



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

REFLECTIONS

Rabindranath's rebellion

On 'Home and The World's' treatment of revolutionary fervour

Too deftly, Rabindranath shifts gears just as the reader gets comfortable with the turmoil at home. The world bangs on the door incessantly and its calls to be invited in brings about a chaotic development. The turning point, if one has to choose one, is when Sandip asks Bimala for money, funds to carry out the noble work of this fight for freedom, for the country, swadesh.

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

"The liberation that comes through sorrow is greater than the sorrow," says Nikhilesh, in *Home and the World*. I quote from Penguin's Modern Classics edition, in Sreejata Guha's translation. Tagore's liberal-minded, university-educated zamindar is a disciple of restraint and weariness, yet this line does not sound out of sync from Nikhilesh, whose heartbreak can also speak for the troubled swadeshi protesters he is so against. Re-reading the novel during such a perilous time, I was moved greatly by Rabindranath's trio of protagonists: through Nikhilesh's hesitations that reflect well the attitudes of his class and their newfound "modernity", through his wife Bimala—egged on to come out to the "world" with him and leave the contours of homes all too familiar to women—and through Sandip, the brash revolutionary and agitator, hanging around Nikhilesh's estate (one can almost say squatting) and flattering Bimala enough to win her over with talks of revolution and freedom.

Rabindranath is for every occasion. Nowhere does it feel truer to me than in *Home and the World*, whose backdrop of political turmoil only strengthens the personal dynamic between a zamindar with a sobering "conscience" and his insurrectionary friend, Sandip. Perhaps, it is testament to Rabindranath's power—an effervescent prose which overwhelms all senses—that a reader is often undecided whether the poet's attacks and denigrations are his own or the expected predispositions of the 'bhadro shomaj' who read him with delight.

Home and the World, much like its author, provides multitudes of reflections, analyses, and reactions. The wrecking of Nikhilesh and Bimala's marriage when Sandip makes his mark in the estate seems to often to be washed away under the waves of nationalist fervour that much of the later half of the novel concerns itself with. I went into the novel to dwell on the former, but Rabindranath's treatment of Sandip did in the end force a few words out of me.

Home and the World begins with Nikhilesh encouraging his wife Bimala to step outside into the world, to engage with their enlightened contemporaries and become more of an equal partner to him in the process intellectually. It is a liberal urge that hides the fact that Nikhilesh's idea of equality is strictly on his terms and excludes any real independence for Bimala. This friction occurs when Sandip's charms propels Bimala to adopt ideals Nikhilesh is at unease with. Nikhilesh, meek as he is, outright refuses when Bimala requests they stop stocking foreign cloth in his estate's market. He believes that "the words that Bimala spoke in the name of the country, were coming from Sandip's mouth and not form a greater idea." An insecurity develops. Stumbling upon his wife in the garden later on in the novel, Nikhilesh blurts out, "Bimala, my cage here is walled from all sides—how can I keep you here? You cannot live like this."

Home and the World, then, already succeeds in conjuring up a great many conversations on the extent of ownership of one another in a marriage.

Too deftly, Rabindranath shifts gears just as the reader gets comfortable with the turmoil at home. The world bangs on the door incessantly and its calls to be invited in brings about a chaotic development. The turning point, if one has to choose one, is when Sandip asks Bimala for money, funds to carry out the noble work of this fight for freedom, for the country, *swadesh*. It is the very moment when the home and the world are entwined together significantly. It is also when Sandip stops being a person and becomes, instead, little more than a caricature. A greedy, materialist demeanour is sketched over him. "He had the divine scabbard," Bimala thinks, "but the weapon in it was the devil's." All talk of supposed revolution is set aside as Sandip dreams: "I want to have fifty thousand rupees in my hands and blow it in two days, on my own comforts and a few deeds for the country. I want to shed this poor man's disguise and look at the real me, the rich me, in the mirror just once."

Why does Rabindranath make him so crass later on? Is it so that Bimala's passion has a rude awakening and she returns to the comforts of her household? And if so, why must she have this reality-check in the first place? Rabindranath's own experiences during the movement to boycott British goods had apparently left him horrified. He felt, as Anita Desai wrote in a preface for a 1985 edition, "that the boycott of cheap British goods in favour of expensive and poorly made Indian goods was harming the interests of the poor, to whom Swadeshi was an abstract, distant and meaningless term." This explains his sympathies with a Nikhilesh he feels so attuned with. Rabindranath's rebellion here has been to completely identify with the zamindar against what he saw as misguided, though earnest, attempts at snatching up self-government by force. Sandip's charisma must, at this point, become witchcraft. Though the theft at the heart of the novel starts as a matter of the home, we find Sandip—the pied piper of "the world"—come out of the ordeal as reckless, predatory, almost evil. He is a boogeyman of the bhodrolok, who must hold him up to discredit an entire revolutionary spirit. Most other revolutionaries of this movement must be discounted as such, too, for Sandip serves satisfactorily as a representative figure. They must defame and deny Sandip the compassion and sentimentality that Nikhilesh is offered easily. Ultimately, *Home and the World's* Sandip is a brute with no serious vision for nation-building. All too often, and perhaps too close for comfort, we have seen a similar denial of humanity, the rebuffing of dignity, and a refusal to truly see contemporary revolutionaries with good intentions. They are shown to be people you cannot trust. Similar to Sandip, the powers that be paint them as the liberal's favourite kind of vulgarity—a radical.

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POETRY

There was complete silence around the time of your birth

RAIAN ABEDIN

the way there was complete silence when you lied for the first time. You opened your eyes scared that the ants would hunt them down—egg white and so in love with the hurricane lamps your mother would bring out for your father to fill with kerosene. You were born like a waterlogged city, you were born with silence in your mouth. You lied like a city still holding on to the rain, soaked lamps and the monsoon gods bleeding. Over time, it will become a part of you—that's what the rain does, your father tells you one day, drenched on his way home, his shadow now touching yours, the closest you have been, it lingers.

And then your eyes—egg white and so in love with this silence finds you as you tell yourself that this, your eyes and the rain, must be love.

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ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

POETRY

Dawn of new (?) air

SNATA BASU

Do you need water? I have water!
He opens his chest to a row of searing bullets, he dies like a raven...we wield fists in their memory, voices escape blood canals. We bundle like fleets of flies in the woods of a distant free world where vigils are carried on the shoulders of our heads, and shoulders of their bodies, peeling in our ears like a scene from the cinema—a scene from an abattoir. A scene where houses are torched to the ground because there used to be an altar there, where someone once sank to their knees asking after a god, a prayer plant in each corner where the sun looped in a dozen pleats. For two days I don't eat a morsel, and my skin collapses by the bones, I start losing my face—I look as cold as a corpse, as this city solvates in silence and hoots, sometimes on the streets and sometimes at our doors. Teetering in between the time I spent on the comfort of my bed the last few days, trying to heal reading Didion's narratives, shedding a tear every time she says 'father', a gaping lacuna of promises says by, the last few days are all I keep. I remember that there is a Hindu family by our windows whose calls of *shankho* trumpet the moving air during pray-hours, and someone asks 'Well, hell! Do they have to be so loud?'



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

and I say, yes, because this is their house. And you might not have seen the light of our homes glittering in the horizon during Dasher, on Kali Pujo, when the floors turn floral, and there's music everywhere. You might not have read about the pillaging of our long legacies that the wrath of faith has eaten, of tribe ingestion of preservers, of the torchings of Devi Maa's hull, but talks of harmony flood your nose. Harmony, harmony, harmony—you want it so bad, and so you put words in our mouths—speak this and speak that! This is for the loving of our land. The joining of our hands. There's a reason we collapse time and time again, our hearts ransacked by the crisscrossing of treachery, leaving behind lesions you will never heal or carry or live through. You hail this spirit of new light that is your own, as a new dawn of incongruity nears, you let it sink through simply because you can.

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