

The character of Bimala in Tagore's *The Home and the World*

Bimala is a rare portrayal of womanhood by Rabindranath Tagore because unlike the other female characters in Indian literature, there are two sides of Bimala. She is obligated to serve her husband and take care of the household. Yet, she is also willing to overstep these boundaries to speak out for her people. This fact is what makes her a positive representation of women in *The Home and the World*. Bimala in Tagore's *The Home and the World* is perhaps the liveliest character of the story. She is the centre of action as well as attraction of the novel. She emblemizes love amid the fire and fury of politics, and her psychological intricacy contributes much in making Tagore's novel an interesting study.

Tagore's Bimala is not a paragon of beauty. She herself admits in the course of the novel that, she had a dark complexion and lacked physical beauty. Yet she was fortunate enough to get married into the Zamindar's house. Bimala was married to Nikhil because of some good astrological signs in her and it was predicted that she would turn out to be an ideal wife. Truly Bimala's conjugal life with Nikhil was happy and blissful. She was fortunate too, to have an ideal, loving husband who unlike his brothers was not authoritarian. She could have from Nikhil not only sincere love but earnest help to make herself a cultivated, advanced modern woman. Arrangements were made for her English training under one European woman, Miss Gilby, and that was quite surprising in an old, conservative family. She got educated, introduced to the modern age and well acquainted with the modern standard of living.

Bimala however at the same time, remained a devoted wife in spite of Nikhil's desperate endeavours to modernize her. She believed that her true place was at her husband's feet. She was inspired by her own mother in wifely dedication and tried to fulfill her wifely duties in the same way as her mother has done. Now this is evident in Bimala's narrative, where she discusses the sari, the dress of the Hindu woman and the vermilion mark on the forehead, the mark of Hindu wifedom and the symbol of devotion. She makes it clear that she is destined to be a perfect wife. She worships her husband and considers him to be his lord. Bimala explicitly tells that every morning, she took the dust of her husband's feet without waking him, as "at such moments [she] could feel the vermilion mark upon [her] forehead shining out like the morning star."

It is therefore clear from the very beginning of the novel that Bimala knew her role as a housewife. She was initially a docile, duty bound, devoted housewife of an old, aristocratic, conservative zamindar family. She knew only her husband and home, and all that she sought was her husband's companionship in her secluded home. She felt much delighted to read his letters, when written almost everyday from Calcutta, and to keep them tenderly in a sandal wood box which was everyday covered with flowers gathered from the garden.

However, Rabindranath Tagore's Bimala is not a flat character. As we witness that she changes with the transition of events and situations. Now the change in Bimala occurs with the arrival of Nikhil's friend, Sandip, in the wake of the *swadeshi* movement. He appears to her as a hero of the *swadeshi* and Bimala gets almost overwhelmed and hypnotized by Sandip's personality at the very first sight. She reveals her own feelings as she says: "The whole place is filled with an immense crowd, through which Sandip Babu is borne, seated in a big chair, hoisted on the shoulders of ten or twelve youths." Sandip's spell seemed to stir her serene heart. His speech had a tremendous impact on her. She forgot her well sheltered aristocratic, conservative home, to which she belonged and started visualizing herself as the sole representative of Bengal's womanhood. Thus in the course of the novel Bimala transforms herself from a meek wife of the home to the inspired champion of the *swadeshi* in the wide world outside.

However Bimala's change, as portrayed by Tagore does not appear to be drastic. She had an intuitive attraction for the *swadeshi*. The storm of the *swadeshi* had effects on her even before she met Sandip. Earlier in the novel she proposed to burn her foreign clothes, but was prevented by her husband. She also wanted to

get rid of her teacher Miss Gilby out of that intuition. Moreover, her husband Nikhil was also instrumental in bringing her out of her home of conjugal love to the world of the wild swadeshi fire. He sharply awakened her from her house-hold slumber to face the stormy real world. His advice was clear enough to draw her from the home to the world. Nikhil said - "Merely going on with your household duties, living all your life in the world of household conventions and the drudgery of household tasks—you were not made for that! If we meet and recognise each other, in the real world, then only will our love be true."

Thus began a new phase in Bimala's life. She came out of her home-spun life and her wifely devotion, partly because of Nikhil's instigation and partly because of Sandip's charm. The latter's well calculated adoration of her as the 'Queen Bee', the symbol of Mother India, was irresistible to her. Sandip did no more appear to her as 'a mere individual' but 'the confluence of the millions of minds of the country'. Some mystic strength, never felt before, seemed to possess her and transcended her from her narrow home to the wildly warm world outside. Sandip's impulsive and persuasive manner, and exalted voice moved her away from her old reliance on her husband's sober, restrained idealistic stand. Bimala laid her heart bare for Sandip, and even felt her husband's idealism quite little by the side of the magnitude of Sandip's personality. Nikhil's sedate vision well perceived the danger of Bimala's hero-worshipping of Sandip. But he did nothing to check her as he feared that any such action on his part would betray the shade of jealousy in him regarding Sandip. So he allowed Sandip to consult Bimala on every little matter, relating to the great cause of the swadeshi. Sandip actually flattered Bimala, and conceded to her every suggestion after stating initial difference in opinion. In this way Sandip made a secret entry into Bimala's inner world.

Indeed, Sandip came to have a place in Bimala's heart. The passion in Bimala's heart made her restless, despite all her resolves to conform to the norms of the society. Her confession comes out clear when she says -"I will not shirk the truth. That cataclysmal desire drew me by day and by night. It seemed desperately alluring, thus making havoc of myself. What a shame it seemed, how terrible, and yet how sweet." Bimala in the intensity of her inexplicable passion, even drew herself apart from her idealistic, philosophical and loving husband. Of course, as a member of a conservative family, she knew well that her attachment to Sandip was unacceptable from the social point of view. But she was too helpless to resist her feeling of love and admiration for Sandip. However, remarkably, even in spite of her ardent admiration for Sandip, Bimala managed to come out of Sandip's snare. Thus we witness that towards the end of the novel, her dilemma between delusion and truth passes away and paves the way for clear judgment.

Of course, there were factors behind Bimala's release from Sandip's delusion. Sandip's covetous nature, his continuous pressure on her, her own mental agony for stealing gold bars, kept by her husband, her acquaintance with Amulya and his dedicated selfless love secured her release from Sandip's tempting captivity. Thus by the end of *The Home and the World*, a new Bimala emerges after being burnt in the fire of passion and cleansed in the flame of truth and love. She could see Sandip's covetousness under the veneer of his charismatic personality and could also understand Nikhil's stand as a true patriot.

After suffering disillusionment Bimala finally returned to Nikhil, the dear centre of her life and love. In fact, she had never loved Sandip truly, though she was fascinated by his external glamour and show. And when his tyranny and cupidity get exposed, Bimala's retreat to her home and husband become all easy and inevitable. Her inner conflict, agony and tension pass away, and she returns to Nikhil who stands for Bimala's true love, devotion and home. Thus after a through analysis of Bimala's character we may conclude with the comments of Pradip Kumar Dutta, who in his book *The Home and the World, A Critical Companion* writes "Bimala in Tagore's *The Home and the World* emblemizes Bengali womanhood in Tagore's contemporary society. And at the same time, the subsequent changes in her way of living and thinking make her psychologically, an engaging personality."