

HOME AND THE WORLD

Rabindranath Tagore

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 his 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.

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.'

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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

NIKHIL (Progressive)

Character In terms of character types in English literature, Nikhil would be called a cultured, country gentleman. He is educated, wealthy and gentle. But he also holds progressive views on important social issues of the day, especially the emancipation of women and the treatment of labourers. He has no qualms about marrying a woman from a lower socio-economic class and shows unusual understanding when she becomes infatuated with his alter-ego, the political radical Sandip. Nikhil realises, or at least hopes, that her involvement with Sandip, both emotionally and politically, is a passing phase in her development as a person. Nikhil is as passionate about nationalism as Sandip, but he believes that India must evolve into an independent country, not achieve that status by violent means. Another example of his progressive views, Nikhil is religious but does not equate religion with nationalism, which was the rallying cry of the radicals. As he explains, 'I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Justice which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as god is to bring curse upon it.'

Activities Nikhil spends most of his time in cultural activities, such as reading and appreciating poetry and music. He is also busy managing a large rural estate. In addition, he tries to supervise the character development of his young wife. Throughout the novel, he engages in debates about nationalism, religion and social justice.

Illustrative moments

Progressive As a progressive thinker, Nikhil has no racial, religious, class or sexual prejudice. This is demonstrated dramatically when a young Englishwoman, Miss Gilby, is verbally attacked and humiliated by a group of political radicals. Nikhil takes her under his wing and lectures the radicals, telling them that Miss Gilby is a fellow human being and not an abstract enemy of Bengal.

Understanding Nikhil's calm, rational outlook is shown one day when he enters a room and sees his wife flirting with Sandip, his old friend and now his political enemy. Instead of becoming angry, Nikhil withdraws, telling himself that his wife was very young when they married and that she must learn, through trial and error, to become her own person.

Patriotic Nikhil's quiet patriotism is displayed when he tells a large crowd that he will not join them in a demonstration against British rule. 'I will not run around singing 'Hail Mother-India', which was the rallying cry of the time. His refusal makes him unpopular among the people of the town and even the police suspect him of 'harbouring some secret political strategy.' His standing up against the crowd to defend his own brand of patriotism is a measure of his courage.

Spiritual While not taking part in religious (or political) ceremonies, Nikhil is deeply spiritual. Here his spiritual outlook is clearly influenced by that of well-known Bengali religious leaders of the time, such as Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo. Like them, Nikhil believes that it is 'part of human nature to try and rise superior to itself.' Living recklessly by acting on instinct and desire, as exemplified by radical politics, is wrong and leads to illusion. Rather, Nikhil says that we should 'recognize the truth of restraint' and realise that 'eternal love steadfastly waits for us beyond the veil of material things.'

BIMALI (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.'

AMULYA (Passionate)

Character Amulya (whose name means 'priceless') is the symbol of youthful innocence that is corrupted by the coarseness of radical politics. He is an ardent patriot, recruited to the cause of Indian independence by an older, more calculating man (Sandip). As Sandip describes him, 'He is no longer a boy. The wick of his life is ablaze.' Amulya's adoptive mother, Bimala, tries to moderate his extremism but fails; indeed, she is the one who is responsible for him committing theft and shooting a man. Despite that criminal act, Amulya is admirable in that he remains principled throughout the chaos of riots and violence that marked the radical politics of *swadeshi* ('self-rule'). In fact, it is through him, that Bimala gains insight into the underlying self-centred and unprincipled actions of Sandip, under whose spell she has fallen.

Activities As a young recruit to the revolutionary cause, Amulya is often involved in discussing politics and carrying out campaigns, such as the boycott of foreign goods, putting up posters and marching at demonstrations. He is sometimes entrusted with carrying important letters back and forth between leaders of the movement. His most dangerous mission is to steal money from the accountant of an estate, which he undertakes and succeeds in. In other scenes, he is shown in conversation with Bimala, his adoptive mother, toward whom he shows great affection and respect.

Illustrative moments

Passionate The wild and destructive passion in Amulya is illustrated in a central episode in the novel, when Bimala asks him to steal money from the accountant [the man who is responsible for the finances of the large estate on which Bimala and Amulya live]. When she tells him that 'money is needed for the Cause' and suggests that he steal it, he says that he will kill the man instead. She protests and he insists that 'it's the only way.' She asks how he will do it, and Amulya pull out a small gun and a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*; the religious text teaches that killing the body is killing nothing because only the eternal soul is real. Then Bimala says, 'Whatever do you mean, Amulya? Don't you know that the dear old man has got a wife and children.' Amulya replies, 'Where are we to find men who have no wives and children? The thing we call pity is, at bottom, only pity for ourselves. We cannot bear to wound our own tender instincts, and so we do not strike at all--pity indeed! The height of cowardice!' In the event, Amulya does not kill the man (he only wounds him) but steals the money and later turns himself into the police.

Principled It is difficult for anyone to stick to their principles in the midst of a revolutionary movement, when events move swiftly and it is often claimed that the 'means justify the ends.' The Indian independence movement is one example, especially in the period covered by this novel and especially in the radicalism that was prevalent in Bengal. The most moving example of Amulya's steadfastness occurs toward the end of the novel, when a riot breaks out in Calcutta. Everyone knows that violence will erupt, it was only a question of what hour. Sandip, the violence-prone leader, shows his cowardice by hiding out in the countryside, while Amulya bravely stays in order to support the non-violent demonstration in favour of Independence. The riot does break out when soldiers fire on the protestors, and Amulya is shot through the chest and dies. When we, as readers, mourn the death of this young man, Tagore want us also to salute his principled stand against violence.