

# A Study of Tagore idea of Nationalism through the Perception of Homi Bhaba Concept of Mimicry

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the profound impact of nationalism on European history, tracing its roots from the Thirty Years War and the Treaty of Westphalia to the unification movements in Germany and Italy, and its aggressive expressions in the World Wars. The study highlights the pivotal moments in French history, including the French Revolution, which redefined national identity. Additionally, it examines nationalisms spread to Asia and Africa, particularly focusing on India's anti-colonial struggle. The paper also delves into Rabindranath Tagore's critical view of nationalism and Homi Bhaba's concept of mimicry, offering a nuanced perspective on the multifaceted nature of nationalism and its global implications.*

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Europe, French Revolution, Anti-colonialism, Rabindranath Tagore

## 1. Introduction

The bloodshed of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) in the Holy Roman Empire, and the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648) between Spain and the Dutch Republic, ended with the Peace Treaty of Westphalia 1648 and with it for the first time Europe was divided into Nation States. The Treaty didn't restore peace in Europe but it established the base for National Self - determination. With time Europe witnessed different historical events where Nationalism showed its different colors and created the chronology of International Politics and History.

In France, on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1789 the clattering sound of the iron gates of The Bastille and the 'Declaration of the Right of Man' on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1789, for the first time changed the very identity of the French people from being a subject of King rule to a citizen of France. It was the light of Nationalism that illuminated the minds of hundreds of Third Estate people, directed by the leadership of the French Bourgeois against the Tyranny of Louis the XIV. During the French Revolution for the first time the citizens sought to impose a single culture and language on all regions of the country, to break down all barriers between these regions to become one nation. The Declaration of the Rights of Man states - "the principle of sovereignty resides essentially in the Nation; nobody of men, no individual can exercise authority that doesn't emulate expressively from it". In Germany and Italy, nationalism acted as a bridge that unified the land into a single nation - state. German unification was the merging of the states in the North German Confederation and other German states to form the German Empire. Italian unification was the political and social movement that agglomerated different states of the Italian peninsula into the single state of Italy in the 19th century. Bismark the architect of German unification in his Blood and Iron speech (1882) said - "Not by speeches and votes of the majority, are the great questions of the time decided — that was the error of 1848 and 1849 — but by iron and blood" (1). The 1914 - 1918 First World War and the 1935 - 1947 Second World War led Europe to witness the ferocity of Nationalism. Out of many of the differences that exist between the two World Wars, the similarity lies in the fact that both war was fought out of the aggressive nationalism that drove the countries of Europe to the stand of madness to establish the power and

authority of their Nation in the International Politics. It was this nationalism, which on one hand showed its barbarous face in the cry of hundreds of Jews who were slaughtered by Adolf Hitler in Germany. On the other hand, nationalism judged the foundation of the Austrian Empire of the Hapsburgs, the Russian Empire of the Romanovs, and the Ottoman Empire of the Turks and fragmented it into separated nation - states.

### The idea of Nationalism

Nationalism has marked itself as a decisive factor in drawing the contour of European history. It also created a definite understanding of the idea of Nationalism which in the latter part was shipped to the land of Asia and Africa and marked their Anti - colonial struggle against the colonial power. But before we study the central part of our article, let's just study the vast idea of Nationalism in a more comprehensive state. Nation refers to people living in a defined territory, inspired by a sense of unity, common political aspirations, common interest, common history, and destiny though they may belong to different nationalities. Smith's definition of the nation is a "named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths, and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy, and common legal rights and duties for all members". Nationalism denotes a sentiment as well as an ideology. As a sentiment, it involves an individual attachment to its nation where the national interest takes primacy over all others. As an ideology, it postulates that the structure of a state or its political organization should be founded on nationhood. In other words, each nation should constitute an independent state and each state should represent a nation. It is a mass consciousness that clings to the state for a proper form of expression. Michael Hecter has proposed a theory of nationalism based on the theory of state formation. According to Hecter's theory, "nationalism consists of political activity that aims to make the boundary of a nation – a culturally distinctive collectivity aspiring to self - governance - coterminous with state" (2).

The vastness of the idea of Nationalism brings its various dimensions and types with the progress of world history and to comprehend that is a tough work to ensue. Leaving behind the grandeur of Nationalism we sail our ship to the time of Colonialism and Imperialism in the continent of Asia

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- mainly India/Bharat and explore the defining aspect of Nationalism that marked itself in their Anti - Colonialism and Anti - Imperialism struggle of India. The British Empire ruled India for 200 years leaving its imprint in Indian culture, politics, administration, society and economy even in the post - independence era. India has never been a land united by a homogeneous structure or identity, it was rather divided into kingdoms with their own system of administration. This acted as a pivotal reason for India's defeat in the Revolt of 1857. The fundamental reason for opposition to the colonial rule is the conflict between the demand of the colonial ruler and the needs of the people of India. Reginald Coupland who wrote that the Constitutional Problem in India (1944) stated that 'Indian Nationalism was the child of British Raj'. The anti - colonial struggle treated colonial subjugation as a great stimulus for nationalist awakening. The idea of liberty, equality, democracy, freedom was infused by Western liberal and rational education which created the base for Nationalism (3). As Bipin Chandra has written, 'the national movement was the process through which the Indian people were formed into a nation and a people...it was the existence of a common oppression of a common enemy and the struggle against it which provided important bonds uniting the Indian people (4). The nationalism that was created (didn't evolve) in India had its variant forms propounded by different persons with different objectives. This discussion seeks to discuss two things, first the perspective of Nationalism that was being drawn by Rabindranath Tagore and secondly to analyze the idea of Nationalism through the idea of 'Mimicry' of Homi Bhaba.

#### Tagore idea of Nationalism:

Rabindranath Tagore is one of the greatest gifts that India has given to mankind. A poet, a lyricist, an artist, a philosopher, and a writer in his one lifetime. His idea of Nationalism has brought down critique on his commitment to the Nation, but in the long run, his espoused idea of Nationalism is what the world needs for its survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Tagore called nationalism 'A Great Menace' stating that he was 'not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations'. Nationalism according to Tagore is not "a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being" where human relationships are naturally regulated, "so that men can develop ideals of life in co-operation with one another", but rather a political and commercial union of groups of people in which they congregate to maximize their profit, progress, and power: it is "the organized self-interest of a people, where it is at least human and least spiritual". Tagore deemed nationalism a recurrent threat to humanity, because, with its propensity for the material and the rational, it trampled over the human spirit and human emotion; it upsets man's moral balance, 'obscuring his human side under the shadow of the soulless organization' (5). He stated that the supremacy of Imperialism was an outcome of the Nationalism that swept the whole of Europe and succumbing to that will not help India. The novel 'Home and the World - Ghare Baire' deals with the centrality of Nationalism through Tagore's lens. The plot develops around three characters Nikhiliseh, the idealist landowner/ reformer who espoused the idea of Nationalism that Tagore drew, Sandip leader of a violent Swadeshi movement, coercive and aggressive, a reflects an extension of individualism molded by West and Bimala's wife of

Nikhiliseh, who must choose between the two visions. In one of the parts of the novel Sandip's aggressive nationalists alienate the peasantry, the very masses he professed to be literate. Sandip wishes to boycott and burn all Lancashire Cloth was being opposed by Nikhilesh, who is equally opposed to British rule, but cannot ignore the damaging effect such a boycott, will have on low - income Muslim traders both economically and politically when they are attacked by rioting Nationalist. Tagore analyses how at the bottom nationalism and ethnocentrism coalesce to ultimately subvert even the values that hold a nation together, because it substitutes a colorful idol for the substantive universal values of justice and rights.

Tagore never supported the non - cooperation movement started by Gandhi because he believed that alienating the West would result in India's 'spiritual suicide'. He has immense faith in cooperation as the cure for individuals and for India (6). For Tagore Western ideas, particularly science and technology were vital to India's regeneration. India must take the best of West was his words. Anti - colonialism for Tagore was not a rejection of what best exist in the West. He stated that only the best of the Western technology should be adopted and then combined with and transformed by, higher indigenous values. He was the first to recognize the danger of aggressive nationalism that raises the nation to the status of demi - God. He believes in openness and despised the notion of narrow domestic walls that nation construct around itself, breeding self - interest and contempt for everything that existed beyond that wall. Tagore's idea was to promote a world of humanism which would ultimately transcend all ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic distinctions. His particular brand of Universalism required the radical rejection of liberal individualism and a utilitarian, positivist rationality in favor of collective social life and spiritual truth. He replaces the ideology of the nation with the idea of Swadeshi Samaj. He espoused an Internationalism which was inherent in the culture of diversity and co - existence in which the Indian civilization had evolved through ages. Ashis Nandy states 'Tagore rejected the idea of nationalism but practiced anti - imperialist politics, all his life...at a time when nationalism, patriotism, and anti - imperialism were a single concept for most Indians' (7).

#### The idea of Mimicry and Nationalism:

Before we step into the second part of our analysis let's just take a brief idea of Mimicry as stated by Homi Bhaba. Bhaba, a post - colonial writer had brought a very different dimension to the understanding of resistance in the colonial discourse. Bhaba's term of Mimicry is a part of a larger concept of visualizing the post - colonial situation as a kind of binary opposition between authority and oppression, authorization and de - authorization. This mechanism of the creation of the mimic men was set in motion when the initial necessity for the master was to create a 'reformed' colonial subject who would help in matters of administration. As Macaulay had laid down "... a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern—a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect" Clearly, the basic idea behind the creation of these Anglicized (but not English) subjects was to make them *repeat* rather than *represent* the West and its socio - cultural formations. It was also to transform Indian

knowledge into European information that would facilitate domination and rule (8). Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence (9).

The menace of mimicry lies in its double vision which is disclosed to the ambivalence of colonial discourse and also disrupts the very authority which has created it. If mimicry reinforces colonial power structures, then it also produces a loss of agency on the part of the colonizer. If the colonized is “almost the same, but not quite,” then the dualistic notion of superior/inferior that supports stereotypical discourse begins to break down. Bhabha assumes that this ambivalence is, surprisingly, inherent within colonial discourse itself, since it opens the door for its culture and language to be reinterpreted by the colonized (10). The European master failed to realize that many of these chosen and educated colonial subjects who were meant to play the role of the mimicry men were also men of letters in their own right. They realized that they were being used by the colonizer for the simple reason that they were better than many of their brethren in certain respects. In many cases, they were even superior to some of their English masters, and this is why there was always the implicit possibility of the counter - gaze. The English - educated colonial subject has the advantage of being conversant with the cultural tropes of both the colonizer and the colonized. He thus becomes a representative of a difference that works both ways—that is both for the colonial master and his colonized other. Mimicry is a comical approach to colonial discourse because it acts as a response to the circulation of stereotypes. For example, in Bengal, Raja Rammohan Roy, Raj Narayan Bose, or Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, who wrote and spoke in both their native tongue and English were some of the chief and most powerful instruments of nationalism in India (11).

Tagore a man born and brought up in an elite family of Bengal was much influenced by Western ideals. He was introduced to high art as well as folk culture, to the ideas of the metropolis and periphery and to the people who were Anglicized as well as those who are not. Tagore was espoused to the same Western enlightenment process and molded from it - where we can claim him to a part of the kinfolk of Mimic man. But this position failed to create the aspect of a colonial subject that the Mimic Man should have within him. Tagore resisted the Colonial Master along with the process of Mimicry and showed its effect on the idea of Nationalism that breed in India during our freedom movement. As Tagore put it, “politics in the West have dominated Western ideals, and we in India are trying to imitate you” (12) “to imitate the British and try to save ourselves by adopting a disguise is mere self - deception”; it would not work in the long term because “ it is nothing but mimicry” (13). Tagore Nationalism is not against Asian Nationalism but against Western ‘greed of material prosperity’ which led to the mass destruction of the First World War (14). For Tagore, the colonial master never intended to develop their hunting ground into a civilized land because that was contrary to their national interest since colonialism found its justification in the ideology of

nationalism - “because this civilization is the civilization of power, therefore it is exclusive, it is naturally unwilling to open its sources of power to those whom it has selected for its purpose of exploitation” (15). Tagore rebelled against the strongly held nationalist form that the independence movement took. He wanted to assert India's right to be independent without denying the importance of what India could learn freely and profitably from abroad. He put his position succinctly in a letter reply to Abala Bose (wife of Jagadish Chandra Bose) that - “Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live.” (16)

## 2. Conclusion

The best elucidation of Tagore resistance can be explained by Forster's *A Passage to India*, with a relatively minor character named Mr. Amritrao, a lawyer from Calcutta, whom the British Anglo - Indians dread. They dread him not because he is unfair; indeed, what is threatening about him is precisely the fact that he has learned enough of the principles of British law to realize that those principles should, in all fairness apply to Indians as much as to the British. As a foreign - educated, English - speaking Indian lawyer in colonial India, he might be mocked as a “mimic man” or a “babu, ” but it may be that that mockery covers over a defensive fear that the British legal system is not quite as fair as it should be. Partha Chatterjee argued that Indian nationalism emerged as “a derivative discourse” – a copy of Western nationalism adapted to the Indian context (17). In a letter to Foss Westcott, Tagore wrote - “believe me, nothing would give me greater happiness than to see the people of West and the East march in a common crusade against all that robs the human spirit of its significance” (18). In his powerful indictment of British rule in 1941, in a lecture he gave which was later published under the title ‘Crisis of Civilization’, he strains hard to maintain the distinction between opposing Western imperialism and Western Civilization. Tagore affirms that the salvation of humanity lies in the meeting of East and West in perfect harmony and truth.

*I do not think that it is the spirit of India to reject anything, reject any race, reject any culture. The spirit of India has always proclaimed the ideal of unity.... Now, when in the present time of political unrest the children of the same great India cry for rejection of the West I feel hurt.... We must discover the most profound unity, the spiritual unity between the different races. We must go deeper down to the spirit of man and find out the great bond of unity, which is to be found in all human races.... Man is not to fight with other human races, other human individuals, but his work is to bring about reconciliation and Peace and restore the bonds of friendship and love. - Tagore Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech.*

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