

Charulata as an Adaptation of ‘Nastanirh’: Satyajit Ray’s Craftsmanship in the Recreation of Tagore’s Work on Celluloid

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Abstract

Tagore’s short story ‘Nastanirh’ (‘The Broken Nest’) shares with us the intricately etched characters created by the master himself and brought onto the small screen by the visionary director Satyajit Ray in his film *Charulata*. Set in a politically unstable period, Tagore’s ‘Nastanirh’ is constantly shifting in the social world of the early twentieth century in undivided Bengal. The audience in our times too will find this world engaging as well as challenging, feeling attached to their emotions, issues, drama and anxieties. Ray retains Tagore’s narrative style even in the visual medium and enhances the words of his pages by casting talent that truly captures the essence of the social and cultural contexts of his work. This study is an analysis on how Ray makes the film powerful, credible and appealing on celluloid in transition with songs, music, cultural references and its newfound political and social expressions, a little more than the actual described world within Tagore’s narrative. This paper aims at exploring how Tagore’s words in ‘Nastanirh’ and Ray’s vision in *Charulata* have amalgamated into a show that transports us back in time to a world as complicated as this one but with far more appeal and beauty.

Keywords: Satyajit Ray, *Charulata*, Tagore, *Nastanirh*, Literature, Film, Adaptation, Recreation, Celluloid.

Literature functions as an inspiration for a film. A film adapted from literature would contain something of the chemistry of the mind of the filmmaker. There can be several reasons for such adaptations ranging from the director’s love for the story, reinterpreting the word text into a film text and the director’s belief that a period in history can be beautifully recreated in the visual medium. Since Tagore’s works are universal — in time, space, emotions, and human relationships, they offer filmmakers a challenge to make the film as powerful, credible, and appealing on celluloid as it is in printed text. Satyajit Ray’s (1921-92) *Charulata* (1964) an adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore’s (1861-1941) short story ‘Nastanirh’ (‘The Broken Nest’, 1901) is known for its historical significance and its exquisite cinematic crafting. The film stands on its own merits

with Ray able to transform his abiding interest in the culture and ethos of nineteenth-century Bengal as well as his veneration for Rabindranath Tagore's fiction that captures it so well into an exemplary work. The film explores Tagore's vision of rural-urban division, colonialism, women's emancipation, and nationalism. In order to transpose Tagore's works across time and media, Ray took a poetic liberty in his method of adaptation. He has brought change into the beginning and ending of the short story as well as has reshaped the plot of the story, focused on the intimacy of Charu and Amal as lovers, added his concept of "nabina" and "prachina" and introduced entirely new set of events and exchanges in his cinematic version of 'Nastanirh'. Just as Tagore exercised his discussion in written mode, Ray audio-visually expanded the author's vision in filmic mode and pushed the author's argument further than the original.

In the opening segment of the film (roughly 7 and a half minutes) Ray takes full advantage of the cinematic apparatus at his disposal, in search of a language entirely free from literary and theatrical influences. Dialogue is almost done away with sound cues and music are carefully selected and introduced with pin-point precision and the action and camera movement are orchestrated to mediate between Charu's reflective pauses and moments of acceleration. The original story of 'Nastanirh' though focuses the loneliness of Charu, starts with the description of Bhupati. The wealthy Bhupati is wrapped up in his work as the proprietor and editor of an English-language newspaper and fails to notice when his child-wife Charu grows into a young woman. This incident is described as:

"The newspaper editor failed to react to this momentous piece of news. His overriding concern was that the Government of India's border policy of gradual expansion might break all bounds and precipitate chaos. In this affluent household Charulata had nothing to do. Like a flower with no hope of fruition she came into bloom, quite superfluous, and somehow whiled away the useless, endless hours. She lacked for nothing. In such a situation a young wife, if given the chance, fusses too much over her husband, violates domestic border policy and steps from being timely to untimely, from proper to improper. Charulata had no such opportunity. The barrier of paper guarding her husband seemed well-nigh impenetrable" (Tagore 376).

This passage comes near the beginning. Ray's challenge was how to express Tagore's metaphors and his bantering tone as soon as the film started. His solution is an extended opening sequence – some seven and a half minutes long – containing hardly a dozen spoken words and none of them between husband and wife. In Ray's own words, "except for one line of dialogue ... the scene says what it has to say in terms that speak to the eye and the ear" (Ray 63). Charu merely wanders from room to room, picking up a book here, playing a note on the piano there and catching glimpses of the intriguing outside world through half-closed shutters with the help of eye-glasses,

a lorgnette. Finally, from his adjacent office, Bhupati appears, fetches a book and slowly returns, nose buried, failing to notice his wife right beside him. As he disappears down some steps, Charu playfully watches him through the lorgnette and then suddenly, frustrated by the game, lets it drop from her eyes. As her arm falls, Ray's camera abruptly pulls back from a close-up of Charu watching her husband to a long shot of her standing alone, framed by wealth – the lonely wife of the film's title. Ray's use of the lorgnette which brings Bhupati and his book physically closer while simultaneously emphasizing his mental distance from Charu, is a masterly cinematic realization of Tagore's line, "the barrier of paper guarding her husband seemed well-nigh impenetrable" (Tagore 376).

Though *Charulata* is based on Tagore's 'Nastanirh' ('The Broken Nest'), Ray who has written the screenplay in addition to directing the film, refashioned details from Tagore's story. For example, Tagore's Amal is a demanding man. He pesters Charu to the point of seeming insensitive to her feelings and situation. She has to tolerate many of his endless tantrums which include providing him with incentives for eating in hotels, buying expensive books of English literature and inviting his friends over for a lavish feast. Charu has accepted all of this as her sole responsibility. Bhupati has no demands on her, on the other hand Amal's demands on the slightest pretext of tutoring are never-ending. Charu sometimes feigns anger and rebellion over this but deep within, it is necessary for her to bear with these little outbursts of affection. Charu's response to him, as Tagore words it seems almost needy: "That someone should ask her for something—in the whole world this is the only person who asks of her and she cannot bear to leave his desires unfulfilled" (Tagore 384). Ray, on the other hand, adds an endearing tenderness to Amal and the gifts he receives from Charu are given to him freely. Even Ray does not show these details description in his film. He just avoids the affection of Charu for Amal and mainly focuses on the love and passion between them. He shows the gifts which Amal find from Charu as the tokens of her attraction towards him. By this Ray has distorted the message which has provided by Tagore in his original story.

The filmmakers are free to rewrite the plot of the story if he feels it is necessary for the development of the story of the film. Ray has successfully utilized this freedom in his film *Charulata*. For instance, in the original story of 'Nastanirh' we find Amal as a college student of 23- year- old who has been given shelter by Bhupati. But in the film, we see that Amal who has already completed his study enters at the home in a stormy day for an extended stay. Even Ray has changed the sequence of the short story. In the very beginning of the film we find Charu needling a B letter on a handkerchief which she has given her husband. On the contrary, the original story presents that Charu has made the handkerchief for Amal. Though the 'B' letter does not carry any significant meaning in the original story of Tagore, it uses as the representation of the idea of the

writer named Bankim Chandra Choudhury in Ray's film. This proves that very often filmmakers have distorted the original story for including a new idea which is totally their own.

Charu and Amal's literary pursuits are another aspect of the story that Ray translated to cinema in a way that added nuance and poignancy. Even in Tagore's story, literature brought Charu and Amal together but Ray used their shared love of writing to create a haven for Charu and Amal—one that kept the real world away, one in which they were equals and unburdened by convention and hierarchy. In the original story Tagore exposes the intimacy between Charu and Amal based on literature at the middle of the story, but Ray is in hurry. After showing Charu's loneliness he abruptly goes to Amal's and Charu's literary interest. Ray has done this because he is interested to show the intimacy between Charu and Amal. While Tagore uses literature as a means of comparison between Charu and Amal and tries to establish the equality between man and woman, Ray on the other hand uses the practice of literature as the means by which Charu's extramarital affair with Amal can be developed.

Change is essential and practically avoidable, mandated both by the constraints of time and medium but how much is always a balance. This will be clear to us if we consider the incident of the notebook that Charu gives Amal in both the short story and the film. In the short story Amal has requested Charu to give him a nice notebook for his writing. Charu gives it because of her affection towards Amal. But in the film Charu has given Amal a notebook abruptly and like a magic the notebook is filled up by Amal's writing. Ray has done this because it is impossible for a filmmaker to present details description of a printed text within a short duration of two or three hours. For this reason, where Tagore takes time to describe Amal's preparation for writing, Ray is in hurry to show how Amal's notebook is filled up by his writing like a magic. Ray has no enough time to elaborate this episode because he has to reach to the climax within a short time. This is the feature of film adaptation which has been strictly maintained by Ray.

Adaptation is constantly evolving in response to changes in its contemporary perspective. On a basic level it is concerned with the transport of form and/or content from a source to a result in a media context. In the film, Charu tells Amal that whatever he writes in it must not be printed elsewhere. When something Amal had written in the notebook is published as an essay in a reputed magazine, it is a breach of trust for Charu. Their world has been exposed to other people's gazes. In the short story Amal also makes sure something Charu had written is published, acknowledging her talent in an act that is in equal parts generous, supportive, and arguably patronizing. In the film Ray helped by a more modern sensibility, showed Charu getting her article published on her own merit, without any help from Amal. That she was able to do so made Charu his equal. At the same time, it showed how differently the two saw their relationship. For Amal she was an inspiration and she made him a better writer. For Charu Amal was the one person with whom she shared a

sense of intimacy and no amount of the public recognition that came from published articles was worth the feeling of belonging that Amal gave her. Ray has brought this change because though he represents 1870's India in the film, his target is the contemporary audience who are eager to see the emancipation of new women who are able to assert her independence.

In most cases of adaptation, the films are required to create identities (for example, character's costume or set decor) since they are not specified in the original material. This is also applicable to Satyajit Ray's film *Charulata*. Some of *Charulata*'s most beautiful moments are the wordless sequences, shot with mesmerizing grace by Ray and his cinematographer Subrata Mitra. The camera spoke using angles, shadows, and perspective. The famous sequence showing Charu on a swing was a feat. The use of binoculars early on in the film perfectly communicated the idea of Charu as a caged beauty who wants to watch, touch, feel and experience the world but is forced to remain cloistered. Rarely has sadness been both so subtle and so beautiful. The short story with its wordy sentimentality certainly does not have the restraint that Ray introduced to Tagore's story. Remaining faithful to the plot Ray removed every sign of excess and every high-strung sentence. The silences made *Charulata* less naive than 'Nastanirh' and certainly less melodramatic.

Ray is merely paying lip-service to what has been recognized by many as the theme of 'Nastanirh': the breakdown of conjugality in the face of Bhupati's knowledge of Charu's deep attachment with his cousin Amal. In Tagore's fiction this is an understanding that slowly dawns on Bhupati in the face of Charu's distracted state, his failure to engage her in literary pursuits and her sense of pain and loss at Amal departure. The text dwells on detailed and painful process of the gradual disintegration of the marriage through eight chapters (chapters XIII to XX). The film, however, not only compresses these long chapters into a single moment of revelation but moves to an entirely different ending. In the film Bhupati comes to know of Charu's desire for Amal when he accidentally enters their bedroom and finds a grief stricken Charu prostrate on the bed, weeping inconsolably for Amal. Though Bhupati is shocked by this sudden realization, when he returns home after a period of distracted rambling through the streets, the expression on his face shows that here is a man who does not have the will or courage to confront his wife. Indeed, when he does extend his hand, after an initial hesitation, the close up of Bhupati's face indicates that he is almost helplessly submitting to his wife who has clearly taken charge of the situation.

Adaptation is used as a process of change or modification by which a film becomes better suited to its contemporary situation. Sometimes a filmmaker adds a new scene or incident for maintaining the sequence of the plot of the film. For example, the film's portrayal of Charulata's responses once she becomes aware that her husband has inadvertently seen her weeping and thus is in the know of things is startling to say the least. Here is a wife who expresses neither guilt nor anxiety at what is a potentially disastrous situation; instead she prepares her toilette carefully and

waits for her husband to return. The penultimate shot of Charu in which the camera focuses on her face half lit by the lamp that she is carrying, shows a positive glint in her eyes as she extends her hand and invites her husband to come in. Ray's *Charulata* stands at the threshold of the home and the world indicating her initiative to rebuild the conjugal relationship on its ruins. It establishes beyond doubt what has actually been for Ray the central theme of his film, the emergence of 'nabina' or the 'new woman'. But there is no scene like this in the original text of Tagore.

Filmmakers are able to shift an act of a particular character for fulfilling his own purposes. They even distort the aim of the original writer and present the act of the characters in a different way. In both 'Nastanirh' and *Charulata* it is Bhupati who, in an attempt to alleviate the loneliness of his wife, suggests a companion in the form of her sister in law, Mandakini or Manda, the wife of Charu's brother Umapada. He is both in Tagore's text and Ray's film deeply engrossed in politics and with the publication of his English newspaper. But in the film Ray has used the incident to introduce a new concept which is absent in the main text. With the arrival of Manda, the scene is set for Ray to cinematically explore the discursive framing of the binary of 'prachina' and 'nabina'. That the illiterate Manda whose world revolves around the making of paan and a desire to eat kulfi is the putative prachina is underscored in the film when Amal in a tone of mock seriousness reads out a section of Bankim's essay 'Prachina or Nabina' in the presence of Charu and Manda. He passes a verdict on Manda as the prachina and exhorts her to leave the room. Needless to say, this is one of the major additions or commissions that Ray makes in his film.

An aspect of film adaptation is the inclusion of sound and music. In a literary text a specific sound effect can often be implied or specified by an event but in the process of adaptation, the film-makers will have to determine specific sound characteristics which subliminally affects narrative interpretation. Having firmly established Charu as the nabina, Ray goes on to immediately explore her sexually transgressive potentials in the famous swing scene in the garden. As she is lifted on the upswing Charu who is humming a lilting Tagore love song, Phule Phule, has her eyes fixed on Amal lying on a carpet on the ground engrossed in his world of literary pursuits. Her expression is playful and buoyant but with a hint that here are the beginnings of longings that can hardly be contained within the licensed intimacy of the sister-in-law and brother-in-law. This is hinted at when Charu's lorgnettes pick up a scene between a mother and her infant on a balcony and the camera pans to reveal that she has moved down to focus on Amal's profile. The significance of this juxtaposition can hardly be lost. What one wonders is the cause of Charu's childlessness? Has the marriage ever been consummated? Missing of course as Ashok Rudra has pointed out is the longish passage in Tagore's text devoted to the childish and fanciful plans about reconstructing the worn-down garden that Charu and Amal indulge in. Ray's film has no time and patience for leisurely exploration of the burgeoning but innocent companionship between Charu

and Amal. His screenplay is focused on tracing the development of his Charulata's erotic longings for Amal.

Adaptation is the way in which we associate the entity or product as both similar to and a departure from the original. Ray is in his cinematic adaptation of Tagore's story. He even changes the relationship between Charu and Amal. In the main text of 'Nastanirh' Tagore presents the relationship as a friendly relationship between a brother-in-law and a sister-in-law based on affection. But in the film the relationship is presented as an affair based on erotic longings for each other. The first instance of such encounter that Ray conjures up is that of Amal playing the piano and singing 'Ami chini go chini tomare ogo Bideshini' as Charu enters evidently still in pique from an earlier tiff between the two over publication of Amal's writing. Aware of his bouthan's mood Amal attempts to lighten it through a playful flirtation. Its effect on Charu is dramatic. As she sits on the chair watching Amal come towards her, her face is suffused with desire and longing. She buries her face in her palms and gradually tentatively peeks. One assumes her heart is beating wildly with anticipation. That this gradual arousal, a veritable foreplay should reach a climax is inevitable and occurs in the scene in which Charu buries her face in Amal's chest, clings to him and begins to sob unaccountably. In between her sobbing she repeatedly says that she should never write again. The reference is to the publication of her essay 'Amar Gram' in the prestigious and snooty Biswabandhu. Ray takes total liberty with Tagore's text in these episodes concerning Amal and Charu's writing and the publication of these essays. In 'Nastanirh' it is Amal who sends his sister-in-law's essay to the monthly magazine Saroruh with the obvious intention to surprise her. In the film it is Charulata who takes the initiative to send off her essay to Bishwabandhu to prove to Amal that it is she, the nabina, who is worthy of attention and not the prachina Manda, with whom Amal has been hobnobbing.

It is perhaps slightly regrettable that Ray in his single minded pursuit of establishing his nabina as a woman capable of deep desires and a love that dares not utter its name totally erases the heroine of Tagore's story, for whom her writing is an expression of selfhood and autonomy and not a weapon in a sexual intrigue. Yet even Ray will not transgress limits of propriety to allow his heroine the momentary bliss of an embrace by her beloved 'thakurpo'. The last shot in which they are seen together shows a clearly uncomfortable Amal trying to disengage himself from Charu who clings on to him trying to gain an assurance that he will not leave her.

Filmmakers bring change or distort the interior thought of the characters, even they make a dramatic change in the act and behavior of the characters. In the film, acting like a faithful brother Amal decides to leave the household and makes a dramatic departure that very night. Shocked at this betrayal Charulata reacts violently to the news, expressing her sense of loss and betrayal by shouting at Brajo the old servant for neglecting his household duties. But in the original story we

find that Amal agrees to marry and goes to London because he wants to help Bhupati. His departure is not an abrupt one. Charu and Bhupati bid farewell to Amal. Bhupati even goes with Amal and comes back to Calcutta after completing the marriage ceremony of Amal. On the other hand, Ray makes a mystery about Amal's departure. Charu and Bhupati even do not know the address of Amal and after a long time they find a letter from him where he confirms that he is not married, and he has been staying with a friend. Ray changes this because he may want to avoid the long description of Amal's departure and may also show the disaster of the life of Charu.

Ray's *Charulata* has little similarity with 'Nastanirh'. Ray has made a new story and cut a large portion of the original story. The film even leaves its location of the interior of Bhupati's luxurious mansion in Calcutta and travels to a seaside at Puri where the couple is holidaying: Bhupati needs to recover from the trauma of betrayal by Umapada. Instead of Tagore's heroine who is devastated by Amal's departure Ray's *Charulata* is perfectly composed; she is decked in all her finery and the famous lorgnette is back in her hands. As she watches a fishing boat tossing in the waves through it she casually but firmly suggests to a forlorn and listless Bhupati that they could begin a newspaper jointly with he taking care of the political news and she in charge of the literary and cultural column.

Ray rewrites the ending of the film. Tagore's ending is ambiguous. Bhupati is about to accept a job as a newspaper editor in far-off South India. The ending is described as:

"Charu suddenly seizes his hand and requests 'Take me with you.' For a moment he studies her face. Then his hand goes slack and drops hers. Bhupati moves away to the veranda and reflects, 'How long could I bear embracing someone whose heart was dead? I cannot face the rest of my life like that.' He goes to Charu in the bedroom and says, 'No, I cannot do that.' He sees the blood drain from her face. She clenches the edge of the bed. At once Bhupati urges, 'Come, Charu, come with me.' 'No,' she replies, 'Thak'" (Tagore 417).

In the film, Bhupati leaves the house in mental turmoil but eventually after nightfall and after much anguished reflection, he returns. He meets Charu on the threshold and with extreme hesitation, accedes to her gentle request to enter. *Charulata* simply holds out her hand and Bhupati hesitates to take it and just before their hands can touch the image freezes. The freeze frame shows a page of Bhupati's newspaper lying in the background, the newspaper that was once *Charulata*'s rival for Bhupati's attention and instrumental in bringing her close to Amal. The film finishes with a brief photograph album of still images: the hands about to touch, the individual shadowed faces of Charu and Bhupati, the face of their manservant bringing a glowing lamp, Charu and Bhupati together in mid-shot, hands poised to meet, finally a long shot down the veranda of these three

people with the title of Tagore’s story in ornate Bengali script superimposed on the screen – ‘Nastanirh’.

Incidentally, this ending is actually not in the original script. Ray has originally written that Bhupati would take Charulata’s hand and the camera would see them walk to their bedroom, hand in hand. While shooting, however, Ray changed his mind and struck upon the idea of a more open ending and the freeze frame because:

“Rabindranath’s ending was a kind of very abrupt, logical conclusion and I wanted a visual equivalent of ‘thak’ instead of the word, an image which would suggest that the two people are about to be reconciled and then are prevented from doing so. I could not end with a word because I have a feeling that the really crucial moments in a film should be wordless. It’s very difficult to express what was precisely meant to be achieved with that series of still shots but it was something that told me instinctively that it would be the right conclusion for the film. I cannot explain beyond that” (Ray 82).

Ray’s adaptation of Tagore’s short story explores the fact that plot is of very little significance in ‘Nastanirh’, its chief asset is a subtle and empathetic analysis on the psychology and interpersonal relationship of its three central characters in a particular social and political contexts. The rest of the long essay is devoted to a detailed discussion of the key changes in the film accompanied by a justification of the investigations Ray has done into the social and cultural contexts of the short story. Ray has made these changes in the social and cultural contexts of the short story in order to adjust his own contemporary social and cultural contexts. Thus it can be claimed that Satyajit Ray’s film *Charulata*, an adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore’s ‘Nastanirh’ makes the adaptability and the vitality of the original story visible as well as examines Ray’s inquiry into the social, political and cultural contexts of the short story.

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