

Bimala in Ghare-Baire: Tagore's *New Woman* Relocating the "World in Her Home"

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Abstract

The character of Bimala in Tagore's *Ghare-Baire* or *The Home and the World* as a symbol of struggle for the liberation of Bengali woman as well as Bengal remains at the centre of scholarly discussion since the publication (1916), translation (1919) and the film adaptation (1984) of the novel. Bimala, the main protagonist of the novel is presented as a native Indian woman who gets western education and lives a modern lifestyle due to her marriage. She has conflicting attitudes, feelings and thoughts which recur randomly in the narrative. The paper focusses on the character of Bimala and interrogates the location of her agency with respect to the rising *Swadeshi* movement and the political excesses on one hand and her relationship with Nikhil and Sandip on the other. On a further note, reflecting on the political and epic underpinnings of Bimala (caught between the gradual and the radical approach to *Swadeshi*), the paper intends to stretch beyond her "situation" (the apex of the triangular relationship) and explore her self-realization at the end of the novel. Bimala, the woman set between the option of choices between the 'motherland' and the 'two-men' gradually transgress from the shackles of her naïve identity to become the beset *New Woman*. To explore Tagore's rewritten epic of a woman (epitomized in real life as the *New Woman*), we need to discuss how the writer helped shaping the image of the *New Woman* through his conscious evoking of Bimala in the role of Sita, Nikhil in the role of Rama and Sandip in the role of Ravana. In response to the popular inscriptions of *Bharatmata*, Tagore allegorises the iconographic representation of Bimala resembling the "divine feminine strength (*Shakti*) for creation and (*Kali*) for the cause of destruction." (Pandit 1995,217-19).

Keywords: Zenana, Epic battle, (Re)location, Bharatmata, New-Woman.

Rabindranath Tagore's novella *The Home and the World* (1915) belongs to the trilogy formed by *The Wreck* (1906) and *Gora* (1909). It was Tagore himself who had introduced the short story in Bengal from France in the second half of the nineteenth century. This form of fiction, like the novella was highly functional in the sense that it allowed the writer in "shaping the cultural and the political representation" (Tiffin,1995) of Bengal in an elliptical but focused manner to gain prominence in strength and concentration.

Bearing the marks of orality, through counterpoising the stories of the three main characters, Bimala, Nikhil and Sandip, the novel explores two unfolding issues recurrent in India-the nationalist movement in the name of *Swadeshi* in Bengal (1905) and the burgeoning woman's



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movement. Taking into account Tagore's views on nationalism as expressed in his lectures on *Nationalism* (1917), a companion text to *The Home and the World*, and Walter Benjamin's reflections on allegory (1928) our aim is to consider how in an allegorical manner the author deals with the process of emancipation of both Bengal and women in a distinctly Indian narrative. The novella centres upon the triad formed by Bimala, Nikhil and Sandip. These characters are emblematic in the sense that through them Tagore allegorizes the Nationalist fervour that took hold of Bengal in the first decade of the twentieth century. These issues become conflated through Tagore's portrayal of his female protagonist Bimala, who epitomizes the concept of nation and the *new woman* through her intense political and social involvements at large. Throughout the novel, Bimala as the representative of the nation and the nation's *new-woman* reflects a series of transformations vacillating between her husband Nikhil (Tagore's alter ego) a thoughtful and insightful critic of *Swadeshi*, and Sandip a passionate and reckless *Swadeshi* activist. Finally, Bimala's "sustained progression" is articulated through an extended metaphor of crossing the threshold between the world of the *zenana*, the private realm inhabited by the women to the world of politics, the public forum of the men. The three characters thus functioning like the vices and virtues in a morality play expresses Tagore's much-criticized views on Nationalism and the *Swadeshi* movement at large

Though the novella is organized in chapters, each chapter narrates an individual story through which each of the characters dramatize their views on the conflict shaping in a way Tagore's inner struggle with the Indian crisis. According to Walter Benjamin, Tagore adopted allegory to shape his narrative because it allowed him to illustrate in a didactic as well as in a scenic manner the idea of *Nationalism*, particularly at a historical conjuncture of Bengal and India. However, lacking the epistemological freedom implied in the symbol, allegory enabled Tagore to illustrate this conflict in a dialectical rather than in a dialogical manner. In this way, the element of orality akin to pre-colonial Indian literature pervades the narrative, lending to it a distinct Indian cadence. This stylistic device is highly functional in the sense that Tagore seems to adopt a multi-layered perspective to recreate Bengali society at a moment of crisis and transition, when the different views and attitudes on the boycott of foreign goods were tearing the community apart. Nevertheless, the radicalization of the two male characters, Nikhil and Sandip, the first representing good and the second representing evil, seems to cancel his desire of equanimity in the narrative.

Bimala stands at the centre of the tale. Bimala's journal which frames the novel recounts her days as a traditional *purdah-bound* wife- in her resistance to Nikhil's more radical impulses toward westernization and through her initial choice to retain the essential ethics of the traditional Hindu culture. Her gradual transformation into an educated, partially westernized woman under Nikhil's loving tutelage speaks of the latter's desire to liberate her from the tradition of *purdah* bearing the symbol of "a seclusion room for woman". Nikhil's echoing of the westernized ideals glorifying the role of women in society, makes him foresee Bimala as an independent self, the *new woman* "free in the outer world to be rescued from her infatuation for tyranny." (Tagore, THW 42). Barathi Ray defining the *new-woman* states that:

"The new woman was to be an educated and brave wife as an appropriate partner of an English educated nationalist man able to run an efficient and orderly home like her Western counterpart, be high-minded and spiritual like the women of the golden age (...) If the

model was absurd, and inimitable, and indeed full of contradictions, no one was bothered. That was the *new woman* the nation needed, and it was women's duty to live up to it." (Ray, 2002).

From the very beginning of the novel, Nikhil tries to shape Bimala as his '*new-woman*'. He wants her to leave *pardah*, to arrive in the outside world to know herself. His earnest desire to see Bimala as a free woman, who will choose to love him, not because custom dictates it but of her own accord, speaks of his denial to the acceptance of the traditional male orthodoxy reigning the society. He dislikes Bimala touching his feet as a form of worship on the pretext that women are cocooned both physically and intellectually, all through their lives, "living in a small world not letting them know their real needs". (Tagore, THW18). On the contrary, he aspires for her transgression in the name of attaining freedom, independence and education Thus "rationality becomes the core feature of this transgressive attainment" (Ashcroft,132) synonymous with 'civilized behaviour' and 'erudite intellectualism.' (Ashcroft,132). Nikhil expects Bimala with her modern outlook and western education to belong to him and counterpoise him in picturing himself as the complete human being. In a way the former expects his lady patronage to be a humanist like him, freeing herself 'from her infatuation to remain loyal with familial servitude and traditional lineage'. (Tagore THW, 44). In his attempt to remodel Bimala as the *new woman* Nikhil frames the image of the female *Shakti* conceived in Hinduism, as a form of the feminine agency waiting to be unleashed upon the earth. Personifying woman as the channel of the pure power *Shakti*, he portrays Bimala as the replica of the feminine life-force of strength and divinity, creation and destruction. Tagore skilfully employs the iconography of Hinduism to make this point explicit, by representing Bimala within the context of the obvious female Hindu role models-specifically, the role of the mother goddess Durga and Kali-long associated with the images of Bengal and its devotional nationalism- "clad in the earthen red sari with a broad blood cell border". (TagoreTHW,73).

As the novel progresses, Bimala is enticed out of her *pardah* with her "full blossoming in all truth and power" (TagoreTHW,41) accompanied with her amorous interest in Sandip. Bimala's coming out from behind the screen of the *zenana* allegorizes the moment of confrontation between the tradition and modernity in India as well. Contextual reference to Anita Desai explains that when Tagore depicts Nikhil urging Bimala to veil out of the *pardah*, to which she had been firmly confined by her traditional custom, he actually heralds the action of coaxing Bengal out of "orthodoxy and transgress into modernity".(Desai,11) Similarly, Bimala's stepping out from the bounds of *pardah nashin* to her (re)location in the 'openness' to listen to Sandip, the leader of the Swadeshi movement reflects a transgressive step of the *new-woman* who gradually and unconsciously transforms herself to the symbol of Bengal, Bande Mataram:

"I was utterly unconscious of myself. I was no longer the lady of the Raja's house, but the sole representative of Bengal's womanhood. And he was the champion of Bengal.

As the sky had shed its light over him, so he must receive the consecration of a woman's benediction." (Tagore THW,31).

However, the new role of women that comes to represent the new style of the nation remains a subject of multifarious interpretations. While Nikhil wants Bimala to make her own choices freely (even if that, unconsciously, means loving him and accepting the status quo) Sandip

worships her as the Goddess of Bengal. The narrative vividly describes Bimala's hypnotic state of mind with hyperbolic expressions after she attends Sandip's meeting at Suksar for the very first time. Her feelings run in ecstasy when Sandip utters 'Bande Mataram!' three times and delivers his speech like 'a stormy outburst scattered the skies into a thousand fragments!' (Tagore THW, 27-28). Relegating the hypnotic effect, she denies to accept Sandip as a mere 'flawed mortal man' but more as the 'embodiment of the messengers of the immortal gods.' (Tagore THW, 115). His revolution like a sacred rebellion "flashes out divine power at every word." (Tagore THW, 115). Bimala believes that she epitomizes an inspiration to this power, 'the flame of the soul itself'. Her presence turns Sandip's divine power into a 'fire', and makes it spark like 'the flash of lightening'. She hopes that this 'auspicious moment' with 'the spell of some magic charm' (Tagore THW, 116) would likewise eliminate the miseries of Bengal too.

Bimala basking in the halo effect of the 'new pride and glory' becomes ready to welcome 'the unthought-of, the unknown, the importunate Stranger' (Tagore GB, 120). The '*Swadeshi* storm' (Tagore GB, 24) imbibed within her makes her turbulent and restless, dislocating her from "her mind, hopes desires and the walls of the home-which was the ultimate world to[her] my mind" (Tagore THW, 10). She can no longer remain 'the lady of the Rajah's house' (Tagore THW, 28), a woman cocooned at her safe home. She no longer considers herself 'only the deities of the household fire, but the 'Bharati' ((Tagore GB, 16), India as the Mother Goddess. She is now 'the Shakti of the Motherland' (Tagore THW, 31) and 'the Shakti of Womanhood, incarnate' (Tagore THW, 36). She becomes the representative of Bengal's womanhood avowed to perform extreme form of sacrifices for the champion of Bengal and Sandip at large. Accordingly, she wants to cut her hair for her hero and glorify him with a garland. She wants to burn all her favourite foreign clothes and demands Miss Gilby's expulsion from her home. She supports Noren's blind rage towards all the British and his malicious attack on Miss Gilby. She feels ashamed of Nikhil's failure to accept the *Swadeshi* spirit and also argues with Nikhil about his judgement of the excitement over *Swadeshi* as a 'destructive excitement' (Tagore THW, 24) and 'a fire of drunkenness' (Tagore THW, 117). Through his "progressive narrative, akin to allegory" (Benjamin, 165) Tagore in a didactic manner depicts the dramatic transgression of Bimala who refuses steadfastly to accept her husband's critique of the *Swadeshi*. On the contrary akin with Sandip's false idealism and infatuated by his 'male fervour' she falls readily in love with him and consequently becomes eulogised as the *Queen Bee* of their movement. Consequently, Bimala's emergence into the *new world* with her hero-worship of Sandip ends up Nikhil with his self-introspection stating "alas, my house is empty." (Tagore THW, 90). Intertwining the images of the home and the world, his home and his nation, Nikhil muses in a melancholic tone, voicing out in an allegorical manner Tagore's disapproval of the *Swadeshi* as being tyrannical and violent:

"I feel sure that this infatuation is deep down in her nature (...) She is quite angry with me because I am not running amuck crying *Bande Mataram* (...) For that matter, I have become unpopular with all my countrymen because I have not joined them in their carousals." (Tagore THW, 42).

Sandip on the other hand is a perfect ideological acrobat who rejects the taken-for-granted moral values and prefers passion to reason, illusion to truth, sin to good deeds, destruction to construction and the concept of 'seize the day' to the future. He is a successful womaniser with practical knowledge of seduction. Hypnotising Bimala, to rethink as the goddess incarnate on the

earth he awakens 'her doze in a sleepy state' to break all her old bonds and become his consort. Eulogised as his *Queen Bee*, Bimala conceives herself as a passively active power who, playing the role of an adviser of Sandip, is actually present in the heart of the *Swadeshi*: "behind whatever was taking place was Sandip Babu and behind Sandip Babu was the plain common sense of a woman." (Tagore THW, 58). This honour makes Bimala happy as this 'glory to be a dedicated worker for the Bengal's cause filled [her] my being' (Tagore THW, 58). Sandip who remains aware of the seductive forces of his rhetoric constantly woos Bimala using the passionate rhetoric of the nationalist movement to worship Bimala as the "Queen Bee" of the *Swadeshi*. He deftly defines his relationship with Bimala through this allegorical model from their first meeting declaring that "you are the Queen Bee of our hive, and we the workers shall rally around you. You shall be our center, our inspiration." (Tagore THW, 44). This language of the national movement opens vulnerable loop-ends for framing an underpinning ambiguity in defining Bimala and Sandip's relationship. which latter dwindles in exhibiting Sandip's behaviour of 'improprieties. Sandip's steady and pursuing endearments dislocate Bimala from her centre as a worker of the country and re-centres her emotion around Sandip. Bimala's personal attraction to Sandip feeds and sustains her commitment to his cause, and only late in the novel, when she has been driven to betray and abandon her husband, does she stop to reflect on what Sandip's true representation. Her final rejection of Sandip occurs when she delivers the stolen money and begins to pray for a symbolic rebirth to regain her lost virtue. Thus, having stepped across the protective line between the *laksramrekha* to the world outside, from the inner realms of the *zenana* to the outer periphery of *mardana*, Bimala is presented as a character caught in the whirlwind of the situational dilemma: "she has left home, forgotten domestic duties, she has nothing but an unfathomable yearning which hurries on her." (Tagore GB, 45).

Her confrontation with the dilemma allegorically portrays the predicament of her future uncertainty:

"So long I had been like a small river at the border of a village. My rhythm and my language were different from what they are now. But the tide came up from the sea, and my breast heaved; my banks gave way and the great drumbeats of the sea waves echoed in my mad current." (Tagore THW, 50).

With the death of Nikhil at the end of the novel, psychological trauma and spiritual nothingness overshadows Bimala into a state of voidness, an abyss into which she has fallen deep:

"When I look into my heart, I find everything that was there, still there, – only they are topsy-turvy. Things that were well ordered have become jumbled up. The gems that were strung into a necklace are now rolling in the dust. And my heart is breaking." (Tagore THW, 254-255).

Feeling deserted by one and enthralled by the other, Bimala pictures herself torn between the two worlds:

I likewise have lost my home and also lost my way. Both the end and the means have become shadowy to me. There remain only the yearning and the hurrying on (...) If the Dark which sounded the flute should lead to destruction, why trouble about the hereafter? (Tagore THW, 80-81).

Bimala's future life of loneliness, desolation and guilt leave her in the final stage of retribution where she tries to (re) locate 'her world in her home'. She surrenders her pride "in complete devotion to attain redemption through salvation." (Tagore THW, 20-21).

In continuum, to explore Tagore's rewritten epic of a woman (epitomized in real life as the New Woman), we need to reflect on Tagore's shaping of the image of the *New Woman* particularly in his rewriting of Sita imaging as Bharatmata. By skilfully portraying Bimala's struggle as an "epic battle" Tagore consciously evokes the *The Ramayana*, casting Bimala in the role of Sita, Nikhil in the role of Rama and Sandip in the role of Ravana. Sita in *The Ramayana* and Bimala in *The Home and the World* are allegorically categorized with specific Hindu construction of women either as the agent of change, of reform or of revolution. Both of them represent an iconographic presentation of various phenomenal forms of feminine divinity; the mythic icon and the patriotic emerging from the symbolism invoking the feminine principle as the source of creation, destruction and restoration. Like Bimala, Sita in the epic *The Ramayana* begins her life -journey as a typical bride: tender and loving by her nature, bethrowed to her husband's care and concern twice 'as much as he loved her'. She could have coated forever in the land of heritage unless trouble had not intervened her path. Her first crisis initiates through her assertion to accompany Rama in exile, challenging the traditional norms of the Ayodhya Nagar worshipping women behind the screens as *purdah nashin*. Allegorically in *Ghare- Baire* Nikhil citing Sita and Draupadi as examples of 'free women' draws an analogy with Bimala in her to encounter with the world not to be keep herself as *purdah nashin* but to allow her to accompany him to Calcutta to complete his M.A. degree. He urges Bimala to know "come into the heart of the outer world and meet reality" (Tagore GB,18)

"The greedy man who is fond of his fish stew has no compunction in cutting up the fish according to his need. But the man who loves the fish wants to enjoy it in the water; and if that is possible, he waits on the bank; and even if he comes back home without a sight of it he has the consolation of knowing that the fish is all right. Perfect gain is the best of all; but if that is impossible, then the next best gain is perfect losing." (Tagore THW, 84).

Thus, both Sita and Bimala leaving the inner circles of the *zenana* come to the 'outer world' equating the terms of their 'free living' with the needs of their individual existence. However, it can never be ignored that both could have stayed in their confinement, had not the inspiration or the initiation remained on the part of their husbands. Thus, counteracting the traditional custom of remaining within the *lakshmanrekha* of their home bounds, their first moves into the "world" reinforce their statements of individuation promoted and protected by their male counterparts at large.

However, the most critical moment in analysis comes at a vulnerable juncture of the situational exposure for both these female protagonists. In *The Ramayana*, Ravana's assault on Sita, followed by Rama's chasing of the jewelled deer, and finally Sita's disobedience in crossing the *Lakshmanrekha* to save Rama on hearing his cry of distress stands in a sharp contrast to Bimala's obedience in crossing the border line at Nikhil's behest from *zenana* to *mardana*. For both the women stepping across the line is a great event, and even more so for Bimala whose transgression of course caters to her need of falling in love with Sandip. Sita's stepping out from her patriarchal protection in a way alludes to her development in earnest: she wages unremitting

psychological warfare to defend herself both against the *rakshasis* and Ravana who all confine her. Likewise, Bimala too follows a dual fight both against Sandip's encroachments and her sister-in-law's persistent attempt to restrict her with the walls of the home grounds. However, like the faithful Hanuman who comes in crisis to rescue Sita, young Amulya the faithful boy intervenes with his attempt to save Bimala by recovering the money Sandip had extorted from the former. Interwoven by the traditional mores of Rama rescuing Sita, Nikhil ensures this "rescue" for Bimala by belatedly ejecting the intruder towards the end of the novel.

After Sita's rescue, when Rama unexpectedly rejects her, she shows the strength of her determination by demanding a fire to be built to test the virtue of her chastity. Sita denies public humiliation and affirms to "pass through fire" attaining the notion of self-sacrifice in response to the crisis. Likewise, her subsequent denial to acceptance by Rama for the second time transforms her will power from 'surrendering' to 'new-living' in the sheltered Valmiki ashram, raising her sons all alone. Thus, the epic heroine symbolising 'virtue under siege' redefines her life priorities by adjusting to the ordeal of simple living in nature's community. Tagore, on the other hand transforms the epic to allow his Sita to fall and still be redeemed. She is not rejected and Nikhil accepts her back with no small sense of relief. Nikhil's calmness and gentleness reflecting the anguished penitence of Bimala stands in sharp contrast to Rama's look of contempt in the face of Sita's innocent joy at reunion. Nikhil, paralleled to a God significantly dispenses the boon of his blessings to redeem his lady love. Bimala's movement from the submissive wife piously taking the dust of his husband's feet as he sleeps, to a woman enslaved by "cataclysmal desire" (Tagore GB, 68) completes the full periphery of the life circle. Bimala's sole desire to return to her husband "as a bride adorned to the place upon that same bridal seat" (Tagore THW, 186) allegorically signifies the return of Bengal to her image as the *Shakti* incarnate, to the "the new epoch [which]like a flood, breaks down the dykes sweeping all our prudence and fear before it". (Tagore GB, 26).

In *The Ramayana* the readers remain aware of Sita's purity even in the absence of Lord Rama, whereas in *The Home and the World* Bimala's audience is constantly reminded of Bimala's transgressions. In spite of the ringing vibrations of the sanctity of her name signifying "without taint, without stain" one might argue that Bimala is more transgressive because in the novel the passion between herself and Sandip seems to grow despite their lack of physical contact. In the novel, she pushes aside the purdah screen – a violent almost orgasmic motion born out of an excess of feelings: "I do not know how it happened and Sandip's eyes like stars in fateful Orion fall upon [her] face".(Tagore THW, 198). Later, despite Sandip's rhetoric about "the bridegroom in Nature's wedding hall [coming] unexpected and uninvited"(Tagore THW, 231) he is denied intrusion across the *zenana* threshold or into the private "female" space to which Bimala retreats due to an uncomfortable drift in the conversation topic-from politics to free love. Bimala's retreat to *zenana*, her fight for mental *swaraj* parallels to that of Sita, protected within the boundaries of the *Lakshmanrekha*. Though Bimala is capable of protecting herself against the patriarchal calumny, the mental rape she incurs by the "defilement" brought on by the proximity to another man from outside the *Lakshmanrekha*, leaves her in a state of psychological stasis-the mind game finally taking up the toll of the body's burden. Bimala at this stage experiences a harrowing physical and psychological estrangement. Her body is petrified beside the window and her mind goes blank. She keeps staring at the darkness outside only to hear the indistinct noises far and near. She feels

her mind is blocked and she cannot think anything. She waits inertly for her fate to prevail: "But I could not move a step from the window [...] was I not awaiting my fate?" (Tagore THW, 279). She feels broken and becomes remorseful: "So long as I was alive, my sins would remain rampant, scattering destruction on every side" (Tagore THW, 279). While Sita's purity is proven in the blazing fire and again, over twelve years later by Earth's welcoming response, similarly Bimala at the end of the novel passes through the fire of her mental trauma. In the aftermath of the tragedy, when Nikhil is left mortally wounded, she is left uncertain with the only ruthless mark of the riot outspread certain. Thus, it might be rightly concluded that the allegorical quality of the novella puts the conflict in absolute terms of good and evil. Tagore's division of the narrative not only in chapters but also in stories, also shows his deep awareness and concern with the conflicting visions that was ripping apart his beloved Bengal, wounding her body bleeding to death.

If the novella shows Tagore's disappointment with the *Swadeshi* movement, one of its remarkable characteristics is his treatment of the feminine character, Bimala. Her predicament remains a complex one initiating from the moment of her stepping out into the outer world followed by her conforming to the varied idealistic demands of the two different men circling her periphery. She becomes the 'free woman' for one of them and for the other she turns herself into the Goddess incarnate, representing the country at the moment of crisis. And as for Tagore's conviction, Bimala chastised for her choices and decisions is made to (re)locate herself in the conservative realms of the inner life. However, through the stages of her incessant development her individuation epitomizes the portrayal of an increasingly aware woman who accepts the responsibility for her part in the ensuing disaster. Finally, through her rejection of Sandip along with her role as the destructive *Queen Bee* of the *Swadeshi* movement she reconciles to her benign domestic periphery praying for a symbolic rebirth to regain her lost virtue:

I threw myself on the ground and sobbed aloud. It was for mercy that I prayedsome sign of forgiveness, some hope.... "lord", I vowed to myself, "I will lie here, waiting and waiting, touching neither food nor drink, so long as your blessings does not reach me." (Tagore THW, 186)

Cynical with her bitter experiences both in the 'home and in the world', Bimala's wish for Amulya to be reborn as her child offers her with a scope of 'redemption through reconciliation' from her outer zone of 'instability' to the inner realms of 'stability'. Bimala in her state of metamorphosis like Sita welcoming the 'womb of the mother Earth' is stripped of her goddess like finery and beauty. Through her process of self-realization, she stands as a 'plain woman' in white *khaddar*, perhaps too tired of being the '*New Woman*'. Thus, to conclude Tagore's *Home and the World* reiterating the old process of 'assimilation and homogenization' resolute Bimala's estrangement by (re)locating her 'world in her home.'

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