



Scene from the film 'Charulata' (1964) by Satyajit Ray, Scene: 00:04:04

Rezension

Love and Leisure: At Discomfort with Modernity in the films of Satyajit Ray

Farha Noor

Picture a setting, lavishly furnished with colonial settees, sofas and chest of drawers. Picture the large drawing room, adorned with oriental wallpaper, framed female portraits from Europe, elaborate lamps and chandeliers. Picture a decked up Bengali woman in a *saree*, designer blouse, hair accessories and heavy jewellery, loitering around this drawing room – this most odd, most sophisticated, unnatural image, poetically synthesised is representative of one of the most researched, written and debated subjects of South Asian Studies today – the relationship of native women to their colonial context – the position of a figure in contestation with a hybrid space that is at the same time deemed as the other, and the aspired, as distant and yet desirable. Satyajit Ray, widely recognised as one of the best film makers of the 20th century is well-known for depicting the changing lives, relationships and positions of women at home and in society as India transformed itself from a colony to a Modern democratic republic. This could be a scene from a number of Ray films where he brings to screen the tussle between indigenous Indian 'doing nothing' with acquired civilised Modern practices of Leisure imported from the empire. *Shatranj ke Khilari* ('The Chess players'), *Jalsaghar* ('The Music Room') are classic examples. However, here I wish to focus on the two celebrated films that take this tussle forward and question the relationship of Gender with regard to Tradition and Modernity at the time of shifting colonial politics and emergent nationalism in India. These two films that are repeatedly discussed and compared to each other are *Ghare Baire* ('The Home and the World') 1984 and *Charulata* ('The Lonely Wife') 1964. While *Ghare Baire* was nominated for Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1984, *Charulata* had already bagged the Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1965. Both films have been extensively written about, from the perspective of female sexuality and modernity. However, I would like to zoom in on these films by reading love and leisure as derived from the master nexus.

Going back to the scene I tried to put in words, it is an early one from *Charulata*, released in English under the title 'The Lonely Wife'. It is a most elaborate and sophisticated cinematic adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's short story. Though highly praised for its many excellent cinematic aspects, the one international criticism it received resoundingly was that it is 'slow'. However, as Andrew Robinson¹ writes, the 'cultured Bengali' would never find it slow, 'rather, he requires three or four viewings to absorb it to the full.' Robinson goes on to describe it as 'Ray's most allusive, fully realised film'. In doing so, perhaps, what Robinson is pointing at is that a fully realised film would take its 'time'. As the credits begin to appear, we see a frame focused on a small corner of a handkerchief being embroidered by deft hands. The motif has leaves on both sides of the corner, centring the Roman alphabet 'B', for Bhupati, *Charulata*'s husband. The background

¹ Andrew Robinson: *Satyajit Ray. The Inner Eye. The Biography of a Master Film-Maker*, London: I.B. Tauris 1989, p. 157

score is an instrumental rendition of one of Tagore's famous songs the subject of which is interestingly, 'natural rhythm' – of dance, of the seasons, of life and its duality. With the last stich, Madhabi, the renowned Bengali actress playing the lead character in the film tugs the thread off the handiwork by her teeth, just in time as she is interrupted by the chiming of a clock. She walks out of the room and starts to call the servant – Braja – tells him that it's already 4 in the afternoon, the time for him to hand over a cup of tea at the 'aapish', a bengalised pronunciation of 'office'. She walks back, admires her handiwork, enters her room and drops the finished hanky on the bed. She yawns, leafs through a book and decides to get another one.

She strolls towards the said drawing room, to its bookshelf and begins to run her fingers along the spines of the various Bengali books lined up. While she does this, she begins to hum the name of her favourite Bengali novelist 'Bankim' in tune. She makes her choice, *Kapaalakundala*, opens the book and starts leafing through it, as she begins to saunter around the room, constantly humming in rhythm. When the rhythm of her feet are interrupted (as Charu has reached one end of the room), she stops, and peeps out of the window that halts her movement. Unable to see things well from up here, she walks back to her room, takes out a lorgnette from a drawer and walks back to the window. She focuses on various figures on the street – the monkey man, a seller of knick-knacks, the palanquin bearers and then, a rounded up, dhoti-clad middle-aged man walking with his umbrella and a pot of sweets. Charu hurries from one window to another to keep watching him walk, almost like throwing a challenge to herself, until after three windows, the man vanishes. This playful scene is followed by intense music, gradually increasing in rhythm and volume so as to emphasize on how Charu has nothing to do as she strolls around the lavishly furnished drawing room, absorbing the ambience, its décor and the meaninglessness of its grandeur for her person. It is the loneliest scene in the film, that is full of exuberance and excess and at the same time, lacking and discontent. She sits at the piano and plays a key or two as she is interrupted by the sound of footsteps. She walks to the door and sees her husband passing by, without noticing her. She stares after him, and waits as he comes out of their room, looking intently down at a page of the book he had gone to retreat. Thus engaged, he walks past her once again, oblivious to her presence. She looks at him through her lorgnette and sees him vanishing down the stairs out of her gaze. Charu's expression of disappointment is so aptly portrayed by Madhabi that the still becomes one of the most iconic ones by Ray. The scene shifts. It is evening and Bhupati is having his dinner as Charu fans him slowly – Bhupati begins talking to his wife. About work. This conversation sets the tone of their relationship as Bhupati explains his ideals. The white men use a phrase for us, he says, 'The Idle Rich'; and that he wishes to prove this idea to be null and void. He believes, he says, that a man can become very useful if he is endowed with responsibility. The next scene shows Bhupati re-reading his editorial loudly to get it ready for publishing in his newspaper, *The Sentinel*. As Charu enters to give him her embroidered handkerchief, he is awestruck and asks how she has so much time to which she replies – 'do I have any lack of time?'

Moving on to the other film to be discussed here, *Ghare Baire* or 'The Home and the World' in English, a similar setting but not in the city of Calcutta, the 'Empire's Brightest Jewel', but in the country side, to the drawing room of a Zamindar (landlord – these feudal landlords were generally in charge of a village or few and the surrounding area). Nikhil is such a Zamindar though unorthodox, who is obsessed with his beautiful wife Bimala and her exposure to the wonders of the Western World. He has seen to it that she is taught to read and write English, he has employed a white woman, Miss Gilby, to endow her with a sense of Western music and song. The film begins in retrospect, with Bimala, the lead female character recounting the story of her marriage to a decent, understanding, modern man, the son of a Rajbari (aristocratic family). Very soon, we have a parallel to *Charulata* – the similar drawing room – upholstered settees, European female portraits and lamps, elaborate furniture. Except that unlike *Charulata*, Bimala has found 'use' of this space. Charu is impulsively creative while Bimala is being trained. She stands by a window, clad in ornate jewellery and saree, with a veil on her head as she sings to the tune played on



Scene from the film 'Ghare Baire' or 'Home and the World' (1984) by Satyajit Ray, Scene: 00:06:37

the piano by Miss Gilby, also singing after Miss Gilby in repetition, in English:

*'Tell me the tales that to me were so dear
Long long ago, long long ago
Sing me the songs I delighted to hear
Long long ago, long ago.'*

As Bimala's husband enters the room, she is annoyed at his interruption. From his conversation with Miss Gilby we hear that Bimala has had classes that day in History, Geography and Grammar. Nikhil is impressed and surprised that she can sing as well since she had told him earlier that she could not. He teasingly asks her if she has learnt how to 'pour tea' and she replies vehemently in irritation and in English, 'No!'

Bimala's condition is very different from Charu's. Bimala is at the centre of her husband's attention and experiments – Charu figures only at the margins of Bhupati's many engagements – perhaps the most neglected one. While Nikhil is invested in making a 'mehsahib' (a white woman) out of Bimala, Bhupati merely wishes now and then that Charu finds something to engage herself in. Bhupati only tells his younger visiting cousin Amal, a student of literature, to provoke Charu to read and write and gauge her abilities whereas Nikhil has officially employed Miss Gilby to train his wife to become adapted to Western tastes. Nikhil refuses to stop at that – he wishes to expose his wife to the outside world, the 'bahir mahal' and introduce her to his friend Sandip, the leader of the Swadeshi Movement, fighting the Colonial oppression of the British Rule. Lord Curzon, the then governor General and Viceroy of India tried to divide India, particularly Bengal, on the basis of communal differences and segregate larger Bengal into two smaller Bengals, one comprising the poor Muslim majority, the other the intellectual Hindus. Led by Gandhi and some other leaders, the political cry of the Swadeshi (literally 'of one's own land') Movement was to boycott all British goods and thus halt the economy of the empire in protest. Nikhil's friend Sandip is a strong leader of this movement, trying to mobilise the rural population by travelling around. It is at one such tour that he happened to pass through and thus live in Nikhil's house. This is when Nikhil decides to break the tradition and introduce his wife to his friend, bring her from inside the Home, to the outside World – referring to the title of Tagore's novel on which Ray bases his film.

It would take one an entire book to write about the socio-political, literary-cultural and cinematic intricacies of each of these films. Also, since much has been written on both films already, I will now focus on some of the common motifs and ideas used in these films to steer towards my reading of them. And the most significant one is the relationship of women with Time – unfurling further engagements with work-leisure, obsession-boredom, and ennui-desire. And to unfurl this, I will look to the one writer-philosopher both works engage with, the most celebrated Bengali novelist of the time, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Bankim is Charu's obsession – she reads his novels as she lives from one empty day to next and compares herself to his heroines – Mrinalini, Radharani, Shaibalini, Kapaalakundala – each more beautiful than the other, making Charu feel rather 'not so beautiful'. However, it is Amal, who reads out passages from Bankim's essay on stereotypes of women – '*Praacheena o Nabeena*'² (The Traditional Woman and the New Woman) – where Bankim declares the traditional hardworking woman to be much more contributing and responsible towards society than the new woman, who spends her life admiring herself in the mirror, whiling away her time reading '*Sitar Banabas*' (Sita's Exile). In *Charulata*, Charu is more a *nabeena* (new woman or modern woman), who whiles away her time stitching, humming, and reading the books of Bankim. Her husband Bhupati ironically seems to agree with Bankim in his outlook of work and laziness and this is why he desires Amal to intervene and see that Charu's 'detachments' and 'driftings' are trained and transformed into something meaningful, something as good as 'work'. On the other hand, Nikhil has already made a *nabeena* out of his *pracheena* wife by training her in the pleasures and leisures of the Western world – and by introducing Bimala to his politically inclined friend Sandip, he exposes Bimala to a faint realization that all her pursuits are only

² Bankim Chandra Chatterjee: *Bibidha Prabandha* 1879, Calcutta: Basumati Sahitya Mandir 1930

leisurely and what she really wants to do is serious ‘work’ – ‘*desh kaaj*’ or work of the nation. On her increasing interaction with Sandip, she is magnetically attracted to the idea of working for the nation, in order to make a difference and does not care for dabbling in Western literature and culture any more. Bimala finds her attachment to Bankim in Sandip’s and the Swadeshi’s war cry, ‘*Bande Maataram*’ (Hail Motherland!), taken from the lines of a poem in Bankim’s novel *Anandamath* (The Abbey of Bliss) that later became the national song of India. Tagore – and Ray – play with Bankim in various contexts through these two films – recalling the scene in *Charulata* where it is this very poem that is recited by Amal when he is offered a tempting marriage proposal that would take him to England and make him a barrister. With these very lines, Amal refuses the land of Shakespeare, Macaulay and Gladstone -

Sujalaam, Suphalaam
Malayajashetaalam
Shasya shyamalam Maataram
Bande Maataram

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Anandamath* 1881

Rich, with thy hurrying streams,
 Bright with orchard gleams,
 Cool with thy winds of delight,
 Dark fields waving Mother of might
 Mother free.

Translation by Sri Aurobindo Ghose

Bankim is one of the foremost writers writing about tradition and modernity in India at the turn of the Century. Tagore, as an upcoming philosopher and writer who would go on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature is engaged with Bankim’s ideas throughout his literary endeavours. Ray, as a world-renowned film maker, is engaged with Tagore and thus Bankim – each of them further nuancing the precursor’s take on modernity and gender in India through the ages. Tagore questions Bankim’s ideas by weaving them in his representative fiction. Ray brings these questions to life by the portrayal of his female protagonists on screen. Tagore’s novel ‘*Ghare Baire*’ is written from three different perspectives, giving each character their voices. Ray chooses to select the voice of Bimala, his heroine, to make her the storyteller. *Charulata* is the heroine of *Charulata* the film – with no heroes whatsoever. It is from the perspectives of two women that Ray shows us the tussle between modernity and tradition, sexuality and society, work and leisure, desire and duty. Both Charu and Bimala are engaged in their own drifting ways with their own interests – it is the invasion of their personal space and interests by their respective husbands that they both resist – be it reading and writing as serious work or the leisurely pursuits of pleasure and sophistication. The husbands, both educated in Western philosophy, politics and literature, are representatives of Macaulay’s brown men with white intellect – however, each of them have learnt to question their intellectual heritage and loyalty and thus are rebels in their own ways – Bhupati by being ardently engaged and Nikhil by maintaining a sceptical distance. It is the entry of the two younger men (both played by Soumitra Chatterjee) that dismantles this thinly balanced scene of domesticity and work in both settings. And that is what Tagore – through literature, and Ray – through Cinema attempt to question. The leisurely existence of both *Charulata* and Bimala are disturbed by the respective entries of Amal and Sandip – one a leisurely youth dabbling in literature, reading, writing and poetry, the other a hard-core political leader, immersed in his political decisions, so much so that he forgets to question his ideology in his actions. Though the character of ‘work’ is very different in each film, it becomes an obsession for both women to change their previous everyday way of futile living and ‘do something worthwhile’ so as to become meaningful, and thus desirable for the young men to whom they are attracted.

This enormous shift in the lives of these women from a particularly well-off background, with much time at hand and nothing serious to do is only possible through their shaking attraction towards the young men – through a

realisation and recognition of desire – through a tussle with Time that changes its nature – that they are in love, outside the socio-religious boundaries of marriage. It is the interference of a regularised day, the 24 hour clock that they resist. They attempt to take Time in their own hands and do what they please, for what they desire. Charu is shaken enough to write and get her writing published in the highly acclaimed literary magazine 'Biswa Bandhu' to which even Amal is under confident to send his writing. Bimala is called 'Makkhi-Rani' (Queen Bee) by Sandip and it is around her that he surrounds his political work in the village – she makes it possible for Sandip to have money needed for his 'work'. The sudden realisation of the transgression each woman is capable of is brought out through their realisation of 'being in love' and perhaps it takes a filmmaker like Satyajit Ray to bring this to life and seek a disruptive reaction from his audience. For both films, Ray's morality-hypocrite Bengali audience reacted exactly as Ray perhaps provoked them to – in both films made twenty years apart, Charulata's transgressive love for Amal is as sceptically frowned upon by the audience as violently they reacted to Bimala's kissing Sandip on screen. Ray through both films thus questions the comfort that Bengali intellectuals claim to have with western concepts of modernity where he sees and shows this transgressive love as a manifestation of the same modernity. Both Bhupati and Nikhil, apparently comfortable with modernity, finds that this transgressive act shatters them – Bhupati hardly engaged enough to notice it flower and Nikhil almost pushing Bimala to experience it. Both films end in unhappiness – *Ghare Baire* a bigger tragedy but *Charulata* on a note of undeniable scepticism as well. Bimala's tragic retelling and her acceptance that she has 'sinned' and will go to hell is of a higher stature but the last scene of *Charulata* is rendered doubtful as well with Ray freezing the scene before Charu and her husband can hold hands. The frame freezes with the Bengali original title of Tagore's short story, '*Nastanirh*' or 'The Broken Nest'. In bringing this disjunction and discomfort with modernity to life, Ray employs as tools, work and leisure – deftly with his female characters as protagonists and the Clock or Time as an antagonist. In *Charulata*, Charu is interrupted on a daily basis by the clock that reminds her of her domestic duties. In *Ghare Baire*, the clocks become a recurring motif, ticking away, waiting for their revenge. It is this discomfort with Time – its utility and wastage that much of Modern Indian Literature is consumed with, always unsure about the relationship of the Clock with the Woman and afraid at the possibility of a transgression beyond the circular, enclosed domains of domesticity, tradition and morality.

Empfohlene Zitierweise:

Farha Noor: Love and Leisure: At Discomfort with Modernity in the films of Satyajit Ray
In: *Muße. Ein Magazin*, 4. Jhg. 2019, Heft 1, S. 18-22.
DOI: 10.6094/musse-magazin/4.2019.18
URL: <http://mussemagazin.de/2019/04/love-and-leisure-at-discomfort-with-modernity-in-the-films-of-satyajit-ray/>
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