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Rethinking Satyajit Ray's *Charulata*, the lonely wife through the perspectives of female identity, marginality and subversion

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Abstract

Tagore's works have been adapted, analyzed, deconstructed and rethought even today to the timelessness of his literary ethos with the strongly written female character at the core of his stories to explore the hypocrisy and Victorian morality of our society. The paper seeks to explore what society does to a woman's potentials by confining her within the four walls of her room with stereotypes and hyper-morality of society. Tagore's women ask question to the society for its unfair rules and societal norms and condition and emerge themselves as a voice of a generation of women who emphatically challenge the stereotypes of men women binary, religious jingoism, repressive trajectory of social control, and sexual identity. *Charulata*, the lonely wife tries to emancipate from the oppression to a post-colonial generation for whom the Victorian morality had long since collapsed and emerges as an independent woman that urges on woman's visibility in the terms of Gloria Anzaldua: "*We cannot allow ourselves to be tokenized*". More especially this ideology of the feminist drawing the lines of comparison to understand the similarity of dominant nature of man over woman and the domination of land in the context of gender relationship is reminiscent of Ecofeminism as well.

Keywords: Deconstructed, potential, hyper-morality, stereotypes, repressive trajectory, ecofeminism

Introduction

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will which I now exert to leave you". (Bronte, 257-258)

The quote is an embodiment of Jane's independence and strong exterior which is relatively connected to a sense of liberty and independence of *Charulata* in a late 19th century Bengali middle class household. Throughout the novel we conceived that Jane is a young woman longing for love and a family, similarly *Charulata* is also longing for someone to love her and care for her. Like *Jane Eyre*, *Charulata* tries to break through the four walls of her room and the stereotypes and hyper-morality of the society. *Charulata* asks question to the society for its unfair rules and societal norms and condition and emerge themselves as a voice of a generation of women who severely challenge religious jingoism, untouchability, and caste system. *Charulata*, the lonely wife tries to emancipate from the oppression to a post-colonial generation for whom the Victorian morality had long since collapsed.

Re-contextualizing Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) as the towering figure of the Bengali Renaissance as well as the poet and playwright of humanity is one of the prevalent historical interpretations. Tagore's works have been adapted, analyzed, deconstructed and rethought even today to the timelessness of his literary ethos with the strongly written female character at the core of his stories to explore the hypocrisy and Victorian morality of our society. Amongst them, *Charulata* (1964) often regarded as one of the finest films – is adapted from Tagore's 1901 novella *Nostonirh* (The Broken Nest). It is widely believed that the narrative was inspired by the story of Tagore's relationship with his sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi who committed suicide in 1884 for some unknown reasons. Kadambari Devi was beautiful, intelligent and a gifted writer. The portrayal of *Charulata* reminds us the vivid picture of Kadambari Devi. Satyajit Ray created such a fine piece of film with many deviations. The novella '*Nostonirh*' is reconstructed with different creative techniques to form a new piece of work, *Charulata* embedded with the spirit of Bengali Renaissance.

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Ray in the film brilliantly makes a different ideology from the text and shows marvelous shifting of language from verbal to visual with the politics of inclusion and exclusion. In this journey from work to text, from fidelity to infidelity and Tagore's *Nostalgia* to Ray's Charulata, he has perfectly created a new piece of intellectual production. Harold Bloom in his work *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) explores that adaptation is an attempt to get away from the source, to deny the element of original author. It ignores the authorial voice. Adaptation is actually in debt to original form of work. The adaptation of Charulata is indeed an interpretation of the original text with the perspectives of the film category of Geoffrey Wagner in his text, *The Novel and Cinema* (1975).

As the film begins, we have seen Charulata embroidering the letter B on a handkerchief as a token of love for Bhupati. When she presents it, Bhupati is so delighted but asks 'when do you find the time Charu?' Evidently Charu replies 'she has a lot of time.' The embroidery of Charulata denotes a transition of woman from reading subject to the writing subject signifying one of the important features of Bengal Renaissance in the postcolonial era. In the opening scene, we see Charulata moving from one room of the house to the other watching passers-by on the street down below the windows. She also loiters around in a room with a book in her hand and she absent mindedly hums tune to herself. Significantly she is a woman confined to the interiors of her house, much like the Mayna in the cage seen later in the film. Therefore, writing is a significant issue in the film Charulata especially woman writing which is in the postcolonial India a sign of modern nationalism. By publishing Charulata's article in *Bisho Bondhu* newspaper, she becomes attached with the outer world. Ray here represents Charu's writing in the 19th century colonial Bengal with the sound of a piano which is a part of western culture. So we find a cross-cultural commonalities and western discourse borrowed by the eastern discourse through the filmy techniques appropriately used by Satyajit Ray.

Ray sets up marvelous examples of visual storytelling with not a single word of dialogue spoken, no narration. Charulata silently standing at the doorway of her bedroom and Bhupati passing by without noticing her and she immediately raising her opera glass to her eyes in a symbolic bid to bring her husband closer to herself. In *'Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema'*, Laura Mulvey poignantly describes that the gaze is the act of seeing and more specifically how an individual perceives other individuals, other groups or oneself. Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1975) developed the concept of the gaze to epitomize the dynamics of socio-political power relations and social dynamics of society's mechanisms of discipline. With this perspective in the film, Charulata, gaze through her opera glasses signify immediate empowerment for her and actual female emancipation from oppression. However more emphasis is given here on the idea of her awakening and self-liberation. Now the question is whether Charu can ever come out of the confines of *Prabina* (conservative/old fashioned) and negotiate with the terms of the *Nabina* (modern/new woman).

Mise-en-scene of the film highlights both the Victorian Bengali luxury of her surroundings and her confinement within them. Among the educated middle classes, there is intellectual ferment of the Bengali Renaissance in India under the British Empire. Charulata as a *Nabina* takes part in this intellectual progress reading different books like *Kapalkundala* by Bankim Chandra and other writers. In this connection, it is noteworthy to mention the relationship between the human and nature. Feminists have given this idea of Ecofeminism to study the interconnection between the oppression of woman and nature. We see here how Charu is owned by the man, Bhupati just as a land is often considered as feminine in nature because of its fertility that nurtures the life and is owned by the man as a property.

It is interesting to note that the inertia in their marriage seems convenient until it is interrupted by the appearance of Bhupati's cousin Amal who is full of youthful virtues-exuberance, poetic idealism, naiveté etc. In the presence of Amal, Charu seems to reject her habitual proximity towards Prachina (conservative woman) – a figure satirized by writers of the time as one who lolls around in bed, reads pulp fictions and only thinks of herself and is classified by Charu's sister-in-law, Manda. By contrast as a *Nabina* (new woman/modern woman) Charu freely exercises an unassuming intellect and harbors a latent sexual attraction towards Amal and challenges the patriarchal norms and hyper morality of the society. Significantly we see here Charu spends most of the narrative oscillating between the *Prachina* and the *Nabina*.

In the book entitled *'A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-colonial Women's Writing'* Kisten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford have used the phrase *'Double Colonization'* to refer to the representations in which women are twice colonized-by colonialist realities and patriarchal social system. Charulata like Neeta in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) and Arati in *Mohanagar* (1963) question the extent to which both postcolonial and feminist discourses present the ways to challenge their representations within the patriarchal framework. The woman-consciousness, attempted independence, transgression and resistance vividly are portrayed in the character of Charulata in colonial and post-colonial veins.

The politics, culture and economics of the British Empire highly influenced the Bengal Renaissance figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Louis Vivian Derozio etc. In the film we come across varied instances and symbols of Bankim especially the song and hat of Amal in the stormy weather. In Amal's western education and Bhupati's fascination for western politics we find the postcolonial trends in the historical evaluation of nationalist thought in the colonial world. The Sentinel is an expression of nationalist discourse. Actually, it is a means of creating cultural consciousness. Through this newspaper Bhupati is interested in the British politics and also inclined to resist the force of the British Empire. In this context, it needs to mention the renowned postcolonial critic Partha Chatterjee's ideas of Derivative Discourse in his seminal work, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (1986). Chatterjee explains cultural nationalism and finds the development of nationalist thought in India. In the same book Partha Chatterjee, states that nationalism is 'produced a discourse in which even it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the

very intellectual premise of modernity on which colonial domination was based.' Most importantly nationalist thought is selective about what it takes from western thought because he thinks that it is actually intentionally and necessarily selective as its politics is to object the colonial rule and resist the immediate political implications of colonial thought. Chatterjee's hypothesis is quite evident in the representation of Bhupati's knowledge of western politics and Amal's voyage for western education in postcolonial era.

Therefore, the garden scene which runs about ten minutes locates Ray at his most intimately lyrical. This is the moment the action has escaped from the house to an open garden indicating a sense of freedom and liberty which Charu long since looks for. There is no denying the fact that music is also used to express underlying sympathies for both Charu and Amal. We hear the tune of 'Mama Chite' (Who dances in my heart) played over the opening images and Amal sings 'Phulephule' (Every bud and every blossom sways...) in the garden scene as they grow ever closer emotionally.

Another important point is that Tagore's *Nostonirh* gives emphasis and examines the concept of 'Bhadralok' Bengalis of the elite class who were part of the Bengal Renaissance and highly inspired by the Brahmo Samaj. Despite his liberal ideas, Bhupati are blind to the loneliness indifference of his wife, Charulata. It is only with the appearance of his cousin, Amal, who incites passionate feelings in Charulata, that Bhupati realizes what he has lost.

The film Charulata climbs its turning point when Amal unwilling to betray his cousin's trust that has already suffered at the hands of Charu's brother Umapada, abruptly leaves the house. Then hysterically Charu shows her disappointment in the presence of Bhupati. There is nothing left but for the forsaken woman and her humiliated husband to forge reconciliation. It is important to note that Tagore's novella *Nostonirh* (The Broken Nest) from which Ray's film is adapted ends with a Bengali word 'Thak' (let it be). So, in quest of an evenly meaningful cinematic resolution, Ray concludes the film with a freeze frame motivated by final shot of a French director Truffaut 'The 400 Blows-Two hands, Charu's and Bhupati's attempts to reach uncertainly out to each other, close but not yet joined.

So it is quite evident that Charulata of *Nostonirh* (the Broken Nest) and Charulata the film becomes representative of a generation of women motivated to demonstrate a sense of liberty and independent will in pre-independent India. But it is evident that in Charulata, Ray displays noticeable emphasis on Charu's perspective yearning towards emancipation from Prachina to Nabina- from a conservative woman to a modern woman in the postcolonial Bengal. The colonial/postcolonial modernity in the one hand and tradition in the other are looking for power over the human family and domestic space. Mary John and Janaki Nair in their book *A Question of Silence: the Sexual Economies of Modern India* (1998) have demonstrated caste and class issues along with that of gender and the nation. Analyzing the character of Charulata in the postcolonial situation in Independent India, I want to quote John and Nair:

"The middle class, upper caste woman has been the ground on which questions of modernity are framed. She embodies the boundaries of licit and illicit forms of sexuality; she is the guardian of the nation's morality." (John and Nair, 8)

The woman is supposed to be fixed and unchanging, even though the postcolonial nation-states undergo changes. Therefore, Charulata is exclusively embedded with postcolonial trends not only in the re-telling of Tagore's classic story of a lonely wife but also in the representation of discourse of the British imperialism.

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