

Postcolonial Literature
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Lecture No. #13
Critics of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and Frantz Fanon

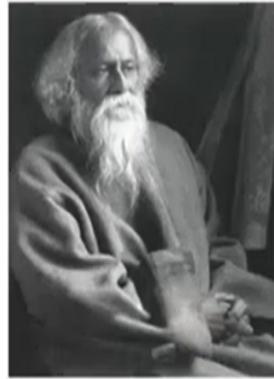
Hello and welcome back, to this Lecture series, on Postcolonial Literature. Now, in all our previous discussions about Decolonisation, we had assumed that the quest for Decolonisation, ends in a Nation State. That is to say that, Decolonisation not only involves the creation of a National community, but it also involves the creation of a sovereign political entity or a state.

So, in today's Lecture, I want to talk about two individuals, who in spite of their 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 20th century, the idea of Nation State as a goal of freedom, was accepted almost universally, through the Colonised world. But, these two people, that I am going to discuss today, one is Rabindranath Tagore, and the other is Frantz Fanon.

They, spoke against this general consensus, which as I told you, was almost universally accepted by the 20th century. 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, that these two intellectual giants, directed against the formation of Nation States, or in fact, the very idea of Nation. So, let us start with, Rabindranath Tagore.

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Rabindranath Tagore
(1861 – 1941)



Now, Tagore was born in Calcutta, in 1861, in a lustrous Bengali family, which was not only known for its wealth, but also known for its involvement, with the socio-religious reform movement, called Brahmoism. Tagore's own involvement, with various issues pertaining to social reform, began quite early in his life. And, by his 20's, Tagore was already the Author of several essays, commenting on the burning social and political issues of the day.

Indeed, in the first decade of the 20th century, Tagore emerged as one of the tallest leaders of the Swadeshi movement. And, Swadeshi movement, as most of you will know, was the first middle class led, mass-based, Anti-colonial movement in India. And, Tagore emerged as one of its tallest leaders, during the early days. Today of course, Tagore is best remembered as a literary figure, and more specifically, as the Author of the National anthems of two Nation States.

One is, of course India. And, the other is Bangladesh. And, these two countries, India and Bangladesh, emerged as Nation States, from the once Colonised part of the globe. But, given this strong association, that we form in our mind, between Tagore and Nation State, it might come as a surprise, that Tagore proclaimed, and here I am quoting his exact words.

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

- “Nationalism in India”

“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 titled, Nationalism in India. Which, along with two other pieces titled, Nationalism in the West, and Nationalism in Japan, forms a kind of a Triptych, which were, sort of these three essays, were printed together in 1971, in the form of a book, which was titled, Nationalism, Initially, they were delivered as Lectures, all of these three essays.

In our discussion today, we will be focusing on these essays on Nationalism, to try and understand, some of the major features of Tagore’s radical Antinationalist starts. Now, it is important to remember here, that unlike Gandhi’s views on Anti-colonial Nationalism, which once he had stated them, in his 1909 publication, Hind Swaraj, remained almost entirely unchanged, throughout his life. Tagore’s engagement with the ideology of Nationalism, passed through various phases.

And, 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 Anti-colonial Nationalist movement, or the Swadeshi movement. Now, the years leading up to the Swadeshi movement, the years leading up to 1905, can be regarded as Tagore’s Pro-Nationalism period.

But, post 1907, post, that is to say, Tagore’s withdrawal from the Swadeshi movement. The Swadeshi movement continued, well beyond 1907. But, Tagore stop being part of the movement, from around 1907. And, after this period, 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, this post 1907 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. So, the question here is, what is Nation, according to Tagore.

In the essay, Nationalism in India, Tagore categorically mentions, that his opposition is not to any one particular Nation or the other, but rather, his opposition is 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 mean, or does not simply refer, to a sense of community, and to a sense of fellow feeling. But, it also refers to the organised power structure of a state, that a National community seeks to acquire for itself.

So, when a National community acquires for itself, the trappings of political power, it is that sort of bringing together of Nation and state, that we know as Nation State, right. So, for Tagore, Nation always means, Nation State. So, if you are reading Tagore’s essays, Tagore does not use the word, Nation State, but he uses the word, Nation.

But, in order to understand his criticism, you will need to understand, that for Tagore, Nation is always, or almost always, Nation State. Now, this definition of Nation, as Nation State, becomes clearer, if we look at his other essay, Nationalism in the West, where Tagore states, and again I quote, “A Nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes, when organised for a mechanical purpose.”

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So, according to Tagore, as this quotation makes clear, Nation is not just any union of people,

“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.”

- “Nationalism in the West”

but rather, it is specifically a political and economic union. In other words, it is a state. But, the question here is, why does Tagore refer to this union, which we can use a shorthand version Nation State, to refer to. Why does he refer to Nation State, as something which is organised, for a mechanical purpose.

And, this is crucial, if we want to understand Tagore’s criticism of Nation and Nationalism, because Tagore frequently uses the trope of machine. And, he uses the adjective, mechanical, quite frequently, to attack the idea of Nation. So, let us try and understand. Well, first of all, what is a machine? A machine is something that is created, to achieve some very specific purpose, right.

So, therefore in a mechanical process, everything else is subservient to that one specific purpose, for which a machine is fine-tuned, okay. So, but for Tagore, a Nation State, works just like a machine, which has been fine-tuned for a specific purpose. And, what is this specific purpose? Well, according to Tagore, it is the purpose of creating maximum economic profit.

Now, as you can see, 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, the 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, in turn, he argues that, because the idea of Nation State is Western, it is a Western importation, it is incompatible with our Indian tradition. Now, 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.

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“ . . . the national machinery of commerce and politics turns out neatly compressed bales of humanity which have their use and high market value.”

- “Nationalism in the West”

In Tagore’s words, “the National machinery of commerce and politics, turns out neatly compressed bales of humanity, which have their use and high market value.” Now, this creates a number of problems. Firstly, Nation as a machine, disregards the aspects of human being, which are superfluous to the idea of profit making. So, for instance, the natural human tendency for altruism, or self-sacrifice, is disregarded, according to Tagore, by the machinery of the Nation State.

Because, self-sacrifice is not plugged, into the process of profit-making. In spite of the fact, that altruism and self-sacrifice, forms the higher nature of a human being. So, as I told you, the first problem with Nation as machine, is it disregards a very significant aspect of, what it means to be a human. In fact, according to Tagore, it disregards completely the higher nature of a man.

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 point, with reference to man's relationship to an automobile, for instance. Now, automobile can give man, the freedom of mobility. Because, the man is free to direct it, and guide its movement.

But, as a machine, automobile does not automatically ensure this freedom. For instance, it will not ensure this freedom, if the human mind guiding it, guiding the automobile, is not free. Now, Nation, by making man, useful and relevant, only as a producer and consumer of surplus value, actually makes man un-free. Because, in such a scenario, it is the National machinery, which is guiding the existence of human beings, and not the other way around.

So, it is National machinery, which is organised towards profit-making, which is geared towards profit-making, which transforms human nature, and which dictates human life, rather than it being the other way around. So, it is like automobile, directing your movement, rather than you directing the movement of your car. As I said, this is the second point. Let us come to the third point.

Third point is that, Nation as a machine, fine-tuned for profit-making, disturbs the sense of balance, which should be at the core of human existence. And this, I would like to quote from Tagore, to explain this point. Because, Tagore does it, really beautifully. And, here is what, Tagore says.

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“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 in India”

“In all our physical appetites, we recognise 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.” So, the national machinery, by prioritising this economic appetite, takes away all sense of moral limits, and consequently robs an individual of his higher nature, and makes him an incomplete man.

Now, apart from this mechanical nature, Tagore also directs his criticism, at the essence of aggressive competition, which underlines the idea of Nation and Nation States. And, this is the second major point, of this criticism. The first major point was, Nation as a machine, right. We have discussed, its various problems.

The second major point of Tagore’s criticism is that, Nation is or is imbued, with the inherent spirit of aggressive competition. So, according to Tagore, the organisation of humanity in the forms of Nation States, which is geared at making more and more material profit. And, I quote him.

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“Goads all its neighbouring societies, with greed of material prosperity, and consequent

“... 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 in the West”

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, organisation grows vaster, and selfishness attains supremacy.”

Now, if you remember, our discussion on the scramble for Africa, that broke out between the European Nation State in the 1880's, you will see that, it is the spirit of aggressive economic competition between Nations, which was largely responsible for the evils of 19th and early 20th century Colonialism.

And, 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 sort of conflagration of suicide. That is how, Tagore describes it.

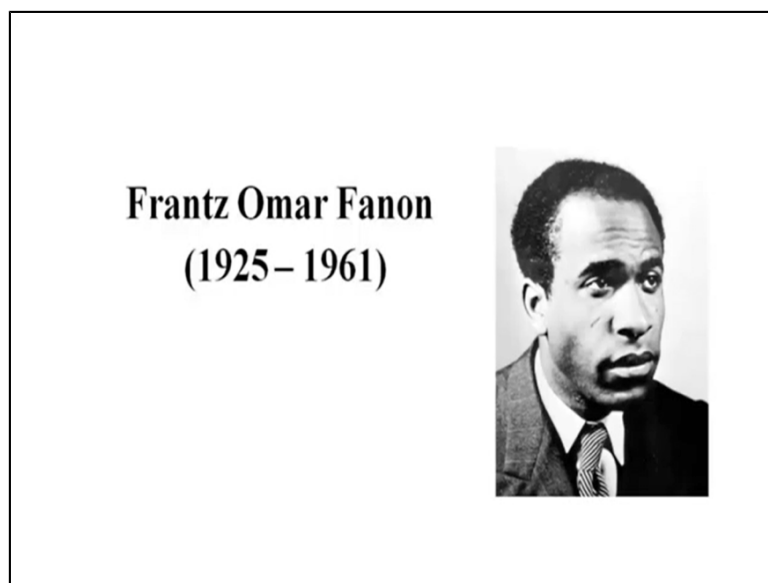
So, to recapitulate, Tagore's criticism of Nationalism and Nation State, is two-fold. His first argument is that, Nation State by mechanically organising people, for the sole purpose of profit-making, destroys the human depth of an individual, and kills his higher nature, which is characterised, not 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 we carefully read Tagore's essays on Nationalism, we will see that, at the core of his criticism, is a capitalist mode of economy.

Because, both the concept of profit-making, and the concept of aggressive competitiveness, are ultimately associated with that mode of economic production, isn't it. But, the problem is that, this attack on capitalism per say, is never clearly spelt out, by Tagore. It remains, all pervasive, but it remains very subtle. In the writings of Frantz Fanon however, the economic criticism of middle class led Nationalism, is more clearly visible.

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Now, Fanon was born in the French Colony of Martinique, which is in the Caribbean. But, he moved to France, at the age of 18, to fight in the second world war. And, after the war was over, he studied psychiatry. And, then later joined, the psychiatric ward of a hospital, as a doctor in Algeria.

And, it was in Algeria, that Fanon became involved with the Algerian Anti-colonial movement, against the French Colonial rule. Now, though Fanon died in 1961, at the young age of 36, within this very short lifespan, he had Authored two very influential books.

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• *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)

• *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)

The first one is, *Black Skin, White Masks*, that is, its English title. And, the second is titled, *The Wretched of the Earth*, in English. And, both of these texts, have now become canonical, even in the field of Postcolonial studies. In our discussion of Fanon today, we will be focusing on the later of the two books, *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, we will be looking at its criticism, on the role of the Middle Class version of Nationalism, and its relation with Decolonisation. Now, 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 seize to exercise their role as a revolutionary class.

Now, as I have discussed earlier, the process of European Colonialism of Africa, was guided by the requirements of the industrial revolution, that took place there. Which means that, the African Colonies, were used as sites, to procure raw materials, to feed the industries, in the Colonial mother country. And, within this scheme of things, the Colonial Periphery, which is Africa, is therefore, and any Colonial Periphery, not only Africa, also a Colonial Periphery like India, which acted as a site of procuring raw material.

They remained, industrially backward, industrially deficient, compared to the Metropolis. Because, that is how, the economy was arranged. The Metropolis was, where the industry was concentrated in, and the Colonial Periphery, places like Africa for instance, or India, acted as,

served as places, from where the Colonisers procure the raw materials, and then dumped the finished goods in.

So, we were both the suppliers of the raw materials. And, we were also the market for the finished product. But, the industrial production, took place in the mother country. And therefore, places like Africa and India, remained throughout the Colonial period, industrially deficient. Now, 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.

In other words, to break this relationship, between the Periphery, as a supplier of raw material, and the mother country, as the site of industrial production. But, Fanon argues that, after 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, come to occupy the very positions, of those departed Colonisers.

And here, we are reminded of Gandhi's Hind Swaraj. Because, if you remember, Gandhi was also making a similar argument, in Hind Swaraj. When, he was saying that, okay, if we send away the English, what kind of governance are we going to have. And, if the answer is that, the English educated middle class, who fashion themselves after the Colonisers, they will take over. According to Gandhi, it will just be the English rule, the continuation of the British Colonial rule, without the Englishman, right.

And, Fanon here, is making a similar argument, in 1961. Now, as Fanon said that, because the Middle Class merely takes over the positions of power, from the departing Colonisers, they do not reform, the Colonial mode of economic exploitation. They do not dismantle, the Colonial mode of economic exploitation, which is already there.

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. So, 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 it terms as Neo-colonialism.

Now, in this economic relationship between the Metropolis and the Periphery, the Middle Class of the newly independent country, merely acts as intermediaries, or as the middleman, through whom the economic exploitation is channelized. And, who in turn, gets a share of the loot, right.

So, the relation of economic exploitation, which existed during Colonialism, between the mother country and the Colonial Periphery continues, according to Fanon, even after independence, with the only change being, that the Middle Class, who led the Anti-colonial movement, now occupies an intermediary position, the position of the middleman, who channelizes, and who sort of organises this exploitation, and benefits from it.

Thus, though Anti-colonial struggle is organised and led by the Middle Class, in places like India and Africa, in the name of Nationalism, there is seen a very little attempt to really forge a National community, by elevating the masses, through revolutionising the mode of economic production, and through an 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 degeneration and perversion of the Nationalist discourse, which soon becomes the discourse of racist chauvinism, which is used, by one if African community, to separate itself, and to exert an asserted supremacy, over another African community.

It is used by one African tribe, to distinguish itself, and assert its supremacy, over another African tribe. Thus, the bull walk of African unity, which won the Anti-colonial struggle, soon disappears. And, it gives way to a thoroughly fragmented landscape, which might have become formally independent, but which still remains a site of new 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 formally do away with Colonialism. Fanon writing in 1961 argues, that Nation under the Middle Class leadership, 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 scoop 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 re-conceptualise the world order, beyond the narrow confines of the Nation State. Thank you.