

# The Ideology on Nationalism Modelled with a Utilitarian Objective for the Critics: Rabindranath Tagore and Frantz Fanon in Their Essays on Nationalism

**Magdelene Aneetee Browne H**

Research Associate  
School of Advanced Sciences (SAS)  
VIT Chennai, Tamilnadu, India  
[aneetee.93@gmail.com](mailto:aneetee.93@gmail.com)

**Dr. Patchainayagi S.**

Assistant Professor  
School of Advanced Sciences (SAS)  
VIT Chennai, Tamilnadu, India  
[patchainayagi.s@gmail.com](mailto:patchainayagi.s@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

The existence of an individual is confined within a dual imagination of either affirming national identities or the desire to transcend themselves to a global and a transnational alliance of economy and culture. Rabindranath Tagore and Frantz Fanon break the stereotypical construction of the idea on Nationalism with their unique approach towards building an economically strong and developed nation, moving beyond emotional boundaries. Tagore aims for the economic recovery of the country under the tag of nationalism and Fanon discusses about the power that shifted to the middle class revolutionaries from the colonizers after independence and their deficiency in ruling over the county. Both the anti-imperialistic critics bring out a different perspective on nationalism in India.

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, Frantz Fanon, Nationalism, Economic development, Neocolonialism, Anti-imperialism.

The eminent post-colonial critic Gayatri Spivak articulates nationalism “a reverse or displaced legitimation of colonialism,” doomed to repeat the “epistemic violence” of the colonialism which it had ones rejected. Meanwhile throughout history people have been in close association or emotionally bound with their native soil, the tradition and culture that grows innately and to establish an authority over their territory. It was only after the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the concept of nationalism assorted to a sentiment molding, public and private life becomes one of the greatest or even the one of the major determining factors of the history of the modern era.

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Nationalism is often considered as an out-dated topic of discussion because of its characteristics that is universal with a dynamic vitality and at times it is mistaken as a permanent factor in political behavior. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the word ‘nationalism’ was used in the facets of justifying the constructions that the revolutionaries created under the label of imperialism and jingoism (aggressive form of patriotism), and xenophobia in countries such as The United States, Italy, Great Britain and France.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century a few scholars also endorsed the rise of fascism to nationalism which was taken to an extreme during the same period but in the later period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term nationalism was often used to label the indigenous movements which strived to seek Equality, Autonomy and Recognition. On a broad-spectrum nationalism was commonly used to describe the way the people of the country define themselves. Nationalism fundamentally sorts people into two— one either is or is not a member of “my nation.” Nationalism prospers through the use of such elements as national folklore, symbols, heroes, sports, music, belief, and the idea that there is a national identity or character.

The postcolonial space encompasses important key concepts and themes under history and memory along with the viability of the nation-state and the perilous concerns of nationalism and its nation. Postcolonial authors or critics mostly channelize their focus on massacre, ferocity, oppression of the guiltless individuals and the humiliations they face under the grounds of religion, caste, and race. Amitav Gosh, Salman Rushdie, V.S Naipaul, Shashi Tharoor, Rohinton Mistry are a few authors who move within such focus areas.

The significance and implication of a nation or nationalism in this situation becomes extremely problematized. This ideology has to be either celebrated or the importance should be denied towards the boundaries or the discourse that is constructed around it. The individual’s life is in a constant dilemma of asserting national identities towards his nation or to transcend themselves to a global transnational culture and economy. An unknown poet records “The dream of seeing all human life, despite its immense variety, as one, and the planet earth as one opens space for nothing else, but limitless personal liberty can only belong to the third imagination” to a poet. The liberal thinkers’ dream was that the idea of nationalism would progressively get diluted in years’ time, which incidentally finds expression in one of Gellner’s statements taken out of context which reads as “trade flows across frontiers: the life of the intellect ignores frontiers; and with the progress of learning, wealth and industry, the prejudices and superstitions and fears which engender frontiers would decline” (Gellner Thought 147). This too has remained unfulfilled.

This article describes the protest feelings of two writers, Rabindranath Tagore and Frantz Fanon—who were fierce critics of nationalism even as they wished fervently for the success of

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national liberation movements. This ambiguous attitude towards nationalism was reinforced by compound four-dimensional imaginaries of threat, in which the freedom of the political communities with which they identified was perceived to be threatened both from outside and within. As anti-imperialists, they made the case for subaltern nationalism; but an anxiety about the oppressions inherent in nationalist mobilization also led them to a critique of nationalism. Tagore, Fanon and Edward Said identified nationalism as a transitory stage through which the subaltern resistance passes to recover its identity and sense of self that the imperialism has trampled under the foot.

Rabindranath Tagore came up with his contradicting idea of nation and nation state to share his deep anxiety that he has undergone within himself during the 1910s-1930s. The three novels—*Gora* (1910), *Char Adhyay* (1934) and *Ghare Baire* (1916)—where he ripped apart the extortions of exaggerated male stereotypical behaviors such as emphasis on aggression, sexuality and physical strength, reflect his ‘dis-ease’ with nationalism. Tagore, in his ‘*Essays on Nationalism*’ (1917), confronts that Indians replicate the concept of nationalism from the west and he also quotes that it has been an “organizing selfishness of nationalism”. Tagore perceived that, “India never had a real sense of nationalism” and that India’s reverence for ‘God’ and the ideal of ‘humanity’ need not be replaced by the European concept of a limited ‘national identity’. Rabindranath Tagore’s writing always had an affinity with the non-sectarian humanist/modernist position.

Tagore’s idea of post-nationalism or anti-nationalism has taken a slight diversion from Gandhi and created ripples between the two in spite of the philosophical affinity they shared. Freedom was the ultimate goal for both the critics. Tagore believed that Gandhi’s political reflex of ‘swaraj’ and ‘satyagraha’ will result in “violent and dark forces” (Kaustav Chakraborty 2017). So, he always thought that such a kind of struggle would not lead to “liberation of the souls” (Kaustav Chakraborty 2017). On the contrary, Tagore’s understanding of nationalism appears a “passion without compassion”. The unsympathetic negative bond between the self and other made him an easy target to criticism in parts of the world like Russia, Germany, Spain, USA, Yugoslavia, Poland, Turkey and Japan along with a long section of the west.

There was a sense of ambiguity in Tagore’s approach towards evaluation of nationalism. The nationalist claimed that “nation is greater than people”, but Tagore found it to be a dehumanizing and a demoralizing act to showcase self-sacrifice for the sake of a nation. However, he considered the “power of self-sacrifice” and the “moral faculty of sympathy and co-operation” structure as “the guiding spirit of social vitality”.

In the essay ‘Nationalism in India’, Tagore unconditionally indicates that his “opposition is not to any one particular nation or the other, but his opposition is to the general idea to all nations”. ‘Nation’ according to Tagore is an “organized power structure” that the nation acquires for itself and not “a community” or a “fellow being” as described stereotypically. It is only by trapping of the political power that a nation can get together. To be precise, for Tagore nation is always a ‘nation-state’.

Nation is not just any union of people but a political or economic union. The organized mass is designed for a mechanical purpose that has a specific drive. For him the nation is fine tuned for a specific purpose of creating maximum economic profit. The political unit of nation-state is inherently connected with the capitalist mode of economy and its profit making imperatives. This perspective of his cannot be entirely rejected because it’s the practice of the west as well. According to Tagore, this idea of nation-state in organizing the human community for the purpose of material production and profit-making transforms an individual into one-dimensional man whose only reason for existence would turn out to be accumulation of wealth.

This concept of Tagore is where the problem arises; humans seem materialized losing the nature of altruism and self-sacrifice. This creates an imbalance within the nature of human being, Tagore in his ‘Essay on Nationalism’ quotes, “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” (Tagore, 2018, p. 50). So, when this economic appetite is fostered, it takes away all the sense of moral limit and makes him incomplete. However, the idea of capitalism is never spelt out clearly, but it always remained subtle.

Frantz Fanon, on the other side of the square, writing about economic criticism of middle class-led nationalism is more visible. Fanon being a French citizen supported the Algerian movement towards anti-colonialism against the French colonial rule. He authored two very influential books, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, both being canonical to the post-colonial realm of study.

Nationalism, according to Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, is said to be failing in achieving liberation across the boundaries of class as its aim is primarily of the colonized bourgeoisie “a privileged middle class who perhaps seeks to defeat the prevailing colonial rule only to usurp its place of dominance and surveillance over the working-class, the lumpenproletariat” (A McClintock - Social text, 1992). The middle class plays an active role in anti-colonial struggle, the moment the nation becomes independent they cease to become the revolutionary class. The process of European colonialism of Africa was guided by the instruction

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of the industrial revolution that took place there. The African colonies were used as procurers of raw materials to feed the industries in the colonial mother country. Within this scheme a colonial periphery, be it Africa or India, remained industrially deficient compared to the metropolitans. The periphery was both the market and procurers, but the motherland or the metropolitan remained the producer as it grew higher and higher economically. Fanon consistently argued that the middle class after independence failed to reorganize the production of the products that was depending on the mother country, rather the middle class having fought off the European colonizers come to occupy the very position of the departed colonizers which brought in a picture practicing the colonizers' rule without the colonizer as they did not dismantle the colonial mode of economic mode of exploitation. It continues to remain suppliers to the mother country even after independence.

This economic relationship between periphery and mother county is called neocolonialism. The economic exploitation continues even after colonization because of improper organization of the middle class in the name of nationalism.

Fanon is in opposition of this idea of nationalism. Fanon blames the intellectual middle class and their laziness as the notable and main reason for the failure of nationalism in India. "The native bourgeoisie rises to power only insofar as it seeks to replicate the bourgeoisie of the "mother country" that sustains colonial rule" (Fanon 1963).

Rabindranath Tagore and Frantz Fanon through their discourse on nationalism bring out a unique perspective on Nationalism and how it is being misinterpreted most of the times. They critiqued nationalism because of their anxiety in the mobilization of nationalism, which was intact with oppression, making a case for subaltern nationalism. The very nature and purpose as an institution is the prime objection to nationalism for Tagore. Nationalism being a social construction, or a mechanical organization is modeled with certain utilitarian objective in mind, makes it even more palpable for Tagore: "Construction is for a purpose, it expresses our wants; but creation is for itself, it expresses our very beings". As a construction, grounded on needs and wants rather than truth and love, it could not, Tagore advocates, contribute much to the moral/spiritual fulfillment of mankind. According to Tagore, race was more of a natural entity, and therefore an acceptable, social unit than the nation itself. He envisioned a world like a "rainbow" in which all the races would live together in amity and harmony, keeping their "distinct characteristics but all attached to the stem of humanity by the bond of love."

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