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SAGES: Imagining India

The Home and the World Essay

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Rabindranath Tagore’s Views on Nationalism

During India’s early struggle for independence from the British, Rabindranath Tagore wrote his novel, The Home and the World, to portray the tragic and devastating effects that radical nationalism had on innocent people in the early 20th century. Although Tagore depicted many points of view throughout the novel, his underlying theme for the novel was the destructive and corruptive force that nationalism had on certain individuals. The three main characters all portray different viewpoints; Sandip being the most corrupted, Nikhil being not corrupted at all, and Bimala being in between the two and therefore the most influenced character. Through these three characters Tagore shows how radical nationalism is irrational, violent, and hypocritical. He also shows how this radical nationalism overshadows and devours moral and virtuous nationalism. Tagore represents these opposing sides of nationalism through the eyes of Bimala and her views of Nikhil and Sandip.

When we are first introduced to Nikhil, his integrity and liberalism are definitely pronounced. The first thing you learn about him is that he wants his devoted wife to think for herself and not to be swayed by society’s expectations. Later you learn about Nikhil’s subtle fight for his country; how Nikhil does not believe that violence and prejudice is the way to eradicate the British. He believes that even if all other countries gained impendence through those means, India still should not. He sees the double standards that Sandip continually upholds. Nikhil believes that India should have glory throughout its struggle for independence, not just in the end. Tagore clearly believes that Nikhil’s actions show what true or righteous nationalism is. Nikhil is noble and has integrity in all that he does regardless of whether it benefits the British (according to Sandip) or benefits India.

Sandip, on the other hand, is far different than Nikhil. He is devoured by the Swadeshi Movement and becomes an integral part of it. His ideals lead him to believe that all British are bad and he begins to poison the minds of those who will listen to him. He is manipulative and is quick to take advantage of the generosity of Nikhil, his supposed friend. Tagore depicts Sandip to be a powerful force, both charismatic and quick with words. One of Tagore’s most powerful themes throughout the novel was the concept of fire and he related this metaphor to Sandip. Fire is uncontrollable, destructive, and very powerful. It is attractive and alluring to those who do not understand its capabilities. The flame of the Swadeshi Movement caught Bimala’s eye and dragged her in. Admist both Nikhil and Sandip, Bimala must choose between the two. At first she is easily swayed by Sandip’s words and charming personality, but soon she realizes what she has gotten herself into by listening to him. She is caught in the flame and cannot put out the fire. Nikhil is swept up in the fire innocently and is killed for it. Sandip runs away, learning that it may be easy to spread fire, but it is also very easy to get burned.

The astounding thing about Tagore’s novel is the fact that it was written well before India gained its independence. It foreshadowed the violence and radicalism that caused so much tragedy in the 1940s before and after India gained independence. Tagore’s comparison of Nikhil and Sandip captures the many aspects of nationalism. The underlying difference between the two is that Sandip believes that the ends justify the means, and Nikhil believes that the means are no different than the ends. Unfortunately, nationalism destroyed both of them in the end, but it proved its point to Bimala. We must also recognize the fact that although Sandip and Nikhil were very different, they both did have at least one thing in common; they both loved their country deeply and were very proud to be who they were. In the end it is clear that Tagore believes that there can be nationalism that is free from violence and prejudice, but that it can only exist if the radical nationalism does not. He believes that radical nationalism is too strong a force to be taken down by small means and that ultimately it can lead to nothing good.