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Vision of Tagore through Applicability in the Spectrum of Ray and Ghosh: Reflection of Feminine Approach in two Bengali Movies

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Rabindranath Tagore had an enormous influence on Satyajit Ray, one of the great directors in India's long tradition of art house cinema who directed Charulata, and Chokher Bali is made by a director much influenced by Ray in turn, Rituparno Ghosh. The film Charulata affords a dazzling view of Satyajit Ray's mastery of the medium and gives vital proof of his ability to explore universal themes without compromising his uniquely Bengali sensibilities. Ray's script gracefully follows the maturing of Charu's artistic and feminine identity. The Bengali filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh writes and directs the costume melodrama Chokher Bali: A Passion Play which focuses on the situation of women. Set in the early 1900s, the film draws parallels between the British colonization of Bengal and the domestic situation of a Calcutta household. This paper tries to analyze the representation of Indian Bengali female characters, written by Tagore in the early 20th century, through the above mentioned two movies.

Keywords: Nationalism, womanhood, partition of India, man-woman relationship

The Nobel laureate Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore had written plenty of stories of which two have been selected for the paper. *Charulata*, one of the finest cinema directed by Satyajit Ray and *Chokher Bali*, another one of the purest cinema directed by Rituporno Ghosh. The feminity projected by the actresses in the early 1900s Bengal were beyond words. The detailed analysis and interpretations of the stories have been provided with the help of intimate relations, proper expressions and overall representations through both the movies.

Cinematic Spectacle of *Charulata*

Satyajit Ray remains largely committed to a social-realist imperative in his cinema. In 1966, following the critical success of *Charulata*, Ray wrote that he had chosen for himself "the field of intimate cinema… of mood and atmosphere rather than of grandeur and spectacle" (Ray, 1976). However, in *Charulata* there is evidence of a cinema born out of the exquisite love affair *between* intimacy and spectacle and an Ophulsian cinematic spectacle. *Charulata* is based on the 1901 novella *Nastanirh* (*The Broken Nest*) by Bengali author Rabindranath Tagore

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(Robinson, 1989). Ray later said that he liked the novella because "it has a western quality to it and the film obviously shares that quality. That's why I can speak of Mozart in connection with *Charulata* quite validly" (Robinson, 1989). Ray decided to set the film in the 1880s instead of in 1901 and spent many months researching the historical background of the film. For the first time in his career he worked without a deadline both during pre-production and during the shooting (Robinson, 1989). Ray worked closely with art director Bansi Chandragupta and no interior scene was shot on location. All sets were built or remodeled, meticulously researched and detailed to accurately portray India in the 1880s. Ray cast Indian actress Madhabi Mukherjee in the role of Charulata, but had difficulty with her due to her addiction to eating Paan, which stained her teeth black. Because of this Ray had to be careful about what camera angles he used to film Mukherjee (Robinson, 1989). Ray once called *Charulata* his favorite of his own films (Robinson, 1989).

Charulata (The Lonely Wife) was Ray's twelfth feature film. Ray described the film as the one which has the least defects. In an interview with 'Cineaste' magazine, when asked about his most satisfying film, Ray said, "Well, the one film that I would make the same way, if I had to do it again, is Charulata." But the film works on many levels and like most Ray films, Charulata is universal in its appeal. In Charulata, Satyajit Ray explores the emergence of the modern woman in the upper-class of colonial India. One can not help drawing parallels with Ibsen's 'A Doll's House'. (*Charulata*, The Lonely Wife, 1965).

Charulata was also the filmmaker's second adaptation of a Rabindranath Tagore work (after 1961's *Teen Kanya*) and, indeed, one senses a close affinity between Ray's cinema and Tagore's literature. Like his literary idol's, Ray's narratives are alive with the textures of nature, the rhythms of native Bengali life, and the nuances of human gesture and behavior. A drifting camera, following Charu around the mansion's breezy corridors and apartments, opens the film. At one point, the camera moves her flitting from window to window, peeking through her lorgnettes at the humdrum of street life below. Otherwise, she thumbs through old novels by Bengali romantics or plays cards with Manda (Gitali Roy), her earthier, saucier sister-in-law. Ray's décor may be divertingly lovely, but he makes sure to include hints of Charu's inner reality: The iron bars on the window and the birdcage poised in the corridor, for example, suggest all is not well. Suddenly, the light in the room darkens and the winds pick up, threatening the home's blasé tranquility. The storm heralds the arrival of Amal (Soumitra Chatterjee), Charu's brother-in-law, an idealist-poet with whom she fell in love. True to Tagore, Ray marshals nature's tantrums to foreshadow or punctuate turning points in his characters' lives, and this is a particularly poignant moment because no one, least of all the happy-go-lucky Amal nor the dutiful Charu, expect the emotional storms to come (Antani, 2004).

'Broken Nest' reads more like a compressed novel than a short story, it moves through extended passages and gaps in time, through episodes and broad developments in characters and situations. The long introductory sequence of *Charulata* is probably the best example and a piece of cinematic poetry of the masterly technique of compression and telescoping Ray uses to translate descriptive passages. Almost without any dialogue the sequence establishes a typical afternoon in Charu's life, her loneliness, her affinity to novels, the spatial limits of her movements. It brings to life an object-world that embodies time – the wallpaper, the furniture, the items of daily use, but also the street sounds and the street images (Biswas, n.d.). These images are glimpsed by Charu through an opera glass: as she opens one blind after another on the wall to peek at the comically graphic characters moving in the street, her socially restricted movement momentarily turns into a playful choreography. And then Charu frames the figure of her husband

Bhupati with the opera glass - passing down the corridor not noticing her, lost in his book. Ray conjures up this interior with a dexterity that reminds of the image of Charu's embroidery in the title sequence, a texture of words is dissolved into a weave of images effortlessly before the eyes (Bandyopadhyay, 1993).

Ray conveys the innermost feelings and thoughts of his characters without any dazzling technique and with minimal dialog. A wonderful sequence is the swing sequence in the garden. In this scene Charu, who has been resisting her feelings for Amal, gives in and admits her love to herself. It is about eight-minute long sequence with almost no dialogue. With innovative camera and narrative style, Ray depicts Charu's state of mind and her dilemma. (*Charulata*, The Lonely Wife, 1965). In 1965, Penelope Houston of Sight and Sound remarked "...The interplay of sophistication and simplicity is extraordinary." *Charulata* belongs to that venerable category of films that unabashedly display their complexities, and are readily regarded as "exemplary" because of the delightful struggle involved in talking or writing about them. For several Ray enthusiasts – it *is* the director's masterpiece, a film that has been likened to Mozart's music (but with little objective justification), and is cinematically "close to perfection" (Nyce, 1988). However, Charu spends most of the narrative oscillating between the *Prachina* and the *Nabina*; she is never quite one or the other (Chaudhuri, 2004).

At a more discursive level, the whole film can be seen to be engaged in a dialogue with one of Bankim's essays, 'Women, Old and New', a major statement on what is known as the 'Women's Question' in the nineteenth century. All this is added to Tagore's original text which finds itself embedded in a tapestry of literary signs. The image of writing, the written word, forms a major visual motif – Amal writing, Charu writing, Bhupati getting intoxicated with the printed word. The alphabet shining on the embroidery over the titles signals a process which leads to the very last image of the film: the hands of Charu and Bhupati freeze before they could meet; the title of Tagore's story appears on the screen in calligraphic design. This would appear as merely explanatory and redundant unless follow the logic of appearance of the written word in the film (Biswas, n.d.). It is a final gesture of receding from the original story, of turning the work itself into an object of the film's gaze. The scene in which Bhupati comes to know about Charu's feelings for his cousin the camera makes a gesture very unusual for Ray: it climbs up the leg of a marble table slowly to reveal a letter lying on it while Charu and Bhupati are heard talking off-screen. The letter is from Amal and it will bring about an emotional outburst in Charu giving her feelings away (Ghosh, 1990).

Bankim's 'Women Old and New' was published in 1879 (Ray gives an exact time for the events, 1879, from the dateline on the copy of the magazine that Bhupati shows Amal) where he argues for a new woman who would be modern in the traditional way. She would embody the resolution of the conflict between tradition and modernity by finding her place in a re-invented patriarchy. She would learn to be the new old woman. As the film launches a dialogue with this essay it maps Tagore's story onto a historical grid, the political drama is brought out into the open. The story tells of the formation of the colonial subject, male and female, and of the inevitable irony and pain that attend the process. Tagore begins his story by an ironic description of the domains his characters occupy (Dutta & Lago, 1992). The idealistic, English educated Bhupati is worried about the expansion of British territories beyond the Afghan borders, but hasn't had the time to notice how his child bride has bloomed into womanhood; Charu's idleness is of a different kind, reminding one of a fruitless tree. As she develops an expressive selfhood, through her love and through her writing, the challenge of the demarcation of domains comes to face her, it demands a heavy price. The dichotomy of literature and

politics suggested in the story is developed into a strong motif in the film. The first is associated with the woman; the second belongs to the man (Biswas, n.d.). Bhupati entrusts Amal with Charu's literary education admitting that he has no taste for such things, busy as he is with the 'real world' of politics. Ray also makes him say to Amal that this politics, critical though it is of the colonial government's policies, is not meant to be disloyal to the masters. And from Bhupati the story showed how worried he and friends are about the outcome of the parliamentary elections in Britain; one of his friends has vowed to sacrifice a goat at the Kali temple if the liberals win (Ray, 1982).

Intermission

What begins as a seemingly straightforward character study quickly develops into a scathing critique of the social hypocrisies of the Bengali Renaissance. Charu becomes representative of a generation of women, encouraged to experience a sense of liberty and independence, but only within the *andarmahal* (inner sanctum of the house). Ray's structural and aesthetic approach to the delicate complexities of his thematics and narrative deserves careful scrutiny, and has certainly not gone unnoticed, but for the sake of brevity it is perhaps appropriate to only highlight the key aspects of his strategy. In the opening segment of the film, Ray takes full advantage of the cinematic apparatus at his disposal, in search of a "language entirely free from literary and theatrical influences" (Ray qtd. in Robinson, 1989). Dialogue is almost done away with; sound cues and music are carefully selected and introduced with pin-point precision, and the action and camera movement are orchestrated to mediate between Charu's reflective pauses and moments of acceleration. The end result is a wonderfully intricate, almost composed tableau that already discloses Ray's thematic concerns as well as his formal approach (Chaudhuri, 2004).

Amal and Bhupati are both dreamers and full of contradictions. In one pivotal, wonderfully played out scene, Bhupati urges Amal to give up poetry and accept a marriage proposal that could send him to London to study law. As Bhupati spins his gossamer visions of snowy London and fabled Europe, Amal is, for a moment, taken in. It's striking that Bhupati, a passionate revolutionary and Bengali stalwart, would be so enamored of Europe, the realm of his colonialist captors. Equally striking is that Amal, so easily swept away by visions of the Mediterranean, would so readily reject Bhupati's offer. For all his poetic flights of fancy, Amal is rooted in the soil of Bengal, its literature and music. Observing this exchange in silence stands Charu, nursing her own conflicted feelings of love and bitterness, both over Amal, emotions that first surfaced in the film's previous and most famous scene (Antani, 2004). Used recurrently as a self-reflexive motif in the film as well as making reference to an enforced spatial confinement (her restriction within the *andarmahal*). A momentary frame is created when Bhupati very briefly stops in his tracks to examine the book he is engrossed in. Charu is positioned a step behind within the frames of the ornate doors, implying an almost helpless vanity. The image, the pause, the positioning – all become highly symptomatic of the inertia that this relationship is based upon. In making the pause momentary, Ray projects this inertia as a trajectory, or the linear progression of a state of affairs, rather than a picture of complete stasis and inactivity. Charu's condition is not something that just *is*, but rather something that *continues to be*, a persisting "sameness" hidden in the wings of a period of socio-political mobility (Chaudhuri, 2004).

That scene, played out in the garden, is significant not only for what it reveals of Charu's heart, but as a microcosm of Ray's artistry. Pivoting the scene on Charu, he deliberately, even playfully, follows her observations, tracing the slow emergence of feelings she knows are

forbidden. As she arcs back and forth on the swing, Ray switches from intimate close-ups of Charu singing her signature tune to her point of view, showing the reposed Amal flitting in and out of her view. The effect is of a chipping away, of Charu realizing that the walls that have heretofore kept her feelings at bay are being intruded upon and expressed visually by Amal's jutting in and out of her point of view. This becomes devastatingly clear moments later—with Ray again using the optical point-of-view tactic—when she spies a mother and child through her lorgnettes and then turns her gaze to a preoccupied Amal. Ray cuts to a protracted close-up of Charu as the tides of regret—over her childless life, her yearning for romance—sweep across her face followed by a wave of sudden panic as her love for Amal dawns on her. It's a quintessential Ray moment of slow, patient observation leading to an emotional wallop of a climax (Antani, 2004).

Bhupati writes politics in English, Amal and Charu writes literature in Bengali. And then to a further division: Amal writes for public circulation, in an ornate register, Charu would like to write for a strictly private exchange, in an unadorned style through which she can evoke personal experiences. Towards the end, after Amal has left the house and Bhupati's magazine has failed, Charu and Bhupati go on a visit to the seaside and plan a poignantly illusory reconciliation between the poles of opposition – between the public and the private, home and the world, politics and culture. Why not bring out another magazine, they propose, which will have politics in English and literature in Bengali (Rudra, 1996).

What Tagore conveys through the words of his omniscient—but interestingly not completely omniscient—narrator, telling that Amal's feelings are like that of a traveler upon a mountain path with one foot extended over a deep ravine, Satyajit Ray shows in a scene wherein words give context to what Amal is thinking. Preceding this scene, Bhupati has found out from his newsprint supplier that Umapati has been cheating him. The Motilal character in Tagore's short story disappears completely from Ray's film. But Bhupati is no less despondent in Ray's depiction of him (Seton, 1971). At the epiphanic moment, when Amal has some sort of realization, Ray shows us a shot Amal, then of Charu. The camera is positioned as though over Amal's shoulder. We the viewers are, as it were, seeing Charu through Amal's eyes. She appears at a distance, then disappears from our and Amal's view. Her glance had been cast in the direction of Amal, and she seemed—and in fact was—completely unaware of the calamity that Bhupati has so recently learned befell him. The simile of the traveler stepping off a mountain path into the ravine is completely missing in Ray's translation. Instead, Ray has Bhupati speak the words Tagore wrote to Amiya Chakravarty, about the earth receding from his feet (Chakravarty, 1966). Tagore meant to convey with that conceit the emotions he felt after Kadambari Devi's death. Ray has Bhupati use that same image to express Bhupati's feelings after learning that Charu's brother has deceived him. The nature of that verbal image is, of course, comparable to the epiphanic extended simile in Tagore's short story. The verbal message, spoken by Bhupati, is not lost on Amal. The facial expression of Soumitra Chatterjee, the actor, conveys all that need to know of Amal's state of mind and, in fact, maybe more than Tagore's words can say. Like Tagore's original, Ray's translation has Amal appear but briefly after this, even more briefly than Tagore allows him to stay. Amal then vanishes during the rest of the film, except for his voice reading his own (Seely, 2000).

When Charu's story is published in a literary magazine, much to Amal's awe and amazement, the bond between her and Amal strengthens into mutual admiration; that is, until Amal begins to feel uncomfortable. Blind to all but his own ideals, Bhupati is left to weather the fate of his business and his marriage. *Charulata's* storyline weave and tighten all the way to its

final seconds when Ray brings it to an abrupt and startling halt. In conveying in filmic terms Tagore's closing message that Charu and Bhupati's marriage is suspended forever in doubt, he brilliantly opts for a series of tableaus (Lago & Sen, 1971). The music, rising in crescendo, is strangled. The figures of Charu and Bhupati stand frozen across a series of still frames with the aggrieved Bhupati returning home and with Charu reaching out pleadingly to usher him back into the household and into the marriage. He, tentatively, appears to want to take it. But, in spite of the lamp a servant is bringing, the corridor—the home, at large—looks haunted now by the spectre of marital discord. The appearance of the title, "The Broken Nest" ("Nastanirh") in Charulata's final shot underscores this and fills the screen. It's Tagore's original title for the story and, by placing it at the film's end; Ray shrewdly endows it with a portentous quality (Antani, 2004). It was ray's cinematic answer to Tagore's original ending.

Though Ray's film has its share of dialog, and very good dialog at that, his translation style relies heavy on the wordless scene. The frozen quality of the stills conveys well the emotional state of their relationship, cold and unmoving, but with the possibility of a thaw (Robinson, 1990). Tagore's conclusion to his short story is much more definitive in its meaning. Bhupati is going to leave Charu and Calcutta itself for parts south. Charu, in a panic, asks to be taken along. Bhupati at first says no. Charu pleads with him. He relents and invites her to come. And she, in a callous and casual and concluding remark says simply, "*thak,*" meaning "no, let things stay as they are, I'll not go." The ending in Ray's translation is dramatic and in a way more ambiguous, less conclusive. Even he admits to not being sure exactly what the still shots convey, though the ending seemed somehow right to him. According to him, Tagore's way of ending with a word of dialog would have been wrong for his translation into film. He termed it as, "really crucial moments in a film should be wordless"(qtd. in Robinson, 1990).

Even while celebrating motion on a swing in her garden, Charu is never entirely mobile. The creaking of the branches as the ropes stretch against them is much too real. Having briefly taken flight, the bird must return to her broken nest. In search of an equally meaningful cinematic resolution, Ray terminates his film with a striking freeze, reminiscent of Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (1959). Charu and Bhupati stand captured in an inescapable moment of stasis, their hands outstretched towards each other in quiet recognition (Chaudhuri, 2004). A script (written by Ray) that delicately turns and builds on itself, music (composed by Ray), layered in motifs across the film, and, of course, Subrata Mitra's heaven-lit cinematography, the film becomes a profoundly enriching experience. Though *Charulata* has been obscured in the Ray canon by a certain trilogy made at the outset of his career, it remains a singularly accomplished song to love, idealism, heartbreak and disillusionment (Antani, 2004).

Cinematic Spectacle of *Chokher Bali*

The early part of the twentieth century was a period of upheaval and unrest in the Indian subcontinent. Politically, Bengal was particularly vulnerable: it was facing partition by India's British rulers even as societal and family values tugged and pulled at the heartstrings. Rabindranath Tagore—keenly observant and mature in his early forties—was at a creative high. Quick to sense the restlessness and changes, he penned a series of short stories and novels, including *Chokher Bali*, *Nashtaneer* and *Gharey Bairey*, which portrayed a new discord brewing within the family and society at large as its characters were pitched against an impending political unrest (Aishwarya's screen presence and passion play, 2003). Tagore elaborately records early 20th century Bengali society through his central character, the rebellious widow, who wants to live a life of her own. In writing this novel he exposes the custom of

perpetual mourning on the part of widows, who were not allowed to remarry and were condemned to a life of seclusion and loneliness. It is a melancholy, stirring tale of the deceit and sorrow that arise from dissatisfaction and sorrow. Tagore has said about the novel, "I have always regretted the ending." (Chokher Bali, Critical acclaim, n.d.)

Based on a novel by Tagore, published in 1906, and filmed once before in 1938, it was set in Bengal at the beginning of the 20th century, a time of change. The state is threatened and there are political, social and philosophical debates in the air. The position of women is one of these subjects: *Chokher Bali* explores, in a claustrophobic, often languorous fashion, the fate of a spirited, singular woman who chafes against constraints (Hawker, 2005). Chokher Bali: A Grain of Sand is Tagore's classic exposition of an extramarital affair that takes place within the confines of a joint family. On the one hand, Chokher Bali: A Grain of Sand is a sensational account of two illicit relationships: Mahendra's infatuation with Binodini which blinds him to everything else, and Binodini's secret passion for Behari of which she is never able to speak of. On the other hand, it is a complex tapestry woven by the emotional interplay between five finely etched characters: the impulsive Mahendra, his adoring mother Rajlakshmi, the frail and sensitive Asha, the strong, silent Behari, and the self-willed and irresistibly attractive Binodini. A compelling portrayal of the complexity of relationships and of human character, this landmark novel is just as powerful and thought-provoking today as it was a hundred years ago, when it was written (*Chokher Bali*–A Grain of Sand, n. d.).

Set in the 1900's, director Rituparno Ghosh illustrates Tagore's characters beautifully on screen in this dramatic and luscious tale of deception and relationship manipulation. We are introduced to Binodini (Aishwarya Rai) who becomes a widow within a year of her marriage. Binodini is an educated and liberated woman - who refuses to conform to her expected widow status—something completely taboo in that era. The admirable part about Tagore's story and Ghosh's direction is that despite her crafty schemes, we are empathetic for Binodini's behaviour and she doesn't come across as a clichéd negative character (*Chokher Bali*, Critical acclaim, n. d.). An attractive young widow in early-20th century Bengal stirs passions both literal and metaphorical in the film, a slow-burning, dialogue-driven but still highly cinematic drama lit by a radiant performance from Hindi megastar Aishwarya Rai. Running just short of three hours, the picture is a quantum leap for Bengali helmer Rituparno Ghosh, here revisiting his favorite theme of upper- and middle-class domestic dramas centered on women. Good-looking result, shot in ochrish colors and handsomely kitted out, snagged festival dates with its semi-arty approach, and even some niche theatrical business with careful handling and Rai's growing name appeal (Elley, n. d.).

Chokher Bali is a strong film that can be viewed as an illustration of several issues with *sensuality and its denial*: The film is about relationships and temptations, the film is a glimpse into Bengali society and their strong philosophies and the film is a portrayal of a widow who refuses to conform to her cultural forms and her ultimate fate. It's also a pleasure to witness no songs lip synched as this would only disturb the story's flow. However, the dubbing leaves much to be desired. The film is definitely offbeat and would only appeal to a niche audience due to its periodic settings and ideologies (Chokher Bali, Critical acclaim, n. d.). Film is based on a 1902 novel, known as "Binodini" in English, whose works were also filmed by the late Satyajit Ray ("Charulata," "Three Daughters," "The Home and the World"). Written just before the first partition of Bengal by the Brits in 1905, and long before the final one in 1947, Tagore's story focuses the story in a large Calcutta household. With the benefit of hindsight, Ghosh has stirred in a smidgen of political background (notably, the growing resistance to

British rule), and explicitly makes the young widow's social situation reflect that of the country as a whole. Opening reel packs in a lot of backstory that needed to be further simplified in the English subtitles (or with an explanatory caption) for non-Bengali viewers (Elley, n. d.).

Along with the onset of liberal tones came the inevitable: a breakdown of old customs and values leading to an upsurge of promiscuity and lascivious self-indulgence. Widow Remarriage, female education and the European missionary influence had a liberating effect. Passion in all forms found itself suddenly out of the closet. Rituparno Ghosh's film adaptation of Tagore's *Chokher Bali* dwells on such turn-of-the-century syndromes that seem to reshuffle human society and its beliefs nearly every hundred years, bringing forth a new social order with its new set of interpretations, morals and value systems (Aishwarya's screen presence and passion play, 2003). Ghosh sets the film between 1902 and 1905. In the film, the 1905 Partition of Bengal is the litmus that tests the troubled waters on the home front. By following the novel closely, Tagore and, to an extent, Ghosh, provide an excuse for Mahendra's slips and follies. But reality is often more complex than what meets the eye. In *Chokher Bali*, Binodini reads *Bishbriksha.* That is where all reference ends. In the film, the *Bishbriksha* reference is left unattended. Ghosh ends up structuring the complexities in the relationships through a different mode. Binodini actually orders a tree cut to allow air and light into Mahendra and Ashalata's richly furnished but dark and stuffy bedroom (Aishwarya's screen presence and passion play, 2003). The interplay of light and shade and the streak of the golden sunset glow that lights up Binodini and Ashalata are beautiful and, at the same time, a clever projection of the various hues and shades of the relationships. A scar in a conjugal relationship, however shortlived, runs deep enough to create future disharmony. All the characters are inconsistent in their dealings and thought patterns. Inconsistency is what the novel and the film deal with (Aishwarya's screen presence and passion play, 2003).

Chokher Bali is Binodini's novel. Binodini – a young, beautiful and charming widow and the grain of sand in Asha's eye. The novel revolves around Binodini, capturing her in all her avatars – as a hapless widow, as a gamine, as a seductress, and as a repentant woman. Tagore lends expression to her longings and fancies in immense detail, so much so that at some points the narrative becomes a tacit debate on love, longing, morality and relationships. And in doing so, he manages to make all to fall in love with her. Tagore's novel is as simple and as complicated as only a true exposition of love can be (Chokher Bali – A Grain of Sand, n. d.). Binodini is a complex character. Her complexities are more inborn than the result of her plight as a lonely young widow. Intelligent, moderately educated, and exceedingly beautiful, Binodini's sense of dignity and mental strength belie her age and social position. She is also an enchantress, a fatal attraction for all those who happen to come close to her. The director's choice of Aishwarya Rai as Binodini raised eyebrows while the film was being made. It will continue to do so as long as Binodini retains her intriguing appeal (Aishwarya's screen presence and passion play, 2003).

Binodini is an intriguing heroine and articulate but with a destructive edge. Towards the end of the film, she declares - spelling out, a little too obviously, that her three identities have enveloped her: she is defined and confined by being a widow, English-educated and a young woman. Other elements - her sensuality - are denied. The film is at its strongest when it creates the atmosphere of that repressed sensuality and the complicated byplays in the relationships between the main characters. It feels more heavy-handed when it deals with the consequences and aftermath of these developments, setting them against current events and debates (Hawker, 2005). Also, one does feel like questioning (this is more to do with Ghosh's dubbing instructions than Rai's portrayal) Binodini's English-speaking skills. A few years of training at home with an

English nun does not normally enable an Indian girl in the first decade of the last century — unexposed to Western society at large — to speak English with a perfect accent, stopping only to fumble with the word 'spleen' (Aishwarya's screen presence and passion play, 2003).

Intermission

Ghosh's special ability is his eye for detail and his research. He creates an unquestioned authenticity (with art director Bibi Roy's innate sense of aesthetics and history) in the film, which has been mainly shot indoors (with the ghats of Varanasi and the garden house picnic episodes the only exceptions). One might choose to relate to Satyajit Ray in both these episodes— the use of the opera glass and the swing at the picnic with Ray's *Charulata*, the barge and the ghats of Varanasi with *Aparajito* and *Joy Baba Felunath*—since Ghosh's obsession with Ray is well-known (Aishwarya's screen presence and passion play, 2003). The tea-making scene and the red jacket episode between Binodini and Ashalata are subtle hints at the artificial ostentatiousness in the relationships that the women of the household share with each other. Binodini's control over Ashalata and her love life have been finely portrayed. Perhaps Ghosh was thinking of a larger, uninitiated audience who would fully appreciate the pains of a young widow only through strong visuals (Aishwarya's screen presence and passion play, 2003). The house that Binodini enters seems consumed by the languor and hedonism of Ashalata's and Mahendra's relationship: writer-director Rituparno Ghosh sets up elaborate tableaus and luxuriant images that emphasise the texture and colour of fabric, skin, and hair. There might be strict rules regulating women's desire (forbidding widows to remarry) but there are still ways to express sensuality in the culture. There's a self-conscious pleasure in play and performance, in the act of being observed, that the two ladies engage in. Although Binodini is the central character and Rai makes her an alluring, mercurial figure, Sen gives Ashalata a touching quality (Hawker, 2005).

The magic of Rai's performance lies in her underplaying of Binodini's ambition to divide and conquer the household, while always playing the dutiful widow. In other hands and with less subtle helming, the role could have devolved into pure, vampish melodrama; in Rai's graceful playing in the early stages, the viewer is never quite sure whether she's a very clever gold-digger or a genuinely devout and charitable young woman. Through the three hours, Ghosh keeps the melodrama well battened down in the slightly stylized performances. Abhik Mukherjee, also open up the picture in the last hour. Only at the final fence does the picture stumble, with an epilogue that unnecessarily joins the dots between Binodini's situation and Bengal's colonial history: Till then, the political turmoil outside the household has been referred to only in fleeting references. Though Rai dominates the film with her delicately sensual presence and physical grace, she's surrounded by some well-cast players. Chakrabarti is splendid as the grumpy old materfamilias. Sen touching as the simple-hearted Ashalata, and Chatterjee believable as the weak, Westernized Mahendra. The friendship between the two men is less convincing, with Raychaudhuri more of a cutout as the politicized Behari (Elley, n. d.).

Debajyoti Mishra's background score is a big draw. His choice of song sequences from Tagore's musical *Mayar Khela* enhances the film's appeal and essence as a play of passions and a game of enchantment and definitely not as one of a freedom struggle for oppressed women. The inherent storyteller is Rituparno Ghosh has successfully transcended the bounds of a period piece to make credible interpretations and universal statements (Aishwarya's screen presence and passion play, 2003). Production design and costuming are aces, and not allowed to overwhelm the picture, thanks to the muted, ochrish lensing. Detailed soundtrack of external

street noise also prevents the household scenes from becoming too claustrophobic. "Chokher Bali" is a picture that goes the distance and repays patience, so long as early problems of clarity can be fixed (Elley, n. d.).

Those expecting *Chokher Bali* to be an extension of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* are in for a disappointment warns the director of acclaimed films. Rituparno Ghosh is equally wary of being compared with Ray. Ghosh doubts if his film's literary antecedents will click with the average Hindi moviegoer in Mumbai. "I don't think *Chokher Bali* is meant for him". He remarked: "The Bengali audience expects it to be a renewal of Satyajit Ray's renderings of Tagore's novels *Charulata* and *Ghaire Bhaire*… The national audience would connect Aishwarya's presence in Bengali literature with *Devdas***.** But my film has little to do with *Devdas* or *Charulata***.** Every period creates its own glamour and nostalgia. The same is true of cinema" (Ash will be remembered in Chokher Bali, 2003). Making Chokher Bali has been a dream comes true for Ghosh. The maker has left no stone unturned to ensure that this period drama stays true to its essence. "I am personally taking care of every department. *Chokher Bali* needs extra caution. This is my first period film, therefore totally alien to me. Even the incidental hawker on the street has to speak and walk correctly."Ghosh fondly concludes, "A lot of people are waiting for her [*Aishwarya*] to fail. In my opinion, Ash has not only given one of her finest performances but also one of the best in cinema. She will be remembered in *Chokher Bali* not only because she is Aishwarya Rai but also because she has become Tagore's Binodini" (Ash will be remembered in Chokher Bali, 2003).

Some changes were made when the novel was adapted to the screen, the director said at a crowded press conference in New Delhi. "I have given the film a backdrop of nationalism, a sense of creeping rebellion which runs parallel to the journey of the woman protagonist," he said. Aishwarya, who plays Binodini, a young widow who falls in love with her best friend's husband, said there could not have been a better combination for her first Bengali film. "This was the best combination I could have hoped for — Rituparno as the director, Tagore's novel and Binodini as the character."The director helped me step into the character easily despite the language barrier. Had the two been playing contemporary characters, he would have allowed them to dub for themselves, Ghosh added. "Binodoni is very special to me as it is one of the deepest characters I have essayed till now," Aishwarya said. The film, shot in 40 days flat with a budget of Rs 2 crores, is about the marginalised sections of society, women in general and widows in particular, Ghosh said (Why Ash loves Binodini, 2003). .He says that Rai's presence in *Chokher Bali* helped hugely during negotiations for overseas distribution. Rai has high-profile visibility and everyone who is anyone in the global film world knows who she is. After all, she is a former Miss World, a jury member at Cannes and a brand ambassador for several multi-national companies.

The film was later dubbed into Hindi and was released internationally under that language. Upon release, *Chokher Bali* met with positive critical and box office reception (Alluring Ash, 2003; Bollywood News | Hindi Movies News | Celebrity News, 2012; Bengali films zoom in on profits, 2004) .Other titles are Choker Bali: A Passion Play (International: English title), Sand in the Eye (India: English title), Binodini (India: English title). The film contains no playback singing. Sreela Majumdar dubbed for Aishwarya Rai in this Bengali film and *Sudipta Chakraborty* dubbed for Raima Sen. In old days in Bengal, women and girls who were best friends would often set a common nickname for themselves and address each other by that name. In this story, two friends Binodini and Ashalata call each other 'Chokher Bali.' Aishwarya has given one of her finest performances and one of the best in cinema (*Ash will be remembered*

in Chokher Bali, 2003; Aishwarya's screen presence and passion play, 2003; Chokher Bali will widen my horizon, 2003; A director's film, 2003) .

Notes

Awards (Charulata) : Charulata was rejected from the 1965 Cannes Film Festival (Berlinale, 1965), but won Ray his second Silver Bear for Best Director in a row at the 15th Berlin International Film Festival in 1965 (The Telegraph, 2005). Charulata also won the Golden Lotus Award for Best Film at the National Film Awards in 1965, President's Gold Medal, New Delhi, 1964, Catholic Award, Berlin, 1965 and Best Film, Acapulco, 1965.

Awards (Chokher Bali) : Chokher Bali won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Bengali and was nominated for the Golden Leopard (Best Film) award at the Locarno International Film Festival in 2003. The film screened at the 34th International Film Festival of India on October 19, 2003 (Why Ash loves Binodini, 2003). It was the Official Selection at the Chicago International Film Festival in 2003 and was showcased in over 25 international festivals including the Toronto International Film Festival (The Toronto Film Festival, 2003), London Film Festival, Palm Springs, Karlovy Vary and Washington DC International Film Festival besides winning the Apsara Film Producers' Award for the Best Regional Film 2004.

Charulata and *Chokher Bali* were the two movies who had an immense storyline, extremely well woven by Tagore, poignant direction by Ray and Ghosh and justified feminine reflection by Madhabi and Aishwarya. The writer, the two directors and the actors are both of nationally and internationally acclaimed statures. The world of cinema will definitely remember these two stories as well as the two movies for a long period.

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