

Empire And Nation: Interrogating The Politics Of Colonialism And Nationalism

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to address the concepts of colonialism and nationalism theoretically. The condition of marginalized section of the society in a colonial rule is also discussed. Woman question under colonial rule is also addressed. At the same time, the paper tries to point out the flaws of nationalism and also tries to focus on nationalist's take on race and gender question. Tagore's views regarding nationalism and how it can be a menace to civilization form an important part of this paper.

Keywords: Colonialism, Nationalism, Race, Gender, Postcolonialism

In a significant passage in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, Caliban, the indigenous inhabitant of a desolate island, tells Prospero: "This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother, /which thou takest from me." (Shakespeare 1610, 976)

The two clauses which Caliban resentfully articulates in his dialogue are: "This island is mine" and "which thou takest from me". The first clause conjures up in front of our eye a contour inhabited by Caliban and his mother much much earlier to Prospero (the coloniser) who had encroached upon it. The second clause indicates an act of appropriation essentially signified by colonialism and colonisation. In the words of Ania Loomba, "the process of forming a community in the new land necessarily meant unforming or re-forming the communities that existed there already and involved a wide range of practices including trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavement and rebellion" (Loomba, 8).

The Western Roman empire attained such an extensive proportion that it was proverbially supposed to be the meeting point of all the roads. The Eastern Roman or the Byzantine empire, which also rose to a vigorous proportion, declined as a result of the Ottoman Turkish invasion in 1353 AD. Ania Loomba informs us in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*: "...the Ottoman Empire, which began as a minor Islamic principality in what is now Western Turkey, extended itself over most of Asia Minor and the Balkans" (Loomba, 8). However, the new colonising venture of the Europeans in the modern era distinguished itself from its predecessors in many ways.

Karl Marx, in his categorical denouncement of the colonisation of India by the British, comments that a company of English merchants colonized India to fleece the nation's wealth. Marx points out that the devious ploys implemented by the colonialists to achieve their aims were the dirty game of divide and rule, exploitation of the advantage of feudal fragmentation, rivalry between regional rulers, the vices of caste and religious disparities and so on. Marx writes about British and the other European colonisers' unprecedented brutality: "The violations of women, the spittings of children, the roastings of whole villages, were then mere wanton sports, not recorded by mandarins, but by British officers themselves." (cited in Sdobnikov, 307). Marx also draws a significant line of demarcation between pre-capitalist (primitive accumulation in Marxian coinage) and the modern colonialism that evolved with the development of capitalism. On the one hand, the modern colonizers ruthlessly plundered all types of resources of the colonized countries, and on the other, they practically decimated the traditional economic system of the occupied countries. On the ideological basis of capitalism, the colonizers subsided the colonized countries into their profit-hunting grounds –markets, where they imported the goods like textiles manufactured in the mills and factories in England. At the same time they reduced the colonized countries to suppliers of raw materials which they exploited for the development of industries in their own countries. In the words of Ania Loomba: "Modern colonialism...restructured the economics of the latter, drawing them into a complex relationship with their

own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonised and colonial countries" (Loomba, 9). The economy of the colonized was entirely subordinated to the interests of the metropolitan country. In consequence of the two-pronged exploitation, perpetrated by the British colonizers, India's century-honoured textiles (Dhaka Muslin for example), cottage and handicraft in the industries were completely ruined. Hundreds of thousands of people, involved in these industries, found themselves in the street. Their rural autonomy was mired, and the country became much poorer than ever. Frantz Fanon observes in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*: "This European opulence is literally scandalous, for it has been founded on slavery. It has been nourished with the blood of slaves. ...The well-being and progress of Europe have been built with the sweat and the dead bodies of Negros, Arabs, Indians and the yellow races." (Fanon, 76).

In whatever garment imperialism was decorated and presented, it always pretended to a messianic role, posing as a benefactor of the "uncivilised" and "barbaric" natives of the colonies. This is exactly what Homi K. Bhabha says in *The Location of Culture*: "The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction." (Bhabha, 101). It is this that Rudyard Kipling highlights in his poem "The White Man's Burden" in 1899: "Take up the white man's burden/ Send forth the best ye breed / Go bind your sons to exile / To serve your captive's need/ To wait in heavy harness / On fluttered folk and wild / Your new caught sullen peoples / Half devil and half child." (Kipling 1899, 136). On the contrary, Tagore in his essay, *Nationalism in India* notes about the Western imperial designs and actions: "...in former days, they organised and plundered; in the present age, the same spirit continues – and they organise and exploit the whole world." (Tagore, *Nationalism*, 1917, 64).

In keeping with Frantz Fanon's observation in his *Black Skin White Masks*, Ania Loomba observes how: "...The colonial experience annihilates the colonized's sense of self, ..." (Loomba, 122). and subjects him 'into a crushing objecthood', ..." (cited in Loomba, 122). The colonial design of objectifying, which Césaire, an advocate of the Negritude movement calls "thingification" can be discerned in the case of Black Native women in their [mis]representation under the images of a new geographical contour. In advocacy of my argument, let me mention a picture featured in Ania Loomba's *Colonialism / Postcolonialism*, "*Vespucci discovering America*, engraved in the late sixteenth century by Stradanus" (Loomba, 68). The picture displays Vespucci, holding a banner with the Southern Cross in one hand and a mariner's astrolab in the other, and looking at America, drawn under the image of a naked woman half-rising from a hammock. The cannibals in the background, symbolize the so-called savagery and violence of the New World Natives. Through such depictions, the colonizers sought to justify their conquest of the Americas. In the dominant scientific ideologies, African women represented the "primitive state" of pre-colonial Africa, and European colonialism often justified its civilizing mission by claiming that it was safeguarding native women against patriarchal oppression.

The reality, as a matter of fact, was different. Colonial system abolished the minimum economic self-reliance enjoyed earlier by women in many African tribal communities, and made them more miserable victims of patriarchy. As in India, so in Africa also, patriarchy formulated "home" as an inner domain, where women were supposed to preserve traditional indigenous religion and culture. The women were yoked under a coercive male-domination. Thus we see that in an absolute contrary to their claim to be protectors of the native women, European colonizers only intensified the sufferings and anguish of women.

In a lecture on "Nationalism in the West", Tagore articulated the predicament posed by aggressive Nationalism. He wrote: "The Nation, with all its paraphernalia of power and prosperity, its flags and pious hymns, its blasphemous prayers in the Churches and the literary mock thunders of its patriotic bragging, cannot hide the fact that the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation, that all its precautions are against it, and any new birth of its fellow in the world is always followed in its mind by the dread of a new peril." (Tagore, *Nationalism*, 1917, 51-2)

The historical justification of this warning requires to be assessed on the basis of a larger human experience with Nationalism and its over all impact upon civilization and culture. But before this, it is necessary to explore the background against which Nation and Nationalism came into being in colonized countries like India.

There is a good deal of controversies about the origin and the growth of Nations and Nationalisms. To begin with, I would like to bring home "the Marxist-Leninist principles of nationalities question, which are based on recognition of every nation's profoundly democratic right to self-determination, to voluntary and free unification of nations and also to establishment of an independent state." (Sdobnikov, 655). In this context, I would like to argue that Marx and Lenin sternly condemned the narrow dogma of sectarian nationalism. It may be observed in harmony with Partha Chatterjee's comment that Lenin "highlighted the central question of political democracy...which led him to formulate his famous thesis on the rights of nations to self-determination." (Chatterjee, 18). As far as I have understood the Marxist-Leninist outlook on the nation-question, neither Marx nor Lenin exclusively theorized nationalism as a branch of epistemology.

The definition of nationalism given by Benedict Anderson in his book, *Imagined Communities*, is widely discussed and debated. According to Anderson, the nation is an “imagined political community”. In connection with Anderson’s depiction of Nationalism, Partha Chatterjee states in accordance with Anderson’s argument that this nationalism “was the ‘coalition of Protestantism and Print Capitalism’”. What...made the new communities imaginable was..., interaction between a system of production and productive relations, a technology of communications (Print) and the fatality of human linguistic diversity.” (Chatterjee, 19). What I comprehend from Partha Chatterjee’s analysis of Anderson’s arguments is that, it was the Bourgeoisie that evolved with the decline of feudalism, that ushered in the concept of nationalism defined as an “imagined community” by Anderson. It is obvious that “print capitalism” played a vital role in the formulation of this nationalism. Let me substantiate my point by quoting Ania Loomba : “Newspapers, Novels and other new forms of communication were the channels for creating such a shared culture, interests and vocabularies within the Nation. Such forms of communication were themselves made possible by ‘print capitalism’ (or trade in books or printed materials)...”(Loomba, 156).

Anderson argues that nationalism developed in Asia and Africa, was essentially based on the different models of nationalism which had emerged in Europe and in the Americas. I do not subscribe to this view on the strength of the logic that the Bourgeoisie elite intelligentsia, while formulating their nationalisms, could not help being influenced by their own geo-political and cultural characteristics. They had to keep in mind the fact that even if they were to replicate the modern western nation-state in the paradigm of their own discourse, they must devise the project in conformity to their indigenous cultures. Therefore, I do feel it worth quoting Partha Chatterjee, satirising Anderson’s argument : “If Nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain “modular” forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas what do they have left to imagine?... . Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.” (Chatterjee, 5).

In my opinion, in the context of the third world countries like India, the rise and growth of Nationalism was not spurred by a mere political ambition for the decolonization of the country. Nationalism in India was essentially inspired by a vision of the nation’s culture. I fully subscribe to Partha Chatterjee’s observation that much earlier to the outbreak of its encounter with the colonial domination, the Bourgeoisie elite manoeuvred a project of constructing a domain that would be free from the colonial intervention ; that would be the trove of nation’s cultural and religious heritage. Let me quote Partha Chatterjee to justify my statement : “It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains – the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the “outside”, of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, are domain where the West had proved its superiority, ...The spiritual, on the other hand, is an “inner” domain, bearing the “essential” marks of cultural identity.” (Chatterjee, 6). It was in the “inner domain”, which the Bourgeoisie elite sought to project as the badge of their cultural / spiritual superiority to the West.

It is a fact of the cultural history of Indian Nationalism that the Bourgeoisie exponents of Nationalism, despite their western academic orientation, took a very active initiative in developing their mother language, because this language had to be made strong enough to convey and represent the nation’s cultural identity. Partha Chatterjee argues : “The bilingual intelligentsia came to think of its own language as belonging to that inner domain of cultural identity from which the colonial intruder had to be kept out; language, therefore, became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world.” (Chatterjee, 7). The establishment of a system of education, based on the ideals of Nationalism, was of great importance because education is the most powerful medium of popularizing the Nationalist dogma. Therefore secondary schools were started.

It was only after schools for boys had been running successfully for many decades that the “bhadrolak” or the Nationalist cultured elites felt the need to establish school for girls. Earlier, women had been denied education on the ground that Native women if educated, might neglect their role as the maintainers of the inner domain of the cultural /spiritual essence. Formal education was spread among the Elite Bengali women. Once the gate to education was opened, women displayed their full potential. As for an example of women’s academic talent, I would like to mention Kadambini Ganguly (1861-1923) who became the first woman doctor from a medical college in India.

In connection with his analysis of how the Nationalist project of modern school education for women was networked, Partha Chatterjee comments : “Through text books, periodicals and creative works, an important force that shaped the new literature of Bengal was the urge to make it accessible to women who could read only one language – their mother tongue.” (Chatterjee, 128). The Nationalist Elite considered it irrelevant and even threatening to allow English language to be the medium of this academic project, for “it might devalue and displace that central site where the social position of women was located.” (Chatterjee, 128). In other words, it was a Nationalist apprehension that, if schooled through English medium, the “Bhodromohila” might be contaminated with western cultural fashions and degenerate into “Memsahibs”.

The Bourgeoisie elite had to work out two problems. They had to formulate an entirely indigenous academic mechanism which would embellish their women with the sort of education they required to be recognized as “new women”, not essentially in the sense the phrase applied to the social context of the western world, but in the sense that the native women were just as much educated as the nationalist elite desired, in order to project them as the very embodiment of the nation, and the inventory of the nation’s spiritual culture. The second problem, encountered by the nationalist elite was how to ensure their patriarchal authority over the “inner domain” and women as well. In order to address this problem, some new cultural mores required to be developed. The nationalist elite sought to mould their women in a way that they might be looked upon as “bhodromohila” – dignified women, quite close to the Victorian metropolitan women, but not the same. The Bourgeoisie nationalists dictated terms that made it imperative for their women to abstain from pursuing such social habits as their male counterparts cultivated in their everyday life. Docility and submissiveness, the two old conventional traits, which are always attributed to women, were looked upon in the nationalist project for the formation of “bhodromohila” as essential qualities of middle class women. It was imperative for them to follow the rituals of Hinduism and to streamline their lifestyle in keeping with the traditional vocations of orderliness, selfless service for their families. These “new women”, fashioned by the nationalist formula were liable to follow a new dress code called “Brahmika” saree, which curiously combined in itself the age-old saree and the Victorian elite women’s wears – blouse petticoat and shoes. We find the reference to this dresscodes in Tagore’s novels like *Gora* and *Home and the World*.

What we can tease out of this discussion can be summed up by Partha Chatterjee’s discreet observation : “The new patriarchy, advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honour of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate subordination.” (Chatterjee, 130).

“If the nation is an imagined community, that imagining is profoundly gendered..., the nation-state or its guiding principles are often imagined literally as a woman.” (Loomba, 180). The accuracy of Loomba’s observation can be appreciated by casting and insighting into the strategem implemented by the Bengali / Indian Nationalist elite to mythologize women in the images of the goddess Lakshmi, representing devotion and chastity and promising familial peace and affluence. Opposite to this myth of “Lakshmi”, the counteractive myth of “Alakshmi” symbolising malefaction and threatening disaster in the family, was tactfully situated in the “Home” project of the nationalists. What motivated such mythification of women was the nationalists’ strategy to coerce or to persuade their women into internalizing the patriarchal intention of projecting them as the nation – the nation-mother, liable to raise an equally mythical glory of the nation’s past – its tradition of cultural supremacy. Through the construction of the fantasy of “Alakshmi”, the nationalist elite obviously mean to signify westernized women, women of lower classes and Anglo-Indian women. Amazingly enough, the Hindu Bourgeoisie Nationalists constructed along side the myth of the docile and submissive “Lakshmi”, the very contradictory myth of “Kali” or “Shakti” emblemizing sexuality, power and violence. This goddess too was often highlighted as the “Nation-Mother”. Such deification of women to consolidate the fantasy of the nationhood, unquestionably precipitated topsy-turvy, a raging ambivalence. In his essay, “*The Home and the World as a Postcolonial Text*”, Dr. Subir Dhar comments : “Having internalized the male generated myth that woman is either a benign household goddess (Lakshmi) or the incarnation of Shakti, she tries to play these roles vis-à-vis her husband Nikhil, and her lover Sandip.” (Dhar, 49). Having split up her entity, Bimala finally found herself nowhere. I have cited the example of Bimala, in order to suggest the undercurrents of traumatic ambivalence suffered by women in consequence of the myth-making project of the patriarchal nationalist-elite. Whereas they sought to manipulate women into subjugation to them on the pretext of glorifying them as “Nation-Mother”, Tagore clearly illustrates a much higher role that women are capable of acting out. In his lecture-turned essay *Woman*, in the book *Personality*, Tagore observes: “... the human world is...woman’s world, be it domestic or be it full of other activities of life, which are human activities, and not merely abstract efforts to organize.” (Tagore, *Personality*, 1917, 161).

In the earlier phase of this discussion on women’s role and position in accordance with the terms dictated by the Hindu Elite Nationalists, it has been shown how the Hindu nationalist elites selectively idolized women in the interest of enshrining the cult of their politics. In this section, I seek to show that idolization of women can be traced in the native literature.

“Kali” or “Devi” as Mother India had been valorized as the very embodiment of India by such writers and exponents of resurgent Nationalism as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. The idolization of the Nation as Mother in his novel *Anandamath* is worth mentioning in this respect. Having sensed the rat in the mythification of women in the pantheon of Hindu deities, Tagore strongly opposed this project. He unmistakably saw through it the patriarchal tact of liquidating the real woman’s selfhood and infantilizing the country men, so that they might irrationally engage themselves in the act of violence to liberate and glorify their imagined mother. In Tagore’s *Home and the World*, Amulya said to Bimala: “According to the Gita, Lord Krishna had said that the soul cannot be killed. Killing someone is a mere phrase.” (Tagore, *Home and the World*, trans. Guha, 160). The juvenile Amulya actually parroted his nationalist mentor Sandip’s

canny legitimization of violence. In Tagore's *Home and the World* Sandip, manipulatively magnifies Bimala as an incarnation of Shakti, the goddess, who would invigorate his sons with energy and inspiration. In Tagore's novel *Gora*, Gora equates women with the inner domain and says : "the scriptures tell us that woman is deserving of worship because she gives light to the home...the altar at which women may be truly worshipped is her place as Mother, the seat of the pure, right-minded Lady of the House." (Tagore, *Gora* , trans. Chakraborty, 9). In the course of a discourse on women's humiliating status in the society, Binay commented : "We call the nation our motherland, but if we don't see the greatness of that female image manifest in our women folk, if we do not see our women as mature, spirited and direct in their intelligence..., we shall never experience the glory of our nation." (Tagore, *Gora* , trans. Chakraborty, 178).

The discussion made so far on the different aspects of the nationalist project in terms of the "inner domain" and the women's station in life regulated by the Hindu nationalist elite in the metropolis like Calcutta, divulges the hard reality that how so ever deified woman might be, whatever trappings of modernity like education, were sanctioned for them, their social strata was little better than their precursors. On the pretence of assigning their women to the honourable task of protecting the nations' essence of culture, the modern Hindu patriarchal elite virtually replicated the tradition of the entrapment of women. Ideological discourses in defence of their strategy was fashioned not only by them, but also by educated elite women, who willingly conceded to their socialization. One such lady, named Radharani Lahiri, wrote in 1873 : "...of all the subjects that women might learn, housework is the most important...she cannot claim any reputation unless she is proficient in housework." (cited in Chatterjee, 129). The Hindu nationalist elite, in my point of view confined women to Sisyphean drudge in practice because they must have felt a trepidation at the possibility of women's emergence as a subversive force. Somnath Zutshi in an essay entitled "Women, Nation and the Outsider in Contemporary Hindi cinema", makes the opposite point that : "...behind this urge for control lay a fear of the powerful forces that lay buried within woman as well as nation – sexuality in the one case and the demand for social justice in the other – forces that could easily become overwhelming." (Zutshi, 85). Tagore in his own estimate of woman's immense resourcefulness, observes : "The time has come...when her field of work has far transcended the domestic sphere of life. The world with its insulted individuals has sent its appeal to her. These individuals must find their true value...and renew their faith in God's love through her love." (Tagore *Personality*, 1917, 167).

Over the centuries, the greater bulk of the Indian population has been bogged down in caste-prejudice, the inhuman vice of untouchability produced and enforced by religiously bigoted, upper-caste Hindu casteists. The Dalits and the other so-called lower castes have always been exploited and humiliated in the caste-ridden Hindu society. In his essay, "Nationalism in India", Tagore rightly observes : "The thing, we in India have to think is of this : to remove those social customs and ideals, which have generated a want of self-respect and a complete dependence on those above us – a state of affairs which have been brought about entirely by the domination in India of the caste system, and the blind and lazy habit of relying upon the authority of traditions..." (Tagore, *Nationalism* , 1917, 76). Out of this vector of the rigid caste system grew all sorts of dehumanizing rituals and mindsets of fatalism and religious fanaticism. Over-laden with such inhibitions, the Indian society ceased to be dynamic and showed every sickening sign of retrogression. In the words of Tagore : "..., Life departed from her social system and in its place she is worshipping with all ceremony the magnificent cage of countless compartments that she has manufactured." (Tagore, *Nationalism* , 1917, 77-78). This is exactly what Gora saw in the countryside and he realised "...how much importance it attached to trivialities, how moribund it had grown, clinging to every prejudice and superstition." (Tagore, *Gora* , trans. Chakraborty, 180).

Basically, Hinduism is not a majoritarian religious dogma of a narrow exclusionary nature. Hinduism, in its very essence is what Tagore describes as "a United States of social federation" (Tagore, *Nationalism*, 1917, 77). From the teachings of such revered sages as Nanak, Kabir and Sri Ramakrishna, it is evident that they all saw Hinduism not as religious dogma, but as a philosophical way of living, celebrating inter-racial amity and inclusiveness. What the elite Hindu nationalist ideologues did in Tagore's time was the very opposite. They institutionalized Hinduism, robbed it of its splendid heterogeneity and narrowed it down to a political weapon for acquiring power. In executing their strategy, they resorted to the casteist dogma of racial discrimination. In order to posit their superiority as a political and cultural force, they inferiorized in the Indian context the Muslim minority. This is precisely what Tagore writes of in "Nationalism in India" when he says : "the narrowness of sympathy which makes it possible for us to impose upon a considerable portion of humanity the galling yoke of inferiority will assert itself in our politics in creating the tyranny of injustice." (Tagore, *Nationalism* , 1917, 82).

Rabindranath Tagore entertained no illusion as to the possibility of the foundation of a Gandhian "Ramrajya" by means of the politics of Nationalism, that, instead of setting itself to a greatly important task of ridding the society of the malaises of caste prejudices, racial conflicts, the "tyranny of injustice" (Tagore, *Nationalism* , 1917, 82) and sectarian violence, always tended to grab power, wealth and to extend territorial domination. Tagore believed that true freedom, that is the freedom of mind and spirit, could be achieved only in a state "where the mind is without fear, where the head is held high...where the world has not been broken up into

fragments of narrow domestic walls.” (Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 31). He knew that Nationalism inscribed in the imagined past was narcissistic, exclusive and bigoted ideology. So it cannot set up the truly free and independent society of his dreams. It is because of his conviction that Tagore wrote in one of his poems: “...I missed man within enclosures / and found him beyond all frontiers/ that divide Nation from Nation /Land from land.” (cited in Kripalani, 222).

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