

## **Bimala (Tagore's novel *Home and the World*) Domestic**

**Character** Bimala is Nikhil's young, innocent and naïve wife, whose transformation from 'home' to the outside world is the main thread of this story. At first, she lacks confidence and remains at home, the perfect ideal of the domesticated Hindu wife. She is even hesitant to cross the threshold and go outside the house. Gradually, through Nikhil's encouragement and through her infatuation with Sandip, a charismatic political radical, she gains the confidence to cross the boundary and emerge into the external world. In this way, the timid, stereotypical Hindu woman is transformed into a sophisticated, westernised woman with opinions on affairs of 'the world.' As a result, she gets confused, swept away by the rush into the external world that is encouraged by her husband. She is so enchanted with Sandip's vision of a new world that she imagines herself as the embodiment of all Bengali women. The drama of her new self-image is evident in her words: 'For 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.' Slowly, however, the dream begins to fade and her emancipation begins to feel like a trap, a test of her chastity that her husband has set for her. In the end, she achieves a fuller understanding of herself and her role in the world, rejecting the selfishness of Sandip and embracing her husband's generosity.

**Activities** During the first half of the novel, Bimala is engaged in typical household tasks, such as sewing, cleaning and especially cooking and feeding her husband. Later on, she takes part in political and social discussions. She also takes lessons in western music and mannerisms from an English woman.

### **Illustrative moments**

*Domestic* In one moving scene, early on in the novel, Bimala is described as poised on the threshold dividing the inner courtyard of the house from the outer part with sitting rooms. She tentatively looks out, drawing the border of her sari tighter to hide more of her face. She places a hand on the doorframe and wonders what takes place 'out there,' and then hears the voice of Sandip, the radical talking with her husband. She listens and as she does so she begins to question why she is not allowed to cross the boundary to the 'world.'

*Devoted* As the epitome of a Hindu wife, Bimala is devoted to her husband, conscious of his every need and serving him food and drink. In their bedroom one night, she wipes the dust from his feet, as a religious devotee would do to the statue of a god. Nikhil, her husband, is stunned into silence by this act of devotion, which on one level strikes him as servitude. But there is such purity and calmness in her action that he remains silent.

*Guilt-stricken* Bimala's infatuation with Sandip, which is the catalyst for her liberation, does not pass without leaving a strong sense of guilt in her. In one scene, toward the end of the novel, she is quietly sewing a blouse when she is overcome with emotion at what she has done. As she explains, 'I wonder what could have happened to my feeling of shame. The fact is, I had no time to think about myself...I am ashamed to speak of it today, but I felt no shame then. Something within me was at work of which I was not even conscious.'