

REVISITING RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S THE HOME AND THE WORLD

REVISITANDO A CASA E O MUNDO, DE RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to make a critical reading of the novella *The Home and the World* (1915), by Rabindranath Tagore, focusing on the emancipation of Bengal and the new role of women at the beginning of the twentieth century during the *Swadeshi* movement: the boycott to English goods to back up Indian industry after the arbitrary division of Bengal by Lord Curzon (1905). This discussion is based on Tagore's book on Nationalism (1917) as well as Walter Benjamin's considerations on allegory (1928).

KEYWORDS

Nationalism, allegory, women.

INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore's novella *The Home and the World* (1915) belongs to the trilogy formed by *The Wreck* (1906) and *Gora* (1909). It was Tagore himself who introduced the short story in Bengal from France in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹ This form of fiction, like the novella, was highly functional in the sense that it allowed the author to represent Bengal in an elliptical but focused manner that gained in strength and concentration.

Bearing the marks of orality, through the counterpoising of the stories of its main three characters, Bimala, Nikhil and Sandip, the novella functions at three levels, as it problematizes the concept of nation and nationalism, reviews the role of women in Indian society, and devises a literary form akin to the conflict he was bent on portraying.

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¹ FRASER. *Lifting the Sentence*, p. 32.

First, it allegorizes the crises that abated over India and Bengal brought about by the *Swadeshi* movement, the policy of boycotting British goods, in order to back up Indian industry, after the arbitrary partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905.²

Secondly, it deals with the question of gender when it proposes the figure of the woman as the representative of the nation. In so doing, the woman is made to cross the threshold between the world of the *zenana*, the private realm inhabited by women in traditional Indian families, and the world of politics, the public. Already in the nineteenth century there was a reform movement of the condition of middle class women in Calcutta, concerning the practices of *sati* (the burning of widows), *pardah* (the restriction of women to the house), and child marriage, and Tagore's novella reflects these changes.³

Finally, the novella, in the hands of Tagore, acquires a distinct Indian quality as it adopts a poetical and philosophical tone to enact the way he understood the question of Nationalism in India and Bengal, intertwining elements of fiction and poetry, written and oral tradition, the use of the past and the present to lend immediacy to the narrative.

Taking into account Tagore's views on nationalism as expressed in his lectures on *Nationalism* (1917), a companion text to *The Home and the World*, and Walter Benjamin's reflections on allegory (1928) our aim is to consider how in an allegorical manner the author deals with the process of emancipation of both Bengal and women, in a distinctly Indian narrative.

If the symbol implies a "momentary totality", allegory implies a "sustained progression"⁴ of the meanings implied in a double level narrative, articulated through an extended metaphor that forms the backbone of the tale, and that generally refers to political or historical events. However if in the case of the symbol there is room for ambiguity, the continuity of analogous meanings, inherent in the allegory, cancels any form of alternative interpretations. In the case of *The Home and the World*, Tagore's staunch views on Nationalism act as the ultimate referent for the *Swadeshi* movement, as will be discussed in this paper.

REVISITING *THE HOME AND THE WORLD*

The novella centers 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. Bimala stands for the new concept of nation and woman because *Swadeshi* also involved the woman question in its fight. At an abstract level, her beauty, according to Benjamin's discussion of allegory,⁵ will come to represent the sacred quality of the nation, because the moral element was understood as being immanent to beauty. In an allegorical manner,

² DESAI. Introduction, p. 8.

³ SHRIVASTAVA. *The Progress of Indian Women from 1900s to the Present*, p. 14.

⁴ BENJAMIN. *Allegory and Trauerspiel In The Origin of German Drama*, p. 165.

⁵ BENJAMIN. *Allegory and Trauerspiel In The Origin of German Drama*, p. 160.

as also problematized by Benjamin, Bimala's private life will be put at the hub of the events affecting the nation and will acquire a divine quality beyond her reach and control, as different forms of grandeur and perfection will be demanded from her by both men.

Nikhil is characterized as representing the generous and broad-minded landowner (Tagore's *alter ego*), while through Sandip Tagore allegorizes the romantic but cruel and self-centered revolutionary. The three characters thus function like the vices and virtues in a morality play through which Tagore expressed his much criticized views on Nationalism and the *Swadeshi* movement.

From Benjamin's perspective,⁶ I understand that Tagore adopted allegory to shape his narrative because it allowed him to illustrate in a didactic as well as scenic manner the *Idea* of Nationalism that so much troubled him at that particular conjuncture in the history of Bengal and India. However, lacking the epistemological freedom implied in the symbol, allegory led Tagore to illustrate this conflict in a dialectical rather than dialogical manner that cancelled other perspectives on the issue. Hence, his radical condemnation of the *Swadeshi* imposes one reading upon the narrative that, at another level, undermines the aesthetic quality of the novella, as it is articulated through the antagonistic relationship between the characters that sets the somber tone of the narrative and stiffens its pace.

As Anita Desai⁷ points out, the novella had a mixed reception by the public due to the fact that if Tagore "had sung Bengal into a nation", in the words of Ezra Pound, he was horrified by the riots and the bonfires of imported cloth and could not see only the romantic side of the movement. He rejected violence in all its forms. Therefore, when *Swadeshi* turned into the confrontation between Muslims and Hindus, Tagore decided to withdraw from it.

According to Desai,⁸ Tagore believed that the boycott of cheap British goods in favor of expensive Indian goods was harming the interests of the poor. The ones who suffered the most were Muslim peasants and traders at the hands of wealthy Hindu landowners and politicians. However, what Tagore seems to have disregarded in the narrative were the patriotic feelings nourished by the many Indians who joined the lines of the *Swadeshi* in order to resist the colonial power. It was this omission that caused such a negative reaction among his readers.

Though the novella is organized in chapters, each chapter is organized in *stories* through which each one of the characters dramatize their views on the conflict and, indirectly, Tagore depicts his own inner struggle with the Indian crisis. In this way, the element of orality akin to pre-colonial Indian literature pervades the narrative, lending to it a distinct Indian cadence.

This stylistic device is highly functional in the sense that Tagore seems to adopt a multilayered perspective to recreate Bengali society at a moment of crisis and transition,

⁶ BENJAMIN. *Allegory and Trauerspiel in The Origin of German Drama*, p. 161.

⁷ DESAI. Introduction, p. 8-9.

⁸ DESAI. Introduction, p. 9.

when the different views and attitudes on the boycott of foreign goods were tearing the community apart. Nevertheless, the radicalization of the two male characters, Nikhil and Sandip, the first representing good and the second representing evil, seems to cancel his desire of equanimity in the narrative.

Bimala stands at the center of the tale. She represents Bengal at a crossroad: through her dilemma, Tagore allegorizes the conflict of the nation. On the one hand, Nikhil, echoing Westernized ideas on the role of women in society, wants to bring her out of *purdah* into the world, at the peak of the *Swadeshi* movement. He wants her to become her own independent self; therefore, his aim is not only to bedeck her with all the riches money can buy but also to educate her. Barathi Ray explains that

The new woman was to be an educated and brave wife as an appropriate partner of an English-educated nationalist man able to run an efficient and orderly home like her Western counterpart, be high-minded and spiritual like the women of the golden age (...) If the model was absurd, and inimitable, and indeed full of contradictions, no one was bothered. That was the new woman the nation needed, and it was women's duty to live up to it.⁹

This new Bengali woman that Nikhil had in mind was to be molded not after Sita, the traditional and submissive wife in the *Ramayana*, but Durga, the Goddess of Bengal: "Up till now Bimala was my home-made Bimala, the product of the confined space and the daily routine of small duties."¹⁰ His desire is to see her as a free woman, who will choose to love him, not because custom dictates it, but of her own accord: "I longed to find Bimala blossoming fully in all her truth and power."¹¹

However, there is a paradox at the heart of Nikhil's view about the role of women. As Indrani Mitra points out, he wants Bimala to enter the world of the public but without jeopardizing the sanctity of the private,¹² as he himself will admit in retrospect: "But the thing I forgot to calculate was, that one must give up all claims based on conventional rights, if one would find a person freely revealed in truth."¹³ The point is that the moment Bimala comes out of *purdah* and listens to Sandip, the leader of the *Swadeshi* movement, she becomes inflamed by his words and unconsciously becomes the symbol of Bengal, *Bande Mataram*:

I was utterly unconscious of myself. I was no longer the lady of the Raja's house, but the sole representative of Bengal's womanhood. And he was the champion of Bengal. As the sky had shed its light over him, so he must receive the consecration of a woman's benediction.¹⁴

⁹ RAY, Bharati. *Early Feminists of Colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002. p. 41. Quoted in: SHRIVASTAVA. *The Progress of Indian Women from 1900s to the Present*, p. 15.

¹⁰ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 41.

¹¹ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 41.

¹² MITRA, Indani. I Will Make Bimala One with My Country: Gender and Nationalism in Tagore's *The Home and the World*, p. 18.

¹³ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 41.

¹⁴ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 31.

Through a progressive narrative, akin to allegory,¹⁵ Tagore depicts, in a didactic manner, the dramatic moment when Bimala refuses her husband's critique of the *Swadeshi*, falls in love with its leader and becomes identified with its ideals.

At another level, her coming out from behind the screen of the *zenana* allegorizes the moment when in India tradition and modernity will be confronted. As Desai explains, when Tagore depicts Nikhil urging Bimala out of the *pardah*, to which she has been confined by custom, he seems to be coaxing Bengal out of orthodoxy, into modernity, on the way to an independent India.¹⁶ However, the new role of women that comes to represent the new style of the nation will be subjected to different interpretations. While Nikhil wants Bimala to make her own choices freely (even if that, unconsciously, means loving him and accepting the status quo) Sandip worships her as the Goddess of Bengal. As such, she will become the symbol of their movement, but also subjected to his desires and decisions.

Likewise, through Nikhil Tagore expresses his disapproval of the *Swadeshi* as being tyrannical and violent. Bimala's infatuation with Sandip stands in the novella for Bengal's infatuation with *Swadeshi*. In a language that is more philosophical than fictional, Tagore expresses his own views through Nikhil:

I had hoped that when Bimala found herself free in the outer world she would be rescued from her infatuation for tyranny. But now I feel sure that this infatuation is deep down in her nature (...) She is quite angry with me because I am not running amuck crying *Bande Mataram* (...) For that matter, I have become unpopular with all my countrymen because I have not joined them in their carousals.¹⁷

What Nikhil refuses to do is to glorify Bengal at the cost of attacking foreign nations. He refuses to be inflamed as Sandip and Bimala have been. At the time, many people understood it as Tagore's insincerity in attacking the colonial power.

Actually, the actions of the three characters dramatize the views on Nationalism that Tagore expressed in a series of lectures on the topic delivered between 1916 and 1917. In them, he draws a parallel between the way Nationalism was understood in the West and in India.

In his lecture, "Nationalism in the West,"¹⁸ Tagore expresses the view that in India the main problems were not related to fights for political supremacy, as in the West, but they had to do with social life and the attainment of spiritual ideals. Therefore, he laments that "the world-flood has swept all over [India] and new elements have been introduced". These elements have to do with the way in which Nationalism is understood in the West and the way they have affected "the India devoid of all politics, the India of no nations, whose one ambition has been to know this world as of soul."¹⁹

¹⁵ BENJAMIN. *Allegory and Trauerspiel in The Origin of German Drama*, p. 165.

¹⁶ DESAI. Introduction, p. 11.

¹⁷ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 42.

¹⁸ TAGORE. *Nationalism*, p. 16.

¹⁹ TAGORE. *Nationalism*, p. 16.

In this new scenario, it was the Westernized concept of the Nation “that drove its tentacles of machinery deep into the soul”²⁰ of India raising havoc.

In his words, we can recognize the ideology that informs Nikhil and Sandip in the novel: for Nikhil, Indians have traditionally been concerned with “human races with their own likes and dislikes” and not with “nations.”²¹ This means recognizing the Other as a human being, in spite of national differences, whereas worshipping one’s own nation implies hating the Other.

For both Nikhil and Tagore in *Nationalism*, reform meant social rather than political reform: this becomes clear in their attitude towards Bimala. Whereas Nikhil wants her to enter the public world so that her role as a wife and companion will be that of a modernized woman, Sandip wants her to join in the political fight that is storming the country. Nikhil’s ideals reveal Tagore’s intended meaning in the narrative related to his desire for social reform, whereas Sandip’s attitude represents the excitement and passion that Tagore so much despised.

Answering his own question, “What is this Nation?,” Tagore explains that

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. Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself. It is a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being. It is a natural regulation of human relationships, so that men can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another. It has also a political side, but this is only for a special purpose. It is for self-preservation.²²

For Tagore the conflict actually arises when the nation’s power begins “to grow and to bring harvests of wealth, then it crosses the boundaries with amazing rapidity. For then it goads all its neighboring societies with greed of material prosperity and consequent mutual jealousy and by the fear of each other’s growth into powerfulness.”²³ In turn, this attitude becomes its ruling force and the bonds of society break up because the interest in humanity is not its ultimate end. It is replaced by the interest in material wealth.

In *The Home and the World*, Tagore condemns this concept of nation through the extended metaphor of greed and consequent robbery that pervades the whole novella and leads to its climax. Hence, in his hands allegory becomes a method of critical analysis to discuss the conflicts that affected Bengal.

Nikhil and Sandip understand the concept of patriotism that should lead to an independent Bengal from different and excluding perspectives. Sandip worships Bengal as a goddess and would have no qualms in doing anything for the cause, even stealing: “But the lesson of the world is: ‘That is really mine which I can snatch away’. My country does not simply become mine because it is the country of my birth. It becomes mine on the day when I am able to win it by ‘force’.”²⁴ Nikhil, on the other hand,

²⁰ TAGORE. *Nationalism*, p. 18.

²¹ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 18.

²² TAGORE. *Nationalism*, p. 19

²³ TAGORE. *Nationalism*, p. 21.

²⁴ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 45.

disapproves of Sandip's attitude. He prefers to see his land in human terms. Therefore, his actions are always regulated by ethics: "Neither I am divine. I am human. And therefore I dare not permit the evil which is in me to be exaggerated into an image of my country –never, never!"²⁵

Nikhil, once again, echoes Tagore's views. For Tagore, people like Sandip were not moved by love of country but by self-interest: "Sandip's love of country is but a different phase of his covetous self-love."²⁶ Tagore discusses these views in *Nationalism* when he says that such an attitude, instead of leading to harmony, leads to war and tyranny: "For greed of wealth and power can never have a limit, and compromise of self-interest can never attain the final spirit of reconciliation."²⁷ This is why Nikhil will not let himself be burnt by the flames that consume Bengal and that come to be represented in the novel by Bimala's red sari as well as by her infatuation with Sandip and the *Swadeshi* cause.

The two factions' fight over Bengal is dramatized in the novella through their attitude to Bimala. She is confronted with a dilemma that stands for the predicament that Bengal is going through. Her words about her own situation actually voice the conflict of the nation:

So long I had been like a small river at the border of a village. My rhythm and my language were different from what they are now. But the tide came up from the sea, and my breast heaved; my banks gave way and the great drumbeats of the sea waves echoed in my mad current. I could not understand the meaning of that sound in my blood. Where was that former self of mine? Whence came foaming into me this surging flood of glory?²⁸

Whereas Bengal is given the shape of a woman's body, Bimala is represented through the metaphor of Bengal's geography; the two become one. What they have in common is also the fact that they do not recognize themselves any longer, because they seem to have betrayed their own values. What has produced this change in them is the fact of being glorified and turned into some supernatural being that will call for inhuman acts in its defence.

This wave of change that affected Bengal had to do, in Tagore's view, with the fact that "the spirit of the West had come upon [their] fields in the guise of a storm scattering living seeds that [were] immortal."²⁹ Tagore, however, did not reject Western views. As he says in the same essay, "we have to consider that the West is necessary to the East. We are complementary to each other because of our different outlooks upon life which have given us different aspects of truth."³⁰

The real problem was that India should assimilate "only what was permanent in Western Civilization."³¹ Tyranny, violence and greed would not count among these values.

²⁵ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 39.

²⁶ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 43.

²⁷ TAGORE. *Nationalism*, p. 22.

²⁸ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 50.

²⁹ TAGORE. *Nationalism*, p. 26.

³⁰ TAGORE. *Nationalism*, p. 26.

³¹ TAGORE. *Nationalism*, p. 26.

And this is the way in which *Swadeshi* is presented by Tagore in the novella: a copy of the Western violent means, as voiced by Sandip: “We must have our religion and also our nationalism; our *Bhagavadgita* and also our *Bande Mataram* (...) I want western military style to prevail, not the Indian.”³²

In very crude terms that once again seem to undermine the artistic value of the novella, Tagore articulates the view that the cruelty imported from the West pervades Sandip’s way of understanding the nation and the woman who has come to stand for it: “I shall simply make Bimala one with my country. The turbulent west wind which has swept away the country veils of conscience, will sweep away the veil of the wife from Bimala’s face, and in that uncovering there will be no shame.”³³

In a crescendo of violence, if in the beginning Sandip sees the goddess Durga in Bimala, he ends up seeing in her Kali, the goddess of destruction: “I am a worshipper of Kali, and one day I shall truly worship her, setting Bimala on her altar of Destruction.”³⁴ On the other hand, Tagore presents Nikhil as a progressive man. 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. Intertwining the images of the home and the world, his home and his nation, he muses in a melancholic tone, “*Alas, my house is empty.*”³⁵

Feeling deserted by one and enthralled by the other, Bimala pictures herself as Bengal, torn between two worlds: “She has been drawn forth from her home corner by the sudden call of some Unknown.”³⁶ Convinced of her own power and glory, she bedecks herself to persuade her husband to join *Swadeshi*, but when he refuses to do so, like Bengal, she answers Sandip’s call:

I likewise have lost my home and also lost my way. Both the end and the means have become shadowy to me. There remain only the yearning and the hurrying on (...) If the Dark which sounded the flute should lead to destruction, why trouble about the hereafter?³⁷

For Tagore, this is the point of no return, since the outcome of these actions will cause the loss of “the wholeness and wholesomeness of human ideals” that will lead “to interminable war...”³⁸ – in this case, the communalist fights between Muslims and Hindus that will end up in the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, and that Tagore foresaw in the first decades of the century.

Sandip thus leads Bimala and, through her, Bengal to destruction when he urges her to steal for a cause that Tagore sees not as the cause of the nation, but as his own personal cause. In order to go on with his fight, he needs money and leads Bimala to

³² TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 80-81.

³³ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 84.

³⁴ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 84.

³⁵ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 90.

³⁶ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 93.

³⁷ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 94.

³⁸ TAGORE. *Nationalism*, p. 22.

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."³⁹

Stealing from her husband means, in the context of the novella, stealing from the nation, since he represents tradition and the establishment. The moment she does it, rather than becoming emancipated and a free woman, she and Bengal become pawns to Sandip's desires:

After I had stolen into my room like a thief, it felt like my own room no longer. All the most precious rights which I had over it vanished at the touch of my theft. I began to mutter to myself, as though telling mantrams: *Bande Mataram, Bande Mataram*, my Country, my golden Country, all this gold is for you, none else!⁴⁰

As can be seen in the narrative, Tagore presents Sandip in a very negative light. 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 an innate selfishness at the core of his decisions since he wants her agency to serve his own purposes and benefits. As the scene of the robbery attests, she betrays her own principles, going against all that was good in her.

Tagore thus illustrates through Sandip the idea of nation that he despises, based on injustice and cruelty: "When this organization of politics and commerce, whose other name is the Nation, becomes all powerful at the cost of the harmony of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity."⁴¹ The fact that they do not recognize themselves as human beings any longer will have its worst expression in the Communalist fights that will abate over the country.

This, for Tagore, was the ultimate evil and the reason why he was so critical of the idea of nation imported from the West: it led to division and antagonism. As he puts forward in his essay, India "did not belong to a race, but is of a process of creation to which various races of the world contributed: the Dravidians and the Aryans, the ancient Greeks and the Persians, the Mohamedans of the West and those of central Asia."⁴² In the same way, they should not have the power to exclude anybody, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, even the English.

Tagore ends up the novella condemning the movement, through the characters' predictable fates that come to reaffirm the allegorical quality of the narrative: Nikhil's fatal wound; Sandip's cowardly departure to the North, after the conflict he has provoked; Bimala's future life of loneliness, desolation and guilt. Bimala and Bengal are thus left without either the home or the world.

³⁹ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 115.

⁴⁰ TAGORE. *The Home and the World*, p. 144.

⁴¹ TAGORE. *Nationalism*, p. 23.

⁴² TAGORE. *Nationalism*, p. 27.

CONCLUSION

When *The Home and the World* was published, Tagore received criticism from different quarters, as Desai points out. Georg Lukács said it was “a petit bourgeois yarn of the shoddiest kind”. Also E. M. Forster, though in milder tones, said that “(...) the World proved to be a sphere (...) for a boarding house flirtation that masks itself in patriotic talk”.⁴³ However, one should understand the political context in which the novella was written as well as what violence meant to a mystic like Tagore. As Desai explains, Tagore thought that *Swadeshi* was actually “an abstract, distant and meaningless term” for the poor, while the ones who actually saw their interests harmed were the Muslim peasants who could not afford to see their goods burnt as rich Hindu landowners and politicians did.⁴⁴ Unlike the *Swadeshi* of Gandhi’s time, what Tagore saw was that the fight that had started against the communalism instilled by the British colonizer was turning into a new form of communalist fight that would rip India apart.

If the novella shows Tagore’s disappointment with the *Swadeshi* movement, one of its remarkable characteristics is his treatment of the feminine character, Bimala. Her predicament is a complex one: the moment she comes into the World, she has to conform to the ideals of two different men. One wants her to become a free woman overnight, exercising her free will, while the other turns her into a Goddess, representing the country in a moment of conflict.

As in the case of *Swadeshi*, however, Tagore, once again, seems to retreat into a more conservative position, and Bimala is chastised for her choices and decisions. However, what should be pointed out is that Tagore is one of the first Indian writers to give agency to a female character and to consider, in a serious manner, the changing condition of women in Indian society.

If the allegorical quality of the novella puts the conflict in absolute terms of good and evil, it might be argued that Tagore’s division of the narrative not only in chapters but also in stories, shows his deep awareness and concern with the conflicting visions that were rendering apart his beloved Bengal, both at a public and a private level.



⁴³ DESAI. Introduction, p. 7.

⁴⁴ DESAI. Introduction, p. 9.

RESUMO

Esse artigo traz uma leitura crítica da novela *The Home and the World* (1915) de Rabindranath Tagore, focalizando a emancipação de Bengala e o novo papel da mulher no começo do século vinte, durante o movimento *Swadeshi*: o boicote dos produtos ingleses, para afirmar a indústria indiana, após a arbitrária divisão de Bengala por Lord Curzon, em 1905. Esta discussão baseia-se no livro de Tagore sobre o Nacionalismo (1917) e nas considerações de Walter Benjamin (1928) sobre a alegoria.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Nacionalismo, mulher, alegoria

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