

Nikhil as a tragic yet triumphant idealist

Tagore's *The Home and the World* is a heroine-oriented novel. Yet Nikhil is the hero of the story. He stands opposite to Bimala, the unquestioned heroine and Sandip, the villain (if the term is permissible) of the piece. He is definitely not as lively and attractive as Bimala, nor as boisterous and aggressive as Sandip. In fact, Nikhil is quite sedate and restrained and not at all authoritarian or imposing. He exercises courtesy and restraint in his behavior and talks with feelings and arguments and not with force and compulsion. Indeed, the hero in Nikhil is polished and quiet, and remains not attractive but impressive enough.

As a matter of fact, the creative artist in Tagore has drawn Nikhil more or less, after his own ideal and outlook. It is quite natural to a great literary creator to manifest his own self in his creation and to represent his own philosophy and idealism in the same. In Nikhil, the hero of *The Home and the World*, a good deal of Tagore's personal views and ideology has come out. His political philosophy, concept of nationalism, broad humanism, radical and advanced views about female education and enfranchisement and liberal yet profound sense of love are all subtly expressed in the character of Nikhil.

Rabindranath Tagore was a dedicated nationalist and stood against the British autocracy that imposed the partition of Bengal (in 1905) as a settled fact. But he was never in agreement with the excesses of the swadeshi movement, with the anarchical enthusiasm of the swadeshi agitators. He had no support for the movement to boycott or burn foreign goods as the expression of the swadeshi spirit. He was actually opposed firmly to any negative measure, any destructive design, and did never accept that as a nationalistic upsurge. He rather looked upon the same as nothing short of fanaticism, contrary to humanism and human ties.

That was also the standpoint of Tagore's hero Nikhil. His own intrinsic beliefs and opinions are heard echoed in Nikhil's dialogues and debates with Bimala, Sandip and others. He objected to Bimala's plan to burn all her foreign articles and questioned the propriety of such a bonfire business. His advice was to build something, and not to waste any energy in destruction. "What I want to say is this: Why not try to build up something? You should not waste even a tenth part of your energies in this destructive excitement." He was not ready to bear any act of tyranny in the name of the swadeshi and told Bimala point-blank—"To tyrannize for the country is to tyrannize over the country." More categorical was his assertion before the assembled local students who were warmly supporting Sandip's swadeshi violence—"But if fear is to regulate how people are to dress, where they shall trade, or what they must eat, then is man's freedom of will utterly ignored and manhood destroyed at the root."

Indeed, Nikhil stood for constructive efforts, for building up indigenous industries, native articles by native means and enterprises. He made diverse ventures on the line, though not with much success. But he was thoroughly sincere, earnest in his endeavour. That was his creative spirit as a true nationalist and that was the spirit to which Rabindranath himself subscribed. Nikhil's view was his creator's own that the real emancipation of the nation would be possible only through the conscious self-awakening of the people and that would come not through the road to destruction and coercion but through the way to creation and co-operation. Nothing less than the bridge of oneness with the humble masses of people could accomplish the true welfare of the country. It was not the mere agitation by force for the spread of the swadeshi but the actual awakening of mass consciousness that would alone achieve the desired goal of freedom for India.

Tagore's Nikhil, like the author himself, was a big landlord, and a benevolent one. The Panchu-episode might well be taken to illustrate his compassion and assistance to the poor peasants of Bengal. In the spirit of Rabindranath, he affirmed that the restoration of the poor, helpless persons, like Panchu, from ignorance, poverty, superstition and bigotry constituted the release of India from slavery and exploitation. Sandip's strategy of coercion and compulsion, in the name of the cause of freedom, had no place here. Nikhil, on the other hand had a philosophic outlook, which was broad and liberal. It had nothing to do with force, possessiveness, or acquisitiveness. He had no misconception about Sandip's real nature. His deception was all clear to him. Sandip's love of the country was rightly detected by him as nothing 'but a different phase of his self love.'

Nikhil truly was no Sandip. He had no glamour, no exhibitionism of his patriotism in catchy slogans, attractive speeches and populist agitations. Nikhil placed truth above everything else and stood ever for the

same. That was why he esteemed right and justice, the vanguards of truth, much more than the cause of the country, which Sandip would have served by the means, foul and forced. His stand was expressed unambiguously by him—"I am willing to serve my country, but my worship I reserve for right which is far greater than my country."

Nikhil was actually idealistic not only in his political belief and philosophic thought, but also in his approach to personal love. He loved, but he did not seek to exert or enjoy it selfishly. He believed that true love blossomed in spontaneous gracefulness, not within the four walls of the home, in the total exclusion of others, but in the wide world where the lovers had their mutual love tested and proved in the fire of experience. His assertion to Bimala was all plain, tuned in his idealism—"What I want is, that I should have you, and you should have me more fully in the outside world " and again—"If we meet, and recognize each other, in the real world, then only our love will be true."

So Nikhil brought Bimala out of her narrow, walled home to the world outside out of his idealistic interpretation of the most effective expression of genuine love. But idealism, when divorced from practical and humanistic realism, is liable to make errors in assessment and judgment. That happened to Nikhil whose idealism made him blind to the real, living woman in Bimala as also to his unconscious self-ego. He failed to read Bimala's mind, long settled to a conventional home and home-discipline. At the same time, he could not assess her ability to confront and control the sudden off-set of the world. So Bimala fell into the trap of Sandip's glamour and pined helplessly as a poor prey. Nikhil realized her predicament as well as Sandip's crookedness. But he silently observed and waited for a change in her, for her realization of and release from Sandip's snare: "I longed to find Bimala blossoming fully in all her truth and power." His nobility did not permit him to exercise his conventional authority as a husband, for he believed that one must give up all claims based on conventional rights, if one would find a person freely revealed in truth.

Yet, Nikhil, even in his liberal and noble standpoint, acted on his ego, of course unconscious ego. He cared for his own self righteousness, but forgot to take into account what were Bimala's feelings and cravings. He realized, though rather late, what was wrong in his egoistic, though idealistic, approach to Bimala—"We must tear away the disguise of her (a woman's) who weaves our net of enchantment at home, and know her for what she is. We must beware of clothing her in the witchery of our own longings and imaginings and thus follow her to distract us from our true quest." That was the lesson for Nikhil, the conscious idealist, but unconscious egoist who felt ultimately his own incompetence, his own Imperfection—"Who am I to judge her ? O life, O death, O God of the infinite existence I bow my head in silence to the mystery which is in you."

Nikhil was an inspired idealist. He lived and worked and stood for what he considered to be the truth of all life. He suffered silently from the pangs of life. He bore quietly his own isolation in his realm of idealism. He saw through the political cookery on a large scale in the name of nationalism and freedom. Yet, he never lost his steadiness or faith, and stuck to his idealism and to his truth. He fervently championed the cause of right and justice, harmony and goodwill. His cause, despite initial pitfalls on the way, stood finally and Sandip and his delusions were all defeated. Bimala, too, realized her mistake and his immensity and they were reconciled. What was more, Nikhil rushed out, in accordance with his humanitarian idealism, to the help of people, under fire in the communal clash. He was brought back, seriously hurt, with his truth and zeal for a noble and dedicated cause. As in the beginning, so in the end, Nikhil remained the personified self of Tagore's exalted humanitarian idealism.