

Crossroads of Love, Duty, and Nationalism: A Study of Rabindranath Tagore's Naukadubi and Char Adhyay

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Abstract

This paper examines Rabindranath Tagore's novels Naukadubi (1906) and Char Adhyay (1934) to explore how he represents the conflicts between love, duty, and nationalism within the social and political contexts of early twentieth-century Bengal. Using a qualitative and comparative approach, the study highlights how Naukadubi addresses the struggles of arranged marriage, mistaken identity, and the tension between personal affection and family obligations. Char Adhyay dramatizes the intrusion of revolutionary politics into private life, showing how militant nationalism demands the sacrifice of human relationships. Through these narratives, Tagore consistently underscores the primacy of emotional truth and ethical choice over rigid customs or ideological extremism. The analysis situates these novels within postcolonial debates on freedom and identity while drawing on Tagore's essays, especially Nationalism (1917), to contextualize his critique of both oppressive traditions and political violence. Findings suggest that Tagore's humanist philosophy is central to understanding his literary vision: he rejects all systems that suppress individual dignity in favour of compassion and moral responsibility. The paper concludes that comparative readings of these two works deepen appreciation of Tagore's evolving thought and open new avenues for research into his plays and essays that further examine similar dilemmas.

Keywords; Rabindranath Tagore, Naukadubi, Char Adhyay, Love and Duty, Nationalism, Humanism, Postcolonial Literature

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore, one of the greatest literary figures of modern India, was not only a poet but also a thinker, novelist, and philosopher. His novels often reflect his deep concern for the individual and society during the turbulent years of early twentieth-century Bengal. This period was marked by colonial rule, reform movements, and the growing wave of nationalist struggle. In such a climate, Tagore's fiction stood out for its unique blend of human emotions and ethical questions. Among his works, *Naukadubi* (1906) and *Char Adhyay* (1934) provide contrasting pictures of love, duty, and political consciousness. While the former deals with family ties and personal responsibilities, the latter explores the impact of nationalism on intimate relationships.

The central problem of this study lies in understanding how Tagore's novels capture the tension between private emotions, social obligations, and collective political goals. In *Naukadubi*, the narrative highlights the difficulties of balancing affection with the expectations of family and tradition. *Char Adhyay* shifts towards the intrusion of political movements into the personal sphere, showing how revolutionary ideals complicate matters of love and companionship. Together, these works raise critical questions about the individual's role in society and the cost of adhering to larger ideals. The objectives of this research are threefold: first, to examine the interwoven themes of affection, social duty, and national identity in these two novels; second, to trace how Tagore changes his approach to personal relationships when political and social obligations take centre stage; and third, to evaluate his critique of aggressive nationalism, especially where it conflicts with human feelings and moral choices.

From this standpoint, the study raises significant questions. How does *Naukadubi* present the clash between emotion and family tradition? In what ways does *Char Adhyay* portray the sacrifice of individual happiness under nationalist demands? Most importantly, what is Tagore's own philosophical position on the imbalance between private affection, social duty, and collective struggle? The significance of this inquiry lies in its contribution to Tagore studies as well as postcolonial discourse. By comparing these two texts, one can see how Tagore's outlook shifted over the years, moving from a concern with traditional social structures to a sharp criticism of militant nationalism. This analysis is also relevant to broader discussions about the conflicts between identity, freedom, and collective loyalty in modern

societies. Thus, the study not only deepens understanding of Tagore's novels but also opens insights into the universal dilemma of balancing love, duty, and political commitment.

Literature Review

Scholars approaching *Naukadubi* (1906) have tended to emphasise how Tagore questions arranged marriage, the instability of identity, and obligations owed to kin. Critics note that the novel's plot of mistaken identity foregrounds the emotional cost of weddings arranged without consent and the moral burdens that follow when families are bound by custom rather than affection. Several readings treat the heroine's predicament as an indictment of patriarchal control and as a probe into how social roles shape selfhood. This strand of criticism situates the novel within Tagore's wider inquiry into how tradition constrains private lives. Responses to *Char Adhyay* (1934) have focused on its darker interrogation of political violence, ethical ambiguity, and the psychological cost of revolutionary commitment. Many commentators read the slim novel as Tagore's explicit critique of militant patriotism: it dramatizes how ideological zeal can erode human sympathy, force painful choices, and demand self-sacrifice that destroys intimacy. Contemporary and later essays highlight the controversy the book provoked on publication, since many readers then equated patriotic violence with nobility; Tagore's skeptical stance attracted strong debate.

Critical literature on Tagore's political thought—especially his essays collected as *Nationalism* (1917)—provides an essential framework for interpreting both narratives. In those essays Tagore warns against the dehumanizing aspects of Western-style nationalism and stresses the value of moral universality over narrow territorial loyalties. Scholars repeatedly draw a line from those essays to Tagore's fiction of later years, arguing that his fiction stages the ethical tensions he lays out in prose: private bonds often stand at odds with mass movements that valorise sacrifice and discipline. Comparative studies of Tagore's novels have explored recurring conflicts between desire and duty across his corpus—works such as *Ghare Baire* and *Chokher Bali* are commonly paired with *Naukadubi* or *Char Adhyay* to map continuities in his moral imagination. These analyses trace Tagore's evolving sympathy for individual feeling alongside an increasing suspicion of collective fervour that suppresses personal conscience. Some recent essays re-evaluate the late novels as part of a steady trajectory from social reform toward a critique of political extremism. Despite this rich commentary, a clear gap exists: relatively few scholars have undertaken a focused, direct

comparison of *Naukadubi* and *Char Adhyay* specifically through the triadic lens of love, familial duty, and nationalism. While separate studies treat marriage and identity or examine revolutionary ethics, systematic work that juxtaposes how Tagore negotiates private affections against public obligations in these two texts remains limited. Filling this lacuna would illuminate how his earlier treatment of domestic constraint converses with his later interrogation of political sacrifice, and would refine our understanding of his ethical trajectory.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study draws upon postcolonial criticism, ethical philosophy, and narrative analysis to understand Tagore's vision. From a postcolonial standpoint, Tagore's rejection of militant nationalism becomes central. Unlike many contemporaries, he resisted the glorification of violence in the freedom struggle, warning that such extremism could destroy human values. His thought is also rooted in ethical and humanist philosophy, where he consistently placed universal compassion and moral responsibility above narrow political goals. This approach highlights his faith in human bonds as more enduring than ideological movements. At the same time, narrative theory helps in studying how his novels weave together intimate stories with wider social and political contexts. In *Naukadubi*, the personal tale of marriage and duty reflects social order, while in *Char Adhyay*, political struggle disrupts love and trust. Together, these frameworks reveal how Tagore balanced private emotions with collective pressures.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and analytical approach, focusing on a close study of Rabindranath Tagore's *Naukadubi* and *Char Adhyay*. The method involves detailed textual analysis, where themes, characterisation, and narrative techniques are examined to understand how Tagore presents the conflicts between personal duty, emotional bonds, and nationalist demands. A comparative framework is applied by placing both novels side by side, highlighting how the earlier work deals with family obligations and arranged marriage, while the later novel reflects the intrusion of political activism into private life. Along with primary texts, secondary sources such as scholarly essays, journal articles, and historical studies are consulted to provide critical insights and contextual depth. This combination of close reading and comparative analysis, supported by relevant criticism, helps to trace continuities and

contrasts in Tagore's vision, offering a deeper understanding of his critique of nationalism and emphasis on human values.

Analysis

Tagore's *Naukadubi* reflects the complexities of personal life in early twentieth-century Bengal. Without retelling the plot in detail, it may be said that the story grows around a mistaken identity within the institution of arranged marriage. Through this device, Tagore reveals how individuals often become powerless before customs that demand obedience. The novel portrays marriage not as a union based on choice but as a social arrangement controlled by family honour and expectations. This creates a sharp contrast between genuine feelings of love and the moral responsibility imposed by traditional bonds. By situating these conflicts within a recognisable Bengali setting, Tagore captures the social climate of his time, where reform debates were already questioning the rigidity of conventional practices. Implicitly, the narrative becomes a critique of rigid traditions. While Tagore does not openly reject cultural values, he exposes the silent suffering of those caught in structures that fail to recognise emotional truth. Nearly three decades later, *Char Adhyay* addresses another form of duty, one linked not to family but to political activism. Here the background is revolutionary nationalism in Bengal during the 1930s, when secret societies and militant groups sought liberation from colonial power through violence. Within this environment, the relationship between Ela and Atin becomes central. Their affection develops naturally, yet it is constantly overshadowed by the demands of political commitment. Atin is drawn into revolutionary activity, and Ela too faces pressure to place the cause above her personal life. The novel shows how devotion to an abstract ideal often demands painful sacrifices, including the denial of human tenderness. Tagore's disapproval of blind nationalism comes through in the way he portrays these sacrifices as destructive rather than ennobling. Love, trust, and compassion are lost when individuals are asked to serve a cause that disregards human values. Thus, *Char Adhyay* turns into a philosophical reflection on the dangers of subordinating life's most intimate bonds to political extremism.

Taken together, *Naukadubi* and *Char Adhyay* illustrate a significant evolution in Tagore's thought. In the earlier text, the tension lies between personal feeling and social duty within a traditional family structure. The conflict emerges from arranged marriage and mistaken identity, emphasising the restrictions of custom. The later novel presents a conflict between private affection and political obligation, where revolutionary zeal takes precedence over

love. In both cases, the individual struggles to balance inner desires with external expectations, yet the sources of pressure differ—society in *Naukadubi* and political ideology in *Char Adhyay*. This progression reveals how Tagore's concerns expanded over time. While he first questioned rigid traditions, he later turned to the growing dominance of militant nationalism, which he believed threatened human dignity. Both novels highlight the tension between personal freedom and imposed duty, but the scale shifts from the household to the nation. Nationalism, like tradition, becomes a backdrop as well as an obstacle to fulfilment. Through these narratives, Tagore consistently reminds readers that ethical choice and human sympathy should not be sacrificed for collective ideals. His works argue that true progress—whether social or political—must respect the individual's capacity for love, compassion, and moral responsibility. In this way, the two novels, though written in different periods, complement each other in showing Tagore's lifelong engagement with the dilemma of love and duty, and his humanist insistence on preserving emotional truth against the claims of both tradition and nationalism.

Discussion

Rabindranath Tagore's vision of humanism forms the foundation of his literary and philosophical work. Both *Naukadubi* and *Char Adhyay* express this belief, though in very different ways. What unites them is his constant rejection of extremes—whether they appear as oppressive social customs or as militant forms of nationalism. Tagore understood that any ideology, when enforced rigidly, can harm human life by ignoring emotions, compassion, and moral freedom. His novels offer a sustained argument for a humanist approach, where individuals are valued not as instruments of tradition or politics, but as beings with dignity, choice, and feeling. In *Naukadubi*, this comes through in his questioning of arranged marriage and its rigid framework. By showing the suffering caused by mistaken identity and the pressure of family duty, Tagore points to the limitations of customs that disregard the inner life of individuals. His humanism lies in giving importance to affection and truth within relationships rather than blindly following social codes. This is not a call for rejection of culture, but for reform that recognises human happiness. In *Char Adhyay*, written decades later, the critique takes on a sharper edge. Here the target is militant nationalism, which demands unquestioning loyalty to the cause of independence. Tagore portrays how such zeal sacrifices love and compassion, leading to alienation rather than liberation. His disapproval of violence stems from his humanist belief that political freedom cannot come at the cost of moral values. In his essays, especially *Nationalism* (1917), he had already argued that

excessive devotion to the nation often dehumanises individuals. The novel dramatises this idea by showing how Ela and Atin's bond is destroyed by political duty.

This humanist perspective holds deep significance for postcolonial debates on identity and freedom. In many parts of the world, struggles for independence gave rise to new forms of exclusion and violence, often replicating the very oppression they opposed. Tagore's warning, expressed through his fiction, anticipates these issues by reminding us that true freedom must include respect for individual conscience. His novels challenge the idea that collective liberation alone is enough; they argue for an inclusive vision where the personal and the political exist in balance. Tagore's critique also resonates with modern questions of how personal life intersects with wider social responsibilities. Even today, individuals face pressures from community, ideology, or professional demands that sometimes overshadow intimate relationships. By presenting characters torn between duty and affection, Tagore makes his works timeless. The dilemmas of his protagonists are not bound to colonial Bengal but reflect universal tensions of balancing private happiness with collective expectations. Ultimately, both *Nauskadubi* and *Char Adhyay* can be read as literary expressions of Tagore's philosophical and ethical concerns. They dramatise his lifelong insistence on compassion, choice, and human dignity as guiding principles for any society. His novels remind us that while traditions and political struggles are powerful, they should never erase the central value of human emotions. In this way, Tagore's humanism offers a vision that remains relevant for both literature and life today.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Rabindranath Tagore represents the tension between love, duty, and nationalism in his novels *Nauskadubi* and *Char Adhyay*. The objectives were to analyse the themes of affection, obligation, and political commitment; to explore the shifting portrayal of personal relationships against social and national pressures; and to understand Tagore's broader critique of nationalism in relation to ethical choices. These goals have been met through close reading and comparative analysis of the two works. The findings reveal that *Nauskadubi* presents the conflict between genuine emotion and the authority of family tradition. The story shows how arranged marriage and mistaken identity create a struggle between individual desire and social duty, reflecting the challenges of early twentieth-century Bengali society. *Char Adhyay* highlights the intrusion of militant politics into private life, as Ela and Atin's bond is overshadowed by the demand for revolutionary sacrifice. Both novels,

though different in setting and focus, demonstrate Tagore's consistent belief that human feelings and moral responsibility must take precedence over rigid systems, whether social or political. These insights deepen our understanding of Tagore's vision of nationalism and human relationships. For him, true freedom could not emerge from blind obedience to either tradition or political extremism, but from a recognition of individual dignity and compassion. His novels remain relevant for present debates about balancing personal happiness with social responsibilities. Future research may extend this discussion by comparing these novels with Tagore's plays such as *Ghare Baire* or with his essays, especially *Nationalism* (1917). Such studies could highlight how his humanist philosophy shaped not only his fiction but also his broader cultural and political thought, enriching our appreciation of his enduring contribution to world literature.

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