worth and agency of individuals within the fabric of society.

The three main characters serve as embodiments of different ethical stances. Bimala's internal crisis mirrors the broader societal struggle between the safety of tradition and the allure of new freedoms. Nikhil's moral anguish reflects the challenge of acting ethically in a world where good intentions are often co-opted by bad outcomes. Sandip, with his charismatic rhetoric and demagogic energy, exposes

the dangers of modern political passion when it becomes unmoored from moral constraints.

Tagore's remedy is not a withdrawal from public life or a retreat into the safe confines of tradition; rather, he advocates for a reflective engagement—a cosmopolitan, morally anchored form of participation in the world. This engagement, for Tagore, means drawing upon the strengths of both home (tradition, intimacy, rootedness) and the world (openness, progress, cosmopolitanism), while steadfastly rejecting any ideology that demands the sacrifice of personal dignity and ethical responsibility. Through *The Home and the World*, Tagore urges a dynamic, critical, and humane negotiation between the forces shaping Indian society and the individual soul.

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