

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 13

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Hello and welcome back to this lecture series on postcolonial literature. Now in all our previous discussions about decolonisation we had assumed that the quest for decolonisation ends in a nation-state. Which is to say that decolonisation not only involves the creation of a national community but also of a sovereign political entity or a state. In today's lecture I want to talk about two individuals who, in spite of being engaged with the politics of anti-colonialism, were among the staunchest critics of the idea of nation-state. And we have to remember here that by the twentieth century the idea of the nation-state as the goal of freedom was accepted almost universally throughout the colonised world. But these two voices that I am going to discuss today, Rabindranath Tagore and Frantz Fanon, spoke against this general consensus. And now that most of the erstwhile colonies have emerged as nation-states, I think we should pay all the more attention to the criticism of these two intellectual giants.

Tagore

So let's start with Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore was born in Calcutta in 1861 in an illustrious Bengali family which was not only known for its wealth but also for its involvement with the socio-religious reform movement of Brahmoism. Tagore's own involvement with various issues pertaining to social reform began quite early in his life and by his twenties Tagore was already the author of various essays commenting on the burning socio-political issues of the day. Indeed, in the first decade of the twentieth century Tagore emerged as one of the tallest leaders of the Swadeshi movement, which in turn was the first major middle-class led mass based anticolonial movement in India. Today of course Tagore is best remembered as a literary

figure and as the author of the national anthems of two nation-states, India and Bangladesh, which emerged out of the once colonised part of the globe.

Given this strong association between Tagore and the nation-state, it might come as a surprise to know that he proclaimed, and here I quote his exact words,

“Nationalism is a great menace. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India’s troubles.”

This quotation is from his essay “Nationalism in India”, and this along with two other pieces titled “Nationalism in Japan” and “Nationalism in the West” forms a kind of a triptych which were printed together in the form of a book titled *Nationalism* in 1917. In our discussion today, we will be focussing on these writings on nationalism to try and understand some of the major features of Tagore’s radical anti-nationalist stance.

It is important to remember here that unlike Gandhi’s views on anticolonial nationalism which once he had stated them in *Hind Swaraj* in 1909 remained almost entirely unchanged throughout his life, Tagore’s engagement with the ideology of nationalism passed through various phases. The period between 1905 and 1907 can be used as a watershed moment here because these were the years during which Tagore was most actively involved in the Swadeshi movement. The years leading up to the Swadeshi movement can be regarded as Tagore’s pro-nationalism phase, but post 1907 we encounter in Tagore’s writings a person who has become thoroughly disillusioned with the Indian nationalist movement in particular and with the ideas of nationalism and nation-state in general. The 1917 essays on nationalism are generally considered as among the most elaborate commentaries by this later Tagore on the idea of nation and its inherent problems. But before we start exploring these problems that Tagore mentions, let us pay attention to how he defines nation in the first place.

What is nation?

In the essay “Nationalism in India”, Tagore categorically mentions that his opposition is not to any one nation in particular but to the general idea of all nations which he defines as “the aspect of a whole people as an organised power”. This means that for Tagore, nation does not simply refer to a sense of community and fellow feeling but it also refers to the organised power structure of a state that a national community seeks to acquire for itself. So for Tagore, nation always means nation state. This definition of nation as nation state becomes clearer if we look at the essay “Nationalism in the West” where Tagore states

“A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose”.

So according to Tagore, nation is not just any union of people but rather it is specifically a “political and economic union”, which in other words means a state. But why does Tagore refer to this union as one that is organised for a “mechanical purpose”? Well a machine is something that is created to achieve some very specific purpose. Therefore, in a mechanical process, everything else is subservient to that one specific purpose for which a machine is fine tuned. For Tagore, a nation-state works just like a machine that has been fine tuned for a specific purpose—which is that of creating maximum economic profit. Now in this definition the political unit of nation-state is seen as inherently connected with the capitalist mode of economy and its profit making imperatives. And in making this connection Tagore is not entirely wrong because in the modern West, rise of nation-states is inextricably connected with the development of capitalism. Therefore, Tagore not only connects nation-state with the capitalist mode of economy but also with the West and regards the idea of nation to be a Western importation which is incompatible with the Indian tradition.

According to Tagore, this alien idea of nation-state, by organising the human community for the purpose of material production and profit making, transforms individuals into one dimensional men whose only reason for existence is perceived as the creation of surplus wealth.

In Tagore's own words

“ . . . the national machinery of commerce and politics turns out neatly compressed bales of humanity which have their use and high market value”. - *Nationalism* (1917)

This creates a number of problems. Firstly, nation as a machine disregards the aspects of a human being which are superfluous to the idea of profit making, like for instance human tendency for altruism and self-sacrifice, which actually forms his higher nature. Secondly, man's position within the national machinery reverses the natural relation between man and machine and actually curtails his freedom rather than enhancing it.

Tagore explains this by referring to man's relationship to an automobile. Automobile can give man the freedom of mobility because the man is free to direct it and guide its movement. As a machine automobile does not automatically ensure freedom if the human mind guiding it is not free. Nation by making man useful and relevant only as the producer and consumer of surplus value actually makes him unfree because in such a scenario it is the national machinery which is guiding the existence of human beings and not the other way round. Thirdly nation as a machine fine-tuned for profit making disturbs the sense of balance which should be at the core of human existence. As Tagore explains:

“In all our physical appetites we recognize a limit. [...] But in the economic world our appetites follow no other restrictions but those of supply and demand which can be artificially fostered, affording individuals opportunities for indulgence in an endless feast of grossness.” - *Nationalism* (1917)

The national machinery, by prioritising this economic appetite takes away all sense of moral limit and consequently robs an individual of his higher nature and makes him an incomplete man.

Nation and competition

Apart from this mechanical nature, Tagore also directs his criticism at the essence of aggressive competition that underlines the idea of nation states. According to Tagore, the organisation of humanity in the form of nation-states geared at making more and more material profit

“[...] goads all its neighbouring societies with greed of material prosperity, and consequent mutual jealousy, and by the fear of each other's growth into powerfulness. The time comes when it can stop no longer, for the competition grows keener, organization grows vaster, and selfishness attains supremacy.” - *Nationalism* (1917)

If you remember our discussion on the scramble for Africa that broke out between the European nation-states in the 1880s, you will see that it is this spirit of aggressive economic competition between nations which was largely responsible for the evils of nineteenth and early twentieth century colonialism. According to Tagore, in a world where greater geographical connectivity is daily bringing people into closer proximity, if nation-state with its aggressive competitiveness remains the primary mode of organising humanity then the world can only end in an arms race leading to a conflagration of suicide.

So to recapitulate, Tagore's criticism of nationalism and nation-state is twofold. His first argument is that nation-state by mechanically organising people for the sole purpose of profit making destroys the human depth of an individual and kills his higher nature which is characterised not by a desire to make profit but by altruism and self-sacrifice. Tagore's second argument is that the spirit of competition and selfishness that informs the idea of nation makes it an unsuitable model for a modern world where the distance between individuals and

communities is ever reducing and where there is an ever greater need for humanity to come together as a universal brotherhood.

Now if you carefully read Tagore's essays of nationalism you will see that at the core of his criticism is the capitalist mode of production because both the concept of profit making and the notion of aggressive competitiveness is associated with it. But this attack on capitalism per se is never clearly spelt out in Tagore.

Frantz Fanon

In the writings of Frantz Fanon, however, the economic criticism of middle class led nationalism is more clearly visible. Fanon was born in the French colony of Martinique in the Caribbean, but moved to France at the age of eighteen to fight in the second world war. After the war he trained as a psychiatrist and later joined the psychiatric ward of a hospital in Algeria. It was here that he became involved in the Algerian anti-colonial struggle against the French colonial rule and emerged as a major anticolonial theorist of the twentieth century. Though Fanon died in 1961 at the young age of 36, within this short life span he had published two very influential books, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, which have now become canonical texts within the field of postcolonial studies. In our discussion of Fanon today we will be focussing on his book *The Wretched of the Earth* which was first published in French in 1961, and more specifically we will be looking at the section titled "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" and its criticism of the role of the middle class nationalism in the process of decolonisation.

In this text, Fanon argues that though the middle class nationalist leaders play a significant role in the anti-colonial struggle, the moment the nation becomes independent they cease to exercise their role as a revolutionary class. As I have discussed earlier, the process of European colonialism of Africa was guided by the requirements of the industrial revolution. Which

means that the African colonies were used as sites to procure the raw materials for the industries of the metropolitan centres. Within this scheme of things, the colonial periphery is therefore always remains industrially deficient compared to the metropolis.

Fanon states that ideally the middle class which leads a country to independence should reorganise the means of production of that country so as to end its dependence on the metropolis. But Fanon argues that post-independence, the middle class does not take any such revolutionary steps to reform the means of production and initiate a process of egalitarian distribution of the country's resources. Rather, the middle class, having fought off the European colonisers now come to occupy the very positions of those departed colonisers. Consequently, the colonial mode of economic exploitation remains intact under them. Indeed, because the middle class fails to industrialise the newly independent country, it continues to remain the supplier of unprocessed raw materials to the industries of the mother country even after independence. Fanon describes this economic dependence and continuing exploitation of the colonial periphery by the metropolis even after political independence as a new form of colonialism which he describes as neo-colonialism. In this economic relationship between the metropolis and the periphery, the middle class of the independent country emerges as the intermediary or the middle man through whom the economic exploitation is channelized and who gets a share of the loot. Thus, though anticolonial struggle is organised and led by the middle class in places like India and Africa in the name of nationalism, there is seen very little attempt to really forge a national community by elevating the masses through revolutionising the mode of economic production and through egalitarian distribution of resources.

Fanon also argues that this failure of the middle class to form a truly national economy and a truly national community leads to a perversion of the nationalist discourse which soon becomes a discourse of racist chauvinism through which one African community tries to distinguish itself from another. Thus the bulwark of African unity which won the anticolonial struggle soon

disappears and gives way to a thoroughly fragmented landscape which might have become formally independent but which still remains a site of neo-colonial exploitation.

So whereas Tagore argues in 1917 that nation should not be the model of socio-political organisation that we should adopt when we have formally done away with colonialism, Fanon writing in 1961 argues that nation under the middle class remains an unworkable model in the ex-colonies. Thus, clearly, in spite of the current prevalence of nation-states in the once colonised parts of the world, there is a real need to think through the problems of the postcolonial human community in a new way. In our next lecture we will take up the writings of Homi Bhabha to see how this leading postcolonial theorist helps us reconceptualise the world order beyond the confines of the nation-state. Thank you.