

Reviewing the Transition from Tradition to Modernity through Satyajit Ray's Film

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Table of Content

Abstract.....	01
Introduction.....	02
Chapters:	
1. <i>Devi (The Goddess):</i> Hinduism Seen Through Western Education.....	04
2. <i>Jalshaghar (The Music Room):</i> The End of an Era.....	12
3. <i>Charulata (The Lonely Wife):</i> Reflections of Bengali Renaissance.....	19
Conclusion.....	27
Reference.....	28

Abstract

During the 19th century, Bengal has gone through a transition from tradition to modernity. As it was under the colonial power, many aspects of the British Raj and the ideas of Bengali Renaissance act as the major causes behind this change. Satyajit Ray, the notable film maker of the subcontinent has attentively captured the quintessential essence of the Bengali life. As his films are regarded as historical documents, therefore in my research, I tried to look at the transition through his films. This paper is an attempt to link the shift and its impact on the individual and the society. The first chapter narrates the impact of Western education and how it collides with the traditional virtues. The second chapter portrays the socio-economic change which is marked by the emergence of Bourgeoisie class, replacing the feudal system. The last chapter is a love triangle that presents the consequences of Bengali Renaissance, which has brought a noticeable change in Bengali lifestyle. While focusing on these issues I have linked them with the historical context to capture the transition from tradition to modernity.

Introduction

This paper is a gesture to gravitate the transition from tradition to modernity through the cinema of Satyajit Ray. Ray was born in 1921 in one of the most cultural minded family of Kolkata. Both his father and grandfather are notable writers of Bengali literature. While growing up, Ray comes close to many sides of art, including literature, music, films, illustration etc. Later in his life, when he starts making movies, this knowledge helped him to portray life as it is. His movies have sincerely followed the lifestyle based on the novels by notable Bengali writers. From his movies one can get a clear idea of the socio cultural atmosphere, starting from the days of Bivutibhushan's *Pather Panchali* to Rabindranath Tagore's *Nastanirh*. In his collection of movies Ray has narrated the transformations of 19th century Bengal. This was a crucial moment for Indian history as it was coming out of the colonial rule. Brinda Bose refers this as "the change which was necessary but seen as deterioration".¹ The change was inevitable and somewhat necessary to cope up with modernity. Nevertheless, the traditional society often disapproves the changes and marks it as a drop of social conscience. As a result, the age old Indian values are in constant clash with the new Western ideas. Some prominent and identifiable reasons are inter-generation gap, empowerment of women, possessing pro-technology mentality, mass access to education, effect of Western education etc. Without declaring a side, Satyajit Ray leaves his audience to view the transformations.

To proceed with my thesis, my primary source is the collection of Satyajit Ray movies and Tagore's *Nastanirh* which served as the textual source for Ray's *Charulata*... My secondary resource is different books by and on Satyajit Ray Also, interviews, critics and academic papers connected to my topic. For further research I have chosen three films close to my topic. The first film is *Devi*, a 1960 film based on a short story by Prabhart Kumar Mukherjee. This film covers a list of themes emphasizing on the initial transformation of Bengal. Although the movie is based

¹ Bose,01

on a rural setting, the aggression of urbanity cannot be denied. The influence of Western education initiates a different approach towards the religious orthodox. Through a father son duo Ray presents an ideological conflict in their lives as well as the nation as whole. The second Film is *Jolshaghar (The Music Room)*, (1958) which is based on a short story by Tarashankar Banerjee. This movie illustrates the clash between feudal and bourgeoisie. The emergence of a nouveau riche indicates a change in socio economic transition. This movie introduces a former landlord who loses everything due to his ignorance. Although, it is a fictional tragedy, this also points the downfall of the former Indian rulers. The third movie is *Charulata (The Lonely Wife)* (1964). This is based on a short story (*Nastanirh*) by Rabindranath Tagore. The movie is based on pre-independent India when the country was going through a major transformation. This movie outlines the ideas of Bengali bhadralok and their take on the socio-cultural change.

In my opinion, Ray's movies are commentary on the social changes and its impact on the nation as well as the individuals. His vivid expression and sharp observation is an outcome of close association with culture and art. All his films thus portray the close depiction of life. In this paper, I tried to link the transition from tradition to modernity by offering a reading of a selection of Ray's films.

Chapter one:

Devi (The Goddess): Hinduism Seen Through Western Education

Devi (1960) is a movie that captures the clashes between new and old belief. Through a father-son duo Satyajit Ray presents a duality of contrasting ideologies that lasts till the end of the movie. In plain sight the generation gap seems to be the only cause behind this ideological conflict. But, in reality, a deeper sense of the then socio cultural and socio-religious transformations will present a different picture. Besides inter-generational differences this film shows the contrasting picture of city, in this case Kolkata and the rural area. In the 19th century Kolkata became the locus point for social transformation regarding education and religion. Although centered in city, the rural areas, for the first time, started to feel the wind of change as well. The Western education and new senses of religious belief initiated disbelief among the new generation. They question the orthodox but, unfortunately, the ground of their new gained knowledge was not strong enough to stand against it. This brought an unharmonious transition that eventually causes the clash. Thus, a common trend begun only to criticize the traditional orthodox, however, no measures were taken or could not be taken to put it a stop. In *Devi* Ray sheds light to this topic. This movie may seem like a tragedy of one family, but in broader sense it presents the misfortune of an era. In this paper, I will try to find what might have inspired Uma to have a different opinion. Secondly, I will focus, despite his knowledge, why Uma fails to support his ideas by stopping his father. While doing so, I will bring similar conflicts that were present in the 19th century Bengal.

If anyone wishes to have a better understanding of any Ray movies, it is a prerequisite to know the time. A vast knowledge of contextual reading is necessary to read between the lines. As his movies act as historical documents, it is not difficult to trace the exact time of any particular movie. The original story (written by Prabhat Kumar) had a different time line. But, Ray's *Devi* took place during September- October in 1868, 68 years later of the original story² One of the main clues is the reference of the Play '*Shadhabar Ekadoshi*'. The historical document ensures that this play by Dinabandhu Mitra was staged in October, 1968. The second clue is that the movie starts with a scene of Durga puja, which also takes place in the month of

² Dhar, 198

October. Ray intentionally sets the movie timeline during this time to strengthen the picture of ideological clash. In the beginning of the movie the audience see how Kalikingkor, a Kali devotee persuaded the idea that the goddess has reincarnated as her daughter-in-law. His devotion and obsession reaches its highest pick and brings about the tragic downfall to him and his family. To the modern audience, Kalikingkor's belief can be labeled as sheer 'superstition'. As Anirudhha Dhar³ has pointed out "the easiest way to describe the situation is to blame Kalikingkor as superstitious. But it is better if you don't fall for that obvious reason"⁴ Calling him superstitious would be the easiest way to describe the situation but this would be one dimensional because the teaching of Hinduism tells it to accept it as it is. Moreover, Kalikingkor is not an irrational man. Beside his hamartia⁵, in this case 'ignorance', Kalikingkor has many good qualities as a character. He is a popular Jamindar in his locality, respected and loved by his family and his subjects. To understand his profound devotion towards Kali we have to understand what Kali means to Kalikingkor and his generation. This will help us grasp why the century old belief of Hinduism do not disapproves the acts of Kalikingkor. Reincarnation of goddess Kali might sound absurd to any modern reader however; reincarnation is believed to be quite common in Hinduism. Kalikingkor considers himself as a true Hindu, a profound devotee of goddess Kali. Dhar argues,

"His faith is based in his Sanatan (traditional) way of acquiring knowledge. His learning process guaranteed him that religion is unquestionable. All his life he keeps this in his heart. His profound devotion assures him the presence of almighty god. He also believes that the goddess may come down to earth in a human figure. Sometime she reveals her presence to her admirer."⁶ (My translation)

As we can observe, Kalikingkor's faith is planted in Hinduism. Here the believers learn everything without raising a question. Like other devotees, he was aware of the reincarnation which is a central belief of Hinduism. As a result, he considers himself lucky to find out that the soul of the goddess has reincarnated in his favorite daughter-in-law. This is why Kalikingkor was so convinced about his dream. Apart from that, according to Hinduism, the creative energy of

³ Dhar, 197

⁴ Dhar, 198

⁵ Hamartia: In tragedy, hamartia is often described as a hero's fatal flaw.

⁶ Dhar, 199

Siva, in a tempestuous mood, is known as Kali. Since Shiva is known as Kala (the eternal time), Kali is also associated with time. To find Kali means finding the mysteries of the eternal time. So, Kalikingkor's devotion can be labeled as a quest for knowledge; the knowledge of all creations. But, this is where Kalikingkor creates a misunderstanding with his son, Umaprashad. Although brought up in a traditional Bengali atmosphere, he has a different perspective than his father. Being the son of an affluent family, he is privileged to get a Western influenced education. His education was different from his father. As a result, what Kali Means to his father does not mean same to Uma. Therefore, he sees the absurdness in his father's decision. Nevertheless, being aware of his father's mistake, he cannot or does not take any efficient step to prevent it. Let us focus what might be the reason behind this lack of actions. As I have already mentioned, Uma is influenced by Western education. He is the first one from the family to go to Kolkata and get educated. Kolkata and his education brings another side of Uma, as if he leads two alter lives. One is Kalikingkor's son when he visits his village; very obedient to his father. Another one is the spirited, friendly Uma who lives in Kolkata. Before, describing the first Uma, let us focus on the city Uma. Here, Uma has a voice of his own. He is confident to give his opinion. In one of the scene we see him encouraging his friend to marry a widow. Nowadays it is not an issue according to the modern world, but at that time it was unimaginable. According to traditional Hinduism, widow marriage was unacceptable. Moreover, it was like a social suicide. As in Uma's friend's case, we see he fears to be disinherited from his father's property. Nevertheless, Uma supports his friend and encourages him to take a step, although he cannot show this fresh attitude in his own family. It is interesting to find out what might have given him the courage to do so. It would not be incorrect to argue that it is Kolkata and his education that has given him the confidence. We have to keep in mind, the transition of Kolkata during Uma's time. For the first time one group of English educated Hindu Bengali redefined themselves as the reformists. They were believed to initiate the intellectual awakening of Bengal in other words the Bengali renaissance.⁷ An education system proposed by the English rulers produced this set of

⁷ Bengal Renaissance It is claimed by many modern scholars that the early nineteenth century, and by some that the whole of the nineteenth century, had witnessed an intellectual awakening that deserves to be called a Renaissance in the European style. They believe that under the impact of British rule the Bengali intellect learned to raise questions about life and beliefs. The

intellectuals. Educational development in India during the colonial period generally has been viewed by educational historians to be the work of British rulers who introduced a system of education with the hidden agenda of initiating a process of socialization.⁸ In this process the traditional Bengali society experienced many changes. The major transformation was regarding religious belief. The emergence of 'Brahmo Shomaj' is an outcome of that. Instead of the existence of many Gods they believed in one god. Their liberal approach is reflected in the fact that they arranged to have the Upanishads read and explained before the entire body of worshippers, which, besides the non-Brahmins, sometimes included Christians and Muslims.⁹ Raja Rammohan Roy is closely associated with the establishment of Brahmo Shomaj. Brahmo Shomaj was established in 1828. After his departure for England, Dwarkanath Tagore continued the legacy. Instead of blindly believing in Veda¹⁰, which was the only source of Hinduism, they proposed new idea. Tagore proposes religious faith can never be drawn from the ancient books; rather it comes from the inner soul.¹¹ The ideas of this society were much more influential during Uma's time. By then Kolkata and her people was introduced with widow remarriage, the abolition of Sati, Brahmo marriage etc. We have to keep in mind a strong educational system was behind these social reformations. Only a class, specifically the English educated people were behind the acts of Bengali renaissance. Interestingly, all most all of them came from affluent, upper class of the society. The reason behind this similarity is only the rich Brahmin boys were

new outlook is said to have affected contemporary life materially. The various protest movements, formation of societies and associations, religious reform movements, coming of new styles in Bengali literature, political consciousness, and other emergent socio-political phenomena have been argued to be the positive symptoms of a Renaissance. (Banglapedia)

⁸ Acharya, Poromesh "Bengali 'Bhadralok' and Educational Development in 19th Century Bengal"

⁹ <http://www.cccba.org.in/bramhosamaj.html>

¹⁰ Veda: A collection of large body of texts originated in ancient India. The texts constitute the oldest rules and regulation of Hinduism

¹¹ Dhar, 201

funded to get such education. Although they tried to bring a social revolution, ironically, they did not like the idea of mass education. In 1854, a large number of British administrators try to use the fund for the poor child instead of the rich kids. But, the Bengali bhadralok class opposed to this idea. They did not want to lose their superiority that was gained by this Western education. As a result, many of the ideas were only kept within them. To them this was a way of modernization while having close relation with the ruling class. Apart from them, the general people of India were not very favorable to these ideas. Not that a lot many people were aware of these reformatations. The lack of education or western influenced education create hollow within the classes. This transformation from tradition to modernity inevitably brings many conflicts. One example is Uma's hesitated friend. He dares to marry a widow which is a vital crime according to traditional Hinduism. He will lose every connection from his family from the rest of the life. Ray tries to indicate the outrageous outcomes of the transformations. Likewise, Uma too fails to stop his father's actions. Except his sister-in-law no one in his family opposed the idea of reincarnation. As Uma's sister-in-law comes from a different family, also she was literate enough to write letters, we can assume, she was brought up in a different atmosphere. But, apart from her none of the family members or villagers questions the validity of reincarnation. The class biased education system is to blame here. Other than Kolkata, the rest of the Bengal does not have the attitude as reformed as the bhadralok. They are not enlightened by the ideas of the Brahmo Shomaj; therefore they do not put up a fight with the traditional values. Instead, they come worshipping the reincarnated goddess.

However, Uma could have pleaded to stop this autocracy of his father. He could have presented a strong defense to his family member or the villagers. But, we do not see him doing such thing. The one person he goes to discuss his problem is a Christian professor. Before focusing on the professor, let us focus why Uma never talks to any of his close ones. May be he senses that none of his folks is modern enough to understand his debate. Since they are not as educated as him, they will stay loyal to the traditional system. Therefore, he goes discussing with an English professor. Ray intentionally uses such a character to nurture his point regarding the social transition. The professor gives him an analytical argument to Uma's confusion, however, he does not give any solution to stand against it. Very subtly Ray presents another problematic trait of the Western education. Before going to further discussion we have to understand the nature of Western education in Bengal. There were two main reasons behind this; number one is

to make an efficient army to maintain the British administrative works, second and the major reason is to oppose the future revolutions.¹² Despite being educated they were politically unconscious, therefore, they stayed voiceless against the oppression of the British. In 1860, British government saw the uprising of Sipahi mutiny. Another mutiny was not expected in near future. Very cunningly they ensured the safety through educational and social institutions. Gouriyo Shomaj, Sharbotatto Deepika Shova, Shadharon Gyanoparjika Shova are few of such social institutions.¹³ But the most notable was Bethun Society. In the inauguration of the society it was officially declared that Bethun society will be strictly out of political and religious discussion. As a matter of fact, no political or religious paper was discussed in this society for the first 14 year. They understood, the less they (young Bengali) know the better it is for them to hold the revolts. This highly influential institution transforms the heart of the young generation. It is interesting that Umashashad's style of repulse against the reincarnation is similar to Bethun society.¹⁴ This society and the former mentioned professor give a rational argument against all odds. But, they do not teach the way to protest and stand for what they believed. Needless to say Uma faced the similar dilemma. He is left with no option but calling his father 'insane', he lacks the strength to take actions. Through Uma's weak personality Satyajit Ray presents a generation of intimidating young Bengals. Social institutes like Bethun society successfully brain washed many of their followers. One of the notable British intellectuals published an article in *Calcutta Christian Observer* about the bravery of English soldiers during the Sipahi mutiny. On the other hand he labels the rebels brutal.¹⁵ Due to the misinterpretation Bengali students find themselves in a confused place. They did not raise their voice against the wrong doings, moreover, they keep silence in order to prove their loyalty. Umashashad had a same mentality, through his lack of confidence Ray thus reveals the characteristic of a generation, in other words the generation polluted by Western education.

¹² Chakraborti, 220

¹³ Ibid, 220

¹⁴ Ibid, 220

¹⁵ Ibid, 224

Amitav Chatterji tags *Devi* as a 'period film'¹⁶ as it depicts an age of superstitions and irrationality of religion. But, I disagree with Chatterji for limiting the messages of Ray. Including India, this part of the world often faces similar problems like *Devi*. Still today, people believe in the healing power of '¹⁷charanamrit'. Dr. Dipongkor Hom points out, many people still use charanamrit as medicine for critical diseases. Also he states this as a cerebral state problem of a nation.¹⁸ People's false trust upon divinity is significant to understand the collective consciousness of a nation. The ideas are so deeply rooted that Dr. Hom identifies it a cerebral consciousness. Doyamoyee's mentality can be understood through the cerebral consciousness. She gets the chance to leave this deity like life. The couple plan to elope in the city. But, Doyamoyee stops anyway after seeing the vague apparition of the goddess. The broken statue(of the goddess) confronts her from a fresh beginning. She gets scared thinking this could bring bad luck to her family. But, more than that, she starts believing that she may have a God particle in herself. This confusion prevents him to run away with her husband. However, Uma could have dismisses her decision by forcing her to go with him. Yet, he does not do so. Her belief is shaken after seeing the revival of a dying child. It hits his mind the holy water may have magical power, thus his wife could be a deity. In modern world there are many rational or educated personas, like Uma who could stand against ridiculous norms of religion. However, they do not, like Uma, their intelligence submerges before the deep seated religious ideas. Since we are standing at the edge of most scientific advancement, such acts are expected to be vanished. But, unfortunately the religious malpractice is still noticeable in the society. Therefore, I would say Ray's *Devi* is not a period film; rather it is a universal film that represents an ongoing clash between tradition and modernity.

Last but not the least, I will say, through *Devi* Ray presents a much bigger picture of 19th century Bengal. Through a clash between a father and son he displays the ideological difference which was not a sole problem of one family; rather it was a problem of the whole nation. In this paper I signal towards the origin of the problem. With the help of Ray's subtle hints I tried to establish this as an outcome of a faulty socialization. Both the British government and the

¹⁶ , Chatterji, 255

¹⁷ Charanamrit : holy water touched by Goddess's feet, believed to have healing power

¹⁸ Hom, 204

promoters of Bengali renaissance are to blame for this ideological gap which eventually brings about a clash of tradition and modern values.

Chapter Two:

Jalshaghar (The Music Room): The End of an Era

In Ray's word this film is about "a music loving zamindar (landlord) who refuses to change with time and thereby meets his comeuppance".¹⁹ Biswambhar Ray (Chhabi Biswas) is the music loving zamindar who fails to see the transformation around him and thus meet his downfall. With his decline, the audiences are reminded of the end of an era. Biswambhar Roy is the member of a feudal system that was coming from centuries. Zamindari system was supported by the Mughal rulers in order to maintain the land revenue. This ancient legacy goes through many shifts during the British Empire. They changed the system by putting different regulation like permanent settlement act or the sunset law. As a result, a list of zamindar failed their power over their property. At the same time, the British government tried to establish a new merchant class to replace the old zamindars. The character of Mahim Ganguly resembles with that class. In the film, we observe Ganguly's emergence as a brand new bourgeoisie. Through the tragedy of Biswambhar Roy, the director portrays a socio-economic transformation that marks the end of zamindars in the 19th century. Since this is a tragic movie, Ray used a host of symbols to articulate the meaning. In my paper, I will locate the transformation with the help of these symbols.

As Ujjal Chakraborti has pointed out, "Ray intentionally presents both the rivals as positive characters."²⁰ Ray does not pick a favorite in this clash of old and new. Ganguly may not be as sophisticated as Roy, however, his presence is necessary. In fact, both the classes are vital parts in order to sustain as an effective society. From the movie we can see that Biswambhar Roy is not a bad person all together. It is evident that he is a kind hearted ruler. Unlike many other landlords he is not brutal to his subjects. Many of his peasants come to take shelter under his roof during the devastating flood. Also, he does not torture them to get the taxes. Despite having all these positive characteristics Roy fails to hold his position for being unconscious. On the other hand Ganguly elevate his position for his consciousness. Ganguly appears to be smart man, Unlike Roy, he is practical and hard working. Even though he is a

¹⁹ <http://www.satyajitray.org/films/jalsagh.htm>

²⁰ Chakraborti, 123

dimly cultured man, he focuses on things that ensure his existence. Even though, he has a similar tendency of flaunting money, he never damages his very existence.

Now, let's focus how the former well-heeled zamindar becomes the bankrupted broke. Apparently there are there reasons behind this. Firstly, it is his extravagant lifestyle secondly, an unfortunate shift of the nature and thirdly the tragic loss of his family. Now, I will try to put a comparative discussion regarding these points. While discussing, I will also narrate how Ray has linked this with a greater socio-economic transformation. From the flashback scene, we come to know about Biswambhar's bountiful days He plans to through a lavish party for his son's initiation. At this time, we see the bank is rejecting his loan appeal. Nevertheless, he throws the party by spending his wife's jewelry. Now, this is not a sole trait of Biswambhar Roy, rather it was common among many landlords. Their grand and pompous lifestyle is an attempt to imitate the lives of the Mughal. Their courts and lifestyle resembles the Mughal dress, food, art and architecture²¹. The architecture of Roy's palace, including the music room has a touch of Parisian architecture which is influenced by the Mughals. Their extravagance to mark any festivals was can also be seen as an imitation of the former rulers. However, this lavish, uncontrolled lifestyle is the primary reason of Roy's misfortune. Ray intentionally sets Roy in a wrecked house. This almost ruined house symbolizes the past glorious days of the Mughals. Like the decaying palace, their presence in the society was fading away.

The impact of destructive nature is another cause of Roy's decline. In the first seen Ray informs this through a long shot of a barren land. Through Biswambhar's eye we see a vast amount of land is grabbed by the river. In the pre British period, zamindars could have negotiated the revenue if they faced any natural calamities. A zamindar could seek relief from the government when peasants failed to pay revenue due to natural disasters or any other factor beyond their control ²²However, this consideration becomes outdated under the British rule. So, we can assume, the lost of land is a reason behind Roy's decline. Although, it is not mentioned, we can assume that he failed to pay the revenue in due time. The new government, unlike the former one, has no sympathetic policy to support him during the critical time. Therefore, Roy's critical financial situation reveals a shift in the government's policy.

²¹ http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/Z_0009.HTM

²² Ibid

The loss of dear ones is another key reason behind his depression. His only son and wife die in an accident by drowning in the river. In this way Roy loses his descendent and also his wish to get familiar with the transformation.

The reference of bank is another modern aspect of the movie. From his accountant's state we come to know that, due to cross the security limit, the bank is no longer liable to give any loan. Surprisingly, this terrifying news does not make him nervous. Even in this critical condition he manages to through the party. His loving wife let him use the last box of jewels for this extravagant arrangement.²³ Here, we come to know the bank has already replaced the treasure box. Bank was introduced by the British rulers and it is a part of modern economy. Before the emergence of bank, treasure box was a traditional way of securing money (and jewelry). The first bank in Bengal was the Bank of Calcutta founded in June 1806. The time line of the story appears long after the emergence of bank. We also come to be acquainted with the fact that, Biswambhar or the zamindar is not the possessor of limitless property. The zamindari act was a heredity right. But, by the permanent settlement act introduces by Lord Hastings, put a halt to this age old system. The most invidious aspect of this settlement was the revenue sale law. Those who could not pay the taxes in due time, were obliged to sale the property to another buyer. In this way, India gains a new class of rich or *nouve rich*. The emergence of this new class certainly marks a transition. Even a century back, the rising of Ganguly (a staff's son) would be unimaginable in traditional setting. But, that became possible due to the new regulation by the English rulers.

Satyajit Ray has intertwined Ganguly with different symbols, to associate him with modernity. The presence of generator, motor cars, electric bulbs declare his up to date life style. In contrast, these modern aspects are absent in Roy's life. His mansion still uses candles and the only way of riding is either horse or elephant. There is a scene that effectively demonstrates this contrast. Biswambhar Roy's elephant, Moti, is wandering in a dusty road. Meanwhile a lorry marked as 'Ganguly & Co' drives past the elephant from the opposite direction. Roy sees the lorry leaves behind a dusty whirlpool gulping his elephant. This scene surely forecast the coming of a new era. Here, elephants are useless. It might be the badge of former glory day but in a

²³ Dhar, 113

modern day, lorry inevitably is a better choice. Beside, Biswambhar any sensible man will prefer using a motor car. The use of motor car is another transition from tradition to modernity.

Ray uses music as another marker of the transition. We notice that Ganguly does not know anything about music. As a result, he cannot have the same appreciation for music as Roy has. Roy knows every tune by heart. He can tell which ragas it is only by hearing it. We also see how passionately he influences Khoka(his late son) to learn about music. His son is very unlike to take music as a profession however; this conveys his respect he is toward music. But, for Ganguly, we do not see such passion. The musical soiree is his gesture to follow Biswambhar's footstep. For him, the quality does not matter. He invites Krishna Bai to celebrate his son's initiation. Atanu Chakraborti marks it as 'Musical degradation'²⁴. The shift of taste marks the preference of dance over music. In the first two concerts we hear the best classical music India has to offer. But, in the last concert, we see Krishna Bai (Rowshan Kumari) dancing Kathak number. Classical music means the pure form of art. People like Ganguly will never get into the depth of it. A dance number will be more appealing to him. This shows why this transformation is marked as degradation. For generations art has been patronized by the rulers of India. The famous Tan sen from Mughal court can be a perfect example. Supporting the artists and their art become a tradition for affluent landlords. Biswambhar Roy is no exception to that. The lavish music room in his ancestor's palace shows that their well rooted adornment for music. But, Mahim Ganguly has no such passion for music. Hosting concert is a way of showcasing his elevating position in society. When it comes to choose the art form, dance is preferred over music. Mahim lacks the intellectual depth or sophistication which is needed to truly appreciate the classical music. Glancing at the beautiful dancer is more suitable to him. As the music loving patrons were declining, the pure art form was also declining. Artists had to induce something in order to survive. In the course of time, the beautiful and sacred arts have become a commodity for many, like Ganguly. The shift of art also meets a transformation from tradition to modernity. With the three musical soirees, Satyajit Ray has pointed out this transformation.

Now, when Roy decides to hire Krishna Bai, he is not doing it for the love of it. Instead, he is doing it as a competition with Ganguly. While doing so, he spends the last money in order to hire the dancer. Interestingly, this attitude is nothing new in the Indian context. The Indian

²⁴ Chakraborti, 127

history is filled with extravagant, over the top stories of raja-maharajas, nawabs and zamindars. The one we can be easily compared with Biswambhar is nawab Wajid Ali Shah. He is the last nawab of Awadh and a great patron of singers, dancers, musicians and other artists. Furthermore, he was a poet and artist himself. In the movie *Satranj ki Khiladi*(1977), Ray presents the lavish lifestyle of the nawab. He too was an impractical character like Roy. He spends more his time among the artists than with his ministers. As Roy does not listen to his accountant, he too does not consult his ministers to protect his kingdom. Both Roy's accountant and Shah's ministers warns him about their consequences. Another similarity is they both are great lovers of music. When English soldiers surround his castle, instead of preparing for the war, he sinks himself in music. So does Roy, despite knowing the coming events, he indulges himself into music. In one scene, Biswambhar sends a gold coin as gift to Ganguly's son. In a family of traders like Ganguly, gold coin does not have much value. Despite knowing this Biswambhar sends it as a gesture to advertise his superiority. A similar gesture can be found in the nawab's life. At one point of his life he sends his famous crown to a significant Western gallery. This crown was encrusted with priceless jewels. This exhibition is a gesture to declare his glory, although, by that time he was completely surrounded by the British soldiers. He could not keep his position but he leaves no chance to show case his former glory. British invention in Lucknow starts changing the century old lifestyle of the Indian people, which marks the transition from tradition to modernity. The same death of tradition is also feared after the death of Biswambhar Roy. Although Ganguly has replaced him from his social position, the same loyalty to traditional music will not be found anymore.

The last scene is very significant to understand the transition. The scene is shows the butler and the zamindar. After the night long musical soirée his butler comes to liquor up his master. Roy asks him if there is any candle left. His servant assures him that it is almost morning. The dawn is declaring a new day. But, Roy does not want to see the day light. Here, daylight symbolizes the coming of the modern era which conflicts with his existence. Suddenly, he rushes to his stable and mount on his favorite White horse. Wearing the finest attire he starts riding the horse. Although he cannot live his grand life, he ensures a grand death. Here, the horse and the fine cloth exhibit him as the proper landlord. As he was riding the horse, the sun was coming out. Suddenly, the horse jumps higher and he fell off the horse. Satyajit Ray ends the movie with such a meaningful scene. The sun can be traced back to the sunset law. This law was

a significant law under the permanent settlement act. Any zamindar would lose his property if he failed to pay the taxes before the sunset. Biswambhar has lost everything as if he has surrendered to the sun. He does not have any reason to watch a new sun. On the ground his lifeless body lay still. As if, he refuses to see the new day. Till the last breath he clings to his older glory. It is better for him to die rather than to accept the changes around him.

By showing the end of Biswambhar Roy, Ray presents a bigger transformation. I have tried to link Biswambhar's life with the Mughal era. The British reign concluded the once mighty Mughals. Similarly, the rules and regulations by the British administration cause Biswambhar to lose his property. By showing different aspects I have shown the transformation from tradition to modernity

Chapter 3

Charulata (The Lonely Wife): Reflections of Bengal renaissance

Charulata (The Lonely Wife) is a cinematic adaptation of a short story by Rabindranath Tagore named *Nastanirh (The Broken Nest)*. Like any other Ray movies the exact time period of the story is needed for a better grasp of his cinema. Although Tagore loosely constructed the story in mid-nineteenth century, Ray meticulously pinpointed the time. There are few clues from which we can successfully determine the year as 1880. The first one pointed out by Dhar is when Bhupati mentions about the upcoming election in Britain. This election between Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone took place in 1 April, 1880. The second clue is the mentioning of *Anandamath*. When Amal rushes in during a stormy evening, the first thing he asks, "Have u read *Anandamath*?" *Anandamath* was at its heightened popularity during 1880s after Bankim Chandra Chatterji started publishing it in *Bangadarshan* (A weekly published literary magazine) from 1879. Both these clues successfully narrow it down as the year 1880. Now, this is a crucial time for pre-independent India. A tug of war was constantly stirring up between the natives and the British government. In this agitated backdrop, Ray presents us the life of Charu (Madhabi Mukherjee); a lonely housewife idly passing her days. Her husband Bhupati is the complete opposite of Charu. Possessing a great appetite for work, he is ever busy with his news paper publication. No matter how different their lives are, this couple is a product of heightened effect of Bengali Renaissances. In every sphere of life, from the décor of their house to their reading interest, everything can be traced as an outcome of Bengali renaissances. The third important character is Bhupati's cousin Amal, who eventually becomes Charu's love interest. Amal is also associated with the life during this intellectual movement. As for Bengali renaissances, it is an overt outcome of the British rule. The pioneers were mostly English educated who later contribute achieving a new lifestyle. As European renaissance is considered to be the beginning of modernity, Bengali renaissance therefore marks the journey of Bengal towards modernity. However, as it comes in terms of its own modernity, Bengal renaissance is not necessarily the mirror reflection of European modernity. Nevertheless, this sure is crucial moment to mark the urge for leaving the traditional believes in order to achieve the modern ones. In this chapter, I will discuss the modern aspects of the characters in terms of their ideologies and lifestyle. Then, I will focus how the modern aspects are linked with the ideas of Bengali renaissance, in other

words, how the characters are affected or involved with the Bengali renaissance. Last but not the least; I will try to show how their life is different from a traditional one which automatically portrays the transformation from tradition to modernity.

To capture this transition from tradition to modernity, Ray precisely presents the characters within a detailed setting. The cinema has fewer dialogues compare to other films, but the set of the story, including every object is carefully present to do the talking. Moreover, every character has specific territory which is essential for the individual growth. Like, Bhupati is unimaginable without his printing press. From the movie, we can see the singular and most important aspect of Bhupati's life is his newspaper. His obsession with the paper can be seen as an apparent manifestation of Bengal renaissance. There was a flood of newspaper publication in Kolkata during the nineteenth century. It was a medium of expression for the reformed ideas that the Bengal intellectuals possessed. Newspaper is also a place to comment and criticize the policies made by the government. In the movie we notice Bhupati's press is publishing the 24th edition of his paper which is named '*The Sentinel*'. Beside *The Sentinel* the audiences get to know about few more newspapers and magazines. The first one is the paper by Suren Banerjee which is assumed to be a similar political newspaper like *The Sentinel*. Later, there is the mentioning of *The Lotus* and *The Philanthropy* which are literary magazines. Charu and Amal are regular subscribers of those magazines and eventually they publish their writing. There are few other magazines which are not directly mentioned in the movie, but trails can be easily drawn back to them. For example, Amal asks Charu, "Have you read *Anandamath*?" I have already mentioned *Anandamath* was publishing part by part in a literary magazine- named *Bangadarshan*. This was a monthly literal journal founded and edited by Bankim Chandra Chatterji. Another one is *Bharati*, another literary magazine founded by the famous Tagore family of Kolkata. Rabindranath Tagore's anticipation with this magazine is not unknown to his readers. Now, all these historic characters like Suren Banerjee, Bankim Chandra Chatterji or Rabindranath Tagore are close associates of the Bengali renaissance. The news paper and the magazines played a key role to support their patriotic conscience. Along with that, the papers initiate the spreading of intellectuals thought regarding religious and social reformation. Readers like Charu and Amal presents a portion of the numerous dedicated readers. In the light of Bengali renaissance, the papers become a part of their life. Surprisingly, Newspapers were first introduced by the British government. 1780 James Hicky published the first news paper 'The

Bengal Gazette' which is also the first newspaper of India. In 1784, another Englishman, Francis Gladwin introduced the first official news paper 'The Calcutta Gazette'. However, the period of prosperity of the *Calcutta Gazette* was not to continue for long owing to the launching of another competing newspaper, the *Government Gazette*, in June 1815, by the Bengal Military Orphan Society. The *Government*.²⁵ Therefore, it is established that, the trend of publication was inherited by the English. Like Bhupati, many of the pioneer intellectual activists regarded it as their duty to support their ideas by publishing newspapers. Reading the newspaper, thus become a part of the modern life. Whoever does not follow the trend becomes a possessor of old belief, like Manda. Amal calls her 'ancient woman' when Manda confesses she does not read any of those. On the other hand, Charu becomes the sign of modernity. Instead of doing the traditional household chores, we see her as a dedicated reader. Although she is not as politically conscious as her husband, she can argue about her literary preference. Therefore, as we can see, Ray has marked a transition from tradition to modernity through the circulation and popularity of newspapers and magazines, which is a notable contribution of the Bengali renaissance.

Although Bhupati's existence is intertwined with the newspaper, it is interesting to observe the topics of his editorials. The motto of his newspaper is 'truth survives'. Although, the newspaper is written in English, the editor mercilessly criticizes the English government. In a dialogue he mentions to Amal about the faulty bureaucracy and injustices done by the English authority. He says to Amal,

"Do we know why the English government is continuing the war in Afghanistan? To maintain the prestige of England to Europe! Why Indian's are obliged to pay the expenses? What about the press act, is it acceptable? ... and what about the Civil Service Scheme, what about the Arms act, the Rent Tax, the Salt tax? The Indians has no right in maintaining the state, government has left no room for that. There is no representation! Have I done any injustice by criticizing them?"²⁶

This dialogue explains about Bhupati's political consciousness. He is acquainted with government's many policies regarding Civil Service schemes, arms act, the rent tax or the salt tax. Each of these acts is result of greed and exploitative measures by the government. His sensibilities ensure that the war in Afghanistan is a showcasing of Britain's power around Europe. This also shows he is knowledgeable about the happenings over Europe from which he

²⁵ <http://www.banglapedia.org/>

²⁶ Dialogues from the movie *Charulata*

comes up with this conclusion. Besides that, he is aware of the fact that Indian people has no voice while assembling the government. Moreover, the exploitative press act has suffocated their power of speech. For these reasons, he wants to bring a change and *The Sentinel* becomes his weapon against all discrimination. This sentiment of standing against all odds is another result of the Bengal renaissances. The activists believed in rational freethinking. The Bengal Renaissance produced an engagement with nationalism, and nationalism in turn questioned the foreign subjugation of the country.²⁷ It was not unfamiliar that native Indians were not aware of the foreign subjugation, but this kind of intellectual attack through the newspaper was a new attempt. The renaissance thinkers are credible for bringing that new version of protest. For Bhupati, there is one man who is the source of all his inspiration; Raja Rammohan Roy. He even commemorates this social leader in one of his merry speech. When Gladstone wins the election, Bhupati throws a celebration party at his place.

Ironically, despite his critical mentality towards the English government, Bhupati was not an anti-British. On the contrary his house, dressing sense, lifestyle and way of thinking are rather pro-British or influenced by British. Even though he thinks about the betterment of his country, he does not boycott the idea to be in Britain. Rather he convinces Amal by presenting a rich portrayal of England. Therefore, we can see a contrasting characteristic. Bhupati who cries against the English policies has a keen desire to be like an Englishman. Either it is his way of modernization by gaining more knowledge or this is a case colonial adaptation. Through this Satyajit Ray respectfully criticizes this trend among the free thinkers.²⁸ He lacks the confidence to establish his culture as an expression of modernity. To him, modernity can only be achieved by following the footsteps of the British. Despite relying to their own culture the Bengal renaissance reformists preferred the English ideologies. The reason behind this is the platform of their knowledge was based on English education. Almost all the activists were highly educated and the medium of their education was English. Moreover, most of them were from the high class of the society. Bhupati is no exception to that. Bhupati has excellent control over English, also, he is from a wealthy class. We can assume earning money is not an issue for him. But, he refuses to be an idle rich, he wants to keep himself busy. The paper is a solution to that. As

²⁷ <http://www.banglapedia.org/>

²⁸ Dhar, 532

Bhupati considers him modern, thus, being busy is a signifier of modernization. Before the British rule the rich class used to inherit the property generation after generation. Many of them never had to work for survival. Bhupati's enthusiasm is therefore a way to deny the former way of living. Needless to say, his way of protest is another way to declare his modern sensibilities. As newspaper is a modern commodity, protesting through it is modern as well. He writes protest in English and publishes it as a gesture to protest. But, this let him see the world from one perspective. He is not interested in local affairs. That is why he keeps all the Bengali literatures in a different shelf to a different room. Only his wife hovers around that shelf. This shows his self isolation from his own culture, or in other words, his lack of confidence to his tradition. At one point Charu agrees to write in Bhupati's paper. But, he reminds her that the paper is an English paper. After that, Charu replies, he can keep writing the political articles in English. But, everything apart from politics can be written in Bangla. Bhupati delightfully agrees to this. It is interesting to find out Bhupati distances him from the real situation. He forgets that politics should reflect the overall affairs of a state. He knows more of the British political situation than his own country. We never see him thinking about the general people of Bengal. Many of the renaissance thinkers were like Bhupati. Ray signals to this attitude of the Bengali bhadralok. In the movie As Bhupati denies Bangla for his paper, the thinker ignores the problems of Bengals. As a result, like Bhupati's broken family they failed to keep Kolkata's glorious status. The capital of India was shift from Kolkata to Delhi. Through Bhupati's tragedy Ray thus reveals an unfortunate state of the Bengal.

This tendency causes his distance from Charu. Despite living in the same house they live in different galaxies. Day by day they have fewer things to talk about. In the first part of the movie we see the couple having dinner. Bhupati does not talk about anything else but his newspaper when Charu hardly nods in response to her husband. But, in the last scene we see a freeze shot where their hands try to reach each other but stops in the middle. This is a symbol of their broken relation. Bhupati's lack of attention for Charu is not the only reason behind this. They have very little to discuss because they don't have much in common. As I have already mentioned, Charu's interest is in literature while Bhupati's is politics. Eventually, the bond breaks despite having a peaceful conjugal life. Furthermore, Bhupati does not try enough to cut this distance. There is a scene when Charu asks him, "have you read *Swarnalata*?" when Bhupati flirtatiously replies, "Why do I need anyone else when I have Charulata?" He ignores to further

continue the discussion. He could have tried a little harder reaching Charu's world if he has shown a common pursuit for literature. But, we can't say the same for Charu. Before the arrival of Amal all her attention circles around her husband. She knits beautiful handkerchief and hand-made sandals for Bhupati. By presenting these small tokens she unsuccessfully demands attention from her husband. Her passion for literature can be seen as a failed attempt to call for attention. There are several clues from which we can determine Charu's origin. She has not come from a highly intellectual family like Bhupati's. When she writes she writes about her village home where everything is different from her urban life. If she was not married to Bhupati she might be left as a traditional Hindu wife like her sister-in-law. Manda is the opposite of Charu. Charu is educated, modern and sophisticated while Manda is just a housewife stuck in her familiar periphery. We can say that Charu has been through a transition from tradition to modernity. She transforms herself in order to match Bhupati's lifestyle. When she stitches her husband's initial, using the English word 'B' May be it is another vague attempt to get closer to Bhupati's world. Nevertheless, this transformation could not help her much to make a connection with her husband.

On the other hand, this transformation is what brings her misery. If she has followed the role of a traditional home maker, she might not be so lonely. She could have made a friendly relation with Manda or passes her day doing the regular household chores. We never see her in the kitchen which is the utmost place for traditional Bengali house wife. Bhupati's modern way of living has given her a force of servants who does all her works. Although, Bhupati's affluent status is one reason behind this, he is modern enough to bring his wife out of the conventional culture.

The opera glass becomes a quintessential part of Charu's character. Through the glasses Charu gazes over the world around her. But, the opera glass reveals about other things as well. This glass was provided from Ray's personal collection. Ray does not use any other glass or binocular but this particular kind of opera glass. This glass convinces us that Charulata often visits the local theatres. Around the late nineteenth century Kolkata becomes the centre of various aestheticisms including theatre. The establishment of 'National Theatre (Minarva)',²⁹ and

²⁹ National Theatre is a theatre built in Beadon Street, Kolkata

'Bengal Theatre'³⁰ starts a rich dramatic culture.³¹ Anirudhha Dhar guarantees, during the year 1877-1878 both the theatres showcases plays based on Bankim Chandra Chatterji's novel.³² Since Charu is a fan of Bankim we can assume that she is a regular audience to the theatre where she seldom uses her opera glass. Apart from theatre there were other places where an opera glass can be used, like 'Opera house' or 'Town hall'. Bengal renaissances nurtured a cultural sophistication aside from evoking a political consciousness. Going to the operas or theatres becomes a trend of that era. This new taste for operas and theaters marks a transition of the amusement preference. In Charu's memoir we see her remembering the village fare. Village fares were a source of entertainments in traditional rural areas. We also see Charu gazing over a monkey-charmer through her opera glass. Monkey charming is an age old source of amusement in this part of the world. Although Charu secretly follows the man from window to window, she does not call him to her house. Her modern self might have clashed to call a street artist to her own house. Therefore, we can say that through the opera glass the director points out another transformation from tradition to modernity.

Apart from the Opera glass Ray set the characters in a modern setting. *Devi* or *Jalshaghar* also tells the story of affluent families. Kalikinkar Roy is wealthy and Biswambhar Ray was a zamindar. They live in grand houses but we have never seen anything like Charu's house. Satyajit Ray wants to present the house as a house of an educated, rich man's from nineteenth century Kolkata. For doing a true imitation Ray chooses a house which belongs to Dr. Mihir Mitra and Digimbar Mitra.³³ This house is a true interpretation of a nineteenth century mansion that belongs to a rich, cultural minded owner. Ray is so particular about Charu's house in order to signify a transformation from tradition to modernity. Charu's house has wall paper, Belgium glass, ornamented columns and black and white marbles. None of these materials were seen in Kalikinkar or Biswambhar's mansions. Using of such materials indicates a Western influenced living. All such emblems have commonly used in Western households rather than

³⁰ Bengal Theatre, an West Indian based theatre

³¹ Dhar, 598

³² Ibid, 598

³³ Dhar, 543

Bengal. Since Bhupati's family is highly influenced by western culture, their house resembles it as well. Ray draws a counter traditional house by presenting Charu's house. In her flashback we see the in which Charu grew up. That house was not a modern mansion but an ordinary village hut. Therefore, we can observe the contrasting lifestyle of traditional and modern Bengali's.

Like the set of the film Ray wants to portray her characters as realistic as possible. Tagore specialist Dr. Prashantakumar Pal draws a parallelism between Charulata and Kadambiri Devi. Kadambiri devi was Rabindranath Tagore's sister in law. According to Dr. Pal, Tagore uses Kadambiri Devi as a model while portraying Charulata's character in *Nastanirh*.³⁴ There are quite a number of similarities between the two characters. Both of them are childless, lonely and ignored.³⁵ Ray attentively makes the connection between Charulata and Kadambiri Devi. For doing so, he relies on the writings about Devi by Abanindranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore and few others. Kadambiri comes from a simple family at a very young age, just like Charu. They both are uprooted from their origin. Like Charu's husband, Devi's husband, Jotirindranath Tagore also edits their family newspaper. Both the husbands abandon their beautiful wives in their business. As a result, Charulata and Kadambiri Devi find their passion in other men. In the movie, we see Charu's growing passion towards her brother-in law Amal. Although, it has never confirmed, Kadambiri Devi is rumored to have a similar friendship with her brother-in-law Rabindranath Tagore.³⁶ In fact, Ray casts Soumitra Chatterjee for his facial resemblance with Tagore.³⁷ So, we can notice, through his cinema Ray wants to presents the life of a new generation housewives who were affected by modernizations, needless to say about the roles played Bengal renaissance. The transformation towards modernity causes hollowness in their life which eventually brings about the downfall for Charu in *Charulata*. She can't get love from her lover Amal or from her husband Bhupati.

Therefore, we can say, Ray is successful in bringing out the transition from tradition to modernity. The life of the characters reveals us of a particular generation that was highly inspired

³⁴ Dhar,559

³⁵ Dhar, 560

³⁶ Dhar, 560

³⁷ Dhar,561

by Western ideologies. The many reformations inaugurated by Bengal renaissance were vividly presents in the life of their followers. Ray also subtly criticizes the activists for leaving their roots. Through the tragedy in Charu's life Ray unfolds the consequences of this transformation from tradition to modernity.

Conclusion

I have always been an admirer of Satyajit Ray's work. But, this paper made me realize what a genius he is. He is not only a great writer but also an excellent narrator of time. His movies made me realize that films can be entertaining as well as informative. The way he presents his cinema, tell us beyond the shots. Through his characters he reveals us the story of a generation. While working on my paper, I came across with many aspects of Bengali history. Bengal was going through a major transformation in 19th century. This paper brings me the opportunity to know it better. I am as delighted to find out significant historical aspects as well as to tie it up with the movies. The surprising fact for me is to find that the individual actions of one person might be an outcome of his/her socio-cultural environment. Any person may or may not change through the course of time, but there is no way to escape it. Thus, any changes, be it political, economical ideological or socio-cultural, brings an unavoidable encounter with the self. It is revealed by the three movies I have focused on. In *Devi* the characters were facing a unique dilemma for the first time. What seems to be a typical father son conflict is in fact a clash of different ideologies. In *Jolshaghor* we see how Biswambhar being as ignorant as possible, tries to escape the situation. But the socio-economic change replaces him any way. And in *Charulata* we encounter with a different side of a transformation. The impact of Bengali renaissance believed to have positive effects, although Ray opens a negative side of it.

These findings have made me grow as a reader. Moreover, it has taught me to sense the ongoing transformations. Ray is a highly notable film maker of all time, which present me a vast source for research. However, a research centre for cinema study may have opened more doors. In future, I hope to work more on Satyajit Ray. I hope, my research on Ray's film will open a way for other students. If anyone wishes to do a Bengali film study, this paper will help him/her to know the pattern of Ray cinema. As I have gained a better understanding of the 19th century Bengal, I will like to know more about other time. And for doing so I will rely on the path through Satyajit Ray's films.

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