UNIT 12: RABINDRANATH TAGORE: *HOME AND THE WORLD* I

UNIT STRUCTURE

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12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- explore how Rabindranath Tagore weaves a narrative of a love story that parallels India's own account of her struggle for freedom
- look into the symbols and metaphors employed by Tagore
- describe the different approaches of Indians towards achieving independence
- appreciate the role of women in the freedom struggle
- critically analyse the pros and cons of Swadeshi

12.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall take up a popular novel, written by one of the leading

novelists of the Indian sub continent, Rabindranath Tagore. The novel is entitled *Ghare Baire,* translated into English as, *Home and the World.* But before we deal with this novel in question, let us first accustom ourselves a little more with this genre as a whole. The Merriam-Webster dictionary's definition of a novel is, 'an invented prose narrative that is usually long and complex and deals especially with human experience through a usually connected sequence of events.' Hence, the novel is a work of fiction that takes into account the experiences and events that constitute a man's life. In most European languages, one term that brings together the many variants of this genre is 'roman' which is derived from the medieval word, 'romance'. In English, however, the term has been derived from the Italian root, 'novella' which means 'a little new thing'. The novel is a prose narrative, distinct in form and style from the verse narrative as seen in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spencer and John Milton, which covered the Medieval English literature till the Puritan age. The modern novel deals with a variety of subject matters and it covers a wide canvas- ranging from Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Charles Dickens' *The Tale of Two Cities* to Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* to Vladimir Nobakov's *Lolita.*



Adhere: stick; continue to give one's support.

Mindscape: the conscious mind; mental space.

The form of the novel has also developed variations with the passage of time. Where Richardson wrote his *Pamela* in the epistolary form, that is, in the form of a series of letters written by the titular heroine, Walter Scott chose the historical mode in writing his *Waverley* Novels and *The Bride of Lammermoor*; Jane Austen's form was defined as the 'novel of manners' because she found it convenient to **adhere** to the conventions of a class-based and class-conscious society while writing her novels. Anne Frank's dossier of the Holocaust, *The Diary of a Young Girl,* was written as diary entries, and this is how the novel was published, in the form of a diary. The modernist mode in novels takes an interesting turn in so far as they reveal more of the **mindscape** of characters, than the landscape. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse,* and James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and *Ulysses* are

examples of the modernist novels. Again, there are novels that tell us how novels from a preceding age were written. John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is one such novel that critically looks back to classical romantic novels and modern novels, almost parodying them, to show how the post modernist perspective works.

The novel that we will be dealing with is, in some sense, a historical novel, because it gives us a clear **verbal** picture of pre-independent India. *Home and the World* is not just an **arid** extract from the pages of Indian history where the writer passively collects and arranges the events, but a lively account of the happenings in the country where the household of Nikhilesh becomes the nation's microcosm. Here, Tagore is no mere **catalyst** to merely repeat what happened in the past; he becomes another speaker, an onlooker, whose recollection incorporates his own individual standpoint. Let us now have a glimpse of the life and works of Rabindranath Tagore.



Verbal: related to words.

Arid: dry; parched

Catalyst: a substance that aids a chemical reaction while remaining unchanged; here, a neutral person.

12.3 RABINDRANATH TAGORE: LIFE AND WORKS

Rabindranath Tagore was born on 7th May, 1861 in Calcutta, Bengal Presidency, in British India. He belonged to a renowned family of Calcutta, and his house was called the Jorasanko Mansion. His father was Debendranath Tagore, and mother, Sarada Devi. He was the youngest of the thirteen surviving children. The Tagore family was an eminent Bengali family, actively hoisting publication of literary magazines that inspired the Bengal Renaissance. Rabindranath Tagore, nicknamed Rabi, grew up in the hands of the servants of that big family. He started writing poems when he was only eight years old. Tagore's father was responsible behind inculcating certain elitist tendencies in him. In 1873, at the age of eleven, Tagore accompanied his father on a tour around the country for several months. During this sojourn, Tagore equipped himself with the knowledge of subjects like Astronomy, History, Sanskrit, modern Science, etc. At a tender age, he was able to pursue the classical literature of Kalidas. In 1877 he returned to his mansion, Jorosanko, and completed a long narrative poem in the Maithili style. He remarked jokingly that it was a revived work of a 17thcentury traditionalist, Bhanusimha. He was

so convincing, and his work so mature, that they were undoubtedly accepted by regional experts as the lost works of Bhanusimha. He wrote 'Bhikharini' (or 'The Beggar Woman'), a short story which was published in the same year. In 1882, Tagore published a volume of his poetry, *Sandhya Sangit.*

Tagore left Calcutta in 1878, and his father got him admitted to a public school in Brighton, East Sussex, in England. His father wanted to make him a barrister. Tagore read law for a brief period at University College, London. But Tagore preferred independent reading to classroom teaching, and thus, he took recourse to Shakespeare. He also enjoyed English, Irish and Scottish folk music there. He returned to Bengal without a degree, much to his father's disappointment, in 1880. He resolved to blend European modernity and novelty with the traditionalists' norms of the Brahmo Samaj in Calcutta. He married Mrinalini Devi (1873-1902) in 1883, and had five children, of whom only three survived.

Tagore became the *zamindar* or manager of his large inherited estate in Shelaidaha (now, a part of Bangladesh). The villagers were only too happy to have Tagore as their zamindar, because, he accepted no monetary rents, only occasional treats of puffed rice and curd. During his managerial sojourn, Tagore was hugely influenced by Baul Lalon Singh, who inspired him with his *Baul* songs, or the traditional folk songs of Bengal sung by wanderings minstrels known as *'bauls'.*In 1901, Tagore moved to Santiniketan, his haven of knowledge and spiritual silence. He gained readership of both India and abroad through his verse collection *Naibedya,*and other translated poems in free verse. He witnessed the death of his wife and his two children in Santiniketan. In 1913, Tagore won the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature for his translated version of the *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (1910). Tagore was knighted 'Sir' in 1915 by King George V, but he soon returned the title after the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre in 1919.

Best known for his poems, Tagore also has essays, short stories, novels, travelogues and songs to his credit. Harvard University Press and Visva-Bharati University together compiled the largest known anthology of works

composed by Tagore and published *The Essential Tagore* in 2011. It came out as a literary tribute to the great master on his 150th birthday, with the joint venture of Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarthy (editors).

Being a music composer, Tagore wrote about 2,230 songs. His songs show a tendency towards the popular Indian song style called *thumri.* Tagore's songs became a genre in itself and they became a part of the formal Hindustani Classical Music called *Rabindra Sangit.* At the age of sixty, Tagore followed his passion for painting. He was largely influenced by the carvings and wood cuts of New Ireland and British Columbia. *Rabindra Chitravali* is an amalgamated work edited by the eminent historian, R. Siva Kumar that consists of Tagore's own critique on his paintings and their reception by art patrons.

Tagore's gamut of literary output is comprehensive of all known literary genres: poetry, songs, novels, novellas, short stories, drama, essays, travelogues and critiques. Among his famous poetry volumes are *Manasi* or *The Ideal One* (1884), *Sonar Tari* or *The Golden Boat* (1894), *Gitanjali* or *Song Offerings* (1910), *Gitimalya* or *Wreath of Songs* (1914) and *Balaka* or *The Flight of Cranes* (1916). Some of his popular dramas are *Valmiki Pratibha* or *The Genius of Valmiki* (1881), *Visarjan* or *The Sacrifice* (1890), *Dak Ghar* or *The Post Office* (1912), and *Raktakaravi* or *Red Oleanders* (1926). Tagore's novels include *Nastanirh* or *The Broken Nest* (1901), *Gora* or *The Fair-Faced* (1910) and *Ghare Baire* or *Home and the World* (1916). His two noted memoirs are *Jivansmriti* or *My Reminiscences* (1912) and *Chhelebela* or *My Boyhood Days* (1940). Most of his Bengali works were self translated into English. His novels *Chokher Bali* and *Ghare Baire* did not earn much readership, however, they were paid attention after being adapted for film by Satyajit Ray. Two of his lyrical compositions were chosen by two nations as national anthems: 'Jana Gana Mana' (India) and 'Amar Shonar Bangla' (Bangladesh). No wonder, Rabindranath Tagore was called the 'Bard of Bengal'.

12.4 INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

Home and the World progresses in the form of three major narratives-

each one by Bimala, Nikhilesh and Sandip, alternatively. Most poetic pieces are Nikhilesh's soliloquies in which he vents his own bottled up emotions for Bimala. Sandip's patriotic songs to awaken the spirit of the youth force of the country are another generic form extensively used by Tagore in this novel.

Flannery O' Connor, in his commendable work, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose,* wrote, "Writing a novel is a terrible experience, during which the hair often falls out and the teeth decay. I'm always irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it's very shocking to the system." Tagore's *Home and the World* carefully delineate the impulsive behaviour of people blinded by their anger towards everything 'foreign'. However, Tagore carefully demarcates between true patriotism and blind devotion. Being a verbal craftsman, he carefully highlights the adverse effect of the Swadeshi. He aimed to reach out to the nation with his message of liberation of his land from the prevailing darkness of poverty and ignorance.

Home and the World do not end on a conclusive note. In fact, Tagore leaves open a lot of questions that haunt the reader long after the book is read and closed down. It might be a product of a pre independent India, but to call it a coming of age novel, we have reasons more than one. First, the novel proceeds in what Bakhtin called a 'polyphonic' mode, which means, incorporating more than one voice. Second, the open ended nature of the text attributes the reader a number of possibilities to interpret the novel. And third, because it does not seek to 'establish' certainties or answer questions. It only generates fresh questions to which the reader is expected to find out the answers oneself. Milan Kundera in his *The Book of Forgetting and Laughter* defined, "The wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything…The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question. There is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude. In a world built on sacrosanct certainties, the novel is dead." *Home and the World,* although primarily a love story, remains a **pulsating dossier** of the struggles of people from different walks of life trying to understand the meaning of nation and nationalism in the face of colonial hegemony. It is also a text that renders



Pulsating: expand and contract rhythmically, indicating life.

Dossier: a set of documents about a person or event.

Tagore's own views, ideologies and philosophy regarding life, love, sacrifice and patriotism. Most of the actions in this novel take place in the mindscape of the characters, but making it an interesting read, nonetheless.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Why were the villagers of Shelaidaha happy to have Tagore as their zamindar?

Q2. Can the novel *Home and the World* be called a coming of age novel? Explain in about 150 words.

Q3. Two nations have adopted Rabindranath Tagore's compositions as their national anthems. One of them is India. Name the other nation.

12.5 THE TITLE OF THE NOVEL

Tagore carefully chose the title for his novel which was originally in Bengali. *Ghare Baire*, as the name appears, relates to events that take place in the home front, but extend themselves to the larger **gamut** of the nation. The story spins around the marital life of Nikhilesh and Bimala whose life goes on in a smooth, lucid manner until their conjugal life is overshadowed by affairs from the outside world in the form of Sandip. Sandip represents the rash, impulsive youth force who aims at achieving his goal by any means possible. Initially, Bimala is fascinated by the outside world, its newness, its strangeness; however, she soon realises the dangers in adapting herself to a totally unfamiliar world. Nikhilesh's role is that of a patient, understanding husband, who gives Bimala ample time and space to realise her mistake and mould herself into a wiser woman. The inner space or circle of their house is representative of India, as a nation, and the outer sanctum, as the unknown, hostile colonial rule that promises novelty and excitement, but which comes with its own price tag. Outside the comfort of the house, Bimala is lost and sees herself in jeopardy. Fortunately, she is safe within the reach of Nikhilesh, and therefore, she is rescued by her husband towards the end of the novel.



Gamut: the whole range or scope.

The novel is mostly set in the living room of Nikhilesh and Bimala. The



Waft: carry or travel lightly through air or over water.

Sanctum: a holy place.

'Home' (Ghare) becomes a negotiating ground for outsiders like Sandip, Amulya (disciple of Sandip) and Chandranathbabu (Nikhilesh's teacher and guide). The readers see much of the action occurring outside (Baire) through narratives that **waft** within the **sanctum** of the 'home'. As the novel proceeds, there is not much difference left between the home and the world outside- the thin line between 'ghare' and 'baire' gradually blurs.

Bimala, initially a simple wife, is a submissive daughter-in-law. However, Nikhilesh does not want her to be confined within the domestic chores of his house. Sandip, his best friend, brings with him glimpses of the outside world, much to the fascination of a naïve Bimala. This window to the outside world creates friction in her own world, her home. The novel proceeds to restore the inner peace of the couple as the narrative winds up towards the end.

12.6 THE CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL

Rabindranath Tagore spins a story that incorporates the pre independence era. The three major characters in the novel represent three different tendencies- Nikhil, the aristocratic Brahmin, represents the moderate, sensitive patriotic, who believes in non-violence; Sandip, the radical extremist, represents the violent, mercenary youth force that capitalises on nationalistic upsurge; and Bimala, the initially naïve and later, the decision making rationalist, represents the maturing sensibility of a nation gradually coming to a point of self realization. *Home and the World* is set against the backdrop of an India still fettered by British colonialism, and her struggles to attain liberty. As a mouthpiece of Tagore, Nikhil embodies a tolerant attitude towards every nation, and believes firmly that a nation cannot survive on its own. It has to be supported by other nations in terms of socio-economic dependence. He is a believer of universal fraternity, and considers every religion and community to be equal in the path of national progress. The novel shows a striking contrast to the ideals laid down by Gandhi in his manifestation of Swadeshi. Sandip is seemingly a staunch follower of Gandhi; he is a hard core Swadeshi worker. He takes shelter in the house of Nikhil and Bimala to operate his mission from there. For the first time, Nikhil's house is interrupted by an outsider. Sandip

chooses Bimala as a soft target to extract money from Nikhil. The initially gullible Bimala cannot realise the insidious intentions of Sandip, and is enthralled by her newly found title, 'Queen Bee', bestowed by Sandip.

Home and the World (1915) can be read as an allegory of two significant events that occurred around the historical partition of Bengal in 1905 and the mythical standards rendered to India as 'Bharat Mata', ushered in by Tagore's contemporary Bengali writer, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. The novel also stands alone as a glaring record of the shortcomings of the nationalist project enthusiastically visualised by Gandhi and his followers. The novel revolves around the main issue of 'tradition versus modernity' ('home' and 'world') caused by the colonisers' intrusion into the cultural, economic and political life of the colonised. The novel makes a better read as an allegory of India's failure to run on the lines of tradition and modernity, simultaneously. The novel offers us Tagore's own ideology that was realised in his founding of the Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan in 1921. The novel exemplifies Tagore's alternative idea of a tolerant nation that goes beyond the contours of communal disparity and class based intolerance to attain freedom from the colonisers.

The novel was first published in Bengali in 1915, ten years after the Partition of Bengal (1905), and then in English in 1919. At that time, Chattopadhyay's 'Bande mataram' was gaining relevance as an **incantation**, a mantra, and it echoed everywhere as a war cry to offer **obeisance** to 'Mother India'. It was around that time that Gandhi was also coming to power by forming the Indian National Congress in the 1920s. With this new found power and strong foothold, Gandhi fostered the ideals of non-cooperation among the Indians. There was a split within the Swadeshi movement itself: the staunch Swadeshi workers or the extremists who claimed that India was superior in terms of economy, politics and arts; and the moderates who continued to adhere to their principles of social reform. It deeply hurt Tagore that the government schools and colleges were being boycotted by the young students, and eventually by the turn of 1921, almost all the government educational institutions remained virtually closed. The hub of intellect and knowledge thus became silent and sterile. Tagore expressed his genuine regret in one of his



Incantation: words or sounds uttered as a magic spell.

Obeisance: a bow or courtesy.

letters to a professor at Santiniketan that he was certainly unhappy at Gandhi's 'narrowness of aims' and that the Swadeshi movement actually 'uprooted students and tempted them away from their career before any real provision was made'.

This regret is apparent in the course of the novel and we find it in the image of Amulya, an eighteen-year-old boy, and how he is misguided by Sandip. The participation of women in the nationalist movements as shown in this novel through Bimala is a clear reminder of the India of 1885 (foundation of the Indian National Congress by the members of the Indian and British members of the Theosophical Society movement). The 'home' or India was considered insufficient culturally and politically. European literature and administration (the world) was always there claiming its superiority over other colonised nations and urging them to consider Europe as their model. This scenario persisted till 1885. The silent participation of women is also seen in another significant novel of pre independent India, that is, *Kanthapura* by Raja Rao. *Home and the World* records Bimala's achievements and failures as she becomes emancipated in the freedom struggles, both at home and outside it.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. Name Nikhilesh's teacher as seen in the novel.

Q5. What did Tagore state in his letter regarding Swadeshi movement?



12.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you already have an idea as to what were the political events that shaped the plot of the novel. You have laso gained a fair idea of Tagore's own political ideology in regard to nation and patriotism. You are now familiar with the title and the context of the novel. The next unit shall acquaint you with the novel in a more detailed manner.



12.8 FURTHER READING

1. Anderson, Benedict. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origins and spread of Nationalism.* Second Edition. London: Verso.

2. Chatterjee, Partha. (1993). *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

3. Dutta, Krishna and Andrew Robinson (eds). (1997). *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4. Tagore, Rabindranath. (2005). *Home and the World.* Haryana: Penguin Books.



12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q 1: Because Tagore did not accept monetary rents and would take only occasional treats of puffed rice and curd from the villagers.

Ans to Q 2: Refer to section 12.4.

Ans to Q 3: Bangladesh.

Ans to Q 4: Chandranath Babu.

Ans to Q 5: In his letter, Tagore regretted the effect of the Swadeshi movement because it 'uprooted students and tempted them away from their career before any real provision was made.'



12.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Do you think *Home and the World* to be an open ended novel? Justify.

Q2. What kind of an ideology do you think Tagore advocates in his treatment of nation and nationalism?

Q3. What do the two terms, 'home' and 'world' represent in the larger context of the novel?

Q4. Write a brief note on Tagore's contribution to the field of literature.

Q5. Write short notes on :

a) The title of the novel.

b) The context of the novel.

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