

Humanism in Rabindranath Tagore's Home and the World

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Abstract:

Humanism is emphasizing the importance of human beings –their nature and place in the universe. It means love of man with all his flaws and fallacies. It is an attitude that concentrates on the activities of man more than the supernatural world. During the colonial rule, the British lost their humanity and were brutal and cruel towards their fellow- beings. Many novelists used their pens to protest against the violence of the British. Rabindranath Tagore is one of them who used his pen over swords to vehemently protest against the cruelty meted out to his fellow- beings. In this paper, I shall discuss on humanism as a concept in Indian English Literature with reference to Tagore's novel Home and the World. The three main characters of the novels portray different personalities and thus reflect humanism.

Keywords: humanism, importance of man, protests, pens.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines Humanism as “A rationalist outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters.” Humanism is a philosophical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence over established doctrine or faith. The meaning of the term humanism has fluctuated, according to the successive intellectual movements which have identified with it.

Although humanism lost its significance a long time ago, a certain naivety about its natural and obvious connotations, complicated by anthropological hubris, lingers on. The tendency consequently is to compulsively and exclusively read humaneness, universal compassion and glory into humanism.

Neither the violence of the human being nor the violence on the human being gets registered in the process.

Grappling with humanism’s bad conscience in the complex terrain in the complex terrain of Indian literature is an obligation that remains unfulfilled.

Rabindranath Tagore lifted Indian literature at world level and gained for modern India a place on the world literary history that won Noble Prize for literature and gave recognition to India on global scale. Tagore, the versatile personality of Indian literary scholar is considered as- the Rishi, the Gurudev and the Maharshi. He was a poet, dramatist, actor, producer, musician, painter, an educationist, reformer, philosopher, prophet, novelist, story writer, and a critic of life and literature. He is a multi-dimensional personality and the underlying theme of his creations is love for man.

Besides Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand’s work is based on the philosophy of humanism. He makes an untouchable the hero of his novel.

Tagore wrote primarily in Bengali and translated many of his poems and plays into English. To his credit, there is a long list of poems and plays, both in Bengali and English which had made his place among the world’s greatest writers.

In Iyengar’s words:

“As the years passed, he became more and more a legendary figure; in his flowing beard and immaculate white robes he was truly in the line of the great bearing witness to the true Reality, seeing the way showing it to others.”

This paper is an attempt to study Tagore’s philosophy of humanism with reference to his novel Home and the World.

Home and the World is a triangular love story with symbolic overtones relating to nationalism and the country in the early 20th century. The partition of Bengal and the subsequent boycott and Swadeshi Movement represent the political context of Home and the World. The three leading characters of the novel- Nikhilesh, Bimala and Sandip appear against the hinterland of this central, historical event. The characters narrate their tales in the first person narrative.

Tagore imbibed the values of rationalism, nationalism and humanism at his Jorasanko house and nurtures them in his works. The influences which form the quintessence of Tagore's philosophy of humanism are – teachings of Vedanta and Upanishads, Vaisnavism, saints like Kabir, Rabidas and even the Sufi saints.

In Home and the World, Tagore looks at the problem of humanism in two different backgrounds of religion and politics separately. Here, he reverts to the political problems of his own time. Tagore's nationalism transcends into universalism which is a unique blend of the East and the West. In the novel, the battle between Nikhil and Sandip represents the battle for the future of Bengal.

Tagore was one of the pioneers of the Boycott Movement in Bengal but when he found it growing violent and indiscreet, he withdrew his support for it and condemned it through his writings. Tagore gives highest place to man. To him, Man is the creator of the creator. As a main lead of human freedom, he is a seeker of peace and hence, follows Gandhi's ideal- non-violence, ahimsa. He realizes that he has some commitment to his fellow- beings. His most powerful criticism against its in humanistic and violent tendencies is expressed through the conflict of opinions between Nikhil and Sandip in the novel.

Nikhilesh is a great humanist and has an unflinching faith on the importance of man above everything else on this earth. He is of the view that truth cannot be imposed. When he finds Sandip belittling the value of man in comparison to knowledge which he gathers and which exists for him, he points out to him:

All I want to say is, that is Europe people look at everything from the viewpoint of science. But man is neither mere physiology nor biology nor psychology, nor even sociology. Man is infinitely more than the natural science of him.

Nikhil derives the strength of his views and purpose from his school teacher, Chandranath Babu who is himself a great believer in universal brotherhood.

Nikhil's liberalism and humanism make him tolerate Sandip's presence in his house and estate for some months, but when he finds his followers in their fervid enthusiasm for the

Swadeshi Movement inflicting tortures on his poor peasants and creating a gulf between Hindus and Muslims, he asks him to leave his house and village.

Sandip represents narrow minded patriotism of the politically conscious Indians during the Swadeshi Movement. He exhorts the people recklessly to burn British goods and resort to violence when opposed. He hypnotises the young students by his eloquence and profound patriotism and wins their whole-hearted support for Swadeshi Movement. He is one who brutally confronts the world and criticizes Nikhil for his wise cowardice. For him, only the end matters. He can do anything to achieve his goal. Both Sandip and Nikhil have the same goal: freedom from oppression. But the difference lies in the way they both perceive freedom and how this freedom is to be realized.

Nikhil is though a staunch believer in the Swadeshi Movement himself, is totally opposed to narrow-minded patriotism and violence of any kind. He has no patience for Sandip's unscrupulous nationalism and bigoted Hinduism.

Tagore is also concerned with the other half of the society, that is, the women. According to him, a society cannot advance full fledged without fullest development of women's personality. Thus, we witness the character of Bimala who decides to break away from the shackles of household (inner world) to enter into the outside world, though with consent from her husband. As the name suggests, Bimala means without 'mal' or blemish. But we see her character as blank, not possessing the capability to think on her own. She is easily lured by Sandip to steal from her husband to help him.

We see that in the novel, Tagore emphasizes the importance of man above all types of orthodoxy, religion, parochialism and violence. He asserts his unswerving faith in the joy of life, freedom of the individual, respect for human personality, man's obedience to his conscience and his enjoyment of life through love and sacrifice- the universal virtues which stand for humanism in life. Though he was delicate in his poetic endeavour but he protested against the stampede of humanism.

Tagore treated the problems of his age from the intellectual and philosophical point of view and hence more profoundly. He could see real man stripped of all prejudices and biases and as an incarnation of divinity on earth. It is this assertion of the importance of man and human values above everything else that gives Tagore and his novels a unique place in Indian literature.

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