

WHEN LITERATURE MEETS CINEMA

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Abstract

To make the study of literature more "contextual" it is important to take into consideration the dialogue and negotiation that takes place at all times not only between one text and another but also between literature and other disciplines. In the late nineteenth century, the birth of cinema enabled the extension of the frontiers of literature. This paper intends to establish that if the study of literature is combined with that of films based on literary texts, it would not only become more interesting but also more relevant and effective.

What literature and cinema share above all is the capacity to narrate stories, though their methods of representation are different. World cinema is replete with movies based on literary works, from the BBC series of the complete works of Shakespeare to the latest film *The Life of Pi*, based on Yann Martel's novel of the same name. *Boi* or book is a Bengali synonym for film which suggests, that a symbiotic relation has existed between literature and cinema ever since the advent of the motion picture. While literature holds an irresistible charm for filmmakers, cinema also provides new insights and exposes literary texts to a larger audience. The paper briefly discusses the merits and limitations of each medium and finally the benefits and drawbacks of the confluence.

From here the paper proceeds to discuss how both Rabindranath Tagore's writings, with their delicate interplay of relationships, and his music, Rabindra Sangeet have been a constant inspiration for the two most talented directors of Bengali cinema, Satyajit Ray and Rituporno Ghosh. Through their cinematic adaptations, Ray and Ghosh have tremendously advanced the humanist legacy of Tagore to suit the present times. Thus not only is the understanding of Tagore literature enriched when studied in conjunction with the adaptations, such a pedagogical approach also widens the entire scope of creativity by merging script and screen.

Ever since its advent, cinema has heavily relied upon literature because of that essential ingredient on which the narrative is based—the story. The novel preceded the motion picture by more than a thousand years but technology gave it a new language in the form of cinematic adaptations and its colossal impact cannot be overlooked. However, the notion of hierarchy is embedded in the very definition of adaptation because it presupposes an already existing original work of art. Those who go to the theatre having read the original text, often expect a word-for-word translation to follow but when their expectations fail, they feel disappointed and betrayed. Several writers like D. H. Lawrence and E. M. Forster deplored cinema and saw its relation to literature as entirely a parasitical one. Virginia Woolf, for example, asserted the power of the rhetoric over the limitations of cinema when she stated, "Even the simplest image: my love's like a red, red rose, that's newly sprung in June, presents us with impressions of moisture and warmth and the flow of crimson and the softness of petals inextricably mixed and strung upon the lift of a rhythm which is itself the voice of the passion and the hesitation of love" (Woolf 1926: 309).

A very different statement was made by Joseph Conrad who aspired towards the condition of cinema in his endeavour to make experience more lifelike to his readers:

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"My task which I am trying to achieve is by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is before all to make you see." Even before the coming of the motion picture, writers like Dickens, Emily Bronte and Hardy were inadvertently fashioning their narratives in a cinematic manner that fascinated filmmakers. In India, Tagore welcomed the new medium and called it *ruper chalotprobaho* (the movement of beautiful forms). But like every new art form, cinema also had to encounter resistance in the beginning. An overwhelming majority of people were spellbound by the motion picture yet adaptations continued to be treated as inferior to the source literary texts.

The coming of the motion picture certainly heralded the greatest age of adaptation. However, the practice of ferrying a text from one genre to another started in the days of antiquity and has been taking place in every age. Adaptation has been a convention in theatrical writing since the time of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. These playwrights crafted their drama out of existing myths and often reversed the viewer's expectations in their treatment of familiar myths. In the Middle English period, the Miracle and Mystery plays were adapting biblical stories. And above all, Shakespeare was indebted to *Holinshed's Chronicles* and *Plutarch's Lives*. However, we dare not brand Shakespeare's plays as adaptations. But we can certainly conclude that all art is gleaned from other art. All artists, whether writers or filmmakers, are first and foremost, readers. The 'stolen fruit' therefore should not be scorned as Eliot had stated in *In Tradition* and the *Individual Talent*: "Not only the best but the most individual part of his work (a text) may be those in which the dead poets... assert their immortality most vigorously." The history of adaptation tells us what was later stated so emphatically by Roland Barthes in his 1964 essay "The Death of the Author" that the reader is an active interpreter and not a passive consumer. Nahum Tate's happy ending to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Jean Rhys post-colonial take on Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and more recently Alice Randall's re-writing of *Gone With the Wind*, prove that texts do not exist in a void but stand in relation to other texts as well as to the culture at large. The term "intertextuality", that Julia Kristeva coined in the 1960s for such a dynamic reciprocation is now widely known. If a text is not something concrete, but "a multidimensional space, in which a variety of writings blend and clash", then the source text is no longer sacrosanct. This entirely defeats fidelity criticism which had adverse effects on adaptation studies. If adaptations had only involved a simple re-telling of the novel through the silver screen, it would be somewhat unnecessary. Cinematic adaptation is then an intertextual and cultural negotiation in which each text can be enriched, modified or subverted.

At its very best, a film adaptation is by no means a lesser work of art than its source. To justify this claim we take into consideration the renditions of Tagore, the great Bard of Bengal, by two master filmmakers Satyajit Ray and Rituparno Ghosh. Ray and Ghosh were both perceptive readers of Tagore and both took Indian cinema to the international level. Satyajit Ray grew up in the Tagorean world, immersed in literature, inheriting it not only from father Sukumar Ray, but also his grandfather, Upendrakishore. Being himself, both author and film maker, Ray was uniquely equipped to marry the two forms. The question is why did these two great film makers repeatedly recycle Tagore?

Reasons are many. The era of Bengal Renaissance featuring in Tagorean texts, the colonial encounter, the painful moment of transition from tradition to modernity and above all its impact on women and their liberation fascinated both the film makers. Tagore is known for depicting women who have great inner strength but to whom subjectivity/agency is denied by society. Both Ray and Ghosh picked up precisely those Tagorean texts which have strong women characters, and through the predicament of such women characters they interpreted

the East-West encounter. Another aspect of Tagore that engaged the creative minds of the two directors is his music. Since Tagore's poetry and music covers the entire gamut of human experience, it can be used to the advantage of cinema. Both Ray and Ghosh deploy Rabindrasangeet to depict a wide range of moods as well as to portray the inner workings of the characters' mind and emotions at key moments in their cinema.

Most often than not Ray and Ghosh deviate from the original Tagore texts in their re-telling. An example of this is Ray's *Charulata/The Lonely Wife* (1964) which is the adaptation of Tagore's novel *Nastoneerh / The Broken Nest* (1901). The critic Ashok Rudra severely stated that Ray totally distorted the original. Indeed, the plot of Tagore's novel was of very little significance to Ray who made changes at all levels of the narration and there is practically no adherence to Tagore's dialogue in the film, yet Tagore's *Nastoneerh* is often remembered through Ray's *Charulata*. It is so because the film captures the spirit of Tagore's work through the portrayal of interpersonal relationships of its main characters against the backdrop of Bengal Renaissance in which the novel is set. The film follows the basic outline of the story by tracing the love triangle between Bhupati, Charu and Amal. But Tagore's is unambiguously a male text which opens with an elaborate exposition of the character of Bhupati, Charulata's husband, the prototype of the enlightened Bengali *bhadrolok*, engrossed in publishing a political newspaper in English in colonial Bengal. Ray, however, introduces us to the eponymous heroine of his film at the very outset. The opening scene, a piece of brilliant cinematic compression, underlines the loneliness of the young and educated Charulata, in Bhupati's opulent mansion. Amal, Bhupati's cousin brother and also a poet, who engages in refining the literary talents of Charu at Bhupati's behest, already lives in Bhupati's home in the Tagore story, whereas in Ray's visual rendition, Amal enters from the world outside. His arrival as well as his departure from Charu's life is dramatically preceded by a storm that defines the turbulence in Charu's life on both occasions. Like Tagore, Ray refrains from descriptive passages spread over several scenes to emphasize the emptiness and boredom in Charu's life. He captures Charu's loneliness, within the unforgettable seven minutes of dialogue-free opening scene. Charulata is seen confined in a large lavishly furnished mansion/her 'nest', engaged in embroidering and then in the library, searching for a Bankim's *Kapalkundala* and finally, playfully peeping into the street outside, through every possible window shutter with opera glasses. As Bhupati passes her by, he is too engrossed in leafing through a book to even notice Charu who can only bring him closer through the apparatus of the opera glasses.

Ray takes the Tagore symbolism a notch higher by using recurring symbols in his film text of which the most pertinent ones are: Bankim, the opera glasses and the swing. It was Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's essay "Prachina O Nobina" ("Women, Old and New", 1879) which initiated the debate/controversy about the 'women's question' during the Bengal Renaissance. Bankim's new woman, as Mainak Biswas has rightly pointed out, is modern in a traditional way, a 'nabin prachina' or 'a new old woman', educated and refined, but not a 'memsahib'. Charulata is an educated woman with a modern sensibility. The story is about the expression of her latent creative talent, her transgressive desire for her brother-in-law, Amal, and finally her painful journey towards acquiring self-knowledge. So the Bankim motif is a strategic departure that enables Ray to put the entire context of the novel's history in perspective. As Charu's favourite novelist, Bankim features repeatedly when she engages in literary discussions with Amal. In Tagore's text, Charu continuously oscillates between the *prachina* and *nabina*, she is never quite one or the other. In fact, her work is 'secretly' published by Amal because for her, writing is a very private affair. In this she is somewhat a *prachina*. However, in Ray's film Charu is more of a *nabina* as it is she who secretly gets her work published and manages to win fulsome praise for her unadorned, simple prose as against Amal's flowery style. Both Bhupati and Amol are astonished and somewhat chagrined. They do not know how to deal with Charu's entry into the public space. Meanwhile, Charu weeps miserably in front of Amal expressing regret at having allowed the public domain

to infiltrate her privacy. The confusing signals sent out by such a scene can only be explained by Ray's own postcolonial, hybrid perspective that valorizes the female, but also retreats carefully in order to adhere to the historicity of his material. It is also a critique of the new patriarchy claiming liberation for women.

The opera glass is another device used by Ray to empower Charulata albeit within the confines of the inner chambers of the home. Cinema as Mulvey argues, hinges upon the woman as the object of the male gaze. Ray, however, gives Charulata the privilege of gazing in the film right from the start and sometimes we feel that it is her gaze that is controlling the action. In the swing scene it is Charu's gaze that prevails, and Amal is the object of her desire as he lies on the grass. Charu's growing attraction for Amal is symbolically conveyed through this scene. The lift of the swing marks her transgression and imaginative entry into the forbidden world of love outside marriage. On the swing Charu revels in her new-found freedom. But again, the agency, through the gaze, is given to Charu temporarily. Her position on the swing anticipates a fall but Ray never allows the fall to be accompanied by guilt.

As the film draws to an end, Ray gradually restores the male gaze. It begins when Charu regretfully weeps (a regress) and Amal starts withdrawing from Charu in the aftermath of the success of her publication. Ray is using his film text to consciously critique the duplicities of the Bengal Renaissance. When Umapada's betrayal finally ruins Bhupati and his newspaper fails, Amal develops a male bonding with him, through which he is further distanced from Charu. Amal's departure leaves Charu broken and by the time Bhupati finally turns to her for consolation, she has already shut him out of her life. The final objectification of Charu happens when Amal's letter makes her weep in an unrestrained manner and Bhupati catches her in the act. Her most private moment is subjected to the male gaze, which is itself, by now, shattered by the surfacing of the truth. Shell shocked, Bhupati leaves in his carriage. But when he returns from his wanderings, Charu, aware of the knowledge between them, opens the door for him. She extends her hand and invites him in, Bhupati too extends his hand hesitatingly. But before their hands meet ... the freeze. The perfect home is now left as a "broken nest". Ray inscribes the final long shot with the title of Tagore's novel: *Noshto Neerh*.

Ray's ending is a departure from Tagore. In fact the text and its film version move in opposite directions in their handling of the female agency. Ray chooses to leave his text open ended. Though the extending of the hands may suggest an impetus towards rebuilding upon the ruins of their marriage, we can never be sure because he pauses the action.

Going in the opposite direction, the Tagore's novel begins as a purely "male" text. Tagore maintains a leash on female ambitions in that his Charulata resists the idea of stepping out of the home and hearth and protests when made to do so via the agency of Amal. However, as the text draws towards its closure, Tagore begins to negotiate with the female agency. After Umapada's betrayal of Bhupati, Amal receives a marriage proposal and decides to accept it in order to prevent Charu from further transgression. After Amal's departure Charu is shattered, totally distanced from Bhupati, she builds an altar to the memory of Amal and retreats into this private space where she can be truly herself, silently suffering. Finally, when she sends a letter to Amal after pawning her jewels, she is past caring for restrictive social norms. This reduces Bhupati's world to naught. He decides to leave for the south alone. Charu is alarmed to discover that she will be left alone and pleads him to take her along, but Bhupati declines. His refusal leaves Charu pale and bloodless. As the colour drains from her face, Bhupati softens and invites Charu to join him. But now it is Charu who withdraws. Her "Na Thak" (Let it be) is a moment of awakening as also a feminist refusal. It is Charu's refusal of the easy way

toward mending her marriage which makes the Tagore ending very different from that of Ray's. However, in spite of the liberties he takes, Ray beautifully taps the spirit of the text, and in a way the novel and the film complement each other so that the film becomes an extension and an expansion of the novel.

Tagore, like Charu, oscillates from one pole to another vis-à-vis the female agency. Perhaps this is so because Tagore was writing from within the social reality that he portrayed; so, his text is less objective in terms of depicting the historicity of his day. Ray's genius on the other hand lies in his restraint; he never commits himself to just one historical frame but subtly balances his own with that of Tagore.

We can conclude from this analysis that a cinematic adaptation is not always a lesser work of art. It is often an interpretive act and the passage of time between the publication of a text and its cinematic adaptation enables a dialogue and cultural negotiation between them. Another example of this is Rituparno Ghosh's portrayal of Tagore's character Binodini in his film *Chokher Bali*, based on the novel of the same name. Both Tagore and Ghosh depict Binodini not as a helpless widow resigned to her fate but as a rebellious woman who interrogates all the injustices that mar and scar life in its youth. As the educated, young, beautiful and intelligent widow Binodini comes to live with her friend Ashalata and her husband Mahendra. The possibility of a romance begins to develop between Mahendra and Binodini during the wife's absence from home. In the second half of the novel, Tagore depicts Binodini as rejecting Mahendra's advances and deeply in love with his friend Bihari. After the family discovers Mahendra's growing attraction for the widow, she has to leave, but is compelled to travel with him. However, she remains faithful to Bihari and when he proposes marriage, she accepts his love, but spares him the social censure of marrying a widow.

Being a twenty-first century director, Ghosh, unlike Tagore, unhesitatingly explores the dimensions of passion in Binodini's life. He introduces several scenes of erotic love between Mahendra and Binodini. He also changes the ending by making Binodini leave for an unknown destination though he retains her romantic interest in Behari. Ghosh's perspective is clear, he wishes to invest in women's autonomy without any ambiguities. Ghosh even goes to the extent of depicting a defiant and malevolent Binodini who refrains from pouring water to help Asha wash the soap and excess sindoor off her face. As Asha pleads for water with closed eyes, we see a smile over Binodini's face which indicates that she is deriving pleasure from Asha's discomfort. The gesture is an attempt to draw the pampered wife into the unredeemed zone of deprivation occupied by the widow. Though Asha, the privileged wife, occupies the centre frame, our gaze is focused on Binodini who is positioned by her side, on the margins. The reinvented Binodini is also unapologetic about manipulating her widowhood to her advantage; she leaves for Kalighat by falsely stating that it is her husband's death day.

In *Chokher Bali*, Ghosh not only uses Tagore's novel as his source text, he also uses key motifs and echoes from Ray's film *Charulata* to unfold the themes in his own film. The swing scene in *Chokher Bali* is a strategic reminder of Charu's emotional transgression through the lift of the swing, her feet leaving the solid ground. Ghosh takes the theme of transgression a step ahead through the unreserved exploration of Binodini's passion. He does this by borrowing another symbol from Ray: that of the opera glasses that Binodini uses at her window to search for signs of intimacy in Asha and Mahendra's room. Ghosh's use of the device not only underlines the crippling limitations of the widow's existence but also makes it evident that Bengali cinema has moved to a point where a serious addressing of Binodini's repressed sexuality is certainly possible, something that was difficult to imagine in Tagore's day and even perhaps in Ray's.

The analysis suggests that intertextuality is the key to the study of texts, whether literary or cinematic because at all levels a dynamic cultural/ideological negotiation happens, not just between a literary text and film text but with other cinematic texts as well. The final freeze frame in *Charulata* reminds us of Michaelangelo's The Creation of Adam with God's hand extending towards Adam and Adam's towards God. But there's a crack in the fresco and the hands do not meet. This shows how there is a constant give and take between different genres at all times. Creative minds can explore various possibilities if the study of texts include not just books but films, painting, music, etc. Ray and Ghosh repeatedly use the songs of Tagore to accentuate emotions and moods in their films. For example, in the popular T.V. serial *Ganer Opore* Ghosh established the relevance of Tagore's music in the contemporary context. The serial depicted the love story of Pupe and Gora with several references to Tagore's songs. In the serial, Pupe hails from an orthodox family that believes Tagore cannot be experimented with. Through her voice a traditional Rabindrasangeet is delivered. Gora, who represents the younger generation, believes Tagore is timeless; so there is always room for experimentation. Through him Ray delivers an unplugged band version of Tagore. Indeed we have Rabindrasangeet for all occasions, emotions and seasons, and the Bengali consciousness even today, both in India and abroad is steeped in the songs of Tagore.

In the age of media and technology, the possibility of creative exchange is not shrinking, but ever expanding. Therefore, a conservative approach to the study of literature would be crippling. The idea of literature as a hallowed and sacred form of textuality is a romantic and outdated notion today. This being an age of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity, it is time to redesign the teaching of English literature. Textual studies need to be pushed beyond the borders of the printed page into socio-cultural practices that can themselves be usefully treated as texts. Perhaps we should stop teaching literature and start teaching texts, in the broader definition of the term.

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