

National and Cultural Identity: Comparing Rabindranath Tagore and Ferdowsi

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the themes of national and cultural identity as depicted in the thoughts and works of Rabindranath Tagore- a pivotal figure in specifically sub-continental literature, and Ferdowsi- the legendary Persian poet. Both writers, separated by centuries and cultural contexts, utilized their literary genius to reflect on nationhood and cultural pride. Tagore, writing during the British colonial era in India, and Ferdowsi, during the formation of a unified Persian identity under various rulers, offer unique perspectives on how literature can serve as a vehicle for expressing and shaping national identity. This essay delves into how these literary giants contributed to forming cultural consciousness and national identity in their respective societies by comparing their thoughts and beliefs showcased in their works.

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1. Introduction

National identity and the quest for independence are central themes in the literature of many cultures, often serving as a means to inspire, unify, and define a people. In the literary histories of the Indian subcontinent (particularly in the countries of India and Bangladesh) and Persia, Rabindranath Tagore and Ferdowsi stand out as two monumental figures- each deeply rooted in their respective cultural and historical contexts while separated by time, geography, and language- who made indelible contributions to the literature of their countries- India and Persia (modern-day Iran) respectively and used their works to explore the themes of national identity and independence. Tagore, the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, and Ferdowsi, the author of the epic *Shahnameh*, both grappled with the idea of national identity in times of political turmoil and cultural transformation. This article seeks to compare and contrast their approaches to national identity and independence, focusing on their literary styles, thematic concerns, and cultural impact; and highlighting how their works resonate with the struggles and aspirations of their respective nations.

2. Discussion

2.1. Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet of Universal Humanism and 'National' Identity

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) lived during a time when India was under British colonial rule. As a writer, philosopher, and social reformer, Tagore's works reflect a deep engagement with the themes of national and cultural identity, freedom, and the human condition. His poetry, essays, and songs became an integral part of the Indian struggle for independence, offering both solace and inspiration to a nation yearning for freedom.

Tagore's concept of national identity was complex and multifaceted. Tagore was a well-known critic of nationalism, expressing his disapproval across a wide range of his works. His book *Nationalism* is perhaps the most explicit example in this case, where he said- "Nationalism is a great menace. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India's trouble." (Tagore, 2020: 29)

But his critique also surfaces in many of his poems, novels, short stories, plays, letters, lectures, essays, and articles. In the novel *Ghare-Baire* (The Home and the World; 1916), Tagore addresses the tensions between nationalism and individual freedom. Through his characters, Tagore critiques the rising tide of nationalism in India, which, in his view, sometimes led to fanaticism and division. He was concerned that the enthusiasm for national identity could overshadow the values of compassion and understanding. (Bhattacharya, 2011: 85) Tagore believed that true independence could only be achieved when individuals transcended narrow nationalistic sentiments and embraced a more inclusive vision of identity. While he was deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of India, he also espoused a vision of universal humanism. This duality is evident in his works, where he often juxtaposes the idea of a distinct Indian identity with the broader notion of human solidarity. In his collection

Gitanjali (1913), Tagore writes of the "mind without fear" and a "world that has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls," reflecting his desire for a world where national identity does not lead to isolation but rather contributes to the collective human experience. (Ahsan, 1991: 38)

Rabindranath's thought developed through a combination of European Renaissance and Indian traditions. He was not just a nationalist; he inspired the people of India with his nationalist ideas and continues to do so today. But as true as Rabindranath is a nationalist, he is also an internationalist. He did not condone radical nationalism. He did not believe in a single nation or race. Rabindranath did not favor any particular ideology in nationalism. His nationalism arose from human consciousness, from self-realization. Rabindranath Tagore's thoughts on civilization, nationalism, and community delve into the essence of modern political power and the fundamental beliefs it holds about human existence (Mukherjee, 2020: 67). He argues that such power should not merely be based on political agreements but must be rooted in social foundations.

2.2. Ferdowsi: The Preserver of Persian Cultural Identity

Ferdowsi (c. 940–1020) occupies a unique place in Persian literature as the author of *Shahnameh* (The Book of Kings), an epic that is one of the most significant works in Persian culture. Composed over three decades, the *Shahnameh* chronicles the history of Persia from the creation of the world to the Islamic conquest of Persia in the 7th century. Ferdowsi's work is not just a historical record but also a profound expression of Persian cultural identity and a call for the preservation of Persian heritage in the face of foreign domination. (Abdullayeva and Melville, 2010: 9)

Ferdowsi wrote the *Shahnameh* during a time when Persian culture was under threat from Arab rulers who sought to impose their language and customs on the Persian people. The epic serves as a repository of Persian myths, legends, and historical events, emphasizing the importance of cultural continuity and national pride. Through his portrayal of heroic figures like *Rostam* and the struggles of the Persian kings, Ferdowsi underscores the resilience of the Persian identity against external influences. (Davidson, 1994: 55) The *Shahnameh* is more than just a celebration of Persian history; it is a work that embodies the ideals of justice, honor, and loyalty to the nation. Ferdowsi's dedication to preserving the Persian language and national identity was an act of resistance against cultural erasure. His epic not only united the Persian people under a common historical and cultural narrative but also laid the groundwork for a renewed sense of national identity that would endure through centuries of foreign rule.

3. Comparative Analysis

Nationalism has been a powerful force in shaping the literature and cultural identity of many nations. Two towering figures in world literature, Rabindranath Tagore and Ferdowsi, utilized their poetic genius to reflect and shape the national consciousness of their respective

societies—India and Persia (modern-day Iran). Despite the vast differences in their historical contexts, literary styles, and personal philosophies, both Tagore and Ferdowsi infused their works with a profound sense of nationalism, although in distinct ways that reflected the unique challenges and aspirations of their times.

Tagore and Ferdowsi, though writing in different epochs and cultural contexts, both used their literary works to address the question of national identity. While Tagore's approach is marked by a blend of universalism and nationalism, Ferdowsi's work is a more focused effort to preserve and glorify a specific cultural heritage. Tagore's writing reflects a tension between the desire for national independence and a broader vision of human unity, whereas Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is a direct response to the need for cultural preservation in the face of external threats. Both writers, however, saw literature as a powerful tool for shaping national consciousness. Tagore used his works to critique the narrowness of nationalism while promoting a more inclusive and compassionate understanding of identity. Ferdowsi, on the other hand, sought to fortify Persian identity by immortalizing its history and values through his epic poetry.

3.1. Historical and Cultural Context and the Birth of Nationalism

Rabindranath Tagore, born in 1861, witnessed the height of British colonial rule in India. During this period, Indian society was grappling with the complexities of Western influence, the struggle for independence, and the need to rediscover and assert its cultural identity. His nationalism was deeply intertwined with his vision of a free and enlightened India, one that embraced both its ancient cultural heritage and the modern ideals of humanism and universalism. It can be said that Tagore's nationalism is often subtle and philosophical, reflecting his belief in a universal humanity that transcends narrow parochialism. In his literary works, Tagore celebrates the cultural and spiritual heritage of India, but he also warns against the dangers of chauvinism and isolationism. For example, in his famous poem *Chitto Jetha Voyshunno* (Where the Mind is Fearless), Tagore envisions a nation where freedom of thought and action prevails, free from the shackles of colonial oppression and social divisions. His nationalism was not merely about political independence but about the moral and intellectual upliftment of the individual and society. (Mukherjee, 2020: 109)

Critics widely agree that Tagore was deeply opposed to nationalism as it was understood in the Western context, advocating instead for a cosmopolitan outlook. In a letter to Aurobindo Mohan Bose on 19 November 1908, Tagore expressed his reservations, stating,

I took a few steps down that road [of nationalism] and stopped: for when I cannot retain my faith in the universal man standing over and above my country when patriotic prejudices overshadow my God, I feel inwardly starved. (Quayyum, 2014: 37)

Tagore's vehement critiques of nationalism were so emphatic that it seems almost inconceivable to view him as a nationalist. Yet, paradoxically, despite his strong denunciations

of nationalism, some of his critics and admirers have considered him a nationalist, even a precursor to Indian nationalism, who significantly influenced the country's nationalist ideology. Nehru, in *The Discovery of India*, remarks- "More than any other Indian... [Tagore] has helped to bring into harmony the ideas of the East and the West, and broadened the bases of Indian nationalism." (Nehru, 1946: 15) As a polymath, Tagore's works spanned poetry, fiction, music, and painting. He was deeply influenced by the socio-political milieu of his time, which was marked by the struggle for Indian independence and the rise of nationalism. Tagore's writings reflect his engagement with these issues, as well as his philosophical musings on humanism, universalism, and the role of culture in society.

Ferdowsi, on the other hand, born in 940 AD, lived during the Samanid dynasty, a time when the Persian culture was undergoing a renaissance after centuries of Arab rule and the Persian language was under threat from Arab domination following the Islamic conquest of Persia. The Arab rulers imposed their language and culture, leading to the decline of the Persian language and traditions. Ferdowsi's response in this context of cultural revival was to compose his magnum opus, the *Shahnameh* (The Book of Kings), an epic that not only preserved the Persian language but also revived the ancient myths, legends, and history of Persia, thus fostering a sense of national pride and cultural continuity among Persians. (Abdi, 2001: 81) The *Shahnameh* is an epic poem that chronicles the history of Persia from its mythic beginnings until the fall of the Sassanian Empire. Ferdowsi's work was instrumental in preserving the Persian language and identity.

Nationalism in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is a central theme, woven deeply into the fabric of the epic. Ferdowsi, writing in the 10th century, was motivated by a desire to preserve Persian culture and identity in the face of Arab influence following the Islamic conquest of Persia. His work serves as a celebration of Persian heritage, language, and values. Another central theme in the *Shahnameh* is the concept of *farr* (فَرّ), or divine glory, which is bestowed upon just and righteous kings who uphold the values of Persian civilization. The loss of *farr* often leads to the downfall of dynasties, symbolizing the dangers of moral decay and foreign influence. (Ansari, 2012: 73) Through this narrative, Ferdowsi emphasizes the importance of maintaining cultural integrity and resisting external threats to national identity.

3.2. Expression of National Identity in Literary Themes

Tagore, probably the only poet to be the writer of the two nations (India and Bangladesh) national anthems, helped to create a sense of Bengali identity with the song *Amar Shonar Bangla* (the national anthem of Bangladesh) that epitomized the meaning of the land for the dispossessed Bengali. Looking back to the history will help to understand this concept better. As an immediate reaction to the announcement of the partition of Bengal in 1905 by the British govt., the anti-British *Swadeshi* (native) movement was launched and Tagore too was involved in that movement. He was not a supporter of the violent methods of course— as revealed in his novel *Ghare Baire*— but his primary reaction to the partition was an outpouring

of grief for the alienation of his motherland. In 1972, the song that Tagore had composed in protest against the division of Bengal became the national anthem of a sovereign country, Bangladesh, the seeds of which had perhaps been sown in 1905 with that division. (Zaman, 2024) Tagore's novel *Ghare-Baire* (1916) (The Home and the World) offers a nuanced critique of the Swadeshi movement, a nationalist movement that advocated the boycott of British goods. Through the character of *Nikhil*, Tagore questions the violent and exclusionary tendencies of nationalism, emphasizing that true freedom comes from within and must be based on love and understanding, not hatred and division.

In contrast, Ferdowsi's expression of nationalism is more direct and militant, reflecting the existential struggle of the Persian people to preserve their identity in the face of foreign domination. The *Shahnameh* is a celebration of Persian history and culture, chronicling the exploits of legendary kings and heroes who embody the virtues of bravery, loyalty, and justice (Mia, 2017: 73). Ferdowsi's epic serves as a reminder of Persia's glorious past and as a source of inspiration for future generations to resist cultural assimilation. The *Shahnameh* glorifies the ancient kings of Persia, such as *Jamshid*, *Kay Khosrow*, and *Rostam*, portraying them as wise, just, and heroic. These kings symbolize the greatness of Iran's past, embodying the values and virtues that Ferdowsi wished to preserve and promote. (Davidson, 1994: 59) Characters in the *Shahnameh* frequently express deep love and devotion to Iran. This is especially evident in the stories of heroes like *Rostam*, who fight to protect their homeland from invaders and internal threats. The sense of duty toward the land and its people is a recurring theme that reinforces the nationalist sentiment. It often depicts conflicts between Iran and foreign invaders, such as the Turanians. These stories symbolize the struggle to maintain Persian sovereignty and cultural integrity against outside forces. Ferdowsi portrays these conflicts not just as battles for territory, but as the essence of the soul of the nation. (Amin-Riahi, 1996: 35) In the *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi blends historical events with mythology, creating a narrative that ties the origins of the Persian people to divine and heroic ancestors. This connection to a glorious, almost mythical past serves to bolster national pride and a sense of continuity with Iran's ancient heritage. In sum, the *Shahnameh* is more than just an epic poem; it is a vehicle for expressing and preserving Persian nationalism, a powerful assertion of cultural identity in a time of significant change and challenge.

Rabindranath Tagore and Ferdowsi, though separated by centuries and cultures, share a common legacy as poets who not only reflected the spirit of their times but also shaped the cultural and national identities of their peoples. Tagore's lyrical and philosophical exploration of human existence complements Ferdowsi's grand narrative of history and heroism, offering readers insights into the universal themes of destiny, identity, and the human condition. Their works continue to resonate with readers across the world, reminding us of the enduring power of literature to transcend time and place.

3.3. Language and Literary Styles

Language plays a crucial role in the nationalism concept of both Tagore and Ferdowsi. For Tagore, Bengali was not just a medium of expression but a symbol of cultural identity and independence. (Quayyum, 2020: 92) He championed the use of the Bengali language in literature and education, arguing that the mother tongue is essential for the full expression of people's thoughts and feelings. Tagore's contributions to Bengali literature were instrumental in the development of a modern Bengali identity, and his works continue to be revered as a cornerstone of Bengali culture.

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is perhaps the most significant work in the preservation and revival of the Persian language. The epic itself is a testament to the resilience of Persian identity and serves as a repository of pre-Islamic Iranian history and mythology. At a time when Arabic had become the dominant literary language in Persia, Ferdowsi deliberately chose to write in pure Persian, avoiding the use of Arabic words as much as possible. By doing so, he not only preserved the language but also reaffirmed the cultural and historical continuity of the Persian people. The *Shahnameh* became a symbol of Persian resistance against Arabization and a rallying point for Persian nationalism, which means by writing the *Shahnameh* in Persian, Ferdowsi resisted the Arabization that was prevalent at the time. (Yaghooti, 2018: 41)

Tagore's literary style is often characterized by its lyrical beauty and philosophical depth. His poetry, particularly in works like *Gitanjali*, for which he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, explores themes of spirituality, nature, love, and the human condition. Tagore's language is simple yet profound, capable of expressing complex emotions with great clarity. His fiction often delves into social issues, particularly the oppression of women, the caste system, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is an epic in the truest sense of the word. Written in almost 60,000 couplets, the poem is a grand narrative that blends mythology, history, and legend. Ferdowsi's style is marked by its grandeur and formality, with a focus on heroism, honor, and the tragic fall of great empires. The *Shahnameh* is rich in symbolism and allegory, reflecting the poet's deep concern with the themes of justice, loyalty, and the cyclical nature of history. (Abdullaeva and Melville, 2010: 10)

Despite their different styles, both Tagore and Ferdowsi grapple with the theme of human destiny. For Tagore, this is often expressed through a spiritual lens, with an emphasis on the individual's relationship with the divine and the quest for inner peace. Ferdowsi, however, presents destiny as a force that shapes the rise and fall of empires, often highlighting the futility of resisting fate.

3.4. The Literary Legacy of Nationalism

Tagore's vision of a free and enlightened India influenced generations of Indian thinkers and freedom fighters. His emphasis on cultural renewal and moral upliftment continues to inspire

movements for social and educational reform in India. However, Tagore's critique of narrow nationalism also serves as a cautionary tale against the excesses of nationalist fervor, reminding us of the need for a balance between national pride and universal humanism. 'Society is central to the history of India, not the State' - Rabindranath said this repeatedly and very emphatically in his works. (Tagore, 2020: 65) He always believed that 'Authoritarian state power is not immortal and its defeat is inevitable.' (Tagore, 2020: 109) His belief in the inevitability of the end of British rule is showcased in many of his notable works; famous dramas like- *Tasher Ghar* (House of Cards), *Raktokorobi* (Oleander), *Muktadbara* (Freeflow), *Achalayatan* (Immobile), and essay named *Shanyatar Shankat* (Crisis in Civilization).

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* remains a foundational text of Persian identity, revered not only in Iran but across the Persian-speaking world. The epic's themes of resistance, justice, and the preservation of cultural heritage resonate with the ongoing struggles of many nations to maintain their identity in the face of external pressures. Ferdowsi's nationalism, rooted in the revival of a glorious past, continues to inspire a sense of pride and resilience among Persians and others who look to their cultural heritage as a source of strength.

3.5. Cultural Impact

Both Tagore and Ferdowsi played crucial roles in the cultural and national identity of their respective countries. Tagore's works became symbols of the Indian Renaissance and the cultural awakening that accompanied the independence movement. His vision of a world where "the mind is fearless and the head is held high" resonated deeply with the aspirations of a colonized nation seeking freedom. Tagore's contributions to Indian culture were not limited to literature; he founded Visva-Bharati University, which became a hub for cultural exchange and intellectual thought. Ferdowsi's impact on Persian culture is equally profound. The *Shahnameh* is regarded as the national epic of Iran, and Ferdowsi is celebrated as a hero who saved the Persian language from extinction. His insistence on writing in pure Persian, at a time when Arabic had become the dominant literary language, helped to preserve Iran's linguistic and cultural heritage. The *Shahnameh* continues to be a source of national pride for Iranians and is studied and revered as one of the greatest works of world literature.

4. Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore and Ferdowsi, through their respective works, have made lasting contributions to the concepts of national identity and independence in their cultures. Tagore's blend of universalism with his deep love for the motherland offers a nuanced perspective on the role of national identity in a globalized world. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, meanwhile, remains a cornerstone of Persian cultural identity, exemplifying the enduring power of literature to preserve and shape a nation's collective memory. Together, their works highlight the complex relationship between literature, culture, and national identity, offering valuable insights into how writers can influence the course of history by shaping the consciousness of their people. Though separated by time, geography, and cultural contexts, both used their literary talents

to express and shape the national consciousness of their people. Tagore's nationalism, tempered by his humanistic ideals, reflects a vision of a free and enlightened India that embraces its cultural heritage while engaging with the modern world. Ferdowsi's nationalism, rooted in the preservation of the Persian language and culture, offers a powerful narrative of resistance against cultural assimilation and the affirmation of national and cultural identity. Together, their works demonstrate the profound role that literature can play in the formation and expression of national identity, offering lessons that remain relevant in today's globalized world.

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