

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



Volume V, Issue III March 2017



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FILMS OF SATYAJIT RAY AND REVIEWING THE FOULNESS OF THE FOULED NEST IN RAY'S CHARULATA

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Abstract

In this paper I intend to bring to light the cinematography of Satyajit Ray with a special reference to his movie Charulata (1964). The main focus in my paper is on dealing of human relationships and bringing to light the foulness of the so called fouled or broken nest of Bhupati and Charu. The paper also portrays Charu as a new woman who is bold enough to assert herself and capable of bringing forth the right.

Key Words: Assertion, Patriarchy, Foulness, Relationships.

1. Satyajit Ray and His Films

Satyajit Ray has been one of the pioneering filmmakers of India. Ray drew his motivation and subject from a very close perspective of life. Say's movies had a very special element added to it. Ray was often referred as an intellectual filmmaker by the film critics rather than a radical one. In an interview with K.S. Roy (1971: 310) Ray expresses his views about his cinema people also complain that I have never treated a really contemporary subject, the sufferings, poverty, and struggles of today. But I want to show, not just single aspects of our life today, like contemporary politics, but a broader view of Indian history, which has not been explored properly in the cinema." The movies of Ray are well researched and grounded to reality. His different personality and perspective towards life often made the critics believe that Ray was very alone in his life. Jean Renoir commented about Ray in 1974 'He is quite alone, of course'. (Giliatte, 1974:31) But in

reality he was alone due to his different ideology which very few people could understand and appreciate.

Ray's movies are often referred to as open-ended. He leaves it upon the viewer to interpret the things in his/her perspective. Human life is full of complexities, paradoxes and intricate relationships. Ray draws a parallel to all and his direction focuses on presenting a realistic view of life. 'Everything in a film is difficult to say' Ray says with imitable candour. 'Plot is the thing here.' (Taylor, 1987:322) Illustrating the Indian theme in the movies of Ray E.B. Havell remarks: "Indian art is essentially idealistic, mystic, symbolic and transcendental" (Chattopadhyay, 1987:18). Ray's films presented us with "diverse social formations seeking to transcend their difficult circumstances, caught in the contradictory pulls of tradition and modernity past and present individuality and communality." (Bhattacharya, 2005:81)

1.1 Ray: A Contemporary Filmmaker

Ray directed 36 films, including feature films, documentaries and short stories. His movie *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little road, 1955) was a trendsetter movie for parallel cinema. The movie was acclaimed universally for its pictography and careful handling of the theme. It won eleven international prizes. His work carried that élan that impressed the filmmakers all across the country and beyond and in spite of the cultural differences they ranked Ray par excellence. Ray himself admitted that he had tried to amalgamate the themes in his cinema from the West. Ray claims that, "they have been brought up to my notice that I can actually name them: irony, understatement, humor, open endings, the use of leit-motifs and a fluid camera and so on. I only try to tell a story in the best possible way balancing the needs of Art with the need to reach an audience. By no means a unique pre-occupation for a filmmaker, but perhaps involving more risks than usual in the context of India. The Western elements often perturbs the Indian viewer in the same way as the indigenous elements perturb the Western viewers." (Sight & Sound, 1982 vol. 51; #2) In an interview with Shayam Benegal about his films Ray said that he had learnt much more from the work of European and American filmmakers. (Benegal on Ray, 1988)

The international flavor in his movies demonstrated his deep research and appreciation for the movies of the West. He himself stated that "'At the age when Bengali youth almost inevitably writes poetry, I was listening to European classical music.'" (Mitra, 1983: 73)

Talking about the films of Ray Lindsay Anderson, the famous British filmmaker said “I would compare Satyajit Ray to Eisenstein, Chaplin, Kurosawa, Bergman and Antonioni. He is among the greatest in world cinema.” (Sen, 2005). The famous Japanese director and filmmaker Akira Kurosawa was overwhelmed with the cinematography of Ray and noted that the quiet but deep observation, understanding and love of the human race, which were the characteristic of all his films, have had a profound impression on him.....he said ‘I feel that he (Ray) is a ‘giant’ of the movie industry. Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon.’ (Robinson 2003: 96)

Times of India published the comment of Seton, in appreciation of Ray “It is absurd to compare it with any other Indian cinema ... Pather Panchali is pure cinema. (Seton 1971:112) Highlighting the importance and reputation of Indian cinema and appreciating Ray’s cinema in the West Johnson briefs that “Indian cinema has a reputation in the West founded more on myth than reality. ‘Art’ directors such as Satyajit Ray are given fulsome praise whilst the majority ‘commercial’ cinema receives nothing but ridicule and the entire industry is pilloried as specious dross by people who then often confess to never having seen any of the films in question” (Johnson 1987:2). Nowhere in the cinema of Ray has one found him away from the cultural roots. Ray seemed to know and love his culture too well. A well-known critic David Ansen declared him as “the Renaissance man” for thorough cultural depth, which Ray possessed innately. (Ansen, 1981)

1.2 Ray’s Cinema: Commercial versus Parallel

Ray was not very interested in commercial cinema for his theme of movies does not fit into the Bollywood romances and dancing around. It is not that Ray was against commercial cinema or did not encourage music. He was a lover of classical music and valued good music compositions. In his movies like *Charulata*, *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* one can clearly see his depiction of scenes and moves through his musical notes. His major focus in the movies was to depict the emotional integrity of human relationships. The beauty of his cinema lies in placing the day to day things in a realistic mode and drawing inferences from it. Speaking about commercial movies he says that “commercial cinema has a penchant for convolutions of plot and counterplot rather than the strong, simple and unidirectional narrative.” (Ray, 1976: 23) And that is why perhaps his cinema does not appeal the mass and is meant for a class. A class of people who have a refined understanding of the subject and can think about it from close quarters. A director is known for the type of plot he

chooses and finally his delineation of characters to fit into his theme. For the same he may not include the package of romantic scenes or other popular stunts. In the same vein Neale (2000: 31) too thinks that a director must have an idea about the expectations of the audience from his kind of movies. He opines movies consist of specific system of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with him to cinema and these expectations help the audience with means of recognition and understanding. Altman (1989: 106) too believes that only when a film combines rhythmic movement with a certain sense of realism can we call that film a musical.

2. Rabindranath Tagore and Ray

Rabindranath Tagore, the poet, philosopher and a dynamic writer had a profound influence on Ray. Ray had a sensibility like Tagore and could understand the unsaid things that Tagore conveyed through his literature. Like, Tagore, Ray too believed that be it relationships, imageries or anything else everything cannot be implicitly stated. One must have a fine eye to understand, observe and analyze rather than comment. Andrew Robinson, (1989:47) comparing the two says, "Tagore and Ray are indissolubly bound. If non-Bengalis know Tagore at all today, it is mainly by virtue of Ray's interpretations of him on film. 'Making a comparison of the contribution to the Bengali society Roberge (2007: 153) is of the view that Ray did for the Bengali cinema, what Tagore had done for the Bengali literature. Amartya Sen, the noble laureate bring out another aspect of the Tagore-Ray relationship. He appreciates the openness and the ability to bring out one's perspective that Tagore and Ray shared in common. Amartya Sen speaking about Ray and Tagore says that they were opposed to the serious asymmetry of power involved in colonial rule but were always eager to embrace useful or valuable aspects of Western culture(Sen, 2006: 119-124). He values Tagore's contribution to Indian literature as a poet, philosopher, painter and more as an educator. Talking about Satyajit Ray, he feels that Ray's films have given a new direction to Indian cinema. He has proved that how being close to culture one can still have a different angle to it and his films truly represent the independence of thoughts that Ray had showcased. He opines that Ray drives home the notion of India's cosmopolitan nature; one that while embracing Asian borne diversity, there is not much that convinces me on the reception of this in the Western ways.

2.1 Charulata (1964)

Depicted as one of the most widely acclaimed of the Ray's movies is *Charulata* (*The Lonely Wife*, 1964) that establishes Ray as a perfect filmmaker. Ray himself rates it as his favourite. "It's the one with the fewest flaws." (Wakeman, 1988: 845.) *Charulata* has been adapted from Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Nastanirh* (*The Broken Nest*). The main plot of the movie deals with three characters *Charulata* (the protagonist), *Bhupati* (*Charu's* husband) and *Amal* (*Bhupati's* cousin). *Charulata* has been portrayed as a meticulous woman taking care of an affluent household. Her husband *Bhupati* is very busy in bringing out his newspaper and talking about liberation and political movements. His intellectual and conversational abilities can be well discerned through his talks. Amidst the hustle and bustle of the press and the outer world does Ray pictograph *Charulata* and her lonely world.

Charu is shown to be occupied in her own world trying to get noticed, gain attention from her husband. There are two instances in the movie where *Bhupati* passes by without even paying a note that *Charu* is standing there waiting for just a small gesture or a smile. He, busy in his own world of thoughts passes as if she does not exist. Her only recluse to the outer world is her binocular through which she ponders at the outside world. The lack of communication and that there is something unnatural in their relationship can be predicted right from the beginning. Gottman (1993:60) is of the view, there is an identifiable pattern of communication that predicts the cascade toward marital dissolution, then are there any realistic interventions than can be made to stem or reverse this tide? The direction of Ray is so compelling that one is bound to understand and feel the indifference and the gap that exists between them. Ray extends a grace to his characters and none of them speaks of anything or reports any problem, he leaves it to the viewers to judge, analyze and draw as many inferences as they can. Satyajit Ray in his films is rather interested in portraying the "clash of values, old and new, in the pattern of human relationships." (Seaton, 1971: 297) Through vivid imagery of storms, blossoms and nature's catastrophe he tries to depict the internalization, dilemma and the phases of transition that his characters are going through.

Everyone has a strong desire to be loved and admired. Similarly *Charu* too in the movie longs to be pampered, loved and heard. Her relationship with her husband *Bhupati*, apparently seems to be alright. She has everything that a woman of a higher class must have, a big house surrounded by servants to offer their services at her call, riches, jewels and all the comforts. But is it all a woman

longs for? When seen from close quarters the nest the bird Charu is living seems to be a fouled one as it lacks communication. Shyam Asnani (1973: 6) observes that: “Mere living together under the same roof, only the accumulating of a life-time’s living habits, without any real bond of intimacies inspite of sex and children, the human substance between them dwindling is nothing but the mockery of marriage. True living lies in understanding each other, in mutual respect and trust, honesty and freedom without dominance”.

Bhupati, though a very loving and caring husband misses the art of pleasing a woman. One can see his concern for his wife when he talks to his cousin Amal about her. He foresees her talent of creativity and writing and requests Amal to bring that out. He also understands that he is not able to give time to his dutiful wife and feels that it is wrong on his part. To fill the gaps and help his brother-in-law (Charu’s brother) he calls Umapati and his wife Manda so that she can be a companion to Charu. Charu is though reluctant on Bhupati’s proposal of offering work to her brother as she knows the callous attitude of her brother and does not approve of it. But it is Bhupati’s humanity which believes that everyone must be given a chance and a responsibility and certainly he will be able to do well.

Amal, a young graduate has a very special role in the movie. His entry is marked as a gush of fresh air. Far from the mundane, his carefree nature, literary talks, reciting of poetry and his cheerful personality immediately appeals Charu. While talking and discussing literature with him Charu is able to revive her literary and cultural sensitivity. Amal too is strongly drawn towards Charu and cares for her likes and dislikes. He is liked not only by Charu but also by her sister-in-law Manda. Charu, indeed is more possessive about him as when Amal declares the news of his publication first to Manda, Charu is quite offended by it. One can clearly see the expressions of Charu changing to anger and disgust. Her rude behavior to Amal that follows is an evidence of her possessiveness about Amal and that she does not like to share his attention with anybody. She takes Manda as a threat to their relationship (Amal and Charu) and to negate it she starts playing the fault-finding game with her in order to assert her authority. Buunk (1991) explains that jealousy responses can occur as a result of an imagined relationship threat. A person may use possessive jealousy to control one’s partner obsessively (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007). In the same vein Schmitt (1988) suggests that one must decide to reduce the threat of the rival by derogating them or by acknowledging one’s own valuable characteristics and this is what Charu does to Manda.

When Bhupati discloses the treachery of his brother in law to Amal and tells him what hurts him all the more is the betrayal of trust. The word trust falls as an alarming bell to his ears and he realizes that he too is doing the same thing. Knowingly or unknowingly he has come between him and Charu. After this realization he withdraws immediately from the scenario and leaves their house without even bidding farewell to Charu. The cinematic genius of Ray again shows everything through imageries of storm. The storm in the background reveals the storm that is present inside the characters, Charu, Bhupati and Amal. Each one driven with the storm and complexities of its own nature.

But is it only Amal who is responsible for their fouled nest? No, Amal was just a medium whom Ray uses to show the distance in their relationship. Charu and Bhupati fall a prey to the dearth of candid communication in their relationship. Bhupati, due to his priority towards his work and Charu due to the patriarchal roles assigned to wife was perhaps never able to express her emotions and feelings to Bhupati. Researchers have time and again pointed out that poor communication, basic unhappiness, loss of love and incompatibility are the persistent causes for the breakdown of one's relationship. (Burns 1984; Cleek and Pearson 1985; Gigy and Kelly 1992; Noller et al. 1997; Wolcott 1984). The needs, expectations and pattern of behavior vary from person for making a marriage a healthy one. Thompson (1960:1) feels that 'The etiology of marital relationships is very complex, and the factors involved operate at different levels. In some marriages a given set of circumstances constitutes a threat which brings about deterioration in the relationship, while in others it calls forth a positive response and a strengthening of the ties between the couple.' The causes of divorce may include the failure to communicate with one another, lack of attention, feeling of being left out and the missing bond essential for a relationship.

2.2 Charulata: A New Woman

1963 and 1965 was the period during which Ray produced *Mahanagar* (1963), *Charulata* (1964), *Kapurush* (1965). The movies made in this period demonstrate Ray's concern for women. (Jayasena, 2007: 161) Charulata depicts Ray's perception of new woman. He always believed women to be strong individuals capable of carving a path for themselves against all the odds. Ray's women are assertive, strong-willed and sensitive females. In an interview Ray says "Well, the one film that I would make the same way, if I had to do it again, is Charulata." (Antani, 2006)

One can clearly mark the independent spirit of Charu in *Charulata*. Though tied with the chains of patriarchy and duty she can be perceived as a woman with a strong daunt of mind and upright expression. In her intellectual discussions with Amal she states her point of view very blatantly and is very explicit in her comments about the works of great poets as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. When teased by Amal about the fineness of writing, she does not withdraw rather takes it as a challenge and gets her work published in *Vishwa Bharati*- a very reputed journal of those times. Her essay reveals her clarity of thoughts, simplicity of ideas and understanding of human relationships. The images that glide through Charu's mind and into her essay in Ray's film are not just one individual's memories: they are visions of the eternal and eternally nurturing nation lying beyond ordinary perception. (Chakrabarty: 2000) Ray portrays her woman as a woman of substance. He believes in giving equal opportunities to women. He somehow did not conform the treatment of women in those times and perhaps because of this his predominant concern about women is visible in his films where he portrays women as an individual. (Cooper, 2000: 75) K.K. Sinha says, "if men have reasons for a particular line of action, women may have theirs too". (Sinha, 2000: 211) Deepa Mehta, the famous filmmaker who is known to bring out the independent spirit of woman in her films, has cited Ray as the director whom she most admires and who has had the biggest influence on her films. She describes him as "the greatest humanist filmmaker" and expresses a desire to "reach his vision on some level." (Levitin, 2003: 273:283)

Ray respected the Indianess in his movies but at the same time he did not agree to the patriarchal image of woman to be a weak and unassertive. Through his movie *Charulata* he brings to light his concept of new woman who is capable enough to bring forth her ideas, present it explicitly of above all assert her individuality. In the last scene when Bhupati to his dismay discovers her mourning about Amal and is taken aback by this fact, Charu is not blamed for anything. Ray again uses imagery and silence as a medium to express the turbulence of the characters. Bhupati then realizes the foulness of their nest. Even at this point of time, Charu is not showcased as a weak woman, though she is beckoned by her emotions yet she does not fall. Nowhere does she show any signs of guilt or shame. For she knows that she has done nothing wrong. She is portrayed as a firm and confident woman, a woman of Ray. Anannya Bhattacharjee remarks (1998:163-185) that a persistent theme of Indian Nationalism has been the re-processing of the image of the Indian woman and her role based in the family, based on models of Indian womanhood from the distant

glorious past. The woman becomes a metaphor for the purity, the chastity, and the sanctity of the Ancient Spirit that is India.

Karney and Bradbury (1995:22) emphasize that to comprehend how marriages 'develop, succeed and fail' over time, it is essential to understand the individual histories and *enduring vulnerabilities* that each spouse brings to the marriage that mediate marital outcomes. These are the demographic, historical, personality and experiential factors of individual temperament and family history that are essentially unchangeable. These researchers also emphasize that marital stability and quality are influenced by the differing *stressful events* that couples encounter, and their *adaptive processes*, or the way that couples are able to respond to these circumstances.

A proper understanding plays a pivotal role in governing the lives of individuals. One can give and spread happiness only when he/she is happy. Charu and Bhupati are seeking for happiness outside their own selves and that leads to their misery. Bhupati in the mad pursuit and publicity of his newspaper completely ignores the concerns and caresses that a young woman looks forward to. The loneliness and longing for motherhood too makes their relationship dry and withered. There is a scene in the movie where Charu and Amal are in the garden, Charu sitting on the swing and Amal busy in writing. Looking through the binocular Charu catches the view of a mother taking care of her child. She pauses and looks at Amal but knows the limitation of their relationship and no possibility of further moves. Quietly she sighs and gets back to the normal course. One can easily understand her longing to be a mother and her pain which she tries to conceal through the lens. Koropecykj-Cox (2002) quoted that childless women are more prone to loneliness and depression. Perhaps her being childless is one of the very strong reasons to be drawn towards Amal. Her motherly instinct of showering love and caring for somebody drenches her and she feels all the more attached to him. Invariably does she request Amal to be with her and not to leave her.

3. Conclusion: An Unparallel

The movie ends with Charu extending her hand to Bhupati, as if a sign of reconciliation, ushering a new beginning. The hands freeze and not meeting of the hand can be again interpreted in different ways. One may interpret it as a new beginning while others may treat it as the end of their relationship. To me, it is a sign of reconciliation of the relationship of Charu and Bhupati. Women are more sensitive to relationships and in this context Thompson and Walker rightly opine that Compared with men, women tend to monitor their relationships more closely, become aware of

relationship problems sooner, and are more likely to initiate discussions of relationship problems with their partners (Thompson & Walker, 1991) and Men, in contrast, are more likely than women to withdraw from discussions of relationship problems (Gottman, 1994). Similarly, Charu too decides to give him a second chance for heart to heart she also knows that Bhupati is not a bad man. Their commitment to their relationship is surely much more than anything that is needed to save a marriage. Bringle (1991, 105) feels that other things being equal, the greater the commitment, the greater the emotional reaction to jealousy-evoking events. Ray's genius lies in not taking sides with any of the characters and showing them as they are. Undoubtedly Charulata is one of the most remarkable contributions to Indian cinema. The way in which he has developed the character of Charu and the equal importance given to each of the characters present in the movie display his careful delineation of the plot. The broken nest and its foulness have been observed very minutely in the movie. The movie Charulata even today sets itself apart due to its uniqueness in dealing with the relationships. There is no blaming for the foulness of the nest. The nest of Bhupati and Charu has been shown just as an ordinary house of an upper middle class family. But what happens inside it is what the director's concern towards his audience. Again as the type of Ray's movies he leaves the possibility of reunion or separation, open-ended, to be perceived by the viewers. Nowhere in the movie has he tried to suggest or teach anything, as a show maker he is just trying to showcase what happens on the bigger stage called 'Life'.

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