Feminist Appropriation of a Tagore Classic on the Screen: The Case of *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World)[1]

Md Rezaul Haque

Abstract

The year 2016 marked the hundredth anniversary of the publication of Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World). Tagore scholars regard the novel as one of the most controversial texts written in Bangla. Although the work is ostensibly based on the *Swadeshi* Movement that swept colonial Bengal in the first decade of the last century, it is the intersection of Indian nationalism and what has come to be known as 'the woman question' (Chatterjee 1993) that forms the bone of contention in most of the readings of the novel.[2] The critical debate intensified when more than half a century later Satyajit Ray recreated *Ghare Baire* on the silver screen in 1984, reconfiguring the position of the Indian woman in relation to the agenda of nation building at a time when independent India had already witnessed the third wave of feminism. In reconstructing the text Ray appears to have tilted the discursive balance more towards the woman question, thus relegating the national issue to a secondary position. In the present essay, I attempt to read Ray's cinematic translation of Tagore's *Ghare Baire* with a view to examining how Ray appropriates the source text to feminist ends as well as exploring his reasons for doing so.

Ghare Baire (The Home and the World), first published in book form in 1916, is one of Rabindranath Tagore's most talked about fictions.[3] Somdatta Mandal even considers it to be 'one of Tagore's most controversial novels.'[4] Set against the backdrop of the *Swadeshi* Movement that shook colonial Bengal in the early years of the last century, the novel deals with a number of issues that don't appear to have become obsolete even a century after its first publication.[5] Questions regarding (post)colonial modernity, nation formation, and female

---

[1] This essay grows out of an earlier draft that I presented at an international conference titled *Redrawing Gender Boundaries in Literary Terrains* organized (on 18-19 May, 2017) by the Department of English and Humanities, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

[2] See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993; rpt. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1994).

[3] Rabindranath Tagore, *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World), trans., Surendranath Tagore (London: McMillan,1921).

[4] Somdatta Mandal, 'Two Masters One Text: Satyajit Ray's Transcreation of *Ghare Baire*,' *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand, and Ray* ed. Mohd. Asaduddin and Anuradha Ghosh, 2012, Oxford Scholarship Online, 6 April 2017 www.oxfordscholarship.com.

[5] The *Swadeshi* Movement was an anti-colonial movement in India. It originated as a reaction against the then colonial government's decision to divide the Presidency of Bengal into two administrative units – East and West Bengal – in 1905. The Movement had its epicentre in the Presidency in question. It began as a non-violent campaign urging Indians to boycott foreign/British goods and use *swadeshi* (home grown) ones instead. But the Movement soon turned violent and went underground in the face of state retaliation. The decision was eventually revoked in 1911. For a detailed account of the Movement, see Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973).

emancipation are as relevant today as they were when the text originally came to be produced. *Ghare Baire*'s continued relevance is perhaps best exemplified the way it has been able to draw attention not only from present-day scholars and students of Bangla literature but also from artists working in non-literary media, especially the cinema.[6] The present essay looks at one of the most powerful engagements with Tagore's book, that is, the 1984 cinematic adaptation of the novel by Satyajit Ray.[7] The one single aspect, as it were, that makes Ray's recreation of *Ghare Baire* on the silver screen unique is the fact that Ray reads the text predominantly, though subtly, from a feminist perspective, thus apparently emptying his translation of the national-political content so palpable in its literary counterpart. But every translation stands in the same kind of relationship with its so-called 'original' as a historical fiction with the time it chooses to reconstruct. Diana Wallace notes:

> Although readers are often attracted to historical novels because they believe they will learn about the past time recreated in the novel, any historical novel always has as much, or perhaps more, to say about the time in which it is written.[8]

The same interpretational logic applies to Ray's adaptation of *Ghare Baire*. That is to say, it sheds as much light, if not more, on the historical moment when the film came to be conceptualised and given form as on the earlier historical moment when its 'source' text was written and published. This essay thus aims at achieving two things: one aim is to examine how Ray appropriates a Tagore classic to feminist ends, and the second aim is to explore some of the major factors that shaped this appropriation.

As a film maker, Ray is famous for his commitment to realism and it is no accident that one of his earliest influences was the Italian neorealist director and actor Vittorio De Sica whose *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) Ray saw during a visit to London.[9] This commitment stands out even in his very first attempt at film making, that is, *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little

---

[6] A more recent adaptation is Reema Mukherjee's *Ardhangini Ek Ardhsatya* (Better Half: Half a Truth, 2016). The last in line (to date), however, is Aparna Sen's *Ghare Baire* which is reported to be released later this year or early 2019. The cast given in the Works Cited entry for Sen's *Ghare Baire* is based on the same newspaper report ('Aparna Sen's "Ghare Baire" to release later this year,' *Times of India* 6 March 2018, 13 April 2018 https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/bengali/movies/news/aparna-sens-Ghare Baire-to-release-later-this-year/articleshow/63185729.cms). On a different note, throughout the essay I'll be using 'Bangla' to mean Bengali language and 'Bangali' to mean Bengali nation. However, 'Bengal' would retain its old meaning, designating the Presidency of Bengal in colonial India.

[7] *Ghare Baire*, dir. Satyajit Ray, perf. Soumitra Chatterjee, Swatilekha Chatterjee and Victor Banerjee, National Film Development Corporation of India Ltd., 1984. These days terms like 'adaption' and 'transcreation' seem to have largely replaced the older supposedly pejorative term 'adaptation,' while 'anterior' and 'posterior' are preferred to 'original' and 'copy.' See Shohini Ghosh, 'Disobedient Women/Disobedient Detours,' *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand, and Ray* ed. Mohd. Asaduddin and Anuradha Ghosh, 2012, Oxford Scholarship Online, 6 April 2017 www.oxfordscholarship.com.

[8] Diana Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 4.

[9] *Bicycle Thieves*, dir. Vittorio De Sica, perf. Enzo Staiola and Lamberto Maggiorani, Ercole Graziadei, Sergio Bernardi and Count Cicogna, 1948. To do justice to his multi-faceted talent, it should be noted that Ray also experimented with other forms of representation such as fantasy (in *Hirak Rajar Deshe* for example). *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (Kingdom of Diamonds), dir, Satyajit Ray, perf. Soumitra Chatterjee, Utpal Dutta, Tapen Chatterjee and Rabi Ghosh, Govt. of West Bengal, 1980.

Road, 1955), the first of the three films constituting what has come to be known as Apu trilogy after the name of its male protagonist.[10] On the thematic front, feminism appears to have been one of Ray's favourite subjects. As with realism, the tendency to engage with issues directly relating to the difficult socio-economic condition of Bangali/Indian women can also be traced back to Apu trilogy, especially in the last film called *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu, 1959).[11] From the 1960s onward, Ray's feminism gradually became more nuanced and at the same time more pronounced. In his brilliant study of the intersection of tradition and modernity in Ray's cinema, Darius Cooper identifies 'two distinct ideological concerns' in the films Ray produced during these years, one being feminism:

> From 1960 to 1985, Ray embarked on a series of woman-centered films in which he traced, with a remarkable feminist sensitivity and historical insight, the troublesome *yatra* or journey the trapped Bengali/Indian woman had to make under the patriarchal gazes and threat of a conspicuously Bengali/Indian masculinity.[12]

It is important to note here that the timeframe within which Cooper locates Ray's 'remarkable feminist sensitivity' includes his wonderful adaptation of Tagore's *Ghare Baire*, perhaps the last Ray film with a clear feminist agenda.

For a long time translation theorists as well as translators themselves tended to believe that in the process of translation something vital gets lost, a belief that inevitably led source and target text to be evaluated differentially as cultural products. The former invariably came to be assigned a higher position than the latter on the scale of value judgment.[13] Only recently a change in attitude appears to have taken place. It is widely accepted these days that if in translation something vital gets lost, something equally vital is also gained.[14] From one perspective then, Ray's recreation of Tagore's *Ghare Baire* suffers some loss of meaning insofar as it relegates the national-political content of the novel – the *Swadeshi* Movement – to a secondary position. But the same ideological/representational move also works to enrich Ray's translation by way of inflecting it with a robust feminism.

Perhaps the most obvious departure of Ray's *Ghare Baire* from Tagore's is the way the film reworks the novel into Bimala's rather than Nikhilesh's or Sandip's quest (albeit initially propelled by her husband) for a self (re)defined in terms of the larger 'world' rather than 'home.' This reworking is accomplished in three ways: first, by giving Bimala a far greater narrative space than Nikhilesh and Sandip; second, by carefully omitting or appropriating

---

[10] *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road), dir. Satyajiy Ray, perf. Subir Banerjee, Uma Das Gupta and Runki Banerjee, Government of West Bengal, 1955.

[11] *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu), dir. Satyajit Ray, perf. Soumitra Chatterjee, Sharmila Tagore and Swapan Mukherjee, Satyajit Ray Productions, 1959.

[12] Darius Cooper, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 5.

[13] In *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 8, Brian McFarlane shows how the discourse on adaptation (from novel to film) 'has been bedevilled by the fidelity issue.' See also Robert Stam, 'Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation,' *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 1-52.

[14] For a postcolonial (re-)conceptualization of the limits and possibilities of translation, see Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, eds., *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (Oxon: Routledge, 1999).

those episodes that are likely to present the female protagonist in a negative light; and finally, by employing the mirror trope to chart her psychological growth. Written in the form of a series of retrospective monologues by its three main characters, Tagore's text contains a total of eighteen chapters, with Bimala and Nikhilesh each allocated seven while Sandip gets four. In contrast, Ray's film is predominantly narrated from Bimala's perspective. However, in light of what Ray said about its narrative patterning in an interview soon after the film was released, one would appear justified to think otherwise:

> The entire narrative is divided into four phases, the first being from Bimala's point of view, where we have Bimala's commentary and we do not have a single sequence without Bimala; upto [*sic*] a point the narrative runs this way. Then before the second phase, a full fade-out and a full fade-in brings us to Sandip's point of view and there is no sequence without Sandip; through his commentary we are able to enter into his state of mind. Thus when the tragedy has taken quite a turn we enter the third phase, where it fades out again to bring us to Nikhilesh's point of view, and here we are concerned with Nikhilesh only and everything happens in relation to Nikhilesh. But the story proceeds all the time in its proper chronological order. And finally in the fourth and last phase we get the director's point of view. The camera can now go wherever it likes, to Bimala, to Sandip or whomsoever it may be.[15]

On the face of it, one cannot be blamed for thinking that Ray maintained an impartial attitude to his main characters by giving each an opportunity to narrate the story from her/his point of view and exercising his directorial authority only in the final phase of the film. But this initial impression gives way to a different evaluation as soon as one takes the length of the 'four phases' into consideration. The longest phase – spanning almost an hour – is the first one focalised through Bimala. Sandip gets about half an hour. Nikhilesh and Ray (the omniscient directorial gaze) divide the last fifty minutes or so between themselves. Ray's assignment of the longest narrative slot to Bimala clearly suggests that Ray has been markedly partial to his heroine. While this partiality sheds light on an important aspect of Ray's temperament as an artist, it also reveals what Ray had wanted to do in recreating Tagore's novel.[16] By allowing Bimala take centre stage and thus marginalising the male protagonists in his adaptation, to put it in plain words, Ray succeeded in turning it into a female *bildungsroman*. His decision to open the film at the end – so effortlessly accomplished by means of Bimala's flashback – does endow it with a sense of finality. But the same narrative circularity, insofar as it is achieved through the female protagonist's retrospection, works to turn *her* sensibility into the film's framing sensibility.

Ray takes care that viewers see his translation of *Ghare Baire* the way he wants them to, that is, primarily as a female *bildungsroman*, charting Bimala's journey from innocence (represented by a partially modernised home) to experience (represented by the modern

[15] Satyajit Ray, cited in Mandal, 'Two Masters One Text.'

[16] As an artist, Ray is temperamentally drawn more towards characters who vacillate than towards the ones who identify themselves with a particular cause. See 'Ray on Ray: *Cineaste* magazine interview with Satyajit Ray,' *SatyajitRay.org*, 19 April 2017 http://www.satyajitray.org/about_ray/ray_on_ray.htm.

world). Hence his opening the film with Bimala looking back at what she has come through: 'I have passed through fire. What was impure in me has been burned to ashes.'[17] The point to be noted here is that she does not appear to judge herself harshly for what she has done. On the contrary, she seems to consider what she has gone through as worth undergoing because it has given birth to a truer self.[18] Although the very next sentence – 'What remains, I dedicate to him, to the man who accepted all my failings in the depths of his stricken heart' – would appear to suggest that Bimala ultimately chooses home and the kind of indigenised modernity it embodies over the world and the sort of radical modernity it represents, there remains not the least doubt that her decision to come back home and all that it stands for is hers and hers alone.[19] Loser or gainer, at the end of Ray's film Bimala is what she herself has chosen to become. Seen from this point of view, Ray's *Ghare Baire* is above everything else a *bildungsroman* with a female protagonist who is well aware of the perils that stepping beyond defined limits entails for the Bangali/Indian woman and who at the same time is ready to pay for her defiance of the set code of behaviour.

In adapting *Ghare Baire* Ray is partial to Bimala not only in giving her narrative prominence but also in characterising her. Those episodes in which the female protagonist appears in a negative light in the literary work are either omitted or appropriated. The incidents involving Miss Gilby and Nanku are two such incidents. Both tend to generate in the readers of *Ghare Baire* a feeling of antagonism towards Bimala. Ray does not include the incident involving Nanku, a watchman in Nikhilesh's household. As narrated (from the perspective of Sandip) in the novel, this episode opens with Nanku trying to prevent the narrator from going to see Bimala in her drawing room. Asked to explain his unusual behaviour, Nanku tells Sandip that he has been ordered not to allow him in, when Bimala is in the drawing room. After a brief verbal altercation, Sandip pushes Nanku aside and has almost entered the drawing room when Nanku grips his hand and begs him not to go in. Freeing his hand from Nanku's grip, Sandip slaps Nanku on the cheek. Bimala comes out and orders Nanku to go away. With Nanku gone, Bimala asks Sandip to get in and then sends for her husband. When Nikhilesh arrives, Bimala informs him of the incident more to draw out an explanation from her husband than to tell on Nanku. All three become speechless when Nanku tells them that it was her sisters-in-law who had ordered him to stand guard on Bimala. Not being in a position to humiliate her sisters-in-law the way they have humiliated her, Bimala shifts her fury onto Nanku and asks Nikhilesh to dismiss him. A conscientious master that Nikhilesh temperamentally is, he sends Nanku away to the countryside in a different capacity. Nanku is thus (represented as) the proverbial scapegoat – a loser in the play of superiors. As such, his victimhood earns him sympathy from the readers who, on the

---

[17] Satyajit Ray, *Ghare Baire*. Quotations from Ray's *Ghare Baire* are all subtitles taken from the film.
[18] The metaphor of trial by fire also invokes one of the most cited trials ever faced by an Indian woman – that of Sita in the great Indian epic *Ramayana* by Valmiki. A good English translation of the epic is *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, trans. Hari Prasad Shastri (London: Shanti Sadan, 1962).
[19] Ray, *Ghare Baire*. Bimala's coming back home has mostly been read as a conservative ending. But a critical reading of the circumstances that lead Bimala retrace her steps would suggest otherwise. I discuss these circumstances in a later section of the present essay.

other hand, have nothing but hostility for the victimiser. Quite understandably, Ray could not but omit the Nanku episode; in all probability its inclusion in the film would have presented Bimala in an unfavourable light and thus ruined his whole ideological design.

With regards to Miss Gilby episode, Ray adopts a totally different strategy. Instead of omitting it, he rather appropriates it to his own ideological/representational end. Unlike the Nanku episode, the one involving Miss Gilby is narrated by Bimala herself. One fine morning Miss Gilby, whom Nikhilesh has hired to teach his wife modern manners, is returning home from church when a boy named Naren injured her by hitting her with a piece of brick. Nikhilesh who had been like a guardian to Naren till then didn't hesitate to send him away. In marked contrast, Bimala sided with Naren who had recently become a champion of the *Swadeshi* cause. She even tried to convince her husband that Naren was innocent and that Miss Gilby was merely fabricating a story against him. But Nikhilesh didn't revise his original decision. However, as the *Swadeshi* Movement began to gain momentum, Miss Gilby herself decided to quit. At the time of her departure, Miss Gilby could not help crying; even then Bimala didn't relent. So, in her own account Bimala stands out as a heartless, immoral and obstinate woman who doesn't hesitate to part with truth for convenience.

Ray's cinematic reconstruction of Miss Gilby episode is notable for two reasons. First, it is represented less elaborately, with the whole thing compressed into a scene in which a bandaged Miss Gilby is seen sitting with Bimala while Nikhilesh stands behind them. Second, Bimala's reaction to Miss Gilby's disgrace and injury doesn't bear the least trace of antagonism. The compression issue perhaps owes its justification to the kind of medium Ray chose to translate Tagore's novel into. However, what Ray achieves from this formal adjustment is a concretely realised delineation of human relationships, using both the auditory and visual potential of the medium to his utmost advantage. Another gain from this same adjustment is that it allows Ray to present Miss Gilby episode in such a way that viewers cannot but feel sympathy for his female protagonist on the eve of her separation from her English tutor. I will look at the scene in some detail to show how all this is achieved.

Unlike Tagore's text, Ray's film does not mention Miss Gilby's assailant by name. It's just 'a local schoolboy' who 'hit' Miss Gilby 'on the head with a stone.'[20] In thus turning a named attacker (in the novel) into an anonymous, faceless one in the film, Ray renders the very question of taking sides redundant. Who will Bimala plead for? More importantly, the assault on Miss Gilby is narrated by Miss Gilby herself in the presence of both Bimala and Nikhilesh. This changed mode of narration and perspective (first-person autobiographical instead of third-person omniscient) has the distinct advantage of addressing the viewers directly. Deprived of her narrative mediation, Bimala is deprived as well of the opportunity of accusing Miss Gilby of falsehood: viewers already know the truth. Ray's use of make-up for Miss Gilby in this scene also contributes to his achieving the intended effect. With her bandaged head, Miss Gilby leaves no room for Bimala to contradict her victimhood which in its turn saves Ray's female protagonist from projecting a negative self-image and thus becoming alienated from the viewers. From this brief analysis of Ray's recreation of Miss

[20] Ray, *Ghare Baire*.

Gilby episode, it becomes clear that whatever else Ray had aimed at achieving through this reconstruction he had obviously wanted to appropriate the episode in such a way that he could present Bimala in a positive light, a position radically different from Tagore's in the source text.

Perhaps more forcefully than the other two strategies discussed in some detail above, Ray's recurrent deployment of mirrors in *Ghare Baire* lends credence to my central argument in the present essay, which is to say, Ray's reading of Tagore's *Ghare Baire* is primarily a feminist reading. The mastery with which Ray has deployed mirrors in a number of scenes in his film has been noted by Ray scholars.[21] One such scholar holds that 'Ray uses "mirror" as a[. . .] recurring motif throughout the film to suggest self-reflection and understanding of the individuals concerned as the "Subject" and the others as the "Other".'[22] Although largely in agreement with its broad interpretational drift, I would like to spend some time on problematising this reading. The first point to be noted about Ray's deployment of mirrors in *Ghare Baire* is that it is Bimala who is found using them most, from the moment when a housemaid does her hair early on in the film to the moment when she realises that Sandip is not what he claims to be and breaks down. A second point is that Bimala's use of mirrors is suggestive of her psychological growth. That is to say, the moments marking Bimala's use of mirrors are also moments that signpost the different stages in her journey from her somewhat modernised home to the modern world, a point to which Jayita Sengupta, the scholar in question, doesn't appear to have given much critical attention. In what follows I'll focus on three such moments.

The earliest use of mirrors in Ray's *Ghare Baire* takes place, significantly, in a traditional domestic setting. Most of the female characters of the film – Bimala, her widowed sister-in-law, and three housemaids – are present in the scene under discussion and are seen listening to music on a gramophone. One of the maids is doing Bimala's hair, while Bimala is looking steadily at a small-sized mirror sitting on the floor and is perhaps enjoying a *paan*. Bimala's voiceover at this point – 'Our rooms were in the inner apartments of the palace. A passage with stained-glass windows led to the outer apartments. The door of this passage always remained closed to us. I didn't mind the confinement, because I was raised to follow traditional values' – clearly suggests how Bimala felt at that time, that is, before her entry/initiation into the world.[23] She felt happy in her confined existence at this juncture in her life. Ray's deployment of a small-sized mirror in this early scene is a brilliant metaphor for the smallness of Bimala's existence/world at that time. Bimala would step out of this

[21] Mandal (in 'Two Masters One Text), for example, 'take[s] the[] mirror shots [in *Ghare Baire*] to symbolize the delusion which all of them [the three main characters] are suffering from.' My reading, however, radically differs from Mandal's.
[22] Jayita Sengupta, 'Ray's Narrative Vision and Synaesthetic Appreciation of Tagore in *Ghare Baire*,' *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand, and Ray* ed. Mohd. Asaduddin and Anuradha Ghosh, 2012, Oxford Scholarship Online, 12 April 2017 www.oxfordscholarship.com.
[23] Ray, *Ghare Baire*.

world when it comes in contact with a kind of modernity almost incompatible with the one she had known so far.

The next mirror moment can be called the moment of the threshold, to adapt the title of Malashri Lal's impressive study of 'women writers in Indian English.'[24] My reason for defining this moment as the moment of the threshold will be self-explanatory to those who have seen the film, characterised as it is by tensions and vacillations on Bimala's part. The scene opens with Bimala looking at her image in a larger-than-life-sized mirror and humming an English tune. The comment her widowed sister-in-law makes at this point – 'English clothes, English songs. Soon we won't even seem related.' – points to the kind of radical transformation Bimala will undergo as a consequence of her venturing into the world.[25] Seen from the perspective of Bimala's sister-in-law, whom Ray represents both as an advocate and a victim of the older (feudal) Hindu patriarchy, this sort of drastic change looks dangerous and disruptive, hence undesirable. Had the scene ended at that point, Ray's reading of Tagore's text would have been anything but feminist. As if to bring his feminism back into focus, immediately after this anxious comment, Ray makes Bimala ask her sister-in-law how she looks in the *new* jacket. The implication of Bimala's impending transformation thus comes to be evaluated from an internal-personal rather than external-social point of view. By virtue of this simple shift in perspective and focalisation, Ray is also able to ground the narrative back into Bimala's consciousness. The more important question now is if Bimala will recognise herself once she steps beyond the threshold. Her husband's entry into the scene and the conversation that follows between the two works to mitigate, if not totally remove, whatever apprehensions Bimala still has about crossing the threshold.

The final mirror moment involving Bimala in Ray's *Ghare Baire* marks the climax of her psychological growth. By the time Bimala confronts herself for the last time in the mirror, Sandip and she have kissed each other twice.[26] That means her relationship with Sandip has already reached its climactic point as far as the narrative trajectory of Ray's adaptation is concerned. The second kissing, however, is directly followed by another climax in which Bimala seals her allegiance to Sandip's militant *Swadeshi* by giving Sandip the gold coins she has stolen from her husband's chest. Unlike its earlier counterpart, the second climactic moment is not only brief but also loaded with dramatic irony: no sooner has Bimala gone over to Sandip's camp than Nikhilesh's revelation of his friend's moral fraudulence in carrying out *Swadeshi* work snaps the very fabric of her fascination for Sandip and all he stands for. It's only after this revelation that the last use of mirrors by Bimala occurs in Ray's film. The narrative positioning of Bimala's final use of the mirror speaks volumes for the kind of meaning with which Ray inflects Tagore's novel in recreating it. It's not without ideological significance that Bimala faces herself in the mirror not after she has violated the sanctity of Hindu conjugality by allowing herself to be kissed by Sandip but after she comes

[24] Malashri Lal, *The Law of the Threshold*: *Women Writers in Indian English* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995).
[25] Ray, *Ghare Baire*.
[26] See footnote 27 below.

to know from her husband of his friend's morally dubious character as a *Swadeshi* leader. It's Sandip the *Swadeshi* leader, not Sandip the lover, whom Bimala rejects at the end of the day, though the first rejection inevitably leads to Sandip's doom as a lover as well.[27] Bimala's rejection of Sandip would thus appear to issue from a sense of betrayal, *not* from a sense of guilt, a small but vital detail for understanding both Ray's agenda and achievement in translating *Ghare Baire*.

In depicting Bimala's rejection of Sandip as originating from a sense of betrayal rather than from a sense of guilt, Ray definitely goes a long way towards endorsing Bimala's passion for Sandip.[28] In clear contrast to Tagore who represents Bimala-Sandip relationship as nothing but a threat to the very foundation of Hindu family life, Ray would thus seem to represent female – erotic or otherwise – desire as a valid passion. The two full-blown kiss scenes briefly discussed above dramatise such a passion in unambiguous terms. It's only in light of these ideological and representational coordinates undergirding Ray's reconstruction of *Ghare Baire* that one can hope to tease out the true meaning of Bimala's last use of the mirror in the film. Betrayed by Sandip, Bimala does go back to her bedroom but, instead of throwing herself onto bed to cry away what has befallen her, she clings to her image in the mirror, though crying all the while.[29] Being the first woman in the world of *Ghare Baire* to step beyond the threshold, there's no one in her household to whom Bimala can turn for consolation or help. Thus the most obvious implication of Bimala falling back upon her own image in the mirror is that, right or wrong, loser or gainer, she takes full responsibility for whatever has happened as a consequence of her crossing the threshold. Her desperate effort to set things right and win Amulya over does not succeed but it does prove that, unlike Sandip who chooses to take to his heels, she does not have the least hesitation to pay for what she has, knowingly or unknowingly, helped to bring about.

In my opinion Ray's decision to give his adaptation of Tagore's *Ghare Baire* an unambiguous ending should also be considered in the same light as his final deployment of the mirror in the film. The ending of Ray's film is exactly the reverse of how Tagore's novel ends. Tagore leaves his text open-ended: Nikhilesh, who had gone out to stop Hindu-Muslim riot spreading like fire in his estate, is brought home in a critical condition. As such, Tagore's ending leaves readers suspended between hope and despair, and would thus appear to suggest that at the end of the day Tagore stops just short of passing any judgment on Bimala so that readers too don't become judgmental about his female protagonist. In marked contrast, Ray chooses to round off his film with a definite ending: 'a series of lap dissolves' gradually 'strip Bimala of her fine accoutrements and clothe[] her in widow's whites.'[30] This ending has

---

[27] Bimala's rejection of Sandip boldly asserts that she doesn't subscribe at all to the (western) idea that 'all's fair in love and war.'
[28] Another endorsement is the kiss scene discussed above. Incidentally, *Ghare Baire* is the first Ray film to show a full blown kiss scene.
[29] In times of crisis or distress a South Asian heroine commonly locks herself in her bedroom, throws herself onto her bed, and cries her misfortune away.
[30] Ghosh, 'Disobedient Women/Disobedient Detours.'

commonly been read as upholding a conformist position.[31] These scholars take the last scene's Bimala (dressed) in the traditional white *sari* of a Hindu widow as dramatising Ray's ultimate endorsement of the age-old moral dictum: as you sow, so you reap. They, in other words, read Ray's reading of Tagore's *Ghare Baire* the way Samuel Johnson had famously read Shakespeare in his *Preface to Shakespeare*, that is, as a moralist.[32] But I don't think this is really the case. I would rather argue (as I've done in the preceding paragraph) that in locating Bimala's rejection of Sandip in a sense of betrayal rather than guilt Ray in fact moves away from Tagore's Victorian brand of morality and thus seems to lay the whole burden of responsibility for his female protagonist's impending doom not on her shoulders but on both her lover's and husband's. For Nikhilesh is no less culpable. And that is what Bimala in the white *sari* of a Hindu widow is meant to stress. Throughout the film Ray has brilliantly capitalised on the make-up of Bimala's widowed sister-in-law. Dressed as a widow, the sister-in-law forcefully brings home to viewers the contradictions inherent in Nikhilesh's project of modernising Bimala. If Nikhilesh is so concerned about his wife's emancipation, viewers cannot but ask, why doesn't he do something that will really help his sister-in-law live with dignity in her own eyes as well as society's? He could have organised her remarriage.[33] Or he could have included her as well in his modernising scheme. Thus read, Ray's ending constitutes a powerful critique of all man-initiated projects meant to modernise the Indian woman, whether the initiator is an enlightened liberal landlord or an unscrupulous firebrand revolutionary.

As mentioned at the beginning, this essay has a two-fold aim: it intends to examine how Ray appropriates Tagore's *Ghare Baire* to feminist ends as well as explore why he chooses to do so. I hope I've been able to shed some light on the 'how' part of my objective through a brief discussion of Ray's *Ghare Baire* as a female *bildungsroman*, a close reading of the strategic omissions and appropriations Ray carries out in his film with a view to presenting Bimala in a positive light, and a somewhat detailed analysis of how the film deploys mirror (moments) as a structural device to chart the female protagonist's psychological growth. Moving on to the 'why' part of my objective, I would say there are basically two reasons why Ray chose to read Tagore's novel the way he did. In a 1983 interview for *India Today*, Sumit Mitra had asked Ray about his take on Tagore's *Ghare Baire*. To Mitra's question: '*Ghare Baire* is both a love story and a political novel. How are you treating it?', Ray's straightforward answer was: 'As a love story. Isn't it a love story first?'[34] Ray, however,

---

[31] Several listeners at the conference where I presented the first draft of this essat, for example, asked me (during the question-answer session) if such was not the case. See footnote 1.
[32] Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare*, *The Project Gutenberg EBook*, 28 August 2005, 19 April 2017 http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5429/pg5429-images.html.
[33] The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act was passed in 1856, that is, exactly sixty years before *Ghare Baire* was published in book form.
[34] Sumit Mitra, 'The Satyajit Ray Interview,' *India Today* 2 May 2012, 25 April 2017 https://www.indiatoday.in/india/photo/satyajit-ray-91st-brithday-367552-2012-05-02. The original interview titled 'The Genius of Satyajit Ray' was published in the magazine's 15 Feb 1983 issue. The issue I've used reproduces excerpts from the original interview to mark Ray's 91st birth anniversary in 2012.

added: 'I mean the political allusions and the interpretation of terrorism are all there, but what is more important to the script is the triangle between the characters, and the eventual resolution of the triangle.'[35] Although from Ray's answer it becomes clear where his preference lay as far as the novel's themes are concerned, one learns almost nothing about the reasons determining this preference. Important light is shed on the issue in Ray's later answers. In one of them Ray identifies both the political culture and the 'censorship laws' prevailing in India at the time as factors that decided for him to downplay the 'political theme' in his cinematic recreation of Tagore's text.[36] As far as representation of politics in Indian cinema was concerned, Ray frankly admitted: 'In India it is not possible to make a Costa-Gavras type of film.'[37] What the allusion to 'a Costa-Gavras type of film' suggests is that it is futile to look for overt political themes in a Ray film. Then how could Ray engage with such a politically charged agenda as feminism in his reconstruction of *Ghare Baire*? Ray himself has answered the question in more than one interview. He does confront socio-political problems in his films but always as an artist.[38] And there can be no doubt that for Ray the artistic way meant the way Emily Dickinson had advised poets to adopt to tell the truth:

> Tell all the truth but tell it slant,
> Success in circuit lies,
> Too bright for our infirm delight
> The truth's superb surprise;
>
> As lightning to the children eased
> With explanation kind,
> The truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind.[39]

In fact, Ray's very decision to choose Tagore's *Ghare Baire* to articulate his thought on the question of modernising the postcolonial Indian woman itself is a clear indication that his method of telling the truth is the slanting one. It is by slanting (that is, by subtly reworking) his source text that Ray is able to inflect it with his kind of feminism. Hence his deployment of the Tagorean love 'triangle' in the film in such a way that the two male protagonists merely serve as props to facilitate Bimala's journey towards attaining a larger and truer sense of the self.

---

[35] Mitra, 'The Satyajit Ray Interview.'
[36] Mitra, 'The Satyajit Ray Interview.' Interestingly, in a much earlier interview Ray had made similar comments. In answering the interviewer's question if censorship in India had 'limited' his work, Ray admitted that it had '[i]n certain areas,' particularly in the areas of 'sex' and 'politics.' See Lindsay Anderson, 'An Interview with Satyajit Ray,' 1969/1970, 2 May 2017 http://raylifeandwork.blogspot.com/2011/01/interview-with-satyajit-ray.html.
[37] Mitra, 'The Satyajit Ray Interview.'
[38] See, for example, Bert Cardullo, 'Master of Art: An Interview with Satyajit Ray,' Bert Cardullo, *World Directors in Dialogue: Conversations on Cinema* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2011), ProQuest Ebook Central, 28 August 2018 http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/flinders/detail.action?docID=648615.
[39] Emily Dickinson, 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant,' *Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved Them*, ed. Christanne Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2016) 563-64.

Ray's *Ghare Baire* was not his first cinematic adaptation of a Tagore classic. Much earlier Ray had recreated Tagore's *Nastanirh* (The Broken Nest, 1901), a novella, on the silver screen under the title *Charulata*.[40] As can be inferred from the very title (named after the female protagonist) of the earlier translation, Ray is more openly a feminist in this film than in the latter. This openness has to do with the historical moment when *Charulata* was released. In 1964 with the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru still in power, India was a much more secular and tolerant geopolitical space than it would come to be after the infamous Emergency of 1975 when most of the civic rights of the Indian citizen were to be curtailed by Indira Gandhi, the first female Prime Minister of India. Hence Ray's cautious move to tell 'all the truth but tell it slant.' His principal objective is to appropriate Tagore's *Ghare Baire* to feminist ends. But Ray being Ray, he sets out to achieve his goal in a roundabout way. Hence his subtle attempt to rework Tagore's novel into a female *bildungsroman*, his omission or appropriation of those episodes that are likely to present Bimala in a negative light, and finally his brilliant use of the mirror (trope) to chart the psychological growth of his female protagonist.

Works Cited

Anderson, Lindsay. 'An Interview with Satyajit Ray,' 1969/1970. Web. 2 May 2017 http://raylifeandwork.blogspot.com/2011/01/interview-with-satyajit-ray.html.

Apur Sansar (The World of Apu). Dir. Satyajit Ray. Perf. Soumitra Chatterjee, Sharmila Tagore and Swapan Mukherjee. Satyajit Ray Productions, 1959. Film.

Ardhangini Ek Ardhsatya (Better Half: Half a Truth). Dir. Reema Mukherjee. Perf. Subodh Bhave, Varsha Usgaonkar, Reema Lagoo, Manoj Mitra, Sreelekha Mitra and Subrat Dutt. Satyom Entertainment, 2016. Film.

Anonymous. 'Aparna Sen's "Ghare Baire" to release later this year,' *Times of India* 6 March 2018, Web. 13 April 2018

Bassnett, Susan and Harish Trivedi. Eds. *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. Oxon: Routledge, 1999. Print.

Bicycle Thieves. Dir. Vittorio De Sica. Perf. Enzo Staiola and Lamberto Maggiorani. Ercole Graziadei, Sergio Bernardi and Count Cicogna, 1948. Film.

Cardullo, Bert. 'Master of Art: An Interview with Satyajit Ray.' Bert Cardullo, *World Directors in Dialogue: Conversations on Cinema*. Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central. 28 August 2018. Web. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/flinders/detail.action?docID=648615.

Charulata (The Lonely Wife). Dir. Satyajiy Ray. Perf. Madhabi Mukherjee, Soumitra Chatterjee, Sailen Mukherjee, Syamal Ghoshal and Gitali Roy. RDB & Co, 1964. Film.

[40] Rabindranath Tagore, *Nastanirh* (*The Broken Home: English Translation of Rabindranath Tagore's* Nastanirh), trans. Lopamudra Banerjee (Ontario: FinalDraft Editing and Publishing Services, 2016). *Charulata* (The Lonely Wife), dir. Satyajiy Ray, perf. Madhabi Mukherjee, Soumitra Chatterjee, Sailen Mukherjee, Syamal Ghoshal and Gitali Roy, RDB & Co, 1964.

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. 1993; rpt. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.

Cooper, Darius. *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.

Dickinson, Emily. 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant.' *Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved Them*. Ed. Christanne Miller. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2016. Print.

Ghare Baire. Dir. Aparna Sen. Perf. Kaushik Sen, Jisshu Sengupta and Tuhina Das. SVF, 2019. Film.

Ghare Baire. Dir. Satyajit Ray. Perf. Soumitra Chatterjee, Swatilekha Chatterjee and Victor Banerjee. National Film Development Corporation of India Ltd., 1984. Film.

Ghosh, Shohini. 'Disobedient Women/Disobedient Detours,' *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand, and Ray*. Eds. Mohd. Asaduddin and Anuradha Ghosh. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012. Web. 6 April 2017 www.oxfordscholarship.com.

Hirak Rajar Deshe. (Kingdom of Diamonds). Dir, Satyajit Ray. Perf. Soumitra Chatterjee, Utpal Dutta, Tapen Chatterjee and Rabi Ghosh. Govt. of West Bengal, 1980. Film.

Johnson, Samuel. *Preface to Shakespeare*. *The Project Gutenberg EBook*. Web. 19 April 2017 http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5429/pg5429-images.html.

Lal, Malashri. *The Law of the Threshold*: *Women Writers in Indian English*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995. Print.

McFarlane, Brian. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Print.

Mitra, Sumit. 'The Satyajit Ray Interview,' *India Today* 2012. Web. 25 April 2017 https://www.indiatoday.in/india/photo/satyajit-ray-91st-brithday-367552-2012-05-02.

Mandal, Somdatta. 'Two Masters One Text: Satyajit Ray's Transcreation of *Ghare Baire*,' *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand, and Ray*. Eds. Mohd. Asaduddin and Anuradha Ghosh. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012. Web. 6 April 2017 www.oxfordscholarship.com.

Pather Panchali (Song of the Little Road). Dir. Satyajiy Ray. Perf. Subir Banerjee, Uma Das Gupta and Runki Banerjee. Government of West Bengal, 1955. Film.

'Ray on Ray: *Cineaste* magazine interview with Satyajit Ray.' *SatyajitRay.org*. Web. 19 April 2017 http://www.satyajitray.org/about_ray/ray_on_ray.htm.

Sarkar, Sumit. *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973. Print.

Sengupta, Jayita. 'Ray's Narrative Vision and Synaesthetic Appreciation of Tagore in *Ghare Baire*.' *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand, and Ray*. Eds. Mohd. Asaduddin and Anuradha Ghosh. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012. Web. 12 April 2017 www.oxfordscholarship.com.

Stam, Robert. 'Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation.' *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*. Ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. 1-52. Print.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*). Trans. Surendranath Tagore. London: McMillan, 1921. Print.

---. *Nastanirh* (*The Broken Home: English Translation of Rabindranath Tagore's* Nastanirh). Trans. Lopamudra Banerjee. Ontario: FinalDraft Editing and Publishing Services, 2016. Print.

Valmiki. *Ramayana* (*The Ramayana of Valmiki*). Trans. Hari Prasad Shastri. London: Shanti Sadan, 1962. Print.

Wallace, Diana. *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers*, *1900-2000*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.