

## ***Home and the World* (1916)**

**Overview** *Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire* in the original Bengali) is one of four novels by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Although Tagore is better known for this poetry (for which he won the Nobel Prize in 1913), his novels are powerful pieces of social realist fiction. Written in the form of diary entries by the three main characters, the novel is also experimental and allows the reader to view events from three different perspectives.

**Story** This is the story of Nikhil, a kind, educated landlord in rural Bengal, set against the background of the Swadeshi Movement led by Gandhi, which sought to wean Indians from the destructive dependence on foreign-made goods. Nikhil marries Bimala, who is from a simple, poor family and does not have the social awareness of her husband. Early on in the story, Sandip, a political radical, comes to stay in Nikhil's and Bimala's home, and he has a deep influence on Bimala. Slowly, Bimala grows closer and closer to Sandip and falls in love with him, although she appears confused and is swept away as much by his politics as his person. Nikhil sees what is happening and tells her that she is free to choose her partner, explaining that he married her when she was little more than a girl and could not choose for herself. He encourages her to have a life outside the home as well as within it, a radical idea at the time, reflected in the novel's title. As Bimala gets drawn into the Swadeshi movement, she adopts a young radical man, Amulya, as her son. When she encourages him to get money for their cause, he commits a murder. Later, when rioters attack the home of a fellow (but Muslim) landlord, Nikhil and Amulya hurry to defend him. Although Nikhil refuses to take a gun, he escapes unharmed, while Amulya, who is armed, is killed. Then Bimala herself steals money from Nikhil but later regrets it and asks Amulya to pawn her jewellery to get money with which to replace the stolen cash. Sandip appears and takes her jewellery box, planning to pawn it and use the money for the cause. Now she realises that Sandip is self-centred and does not love her, whereas Nikhil does. This results in a reunion with her husband, which is cut short by his untimely death. The novel concludes on a sombre note, with Bimala alone clad in the white clothes of a widow.

### **Characters**

**Nikhil** Nikhil, the protagonist, is a cultured man from a high-status caste of landlords (not unlike the author of the novel). He is gentle and progressive in his thinking, as exemplified by his choice of marrying an ordinary woman from a poor family. He treats her with love and respect, but his liberal attitudes are stretched when he discovers that she is in love (or infatuated) with another man. Despite that, he tells her she can have her freedom, if she desires. He is a self-declared patriot, although he does not participate in the political movement of the time (*swadeshi*, or 'home-rule').

**Bimala** Bimala is Nikhil's wife and in some ways is just as central to the themes of the novel. Unlike other women in Nikhil's aristocratic family, she is ordinary-looking and from a poor background. At one point Bimala is described 'taking the dust of my husband's feet without waking him.' She undergoes a transformation from the innocent, idealised dutiful wife, confined to the home where she wants to be, to a politically-aware, confident woman who learns how to be an equal partner in her marriage.

**Sandip** Sandip, a friend of Nikhil, is the third major character in the novel and forms the third side of a love triangle. He is passionate in his revolutionary politics, advocating violent overthrow of the British Raj. He argues with the passivist Nikhil, saying 'there is not the time for nice scruples. We must be unswervingly, unreasoningly brutal. We must sin.' Later, however, he is revealed as self-centred and deceitful, betraying friendship to support his cause.

**Amulya** Amulya is a younger radical, under the thumb of Sandip and just as passionate. He represents the raw power of politics without any compassion for real human beings. Half way through the novel, he is adopted by Bimala, but even she cannot control his violent tendencies, as when he kills a man to raise money for the cause.

## Themes

*Nationalism* The novel was written during one of the intense phases of the movement for Indian independence. Swadeshi, or self-rule, was promoted by Gandhi and others as a non-violent means (boycotting foreign goods) to independence. Others advocated violent uprising as the only way to drive out the British. Tagore dramatises the debate by making Nikhil and Sandip take these two opposed strategies for national independence. The fact that Sandip, the violent radical, is shown to lack a personal morality is certainly Tagore's verdict on the political debate that was raging during his lifetime

*Women* \_ An equally strong theme is the role of women, which was central also to some strands of the Independence movement. In the first half of the novel, Bimala (Nikhil's wife) is shown as blindly worshipping her husband because this is what she is expected to do. This is the 'home' element of novel and its title. She is 'at home' in the domestic sphere. Slowly, she emerges, in part through the political awareness she gains from her infatuation with Sandip. Now she can take part in 'the world,' the other half of the title. And, in the end, she begins to realise that she loves her husband not necessarily because that is her role but because she is free to love him. And that, Tagore, suggests is the mark of a truly emancipated woman, someone who can choose.

*Truth and Illusion* Tagore was a mystic, whose poetry often described the world in terms of *maya*, or illusion, and *satya*, or truth. He explores this tension in this novel, too, describing characters who are subject to fantasy and are redeemed by reality. The political radical, Sandip, for example, believes that violence can create freedom. He acts as a sort of con-man, who tricks people into believing that independence will be a world of unlimited material comforts and sensual satisfaction. What they get, however, is a grim and ugly struggle. Bimala, too, suffers from the belief that she is responsible for the pain and suffering caused by the violent political movement she supported. Her delusion is evident when, after becoming politicised, she declares that she is 'the sole representative of Bengal's womanhood.'