

The Inseparable Dichotomy of Nationalism: the Readings of *The Home and the World* in China and the Reconsiderations

Xingyue Zhou
Peking University, China

Abstract

While Tagore's literary works are widely praised in China, his political thoughts have undergone a longtime denouncement. The reception history of *The Home and the World* fully proves this double-standard: acclaimed for its artistic achievements but despised for its nationalistic thoughts. This essay traces the Chinese scholars' different reviews on this novel in various periods, at the same time it investigates into Tagore's own meditation and choice in front of the conflict between mild humanism and radical patriotism. As this investigation touches some ideological dichotomies, it intends to uncover the absolutism of these criticisms, in order to refresh the critical views toward Tagore's effortful request in the complicated reality of nationalism.

[Key Words: Nationalism, *The Home and the World*; dichotomy, patriotism, cosmopolitanism.]

During the early 1920s, Rabindranath Tagore had been a cultural trend and swept through the Chinese literary circle. Meanwhile, the receiving of Tagore in China had been bifurcated ever since then and this deep contradiction was never to be reconciled until the late 20th century with the final fading out of the Marxist jargons' dominance in literary criticism. On the one hand, Tagore is perhaps the most widely recognized foreign poet among the Chinese readers and has influenced the Chinese "New Poetry" in a tremendous way; on the other hand, Tagore's social and political thoughts had undergone many diatribes by the revolutionists in those unsettling years and remained unacknowledged for a long time in the main proletarian ideology.

Under this context, the destiny of *The Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire*) in China could be inferred to a large extent, yet what makes this case more curious is its own bifurcation in its receiving history. Being one of Tagore's most overt political novels, it was being thought as conservative and wrong in its negative view on the revolution and its distortion of the revolutionary leader, which in return might also indicate much of people's views towards Tagore's political ideas; but at the same time, no one doubted the verbal delicacy and the artistic value of this novel, not even the most caustic opposers. Another interesting phenomenon might have subtle relations with this double criterion: having three Chinese versions by four distinguished translators¹, this novel gained few reviews through all the times and is little known among the public compared with Tagore's other works.

After *The Home and the World* was translated and introduced to China in 1923, under the fervent wave that had been aroused among the Chinese literary circle for the eastern poet and philosopher, the communist literary critic Qu Qiubai might be the first one to write a public review on it, which became the sole one of that time that can be found today. Speaking for the radicals as he was, Qu also had a refined literary background and had appreciated many of Tagore's thoughts in his earlier days, which made his sided opinion also of some complexities to represent the Chinese receiving of Tagore during that special historical period. Just six days after Tagore's arrival in Shanghai on April 12th, 1924, Qu's article "Tagore the Has-Been" appeared on *China Youth*, the official magazine of the Communist Youth League of China. Following this literary event and his another article on Tagore's nationalism published two days before, Qu's intention to prohibit the discouraging influence of Tagore's peaceful thoughts on China's ongoing revolutions is fully expressed. All through the article he viewed Tagore as a "Has-Been Saint," and *The Home and the World* as a novel "unquestionable in its artistic value, but unfortunately out of date" (1149).

This emphasis of time is closely related with Qu's earlier essay "Tagore's Concept of the Nation-State and the East," where he made a parallel comparison of Tagore's thoughts with those of Confucius and Mencius. During the period of the New Culture Movement in China, the Confucianism was discarded in a large measure by the revolutionists, who believed that the western way is the trend and should be the solution of the nation's future. Written shortly before and published it at the very moment of Tagore's visit, Qu ended his article by a quite unwelcoming greeting, "Thank you, Mr. Tagore. Yet we still have many Confucius and Mencius of our own" ("Tagore's Concept" 1084). Here the irony is sharp in Tagore's case, as he was held as a great innovative poet and his literary works were applied for the Chinese literary revolution; yet his mind seemed so retrograde and impracticable for China's rapid changing time and situation.

India had, according to Qu, also "come to a modern stage, yet Tagore still dreaming of back to the Brahma." ("Tagore the Has-Been" 1149) He analyzed the Indian social problems and situations which proved that the revolution was just as urgent for them as it was for China. Labeling Nikhilesh's deed as "passive resistance" and Sandip's as "active resistance" (1151), Qu not only identified with the Indian activists, whom he thought had already dominated India, but also thought that the Chinese revolution was still not developed enough, not bloody enough to cause larger social changes. Under such a historical trend, both Tagore and Nikhilesh's thoughts were ironized by quotation marks, as the sayings of "love and brightness" (1150), or "Right which is far greater than my country"² (1151) were quoted like something too obsolescent not to be derided.

Yet the most ironical thing here is Qu's own change of attitude during those years, for not long before that he was still quoting Tagore's "love" philosophy as an approach to life and nature³. But at this critical historical time, people's judicious mind gave way to the ardency for action and more tended to make absolute judgments. Qu viewed Nikhilesh as the representative of the eastern culture, while Sandip standing for the western culture, which is not unlike the Indian literary figure Pramatha Chaudhuri's famous commentary on the novel, that "Nikhilesh is ancient India, Sandip modern Europe."⁴ Though they were valid as interpretations, and Tagore indeed suggested such distinctions in the novel, especially to attribute the voracity of Sandip to the western character, yet this kind of ideology of irreconcilable dichotomies of the east and the west, and of the tradition and the modern, is just like that of the absolute nationalism, which could be easily exaggerated during the unrest years to those who either for or against the revolution, and to cause absolute discards of and fierce curses on one or the other. Holding this absolute dichotomy, and standing in the same revolutionary position with Sandip, Qu's reading of the novel just couldn't agree with Nikhilesh's peaceful resistance, and sometimes showed hostility towards it, out of an imaginary necessity to protect its own stand. This reading was very symptomatic of China's ideological trend of that historical period, whose negative consequences of the total abandoning of the "east" and tradition have also been raised up in later ages. At the same time, this reading of the novel was also typical among the revolutionists of other places in the world, such as the widely known denouncement from the Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukács, and also among the active Indians themselves⁵. Out of an absolutism which ignored many real social circumstances of either China, India, or any other countries, this reading itself went in reverse fundamentally with Tagore's very concepts of trying to keep congruous with nature and reality, even though there are many conflicts within. What so intriguing about *The Home and the World* lies not in the complete opposition between Nikhilesh and Sandip, but in the involved and inseparable relation between the two ways of nationalism and in Tagore's efforts to explore the complicities and to find a solution in the hard times. Justified these reviews may seem from their own political perspectives, a subtler reading of the protagonist and the anti-protagonist should be traced, in order to find a much more sophisticated and intertwined thoughts of Tagore himself facing this conflicts.

Ashis Nandy's thorough analysis of the novel is merited, especially for the emphasis on "Bimala's Choice" (Nandy, 10–15). Seen by Chaudhuri as the "present-day India" (qtd. Chattopadhyay, 194), Bimala was the very common ground after which both the two types of nationalism sought. Her own psychological changes and struggles reflected the intricacy of the Janus-faced ideas, and it was also in Bimala that both Nikhilesh and Sandip had been questing

for something beyond their own values. Her constant oscillation between hopes and fears for actions has been the main clue of this novel, and her independent mind of decision making is the most expected result of the whole plot. She bore complicated meaning as a woman both traditional and modern, with both eastern virtue and western sense, yet she tried hard but hadn't truly made her own choice from beginning to end. Along with the opinion that the final tragedy represents Tagore's own pessimism in reconciling the two and the novel's failure in "fulfilling its own ideological fantasy,"⁶ it should also be noted that Bimala's choice somewhat stands for the choice of the nation, thus her indecision and lost in the end also suggest no road out of this predicament. For this ending, it is a novel delicate for the heart's awakening and development within the dilemma, rather than a simple impugment of the radical side; it is with the author's full awareness of the goods and bads in the complicate social situation, rather than a lofty idea of humanism alone.

Bimala's importance was also emphasized by the critic Shi Xi, in the article "*The Home and the World* and Literature on the Theme of Family,"⁷ placed in the 1987 edition of the novel translated by the expert of Bengali literature, Dong Youchen. It is a more detailed reading than that of Qu after more than sixty years, during which China had undergone great social changes. Due to many sensitive political reasons, Tagore's works of strong political intention were barely touched or discussed in China, which might also be the reason of *The Home and the World's* unfamiliarity to the Chinese. In this article, Bimala was also seen as the one who would make the choice, and to a large extent related to Tagore's own effort to find a solution. Still under the shadow of the former Marxist literary criticism, the ending of the novel was read as a deviation from the historical trend. "Holding a negative attitude towards the Swadeshi Movement, Tagore had betrayed the historical truth in his artistic work, and had to make Bimala move forward on his ideological path" (9). According to Shi, the strategy of epitomizing the troublous times into Bimala's own disquiet is very clever, which deals with the grand topic of the world through the events of one family, or one home. Nearly all the aspects of this novel were praised to be excellent, like its structure, conception, narrative perspective, psychological portrayal, classical allusion, and linguistic delicacy, except its political stand. "Not knowing its meaning rightly" (6) or "adopting the wrong attitude in front of reality for the limitation of his Weltanschauung" (10) became the often used phrases to describe this political discordance. Under such terms, Sandip was even suggested as the representative of the world matters. "For Tagore's decision, Bimala returned back to her former living and olden home. The emotional crisis of the family ended, but the grand issue of the world was also forgotten and faded away. From then on, what remained in Bimala's heart was only intolerable memories, thus the historical

significance this work once bore had been dimmed and vanished. And this proves that how great a harm can a writer's own limitation do to his composing" (10). While making the statement of Tagore's limitedness continuously, it also left permanent proof of Shi's own historical limitedness. With a suspended ending, Bimala's future as a nationalist was yet open to all possibilities. Though more relived in tone and more focused on other aspects of the novel than Qu, Shi's basic stand point was yet not changed much after six decades, at an age when this novel and Tagore's nationalism were about to be a hot topic once again in the world.

As Tagore's biographer Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay once said, "Of all the works of Rabindranath, *Ghare Baire* has probably provoked the largest number of critics, literary or otherwise" (qtd. Chattopadhyay, 187). Among all these criticism the debates on nationalism were the most controversial ones, and the above Chinese articles were just another version out of the whole world's political criticism at an age of revolutions and fervency. After the pass by of the most radical years and the most turbulent events, the former disputes are reviewed in a much calmer way, and so is Tagore's nationalism, being restudied and reanalyzed by today's political theorists. From the 1990s, a number of scholars went back to Tagore's political thought, taking it as a distinctive one within the history which might also shed some light to today's national problems. From Isaiah Berlin to Ashis Nandy, from Martha Nussbaum to Amartya Sen, Tagore's thought is affirmed and treated honorably by all, with the gradually fading out of the former ideological bias of east and west, or of tradition and modern. Correspondingly this matter is now dealt with by the Chinese scholars more frequently and more evenhandedly. Together with this change the conflicts in *The Home and the World* are also reread in a more objective and comprehensive way. Of these readings, the article by Li Yuejin and Zeng Zhen published in 2003 is an exemplary one. Titled "The Hard Choice between Eternal Truths and Practical Needs: Viewing Tagore's Nationalistic Thought through *The Home and the World*," it read this novel with close reference to Tagore's biographical experiences and India's political situation at that time, to see Tagore's "quest for the independence of India in his own way" (477). Here the process of "quest" is emphasized, which sees the novel as a continuous inquire into the reason and consciousness, rather than an absolute advocacy of one and denouncement of the other. In their view, this novel "is a real and touching picture of the Indian national liberation movement in early 20th century, and at the same time it is also Tagore's polyphonic 'music of heart' in front of the complicated reality" (464).

The historical misunderstanding seems to have passed, yet Mukhopadhyay's former word still bears meaning now, for the debates are still continuing, in a new way. Out of these readings another dichotomy arose up into

the scholarly discussion, which again made the meaning of the novel more intriguing. Advocated by Nussbaum and generally accepted by many, the concept of Tagore's cosmopolitanism was recently challenged by Saranindranath Tagore, Rabindranath's great-grandson, who urged a reconsideration in his article came out at 2008. Seen as a cosmopolitan in Nussbaum's essay, Nikhilesh was to present Tagore's own worry towards the patriotism. Yet while a stance transcending the social distinctions or discriminations was affirmed through Nikhilesh, and a cosmopolitan education was proposed by Nussbaum, S. Tagore thought that this kind of universality is equally dangerous, for it poses threats to all the individual traditions, especially when it's discussed in the context of post-modernism. According to S. Tagore, this is not what Tagore meant, for he was never a Kantian philosopher who could make these abstract categories, what he viewed and thought was more out of a deep understanding of the tradition and a humanistic insight. Facing this dichotomy, "only one who has a profound knowledge of one's own tradition can be a cosmopolitan" (1078); only in the restatement of the tradition and the care for each individual, can the character of Nikhilesh be wholly understood, who was not a detached sage but deeply concerned in the nation's history and future. This also urges us to return to the novel, to look at the contradictory yet interrelated two minds of nationalism, and its most sincere quest for the liberating road. To the contrary of Qu's allegation that it's "out of date," *The Home and the World* still bears meaning in today's world, and is of much help for us to look at the current issues such as the globalization and a new nationalism.

Notes

¹ Respectively translated by Jing Meijiu and Zhang Mochi, Shanghai: Taidong Book Company, 1923; Shao Xunmei, Beijing: The People's Literature Publishing House, 1987; and Dong Youchen, Jinan: Shandong Wenyi Press, 1987. Dong's version is the only one translated from the original Bengali.

² Nikhilesh's saying to Bimala, which was quoted by Qu here to mean Nikhilesh's unwillingness to go against the British directly. See Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*, Trans. Rabindranath Tagore, London: Mcmillan, 1919, p. 22.

³ See Qu's earlier essay "Nature," *Chidu Xinshi*, Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2004, p. 126 – 127.

⁴ Qtd. Jayanti Chattopadhyay, "Ghare Baire and Its Readings," *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World*, ed. Pradip Kumar Datta, London: Anthem Press, 2005, p. 194.

⁵ May consult Lukács' "Tagore's Gandhi Novel: A Review of Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*," and Chattopadhyay's article quoted in Note 4 for the general commentaries in India on the novel.

⁶ Quoted and consulted largely from Michael Sprinker's article "Homeboys: Nationalism, Colonialism, and Gender in *The Home and the World*," *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World*, ed. Pradip Kumar Datta, London: Anthem Press, 2005, pp. 107 – 126.

⁷ *The Home and the World*, Trans. Dong Youchen, Jinan: Shandong Wenyi Press, 1987, pp.1 –11.

References

- Berlin, Isaiah. "Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality." *The Sense of Reality*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996, pp. 249 – 266.
- Cohen, Joshua, ed. *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*. Martha Nussbaum with respondents. Boston: Beacon, 1996.
- Datta, Pradip Kumar, ed. *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World*. London: Anthem Press, 2005.
- Hay, Stephen N. *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China, and India*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.
- Li Yuejin and Zeng Zhen. "The Hard Choice between Eternal Truths and Practical Needs: Viewing Tagore's Nationalistic Thought through *The Home and the World*." *The Eastern Literature: From Romanticism to Mysticism*. Ed. Wang Bangwei. Changsha: Hunan Wenyi Press, 2003, pp. 464 – 477.
- Lukács, Georg. "Tagore's Gandhi Novel: A Review of Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*." *Reviews and Articles*. Trans. Peter Palmer. London: Merlin Press, 1983, pp. 9-11. (First published in the Berlin periodical *Die rote Fahne* in 1922).
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of the Self*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Qu Qiubai. "Tagore's Concept of the Nation-State and the East." *The Collected Essays of Qu Qiubai*. Chongqing: Chongqing Press, 1995, pp. 1078 – 1084. (First published in *Xiang Dao*, No. 61: 487 – 490 (Apr. 16, 1924).
- . "Tagore the Has-Been: *The Home and the World*." *The Collected Essays of Qu Qiubai*. Chongqing: Chongqing Press, 1995, pp. 1149 – 1151. (First published in *China Youth*, No. 27: 2 – 5 (Apr. 18, 1924).
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Home and the World*. Trans. Surendranath Tagore. London: Mcmillan, 1919.
- . *The Home and the World*. Trans. Dong Youchen. Jinan: Shandong Wenyi Press, 1987.
- . *Nationalism*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917.
- Tagore, Saranindranath. "Tagore's Conception of Cosmopolitanism: A Reconstruction." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 4, (Fall 2008), pp. 1070 – 1084.

Xingyue Zhou is an M. A. candidate at the School of Foreign Languages, Peking University Beijing, China. E-mail: zhxy921@gmail.com
