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Id, Ego, Superego: An Analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*

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Abstract

This paper is a critical reading of the novella *The Home and the World* by Rabindranath Tagore, wherein I focus on the tripartite model by Freud on id, ego, and superego. These concepts are used to explore the internal psychological dynamics that contribute to moral decision making - the contrasts between self-interest and concern for others, selfishness and moral values, and moral conscience and social conformity. I apply these psychological concepts to demonstrate their usefulness in understanding the three central characters of the novel- Sandip, Bimla and Nikhil.

Keywords: id, ego, superego, Freud, moral character, Tagore, etc.

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's novella *The Home and the World* (1915) is a part of the trilogy formed by *The Wreck* (1906) and *Gora* (1909). It focuses upon the triad formed by Bimala, Nikhil and Sandip. These characters are emblematic in the sense that through them Tagore allegorizes the Nationalist fervor that took hold of Bengal in the first decades of the twentieth century. But besides that, they also could be seen as representing the three parts of the psychic apparatus defined in Sigmund Freud's structural model of the psyche namely id, ego and superego. Bimala stands for ego, Nikhil characterized as the generous and broad-minded landowner for superego, while cruel and self-centered revolutionary Sandip for id.

The novella is written as a series of interwoven soliloquies by these characters who sometimes narrate through flashbacks and sometimes report on the ongoing flow of events. The novel is divided into several temporal planes which spiral down to the last violent denouement. While the monologues are framed as introspective musings, providing points of stillness and depth within the narrative with dramatic and surprising turns of events, it is more than is usual for Rabindranath's novels.

Sandip-Symbol of Id

The id is the unorganized part of the personality structure that contains human's basic, instinctual drives. The id contains the libido, which is the primary source of instinctual force that is unresponsive to the demands of reality (Carlson, 453). The id acts according to the "pleasure principle", seeking to avoid pain or displeasure aroused by increases in instinctual tension (Roycroft). Likewise, we find, Sandip is all unscrupulous, evil, selfish, manipulative, irrational, oppressive, and tyrannical. He has a personality which is framed with fire and therefore making him greedy, violent and destructive. He is more governed by Machiavellian philosophy: "There is not the time for nice scruples. We must be unswervingly, unreasoningly brutal. We must sin" (39). He admonishes Nikhil, and adds matter-of-factly, "Every man has a natural right to possess, and therefore greed is natural.... What my mind covets, my surrounding must supply" (49). Elsewhere he argues, "We are the flesh-eaters of the world; we have teeth and nails; we pursue and grab and tear. We are not satisfied with chewing in the evening the cud of grass we have eaten in the morning.... In that case, we shall steal or rob, for we must live"(52).

Indeed, Sandip is so recklessly selfish and unscrupulous that he does not even for a moment hesitate to woo his friend's wife while living under his roof or to incite her to rob her own husband. He provokes the youths of Nikhil's village to calculated violence against their poor, innocent neighbours just to terrorize them into accepting his viewpoint. By this he arouses Nikhil's subjects into a bloody religious riot, of which Nikhil himself becomes a deadly victim at the end, thus paying with his life for the benevolence done to a friend who seems every bit a scoundrel.

The id "knows no judgments of value: no good and evil, no morality... Instinctual cathexis seeking discharge — that, in our view, is all there is in the id." (Freud,107) It is regarded as "the great reservoir of libido", (Freud, 369) the instinctive drive to create — the life instincts that are crucial to pleasurable survival. Similarly, In *The Home and the World*, Sandip believes in the primal drives. He is very much conscious of his nature when he says, "Yes, I am gross because I am true. I am flesh. I am passion. I am hunger, unashamed and cruel"(64). He is a man who thinks only of himself. He reduces man-woman relationships to brazen sexuality. In his opinion "the attraction of man and woman for each other is fundamental" (63). This single-mindedness is brutally exposed when Sandip equates his intention of seducing Bimala away from her husband with his intention of stripping away all traces of the old moral and political order. The complete irrelevance of moral standards characterizes his relationship with everyone in the novel.

As the id does not argue or deliberate, possesses no value or rules, and respects neither common sense nor logic, similarly, Sandip finds justification for his actions in

history. Life, he says, is "indefinite—a bundle of contradictions," and humankind's aim is to "strive to give it a particular shape" (100). According to him, in his world, there is no place for religious idealism, and there are no higher purposes than that humankind creates. Sandip perversely chooses to ignore the flaws in his personality; the external pressure of mass action thereby sweeps aside any sense of moral consciousness.; he is interested in preaching the discipline of Injustice. "I say to everyone: Deliverance is based upon injustice. Injustice is the fire which must keep on burning something in order to save itself from becoming ashes"(99). Sandip represents himself as a realist, one who brutally confronts the world. "The world into which we are born in the world of reality. When a man goes away from the market of real things with empty hands and empty stomach, merely filling his bag with big sounding words, I wonder why he ever came into this hard world at all"(50).

Id comprises both the pleasure-seeking urges with which we are born and the wishes, obsessions, and other effects derived from or associated with them. For Sandip, the end justifies the means, and he argues that virtually any human action can be excused if the stakes are sufficiently high. This is the only fundamental principle of existence. "Nature surrenders herself," he indicates, but only to the robber. For she delights in this forceful desire" (50). He stops at nothing to achieve his ends, as he stresses that "whenever an individual or nation becomes incapable of perpetrating injustice it is swept into the dust-bin of the world" (99). What is also frightening about Sandip is his extremism, his belief that everything of the old order must be destroyed for a new order to take its place, and his assumption that the power which he represents is unstoppable. This is reaffirmed by the speed with which events in the novel tumble one on top of the other: the boycotting of schools, the burning of foreign cloth, the destruction of granaries, and the forced participation of Muslims in the Hindu-dominated swadeshi movement.

Id is pure craving, so is Sandip. He leads Bimala to destruction when he urges her to steal for a cause which is not for the nation, but as his own personal cause. To go on with his fight, he needs the money and leads Bimala to steal from her husband: "Get it you shall and must. You know best how. You must get it for Her to whom it rightfully belongs. Bande Mataram!... confound the hearts of those who are disloyal to his call"(151). Although he worships Bimala, he does not want to give her the possibility of choice. He treats her like a goddess whose ultimate aim is to guide him in his enterprise. There is innate selfishness at the core of his decisions since he wants her agency to serve his own purposes and benefits.

Nikhil-Symbol of Superego

While the id motivates us to seek sensual pleasure, the superego motivates us to behave socially. Freud's theory implies that the super-ego is a symbolic internalization of the father figure and cultural regulations. The super-ego works like the conscience, maintaining our sense of morality and proscription from taboos. It is an absolutist. It accepts no transgression, however small, no slip-up, however temporary, no compromise, however well-intentioned. Moreover, to the superego thinking of crossing the line is just as bad as actually doing it (Meyers). It is emblematic of all good and so is the character of Nikhil. Nikhil is widely regarded as an ideal type. He remains calm, gentle, understanding, forgiving, liberal, rational and altruistic throughout the novel. The dominant element in Nikhil is light and therefore he is wise, intelligent, progressive and pure.

Just as the super-ego, which controls our sense of right and wrong and guilt by helping us to fit into society by getting us to act in a socially in an acceptable way (Snowden, 105-07). Nikhil tries to locate his self in relationship to the other's view of it. He does not look to a mirror to find himself but seeks out the other's gaze. He looks for the exchanges of inter-subjectivity as the basis of his self: a subjectivity that retains a sense of interiority and individual distinctiveness, but experiences it through its relationship with other people.

The super-ego works in contradiction to the id. The super-ego strives to act in a socially appropriate manner, whereas the id just wants instant self-gratification. As the super-ego's demands often oppose the id's, so are the characters of Nikhil and Sandip. Nikhil is the antithesis of Sandip. Nikhil's honesty, altruism, and idealism are matched by his friend's cunning, cupidity and flagrant narcissism. Nikhil appears divine, while Sandip is diabolic. If the nation for Sandip is just a bounded territory that he can fill up with the largeness of his desires, Nikhil's imagination of the nation is based on the everyday nature of its people and their interrelationships. Correspondingly, while Sandip seeks to transport Bimala with him into a transcendental condition that makes the question of choice and equality irrelevant, for Nikhil these preoccupations are crucial to his relationship with her. In the words of Sandip, "Nikhil's discourse always ends in a moral. The strange part of it is that with all his familiarity with moral percept, he still believes in them"(158).

People driven predominantly by their superego are faced with three problems. Firstly, their superego always demands more than they can they deliver. Nikhil thinks that he is not able to keep his wife happy and satisfied. He constantly blames himself for this strained relationship. He admits the flaw in his character and says, "I must acknowledge that I have merely been an accident in Bimal's life"(79). Secondly, it

forces them to evaluate the result of their actions in too critical away. Nikhil introspects and finds faults with his own conduct. "I often try to...see myself as Bimal sees me. What a dismally solemn picture it makes, my habit of taking things too seriously!"(77). When Bimal tried to worship Nikhil in order to show respect towards him, he stops her by saying, "Of that false me. It only shows that I am too petty for you, that you want some extraordinary man who can overpower you with his superiority, and so your needs must take refuge in making for yourself another 'me'" (95). Last but not least, it produces a strong sense of guilt every time they do not live up to its inflated demands. Such people constantly feel that they are bad. They become disgusted with themselves and often fall into a depression. Nikhil constantly compares himself with Sandip. He imagines Sandip to be the right kind of a person, better suited for his wife Bimala than him. That is the reason why he finds his "life has only its dumb depths, but no murmuring rush" (108).

Because of its absolutist nature, the superego is never satisfied; everything and anything that it does not consider perfect is considered bad. The superego's world view is rigidly dualistic: something is either good or bad, with nothing in between. Since in reality things are always a mixture of good and bad, or good from one perspective and bad from another, people driven predominantly by their superego cannot but believe the whole world, and not just their own thoughts and deeds to be entirely bad. By relinquishing his authority as a male, Nikhil experiences what a woman feels, gaining a capability to free himself from the fixity of social identity. But there is also another element to his suffering. Nikhil seeks to understand his suffering by looking at himself through Bimala's eyes. He sees himself as a boring pedant.; While questions of choice and mutuality provide the groundwork for the emergence of Nikhil's new self, what actually begins the process is the nature of Nikhil's suffering. Nikhil epitomizes the unselfish, progressive husband who wishes to free his wife from the oppressiveness of a traditional Indian marriage. He does not wish to coerce anyone, for he respects at all costs the value of the individual. Instead of subjecting his wife to his desires, he frees her when he realizes that she does not love him and that there is a greater good to be pursued rather than one's own desires: that of humanity.

Bimala-Symbol of Ego

The ego is the decision-making component of the psychic apparatus that seeks to express and gratify the desires of the id in accordance with the constraints imposed by the outside world. The ego acquires its structure and functions from the id, having evolved from it, and proceeds to borrow some of id's energy for its own use in response to the demands of social reality (Hjelle). Bimala who initially in the novella is represented as an innocent wife, completely subservient to her husband, is later referred to as Durga, the female goddess of creation and destruction, and as Shakli, the

ultimate female principle underpinning reality by Sandip. Thus we see her more of an extension of Sandip's imagination. Sandip's zealous nature fuels Bimala's new ideals bringing out the fiery and shameless side of her personality. We find Bimala so much influenced by Sandip that on Sandip's insistence she even goes to the extent of stealing money from her own house. She gives shape to Sandip's dark desires. She emotionally trips, vacillates between Sandip and her husband(Nikhil), She flaunts her sexuality and independence over domestic discipline, until she returns home bruised and humiliated but with a more mature understanding of both the home/self and the world... "Both Sandip and Bimal see love as something that requires a reification of the object of love, an investment of hyperbole, of metaphoric, symbolic and aesthetic excess that mystifies the real, the ordinary, every day"(Sarkar, 39).

The ego represents the organized part of the personality structure performing defensive, perceptual, intellectual-cognitive, and executive functions. Bimala too is portrayed as a very practical person. Her political views are not idealistic like her husband's. That is the reason why she does not support Nikhil's idleness, and unwillingness to participate in more "patriotic" endeavors. "She is the kind of woman who has no patience with patience. She gets drawn towards men who are turbulent, angry and unjust. Her respect must have an element of fear."(42) At one point she even refuses her husband's critique of the Swadeshi, falls in love with its leader and becomes identified with its ideals. Convinced of her own power and glory, she bedecks herself to persuade her husband to join Swadeshi, but when he refuses to do so, she answers Sandip's call. Bimala becomes obsessed with the images of herself as an embodiment of 'sakti', picturing herself "as the Shakti of Womanhood, incarnate, crowning Sandip Babu simply with my presence"(36).

The ego makes out what is real. It helps us to organize our thoughts and make sense of them and the world around us (Snowden, 105-07). "It serves three severe masters ... the external world, the super-ego, and the id." (Freud, 110) Id's job is to find a balance between primitive drives and reality while satisfying the id and super-ego. What concerns most to id is the individual's safety. It allows some of the id's desires to be expressed only on the condition that the consequences of those actions are marginal. "Thus the ego, driven by the id, confined by the super-ego, repulsed by reality, struggles ... [in] bringing about harmony among the forces and influences working in and upon it," and readily "breaks out in anxiety — realistic anxiety regarding the external world, moral anxiety regarding the super-ego, and neurotic anxiety regarding the strength of the passions in the id" (Freud, 110).

We find Bimala being torn apart between Sandip and her husband. On one side is the physical attraction towards Sandip, overpowering her, setting aside all her morality, the so-called fidelity towards her husband and on the other side is an idealist

husband whom she had loved like a devoted wife. "I want! These words of Sandip echo in my heart-beats like a war-drum. They shame into silence all my conflicts with myself. What do I care what people may think of me? ...the primal fire of creation burns in me" (97). Feeling deserted by her husband and enthralled by Sandip, Bimala pictures herself balancing between two worlds: "She has been drawn forth from her home corner by the sudden call of some Unknown"(36). Bimala moves between bodies that are dressed by the desires of her men: the bare neck and the piled-up hair that Nikhil adores (127) and the partly bared bosom, the deep red colours and the sinuous skills that enthrall Sandip (33).

Id has to do its best to suit all three, thus is constantly feeling hemmed by the danger of causing discontent on two other sides. It is said, however, that the ego seems to be more loyal to the id, preferring to smooth over the finer details of reality so as to minimize conflicts while at the same time pretending to have a regard for reality. But the super-ego is constantly watching every one of the ego's moves and punishes it with feelings of guilt, anxiety, and inferiority. Bimala too is racked with guilt and self-loathing not when she falls in love with Sandip, but when she discovers his moral shallowness and political dishonesty. She wants to return to Nikhil, although it is not an instant or effortless conversion. She struggles to free herself from Sandip's influence, mourning "as the pathway to the supreme good was closed when the mistress took the place of the mother and locked it again. The very next day I saw Sandip and madness, naked and rampant, danced upon my heart" (189).

To overcome this the ego employs defense mechanisms namely denial, displacement, intellectualization, fantasy, compensation, projection, rationalization, reaction formation, regression, repression, and sublimation. The defense mechanisms are not done so directly or consciously. They lessen the tension by covering up our impulses that are threatening. (Meyers) Ego defense mechanisms are often used by the ego when id behaviour conflicts with reality and either society's morals, norms, and taboos or the individual's expectations as a result of the internalization of these very morals, norms, and their taboos. Bimala is aware of her emotions towards Sandip but at the same time is guilty. She finds it morally incorrect for a married woman to fall for another man. "This cataclysmal desire drew me by day and by night. It seemed desperately alluring, -this making havoc of myself. What a shame it seemed, how terrible, and yet how sweet!" (83). In order to put this relationship to an end Bimala decides to avoid the company of Sandip and confines herself to the zenana. But Bimala describes the pull of sexual passion even when it has detached itself from love, when Sandip has begun to repel her as a human being, his physicality still proves irresistible. Finding Sandip low as a person, she begins to veer away from him. She discovers maternal love for Amulya which teaches her the value of nurture, of caring and building, of saving and healing, of valuing goodness and innocence.

After analyzing the characters, we realize that barring Bimala who represents the ego, both Sandip and Nikhil exhibit two extreme ends of the character. These extremities are nothing but two sides of the same coin. They both inhabit a similar condition which cannot take its norms for granted. As in the words of Chandranath Babu, "I now see that though you do not rhyme, your rhythm is the same" (139). We cannot assign one good over the other. Freud too opines that both id and superego are conducive to our mental and physical health. As social obedience contributes to our living together in an agreeable way, so is our sensual pleasure. That way our superego is not better than our id, nor our id better than our superego. Problems only arise when there is an imbalance between the two i.e. when one suppresses the other. Not only can psychological goodness be bad, but also moral goodness can be psychologically bad. A little bit of evil that way can restore the balance between id and superego, reducing the tension, which otherwise might lead to a much stronger explosion of id forces. This is what we see in the novella. An imbalance between the id-superego in the characters brings about the tragedy because of which each of them had to suffer.

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