

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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## THE HOME AND THE WORLD (GHARE BAIRE) 1984

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali Language)

**Contents** (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

### OVERVIEW

*The Home and the World (Ghare Baire)* is a late film by India's most famous director. Ray took the story from a novel of the same name by India's most acclaimed writer, Rabindranath Tagore. The romantic drama in the film (and novel) reflect the turbulent political times after the controversial Partition of Bengal in 1905. In brief, the story is a love triangle between a rich landlord (Nikhil), his young wife (Bimala) and an ardent nationalist (Sandip). Bimala, married at a young age, grows up during this time of change and wants her freedom, in both the home and the world.

### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

There is a good reason why India's most famous novelist and film-director were attracted to this story. It combines the enduring social issue of a woman's place with the sensation of the radical politics of nationalism. Moreover, these twined themes are dramatised through a gripping love-triangle. Loyalties are tested, minds are awakened and there is a tragic ending. But this is not just an 'Indian' story. The difficulty of balancing work and home, commitments to one's family members and to one's colleagues, the private and the public sphere, is something faced by western societies in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, too. But when that dilemma is dramatised in the context of the political struggle for independence, the cultural significance is immense.

### STORY

*The golden past* The film begins with a long flashback as Bimala describes her marriage, ten years ago, to Nikhil. She lives the life of a conventional, upper-class Hindu wife, confined to the inner apartments of a mansion but given every comfort, including tutoring by an English woman, Mrs. Gilby. Bimala considers herself fortunate because her husband is liberal-minded and wants her to be an educated, modern woman.

*Sandip* The drama begins when Nikhil tells Bimala that he wants her to meet Sandip, one of his old college friends, who is coming to stay with them. But Sandip is not just any friend. He is a passionate campaigner for Indian independence (*swadeshi*, lit. 'self-rule'). This revelation prompts a long conversation between husband and wife about the swadeshi movement, its origins in the Partition of Bengal (two years back) and its boycott of foreign-made goods. Sandip arrives and Nikhil arranges a meeting to be held in the courtyard of the house. When Sandip delivers a fiery speech in support of independence, Bimala watches with rapt attention from a shaded balcony window.

*Coming out* Bimala's physical confinement is then broken when Nikhil invites her to leave the inner apartments and join him and Sandip in a sitting room, where they discuss politics. This is the first time in ten years that she has met a man in 'public.'

*Political differences* The three main characters sit down to have tea. 'Darjeeling. Swadeshi tea', Nikhil says and they all laugh. This sets the tone for their conversation. Sandip the radical and Nikhil the conservative discuss the merits of burning foreign-goods. Sandip says it is essential, while Nikhil disapproves. But their voices are jocular. They are old friends who trust and respect each other; there is no discord, only disagreement. In the end, however, despite the light-hearted atmosphere, Bimala has said that she will join the swadeshi movement. The scene ends when Sandip says he must go to oversee a bonfire of foreign goods organised by the manager of Nikhil's estate.

*Misgivings* Afterwards, again despite the good-humoured tone of the conversation, Nikhil has misgivings about his friend. 'The less one knows him, the better one likes him,' he says to Bimala. He says that burning foreign-goods only hurts the Muslim shopkeepers and traders in the local area.

Shouting 'Hail to the Motherland' is just meaningless propaganda, used by ambitious men to manipulate the masses. Thinking of the country as a mother goddess is silly, he goes on to say.

*Tension* The polite disagreement between friends over tea soon becomes a violent clash in the streets. Sandip has no intention of simply discussing politics. He colludes with Nikhil's estate manager to burn more foreign goods and then takes another step. Discovering that the goods are brought to market by boats, he pays thugs to sink the boats, which destroys the livelihood of many traders.

*Bimala and Sandip* While much of the middle of the film focuses on these political differences between Sandip and Nikhil, we become aware of a growing attraction between Bimala and Sandip. After their initial meeting, in which she pledged her support for his campaign, they have almost daily meetings in the sitting room (outside the secluded women's quarters). Tired of her husband's 'good judgement,' she is slowly drawn in by Sandip's passion and energy. Although she reminds him that he has not given up smoking foreign cigarettes, she says that she will work with him, even against her husband's wishes. At one point, she agrees to help fund his actions by stealing gold coins from the estate's safe. For his part, Sandip is also attracted to the beautiful wife of his friend and begins to call her his 'queen bee.' This fatal attraction does not go unnoticed by Bimala's widowed sister (who lives with the family).

*Flight* Bimala carries out her promise and steals a large quantity of coins from the family safe and hands them over to Sandip. Now, it is obvious that she is in love with him, and her with her. There is a tender scene, in which he sings a nationalist song to her and then a love song. When he tells her that he may have to leave the area (because the authorities are cracking down on dissidents), she expresses her love and they kiss (the first kiss shown in a Satyajit Ray film). Meanwhile, only slightly aware of what is happening inside his house, Nikhil tries to curb the swadeshi activity in his area by arguing with other leaders, but his words are not persuasive.

*Remorse* Bimala slowly comes to realise that Sandip is not the charismatic hero she thought he was. Instead, she accepts that he is vain and selfish. She regrets stealing the money and wants to replace it so she asks Amalya, Sandip's disciple, to pawn her jewels. But Sandip then takes her jewels from Amalya.

*Decisions* With the riots and violence threatening to engulf the family mansion, Nikhil decides that the family should leave and go to Calcutta. Bimala is afraid when he says that it is his duty to go out into the town and try to quell the violence. At this crucial moment, when Hindus and Muslims are fighting each other on the streets, Sandip chooses to flee, while Amalya stays.

*Departures* Near the end, Sandip returns the jewel box to Bimala but keeps the money that she had given him. He says goodbye to Nikhil and to Bimala, using the 'Hail to the Motherland' slogan. Significantly, Bimala does not reply in kind. The final minutes of the film show a riot, we hear gunshots and then the camera cuts to a funeral scene watched by a grieving Bimala. Her beloved husband has died.

## THEMES

***Women's emancipation*** A key theme of the film, announced in its title, is the emancipation of women. This is a common theme in Indian literature and film, but Ray teases out its complexity. Bimala is a traditional upper-class woman and wife, married while still a girl and then kept not only inside the house but in the most interior parts of the house. Soon, she comes out of that inner compartment and crosses the line over into the rooms where male visitors and friends congregate. In other words, the spatial divide in the house equates to the separation between the interior home and the external world. She has to be coaxed out of the confined interior space, but once there, she spreads her wings and takes flight. She joins Sandip's nationalist campaign and enters the world of politics.

Bimala's story, however, is not a simplistic expression of the 'new woman.' For one thing, she faces severe criticism from the other women in the family, for example, her widowed sister-in-law and Nikhil's grandmother. For another, Nikhil is the one who persuaded her to cross the divide, and it is he who suffers as a result when she falls in love with the charismatic Sandip. In fact, despite her adventures in the outside world, by the end of the film, Bimala reverts back to the devout wife. She feels remorse for stealing the money and for being disloyal to her husband. When she tells Amalya to

pawn her jewels, she says that she would do it herself except that 'the outside world is closed to me because I am a woman.' Indeed, at the very end, she becomes a widow, which might be said to be her punishment since widows are traditionally kept in even greater seclusion than married women.

In addition, the divide between the 'home' and the 'world' is also played between the two male characters. Nikhil is the domestic type, whereas Sandip the opposite. Nikhil, the husband and owner of the estate, is as reluctant as Bimala to enter the world of politics. Sandip, on the other hand, is entirely externalised. He comes to life in front of crowds, depends on charisma and believes in action, not contemplation. It could also be said that Nikhil is domestic in that he does not support the burning of cloth or other goods that are used in the home.

**Nationalism** The other major theme is nationalism. In an early scene, Nikhil and Bimala have a long conversation which introduces the independence movement, or *swadeshi*. Bimala explains that in 1905, Lord Curzon ordered the infamous Partition, which divided Bengal into a Hindu west and a Muslim east (classic example of the British tactic of 'divide and rule'). This action outraged many people and turned the fledgling nationalist movement, hitherto a debating society, into an active anti-British political campaign. 'Don't swadeshis burn foreign cloth?' Bimala asks. 'Yes,' Nikhil answers and points out that the cloth of the sari she is wearing comes from Manchester. He then goes on to name all the objects on her dressing table that are foreign-made: a brush, mirror, hair pins and so on. 'Even the table itself,' he says. What makes this film so brilliant, however, is the way it goes on to show the complex intersection between women's emancipation and nationalism. For example, it demonstrates that the *swadeshi* movement was powerful precisely because it used household realities as political capital: burn (or boycott) foreign-made clothes and liberate the country.

Moreover, Ray's story features neither heroes nor villains of nationalism, but only compromised characters. Nikhil may be admirable in his reluctance to support violence, but he is passive and weak in other respects. Sandip may be sincere (though many viewers will doubt even that), but he is ruthless and possibly a coward. Bimala is gullible, makes mistakes and causes heartbreak. This is a brave treatment of *swadeshi*, which was and still is one of India's sacred cows. The suggestion that crowds chanting 'Hail to the Motherland' were just ignorant peasants mesmerised by a leader is controversial. And just so we don't get the idea that the British were evil oppressors, there is a scene in which Mrs Gilby, Bimala's English tutor, is shown with a bandaged head. She was walking down the street when a schoolboy threw a stone at her and knocked her down. But Ray is not interested in championing a political ideology. His focus, as ever, is on the frailties of his characters, their flaws and their ideals.

## CHARACTERS

**Nikhil** Nikhil Choudhury is the landlord of a wealthy estate in rural Bengal. Nikhil is a sensitive and thoughtful man. As a rich landlord who wants his wife to be educated and take part in public life, he is a liberal and kind man. Yet, he is beset by conflicting motives. Although he is principled, loyal and well-versed in Indian classical texts, he is also passive, romantic and naïve. Whether his strengths outweigh his weaknesses is a question left unanswered at the end of the film.

**Progressive** Nikhil announces his progressive ideas throughout the film. He criticises Hindus for mistreating Muslims; he attempts to protect the interests of Muslim shopkeepers on his estate; and he is in favour of rigorous political debate but not radical action. Perhaps the most revealing moment, though, comes early on when he and Bimala are alone in their bedroom. He embraces her and says that his beautiful wife should be seen by more men than just him. When she expresses doubt, he says, 'You know, the seclusion of women is not a Hindu tradition. Draupadi and the great heroines of Hindu epics were never in purdah.' Nikhil goes on to explain that he doesn't wish to return to the 'golden age,' but that there is logic in this seclusion. 'You have only known your husband,' he points out, 'so how can you tell what kind of a man he is?' Here we have a hint that Nikhil's progressivism may contain an element of selfishness. He is interested in Bimala's emancipation insofar as it will reflect well on himself. He wants his friends to admire his beautiful wife, which again will raise his status in their estimation. Again, we come back to the title of the film: Nikhil believes that his domestic situation (his wife) can elevate him in the public sphere. He is a firm advocate of the belief that a proper house is the foundation of a proper society.

**Loyal** Nikhil's essentially humane character is tested in his conflict with Sandip, the political radical and (as later revealed) a charlatan. The two old friends hold diametrically opposed views on the key issue of nationalism. But that is not the problem—the two chums exchange their views in polite

terms, even making fun of their own positions. Instead, the relationship reaches a breaking point when Sandip, who is a guest in Nikhil's house, brings chaos to his ordered world. He instigates riots in the town and steals the affections of his wife. Nikhil knows all this but still he refuses to reject his friend. This loyalty is demonstrated explicitly in a scene toward the end of the film. In a conversation with his estate manager, Nikhil says that he doesn't know how to stop the riots and illegal fires. 'Root out the source,' the manager says. 'Tell Sandip to leave.' Nikhil frowns and admits that he wishes his friend would leave but that he cannot throw him out. He goes on to say that he feels pity for him because he has never really achieved anything, that his politics is the result of his deep-seated frustration. Whatever the wisdom of that psychological analysis, it demonstrates Nikhil's unwavering loyalty to his old friend.

**Dutiful** If Nikhil's fatal flaw is his passivity (as illustrated by the above paragraph), his greatest strength is his sense of duty. He is a conscientious landlord, concerned about the welfare of his tenants, both Hindu and Muslim. And, again in keeping with the theme of private and public spheres, he also shows a strong commitment to domestic duties, including the well-being of his widowed sister and wife. The most telling illustration of his sense of duty occurs at the very end of the film. The riots and associated violence are threatening to destroy his estate and house. His first decision is to send his wife, sister and grandmother to safety in Calcutta. His second decision is to go out into the world and confront the protestors in order to quell the violence. This decision highlights his bravery, in contrast with Sandip's cowardice when the latter absents himself from the rioting.

**Bimala** *She is* Nikhil's wife. Bimala is a fascinating and complex character. She is traditional yet bold, sedate yet restless. She is a child-bride who later crosses over the threshold into the public sphere, where she supposedly finds freedom but instead is manipulated by Sandip, betrays her husband and is widowed in the end. She is a lively person, full of good humour and witty remarks. But, perhaps because of her seclusion, she is gullible and naïve, which leads her to make fateful mistakes.

**Spirited** When we first meet her, Bimala has been married to Nikhil for ten years, during which she has never ventured outside the women's quarters in their large house. Despite this, she is not simply a docile wife without a personality. Her spirited character is well illustrated in the first full scene, when she has a long conversation with Nikhil in her dressing room. He sits while she arranges her hair, straightens her sari and applies make-up before dinner. Throughout this intimate talk, Bimala shows flashes of wit and self-confidence. Nikhil is ponderous and serious, while she throws out lines with a nonchalance of a woman who knows her own mind. For example, when he suggests that she meet his friends and cites examples of 'liberated' heroines in the Hindu epics, she replies, 'Oh, so you want to bring back the classical age?' Then she surprises him by giving a succinct and accurate description of *swadeshi*. 'Don't be surprised, my good schoolmaster,' she says in a mocking tone. 'I read the newspapers, you know.' She is even spirited in defence of her physical isolation. Nikhil says that he has invited a friend and wants her to meet him. She throws back her head, smiles and retorts, 'Not interested. You see, I'm happy in my seclusion. Unlike your classical heroines.'

**Rebellious** This early glimpse of her spirit lends credibility to the transformation that takes place in her character as the story develops. In a dramatic shot, Nikhil leads her out of the women's compartments, down a long corridor and into the outer rooms of the house. There, she is introduced to Sandip, Nikhil's friend and political radical. This is the first man she has spoken to, excepting relatives, for ten years, yet she rises to the occasion and displays a rebelliousness. As they discuss politics, both men expect her to listen quietly, but she expresses her own opinions. 'Well,' she says, 'if *swadeshi* boycotts and bonfires give the British a little trouble, then we should do it.' Her husband looks alarmed at this, but she goes on. 'Yes, and not just a few people, but the whole country.' A few minutes later, Sandip is explaining the importance of the slogan ('Hail to the Motherland) and recommends that she try saying it. 'Softly,' he suggests. 'Actually,' she says, 'I've said it already. When you and the others were chanting, I did, too, and it sent a shiver down my spine.' Finally, she challenges Sandip on the sincerity of his politics, pointing that he smokes foreign cigarettes. 'Can't you give it up?' she asks with a sly smile. 'Don't have the will-power?' Sandip, the radical, is taken aback and pauses before proposing that he will give it up if she joins his party. To which, she responds by saying, 'Sign me up.' Bimala, the spirited but traditional Hindu wife, has taken a leap into the unknown.

**Sandip** Sandip is Nikhil's friend from college who is now a political radical. Sandip is charismatic and passionate, but also brash and selfish. He is a political radical and also a ladies' man. Nikhil sums him up this way: 'Married life doesn't suit him. He's not the domestic type.' He is ruthless in his

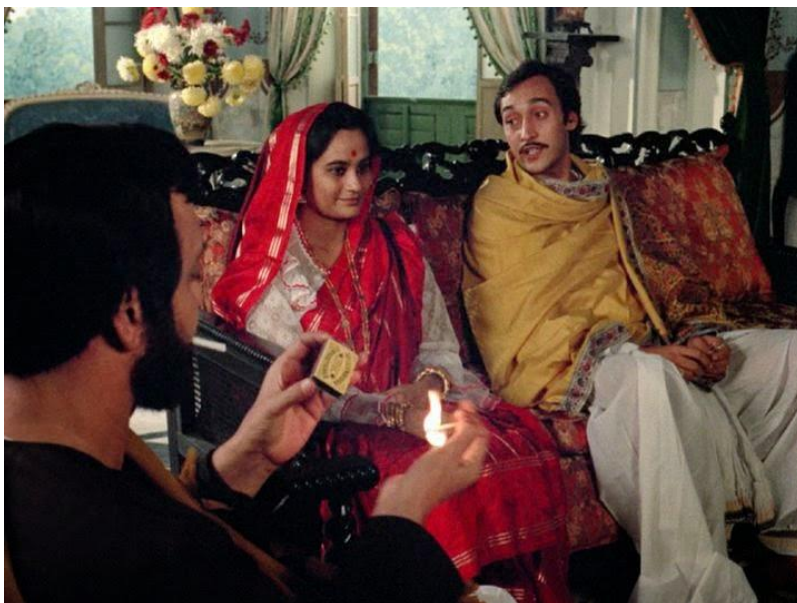
campaign to rid the country of the British rulers, but he betrays his best friend by making flirting with his wife. For all his faults, we might still judge him as sincere in his political beliefs; or we might say he believes in himself. He has the conviction of self-righteousness—not superficial, but lacking in depth.

**Charismatic** In playing a foil to Nikhil's principled thoughtfulness, Sandip is a charismatic figure. The most dramatic illustration of this characteristic is his first appearance in the story. He is carried to a mass rally in a palanquin, more like a god than a man, and he is dressed like a Hindu saint. Cheered by his thousands of devotees, he speaks with passion, raising a clenched fist in defiance of the colonial rulers. He is a skilled orator, who slowly builds his case and ends by asking everyone to utter the sacred slogan 'Hail to the Motherland!' We can appreciate his charisma not just by watching the crowd stirred to action, but also by the face of a Bimala, who is listening from behind a curtained window.

**Ruthless** Sandip is an ideologue (and perhaps a caricature of a certain type of political radical), ruthless in his pursuit of a goal. Although he never uses the phrase, it is abundantly clear that for him 'the end justifies the means.' We see this illustrated in several examples, most blatantly when he orders thugs to destroy boats owned by Muslim traders because they are carrying foreign goods. But an even more revealing illustration is his request to Bimala to steal from her husband's safe. He knows that Bimala is in love with him and he uses that love to manipulate her into betraying her husband financially as well as emotionally. The scene when he receives the money from her is dramatic in the extreme. He is ecstatic at the sight of the gold coins she gives him. 'Gold! Gold!' he pants excitedly. Now he can pay his henchmen to destroy more boats and burn more barns.

**Cowardly** Any respect we may have for Sandip evaporates at the end of the film, when he flees danger at the crucial moment. The rioting in the town has reached a dangerous level: Muslims are attacking temples, and Hindus are besieging a mosque. The police are looking for Sandip. Instead of staying and supporting his own campaign, he packs his suitcase and takes a train to another city. 'I must live to complete my work,' he explains to his disciple, Amalya. Just before he departs, though, he goes to Nikhil and Bimala to return her jewels (which she had pawned in order to give back the money that she stolen from her husband). Sandip's action seems noble, but as he goes out the door, he turns and says that he will keep the money that she gave him, 'for the cause of nationalism.'

**Bara Rani** Bara Rani is the widow of Nikhil's dead brother.  
**Miss Gilby** Miss Gilby is an English woman who teaches piano and English to Bimala.  
**Amalya** Amalya is Sandip's disciple.



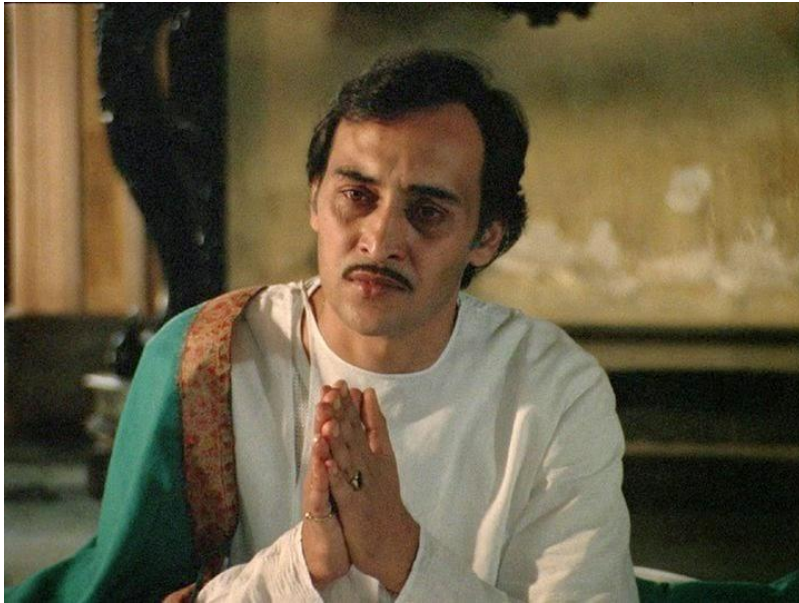
(Bimala and Nikhil at home, with Sandip in the foreground)



(Bimala and Sandip share a joke)



(Nikhil and Bimala in a tender moment)



(Nikhil pleads with someone to cease the violence)



(The flames of the riot engulf the town)