

**Character** Mallika Sengupta is mother to Nirmalya and wife to a wealthy industrialist in Bombay. She is a Bengali, who feels somewhat out of place in Bombay, where Hindi, Marathi and English are spoken. She comes from a small town with little pretensions but was found to possess a beautiful voice. As a teenage girl, she entertained old ladies in drawing rooms, although some found her voice 'old-fashioned.' Her talent went undeveloped, because she was a girl, and so she accepted the offer of marriage from Mr Sengupta. 'She wisely accepted his offer, largely because she decided, shrewdly, that life with him would allow her to pursue her singing.' That, however, did not happen. She ended up sublimating her musical ambitions to the demands of being a wife and a mother.

**Activities** Mallika spends most of her time in the house, managing servants, waiting on her son and husband. When time permits, she gets out her harmonium and practices her singing or takes lessons from a teacher. She also spends evenings playing the 'perfect hostess' when her industrialist husband has his business partners over.

### **Illustrative moments**

*Domestic* Mallika's musical ambitions are thwarted by the domestic routine she throws herself into after marriage. The absolute control that her domestic duties maintain over her music is illustrated in an early chapter. It is early afternoon, she has finished her music practice on the harmonium and waits for her son to come home for lunch. The author puts it this way: 'She focused on the boy returning from school. She'd feel an inward restlessness, as if a job left undone, until he'd come back and eaten. The music was a constant trickle in her life, not allowed to disturb her routine; in fact, the routine went on, and now and then, it paused decorously to make time for the music, at which point the routine was consigned to someone else's hands—the cook, or the maid; but it wasn't allowed to stop.'

*Anxious* Mallika is often anxious, lacks confidence and seems ready to believe the worst in any situation. A good illustration of this occurs when her son, Nirmalya, is bitten by mosquitoes and falls ill with dengue fever, Mallika is distraught. She feels guilty because she left him in the car, without closing the windows. Dengue fever can, she has read, permanently damage the heart. The doctor assures her that the condition is congenital, was there from birth, and that she should not accuse herself of neglect. But still she feels terrible. Her servant tries to console her, and Mallika briefly wonders if she would change places with this poor woman living in a slum if she could. At least, she wouldn't worry so much, she thinks. No, she admits, I wouldn't want to change places with her. 'But she would have liked to have had her easy, taking-for-granted attitude toward her four children. She would have liked that, but she knew she couldn't have it.'

*Practical* Despite her thwarted musical ambitions, Mallika makes peace with her compromise of married life. She realises that she didn't really want to become a famous singer, travelling all over the country giving performances, staying in hotels, meeting all sorts of undesirable people. This practical side of her nature is demonstrated in a scene following an unwanted sexual advance from a music impresario named Shukla. As the author explains, 'she knew she could have been famous, but opted for the life of a Managing Director's wife. It wasn't only because she wanted the easy way out; it was also because she couldn't deal with the likes of Shukla...She knew, after all, she'd made the right decision...She didn't want to be a hermit. She loved life. When her husband became Managing Director she found that she just discovered existence. She'd go to the sari exhibition and contemplate buying a Kancheepuram [expensive, handprinted sari]. She'd lose herself in the red and deep blues of a sari.'