



Transcreation of a Classic: A reading of *Charulata* by Satyajit Ray



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Abstract

My paper is about the Noble prize-winning author Rabindranath Tagore's novella Nastanirhr (1901, The Broken Nest) and its cinematic adaptation by an equally renowned filmmaker Satyajit Ray titled Charulata. (1964, The Lonely wife) It is significant that Tagore had always been Ray's inspiration. However, a number of critics and contemporary writers had long debates about the concept of 'fidelity' in

adapting from Tagore. His works set a benchmark and did not deserve a filmmaker with any lesser a reputation than Satyajit Ray. It is interesting to observe how Ray interprets Tagore in this adaptation. He made bold statements and said that his work Charulata is more of an interpretation and a transcreation rather than mere translation.

RESEARCH PAPER

John Harrington in an essay titled *Film and/as Art* claims that one in three films ever made have been book adaptations. Nearly a hundred per cent of all the Classic literature taught at the High school level has been adapted into films and multiple adaptations have been made of classics which are more famous than others for instance all the novels of Jane Austen and most of Shakespeare's plays. (Prentice Hall, 1977)¹

Significantly, Tagore had always been Ray's inspiration. However, several critics and contemporary writers had long debates about the concept of 'fidelity' in adapting from Tagore. His works set a benchmark and did not deserve a filmmaker with any lesser reputation than Satyajit Ray. It is interesting to observe how Ray interprets Tagore in this adaptation. I attempt to analyse the work that went into making a classic story into an award-winning film. The challenges that Ray faced in the making of *Charulata* and how he weaves the beautifully written tale by Tagore to make visible a lonely wife and her mundane life in words and verses that weave around her state of mind. For Ray, the challenge was to transform this sexuality, loneliness and boredom into cinematic language. How he applies the cinematic language to make classic cinema is the concern of this paper.

First, I talk about Adaptations and how they work. Beginning with some popular theorists and how they understood adaptation and moving on to certain popular beliefs about the process of adaptation, I take you on a journey traversing the popular notions and interpretations of the term. Then I would give a brief introduction of the two stalwarts I have decided to work on, one a Nobel prize winner of Literature for his collection of poems entitled 'Geetanjali' and the writer of India's national anthem Rabindranath Tagore and the other, an equally reputable and world-famous film director Satyajit Ray who has won innumerable national and international awards for his cinematic genius.

The next section of my paper is about looking at *Charulata* as an adaptation and why I call it a 'transcreation' substantiating my arguments by showing you what Ray did to Tagore's novella and how he 'trans created' a classic. The techniques and the vision of Satyajit Ray in *Charulata* elevated its stature in inexplicable ways and one which has been equally inimitable as well.

David Jung in his article in 'Millennials of New Jersey' (2018)² talks about a few significant factors to be considered while making the film adaptation of a book.

A good story, Jung says, is the crux of the film and if one wants the audience's attention, one must start with a good story. The second factor is that of character. "What's a good story without a great character?" Jung says. The story can engage the audience but it's the character which makes them stay.

Also, the length of a book can never fit into the 2–3-hour span of a film, so not everything that's in the book is needed in the movie. Finally, Jung talks about the character's 'inner voice', which can connect with the audience, that which is relatable and which shows the vulnerability of the character. Balazs in her collection of essays *Theory of the film: Character and growth of a New Art*³ "argue that even though an adaptation takes the subject of a source novel or play, the adaptation is a completely new entity." According to Jean Mitry "at the level of *misc-en-scene*, if we define the phrase simply as the creation of the dramatic space, the adapter can compose the world that the novel suggests, its climate, its ambience and record it with camera."⁴

Jung, Balazs and Mitry's insights parallel those of Satyajit Ray in the film *Charulata* which is the subject of our discussion in this essay. Several other theorists who talk about Adaptation seem to fit into this analysis of Ray's film.

In his essay, 'Independence of Mixed Cinema' Andre Bazin⁵ argues that Fidelity is a virtue and that adaptation should be regarded as a form of translation... "a good adaptation is the essence of the letter and the spirit." Bazin thinks that a successful film adaptation is neither replication nor a substitution but a "re-experience" in another medium. Linda Hutcheon, a prominent Canadian theorist, in her book *A Theory of Adaptation* talks about adaptation as a "process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re)interpretation and then (re) creation; this has been called both appropriation and salvaging." (8)⁶

Recent trends in Adaptation theory debunk any conflict between a piece of literature and its adapted film version. The test of a good adaptation can repeat the success without being a replica of the original.

When we begin to explore the relationship between a book and a film, it is always the question of 'Fidelity' that is a challenge.

"The most common discussions and debates about film adaptation seem generally to focus on the notions of specificity and fidelity." (Timothy Corrigan, 31)⁷. Historically, film

belonged to and catered to the category of the working class and was considered a 'lower art' and literature as 'High Art.' In this sense, the stature of a film is elevated when it is adapted from a literary text. It gains respect and acceptability.

The idea that the 'original' text is 'pure' is opposed by many critics like McFarlane who states that 'fidelity' is a "wholly inappropriate and unhelpful criterion"⁸ for judging a film. In the words of Diane Lake:

"The adapter reads with an eye not to represent what is already in the book, not to translate it scene for scene but to uncover the soul, if you will of the book and to think about how to bring the 'soul' to life through visual storytelling." (Lake 409)⁹

My subject in this paper is to talk about a classic novel and then to present its classic cinematic adaptation in all its perfection. *Nastanirh* by Rabindranath Tagore is a classic example of a piece written during the Bengal Renaissance which was predominantly a resurgence of literature, reformation and culture in the later years of the 19th century pre-independence Bengal. Later, it became a source for Satyajit Ray's *Charulata*, a film that received high acclaim for its direction and its portrayal of unconventional ideas.

Tagore was a writer of the age of social reformation in Bengal. His concern for women is seen in a number of his works and his focus on the fairer sex remained a part of his psyche right through his writing career. He was a modernist writer with a bold vision and therefore he spoke about the needs of a woman in his novels much before any other writer could speak of it. It is in Tagore's literary works that we first discover women characters questioning the stereotyped conventions surrounding them.

In the novella *Nastanirh* written in 1901(The Broken Nest), Tagore presents the psychological dilemma and conflicts of suppressed desires of an educated housewife who wants the freedom to express herself and strives for emancipation while living in her confined domestic space.

The novella *Nastanirh* (1901, The Broken Nest) by Tagore was inspired by his relationship with his sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi who committed suicide in 1884 for unexplained reasons. It is widely believed that Charu's character is based on the beautiful,

intelligent and gifted writer Kadambari Devi, as were hundreds of other female characters created by Tagore. He admitted this fact towards the end of his life.

Satyajit Ray's film *Charulata* (1964) is a retelling of this novella and is the story of Tagore's own time spent with his elder brother and his wife. However, that is only a fact and not an interpretation bordering on the reductive, presuming Tagore's prodigious talent in a way that is too limiting. Tagore was a master storyteller, rendering a tale with all its twists and turns of human emotions and psychological drama. Ray takes *Nastanirh* and renders it a classic look which involves many departures from the original and adapts it into cinema through his modern sensibility.

Several critics challenged Ray's fidelity to the original story of Tagore since his works were considered too pure to be subjected to a filmmaker's interpretation. Some people alleged that the film version was a distortion of the Tagore original. Satyajit Ray in an article called *Charulata Prasange* responded to these critics:

I know I have made a story by Tagore into a film. It is an interpretation, a transcreation, not a translation. Without Tagore, there would be no *Charulata*. After all, he set me off; he was the reason for it. There is a lot of the original in the film, a certain state of mind which the author describes beautifully through the words...you can't do that in films. You have to use a different method...all the time, you have to find something for *Charulata* to do to establish her state of mind. That is the challenge of Cinema.¹⁰

The plot is simple. *Charulata* is a beautiful, artistic, educated upper-middle-class housewife, lonely in her childless marriage and suffering from isolation and boredom. Her husband Bhupati is too involved with the publication of his newsletter *Sentinel* which propagates his political ideology of reforming the autocracy of the British, to pay much attention to his wife.

Consequently, he invites Charu's brother and his wife to provide some company to Charu and employs her brother to handle his accounts. Meanwhile his cousin Amal arrives on the scene and Bhupati gives him the responsibility to entertain Charu in her literary pursuits.

This is a turning point in the film as Amal transforms Charu's life. He appreciates her talent, which had gone unnoticed till then, encourages her to write and publish, shares his writing and compositions with her and becomes her constant companion. Both have a shared

interest in music which flourishes because of their companionship. At one point in the film, Charu is full of the realization of his need for her company, her attention and her friendship. Gradually, he becomes the focus of her life. She, Charulata, the lonely wife thought that these moments had permanence and so when he decides to leave, she is crestfallen.

Thus, till this point in the story, there are no major differences between the novella and the film. It is after Amal leaves that we see the two narratives beginning to diverge.

In the novella, Tagore traverses the entire journey of a depressed Charu, immersing herself wholly into domesticity and pining for Amal and yet trying her best to be a good wife to Bhupati. She does an excellent job of keeping her emotions at bay and maintains an outer cloak of politeness with all her turmoil simmering underneath. This is a difficult time for Bhupati as he is trying his best to cater to Charu's wishes and interests. However, he soon realizes the futility of all his attempts when he observes Charu going about her domestic chores with ease which is exceptional. She manages to conceal her heartache from him but he loves her too much to let her go on with this façade. His decision to leave town comes when he thinks it best to give her both time and space.

The novella ends with Bhupati's final call to join him in Mysore and her single monosyllabic answer "No, *Thak.*" (Let it be).

What Satyajit Ray does is end the story with the finest scene of the film in consonance with his contemporary, modernist perspective. In the last scene of the film, *Charulata* has both Charu and Bhupati with their extended hands in a shot resplendent in light and shade. The hands do not meet and there is a freeze-frame of the camera in the lonely mansion with the film coming to an end.

For Ray, the resolution comes earlier and is more modern and complicated. The end of his film raises more questions than answers. Instead of the binaries of good and evil, Ray prefers the subtleties of this relationship without a hint of censure. His resolution is complex and open-ended and forces us to think.

Cinema is complex and Ray knew this before everyone else. Charulata's ability to show a reasonably affluent modern educated woman and her agency to make choices is exceptional and transforms the film into a fine study of human relationships. The actress Madhabi Mukherjee¹¹ who played the character of Charulata uses her expressions, gestures

and body language more than dialogues to convey all her emotions. Ray's artistry is at its peak here.

So, what is it that makes *Charulata* a classic film? What are the elements that take this simple novella of Tagore and elevate it to the status of a brilliant cinematic experience?

The opening scene of the film and its visual presentation has an elegance and a subtle subtext which is difficult to ignore. The misc-en-scene is that of an artistic, opulent mansion, with its brocade upholstery and ornate décor and coloured glass windows which give the feeling of Charu being trapped in a 'golden cage'. This portion of the home known as 'Andar Mahal' was the private or the women's section as opposed to the outer, public (read Men's) zone comprising Bhupati's living room and study. 19th century Bengal and its restrictions on women are quite obvious in the way Charu is placed in the narrow corridors of domesticity.

In this entire sequence, Ray's camera follows Charu as she flits from one window to another, moving quickly (almost bird-like) and amuses herself with the help of her eyeglasses. The camera captures not only her boredom and her restlessness (when she looks at the bookshelves) but also frames her in several spaces like doorways and corridors. When she looks outside with her eye-glasses on, the shot turns into a single subjective one and when she is seen in the corridor, on the window, moving here and there, the shot turns into a tracking one. The camera seems to be almost her partner in crime, assessing her through its lens and others through her gaze.¹²

In this context, it is important to remind ourselves that both for Tagore and Ray, women were always at the centre of their stories. Ray never treated the women's roles in his films as secondary but equal and active participants of the human experience. As opposed to the male gaze brought forth by Laura Mulvey¹³, it is the 'female gaze' that is the focus in Ray's cinema. For Ray, the female gaze is a stark and true reflection of how a woman sees or feels in a particular context.

In this film, Ray takes us into Charulata's mind. There is no censure for Charu in Ray's camera, instead, there is compassion for this void in her life. Instead of judging her, Ray lets us venture into this woman's mind, through a skilful camera, capturing each of her emotions, the conflict in her eyes and her body language which parallels the restlessness of her mind. The audience can't help but identify with Charu's dilemma and go through each of her psychological conflicts with her.

When Charu looks out of the window through her opera glasses, Ray is making us take note of two different things at the same time. The first is related to her isolation when she looks out on the street to amuse herself. The other is when she looks at her husband who is too preoccupied with his book to look at her and passes her by in the corridor, reinforcing the fact for the audience that he is not aware of her presence.

The entire opening sequence is devoid of any dialogue or narration, accentuating its tone and setting. There are many such moments in the film when Ray focuses on Charu's body language, facial expressions, sounds and music, and even songs to convey her emotions. Most of her dialogues don't do as much. However, Charu's silence doesn't come out of any weakness or subjugation. Instead, it is the strength of her subjectivity which is conveyed through her silence. It is almost as if Ray is urging his audience to understand Charu's unspoken thoughts.

Phillip Kemp in his essay on *Charulata* published in the Criterion collection (August 20, 2013) says: "*Calm without, Fire within*", the title of Ray's essay on the Japanese cinema could apply well to *Charulata*."¹⁴

The film is replete with scenes that exhibit emotional turbulence through the gaze of our protagonist, her body language and sometimes in the lyrics of a melody she hums.

In a seminal scene of the film ¹⁵ which features Tagore's song 'Phule phule' in the background, *Charulata* is poised on the swing gently swaying with Amal laid flat with his head bent on his notebook on a mat nearby. The scene is set in a sunlit garden. Charu and Amal are revelling in this silent companionship, Charu more so for her intellectually erotic stimulation in Amal's company. Many things are happening here, there is the 'freedom' of the outdoors, away from the 'caged' existence of Charu and Amal is writing in a notebook that has been personally crafted for him by Charu. It seems that Ray is showing us a montage of several such meetings reaching their crescendo in a moment that seems to the point of culmination.

Ray's camera focuses on Charu reprimanding Amal and inciting him to write, with her swinging back and forth on the swing gradually settling on a close-up shot of her face. Her expression is a mix of her realization of her feelings and attraction for Amal. It is as if this silent camera speaks volumes of her mind and the self-revelation that she has at this

moment. No amount of writing can make this scene more appealing than its cinematic visuals.

Ray uses music to show the affinity that develops between Amal and Charu. The songs too, are Tagore's compositions.¹⁶ We hear the first 'Mama cite' ("Who dances in my heart") in the opening images and Amal sings another 'Phule phule' ("Every bud and every blossom sways and nods in the gentle breeze.") that Charu sings later in the garden scene. Their mutual love for music bonds them emotionally in ways they are both unaware of.

What then is the major conflict of the film? It is mainly in Charulata's mind. She is gifted and educated. She is yearning for freedom but at a subconscious level, it is leading her towards her betrayal of Bhupati. But we must reiterate here that Ray is not a conservative patriarch with a judgemental lens. He is merely displaying the conflict in Charu's enactment. Ray is a master storyteller in this film. He shows us a woman who is seen feeling all that she is; without any restrictions from anybody in the family. This display of uninhibited expression of Charu's feelings is what makes the film boldly iconic for its times.

So, when I watch this piece of classic cinema as a woman, *Charulata* comes across as a film about a woman whose heart has space for herself and she doesn't need anyone else's validation for her feelings, least of all, of the men in her life. Unlike so many contemporaries who made films around women, Ray's heroine does not have a singular purpose in life, that is to serve the interests of her husband.

Charulata is a film which speaks volumes about a woman's feelings. It also shows us the woman in the proverbial golden cage around her and many such cages which crop up indiscriminately in the life of a woman.

The final sequence of the film is different from the way it is narrated in the novella. In the latter, Bhupati is going out of town and Charu asks him to take her along. He hesitates to answer and Charu says "Thak" in Bengali which translates as 'Let it be.'

But the cinematic genius of Satyajit Ray makes the scene dramatic by a freeze-frame shot at the end with both Bhupati and Charu extending their hands toward each other but the hands do not meet and the camera shows them in a frozen frame...in mid-air. Ray's camera follows showing their half-lit faces, a servant holding the lamp, a mid-shot of Charu and Bhupati and finally a long shot of them. The musical score reaches a crescendo and the words

'*Nastanirh*' (The Broken Nest) appear on the screen. This was Ray's answer to Tagore's original ending.

Not only does he manage to acknowledge his debt to Tagore but also presents the denouement as an open-ended one making the film about complex choices that both his characters will have to make in another world. One that he would not like to venture into just yet.

In the words of Neel Choudhury in his review of *Charulata* published in 2004 in *Senses of Cinema*:

Having briefly taken flight, the bird must return to her broken nest... Tagore's novella *Nastanirh* (The Broken Nest) on which Ray's screenplay is based ends with the Bengali word 'Thak' (literally, 'Let it be'). In search of an equally meaningful cinematic resolution, Ray terminates his film with a striking freeze, reminiscent of Truffaut's *Le Quatre cents coup* (1959). Charu and Bhupati stand captured in an escapable moment of stasis; their hands outstretched towards each other in quiet recognition.¹⁶

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- ² Jung, David. "Millennials of New Jersey." *Adaptation: From Novel to Film*, 2018. Film in the Classroom.
- ³ Balázs Béla, and Edith Bone. *Theory of the Film - Character and Growth of a New Art*. Dobson, 1952.
- ⁴ Mitry, Jean. *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*. Indiana Univ. Press, 1997.
- ⁵ Bazin André. *What Is Cinema?* Edited by Hugh Gray, Univ. of California Press, 1972.
- ⁶ Hutcheon, Linda. *Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, 2006.
- ⁷ Cartmell, Deborah, et al. "Literature on Screen, a History: In the Gap." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature On Screen*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 29–44.
- ⁸ McFarlane, Brian. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Clarendon Press, 1996.
- ⁹ Cartmell, Deborah, editor. "Adapting the Unadaptable." *A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation*, Wiley-Blackwell, West Sussex, 2012, pp. 408–416.
- ¹⁰ Ray, Satyajit. *Bisay Chalchitra*. Ananda Publishers, 1964.
- ¹¹ Madhabi Chakraborty (née Mukherjee; born 10 February 1942) is an Indian actress. She won the National Film Award for Best Actress for her performance in the Bengali film *Dibratrir Kabya*. She has acted in some of the most critically acclaimed films in Bengali cinema and is considered one of the greatest actresses of Bengali cinema.
- ¹² Hoque, Nikhat. "Female Gaze." *Feminism in India*, 2019.
- ¹³ Mulvey, Laura, et al. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Afterall, 1973.
- ¹⁴ Kemp, Phillip. The Criterion Collection: Reference Reviews, vol. 29, no. 6, 26 Aug. 2013.
- ¹⁵ Tagore's compositions are used by Ray as songs in *Charulata*.
- ¹⁶ Chowdhuri, Neel. "Charulata: The Intimacies of a Broken Nest." *Senses of Cinema*, vol. 31, 2004.