TWO MASTERS ONE TEXT:
SATYAJIT RAY’S TRANSCREATION OF GHARE Baire

Somdatta Mandal
Department of English & Other Modern European Languages
Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, W.B.

Rabindranath Tagore's Ghare Baire (1916) written in the diary form of narrative is a significant yet rather complex work of fiction. Embedded in it is a historical moment of the swadeshi in Bengal around the years 1903 to 1908 – a period in Indian nationalism when the concerted demand for self-government and the boycott of British goods seemed for a while to rock the very foundations of imperial administration in India. This theme is dealt in detail by juxtaposing the character of the firebrand revolutionary, Sandip with Nikhilesh, the noble, misunderstood hero who personally believed that each individual has a freedom to choose his own way of serving the cause of social and political emancipation. But what is more significant is how Tagore portrays the invasion of this swadeshi political movement to 'home,' and ultimately brings in a threat to feminine virtue. By making Bimala leave the seclusion of the zenana for the first time to enter the public space of her husband's sitting room, Tagore toys with the possibility that essential female nature is a potent and destructive sexuality. But the highly troubled question that the novel seems to confront is not how Bimala can be liberated but whether she can be liberated without dismantling the fundamental structure of society. In short, Ghare Baire remains a significant novel because “it marks a moment in the historic consolidation of bourgeois cultural and political hegemony, perhaps the single-most significant cause of women's continued oppression in post-colonial India”(Mitra 243-64).

When such a complex story is made into a film by a world-class avant-garde filmmaker like Satyajit Ray, one is naturally interested to see how the symbolic meanings of the 'home' and the 'world' are analyzed. Though it is a well-known fact, it should be mentioned here that Ray had been nurturing the idea of filming the novel way back in 1946, much before Pather Panchali emerged and though the 1984 film production almost thirty-eight years later differed a great deal from the early Hollywoodian script, this film has the longest gestation period in Ray's ouevre. Satyajit had wished to begin his film career by adapting this novel and in this respect he and his friends had also progressed quite a lot. Obtaining the copyright of filming the novel from Visva
Bharati, it was decided that Satyajit would write the script and Harisadhan Dasgupta would direct the film. The veteran Bengali actor Radhamohan Bhattacharya was chosen to act as Nikhilesh, and though not finalized, it is said that Manju Dey had herself approached them for playing the role of Bimala. But the project got scrapped for various reasons, the primary one being Ray’s unwillingness to change the filmscript at the request of the producer. Having come into close contact with Rabindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose during his short but artistic education at Santiniketan, the reason for choosing this particular novel for making his first film was also somewhat historical. As already mentioned, Ray wrote the script in 1946 and decided to make the film in 1948. The two years are significant because between them came 1947 – the year of Indian independence and the partition of Bengal. That Bengal would be divided was gradually becoming clear right from the beginning of the forties decade and specially it had become necessary after the riots in August 1946. So after the actual partition, the historical impact on the lives of the Bengalis expedited the desire for making the film. This was because the historical background of the novel was the first partition of Bengal. Standing at the threshold of the second partition of the state our intellectuals and artists wanted to evaluate the significance of the earlier episode. Hence, if this film was made then, it is uncertain what shape it would have actually taken. After three and a half decades, the trajectory had changed and along with it changed its script and other ancillaries. Since Ray did not preserve the earlier script, even comparisons are no longer possible.

On different occasions, Satyajit Ray had confessed that he had been suffering the “pin-pricks” of his conscience for thirty-six years and so it can be well assumed that the story of Ghare Baire had been transcreated in his mind long before he began the film. Moreover his illness during the shooting of the film actually restricted the director to stick to more indoor shots and he had to rewrite the script keeping outdoor shots to a minimum. It is a well-accepted fact that certain differences between the filmic and the literary mediums are bound to occur. Except for the ending, the film version of Ghare Baire is very closely similar to Tagore's text, but we are puzzled when we read Ray's statement that he “did not use a single line of Tagore's dialogue in the film. The way people talk in the novel would not be acceptable to any audience” (Chitrabhaas 99, translation mine). This paper will examine some of these issues and try to show how Ray makes a constant and consistent effort to plumb the depths of the human mind and its interaction in different situations.
The controversy about the relationship between novel and film is perhaps more than a hundred years old beginning right from the days of cinematographic history. Though ideally the novel and the film should be regarded as independent entities, several critics have dealt with the question of narrativity and fidelity to the text. Geoffrey Wagner for example, divides film adaptation into three “modes”: the transposition, in which a novel is directly given on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference; the commentary, where an original story is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect; the analogy, (which) must represent a considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art. According to the French critic Jean Mitry, “a novel is a narrative that organizes itself into a world; a film is a world that organizes itself into a narrative” (Roberge 60). Thus Mitry argues that the adaptation of a novel to film rests on the absurd assumption that there exists a content which can be transferred – transformed – from one form of expression to another. But in art, the content, if the word must be used, does not exist apart from its form. A change of form, therefore, results in another content. In short, in adaptations, you do not express the same thing differently, you express a different thing. Marie Seton, in her biography of Ray specifically mentions, “Books are not primarily written to be filmed, if they were they would read like scenarios; if they were good scenarios, they would probably read badly as literature.”

One may therefore logically raise the question, what was Ray's own point of view? Though he had already handled several stories of Tagore before, the case with this introspective novel was slightly different. As mentioned earlier, the Bangla novel Ghare Baire, as well as its English translated version, The Home and the World (done by his nephew Surendrath Tagore under direct instructions and approval of the author), is written in the diary form, progressing through Bimala's narrative seven times, Nikhilesh's narrative seven times, and Sandip's four times. Due to these autobiographical narrations, there has been a lot of emphasis on the verbal language. From the very beginning, Ray distributes these eighteen points of view into ten scenes. Altering the plot substantially, he preserved the separate voices in four sections. By beginning at the end, so to speak, with Bimala’s ‘epitaph’ for Nikhilesh, Ray intensified the sense of predestination in the events that follow. From the outset we know that Nikhilesh and the woman he loves are doomed. In an interview published immediately after his film was released Ray stated his objective very clearly:
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; up to 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 (Chitrabhaas 6, translation mine).

We are all aware that the a-chronological narration of any story, i.e. moving backwards and forwards in time and space is much more easily done in the celluloid medium. The case for the film version of Ghare Baire is unfortunate in this respect. Though Tagore presents his story through multiple points of view, shuffling through the narratives of the three main characters at random, Ray's straightforward narration makes some critics feel that the film is structurally weak. Bidyut Sarkar endorses this viewpoint when he mentions that the film is divided into three separate watertight sections:

The first section deals exclusively with Bimala. The political involvement of Sandip and Nikhilesh covers the second section. The third section primarily focuses on the Hindu/Muslim riot and clash (89-90).

According to Sarkar, these three sections do not seem well-coordinated, or in other words, one section does not automatically lead to the other. Politics is absent in Bimala's character, so we cannot smoothly slide over to the politics of Sandip and Nikhilesh. Again, ideological differences of political opinion between these two male protagonists do not lead to the Hindu-Muslim riots. The failure of the film also lies in the fact that this riot does not move us – no explanation is offered as to how the rich/poor divide is changed to religious Hindu/Muslim riot. Moreover, this section does not have any relationship with Bimala, the lead woman of the story.

Taking a lead from this criticism by Mr. Sarkar, it would not be out of place here to take a quick look at the reception of the film both internationally and also in Bengal in particular. In his revised and updated biography of Ray, Andrew Robinson state that the Bengali ambience is so much seeped in the film that it becomes “his most demanding work for a non-Bengali viewer,” with the possible exception of Devi (The Goddess):

Like The Chess Players, it shows the interaction of India with the West in microcosm, but unlike that film, Ray provided no key to unlock its background. Westerners have therefore tended to stumble badly over both the film and its original, the novel by
The New York Times, reviewing Ray’s film noted that it dramatized the political difference between Tagore and Gandhi in the persons of Nikhil and Sandip, while the New York Review of Books, felt that these two characters were respectively “the radical and the humanist, the two faces of modern Bengali culture.” In a review of the film published in Cahiere du cinema, Allen Phillipan focuses on the two separate and parallel issues running in the film, namely, love and politics. He states:

If we see it in this light, we see two stories in the film; one of love (how an aristocratic gentleman surrenders his wife to a childhood friend) and a socio-political story (the tumultuous Bengal at the beginning of the nationalist movement and the origin of the British policy of ‘divide and rule’) (Cahiere 370, 1985).

A British critic of the film, John Coleman (who was usually very sympathetic to Ray’s films) wrote that Nikhil seems to expose his wife to “some weird fidelity-test”; while a critic for a women’s magazine in London remarked that the film “tells us all about relationships and love. And tells us virtually nothing.” The reviewer of the Sunday Telegraph observed: “The film catches the conservative element in some revolutionaries and the revolutionary element in some conservatives as well as any film I know.” Of all the critics in the West, Pauline Kael came nearest to the truth with her comment that the film has “a large theme…presented in a formal style that owes almost nothing to the conventions of American or western European films” (Robinson 262). According to Andrew Robinson himself:

Ray, by his own admission, saw the novel more as a love story than as a struggle between opposed values; the dramatic irony inherent in Nikhil’s decision to free his wife ‘from her moorings,’ as his disapproving widowed sister-in-law puts it, is what principally drew him to it – and this maybe responsible for the weakness in the film as well as in the novel. Some critics imagined that Ray could not bring himself to adapt Tagore’s novel ruthlessly enough, but there is not much evidence of that (269).

Also, Robinson is uncomfortable with Ray’s conception of Nikhil. “I felt very close to him when I read the book,” said Ray. But the flawless, totally admirable Nikhil in the film is somewhat different from the more complex Nikhil in the text, who comes gradually to feel that he may have committed an error in insisting on his wife’s liberation against her will. “Tagore did not set Nikhil upon quite so high a pedestal as Ray had done. It is particularly odd that Ray should have chosen to do this here, with his lifelong critical immersion in Tagore and his works” (270). But the real awkwardness in the film lies in Ray’s (and Tagore’s) conception of the characters, which the performances cannot quite overcome, and which is responsible for the common criticism that
the film is too “talkative.”

Coming to his home turf, most of the Bengali critics reiterated in different terms that the film was a failure. Purnendu Patrea, the artist, illustrator and director who adapted Tagore’s “Strir Patra” into film, talks about the misuse of details in the novel. Quoting in details the last scene in the novel and the last scene in the film, he says that instead of interpretation, Ray made this into a mere illustration. (540). Nityapriyo Ghosh justifies a director’s choice of changes from the original text, but he expected Ray to make only the changes necessary for the transformation of a printed language into the celluloid medium. According to him, the biggest drawback of the film is in its structure. He also strongly opposes the misinformation that would be supplied to viewers who watch the film with subtitles. For them it would read like the failure of a women’s liberation movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. Or to see it even more crudely, it would be the story of adultery in a Bengali zamindar’s house and this would hurt the viewer to see the poor adaptation of Tagore’s complicated psychological novel. Ghosh’s sarcasm, if literally translated from Bangla reads as follows:

The topic of this film is therefore how Bimala turns into a widow. Satyajit Ray had made a film called Charulata after changing the original title ‘Nastanir.’ It remains a mystery why he did not change the name of Ghare Baire and call his film ‘Widowed Bimala.” (545, translation mine)

According to the actor Dhritiman Chattopadhyay (who acted in several films of Ray), we have to judge the director’s point of view towards the material that he gets. Since most critics have decided not to label it as a major film, Chattopadhyay sees Ghare Baire in another way and raises questions about the definition of a major film. Before its release many people had great expectations but later most viewers and critics were disappointed. That can always happen, he feels, but what interests him is that the amount of discussion that the film generated after its release is unprecedented in the history of films in our country. All this discussion is, according to him, therefore a big positive aspect of the film. He is sure that no one would have attempted to do this film in our country except Ray and that too show such courage in making it. He believes that most film critics in our country come from literary backgrounds, hence they do not possess much technical expertise of filmmaking. Most reviewers therefore place more emphasis on the ‘content’ than on ‘technical execution.’ Chattopadhyay also applauds the way the storyline or its ‘structural complexity’ has been handled in the film. After detailed discussion on how Ray uses ‘framing’ and ‘camera movement’ to make his film more ‘visually cinematic,’ he concludes by
reiterating that *Ghare Baire* is an important film, a major film and in spite of its drawbacks is a ‘milestone’ in our cinematic history. In an interview given to Nermeen Shaikh on April 15, 2005, the noted film director Rituparno Ghosh compares the black-and-white film *Charulata* with the colour of *Ghare-Baire*, and states that “as a piece of cinema, or as an aesthetic piece, it *[Ghare Baire]* is a complete disaster.”

For Satyajit Ray, there was no special problem in filming a Tagore classic. Certain elements in the story attracted him to it in the first place, but he would not hesitate to reconstruct some others to meet the requirements of cinema. Thus, he would as a rule, preserve the major characters and incidents and the spirit of the literary work but the final screen version was an act of combining the original and his script. This made Ray an iconoclast in the eyes of those who felt that he had not maintained the purity of literature. In the Amal Bhattacharyya Memorial Lecture that Ray delivered in Calcutta, he had specifically mentioned that when he made the film, he did not find 'details' of many things within the novel – nothing of the house, the furniture, the dress worn by the characters. He stated that the 'major' novel with which he was working now (for the second time), namely Tagore’s *Ghare Baire*, lacked visual and materialistic details. Thus in a sense, he justified the liberties he took as a screenwriter and director. Though critics and the viewers in general accept the changes when a work of art is transferred from one medium to another, from one set of codes to another, one of the frequently raised questions regarding *Ghare Baire* is that whereas Tagore left the novel rather 'open-ended' (with the communal riots breaking out, Sandip runs away to safety and Nikhilesh rides off into the night to face the hostile mob), Ray makes his story rather 'well-closed'. In the film, Bimala is seen looking out of the window and she sees the people carrying in Nikhilesh's dead body in a procession and immediately the image of the anxious and repentant housewife Bimala’s image fades out into that of a widowed Bimala in white and fills up the screen.[II 1.04]

According to Andrew Robinson, Ray “made concrete all the elements of the palace and the characters which Tagore, in his preoccupation with their thoughts, hardly bothers to describe.” Yet, it is interesting to note that though Ray had complained about the dearth of 'details' in the original story, whatever 'details' were actually present in Tagore's novel have not been used by the filmmaker at all. Surprising, but true. For example, the way the characters wrap themselves in shawls in the film gives one the mistaken impression that the entire chronology of
events takes place in the winter, whereas the actual time of the novel spreads out through an entire year, with references of summer (use of the hand fan), monsoon (“Bhadrer borsha charidike tolmol korche”) and autumn (recitations from Jaidev's Geetagovinda invoking the season/ “amar shei shobar bahrer bahnga khanchatir bhitor theke jokhon shei hemanter madhyaner khola alor modhye beriye elum…”). Three other sections of the film in which Ray radically differs from the original text should also be mentioned. The first occurs in the scene where Bimala sits still holding Miss Gilby's hands prior to her farewell and both remain silent.[I:17.00] The second departure occurs when we see Bimala taking out Sandip's photograph from the stand and keeps it with her very carefully, with affection. In the third instance, Bimala sees Nikhil’s dead body being carried in almost as a procession and the picture of the widowed Bimala fills the screen.

Ray's use of symbolism also offers the viewer some of his own interpretations of Tagore's novel. Among them, special mention should be made of the constant play of light and shade, the juxtaposing of black and white images, the use of mirror/reflection, and of course, the very significant use of the flame icon. In several instances Tagore mentions the image of the flame. Bimala’s voice over at the beginning of the film: “Aami aaguner moddhey diye beriye esechi…shei aagun nibedon kore dilaam taar paye” (I have come out of the flames…I am dedicating that fire to his feet); [I:beginning shots] Sandip refers to Bimala as a “living flame,” and “visible fire” (Home and the World 56) and Ray literally transcreates Bimala emerging out of the flames. (Incidentally, Ray had himself designed the logo of the film and the five Bengali syllables of the original title “Ghare Baire” has a long and elaborate flame drawn over the fourth syllable). The changes between the literary language and the celluloid one are of course best revealed through the use of mirrors. In several scenes of the film, we see the three main characters reflected through the mirror and we can take these mirror shots to symbolize the delusion which all of them are suffering from.

Critics opine that though Tagore's novel is located at a critical point in the history of the freedom movement, the cinematic counterpoint does not reveal the Swadeshi movement in its entirety, namely, how it went from a campaign for constructive self-development at the beginning to militant activism in its final phase. Incidentally we are also aware that like Nikhilesh in the novel (who calls the Swadeshi movement a sort of ‘nesha’ or intoxication),
Tagore’s public retreat from political activism and his apparent espousal of a quietist accommodation with authority made him quite unpopular so much so that in analyzing the impact of social and economic boycott in civil society in the post-partition years, the historian Ranajit Guha speaks of the head wound suffered by Nikhilesh in his attempt to save the lives of Muslim villagers as a “metaphor for the author’s own battered reputation of 1908” (Guha 109). Ray was himself aware that Nikhilesh in the novel is literally Tagore’s spokesman and he points out:

Tagore’s essays on the terrorist movement and some of the other things that he wrote are actually put in the mouth of Nikhil – exact sentences even. He represents Tagore’s attitude to the terrorist movement and its ultimate futility. It’s a very valid point, very rational. It was really a middle-class movement with no connection with the lower strata of society at all. So ultimately it just fizzled out, and in other cases it turned into very violent riots between Hindus and Muslims. It was a failure and Tagore could see it was going to be a failure, although the political leaders didn’t see it his way. (quoted in Robinson 267)

The correspondence and the articles that Tagore wrote on “nationalism” during this period bear testimony to the close affinity between his point of view and that of Nikhilesh. If there are differences in defining what is a 'political' film, it is not surprising that there should be disagreement on what its contents should be. Ray’s films have political significance, dealing as they do with human relationships and situations of conflict in society, but they do not indulge in any flag waving. In this Ray follows the path of restraint Rabindranath Tagore expressed through Nikhilesh when he tells Sandip, “I accept the truth of passion only when I recognize the truth of restraint. By pressing what we want to see right into our eyes we only injure them, we do not see.” This Tagore credo definitely had a psychological impact upon Satyajit Ray who made it a definite “period” story unlike the general nineteenth-century background of Charulata and left it at that.

Here we can digress for a moment and make some comparisons of Ghare Baire with Charulata. Both films are based on Tagore, both are set inside an orthodox zamindar’s mansion, and both deal with a triangle in which a childless woman emerges from traditional constraints into unfulfilled sadness. Yet the two films differ fundamentally in tone, key, and texture. Charulata is at root a simple tale of unrequited love. The Home and the World is high tragedy: its ambit is of much greater complexity, shorn of easy romance, its characters forced to confront the wider effects of their deficiencies. The vision is deeper, maturer and darker. “There is a kind of tension in the film; you know everything is going to fall apart,” said Ray. “That probably
prevents people from enjoying it in the way they enjoy *Charulata*, which perhaps has more lyricism in it”(Robinson, 272).

Coming to the differences in the art of characterization, it is a well-known fact that in a novel, things take shape progressively, but in the cinema they are given all at once. When she appears on the screen, Bimala is fully there. In the novel, she is evoked, revealed or described. In other words, she progressively takes shape in our minds. A critic, Sarmita Som, divided Tagore’s female characters into four categories -- namely the suffering, the assertive, the ambivalent and the supportive. Bimala in this respect is Ray's best depiction of the “ambivalent woman”( Som, 3-5). Torn between Nikhilesh, her cool, rational, and politically moderate husband, and Sandip, the firebrand revolutionary, Bimala shapes her way to the outer world but she is at the same time a victim of circumstances that bring disaster to the family. Together with her husband, she is forced to confront the wider effects of her own deficiencies and ambivalence. Though Ray's Bimala is full of tension and complexity that leads to the tragic denouement, she does not seem to be a strong-headed independent woman that Tagore depicted her to be. She often seems to be a puppet, an aristocratic showpiece. Here one may recall the full one minute that Ray devotes showing Nikhil leading his wife out of the threshold of the ‘andarmahal’/’home.’ The voice-over states:

“Baroyee Agrahayan, terosho choddo. Sukhsayarer chotorani sabeki niyom bhenge andarmahal theke baire berolen.”
[“12th of Agrahayan, 1314. The Chota rani of Sukhsayar broke the traditional rules of the andarmahal and came outside.”][ I;26.07]

Coming to the two male protagonists, the special ‘firmness’ in Sandip's character is missing in the film. He seems more like the lovelorn hero begging at Bimala's feet. (cf. “I ask for whatever I want, and I do not always wait to ask before I take it” (50). At one point in the film we hear him singing the song, “Bujhte nari nari ki chaay, chaay go” (I do not understand what a woman wants…) [II 33.35] Nikhilesh's character too seems somewhat lifeless, a bit stifled. In spite of having a lot of restraint in him, Tagore expresses Nikhilesh's magnanimity through the support he lends to Panchu (the representative of down-to-earth peasant folk of Bengal). Since Ray omitted the character of Panchu in the film, a lot of Nikhilesh's ideology (as well as of his creator's) seems to be lost. He is just depicted as a mediocre zamindar leading quite an aristocratic lifestyle and wanting to advocate the equality of the sexes (cf. “I had hoped that
when Bimala found herself free in the outer world, she would be rescued from her infatuation for tyranny” (43-44). It is true that the film, like the novel, presents characters involved in a sequence of events, the relations of which are not universal but contingent. These events cause significations that cannot be reduced to the events themselves, and their duration is not meant just to spread out and serialize situations but to reveal individuals, their psychological mobility, their ambiguity. Thus Ray's deviations can be justified as long as the characters “confront the tragic result of their limitations” (Robinson, 1984) through infatuation and in a complicated situation.

_Ghare Baire_ is one of Tagore's most controversial novels. Even if we do not agree with Lukacs' s mistaken assessment, or delve into the fact why Tagore wrote to Ramananda Chattopadhyay that he wrote this novel not only in the Indian perspective but also as a tirade against Japanese and American nationalism, the fact remains that Tagore had come to realize that “cinema continues to be sycophant to literature because no creator has yet liberated it from this servitude by the strength of his own genius “ (Sarkar 56). Satyajit Ray attempted to do just that. Since Ray's ill-health and two heart attacks confined him within the studio sets, and since his son Sandip finished parts of the film (though the editing was done by the senior Ray), technical lapses on the part of the director can certainly be overlooked. I would like to conclude by quoting from the critic Joy Gould Boyum where she talks about the various problems of adaptation and which ideally explains the Ray predicament:

In assessing an adaptation, we are never really comparing book with film, but an interpretation with an interpretation -- the novel that we ourselves have recreated in our imaginations, out of which we have constructed our own individualized 'movie', and the novel on which the filmmaker has worked a parallel transformation. For just as we are readers, so implicitly is the filmmaker offering us, through his work, his perceptions, his visions, his particular insight into his source. An adaptation is always, whatever else it may be, an interpretation (61-62).

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**Works Cited:**


Lukacs, Georg. 'Tagore's Gandhi Novel: Review of Rabindranath Tagore : The Home and the World.” Reviews and Articles from Die rote Fahne. Trans. Peter Palmer. London: Merlin Press, 1983: 8-11. (“Tagore himself is, as imaginative writer and as thinker, a wholly insignificant figure. His creative powers are non-existent: his characters pale stereotypes; his stories threadbare and uninteresting and his sensibility is meagre, insubstantial.... The hypothesis is that India is an oppressed, enslaved country, yet Mr. Tagore shows no interest in this question.”)


