

Adaptations

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Some Journeys from Words to Visuals

Edited by

Shri Krishan Rai and Anugamini Rai

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-7466-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7466-3

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The concept for this book came about in June 2013 when we organized the international conference on “Literature to Cinema: Adaptation, Appropriation, Adulteration” at National Institute of Technology (NIT) Durgapur, West Bengal, India. The overwhelming response to our invites, followed by the enthusiastic participation of over two hundred delegates, encouraged us to take the idea forward. Our anonymous peer reviewers had to undergo a rigorous and harsh selection process for this book to pick only eleven research papers from around the two hundred presented at the conference.

We gratefully acknowledge all the authors without whose contributions this volume would not have materialized. Our heartfelt gratitude is also due to the peer reviewers from whose comments we benefited much. I would like to acknowledge the support of my institute, NIT Durgapur, India, who made the conference happen. I also want to extend my sincere appreciation to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for bringing out this volume.

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INTRODUCTION

The adaptation of literary classics to films has surged as one of the most appealing topics in the twenty-first century in interdisciplinary studies. Adaptation is not new; it has been in discussion since the days of silent movies. In the perspective of Indian cinema, the first full-length Indian feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, was based on a legend mentioned in Indian holy scriptures. Since then, several literary texts have been filmed, and this process has become a popular phenomenon. The recent film by Vishal Bhardwaj, *Haider*, an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, has raised the expectations of lovers of this symbiotic relationship between literature and film. Based on Bhardwaj's track record, with films such as *Maqbool*, *Omkara* and *7 Khoon Maaf*, such heightened expectations are quite genuine. But at the same time, this ambience has stimulated a fidelity discourse on the filming of canonical texts. The last few decades have witnessed the opening of several fully-fledged film courses and departments across the world to discuss issues of fidelity and the aesthetics of the amalgamation of literature and cinema. This collection of essays is developed with the intention to discuss such issues in this burgeoning field of studies.

The book is an invitation for readers to embark on some fantastic journeys of words to visuals. It is divided into two parts. The first broadly focuses on the cinematic adaptations based on the texts of Indian literature while the second emphasises the adaptations of literary works from other countries.

The opening chapter, "Adapting, Interpreting and Transcreating Rabindranath Tagore's Works on Screen" by Somdatta Mandal, is focused on Rabindranath Tagore, India's first Nobel laureate of literature. It presents Tagore's own ideas of cinema and his involvement in *Notir Puja* (1932), the only film he directed and in which he made a cameo appearance. The paper also focuses on the evolution of the huge number of films adapted from Tagore's works, beginning from six silent productions to talkies made as late as 2012.

The next chapter examines Peter Brook's *The Mahabharata* as a case study along with Ray's and Tagore's narrative chain that the author, Sonjoy Dutta-Roy, uses as an example in the early part of the paper. Brook's continuation of the *Mahabharata* chain brings in interesting

issues of purism and hybridization in this vast process and reveals, along with the Ray Tagore dialectic, the advantages and disadvantages of medium crossovers in this contemporary narrative chain.

Daniel L. Selden's "'Our Films, Their Films'—a Postcolonial Critique of the Cinematic Apparatus" may be considered as a tribute to Satyajit Ray on the completion of a hundred years of Indian cinema. In this paper, the author attempts to understand and highlight the cinematic ability of Satyajit Ray. He also critiques the ideology inherent in the basic cinematic apparatus and the diegetic codes solidified by D. W. Griffith.

The fourth chapter, "Literature to Cinema—Two Novels, Two Adaptations, Two Versions," is by Krishna Mohan Pandey. In this paper, Pandey discusses the centrality of Khushwant Singh's masterpiece *Train to Pakistan* in partition literature and Pamela Rooks's adaptation of the same. The paper takes into its orbit another classic partition novel by Bapsi Sidhwa, *Ice Candy Man*, and its cinematic rendering by Deepa Mehta.

Goutam Buddha Sural attempts a fidelity check of Vishal Bhardwaj's film *7 Khoon Maaf*, an adaptation of Ruskin Bond's novella *Susanna's Seven Husbands*. Sural's direct interaction with the author gives genuineness to the observations.

The next two chapters discuss R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* and its cinematic adaptation in detail. Gyanabati Khuraijam and Yumnam Oken Singh's "R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*—the Film Adaptation and Re-Creation of a New Text" highlights the inter-textual nature of adaptation and recreation of a new text in a different medium. On the other hand, Sonali Das's fidelity test finds the spirit felt in Narayan's text lacking in Vijay Anand's *Guide*. In this search of the faithfulness of cinematic adaptations to their source texts, Das also covers Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas*.

The second part of the book opens with Obododimma Oha's "Cinematic and Software Adaptations and Appropriations of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*." This paper analyses the adaptation of the narrative of dangerous adventure in *Treasure Island* for both the screen and a digital mathematical game of fractions called *The Treasure of Fraction Island*. Both adaptations, it is argued, are interesting attempts to realize the meanings of the narrative of adventure across disciplines of knowledge and generate positive values.

Nazua Idris, in "*Pride and Prejudice* from Page to Vlog—Adaptations and Questions of In/Fidelity," makes a comparative analysis of the major adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* with a special emphasis on *Bride and Prejudice*, *Lost in Austen* and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Apart from the

fidelity check, Idris talks about the cultural and ideological patterns behind the in/fidelity in such adaptations.

“Striving for Grace—A Study of the Novel and Film Adaptation of J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*” by Bashabi Gogoi explores Coetzee’s novel and its cinematic adaptation. Gogoi tries to focus on the presentations of trauma, strained relationships and complicated racial complexities of the new South Africa in two different media (literature and film).

The last chapter of the book, “Adaptation and Demystification—Treatment of the *Romeo and Juliet* theme in Deepa Mehta’s *Water*” by Sharmistha Chatterjee (Sriwastav), critically examines the extent to which the basic Shakespearean text is adulterated to suit cultural and cinematic purposes. In her paper, she tries to prove that *Water* is a deconstructed version of *Romeo and Juliet* and not a reconstructed one like other Bollywood films. It also searches for the techniques adopted to do so and so bring forth the aim of the filmmaker.

Though the authors have journeyed a long way to find the intricacies of the symbiotic relationship of literature and film, there is still much to explore in this area of literature, film and comparative study. The views and ideas given in the book are original and the authors have full authority and accountability for anything mentioned in their respective chapters. The observations and findings of the papers are neither final nor ultimate, but as a whole create an ambience for contemplating such an interesting topic.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

ADAPTING, INTERPRETING
AND TRANSCREATING
RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S
WORKS ON SCREEN

SOMDATTA MANDAL

A minor work has no claim to act as more than a springboard when adapted for another medium, but a major work deserves, that any approach is made with respect to its essence. The scenario must express the quintessence of the book. It must emerge as clearly as possible, an honour to the original, to our process of transportation, and to cinematic art.¹

One of the most interesting things about the early twentieth century is that the arts of literature, painting and cinema went through the modernist crisis at about the same time, despite the fact that cinema was a fledgling art and the others were well into their maturity. Whether they did so in response to each other (influence), or independently, in response to the state of Western culture (parallel development), is extremely difficult to prove. Apart from literature, Rabindranath Tagore, who excelled in so many art forms like music and painting, also embraced the new medium of cinema. Though not consistent enough to engage his interest in cinema in a regular way, his interaction with this emerging art form is an interesting subject for analysis which includes both direct and indirect connections. In order to assess Tagore's direct relationship with cinema one has to go through his own writings, letters and information published in different newspapers and journals, and the reminiscences of various people who interviewed him or were close to him. The indirect connection with cinema is of course restricted to the many films that have been produced based on his works.

¹ Montague, 115–116.

Divided into two parts, this paper will first focus on Tagore's own ideas of cinema and his involvement in *Notir Puja* (1932), the only film he directed and in which he made a cameo appearance. It will then focus on the evolution of the huge number of films adapted from Tagore's works, beginning from the six silent productions to the talkies made as late as 2012. Interestingly, apart from the stalwarts of the New Theatre productions, almost all significant directors in Bengal, whatever their agenda, adapted Tagore's works as a kind of rite of passage. What was the logic behind this? While some chose a Tagore story for adaptation because of its strong story line, and others for the depiction of unusually strong and unconventional women characters, there were also some directors who ideologically agreed with Tagore's worldview. It is needless to add that by the time we come to the spate of film adaptations that coincided with the writer's 150th anniversary in 2011, Tagore the writer had also transcended to become a character in his own story, as Rituparno Ghosh's film *Noukadubi* illustrates.

Tagore's first interaction with cinema took place in 1917 and shows that he was already conversant with the medium. Nitin Basu reminisces how in 1917 Prasanta Mahalanobis and Rabindranath Tagore took him to Bolpur, requesting him to film a dance performance accompanied by Tagore's songs in Uttarayan one evening. He took pictures, processed them in Mahalanobis's laboratory at Presidency College, developed the print at home, processed it again in the laboratory and projected it for Gurudev. He liked this 17-minute film so much that he watched it again and again. Unfortunately, the film is now lost and if available it would have been the first film in which Rabindranath had also performed a role. After this, in 1920 there was an attempt by the Madan Company to film Tagore's play *Biswarjan*, but the project was aborted due to lack of female artists.

In one of his trips to England in 1920–21, Tagore happened to watch the euphoria of the English people when the famous Hollywood stars Mary Pickford and her husband Douglas Fairbanks came there and gave a critical interview in the *Daily News* on it. Incidentally, in Calcutta at that time people had already started cinematic ventures based on his stories. In 1923, the silent film *Manbhanjan*, based on Tagore's story of the same name, was made by Naresh Chandra Mitra. From Madhu Basu's autobiography, it is also known that he had interacted with Tagore in making a film on the same short story, and after the Madan Company signed the bond with Visva-Bharati, Tagore even revised Basu's film

script, added some dialogue and advised *Giribala* as a name for it.² All these events make it clear that Tagore was already aware of the immense possibilities of the new medium of the cinema and by 1929 his relationship with it became quite strong. That same year, in a letter to Murari Bhaduri (brother of theatre legend Sisir Kumar Bhaduri) written on November 26, 1929, he stated that the flow of images makes up cinema. This flow, he wrote, should be used so that it can communicate without the help of words. “The cinema (*chhayachitra*, in his words) is still enslaved to literature,”³ and he attributed this “dependence” to the general ignorance of the masses to which cinema caters. He added that a time will come when cinema will stop depending on literature for inspiration and stand independent of the written word, on its own, having evolved its own language.⁴

Interestingly for a man much ahead of his time, this observation stands in sharp contrast to the films produced on Tagore’s works, both during his lifetime and afterwards. One thing that has to be kept in mind here is that when Tagore wrote this letter to Bhaduri, cinema was still a silent medium and hence his emphasis on the “flow of images.” But later with the advent of the “talkies,” his idea about the possibilities of cinema underwent a change. He realized that sound, music and dialogue were equally important. In the detailed letter to Bhaduri, and from his other comments, we can summarize that Tagore emphasized five issues:

- a) Independence of the art forms
- b) Cinema (*Chhayachitra*) is dependent on literature
- c) Cinema requires financial investment
- d) Cinema needs its own language
- e) Both the creator and the public audience are to be blamed for suitable cinema not being made.

Towards the end of 1929, Dhiren Ganguly (aka DG) decided to film Tagore’s play *Tapati* and the poet wrote the screenplay for it. Interestingly, it was also decided that he will act in the role of Bikram. This news was published in *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*:

² This film was later released in 1929 and it was Tagore who suggested that the title *Manbhanjan* be changed to *Giribala*. We know of Tagore’s involvement in writing the film script from Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay’s *Rabindrajiboni*.

³ Rabindranath Tagore’s letter to Murari Bhaduri in 1929 cited in Arun Kumar Roy, *Rabindranath O Chalachitra*.

⁴ Chatterji.

“Dr. Tagore as Movie Star”

Family Also To Take Part

To Be Shot In Santiniketan Calcutta, December 4

Dr. Rabindranath Tagore appears for the first time in the film version of the poet's latest drama entitled *Tapati* which will be produced by the British Dominion Films Company under the direction of Mr. Dhiren Gangopadhyay. Many members of Tagore's family and his students are to take part in the film, which will be shot at Santiniketan. The scenario has been written by Dr. Tagore himself and it is hoped the picture will be eight reels and will be finished before the year.⁵

A similar news item entitled “Rabindranath Tagore as Film Star” was published on December 22, 1929 in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, but it is unfortunate that out of the eight reels only three were shot and Tagore went abroad in 1930. Though it is said that he had approved the print of those three reels, they simply cannot be traced. As mentioned earlier, apart from getting permission to use songs and editing screenplays written by others, Tagore's most sustained cinematic endeavours were during the filming of *Notir Puja*. Based on his famous poem “Pujarini,” it was adapted into a stage play entitled *Notir Puja* by Tagore himself in 1926, who directed the first production in Santiniketan in 1927. He even took *Notir Puja* on a cross-country tour, and eventually directed the only film in his career, released in 1932 under the banner of the venerable New Theaters Limited. Shot over four days and breaking the conventional rules of cinema, *Notir Puja* was filmed like a stage play. It was released at Chitra Talkies on March 14, 1932 and featured music by Dinendranath Tagore and cinematography by Nitin Bose. That the film was a recorded version of his stage play and Tagore made a cameo appearance in it are historically significant because the film industry in India was still in its infancy, compared to the fact that Hollywood had advanced in cinematographic productions both thematically and technically. For instance, 1932 saw Howard Hawks' *Scarface*, W.S. Van Dyke's *Tarzan the Ape Man*, Greta Garbo and John Barrymore starring in the *Grand Hotel* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Number 17*. It is surprising that for someone who was aware of the great possibilities that the film medium could afford (shown by his acquaintance with Sergei Eisenstein's films, for instance), the production of *Notir Puja* was a poor representation of cinema as an art form. It was just shooting of a stage production from a fixed camera. The poet called it “Bioscope,” and took a few young girls to watch it.

⁵ *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, December, 1929.

According to Pulin Behari Sen, in 1936 Tagore joined together his works *Rajarshi*, the play *Biswarjan* and the story “Dalia” to write a new play suitable for the cinema. Divided into four sections, this incomplete script, though not fleshed out properly, proves his growing interest in the new medium. By 1937, he realized that whether he liked it or not, the influence of the cinema on the common person was growing at an alarming rate. On July 30, 1938, the movie *Chokher Bali* directed by Satu Sen was released in Calcutta.⁶ On August 4, 1938, Tagore wrote from Santiniketan:

While staying in Calcutta I had the opportunity to see the “cinema-natya” *Chokher Bali* in the Jorasanko house. I was especially satisfied with the praiseworthy acting skills. The way the actors were able to express the tremendous inner conflict of the hero-heroines leading to an exciting dénouement speaks of real credit on their part. This drama is difficult because it deals primarily with the trappings of the psychology of happiness; that is why I hope that those who are connoisseurs will find pleasure in viewing the performance. (Translation mine)⁷

Here, I would like to draw attention to the change in the way Tagore talks about cinema. Earlier in 1929 he had called it “*chhayachitra*,” but now he terms it “cinema-natya.” We might assume that the transition from the visual and moving images of the silent cinema to the powerful dramatic performances in the talkies made him rephrase it. From this chronological analysis of Tagore and the cinema, it becomes clear that it was an interesting love-hate relationship. The poet was far-sighted enough to realize that this new art form would eclipse many others, but he could not accept its popularity wholeheartedly. From this, let us move to the second section of this article which focuses on the cinematic adaptations of Tagore’s works.

Adaptations

The controversy about the relationship between fiction and film is more than a hundred years old, starting from the first days of cinematographic history. In discussing the aesthetics of film adaptation, one must be clear about the difference between translating a literary piece of work from print

⁶ This version of *Chokher Bali* directed by Satu Sen released at the movie hall Shree had Suprava Mukherjee, Indira Roy, Rajlakshmi, Chhabi Biswas, and Manoranjan Bhattacharya in the lead roles.

⁷ qtd in Roy, 40.

to the audiovisual media. There can be several reasons for such adaptations, ranging from the director's love for the story, reinterpreting the word text into film text, the director's belief that a period in history can be beautifully recreated in the visual medium, the director's desire to film the story because the literature reflects their own ideological stand on a particular subject/issue, and the film medium can convey this ideology to their audience. Whatever the reason for the cinematic adaptation (and sometimes multiple adaptations of the same text), the subject is intriguing and befits critical discussion. The filmization of a literary work depends on two aspects by the director, namely (a) their approach towards the literary source, and (b) the reasons they have for making the film.

All problems linked to the two mediums of cinema and literature mainly spring from the common belief that cinema ought to be a celluloid translation of the literary source it is based on, and that no permutations and combinations through the director's personal creative inputs should be used. There is a difference between *translating* a literary piece of work of two-dimensional media of the printed word to the three-dimensional media of cinema and *adapting* a literary work for the cinema. Literature also functions as an *inspiration* for a film, in which case the filmmaker does not feel the need to stay rigid about the literary source. Chidananda Dasgupta insists that a film adapted from literature contains something of filmmaker's mind. According to Dasgupta some aspects of plot and characters are bound to be changed when a literary work is converted into a film. 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 print. A film based on, adapted from and interpreted from Tagore's oeuvre offers scope for argument, discussion, analysis, debate and questions among the audience, critics and scholars. A brief survey of films adapted from Tagore's works shows that six silent films, from *Manbhanjan* (1923) to *Noukadubi* (1932), and forty-six talkies in Bengali have been produced to date. This excludes documentaries and feature-films that are in production and are to be released soon. Beginning with *Notir Puja* (1932), directed by Tagore himself, the long list ends with two films released in 2012. It is interesting to note that of the nine Hindi productions, six were made by Bengali directors.

Interestingly, apart from the stalwarts of the New Theatre productions, almost all significant directors in Bengal, whatever their agendas, adapted Tagore's works as a kind of rite of passage. Though a comprehensive list of all adaptations does not fall in the purview of this paper, I would like to mention a few major directors and the different ways they have adapted

Tagore's stories for the screen. Satyajit Ray made three films, *Teen Kanya* (1961), *Charulata* (1964) and *Ghare Baire* (*Home and the World*, 1984), based on Tagore's work. 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 construct others to meet the requirements of the cinema. For instance, in justifying the changes he made at the end of *Postmaster*, Ray wrote in "Film Eye," *Journal of Ruia College Film Society*:

... That was my interpretation as a twentieth century artist working in 1960. The purist objects to these changes. Well, I made them because I am also an artist with my own feelings. I was using Tagore's rendering of a story as a basis and this was my interpretation of it.⁸

Again, most debates on *Charulata* are around Ray's fidelity to the Tagore original, since Tagore and his works remained too sacrosanct to be subjected to a filmmaker's interpretations. Ray personally responded to attacks on his alleged distortion of the Tagore original *Nashtanir* through his article "Charulata Prasange" in the collection *Bishay Chalachitra*.⁹ In another article, he explains:

... I know I have made a story by Tagore into a film. It is an interpretation, a transcreation, not a translation. Without Tagore there would be no *Charulata*. After all, he set me off; he was the reason for it. There is a lot of the original in the film a certain state of mind which the author describes beautifully with words ... you can't do that in films. You have to use a different method. Tagore is a great poet, a great writer. He uses wonderful language to describe loneliness and all the small things that go on in the mind. All the time, you have to find something for *Charulata* to do to establish her state of mind. That is the challenge of the cinema.¹⁰

Coming to the adaptation of *Ghare Baire*, it is a well-known fact that Ray had been nurturing the idea of filming it from as far back as 1946, long before *Pather Panchali* emerged, and though the 1984 film production almost 38 years later differed a great deal from the early Hollywood script, this film has the longest gestation period in Ray's

⁸ qtd in Roy, 69.

⁹ Ray, *Bishay Chalachitra*. They were addressed in the form of letters directed at Ashok Rudra, who attacked Ray for the diversions he made from the original in *Charulata*. According to Dhruva Gupta, Ray's final article was "a wonderful piece of literary criticism of the Tagore original in the then-distinguished Bengali magazine *Parichay* in 1964".

¹⁰ qtd in Roy, 68.

oeuvre. He confessed that he had suffered 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. Except for the ending, the film version of *Ghare Baire* is close to Tagore's text, which makes Ray's statement that he “did not use a single line of Tagore's dialogue in the film” as “the way people talk in the novel would not be acceptable to any audience” puzzling.

So much for Ray. Tapan Sinha, who made four very successful adaptations of Tagore's stories—*Kabuliwala* (1957), *Khsudita Pashan* (The Hungry Stones, 1960), *Atithi* (1965) and *Kadambini* (not released publically). In *Khsudita Pashan*, he used dreams and fantasy to heighten the intrigue of the romance not present in Tagore's story. In other films, he used Tagore's songs generously and to good effect. In *Daughters of this Century* (2001), Sinha chose Tagore's *Living or Dead* (1904) and stated: “Many people had told me that it is very difficult to transfer a Tagore story into film. But it is not true. If you understand Tagore well and internalize his statements, then the task becomes simpler. But before that one has to know Rabindranath well.” Purnendu Patrea, who made *Streer Patra* (1972) and *Malancha* (1979), reminiscences that:

A waft of fresh air still emerges when I remember the difficult days of writing the film script of *Streer Patra*. It was the wind of creation or the pleasure of creation. I had to search for answers to thousands of questions, such as what the names of the other characters apart from Mrinal and Bindu would be, and how I could depict the historical period of the story.¹¹

Here, one must mention the role Tagore played in the films of Ritwik Ghatak. We all know that Ghatak conveyed both utopian and dystopian visions of “homeland” in his films, especially for people affected by the Partition of India. Though he did not borrow the stories from Tagore, the way in which he used Tagore's songs in both *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha* needs to be mentioned here. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the claustrophobic interior and the suffocation of Nita come out through the famous song “Je raate mor duarguli bhanglo jhore” [“I didn't realize that you had come to my room, the night when my door broke down in the raging storm”], and appear to be a metaphor for her approaching death. In *Subarnarekha*, Sita resides in a *bustee* on the outskirts of Kolkata immediately following Partition. Her growth as a woman is told in the film through the Tagore song “Aaj dhaner khete roudro-chhaya lukochuri khela re bhai” [“The sun and shade play hide and seek over the paddy field

¹¹ qtd in Mandal, “Cinematic Adaptations of Rabindranath”.

today”]. This song personifies Sita and follows her life’s trajectory. Thus, not only does Ghatak aptly juxtapose the innocence and openness of childhood with the degradation of contemporary life through Tagore’s song, a synthesis in the dialectical sense takes place with Bengal Marxism and bourgeois liberation. In an interview given just before his death in 1976, Ghatak eulogized the bard in this manner:

I cannot speak without Tagore. That man has culled all my feelings from long before my birth. He has understood what I am and he has put in all the words. I read him and I find that all has been said and I have nothing new to say.¹²

Even Mrinal Sen, the diehard leftist director who critiqued Tagore and his landed gentry’s background, made a film in 1970 called *Ichchapuran* produced by the Children’s Film Society. Based on a story written by Tagore in 1895, the fantasy and pure humour in the story probably attracted Sen to direct it. Though a Hindi production, when Kumar Sahani made *Char Adhyay* in 1997 he stated that he was inspired to make the film because he was particularly attracted to the ideology expressed in the novel.

Rituparno Ghosh’s tryst with Tagore began with *Chokher Bali* (2003) and *Noukadubi* (2011). Apart from facing a lot of criticism for casting the glamorized Bollywood diva Aishwarya Rai in the role of the young widow Binodini, Ghosh justified his directorial liberty especially with the ending of the story. In his adaptation of *Chokher Bali*, Ghosh attempts a negotiation with the “woman question” that occupies a central place in the discourses of nationalism. At the end of the novel, we find a penitent and reformed Binodini sobered and educated by experience graciously forgiving Mahendra. She asks forgiveness in turn before leaving for Kashi, the haven of Hindu widows. That this ending is contrived becomes clear from Tagore’s own dissatisfaction with it when he stated, “Ever since *Chokher Bali* was published, I have always regretted the ending. I ought to be censured for it.”¹³ Two months before he died, he wrote, “I need to be seriously criticized for it, I deserve this criticism. I should be punished for it.”¹⁴ For Rituparno Ghosh, this became a good opportunity to invest Binodini with agency resulting in transforming her rather abruptly and unaccountably into a feminist whose quest for autonomy merges with her

¹² Robinson, 47.

¹³ The film *Chokher Bali* starts with these words of Tagore, also mentioned *Chithipatra* Vol.XVI.

¹⁴ qtd. in Mandal, “Cinematic Adaptations of Rabindranath.”

search for *desh*, or a homeland. In an interview, Ghosh justifies his reason for deviating from the novel:

Today when you read the novel, you can make out that this *cannot* be the ending. A lot of people wanted Binodini to get married to Behari. I think that would have been a solution 30 years ago when people were propagating widow remarriage ... But in today's time, I think a woman can live on her own completely. She does not require a male surname, or title, or an appendage of any kind to help her lead her life ... In the letter she writes when she leaves, Binodini mentions her own *desh*, which is not "country," it should not be translated or read as a country; it should be read as a space, a space or domain ... And that is what Binodini speaks of at the end.¹⁵

Before talking about how *Noukadubi*, a tale of four cross-wired lovers, gets a contemporary makeover in Ghosh's production, it has to be mentioned that this story happens to be the most filmed adaptation of any Tagore work.¹⁶ Also, as the narrative makes clear, *Noukadubi* is the most cinema-friendly story by Rabindranath Tagore. It has elements of mainstream Indian cinema filled with dramatic coincidences, love triangles, an accident and even a villain. It is not surprising therefore that film directors have gone back to it over and over. Since the novel is not considered among the best of Tagore's works, the question of its popularity naturally arises. It is a rather progressive Bollywood style story from *Galpaguccha* (1912) and maybe because it had risen eyebrows during Tagore's lifetime for its freewheeling slant, it inspired Ghosh to adapt it. Almost Shakespearean in its premise and plotting, Tagore's *Noukadubi* explores mistaken identities leading to misunderstandings and an exchange of wives. But while the Bard would use such devices for a romance or comedy, Tagore creates a tragedy out of the mayhem. The concept of a boat wreck, bringing together a groom and a bride from two different sets of newlyweds, may sound preposterous today, but Tagore

¹⁵ Ghosh, 2005.

¹⁶ The list begins with the 1932 silent film version produced by the Madan Company and directed by Naresh Chandra Mitra, followed by Nitin Basu's double production for Bombay Talkies in 1947 in both Bengali and Hindi versions, the latter titled *Milan* and starring Dilip Kumar in the lead role. In 1960, Ramanand Sagar directed *Ghunghat* starring Bina Rai. In Bengal, director Ajoy Kar remade the film in 1979, followed by the latest version by Rituparno Ghosh in 2011, which Subhas Ghai also dubbed into Hindi as *Kashmakash*. Since the novel is not considered among the best of Tagore's works, the question of its popularity naturally arises.

used the event as an excuse to check relationships brought about by chance against those by choice and compulsion. He also uses this romantic love story to indict the institution of arranged marriage where the bride and groom sometimes do not even see each other's faces, and also critiques the misguided belief in horoscopes to match the ideal pair for marriage. When Ghosh was asked why he chose to adapt *Noukadubi*, he said:

Noukadubi isn't regarded as one of Tagore's best works. While reading *Noukadubi*, there could be moments when one wouldn't know if it was penned by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay or Rabindranath Tagore. Yet, I felt that *Noukadubi* would give to Bengali cinema, a film with a strong narrative. In recent times, it has become a fad to think that breaking the narrative is the only way of making good cinema in Bengal. While breaking the narrative could be a style of filmmaking, that can't be the only method. There has to be space for both styles. One need not usurp the space of the other.¹⁷

Thus, we can assume that in spite of contrived plot situations, for which Tagore is himself apologetic in the preface of the novel, the strong narrative element is a plus point of this story and becomes the director's reason for choosing it for the screen. The poet's loss thus becomes the director's gain. Also interesting is the fact that in the film, Tagore himself becomes a character—he is the idol that the young Hemnalini worships day and night; his picture adorns the dresser and a song (interestingly a Rabindrasangeet, “*Khelaghar bandhte legechi ...*”) recurs like a refrain. Filmmaker Suman Mukhopadhyay was inspired to adapt the novel *Chaturanga* into a film in 2009 because he felt that “the socio-cultural context is that of a nation under colonial rule that is trying to find its own voice. That search is still on even in post-colonial India. Sachish is the epitome of that search.”¹⁸ When asked by the interviewer about how he resolved this issue when making the film and how much liberty he felt free to take, Mukhopadhyay replied:

Tagore is always a difficult phenomenon to explore in the Bengal milieu. People are oversensitive about him. Firstly, all Bengalis think that they understand Tagore. And they have their pre-set images of the characters. And that creates lots of trouble for a contemporary artist who wishes to re-explore Tagore. If you notice how Shakespeare is reinvented in the West—it is a revolution. But Tagore has been out of copyright for a few years. It is difficult for Bengalis to accept any new intervention regarding Tagore.

¹⁷ Dasgupta, Priyanka.

¹⁸ Mukhopadhyay.

Consequently, *Chaturanga*, the film, is both hated and loved, about 50/50, I would say. It is Tagore's genius that he unified and integrated the social dilemmas that a nation was facing through the novel. I don't agree with those who say that *Chaturanga* is a novel of ideas. It is a very living text and the work of a genius and a visionary.

... I have taken liberties as much as I needed to take for the film. It is a film and film has its own language. One cannot go back to the literary text and blame the filmmaker for his detours and interventions.¹⁹

Close on the heels of Tagore's 150th birth anniversary in 2011, four comparatively young Bengali films directors ventured into making films based on Tagore's works. These are *Musalmanir Galpo* (2010) directed by Pranab Chaudhuri, *Laboratory* (2010) by Raja Sen, *Elar Char Adhyay* (2012) by Bappaditya Bandopadhyay and *Charuulata 2011*(2012) by Agnidev Chatterjee. Each of these four films is made with a certain agenda in the director's mind. For instance, *Musalmanir Galpo*, reportedly the last short story Rabindranath Tagore wrote a month-and-a-half before he passed away, has provided fodder for a couple of telefilms but without much success in terms of ratings. Unlike most Tagore creations, it is very cinema-friendly, message-oriented and carries a strong woman-centric statement. As a period piece, it talks about Hindu-Muslim relationships and seemed to the director to be a very good vehicle for promoting the idea of national integration in a secular country like India, a subject also very popular with many other popular commercial movies. The story is about a village girl, Kamala, who's married off to a zamindar twice her age. Dacoits attack the groom's party as it is winding its way through a jungle and Kamala's husband runs for his life, leaving his bride behind. The timely arrival of Khansaheb, a Muslim zamindar, saves Kamala but, having been sheltered by a Muslim household, Kamala becomes an outcast from her own family. With no one to lament her fate, Kamala learns sword fighting and falls in love with Khansaheb's son Karim. When her stepsister meets with a similar fate after her wedding, Kamala takes on the gang of dacoits. The slow pace and length, coupled with too many song sequences, makes *Musalmanir Galpo* a failure in the end. Despite wonderfully mellifluous songs one is often confused about whether the film is a musical, a period film, a Tagore film or a feminist statement. Though well-intentioned, it loses its way in the plethora of multiple perspectives that the director fails to control.

In the twilight years of his life, Tagore created the true modern woman—in fact the Indian version of the New Woman—in Sohini in the

¹⁹ Ibid.

short story “Laboratory” by uniting contradictory forces. Sohini is independently minded, believes in women’s empowerment and is not averse to sexual plurality by virtue of her sexual freedom, and yet can stake her life for saving her husband’s laboratory at any cost, even if it means sacrificing the happiness of her daughter. She is convinced that she does not need to abide by the moral norms imposed by society. Thus, by uniting idealism and individualism, Sohini becomes Tagore’s ideal woman. Like all cinematic adaptations, in the film version of *Laboratory* the director Raja Sen often deviates from the original characterization, but it is interesting to note that in this case he focusses visually on the uniqueness of the portrayed character as a non-traditional woman through certain visual tropes. Thus, it is understandable that he found it even more convenient to cast Raveena Tandon in this lead role as her broken Bengali suits the role of the Punjabi woman perfectly, though it remains doubtful whether Sen could deliver the idea of Tagore as a feminist in the manner that Mrinal was depicted in *Streer Patra*.

The next film *Elar Char Adhyay*, based on the Tagore novel *Char Adhyay*, captures the ideals of the Bengal Renaissance of the 1930s and 40s. Bappaditya Bandopadhyay adheres strictly to Tagore’s story and lives up to the challenge of bringing across a poetic, lyrical and romantic interpretation of a political novel. He includes Tagore’s multi-layered satire through the British-attired Indranath who drives expensive cars and smokes foreign cigars. Atin tells Ela about how the group killed an old village woman by exploiting the trust of a colleague who belonged to the same village, counted the loot while the woman lay dead and enjoyed a lavish feast with the proceeds, all in the name of “revolution.” The film ends with Ela lying dead amidst the flames. Bappaditya uses the flashback to open with Ela’s death and Indranath’s voiceover, and ends with the same scene. Filmmaker Goutam Ghose tells us why he liked the film, despite its drawbacks:

Tagore’s *Char Adhyay* is a very complex novel and the dialogue sometimes gets slightly discursive, so it’s not so easy to interpret in cinema. But he (Bappaditya Bandopadhyay) did it very intelligently. He didn’t want to tell a complex story in a linear form, rather he has put Ela in different situations so that’s why, though the film begins from the end (in the text), you don’t feel uncomfortable. It is not pronounced, it’s quite cinematic. It’s like a rondo in a music piece where you come back to the tonic.

I don’t know if people would be able to understand the dialogue now. Bengali language—*er charcha toh komey gachhey*. But I am sure there is an audience. When I made *Moner Manush*, a lot of people had told me that

the audience wouldn't understand the philosophical dialogue, but that didn't happen. People understood and they connected if they wanted to.²⁰

The last but not worst travesty of a freewheeling adaptation, of course, remains Agnidev Chatterjee's *Charuulata 2011*. From time immemorial, poets and authors have written classics on women's loneliness and identity crises. Tagore's *Nastanirh* was one of these and was immortalized with Satyajit Ray's celluloid classic *Charulata*. So, when a film named *Charuulata 2011* was released, also based on Tagore's story, it was not unnatural for expectations to grow. Here, the director loosely followed the main storyline, merging it with his own. Today's Charu is Chaiti, a young, beautiful and intellectual wife of a very wealthy newspaper editor, Bikramjit. With Bikram being preoccupied with his editorial responsibilities, Chaiti keeps herself busy with expensive saris, filing nails, watching TV and, despite being a highly educated modern woman, doing nothing on her own. From the beginning, the director has played with the timeline of the film and so the story builds in a non-linear way. Chaiti, depressed with a miscarriage and the lack of physical intimacy with her husband, befriends Amal on the internet. To Amal, she becomes *Charuulata 2011*. Her lonely heart finally finds the right company. But the story goes on to show how guilt pangs over her intimacy with Amal make Chaiti sever all her ties with him, but still she can't resist meeting him when he finally comes to Kolkata from London. From the moment Chaiti realizes that Amal is her husband's cousin Sanju, who's going to stay at their place, the film focuses on Chaiti's guilt versus her wish for Sanju. Without the presence of the sublime mental connection of love between them, the movie thus becomes a story of a rich, lonely wife's adulterous affair with her husband's brother, and love becomes synonymous with sexual desire. Remakes of classical stories always bring in certain problems and this film is no exception. For most viewers it just seems to be a vehicle for promoting the Bengali actress Rituparna Sengupta.

After citing so many examples, the moot point remains that to date each director has found their own individual reasons for filming a Tagore story. To conclude, it can be unanimously accepted that as long as Tagore's works are adapted to the screen, critics will go on hoping that the sanctity of the literary text is destroyed. Andrey Tarkovsky's declaration that "the time has come for literature to be separated, once and for all, from cinema"²¹ can find theoretical acceptance; Ingmar Bergman's declaration

²⁰ Ghose, Gautam.

²¹ Tarkovsky, 15.

that “film has nothing to do with literature”²² may find diehard cinema fans supporting his point of view, but as long as the film industry relies on literature to constantly supply raw materials, adaptation, with its varied problems, will continue to worry critics, readers and viewers alike. And with our “man for all seasons” to go on supplying stories, more new cinematic adaptations of Tagore’s works will keep his legacy alive.

²² Humboldt, 352.