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# Beyond a Conjugal Life; Tagore's Home and the World: A Gendered perspective

Barnana Guha Thakurta (Banerjee)

## Abstract:

*Ghare Baire* is one such text written by Tagore which has created a furor in the then society not only because it has questioned the western version of nationalism but more because it has exposed the existing patriarchal values that shrouded the Bengali middle class conjugal life. The novel is not simply a story depicting the woes of women. It rather surpasses it and went beyond the patriarchal structure thereby bringing forth the issue of autonomous subjectivity of women, in a paradigm different essentially from its western connotation. The present study tends to view the text from a gendered perspective keeping in mind the multi-cultural aspects that differentiates most of the middle class families of a Bengali society from its western counterpart.

Keywords- nationalism, gender, patriarchy, conjugality, subjectivity, multi-cultural.

There can be a multiple reading of a text. This becomes more true for a text like *Ghare Baire* which is fiercely contested over the years, be it, in terms of nationalism or gender. In the recent years, reading strategy has attracted the attention of many scholars all over the world. Controversies relating how to read a text, no wonder has divided the world of literature into different schools starting from textual, contextual to author centric. Though these schools differ largely from one another yet their arguments on reading strategy opened a new horizon in the interpretation of a text. Interpretation, infact, plays a crucial role in the analysis of a text. It is a difficult task since it goes beyond the simple literal meaning of the text and tries to bring out those aspects which perhaps attach a new meaning to the characters involved in it. The broad categories of textual and contextual approaches to interpretation were not enough and so a new Cambridge historian Quentin Skinner's emphasis on authorial intention assumed a special significance. Tenence Ball's work contributed significantly to the theory of interpretation. It denies giving undue importance to the process of the recovery of the authorial intention behind a given text and went further to the point of its reception, the reader's response. The logical argument that the text is not merely an artifact

produced by the author but it is also a piece of communication to be received by the reader/interpreter was strongly upheld in his book. As such for Ball there could be no single method or strategy for the task of interpretation. One could select from a variety of strategies depending upon the nature of the interpretative problem.

This suggests that texts have a life of its own which can be interpreted, reinterpreted and the process might have continued years after thereby making the text either more relevant or irrelevant in the contemporary world. It is with this objective, one of Tagore's most controversial political novels was taken for introspection.

The present article tries to re-read Tagore's *Ghare Baire* and attempts to figure out, how the concept of gender has evolved and found new meaning which perhaps seems to depart from its western notion. The novel with an explicit political and gender undertone has sown the concepts of gender firmly rooted into the indigenous soil. With Said's questioning on the entire oriental formulations, followed by post modern emphasis upon cultural differences, *Ghare Baire* had become even more relevant now in projecting Tagore's view on gender from a different perspective.

Rabindranath Tagore never seems to be

comfortable with his creation, *Ghare- Baire*. The novel published in 1916 created furore in the then society thereby giving rise to serious debates and criticisms from almost all quarters of society. *Ghare Baire*, the Bengali original of *The Home and the World* was written and serialized in a journal *Sabuj Patra*. Serialized roughly between Baisakh to Falgun 1322 ie. May 1915 to February 1916 *Ghare Baire* apparently seems to locate the key social and political themes of Bengal. Here it must be noted that *Sabuj Patra* has contributed significantly in creating a new trend in the world of Bengali literature. It introduced two specific innovations. The first was the use of more colloquial language (*chalitbhasa*) instead of the formal *sanskritised* version (*sadhubhasa*). *Rabindranath* had however used such informal languages earlier but the only difference is that he employed it in only personalized forms such as diaries and letters. The second innovation was its pertinent attention to gender, specifically relating to questions of women's choices and desires. This part of innovation makes *Sabuj Patra* more significant in creating a new gender equation in Bengal and therefore more relevant for our discussion. In fact, most of the stories that *Rabindranath* wrote for the journal dealt with women as individual subjects. Is it true even for *Bimala*, the female lead character out of the three in *The Home and the World* is the question which will be touched upon as we proceed further. *Ghare Baire* appears to be otherwise a simple story revolving around three main characters. Apart from *Bimala*, the other two protagonists of the novel were *Nikhilesh* and *Sandip*. *Nikhilesh*, *Bimala's* husband was an 'enlightened, introspective, upper-caste young zamindar' who wants his wife to enter the modern world by learning the English language and manners through *Miss Gilby*, a British governess engaged for the purpose. The story would not have gained momentum until and unless *Sandip*, *Nikhilesh's* charismatic *swadeshi* friend appeared before us. *Sandip*, a fiery nationalist leader represents a new personality of his time. Despite the existing differences in their outlook, vision and values, *Sandip* received regular financial help from *Nikhilesh* much against *Bimala's* wishes. However, *Bimala's* initial disliking for *Sandip* underwent a change when she sees him delivering a political speech at a public place. Swayed away by his

attractive looks and personality *Bimala* developed an intimate erotic relationship with *Sandip*. *Sandip*, being an ardent advocate of power desires to control everything even a human relationship in a masterful manner. *Nikhilesh* knowing well the growing relationship between *Sandip* and *Bimala* has throughout been very composed yet quite firm in his attitude, strongly hold on to his ideology though his mental conflict tore apart his heart.

This novel apparently seems to be a triangular love story, but it soon surpasses it and goes further beyond to show the latent aspects of nationalism, conjugality and patriarchy in the then Bengali society. Before taking up the novel for discussion it is essential for us to know how *Tagore* has viewed the notion of nationalism in general and then tries to find its reflection in the novel.

Whether intentional or not *Ghare Baire* has questioned the stereotyped mainstream conjugality of the then Bengali society which may be relevant even now. The institutionalized conjugal life may allow couple to stay under the same roof without even knowing each other. The novel in a way tried to construct a new kind of conjugality based on the recognition of equality of men and women. Such a new conjugality was aspired by none other than *Nikhilesh* in the novel. However, the honest intention behind *Nikhilesh's* aspiration didn't appeal to *Bimala* initially who were used to think in a conventional way of the society. "The first two anniversaries of our married life I spent in Calcutta, where I went through my examinations. But from the next year onwards, for seven years without a break, we have celebrated our union among the blossoming water-lilies. Now begins the next octave of my life. It was difficult for me to ignore the fact that the same month of August had come round again this year. Does *Bimala* remember it, I wonder? —she has given me no reminder. Everything is mute about me". For *Bimala* conjugal life was premised on a traditional role played by women while carrying out a selfless service to the family. Furthermore, being highly influenced by her mother's chastity *Bimala* wanted to retain the same legacy in her own domestic life. As such initial years of her marriage went away in worshipping her husband, that too in a much institutionalized form. Infact she wanted to uphold her chastity as the replacement of her beauty which she lacked in the conventional sense. In doing

so she was neither true to herself nor to her relationship. So they both perhaps were unable to share and communicate of a life which they aspired for to the other. This gap in understanding of life silently existed despite their physical proximity just like many other Bengali middle class families even now.

Again, through Bimala Tagore actually wanted to construct a 'new woman' who will be more lady like i.e. educated, sophisticated, holding on to the Victorian values unlike common women who were more "course, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males". Her education is required so long she could successfully play the role of an intellectual and emotional companion to her husband. However here it must be noted that the picture of a new woman restricted mainly to the upper class denies the existence of the subaltern lower class women. Further while constructing the new woman Tagore took every care to see that she does not cross the limited sphere of activity framed essentially for her and if she does she will be penalized both from inside and outside. So does her heroine Bimala at the end of the novel.

Viewed essentially from a gendered perspective *Ghare Baire* has a special significance because of its narrative style. It was designed in an autobiographic form of the three characters, as if each speaking their own stories, holding the secrets from others and at the same time uttering the words and arguments of others. This style is interesting since it seems that the author is dead and we are reading merely the autobiographies of three individuals whose characters are framed as much from their own versions as from the others. As such the authors sketching of the characters do not come directly to the readers but appears in a more latent and diffused form. What is more striking is that here the woman speaks herself. She therefore represents herself. "The self-representing woman is not only a newcomer in Rabindranath's writing, she is startling new character on the Bengali literary and social landscape." The pains and sufferings which she experiences are revealed through her narration. Many like Nikhilesh's sister-in-law do not wish to repeat the life of a woman. "No, brother dear," she replied with a sigh, "I would not live my life again—not as a woman!

Let what I have had to bear end with this one birth. I could not bear it over again."

Another interesting feature of the novel is that Tagore has created his two male protagonists in sharp contrast to each other. Throughout the novel "Nikhilesh describes his relationship to Bimala and others in a much contemplative, non-masterful, eager to respect the autonomy of others" which is exactly the opposite characterization of Sandip. Sumit Sarkar argues that while projecting Nikhilesh Tagore had actually suggested an alternative conception of masculinity different from the mainstream aggressive one (as projected through Sandip). Further, here it must also be noted that the contrast characterization of Nikhilesh and Sandip however shares a common aspect, if studied carefully. Both tried to construct Bimala thereby ignoring her autonomous subjectivity. It also seems that both forms of nationalism as projected through these characters tried to treat Bimala as their extended colony where each in a way created their own sphere of influence and expected Bimala to act in accordance to their wishes. Whenever such sphere of influence is likely to be threatened, they either disassociate her (as with the case of Nikhilesh) or dismiss her (as with Sandip) from their lifestyles. Perhaps Tagore whether consciously or not tried to project that nationalism in whichever form is practiced ultimately lands up in pursuing own self interest, be it a nation or an individual. Possibly his disregard for nationalism and strong recommendation in favour of cosmopolitanism finds a latent manifestation through the novel.

Tagore's emphasis upon morality can also be traced even through the female character of the novel. It appears as if the women in the novel were provided with a free space but at the same time it is being limited by some principles of moral conduct beyond which her journey seems to be non-permissible. This becomes evident through Bimala in the novel. Bimala's exposure to the outer world, her education – all seems to be provided for being a good companion to her husband. Things perhaps went wrong when her subjectivity prompted her to move a step ahead and respond both to the call of nationalism and Sandip. Even if nationalist call might have been excused, her passionate involvement with Sandip seems to have violated the code of morality.

Does that mean Tagore's novel has lost its relevance for women of contemporary era? Answer to this question creates a dilemma in our mind. This is so since it is very difficult for us to dismiss Tagore from our daily lives. Though we might differ from his patriarchal construction of feminine figure which seem to be largely dominated by the then mainstream nationalist discourse yet is it not true enough that his novel provided a space to the women, to take a pause and think differently? To understand the female characters of his novels one needs to understand his view on gender. It is difficult to formulate Tagore's view on gender in a monolithic manner. Like many other philosophers his view was marked by occasional shifts and changes. Sometimes it appears as if his views were getting obscured submerging into general abstraction while again, at times it reappears and its existence firmly grounded into reality. To cite for instance, one of his early writing entitled, "*Ramabaiyer Baktrita Upalaksh*" published in 1889 when he was 28 yrs of age, Tagore saw the estrangement of men's and women's world as an essential condition of law of nature. Upholding the age old logical argument of Law of Compensation, Tagore argued that because of the existing natural differences men and women would complement thereby taking recourse to each other. To him, the act of carrying the womb confined women in their inner world thereby compelling them to take a backseat as against their male counterpart. He was strongly against discarding these natural distinctions since he believed that the ultimate objective is to retain a harmonious tie between the inner and the outer world. As such for him women's dependence on men should not be seen as an obstruction to their liberty rather it is to be viewed as an act of Dharma or greater morality. Such views undoubtedly created controversy in the feminist circle. But at the same time it is interesting to note as well that same Rabindranath wrote *Streer Patra* it seems his earlier view shifted more in favour of women's emancipation. To understand this shift one has to demarcate between women's liberty and women's emancipation. If women's liberty indicates expansion of their socio economic cultural political rights then the concept of women's emancipation or narimukti is more autonomous in terms of its depth and pervasiveness and has a much greater connotation. Women's gradual discovering their own

selves while pulling down the patriarchal shackles, cultivating their self reliant powers, encouraging self making- all in a way leading us towards Narimukti. Thus narimukti leaves behind a distinct impression whose objective is to create a gender neutral more humane world. His perception of narimukti perhaps motivated him in creating the characters of Mrinal in *Streer Patra*, Bimala in *Ghare Baire* and Ela in *Char Adhyay*. Mrinal was a self created character who explicitly manifested the idea of Narimukti. But in Bimala and Ela the same idea could be traced in a more latent and subdued manner. Throughout his social and political life Tagore nurtured the idea of 'Atmasakti'. Based on it he developed his concept of 'atmamukti.', though at times both seems to lose its distinctness and merges with each other. In fact, through both his principles Tagore perhaps tried to uphold the Indian philosophy as against the western materialist world.

Not only the characters but also the concluding part of the novel seems to have created obscurity in the minds of the readers. For instance, Ajit kr. Chakraborty regarded *Ghare Baire* as an unfinished novel. Somewhat a similar feeling was exerted in a review of *The Home and The World* in the Times Literary Supplement – "at the end the story grows confused; the counterpoint of the cause and the characters is lost in a mere muddle of both and we are left hardly knowing what has happened. It is, in fact, not an end at all but merely a stop; and we wish to ask a number of questions which the author does not answer". As against it Rajshekar Basu published an article in *Prabashi* where he stated that the readers often misinterpret the author and his creation. When the characters speak there is a tendency to deduce that they are speaking on behalf of the author. Basu even felt that if the author happens to be an amateur or less popular then the entire attention of the readers is fastened with the characters of the novel and the author seem to be exempted from adverse comments. But if the readers are inquisitive about the author himself then perhaps he fails to mete out justice. This is what has happened to Tagore.

Critics like Krishna Kripalani pointed out the reasons for considering *Char Adhyay* as a continuation of *Ghare Baire*. To quote him, "in this short but powerful novel he returns to the theme he had discussed earlier, in a different setting in his

novel *The Home and The World*- human values and political ideals. The setting is the underground revolutionary movement in Bengal, against his heroism and its terrorisms depicted the frustration of love and the gradual debasement of human values. The author's analysis of the motives that inspire and condition political heroisms marked by deep insight into the psychology of the characters in this tragic drama of frustrated idealism and is expressed in language of great vigor and beauty. The novel aroused a storm of controversy in Bengal and the author was mercilessly reviled. He had uttered too many home truths".

Infact, to understand Tagore, one needs to understand the time and the cultural context in which he wrote. This we often ignore and thereby interpret very crudely and mechanically. For instance, by the end of the passage Nikhilesh is satisfied that he has at last found the true path in life and that in doing so he has attained freedom, while acknowledging the freedom of others – specifically the world. Michael Sprinker is however critical about it since to him it seems "Nikhilesh's discovering the secret of self-liberation discloses that the subject, which is the agent of his own freedom, depends on the world to realize its freedom". Sprinker perhaps was very mechanical in arguing freedom cannot be given to one another; one can only achieve it for oneself. It is here that I presume the question of culture becomes significant. The family structure of a Bengali society, the mutual interdependence and social bonding between married couples, their relation with other members of the family and society is very different from that of the west. It was not a customary feature of women of the then society to move out of their '*andarmahal*' and meets the outside world. Bimala, herself was hesitant to do so because of her socialization but did it on her husband's insistence. She could not have realized the true spirit of liberty, had she not stepped into the outside world. In this respect Nikhilesh's cooperation cannot be denied. But at the same time it must also be mentioned that Bimala once exposed to the outside world could exercise her liberty perfectly which is revealed through her interaction with both Nikhilesh and Sandip. This freedom, she has acquired because of her individual subjectivity. As such, it will not be correct to universalize the nature of the concept of

freedom. Hence, when Nikhilesh said, '.... I shall allow freedom to others '. Perhaps here he tried to mean that he will respect the freedom of others and like other husbands of the then society he would not allow the social norms to dictate the terms and conditions of freedom of others, doesn't matter even if it happens to be his wife. Thus from the core of his heart he was a liberal humanist in all respects. In fact, this is where I would like to go back to my introductory part on interpretation and add further that there cannot be any ultimate conclusion of a text; all we can suggest are temporal ones.

No doubt, Ghare Baire has questioned the nature of conjugality of the Bengali society yet Bimala's return to Nikhilesh at the end without any outside compulsion is very significant. Bimala though motivated by Sandip initially has responded to the nationalist call but her dedication to the movement was an honest one and hence cannot be questioned. Her strong passion towards Sandip was revealing and so was her love for Nikhilesh. Her inner conflict has created within her a split personality. "On the one hand I was eager that my husband should win in argument and that Sandip's pride should be shamed. Yet, on the other, it was Sandip's unabashed pride which attracted me so". Like Nikhilesh she too suffered from mental agony but unlike her husband her pain cannot afford to receive any sympathy from the readers since she has done something which is regarded as a crime in our society. Hence conflict regarding social values and changing times did not end. It continued even today when women's having a dual mind passes through a similar trauma. Her return to Nikhilesh is however crucial since it shows how her self liberated position took her a step ahead towards self emancipation. Self emancipation or '*Atmamukti*' however utopian it might sound bears an important stage of salvation of human soul in Indian philosophy. Tagore a firm believer of it did not want to deprive women from such essence of spirituality. As such his creation of Bimala in *Ghare Baire* tries to achieve this ultimate objective of '*atmamukti*' nourished and based upon '*atmasakti*'. This in fact confirms and upholds his unbiased position regarding gender. Furthermore, Bimala's return to Nikhilesh also indicates the relevance of commitment to one's own relationship. This commitment is not merely for retaining the

relationship, but commitment to discover our true selves, to realize our own self-reliant powers or “*Atmasakti*” by complementing each other which otherwise goes missing in our everyday thirst for consumerism. This is something which is rooted in our culture, which with changing times changed its form but the underlying philosophy is retained.

### End Notes

1. Refer Skinner Quentine, 2002, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” in *Visions of Politics*, vol-I C.U.P., Cambridge.
2. Ball Terence, 1995, *Reappraising Political Theory*, Chapter-I, O.U.P.,.
3. Sabuj Patra was a journal edited by Pramatha Choudhury who happened to be one of Tagore’s close friend and relative.
4. Tagore employed this method for the first time in one of his short stories ‘*Streer Patra*’.
5. See the Introduction, 2007, in S.Sengupta, S.Roy and S.Purkayastha ed. *Towards Freedom*, Orient Longman, Delhi.
6. Cited from Tagore Rabindranath, 1985, *The Home and The World*, trans. Surendranath Tagore, Penguins Books India, New Delhi,
7. I have taken the definition of modern women from Chatterjee Partha’s art. 1989, ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question’ in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid ed. *Recasting Women*, Zubaan Publication, New Delhi, p.244
8. Sarkar Tanika, 2002, ‘Country, Woman and God in The Home and The World in P.K.Datta ed. Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and The World: A Critical Companion*, , Permanent Black, Ranikhet, p.29.
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12. Ghosh Abhra, Ganatantrer Rabindrik Paradyeme, K.P.Bagchi, p72
13. *Ibid*, p75.
14. Sita Debi Purnasmriti p83. I’ve referred from Rabindrarachanabali Shoroshokhanda, Govt. of W.B.

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15. 29<sup>th</sup> May 1919 p 289
16. I’ve referred Rabindrarachanabidhan, vol-viii, ed. Anuttam Bhattacharyya, Publishing Plus, Kolkata. p.423.
17. Kripalani Krishna, Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography, p. 402.
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19. Cited from Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and The World*, trans. Surendranath Tagore, op cit.

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