

Nikhil (Tagore's novel *Home and the World*) 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.'