“May You Be the Mother of A Hundred Sons!”: Barrenness vs. Motherhood in Bengali Cinema

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Borrowing from the recently published novel *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s reimagining of the world-famous epic *Mahabharata*, let me begin with a well-known story. “Gandhari’s marriage, although she’d given up so much for its sake, was – like Kunti’s – not a happy one. Dhritarashtra was a bitter man. He never got over the fact that he’d been passed over by the elders – just because he was blind – when they decided which of the brothers should be king… The goal of Dhritarashtra’s life was to have a son who could inherit the throne after him. But here a problem arose, for in spite of his assiduous attempts Gandhari didn’t conceive for many years. When she finally did, it was too late. Kunti was already pregnant with Yudhisthir. A year came. A year went. Yudhisthir was born. As the first male child of the next generation, the elders declared, the throne would be his. Dhritarashtra’s spies brought more bad news. Kunti was pregnant again. Now there were two obstacles between Dhritarashtra and his desire. Gandhari’s stomach grew large as a giant beehive, but her body refused to go into labor. Perhaps the frustrated king berated her, or perhaps the fact that he’d taken one of her waiting women as his mistress drove Gandhari to her act of desperation. She struck her stomach again and again until she bled, and bleeding gave birth to a huge, unformed ball of flesh. The palace was in an uproar… people running around ringing their hands, crying that this was the work of demons, the blind king sitting stunned on his throne while Gandhari lay in a faint. But luckily a holy man showed up. He cut the ball into a hundred and one pieces, and called for vats of butter, one for each piece. He sealed the pieces in the vats and cautioned that they shouldn’t be opened for a year. And that’s how Duryodhan and his brothers – and their sister Duhsala – were born (Divakaruni 76-77).
Written primarily with her western readers in mind, this well-known story reminds us that among the different forms of disability endowed upon women in Indian society, barrenness or the inability to deliver a male progeny to carry on the family genealogy is the most elemental. It is probably from this desire that the most common blessing given to women remains, instead of “Shatayu bhaba” (may you live for a hundred years), “Shataputrer janani hao” (May you be the mother of a hundred sons). This ubiquitous phenomenon is ingrained in the Indian psyche from times immemorial and therefore Indian literature and films are full of examples of situations where a family is considered dysfunctional with a barren wife until and unless the gender role of motherhood is fulfilled. Sometimes it is the woman herself who turns abnormal and psychic for not being able to conceive, but in many cases it is the psychological, and in some cases even physical torture, inflicted upon her by her husband, her immediate family and society at large.

This presentation examines Bengali cinema via-a-vis this phenomenon of barrenness versus motherhood expressed in different nuances. Commercial or mainstream popular cinema has been dealing with this issue in direct, subtle or nuanced ways. But it is interesting to note that even in the so-called ‘art’ films or serious parallel cinema, the theme recurs. Whether it is the films of Satyajit Ray, Purnendu Patrea or Rituparno Ghosh, the subject is worth an appraisal. Beginning with barrenness as the root cause in the break-up of husband-wife relationships in several films of Satyajit Ray namely Monihara, Devi, Charulata and Ghare-Baire, I will also examine Purnendu Patrea’s Streer Patra, Rituparno Ghosh’s Chokher Bali and Antarmahal [The Inner Chamber] where the director narrates a nineteenth century tale of a Bengali zamindar whose desperation in begetting a male heir leads to bizarre circumstances. But first with Satyajit Ray’s handling of the theme. We are all aware that Satyajit Ray is a rare auteur whose cinema has consistently explored different aspects of womanhood to generate a constellation of images, ideas, reflections, debates, histories and provocations. Situating the eye as the site of perception and reflection, Ray’s films emphasize a central role for cinema in articulating and structuring identity – most often, that of women in India. Among the different forms of portraiture of women in his films, the married and childless
wife reveals herself in different avatars. In most cases, these women become sort of loners, or outcasts, bereft of normal heterosexual behaviour. It is more than a coincidence in each case that the woman protagonist turns out to be childless. Also, most of these stories, based on nineteenth century Bengali households, emerged at a time when society and the Bengali intelligentsia were divided on the role of a woman as a mother, nurturer, or as someone who would venture outside the home by crossing the threshold – in other words, the modern woman. The dichotomous world of the andar vs. bahir (the inside and the outside) as well as the Prachina vs Nobina (the age-old versus the modern) debate regarding women also played significant roles in such evaluation.

Let us begin with Devi (The Goddess) which Ray made in 1959- 60. Set in the 1860’s its pivot is a religious belief with ancient roots: the notion that a woman can become an incarnation of a goddess. In this case she is a young and defenseless village bride, Doyamoyee, living in a rich orthodox zamindari household; and the goddess is Kali, the Mother, who is worshipped in shrines all over Bengal. Her father-in-law Kalikinkar Roy, an ageing pious zamindar who has lost his wife some years previously, is responsible for perceiving Doyamoyee’s divine status; he has a compelling vision of it one night, and falls at her feet. Her husband Umaprasad, Roy’s younger son, is away from home at the time, studying in Calcutta, absorbing English ideas and literature. A letter sent by his skeptical sister-in-law, who is married to Roy’s older son brings Umaprasad back to the village. The stage is set for a confrontation between father and younger son, between opposing philosophies and as usual, Doyamoyee becomes the scapegoat. Umaprasad, deeply repelled by his father’s irrationality, has the courage to tell him that he is mad. His father quotes Sanskrit verses from memory to prove that he is not; but much more telling is Doyamoyee’s apparent power to cure a sick child from the village. As word of this spreads, devotees gather from all over the area. Umaprasad remains unconvinced, but his impressionable young wife begins to believe in her incarnation. The interaction between husband and wife at night is one of the memorable scenes in the film. Separated by her ‘holiness’ into a secluded room adjacent to the puja room, Umaprasad has to meet his wife surreptitiously at night. This breaks the conjugal relationship further. A hidden power appears to prevent Doya from following her husband out of the village by night,
and he is too uncertain of himself to defy his father outright and compel her. By the time Umaprasad has made up his mind to do so, after consulting his professor in Calcutta, it is too late; the sister-in-law’s only child, on whom Doyamoyee used to lavish her affection, has died due to lack of medical treatment in her arms, placed there by their father-in-law in his blind faith – and Doyamoyee lost her mind. Doya’s love for this child and the child’s affection towards her is revealed in significant details in the film. At the end, rather than follow the original story’s merciless conclusion in which Doyammoyee hangs herself with a sari, Ray softened it to make her fate ‘a little more lyrical and mysterious.’ In the ultimate enigmatic shot of the film, as Umaprasad desperately calls ‘Doya, Doya’, she is seen darting away across the field next to their house and vanishing into the mist, decked out in her wealth of jewellery and gold ornaments. It is said that Ray replaced his original idea of having Doyamoyee die in the arms of her husband saying ‘no’ to her divinity; this shows an unfinished clay model of Kali waiting to be dressed and decorated for worship. [clip 1]

The childless and isolated wife of a rich businessman in Monihara (The Lost Jewels), one of the three films in the trilogy known as Teen Kanya (Three Daughters) made in 1961 as a tribute to Tagore in his birth centenary, is the second example of a woman who remains dysfunctional in family life. Loneliness makes Monimalika avaricious and cruel: traits that are unique to her among Ray’s women characters. She is utterly obsessed with jewels and ornaments which she accumulates by nagging her husband Phanibhusan, who imagines that they will help to buy her love. Though they have been married ten years, she is still cold to him and they have no children. Her consuming fear that one day he may ask for the jewellery back. When a fire destroys his business, she decides to test him and suggests the idea of selling the jewellery. But when he shows interest she withdraws in hysterical panic. Her husband leaves for Calcutta to raise money in other ways, leaving her behind in their vast silent palace. Manimalika acts swiftly. She summons her cousin Madhusudan and demands that he escort her to her parents’ house some distance away. Madhusudan eventually agrees but eyes the jewel box. They leave the palace together and nothing is heard of them again. She is not seen again in human form. When her husband returns from Calcutta with a new piece of jewellery for her, he is alarmed to
find his wife missing. At night strange things begin to happen: as Phanibhusan opens the new box of jewels there is a peal of maniac laughter but on opening the door he cannot see his wife anywhere. Later while lying in his bed he sees a black figure slowly shaking its head. Afraid now, he intuitively grasps what his spectral wife has really come for: the jewel box at his bedside. Hesitantly he reaches out to stop this – and a skeletal arm, still wearing its gold bangles, shoots forward to grab the box, accompanied by horrible laughter. Though Ray portrays mystery and horror in this film, he also brings to our attention the plight of several dissatisfied wives of erstwhile zamindar families, who having no straightforward conjugal lives, expended their energy in their obsession with jewels and ornaments.[clip 2] One is reminded of the ‘bahu’ in the film Saheb, Bibi aur Gulam (played brilliantly by Meena Kumari) whose unsuccessful entreaties to her husband to spend more time with her leads to alcoholism.

Speaking of loneliness, we cannot avoid Charulata. This film has been ad nauseum hailed for reversing the idea of a male operative gaze, and for assuming the woman’s look/perception/point of view. Adapted from Tagore’s short story ‘Nastanirh’ (The Broken Nest) the story is too well-known to be reiterated here. Wife of a somewhat earnest newspaper owner and editor, Bhupati, the lonely and childless Charu gradually becomes close to her insouciant brother in law, Amal. This gradually leads to amorousness and barely controlled passion in Charu which would have inevitably matured if Amal stayed back, and which is exactly why he doesn’t. The main reason for Bengali unwillingness to see the Charu-Amal relationship for what it is, is peculiar to Bengal. As Ray commented:

The relationship between a wife and her debar, her younger brother-in-law is always very affectionate. She is free to come out before him, not before other men. It always verges on a kind of intimacy which is exactly as shown in Charulata, where the younger brother is attracted to the sister-in-law but is afraid of going beyond a certain point. He realizes that the danger is there. So it creates a situation that is rather tense, and also pleasing for both the characters. ..there is always the possibility that a relationship of a rather deep nature might develop.” (quoted in Robinson 160).
After Amal leaves, the intensity of their relationship dawns on Bhupati but it is too late to mend the distance that has been created between him and his wife.

Like so much that Tagore did, “Nastanirh” (The Broken Nest) attracted adverse criticism from Bengalis at the time. The story gave the foundation of family life a shake, which many people resented. Ray had read their comments before setting to work on his adaptation; the general tenor was – why can’t Tagore write about a straightforward marriage instead of using extramarital relations? He found people still sensitive to the issue sixty years later, when he discussed with them what he had in mind. Also, Charu is embroiled in the conflicts surrounding the role of Bengali women in the late nineteenth century. Should she be a Prachina (Conservative Woman) concerned only with the home and having children, or a Nabina (Modern Woman) who, traditionalists fear, is more interested in reading novels and even getting employed outside the home? Though Charu tends towards the Nabina figure, an important part of her feels differently however; it is not so much the outside world she craves, but love. The husband does not give this to her until it is too late.

This brings us to the important conclusion of the story. Tagore ends it with a single word, Thak (Let it be). Bhupati is about to go to Mysore and Charu suddenly tells him, “Take me with you.” Her husband hesitates and so Charu says ‘Thak’. The last sequence of the film consists of a freeze and a series of still images, as if from a photo album. Bhupati has been out in his carriage being driven distractedly around Calcutta trying to come to terms with his colossal insensitivity to what was happening under his own roof. Charu is inside the house, facing the damage done to her marriage with a calm sharply contrasting with her storm of grief after Amal’s departure. At last, calling the servant to bring a lamp, she goes to the door of the house and opens it. Bhupati is standing on the other side. Gently she bids him enter, and after hesitating, he does so, reaching forward for her hand. It is on this gesture that Ray freezes the action, before cutting in succession to her half-lit face, his half-lit face, the servant holding the glowing lamp, a mid-shot of Charu and Bhupati and, as the very last image of the film, a long shot of them both, frozen in time at the far end of the verandah. A dissonant music rises as the word ‘Nastanirh’ (The Broken Nest)
appears on the screen. The nest is literally broken for ever. Ray justified his deviation from Tagore’s ending thus:

That 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 are about to be reconciled and then are prevented from doing so. I couldn’t 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 it would be the right conclusion for the film. I can’t explain beyond that. (Robinson 169)

Before discussing the plight of another childless wife, Bimala in *Ghare-Baire* (The Home and the World), it would be worthwhile to mention Purnendu Patrea’s recreation of another short story by Rabindranath Tagore called “Stree Patra” (The Wife’s Letter). Released in 1972, the film was a good depiction of a woman protagonist, Mrinal, another childless housewife who was way ahead of her time and naturally caused an uproar among conservative minded people when she consciously decided to walk out of her house and marriage and never come back again. Mrinal had showered her motherly affections on an orphan girl Bindu, who was given shelter in their household but when she could not prevent the societal pressure (which also included her husband) to get the girl married off to an insane man as old as her father, she construes her unique form of protest. The film ends with the incident of Mrinal going on a trip to Puri from where she writes the eponymous letter to her husband stating that she shall never return to his household.

Though the main background of another novel by Tagore is the *swadeshi* movement, *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World) is also the story of Bimala, another childless wife, who is goaded by her liberal husband Nikhilesh to cross the threshold from *antahpur* (represented by the term *ghar*) to the *bahir*, the outside. Without discussing Bimala’s relationship with Sandip, the firebrand revolutionary leader, here I just draw your attention to the way both Tagore in the novel and Satyajit Ray in the film version made in 1984, juxtapose the two women in the house, one Bimala herself and the other her sister-in-law, a childless young widow who craves for the companionship of
Nikhilesh. That both are somewhat dysfunctional members of the household is too overtly expressed to be dubbed as coincidence.

Coming to the acclaimed director Rituparno Ghosh, we find that right from the beginning of his career when he made *Unishe April* (1995), he made films revolving around women, so much so that he has often been labeled as “the woman’s director of Bangla (Bengali) cinema.” His explanation for his oeuvre was also simple – he just felt that he understood “the inner feelings of women, their passion, agony and suffering” (Mandal 18). Thus all his films up to *Titli* (2001) dealt with women-centric situations, either talking about the new woman, the lonely one, the rebel one or the persecuted one. Ever since he adapted Tagore’s *Chokher Bali* (*A Passion Play*, 2003) and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s short story “Protima” as *Antarmahal* (*The Inner Chamber*, 2005), Rituparno has been mired in controversy for making films with too much, and often unnecessary, focus on sexuality and what film critics like Laura Mulvey call “visual pleasure” or “the gaze.” Moving backwards in time and setting these two films in the nineteenth century, Rituparno became bolder in depicting relationships and sexual escapades of characters than he did in films set in contemporary times. Also, as Chakravarti and Ganguly rightfully state, the gender-sensitized director seems to have become more keen on cashing in on the global culture market’s penchant for ‘authentic’ India (read Bengal), which can be constructed by invoking the past as it exists in the popular imaginary (2007:243). Thus we have ample bare-bodied women in the *zenana*, young widows and matured first wives whose menstruating situations -- described by the director in graphic details in both the films under discussion -- pointing out to the viewers the latent sexual potentiality of suppressed womanhood and inability to conceive.

Talking of sexuality, let us first take the example of *Chokher Bali*, a film subtitled a “passion play.” Though the phrase encapsulates the complex web of desire into which the novel’s two male and two female protagonists are inextricably caught, the person singled out for exclusive attention is Binodini. Ghosh transforms Rabindranath Tagore’s avowedly psychological novel of triangular love into a period piece with his own version of the nation and its women. The deprivations, both sexual and material, that mark the
life of an unusually gifted, educated, strong-willed and passionate young widow who willfully transgressed the code of conduct proper for her, provides the director with “the convenient apparatus to showcase the apparently de glamourised sex appeal of Bollywood’s diva Aishwarya Rai cast in the role of Binodini” (Chakrvarti & Ganguly 2007:243). Anticipating opposition towards his film and creating a rationale for his departure from the original, Ghosh begins the film with a quote from Tagore in which the latter expresses regret about the ending of the novel: “Ever since Chokher Bali was published, I have always regretted the ending. I ought to be censured for it” (translation mine). After a great tumult of adulterous passion between the widowed Binodini and Mahendra that precipitates a crisis threatening the latter’s marriage, the novel concludes with a reconciliation of the married couple at the bedside of Rajlakshmi, Mahendra’s dying mother. Binodini forgives both the men and goes off to Benaras and leads an ascetic life. Ghosh is unwilling to accept this analysis. “Suddenly she becomes very clinical and antiseptic, devoid of all passion, because that is the right thing for a widow to do,” says Ghosh in an interview with AsiaSource.

Tagore started this serialized novel with the forbidden passion of a widow, more because of reasons of titillation; he had to draw people to read his novel because he was editing the magazine! It got a bit out of hand midway, and all the holy Brahmins, their hair went up in holy smoke [laughs] and they almost started lambasting Tagore, so he himself not being a Hindu decided not to fiddle too much with Hindu sentiments and restored her to the conformist, Hindu domesticity that society demanded at that time.

So in Ghosh’s Barthesian reworking of the novel, to borrow the idea from Chakravarti and Ganguly again, “there is no neat closure of the intense claustrophobic web of desires and jealousies set up between the protagonists. Instead, the ending is made much more complex, enigmatic and open in which the audience learns of Binodini’s decision, through her letter written to Ashalata, to search for her ‘desh’ instead of simply of going away to Kashi to live as a good Hindu widow” (2007:244). This ‘desh’ is not ‘country’ nor should be translated or read as country, says Ghosh. It should be read as a space, a space or domain for an independent woman that Binodini was. In another interview given to film critic Shoma A. Chatterjee in 2003, Rituparno commented on what inspired him to make a film on Chokher Bali:
It was the delicate interplay of relationships that touched me. The story offered a vast matrix of relationships, which I, as director, could play around with in a myriad different ways. Chokher Bali struck me as a very original text to begin with. It deals with unfaithfulness in the man-woman relationship within the institution of marriage. (Chatterjee 223-24).

What is interesting to note is that the film’s violation of historical and textual fidelity is closely linked to issues of sexuality. In the puja room, Mahendra comes with the jewel box and touches her in an endearing way and apart from asking him to take her to the River Ganges, Binodini states that she does not want to take ‘the middle path.’ She wants Mahendra to accept their relationship in public, which obviously he cannot do. Mahendra calls him his ‘pran bhomra’ (literally and metaphorically meaning the wasp that carries his life and soul) and when he kisses Binodini, she states, “My husband died of TB” and laughs at the shirking attitude of Mahendra, the would-be doctor. Other critics also note that although the novel does not allude to a consummation of the illicit relation between Mahendra and Binodini, the film flamboyantly displays the love bites on Binodini’s exposed neck and has several scenes of love-making, the most notable of which takes place inside a horse-drawn carriage where the passion of the lovers is offset by the sounds and sights of the rallies protesting against British domination. Later when Binodini sheds all her inhibitions, comes decked in gold ornaments and succumbs to Behari by asking him to marry her, she says, “You don’t have to love me… Take me.” Though her proposal is rejected, she tries all the sexual mores possible to attract Behari’s attention and wants to do away with the three female attributes she has, namely as a young woman, as a western-educated memsahib and as a childless widow.

Ghosh’s next film Antarmahal boldly touches upon various tales of oppression, of aged husbands raping wives half their age, society making fun of wives unable to bear children, priests taking advantage of helpless housewives and so on and made the director state: “For the first time I have done something which is not just relationships or not just interpersonal psychological transaction, but also has a firm social base to it and captures history of colonial India in several layers.” Set in the late nineteenth century, 1878 to be exact, Antarmahal (Visions of the Inner Chamber) is a definite period piece bringing into focus the patriarchal zamindari system of rural Bengal with landlords keeping their wives
hidden in the zenana. It is a brilliant depiction of the oppression women suffered at the hands of their ‘masters’ -- the zamindars, husbands and priests. Bhubaneswar Chowdhury is a wealthy and tyrannical zamindar who has two obsessions: the first is his desperate attempt for an heir which even his new young second wife Jashomati seems unable to deliver; and competing with his regional rivals to produce the most magnificent effigy for the annual Durga puja ceremony. This year he concocts a master plan – why not change the face of the goddess for the most powerful woman on earth – Queen Victoria. This would fetch him the enviable title of ‘Roy Bahadur.’ Meantime his two wives Mahamaya and Jashomati try to look out for one another especially as Bhubaneswar begins to sexually assault his younger wife each night. He even brings a Brahmin priest to chant holy shlokas pleading to the gods of procreation (10th episode from Kalidasa’s Raghuvarsha) while the intercourse goes on so that the brave exploits of mythological heroes would expedite the conception of a male heir. Traumatized and lonely, Jashomati is dangerously drawn to the young sculptor Braj Bushan who has been employed to create the new effigy of Durga. Despite the purdah system, Ghosh manages to create several situations in the film where the young Jashomati comes physically very close to Braj Bhushan. The contrast between love and sex, male oppression and tender ministration is brought into the frames with sensitivity. By the time the zamindar realizes that the face of the Goddess Durga has been modeled on his young wife and marches with his gun to shoot her, the woman has already committed suicide. The British painter who serves as the objective narrator of the story concludes the film with the following statement. “She died of an incurable malady. No one knows what happened to the young sculptor.” [clip 3]

As a self-proclaimed expert in portraying relationships, in this film also Ghosh excels in developing the subtle nuances between characters, especially the interplay and interdependence of the two oppressed women, who are ironically juxtaposed against patriarchal adoration for supernatural heroines. But Antarmahal created quite a furore for his blatant presentation of sex. Though some critics accused him of presenting pornography, Rituparno was quite nonchalant about the whole affair. In an interview given to Indrani Roy Mitra for rediff.com (November 22, 2005) he stated that he failed to
understand why Indians couldn’t accept sexuality as a part of life. He felt sad the accusation of creating pornography came from a country that adores the architectural excellence of Khajuraho and takes pride in the Kama Sutra. He said:

A film is but a mirror of life and so in Antarmahal. It spoke of the life and times as they were in the 19th century Bengal. The period witnessed the sexual exploitation and my job was to recreate it. Pornography is something that makes use of sex and sexuality to generate physical excitement. It’s a pity that people are equating Antarmahal with cheap exhibitionism. The intimate scenes were not meant to entertain. They were meant to stir the audience’s minds. The zamindar makes a point to have sex with his wife every night so she can bear him a child. Their sexual interaction is a dry, mechanical process bereft of love and emotion. The wife is used and abused every night by her mindless husband. Through the oft-repeated ‘intimate’ scenes, my intent was not to focus on the sex but on the way the woman in question was exploited by her husband. People in our country are used to sexual overtones in literature, but not in films. I wish they would get rid of such inhibitions.

This kind of self-declared mission of exposing patriarchal oppression therefore is supposed to lift the film from the accusations it has been facing since its release. Dubbed by some critics as ‘Rituparno’s porno,’ questions were raised whether the director could not have shown some of the intimate scenes a little less exposed and more suggestively as did Satyajit Ray from whom he borrowed many tropes, ideas, scenes in both Chokher Bali and Antarmahal. For instance, Jashomati, acted by Soha Ali Khan resembles the child-bride in Satyajit Ray’s Devi (The Goddess, 1960) portrayed by her mother Sharmila Tagore, but with a difference. Ray was too much of a puritan to project sex in anything but silhouette and could never imagine of going into the graphic scenes of sexual subjugation. Justifying the bold scenes Rituparno further states:

The crux of the matter is that people have become so used to seeing middle class ethos and life patterns in my films, that they just cannot accept Antarmahal which is a conscious deviation from the known path. They are more irked as the film appears to be laden with sexual overtones. Why can’t they understand that it is meant for adults, for whom sex is an indispensable part of life?

In the film, Mahamaya, the elder wife gets a screen fixed in her husband’s bedroom in order to shield the sexual act from the sloka-chanting Brahmin. This screen also acts as a
safeguard for enticing the man with her own body. Using the age-old trope of female seduction, Mahamaya tries to distract the man’s attention but inevitably leads herself to become a commodity for sexual enjoyment when the Brahmins convince her husband to ask her to satisfy five men of their kind. That she agrees to satisfy those Brahmins so that she can ultimately bear a child of her own (the system of *niyog* being a common device even mentioned in our ancient Indian epics) and that she becomes hysterical on the fateful night because she starts menstruating is deviating into other issues of the film. Though taking liberties with the original plot of the story, Ghosh’s good intention of portraying the plight of two barren wives is quite successful.

Rituparno’s recent film *Khela* (2008) also focuses on a husband-wife relationship on the verge of disintegration due to barrenness. The male protagonist of this story is a committed filmmaker whose only passion is to make a successful art film and thus has no time to devote to his wife. Like the neglected wives in several other earlier films, the wife in this film too wallows in self-pity and decides to break off the relationship. Several times in the story she overtly and covertly implies to her husband the need for a child but he remains firm in his ideology that the uncertainty of his income will not enable him to provide sustenance for the family. This is not a nineteenth century story but set in contemporary times. It seems that the director wants to reiterate that the Bengali (read Indian) mindset of ordinary middle class people now well into the twenty-first century has not undergone any changes at all.

To conclude, I must admit that in this selective survey of some Bengali films, I have tried to focus on the issue with which I began this presentation, namely, the depiction of motherhood and barrenness as two forces dictating the lives of married Indian women down the ages. Incidentally most of the examples depicted in my discussion come from stories set in the 19th century. This does not mean that society has changed much and the term *banja*, the Bengali label given to childless women and used in a derogatory sense, is used in contemporary times as well. The award-winning film, *Anuranan* (2006/7) made by debut filmmaker Anniruddha Roy Choudhury set partly in London and partly in contemporary Kolkata explores the complications and ultimately breakup in relationships
of two couples, both childless. This endorses the viewpoint that in the Indian psyche a woman remains dysfunctional until and unless she is able to produce offspring. When and how this mindset will change is a million dollar unanswered question.

References:

Filmography:

Devi [The Goddess] 1960
Produced & Directed by Satyajit Ray
Screenplay from the short story of the same title by Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay on a theme by Rabindranath Tagore.
Cast: Chhabi Biswas, Soumitra Chatterjee, Sharmila Tagore, Karuna Banerjee

Story: Rabindranath Tagore
Screenplay & Direction & Music: Satyajit Ray
Cast: Kanika Majumdar, Kumar Roy, Gobinda Chakravarti

Charulata [The Lonely Wife] 1964
Story: Rabindranath Tagore
Screenplay & Direction & Music: Satyajit Ray
Cast: Soumitra Chatterjee, Madhabi Mukherjee, Sailen Mukherjee

Director: Purnendu Patra
Story: Rabindranath Tagore
Cast: Madhabi Mukherjee, Nimu Bhowmik.

Ghare Baire [The Home and the World] 1984
Story: Rabindranath Tagore
Screenplay, Direction & Music: Satyajit Ray
Cast: Soumitra Chatterjee, Victor Banerjee, Swatilekha Chatterjee, Gopa Aich, Jennifer Kapoor

Story: Rabindranath Tagore
Direction and Screenplay: Rituparno Ghosh
Cinematography: Aveek Mukhopadhyaya
Music: Debajyoti Mishra.

Direction & Screenplay: Rituparno Ghosh
Cinematography: Abhik Mukherjee
Music: Debajyoti Mishra.
Anuranan 2007
Director: Anniruddha Ray Chaudhuri
Cast: Rahul Bose, Rituparna Sengupta, Raima Sen,

Khela [The Game] 2008
Story & Direction: Rituparno Ghosh
Cast: Prosenjit Chatterjee, Monisha Koirala, Raima Sen.

Works Cited:


Q & A Interview with Rituparno Ghosh. April 15, 2005.
www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/ghosh.cfm