

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the video

In the previous lecture, we familiarized ourselves with the notion of the bhadramahila, the idealized figure of the respectable, educated, upper-caste Bengali woman in colonial society. This concept, emerging during the Bengal Renaissance, played a crucial role in shaping gender norms, as it sought to balance traditional domestic virtues with the emerging ideals of modernity and education. In this lecture, we will examine the portrayal of the bhadramahila in Satyajit Ray's cinematic adaptation of Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire* which can be translated into English as *The Home and the World*. The film provides a nuanced exploration of the tensions that define the life of Bimala, the central female protagonist. Through her character, we see the interplay of home (ghar) and the world (baire), reflecting the larger socio-political transformations of early 20th-century Bengal. Before we get into the politics of the formation of Bhadramahila in the cinema, let us briefly understand the story in a nutshell.

The story goes as follows. Nikhil is a kind and modern-thinking landowner. He believes in freedom, peace, and women's rights. He loves his wife Bimala deeply and encourages her to step outside the traditional boundaries of the home and see the world beyond. Bimala has always lived a quiet life inside the house, following tradition. But when Nikhil introduces her to his friend Sandip, everything changes. Sandip is a passionate and forceful leader of the Swadeshi movement. He speaks with great emotion about patriotism and love for the country. Bimala is drawn to him—not only to his political ideas but also to him as a man. Nikhil realizes that Bimala is starting to support Sandip's Swadeshi ideas, which insist that all foreign goods should be rejected. Nikhil is worried because his tenants depend on selling foreign goods to pay their taxes. If the Swadeshi movement is strictly followed, it could harm their livelihood and damage his estate. He tries to explain this to Bimala, but she does not listen and continues to support Sandip. As a result, Nikhil's land and estate suffer. Sandip turns out to be a fake nationalist—he uses the Swadeshi movement for his own selfish gain. By the time Bimala understands her mistake and realizes Sandip's true nature, it is too late. A communal riot breaks out in Nikhil's land, incited by Sandip's aggressive politics. Nikhil tries to stop the violence, but he is killed in the chaos.

The bhadramahila in the story is Nikhil's wife Bimala. As the movie opens, Bimala is simple woman who has no idea about the modern material world. She is strictly a traditional woman who belongs to the upper-class, upper-caste section of society. By birth and marriage, Bimala belongs to the social elite, making her a suitable match for Nikhil in terms of class and caste. However, despite these privileges, she is not yet a bhadramahila. In other words, she is not the idealized, educated, and socially refined woman of colonial Bengal. In the first section of the film, we see Nikhil's deliberate efforts to transform Bimala into a new woman—one who is educated, self-aware, and capable of managing a modern household without necessarily neglecting her conventional gender roles as a caregiver and a nurturer. Unlike the traditional view that confines women to the inner quarters, Nikhil believes in women's education and autonomy. His progressive vision for Bimala aligns with the bhadramahila ideal, which sought to blend domestic virtue with intellectual refinement. Nikhil's attempts include encouraging Bimala to step outside the private sphere. He helps her learn English and exposes her to new ideas. He also fosters in her a sense of agency.

Marriages like Bimala and Nikhil's were, at first, conventional and not really based on love or companionship. They followed the customs of their social class and were arranged in the usual way. From the outside, their marriage may later seem romantic and modern, with mutual respect and emotional closeness. But this change didn't happen on its own. It was something that was carefully created over time. In other words, the marriage wasn't romantic to begin with—it was made that way later. This was true for many marriages at the time. The idea of a companionate marriage came later, often shaped by new ways of thinking and personal effort. So, what looked modern was often built on a traditional base. Bimala and Nikhil's marriage shows how people tried to bring new meaning into old customs.

To help Bimala learn about the modern world, Nikhil appoints a Western woman named Miss Gilby. Miss Gilby teaches Bimala how to manage a modern household. She shows her how to pour tea, stitch, knit, play the piano, behave properly in front of men, and maintain hygiene. Miss Gilby plays a crucial role in shaping Bimala's external refinement by teaching her skills considered essential for a well-bred, modern housewife. She introduces Bimala to Western etiquette. It is important to understand that the skills Miss Gilby teaches Bimala are meant to help her run a modern household. A traditional woman may not know how to interact with guests, follow modern cleanliness standards, or manage a house in the "Western" way. So Bimala is now being trained to do all this, so the household can appear "modern" and "civilized." At the same time, the man—Nikhil in this case—can say, "I educate my wife, I give her freedom," and present himself as a progressive, modern man. But this freedom is limited and controlled. Earlier, Bimala wasn't allowed to step out of the house. Now she can, but only with Nikhil's permission and under his watch. So, her freedom has boundaries. The *bhadramahila* becomes a way for the modern man to show that he is different from the traditional Indian man. He is not openly oppressive; he believes in educating women and giving them freedom. However, this freedom is limited. The woman is now allowed to step out of the house, but only under her husband's close supervision. So, her empowerment is only partial, and her independence is still controlled.

Bimala's movement into the public sphere happens only after she becomes a subject who can successfully embody the good tastes of her modern husband. Her education, dressing style, and mannerisms are shaped by Nikhil's vision of the ideal modern woman. Thus, even as she steps into a new role, her autonomy remains conditional and supervised, underscoring the paradox of women's emancipation in colonial India.

A crucial scene in *Ghare Baire* is the moment when Nikhil walks Bimala through the corridor into the living room. This transition is loaded with symbolic meaning. First, it marks Bimala's movement from the private sphere or the interior of the house to the public world. Second, it highlights the role of men in facilitating and controlling women's access to public life. Bimala's entry into this public space is not independent. It is enabled and supervised by Nikhil. It reinforces the idea that women's participation in the social world was mediated through male approval. This scene reflects a key historical reality: the emergence of the *bhadramahila* was made possible by the *bhadralok*, the elite men who saw themselves as reformers. They believed that women needed to be educated, cultured, and refined to fit into the modern household and society. However, this transition was not about complete liberation but rather a controlled entry—one where women had to conform to male-defined standards of taste, refinement, and morality.

Bimala's first meeting with Sandip is a significant moment in *Ghare Baire*. Nikhil, who believes in gradual reform through education, proudly presents Bimala as an ideal *bhadramahila*—a woman who is cultured, refined, and capable of participating in polite society. By emphasizing that she knows how to pour tea, play the piano, and speak English, Nikhil signals that she has successfully transitioned from the secluded *antarmahal* to a

modern, outward-facing role. When Nikhil highlights that Bimala knows how to pour tea, play the piano, and speak English, he is not just talking about her personal growth, but also showcasing his own identity as a modern, progressive man. By teaching her these things, Nikhil presents himself as someone who educates and empowers his wife, unlike the typical patriarchal Indian husband.

The location of Bimala and Sandip's first meeting is the living room. The location of this meeting is deeply significant. The living room is a liminal space. It is situated between the secluded inner quarters of the house (*antarmahal*) and the public world outside. Unlike the private chambers where women traditionally resided, the living room is a threshold where domesticity and public life intersect. This setting symbolizes Bimala's transitional position in the narrative—she is neither fully confined to the inner household nor entirely free to step into the external world. More crucially, the living room is not a neutral space. It is carefully supervised by Nikhil, who, despite his progressive ideals, still controls the extent of Bimala's freedom. His presence acts as both a facilitator and a gatekeeper—he enables her entry into the social world, but at the same time ensures that it happens on his terms. By bringing Sandip into this space, Nikhil seeks to display Bimala as an embodiment of his ideals, demonstrating to his nationalist friend that she has been successfully transformed into a refined, educated, and modern woman.

The living room in the movie also represents the reformed domestic sphere. It represents the modern aesthetics and functionality of the house. Everything in the living room is neatly arranged, reflecting a deliberate shift away from the traditional household. The new aesthetics of the house emphasize discipline, cleanliness, and refinement which are values associated with the *bhadralok* class and their aspirations for modernization. This transformation is significant because it mirrors Nikhil's larger project: the restructuring of not just the home but also Bimala herself into a modern, educated, and cultured woman.

The real conflict in the movie arises, when Bimala acts independently outside the supervision of her husband Nikhil. Until this point, Bimala's transformation into a *Bhadramahila* appears smooth and controlled, with no visible disruptions. She exists within the supervised space of modernity, carefully crafted by Nikhil. As long as she meets Sandip in Nikhil's presence, the encounter remains within the bounds of what is considered acceptable. Her role as a modern woman is still being mediated through her husband, ensuring that her newfound freedom is both facilitated and monitored.

Bimala's life changes the moment she decides to meet Sandip on her own, without Nikhil's permission. Until then, her freedom was allowed only within limits set by Nikhil. Now, she starts making choices independently. This marks the beginning of her downfall. The story shows that when a woman acts outside a man's control, she risks losing her place in society. Her actions are not just personal decisions. They are seen as breaking social rules. She moves from a safe, guided modern life to a dangerous kind of freedom that is not accepted. This portrayal reinforces a deeply ingrained anxiety about women's agency. While modernity encourages women's education, refinement, and participation in social life, it still insists on male supervision as a necessary safeguard. The moment Bimala moves beyond Nikhil's protection, she is seen as crossing a dangerous threshold. Her attraction to Sandip is thus framed not simply as a romantic entanglement, but as a cautionary tale about the limits of female autonomy in a patriarchal society.

Bimala's transition from a modest *Bhadramahila* to a woman exercising her own agency can be understood both spatially and conceptually. Satyajit Ray masterfully presents this transformation. Her journey is mapped through her movement across different spaces, each representing a shift in her autonomy and self-perception. Initially, she meets Sandip in the presence of Nikhil, within the living room—a liminal space that is both part of the household and open to the social world. Here, she is under the watchful eye of her husband, and her

behavior aligns with the ideal of the modern, yet respectable, Bhadramahila. In this controlled setting, her modernity remains acceptable and contained. As the narrative progresses, Bimala starts meeting Sandip alone in the same living room. This shift marks an important transition—she is no longer just an observer or a passive participant; she begins to make choices of her own. The absence of Nikhil's supervision signals the first step in her autonomous engagement with the world, although still within the familiar, respectable boundaries of her home.

The final and most crucial transformation occurs when Bimala crosses the threshold of her house and meets Sandip in his space. This act represents a complete departure from the reformed domestic sphere. Moving outside the home entirely, she steps into a domain beyond societal expectations. This spatial shift parallels her growing independence, but also her fall from the carefully curated identity of a Bhadramahila, marking her transition into a woman who exercises her own will, but at great cost.

Bimala's alignment with Sandip in the ongoing debate on Swaraj marks a critical moment in her transformation. Instead of supporting her husband, Nikhil—who represents a rational and balanced approach—she is drawn towards Sandip's fiery nationalism. Nikhil tries to explain to Bimala that the idea of Swaraj, which demands the rejection of all foreign goods, will have detrimental effects on their zamindari. However, Bimala refuses to listen to Nikhil. Her understanding of Swaraj comes from external sources, bypassing Nikhil's intellectual mediation.

Her education in nationalism happens independently in three distinct phases. First, she is swayed by Sandip's speeches, which are filled with passion and rhetoric. Then, she begins to read newspapers, which reinforce her belief in the nationalist cause. Finally, she engages with the pamphlets given by Sandip, further solidifying her conviction in his version of Swaraj. However, the film presents this trajectory as flawed, suggesting that her uncritical acceptance of nationalist ideals, without deeper understanding, leads to disastrous consequences.

Bimala's blind faith in Sandip reaches its peak when she gives him her ornaments, believing in his cause, only to later realize that he is nothing more than a manipulative opportunist. The repercussions of Sandip's movement soon manifest in Nikhil's zamindari, where conflicts escalate into a full-fledged Hindu-Muslim riot. Ultimately, Nikhil pays the price with his life, showing that rash, emotional decisions, particularly in political matters, can lead to irreversible damage.

The film presents Bimala's independent learning about the world as dangerous, reflecting a patriarchal view. She learns about nationalism without Nikhil's guidance, mainly through Sandip's speeches and the pamphlets he gives her. Nikhil, who represents reason and moderation, could have provided a more thoughtful understanding, but Bimala is left to explore these ideas on her own. The film suggests that when women learn on their own, without male influence, they make poor decisions. This idea reinforces the belief that women are not capable of understanding complex issues or making informed choices without male control. It portrays women's independent knowledge as something that needs to be limited and guided by men to avoid harm.

The last point I want to explore in this lecture is the juxtaposition of Bimala vis-à-vis a western woman, the traditional Indian woman and the lower-class woman. The Western woman in the movie is Bimala's instructor Miss Gilby. In spite of Miss Gilby's influence on Bimala's outward behavior, Miss Gilby's presence has little effect on Bimala's deeper identity as a woman. She does not alter Bimala's fundamental understanding of femininity, nor does she transform her emotional or ideological outlook. Instead, Bimala remains rooted in her own sense of self, adopting only the practical skills that align with her husband Nikhil's vision of a bhadramahila—a woman who embodies both domestic virtue and modern sensibilities. This distinction is important because it highlights the limitations of colonial

education in reshaping indigenous identities. While Miss Gilby represents a foreign model of womanhood, her teachings remain superficial in Bimala's life. Bimala's transformation into a new woman is not driven by her English education, but rather by the ideological shifts within her own society. Her journey remains tied to the cultural and political forces shaping Bengal, making her evolution far more complex than mere Westernization

The second kind of woman in *Ghare Baire* is the widow in Nikhil's house. Unlike Bimala, she is not a *bhadramahila*. She does not possess any knowledge about the world beyond the domestic sphere. She serves as a stark contrast to Bimala, embodying the old, repressive structures of patriarchy that had long dictated the fate of women in traditional society. Her life story is one of subjugation and loss. She was married off as a child to an elderly man, a practice that was common in traditional Hindu society. However, soon after the marriage, her husband passed away, leaving her widowed at an early age. As a result, she became a victim of the old patriarchy, where widows were stripped of their autonomy. She is confined within the four walls of the household, and subjected to severe social restrictions. Unlike the *bhadramahila*, who was at least allowed access to education and a degree of refinement, the widow was denied even that limited agency. Her subjugation is explicit. It is visible in the way she is treated and in the roles assigned to her. Her body is not aestheticized in the way that Bimala's is; there is no attempt to adorn or present her as an object of admiration. Instead, she exists as a shadow within the household. Her life is dictated by rules that render her invisible to the outside world. In many ways, she represents the "old woman" that Partha Chatterjee speaks of—the woman who is fully subjected to traditional patriarchal norms, without any of the agency or dignity afforded to the *bhadramahila*. Her presence in the film serves as a reminder of the oppressive past that still lingers. Even as women like Bimala begin to step into the new age of modernity and self-awareness, the widowed sister-in-law stays inside the house.

The sister-in-law in *Ghare Baire* is a significant figure who represents the old world order of Bengali society. She is a woman of the *antarmahal*, confined within the inner quarters of the house, and remains invisible to men outside the household. Her role within the domestic space is passive—she neither engages with the management of the household nor steps into the modern responsibilities expected of women like Bimala. Unlike Bimala, who actively supervises the *dāsīs* (servant women) and ensures the smooth running of the home, the sister-in-law simply exists within its boundaries, embodying the values of an earlier era.

The contrast between Bimala and her sister-in-law is central to the film's exploration of changing gender roles. Bimala is modern, educated, and efficient. These are the qualities encouraged by her husband, Nikhil, who wants her to be a "new woman" capable of navigating both the private and public spheres. In contrast, the sister-in-law is orthodox, uneducated, and resistant to change. She represents the patriarchal mindset that believes women's liberation is a dangerous move, one that threatens the stability of the household and the broader social order. Her presence in the film serves as a reminder of the lingering resistance to women's modernity, even within elite families. While Bimala steps into a new identity shaped by education and exposure to the world, the sister-in-law remains trapped in tradition, reinforcing the tension between progress and conservatism in colonial Bengal.

The presence of lower-caste, lower-class women in Nikhil's household adds another layer to the social hierarchy depicted in *Ghare Baire*. These women, primarily servants or *dāsīs*, occupy the lowest rung of the domestic structure. Their marginalization is not just economic and social but also sartorial, marking their distinct status within the household. One of the most visible contrasts in clothing appears between Bimala's sister-in-law and these lower-class women. While the sister-in-law adheres to the norms of the *bhadramahila*, wearing a proper white sari with a blouse, the servant women simply drape a sari around their bodies, often without a blouse. This difference in attire is crucial to understanding the

socio-cultural transformations that were unfolding in colonial Bengal. As we discussed in the lecture on sartorial changes, the blouse and petticoat became markers of respectability for upper-caste and upper-class women during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Influenced by Victorian notions of modesty, reformers and social elites encouraged women to cover their bodies "properly." This change was particularly emphasized for bhadramahilas, reinforcing their distinction from women of lower status. The white sari with a blouse worn by Bimala's sister-in-law, then, is not just a personal choice but a cultural imposition—a sign of her adherence to the moral and social codes of the bhadralok class.

In contrast, the servant women remain outside this discourse of refinement. Their mode of dressing, that is the draping of the sari directly over their bodies without a blouse, clearly reflects both class-based constraints and traditional habits. Many lower-caste and lower-class women did not adopt the blouse immediately, either due to financial limitations or cultural resistance. Unlike bhadramahilas, whose bodies were expected to be covered and controlled, the bodies of servant women were neither aestheticized nor subject to the same moral anxieties.

Thus, in *Ghare Baire*, clothing serves as a visual cue for class, caste, and gendered discipline. It reinforces the divisions within the household, highlighting the ways in which sartorial changes functioned as a tool for shaping and regulating the identities of women in colonial Bengal.