REVIEW ESSAY

Identity and Shared Humanity: Reflections on Amartya Sen's Memoir

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Home in the World: A Memoir, Amartya Sen (New York: Liveright/W.W. Norton, 2022), 480 pp., cloth $30.

The concept and implications of our shared humanity are central to the questions of where we belong, who we are, and how we relate to others. This idea features prominently in Amartya Sen's work and it runs through his recent memoir *Home in the World*. Sen's memoir is a compelling read, giving a fascinating view of the making of a great mind, a Nobel Laureate in welfare economics who is one of the foremost public intellectuals of our time. The approach taken in the memoir is decidedly inclusive, as Sen notes in the preface. Avoiding fragmentary and disjointed perspectives, he weaves a comprehensive and interlocking narrative of people, places, and ideas that brings together a unitary worldview where two multidimensional themes are juxtaposed: the presence of the past and the convergence of the near and the far. Sen notes that the divide between the near and the far is not so much a product of the barriers of space and time as it is a characteristic in the attitudinal makeup of people, both between and within communities.[1] In a stratified society, for instance, the near can be far due to a lack of shared concerns. Attitudinal changes enabled by establishing contacts and getting to know others expand people's moral universe and expedite institutional reforms.[2]

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Born in 1933, Sen grew up in a nurturing and liberal-minded community of friends and family in Bengal, India, with exceptionally gifted parents and grandparents. He received his early education at an innovative school that fostered curiosity, imagination, and empathy rather than competitive excellence. His college days were spent in two premier institutions in India and England. His penchant for engaging in animated discussions on topics covered (as well as not covered) in college curricula not only drew him closer to his classmates and professors but put him in the company of many of the most prominent intellectuals of the day. Added to this upbringing was his inherent fascination with abstract thinking and a "greedy curiosity" about the world around him. As Sen puts it: "Education, I decided, comes in many different forms" (p. 341). All this made him especially attuned to the power of knowledge, the value of education, the joy of friendship, and the allure of diversity. Not only did these values allow him to realize the potency of ideas, imagination, and empathy in reaching out to others and breaking down the barriers that divide people, they inspired him from his schooldays to actualize these ideals in his own life.

Sen's work, like his life, is global in dimension, and his memoir is rich with discussions on normative, practical, and policy concerns vital to our time, such as war, peace, and justice. In this essay, I highlight some of the life experiences and lessons shared in Sen's memoir, grounded in his ideas of identity and shared humanity. These ideas took on a prominent place in Sen's life, in part through his educational experience at the innovative school founded by the visionary poet, Rabindranath Tagore. Here, I draw on the views of both Sen and Tagore, as discussed in *Home in the World*. These lessons and ideas can guide us today as we navigate some of our most pressing challenges, many of which center around questions of identity and difference.

Where Is Home?

Where are people from and where do they belong? To this question, Amartya Sen wonders: "Why one place?" (p. 4). In reflecting on the first three decades of his life—all filled with an amazing range of experiences, encounters, and intellectual explorations spanning Asia, Europe, and North America—Sen finds that his home was wherever he found receptive and reflective human company. For Sen, a home does not have to be exclusive.

Partly, this was inculcated into Sen from an early age. His ancestral home in Dhaka was named "Jagat Kutir", which, in Bengali, means "The cottage of the

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world" (p. 6). This name reflected the disdain Sen's grandfather had for nationalism and was for Sen a reminder of the one shared world in which we live. Yet Sen also learned this by observing nature. For instance, growing up near mighty rivers in Bengal and Dhaka left a deep impression on him. The primacy of rivers in people's lives, regardless of their sectarian divides, became for him a symbolic nod to the shared plight of humanity—a lesson Sen carried with him all through his life.

All this helped him grow up with an open mind—even more so when, in 1941 at the age of seven, he moved from Dhaka to the other side of Bengal, to the idyllic college town of Santiniketan, where he spent ten engaging years at the school founded by Rabindranath Tagore at the turn of the twentieth century. The progressive, coeducational school was Tagore's vision of education put into practice where the mind is set free—where through a playful engagement with the arts and nature, along with learning the basics in the sciences and humanities, a child can joyously develop to his or her highest potential. Sen aptly called it the "school without walls," referring not only to the outdoor classes (weather permitting) but also metaphorically to the school's active commitment to transcending divides and boundaries. Along with an emphasis on reasoning and critical discourse, the values of empathy, imagination, and wonder were ingrained in the school curriculum and exemplified by the remarkable teachers, scholars, and thought leaders who were drawn to Tagore and the school from all over the world.

Santiniketan, where Tagore's school was located, is Bengali for "Abode of peace." The school's name, Visva-Bharati, means "India and the world." Its motto in Sanskrit, *Yatra visvam bhavatyeka needam* ("Where the world finds its nest"), reminded Sen of Jagat Kutir, his ancestral home, and the inspiration he derived from it. It was at Tagore's school that the young Sen found a renewed joy in learning and friendship that would propel him throughout his life.[3] He writes:

> Santiniketan was fun in a way I had never imagined a school could be. There was so much freedom in deciding what to do, so many intellectually curious classmates to chat with, so many friendly teachers to approach and ask questions unrelated to the curriculum, and—most importantly—so little enforced discipline . . . . (pp. 37–38)

Above all, though Tagore died a couple of months before Sen enrolled at the school, his life and ideas profoundly influenced and inspired Sen. He notes: "I was then seven, and had no idea how radically Tagore would influence my thinking in years to come" (p. 35). Tagore was deeply committed to the idea that the

boundaries and differences that create barriers to our common humanity are to be transcended in favor of a joyous engagement with the global world. But he was also careful to nurture this global vision of shared humanity while acknowledging and appreciating cultural complexities and differences. Tagore rejected the outright endorsement of anything and everything in the name of culture, but he was also against denigrating cultural practices per se.[4]

Sorting out the right balance of this approach is not simple. It requires a delicate blend of reason and imagination that takes time to cultivate and is best started at an early stage in one's life. At Tagore's school, Sen was intrigued by this challenge. Looking back, Sen writes:

> Rabindranath insisted on open debate on every issue, and distrusted conclusions based on a mechanical formula. . . . It is in the sovereignty of reasoning—fearless reasoning in freedom—that we can find Rabindranath Tagore's lasting voice.[5]

At the same time, Tagore's educational philosophy was rooted in the belief that a flourishing life is one that has room for play, exuberance, and imagination, which take us beyond mere acceptance of difference to a joyous celebration of diversity, as well as beyond the static comfort of our daily routines to the boundless wonder of the great unknown. Satyajit Ray—the celebrated film director who got his art degree from Tagore's university—has noted that even in Tagore's paintings, "the mood evoked . . . is one of a joyous freedom."[6] As Sen puts it: "The exceptional importance of that combination"—fearless reasoning and joyous freedom—"has remained with me all my life" (p. 43).

Sen's experience in Santiniketan helped supplement other experiences from his childhood. For instance, as a young boy during a three-year sojourn with his family from Dhaka to Mandalay, Sen was deeply moved by the beauty of the land and the buoyancy of the Burmese people paired with their serene simplicity. What he especially noticed was the prominence of women in Burmese society. Looking back, Sen considers women's agency in his Mandalay memories a learning experience—a lesson that was reinforced in Santiniketan, where Tagore's educational experiment was especially mindful of girls and women.[7] Tagore put great emphasis on dance and songs for infusing education with passion and delight. Performing in dance dramas gave female students a new sense of freedom and defiance, and girls and boys performed together. Often, Tagore himself would play a role with them, which they found inspiring. Even in those early days of the 1920s, the girls were instructed in martial arts and took part in games and

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sports along with the boys.[8] Sen was deeply touched by Tagore's guidance and inspiration that made possible such practical displays of women's empowerment. He writes: "It says something about Tagore's school that this opportunity was offered to girl students as well as boys a hundred years ago" (p. 7).

As Sen moved on with his studies at Santiniketan, he came to see that Tagore's quest for freedom and human dignity was embedded in a broader vision of humanity that makes room for multifaceted and overlapping identities of individuals and groups. In taking women out of their "boxed" identities as passive and subordinate members of society defined by their gender and infusing them with delight and confidence as they explored uncharted territories, Tagore was an inspiration for Sen, whose later work would contain pathbreaking ideas on women's agency.

In the midst of his "extraordinarily happy schooldays," Sen was acutely aware of "how terribly badly the lives of many others—hundreds of millions—go when deprivation of various kinds are heaped on each other" (p. 55). The 1943 Bengal famine was one such instance. Despite a severe lockdown on information imposed by the British rulers on the unfolding of the catastrophe, it was a topic of intense concern and discussion in Sen's family in Santiniketan. Sen took an early interest in this and other instances of human deprivation during his school days. His later work on famine and other related issues would eventually change the course of human understanding of poverty, deprivation, and human development.

College Life: Calcutta and Cambridge

After Santiniketan, Sen enrolled at Presidency College in Calcutta. The college had a stellar reputation for its intellectual leadership, but Sen was intrigued as much if not more by the heated discussions that took place outside of the classroom. In the coffee house across the street from the college, identity and the related issues of inequality and social conflicts were the recurring topics of conversation with his "left-leaning" classmates and friends. On the topics of liberty, social inequity, and market economies, the writings of Karl Marx evoked great interest in the group. For Sen, Marx's insistence upon seeing people from many different perspectives was a "vitally important message" for our world, where the penchant for labeling individuals and groups in one-dimensional terms not only robs them of the richness of their plural identities, it also lies at the root of pervasive inequality, exploitation, and conflict. Kenneth Arrow's social choice theory was another

topic of intense discussion for Sen and his friends, who obtained a copy of Arrow's important book on the topic, which had just been released at the time.[9] Adam Smith's ideas on political economy, especially their relevance in the understanding of inequalities and their remedies in India, were also topics of discussion at Presidency College, and more so in the coffee house across the street from the school.[10]

The joys of intellectual deliberation—reading, arguing, and debating—continued for Sen when he enrolled at Trinity College in Cambridge, England, in 1953. Looking back, Sen writes: "Reasons to reflect upon our varying identities seemed omnipresent in my college life and became increasingly clear to me in my years at Cambridge" (p. 372). His college days with Trinity continued for ten years, first as an undergraduate, then as a research student, and finally as a young lecturer. The discussion topics Sen encountered in Cambridge were broadly the same as they had been in Calcutta—the role of liberty and equity in left-wing political theory, with the complexity of identity problems in economic and political decision-making commanding a fair share of attention. Besides joining several debate and discussion societies at the university, Sen reached out to a wide range of exceptional thinkers in the Cambridge circle, while many others reached out to him. He was mentored by well-known economists, including three with very different political perspectives who became his close friends and eventually his collaborators: Maurice Dobb, a Marxist who had been Sen's hero in Calcutta when Sen first read his 1937 classic on political economy; the eclectic skeptic Piero Sraffa, who had a big influence on Cambridge philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein; and the conservative neoclassicist Dennis Robertson.[11]

Sen had misgivings about the one-sided coverage in the teaching of mainstream economics that he experienced first in Calcutta and later in Cambridge. He questioned the general assumption that "everyone puts self-interest first, without any other values influencing our concerns and decisions" (p. 220). For Sen, this one-dimensional portrayal of human motivation undermines the rich texture of a flourishing human identity. His concerns were shared by his left-leaning friends in the coffee house in Calcutta and especially by his diverse group of exceptional peers and mentors in Cambridge. Some of Sen's friends in the South Asian student groups in Cambridge shared with Sen the same concerns, and they would, along with him, go on to correct this deficit. Two notable friends include Mahbub ul Haq from Pakistan, who later pioneered the human development approach at the United Nations, through which nations are gauged in terms of

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the quality of life of their people; and Lal Jayawardena from Sri Lanka, who in 1985 became the founding director of the World Institute for Development Economics Research at the United Nations University in Helsinki.

As a student in Cambridge, Sen came to better understand some of the complexities of our multiple identities, including how circumstances shape it. He greatly benefited from his discussions with the world-renowned economist Oscar Lange, among others.[12] Sen also found Tagore's ideas quite relevant in understanding how identities adapt to circumstances. Tagore had been a major critic of Britain's subjugation of India but did not consider the British people as his (or India's) enemies. As Sen notes, Tagore "went out of his way to dissociate his criticism of the Raj from any denunciation of British people and culture" (p. 92). For Tagore, the "distinction between the role of Britain and that of British imperialism could not have been clearer" (p. 169). Likewise, not long after arriving in Cambridge, as Sen started wondering why England's social progress was not reflected in its relationship to colonial India, he became even more convinced that "the British in India went in a very different direction from the British in Britain" (p. 390).[13] Despite Britain's colonial subjugation of India, which Sen has powerfully critiqued in his speeches and writings, he was deeply touched by the friendliness and hospitality of the British people in England. He narrates a story of how deeply moved he was by the "Christian humanity" of a British friend's parents during his visit to the friend's home in Yorkshire. The parents "had spontaneous warmth and strong sympathy for all those they met—and indeed for people across the world" (p. 270). Sen notes: "In thinking about the changeability and manipulability of identity, I became increasingly convinced that we must consider much more carefully how our identities adjust to circumstances, often in unpredictable ways" (p. 375). Although in this statement Sen is referring to a very different set of circumstances related to politics and economic decision-making, the point made here has general validity.

Nested Multiple Loyalties

With the symbiotic relationship between identity and violence in the rising politics of hatred and intolerance across the globe, Sen sees "how easy it is to generate hostility and violence by fanning the flames of division in artificially generated identity confrontations" (p. 266). He witnessed this as a young boy in the Hindu-Muslim riots prior to the partition of India in the 1940s, when an

otherwise tolerant and inclusive Indian society went up in flames over the religious divide. Later, as a student, seeing the names of so many Trinity men who had been killed in the two European wars on the walls of the college chapel, Sen was reminded that the Europeans fought against each other along the lines of another identity divide—national identity—which even trumped the commonality of their religion.

For Sen, who grew up with a disdain for nationalism and communal separatism, such vivid instances of the disruptive power of singular identity left a deep impression as he struggled to understand the multiple layers of identity. He found inspiration in Tagore, who responded to similar concerns. At Santiniketan, Sen was nurtured by Tagore's global vision of a broader humanity that makes room for multifaceted and overlapping identities of individuals and groups. For instance, Tagore took pride in his cultural heritage, yet he cautioned people not to use the rigid identities of culture and religion as a wedge in their common pursuit of human dignity. We see a nod to this idea in Sen's affirmation of his Bengali identity: "A Bengali identity has always been important for me, without being invasive enough to obliterate my other loyalties of occupation, politics, nationality and other affiliations, including that of my shared humanity with all others" (p. 132). For Sen, an individual's various loyalties, made up of plural and overlapping identities, are to be understood not as conflicting loyalties but as nested multiple loyalties. They may sometimes compete with wider objects of loyalty or affiliations, such as our shared humanity, but we negotiate the challenges posed by multiple identities all the time. Sen would like us to get beyond the narrow conundrum of conflicting loyalties—beyond the boundaries of groups, cultures, and religions—and focus on the substantive issues of interdependence confronting our common humanity while simultaneously embracing the best in all cultures and groups.

Futility of War

Sen focused on mathematics and Sanskrit in his studies at Tagore's school in Santiniketan. He found the two complemented each other. The analytical rigor of mathematics was reflected in the linguistic intricacies of the Sanskrit grammarians and in the works of several great Sanskrit mathematicians. Studying Sanskrit opened up an important dimension in Sen's thinking, as he explored the vast reservoir of literature on agnostic and argumentative atheistic thought based in the

works of the Lokayata and Charvaka schools of philosophy, among others.[14] Sanskrit was also the language of Gautama Buddha's rationalistic and agnostic philosophy. Learning about Buddha's reason-based moral psychology had a great impact on Sen's thinking. Buddha's focus on humanity's interdependence and interconnectivity and, as a corollary to that, the Buddhist ethics of universal compassion would be valuable resources for Sen in his later work on justice.[15]

Yet Sen also loved the great plays and poetry of the ancient classics and the two Sanskrit epics: the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata.* From the ancient Sanskrit plays, Sen gleaned lessons on the significance of a person's multiple identities as well as the value of social attitudinal reform in mitigating conflict and violence. Sen also took note of the *Bhagavad Gita*—a short but important poetic text that is part of the *Mahabharata*—containing the dialogue between the divine Krishna and the dissenting and despondent warrior Arjuna on the duty to fight a just war and the morality of social contract. Collectively, these ideas feature in Sen's later work on justice and the argumentative tradition in Indian thought.

Sen draws on the teachings of Jesus and Buddha to underscore the dimension of shared humanity in his pioneering work on justice. Citing the story of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus questions the idea of a fixed neighborhood, Sen observes that "there are a few non-neighborhoods left in the world today."[16] Going beyond the concept of reciprocity between equals that is embedded in the idea of social contract in the dominant Western ethics of justice, Sen's project of global justice takes a critical look at the realities of entrenched inequalities. Citing Buddha's teaching, Sen argues that we have responsibility to the global poor precisely because of the asymmetry between us—our power and their vulnerability—and not necessarily because of any symmetry that is presumed in the social contract of reciprocity. Although Sen's idea of justice is relational, it is not transactional—it is inclusive. It is to Sen's credit that he integrates the uplifting words of two great religious teachers into his secular political philosophy of justice, thereby providing a seamless blending of dimensions that is rich and unique.

To illustrate the scope and relevance of a broad-based consequentialist evaluation critical to his theory of justice, Sen cites the dialogue between Krishna and the ace warrior Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, raising foundational questions about the ethics of war and peace. Sen notes that Arjuna's concern with fighting was not only about the impersonal consequences of the war's devastation; it was also about his own role in contributing to that carnage. For Sen, a comprehensive

consequentialist approach accommodates the motivation of taking responsibility for one's choices, which demands a "situated evaluation" of one's own position in the scheme of things.[17] This agent-sensitive consequentialist perspective endorses the importance of agency and personal responsibility so ingrained in the deontic framework, without making the procedure unduly tilted toward backward-looking considerations. It also puts a limit on the impersonal optimizing strategy that critics level against consequentialism. This broad-based consequentialist evaluation, where actual consequences are just a part of what Sen calls the "plural grounding procedure,"[18] is a key element of Sen's social choice matrix of comparative justice, one that assesses the relative merits of available states of affairs. From this perspective, Krishna's duty-based exhortation to Arjuna to fight and not give up pales next to Arjuna's compelling real-life moral dilemma.[19]

Sen's reconfiguration of the moral imperatives of the Krishna-Arjuna dialogue shows that the story is not just about Arjuna's crisis of faith and resolve, which is how the tale is widely known, but more importantly, it is about the futility of war itself, even when a war is considered just by the prevailing judgment of the day. Indeed, Sen's work on global justice has been an exemplary road map for showing the futility of warfare for the cause of peace, security, and justice. Instead, Sen's project calls for rooting out the underlying causes of conflict, injustice, and humanitarian crises through a collaborative system of just governance. The goal of his proactive noninterventionist platform is to make the case for preventive military intervention redundant. Sen has shown that peace with justice, or "just peace," is the true foundation of an enduring peace.

Returning to Trinity as the master of the college forty-five years after he enrolled there as a student and seeing again the names of the Trinity men killed in the First World War, Sen realized that they died "in a *completely unnecessary* European war, long before I was born in a far-away land" (pp. 262–63, emphasis added).

Global Amity

As we saw above, in Cambridge Sen wondered how Europe would overcome the political division that had led to the "carnage in Europe in the two world wars" (p. 305). The dreadful manipulation of national pride leading to such horror was a powerful reminder for Sen of the complexity of identity and its potential

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for generating violence. Sen was well aware of Tagore's vocal opposition to nationalism and his stance against communalism and religious sectarianism. Tagore's message was consistently to "stand upon the higher ideals of humanity and never to . . . [fall prey to the] organized selfishness of Nationalism as . . . [a] religion." For Tagore, "Moral law is the law of humanity."[20]

Although Tagore's vision of a global world has no room for nationalism in this sense, it also eschews liberal internationalism. Anthony Burke, in an opinion shared by other scholars, has noted that liberal internationalism, with its latent "statist, geopolitical agenda," has been "inexorably drawn toward the norm of war and the instrumental images of the human . . . [that] war would engender."[21] As early as 1916–1917, Tagore foresaw that this flawed civilizational model rooted in Europe's liberal internationalism would someday engulf the continent and the world in the ruined ashes of violence and war. This is what he saw happening in 1941, when in his last message to the world in *Crisis in Civilization*, he wrote in anguish: "As I look around, I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilisation strewn like a vast heap of futility."[22]

The memories of the war were still fresh in the minds of people across Europe in the 1950s, when Sen, as a student in Cambridge, undertook several trips across the continent. Visiting Italy and Germany, where nationalism had been such a dominant force for several decades, Sen was pleased to see the unrepressed buoyancy of the Italian people and was taken in by the idealistic global vision of the young German students he met at a local wine festival on the Rhine. A comment made by one of the students struck a special chord with him. Hearing from Sen how far away his native Bengal was from where they met, the student became quite excited and announced: "We have to get the whole world together. . . . We are all neighbours . . . but we must work for it" (p. 307). The comment reminded Sen of Luke's gospel in the story of the Good Samaritan. He could sense how the young generation in Germany was shifting away from the earlier nationalism. He saw many signs of change only a decade after the terrible war, including the message of "global amity" implicit in the student's comment. This memory came back to Sen later when he heard German chancellor Angela Merkel arguing, in response to the Syrian crisis, that "Germany must take a large number of refugees, as a part of its reasoned commitment to 'our global neighbours'" (p. 307).

Likewise, while teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, on a visiting assignment in 1964–1965, Sen was impressed by how minority immigrants growing up under British colonial rule in diverse parts of the world were drawn to

Berkeley and found a home, and friendship, in the intellectual and argumentative circles shaped by Berkeley's free speech movement. The *New York Times* reported: "For foreign students—many coming from countries with strong left-wing movements—the rise in activism made them feel at home, said the Indian economist Amartya Sen . . . who was teaching at Berkeley at the time."[23] Sen notes that America's turn toward greater social equity and inclusive public policies over the decades has been in large part due to the free speech movement and activism in the 1960s: "Public debates and radical movements have made a significant contribution to this change" (p. 367).

Sen enjoyed the thrill of teaching his "astonishingly talented" students at the Delhi School of Economics, after completing his tenure at Cambridge in 1963. He narrates a moving episode of the reaction of his students during one of his lectures when he read aloud a passage from Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in which Smith strongly denounces the practice of slavery in America and Europe and resoundingly praises the people from the coast of Africa as superior to the slave owners. Sen's students, who in their own investigations found some of the practices of inequality in India close to the inhumanity of slavery, felt an "immediate sense of solidarity" with and a sense of pride in the people far away from them in Africa, as they felt with the people nearby. Sen recalls the shock and horror Tagore felt, much as Smith did, in response to the degrading treatment received by a segment of humanity on account of their race or status. Sen concludes his memoir thus: "It was reassuring to find that the fundamental respect and understanding of people for which Smith and Tagore argued was so clearly recognized by the students. This must surely be a strong source of hope in the world" (p. 407).

Democracy and Identity Politics

Meeting and interacting with people in different European countries who were open and inclusive during Sen's youthful travel days gave Sen a sense of watching the "unfolding of European integration." Indeed, as Sen looks back, he sees "some amazing achievements in Europe" over the intervening years in such important areas as human rights, rule of law, participatory democracy, the rise of the welfare state, and economic and political cooperation. Yet, with dismay, Sen notes the recent rise of a "backward-looking attitude" in several European countries, including Britain, regarding European democratic tradition and European unity (p. 386).

This trend reflects a recent surge of polarized politics centered on nativist populism and identity politics in democracies all over the world, posing a threat to the viability of participatory democracy. As with many related areas, Sen's justice project has an important bearing on this issue. Indeed, his project has innovative prescriptions for a built-in safeguard against the corrosive effects of identity politics within a liberal democracy.

The prime source of conflict between proponents of democratic solidarity and nativist populism on issues of identity is the cherished liberal idea that an impartial liberal theory of justice need not be incompatible with distinct principles of affirmative equality with regard to minority groups, within reason, of course. This idea helps liberals justify minority accommodation in a pluralistic liberal democracy. But it leaves both sides—the minorities and the populists—unhappy, with the complaint of tokenism on one side and that of over-catering to minorities on the other, leading to simmering anger rooted in feelings of powerlessness.[24] This distrust is a barrier to dialogue and deliberation as a means of negotiating claims of culture and identity, both within and among groups. It makes pluralism—the hallmark of liberal democracy—an elusive goal.

In contrast to this divisive solidarity along national, cultural, and ideological lines, Sen's ideas lay the foundation for an inclusive democratic solidarity. During his student days in Cambridge, Sen was instructed by his mentor Piero Sraffa to read Sraffa's old friend John Maynard Keynes "on the formation—and importance—of public opinion and its role in social transformation . . ." Sen learned, among other things, that for Keynes public reasoning was critically important for a healthy democracy, and that "Keynes was eager to show how crucial it was for different sides to work together for the realization of their respective goals . . . even when their goals do not fully coincide . . . ." (p. 387).

The importance of public reasoning in a pluralistic democracy has been a key component in Sen's great contribution in the culture and human rights debate, as well as to the topic of justice. Sen has opened the way to bridging the divide between theoretical pronouncements and practical impediments by situating the arguments of justice in the real world of diversity, need, vulnerabilities, and interdependence. Sen's approach is practical and pluralistic, and based on the discipline of social choice, which pays attention to the lives of people as lived in the real world. For that, according to Sen, one need not be focused on ideal institutional arrangements, but should instead concentrate on promoting enabling institutions and viable social realizations to ensure the mitigation of injustice.

Accordingly, Sen proposes a comparative approach that is primarily about rectifying injustices rather than locating ideal justice. This bottom-up approach is in contrast to the dominant Western social-contract paradigm that seeks perfect justice in a liberal democracy. Sen's concern is more practical, guided by the realities of people's lives and capabilities, with a focus on people's plural identities.

Sen's comparative approach is open enough to guide people in assessing and ranking available alternatives, without the need to speculate on all possible outcomes for a perfect resolution. In fact, his approach is broad and inclusive in its enunciation of what counts as reasonable, and it even accepts the prospect of more than one reasonable option. Even if this procedure cannot always resolve all competing claims, Sen points out that this "valuational plurality" makes public reasoning all the more necessary, to be celebrated rather than shunned in a democracy.[25] Public reasoning emboldens democracy by making it truly participatory.[26] It brings disparate groups together by showcasing their concerns in the shared arena, which generates cooperation and mutual understanding.[27]

Sen's justice project is tied to the plurality of impartial reasons embedded in today's expanding circle of global human-rights approaches. Because the notion of human rights is predicated on our shared humanity, Sen's idea of justice is open to the world. It goes beyond national borders and regards people, rather than states, as sovereign.[28] Sen is aware that "there are bound to be difficulties in advancing the assessment of global justice through public reasoning,"[29] especially due to social media and the Internet. Yet he is cautiously optimistic. He notes: "What is needed is to make . . . public reasoning more extensive, more systematic, and much better informed, partly through expanding the vehicles of dissemination of information, strengthening the facilities for 'fact-checking' and for the scrutiny of 'fake news,' and doing what we can to remove the barriers to public discussion."[30] Sen declares that in a world where our lives are globally interdependent as never before, "if the jointness of problems of justice is a *global reality*, interactive and informed reasoning is surely a *global necessity*."[31]

Sen gives us a challenging but promising road map toward restoring liberal democracy in the face of populist illiberalism. However, regardless of how inspiring and practicable his path might be, it ultimately depends on the prevailing political will as to whether or not his vision is put into practice.[32]

Sen notes: Keynes's efforts to "sway contemporary government policy were not immediately successful," but he "contributed a great deal to the 'general opinion of the future'. . . ." (p. 388) Likewise, regardless of whether Sen's ideas are getting

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immediate success in responding to the current political challenges, his monumental contribution to the imperatives of justice in our global world is a great gift to scholars and policy makers for generations to come.

Home in the World

Noted ethicist Sissela Bok observes that when children are deprived of a culturally rooted education, "they risk developing a debilitating sense of being exiled everywhere."[33] Tagore was well aware of this risk. He made efforts to see that students' education was firmly rooted in Indian history and culture as well as in the Asian heritage, while simultaneously pursuing relevant knowledge and wisdom gathered from all corners of the world. Sen was a beneficiary of this well-rounded education early in his life. In Sen's world, the local and the global complement each other. Sen's affirmation of his humanity and universalism is not rootless globalism or vacuous cosmopolitanism—it is the confluence of the near and the far in his wide range of experiences, encounters, and intellectual explorations all through his life. Sen takes pride in his Bengali identity, but it does not prevent him from affirming his other interlocking identities, loyalties, and obligations, including an affirmation of his shared humanity.

Instead of the exclusivity of a singular identity, Sen's vision makes room for a joyous interplay of multifaceted and overlapping identities whereby the imperatives of human yearnings are not compromised in the name of local practices or blindly followed while ignoring cultural roots and traditions. He goes beyond the narrow conundrum of conflicting loyalties, where the forces of nationalism and ethnocentrism can have an uneasy alliance with the broader vision of our common humanity, as we see in Tagore's novel *The Home and the World*.[34] Sen's mission is to bring the local and the global together in finding our home *in* the world.

Sen himself has felt at home in the world in terms of both his ideas and his global engagements. He has been a leading catalyst for innovative vision in today's troubled world. His ideas have been instrumental in exploring the prospects of collective action and value-based dialogue in a divided world where norms clash. A leading critic of culture and also a passionate global citizen who embraces the best in all cultures, Sen rejoices in the shared humanity of the global world.

Being at home in a global world is the foremost challenge of our time. By reframing the debate on culture and universal norms in accessible experiential

terms, away from its usually contested cultural and foundational juxtaposition, Amartya Sen has shown us the way toward responding to this global challenge.

Notes

[1] Noted philosopher and ethicist Amy Gutmann cites the compelling example of Cornelia Sorabji to make a similar point: "Sorabji's cultivation of multiple cultural identities permitted her to feel more rather than less at home in England, despite the fact that it was not her homeland." Amy Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 52. (Amartya Sen brings in the example of Sorabji's plural identities in one of his essays, and Gutmann cites Sen to make her point about Sorabji.)

[2] Sen cites friendship as a good example of this. In extolling the virtues of friendship in fostering connections between people far and near, Sen points out the "admirable goodness" of humanity that often gets overlooked (Amartya Sen, *Home in the World* [New York: Liveright/W.W. Norton, 2022], p. 301). Likewise, Sen notes that shared vulnerabilities, not just strength, can also bring people together. He bemoans the lack of sufficient coverage on the topic of friendship in literature, compared to, say, love (p. 54).

[3] Tagore's school "began as a school for boys in 1901, but in effect it was co-educational throughout because the teachers' daughters were a part of the school and its activities from its inception." (Uma Das Gupta, "Shantiniketan: Education for Girls," in *Tagore's Ideas of the New Woman: The Making and Unmaking of Female Subjectivity*, eds. Chandrava Chakravarty and Sneha Kar Chaudhuri [London: Sage Publications, 2017], pp. 13–25, at p. 13). The school became a coeducational international university with the name Visva-Bharati in 1921, with facilities for higher studies and research. Its institutes for art, music, languages, and area studies, as well as undergraduate and graduate studies, were widely known.

[4] In other words, Tagore showed us that rejecting relativism is not inconsistent with endorsing pluralism.

[5] Amartya Sen, "Tagore and His India" (*New York Review of Books*, June 26, 1997), pp. 55–63, at p. 62.

[6] Satyajit Ray, quoted in Sen, "Tagore and His India," p. 63.

[7] The feature that Sen considers a "global lesson" for him in his Mandalay memories is how propaganda and selective hatred focused on a singular identity can move a tolerant and serene people toward militancy, as happened in Myanmar (formerly Burma) in its treatment of the Rohingya people.

[8] Sen's mother, Amita Sen, a noted alumna of Tagore's school, played the lead role in several of Tagore's dance dramas and also learned judo at the school.

[9] Sen and his exceptionally gifted friend at Presidency College, Sukhamoy Chakravarty, among others, were actively engaged in pursuing the implications of Arrow's social choice theory at the Calcutta coffee house. To Sen's delight, Chakravarty was also teaching at MIT on a visiting appointment when Sen was invited to teach there for a year during his Cambridge days in 1960.

[10] Neither Arrow nor Smith featured prominently in the curriculum of Sen's Cambridge studies. Sen has been instrumental in taking social choice theory to a new height. The topic played a central role in Sen's later work on justice. He and Arrow collaborated on this and other related ideas and were later colleagues at Stanford and Harvard. Sen's work on justice also benefited greatly from Smith's ideas.

[11] Noted economist Joan Robinson was Sen's PhD thesis director. In discussing with Robinson her critique of mainstream economics as well as the Marxian perspective, Sen found her rather dogmatic and rigid. Sen could not help thinking about the open-minded argumentative Indian philosophical tradition that he found so inspiring in his study of Sanskrit at Tagore's school.

[12] Lange's name often came up in Sen's political and economic discussions with his friends at the Calcutta coffee house.

[13] Coming from the Indo-Gangetic plain, Sen was taken in by the early sunset in his first autumn in Cambridge. Sen comments: "No wonder the British have had such an obsession with possessing an empire where the sun never sets" (p. 295). In the colonial world, however, some people have a different take on this. For them, the sun did not set on the British empire because God did not trust the Brits in the dark!

[14] The Charvaka example of rational discourse, in its emphasis on a penchant for clarity and nonconformity, a questioning mind, and a humanist spirit, has played a seminal role in Sen's own thinking.

[15] Sen's learned maternal grandfather, Kshiti Mohan Sen, was a big influence on Sen's intellectual development. Kshiti Mohan introduced young Sen to Buddha's ideas and to various Sanskrit texts, as well as to the songs and poems of the medieval Muslim Sufis who pursued religion in their own ways that showed respect for both Muslim and Hindu thought. Kshiti Mohan was Tagore's associate

from the early days of the Santiniketan school and helped Tagore in the broadening of his understanding of religious pluralism.

[16] Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 173.

[17] Amartya Sen, "Consequential Evaluation and Practical Reason," *Journal of Philosophy* 97, no. 9 (September 2000), pp. 477–502, at p. 483.

[18] Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, p. 2.

[19] Nonetheless, pointing to the richness of the evolving narrative depicted in the epic, especially Krishna's nuanced and lengthy exploration of moral psychology in defending an innovative and far-reaching duty-ethic, Sen acknowledges that the debate could possibly have two reasonable sides where both positions have ample room to develop their respective arguments (Sen, "Consequential Evaluation and Practical Ethics," p. 482). I discuss this "valuational plurality" in more detail in the section titled "Democracy and Identity Politics."

[20] Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1918), pp. 39, 22.

[21] Anthony Burke, "Against the New Internationalism," *Ethics & International Affairs* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2005), pp. 73–89, at p. 86.

[22] Rabindranath Tagore, "Crisis in Civilization," in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3, ed. S. K. Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1999), at p. 726.

[23] Ellen Barry, "How Kamala Harris's Immigrant Parents Found a Home, and Each Other, in a Black Study Group," *New York Times*, updated October 6, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/09/13/us/kamala-harris-parents.html.

[24] Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018); and Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

[25] Early on, Sen found a version of this valuational plurality in Tagore's thinking. Sen writes: "One important aspect of it was his willingness to accept that many questions may be unresolved even after our best efforts, and our answers may remain incomplete. I found Tagore's outlook very persuasive and it had a great influence on my own thinking. The domain of unfinished accounts would change over time, but not go away, and in this Rabindranath saw not a defeat, but a beautiful, if humble, recognition of our limited understanding of a vast world" (p. 90).

[26] We saw an instance of this in the preceding section where Sen notes that America's turn toward greater social equity and inclusive public policies was in large part due to the free speech movement and rising public debates in the 1960s.

[27] Sen has famously shown that famines do not happen in democracies that thrive on public debates and discussions, even when there is scarcity of resources.

[28] Besides Keynes, Adam Smith's idea of the "impartial spectator" in the "Smithian moral reasoning"—"paying attention to the lack of bias and divisiveness that we should try to utilize by imagining how someone from outside, devoid of personal or local prejudices, would assess a particular situation" (p. 406)—was an inspiration for Sen in developing his idea that public reasoning is critically important in a vibrant democracy.

[29] Amartya Sen, "Ethics and the Foundation of Global Justice," *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2017), pp. 261–70, at p. 269.

[30] Ibid., p. 269.

[31] Ibid., pp. 269–70.

[32] On a similar note, Joshua Cohen writes: "We are not without resources for addressing possible tensions between and among the values of liberty, equality, and community built into the deliberative conception. But whether or not those resources are exploited is, of course, a matter of politics." Joshua Cohen, "Procedure and Substance in Deliberative Democracy," in Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 95–119, at p. 113.

[33] Sissela Bok, "From Part to Whole," in Joshua Cohen, ed., *For Love of Country? A New Democracy Forum on the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 38–44, at p. 43.

[34] In noting the influence of Tagore's ideas in his life, Sen writes: "The title of this memoir is inspired by [Tagore's] book *The Home and the World*, and reflects his influence" (p. xiv).

Abstract: Amartya Sen's memoir, *Home in the World*, is a compelling read, giving a fascinating view of the making of the mind of one of the foremost public intellectuals of our time. In reflections on the first three decades of his life—all filled with an amazing range of experiences, encounters, and intellectual explorations that span Asia, Europe, and North America—Sen weaves a comprehensive

and interlocking narrative that brings together a unitary worldview where two multi-dimensional themes are juxtaposed throughout the book: the presence of the past and the convergence of the near and the far. In this essay, I highlight some of the life experiences and lessons shared in Sen's memoir grounded in his ideas of identity and shared humanity. These ideas took on a prominent place in Sen's life, in part, through his educational experience at the innovative school founded by the visionary poet Rabindranath Tagore. I draw on the views of both Sen and Tagore, as discussed in Sen's memoir. These lessons and ideas can help us in appreciating the power of knowledge, the value of education, and the allure of diversity. They can also guide us in our search for a more just world.

Keywords: women's agency, Gautama Buddha, democracy, shared humanity, identity, justice, nationalism, Amartya Sen, Rabindranath Tagore, war