



SATYAJIT RAY THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

Charulata

(The Lonely Wife)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

Two hands, a man's and a woman's, reach tentatively out to each other. But just before they meet, the frame freezes. Reconciliation? Maybe not just yet...

Charulata (1964) is the subtlest and most delicate of Satyajit Ray's chamber dramas, and his own favourite among his films. It's adapted from the novella *Nastanirh* by the titan of modern Bengali literature, Rabindranath Tagore – at whose 'world university' of Santiniketan Ray studied – and is set, like so many of Ray's movies, in his native Calcutta. We're in the early 1880s, and the intellectual ferment of the Bengali Renaissance is at its height. Among the educated middle classes there's talk of self-determination for India within the British Empire – perhaps even of complete independence. Such ideas are often aired in the liberal English-language weekly of which Bhupati Dutta (Sailen Mukherjee) is owner and editor. A kindly man, but distracted by his all-absorbing political interests, he largely leaves his wife, the graceful and intelligent Charulata (Madhabi Mukherjee), to her own resources.

In a long, near-wordless sequence early in the film we see Charu, trapped in the stuffy, brocaded cage of her house, trying to distract herself. She leafs through a book, discards it, selects another – then, hearing noises outside in the street, finds her opera glasses and fits birdlike from window to window watching the passers-by. When Bhupati wanders past, too engrossed in a book to notice her, she turns her glasses on him too – just another strange specimen from the intriguing, unattainable outside world.

Becoming vaguely aware of Charu's discontent, Bhupati invites her brother Umapada and his wife Mandakini to stay. Umapada offers his services as manager of the journal's finances; but Mandakini, a featherheaded chatterbox, is poor company for her sister-in-law. Then Bhupati's young cousin Amal (Soumitra Chatterjee) arrives for a visit. Lively, enthusiastic, an aspiring writer, he establishes an immediate rapport with Charu that on both sides drifts insensibly towards love.

'Calm Without, Fire Within', the title of Ray's essay on Japanese cinema, could equally well (as Bengali critic Chidananda Das Gupta noted) apply to *Charulata*. The emotional turbulence that underlies the film is conveyed in hints and gestures, in a sidelong glance or a snatch of song, often betraying feelings only half-recognised by the person experiencing them. In a key scene set in the sunlit garden, Amal lies prone on a mat seeking inspiration, while Charu swings herself high above him, singing, rapt in the ecstasy of her newfound intellectual and erotic stimulation. Ray, as Robin Wood observed, 'is one of the cinema's great masters of interrelatedness'.

To a Western audience, all three members of the triangle might seem impossibly naive. This would be a cultural misapprehension. In Bengali society, as Ray pointed out in an article in *Sight & Sound*, a playfully flirtatious relationship between a wife and her *debar* (her husband's younger brother or cousin) is accepted. Charu and Amal have simply slipped, half-unknowingly,

across an ill-defined social border. While Bhupati hosts a musical evening to celebrate the election of a Liberal government at Westminster (Gladstone's Liberals, he believes, will be more favourably disposed to their cause), Umapada, who has been systematically defrauding his trusting brother-in-law, absconds with all the journal's funds. Amal, conscious that he too has been contemplating a betrayal, hastily departs. And Bhupati, inadvertently witnessing Charu's irrepressible outburst of grief, realises what's been happening.

In the film's final scene Bhupati, whom we last saw sitting weeping in a horse-drawn cab, returns in the evening to the house. Charu, who knows he overheard her reaction to Amal's farewell letter, is waiting for him, dreading his response. Hearing his steps, she goes to the door and opens it. The two gaze at each other for a long moment before Charu says quietly 'Come in.' She reaches out her hand; Bhupati hesitates, then reaches out also – and the screen freezes on a shot of the two hands, close yet not joined. Ray pulls back in a series of freeze-frames – the couple, their eyes locked together, the elderly servant bringing in the lamp – until all three figures are frozen in longshot at the end of the veranda as Ray's *tanpura* score rises in a plangent crescendo. On the screen appears the title of Tagore's story: *Nastanirh* (*The Broken Nest*). But it is irretrievably broken? Ray, subtle and unprescriptive as ever, leaves that for us to decide.

Philip Kemp, *Sight & Sound*, March 2013

A contemporary review

Many Anglo-Saxons tend to become defensive when confronted with the general French disdain for the films of Satyajit Ray. Withdrawing behind murmurs of 'humanism,' we concede that our taste is perhaps old-fashioned. And yet, it is astonishing that none of the Mac-Mahonists or further-out *Cahiers* writers have yet discovered Ray – on their own terms. After all, just as much as Losey or Walsh, Ray's technique of filmmaking is that basic classical style which relies on the straightforward filming of performances. Is not his a *cinéma du regard*, too? Does not his camera penetrate the soul of his characters just as much as, say, Preminger's? Does he not, like Hawks, place his camera 'at the height of a man's eyes'?

Based on a Tagore novel, *Charulata* is set in the past: the year is 1880 and the setting is the upper-class Bengali milieu nourished by English liberal ideas, but profoundly marked by the old traditions. Shot through with litanies to Macaulay, Gladstone, and Shakespeare, spattered with English words, *Charulata* concerns a girl married to an English-language newspaper editor/publisher. Her husband neglects her for politics; when his sensitive, more literary-minded cousin Amal arrives, Charulata turns to him for understanding.

Charulata is distinguished by a degree of technical invention that one hasn't encountered before in Ray's films. There are still the typical and treasurable scenes that he does so well. A leaf-shadowed garden in the heat of the afternoon; from beyond the walls comes a vague murmur of life outside; the girl in the swing, the man lying beside her on the grass, her singing punctuated at rhythmical intervals by the creaking of the taut rope: the enchanted garden, Eden. And, in fact, the snake is not far off, for Charulata is beginning to fall despairingly in love with Amal. But there are other, more unusual sequences: we are introduced to Charulata wandering listlessly around the house, until suddenly, galvanised by a tiny hope of excitement,

she tracks down a passer-by with field-glasses. And with great fluidity and skill the camera tracks her moving from window to window, from shutter to shutter.

All the same, it is not for his technique that one admires Ray so much: no enumeration of gems of *mise en scène* would convey the richness of characterisation and that breathless grace and radiance he manages to draw from his actors (Madhabi Mukherjee as Charulata and Soumitra Chatterjee as Amal: both superb). So one is left gasping inarticulately: beauty, tenderness, lyricism.

Richard Roud, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1965

CHARULATA (THE LONELY WIFE)

Director: Satyajit Ray
Production Company: R.D. Bansal Productions
Producer: R.D. Bansal
Assistant Director: Amiya Sanyal
Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
From the novella Nاستانيرh by: Rabindranath Tagore
Director of Photography: Subrata Mitra
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta
Music: Satyajit Ray
Playback Singer: Kishore Kumar
Sound: Nripen Paul, Atul Chatterjee, Sujit Sarkar

Cast

Soumitra Chatterjee (*Amal*)
Madhabi Mukherjee (*Charu*)
Sailen Mukherjee (*Bhupati Dutt*)
Syamal Ghosal (*Umapada*)
Gitali Roy (*Mandakini*)
Bholanath Koyal (*Braja*)
Suku Mukherjee (*Nisikanta*)
Dilip Bose (*Sasanka*)
Subrata Sen Sharma (*Motilal*)
Joydeb (*Nilatpal Dey*)
Bankim Ghosh (*Jagannath*)

India 1964
117 mins

SATYAJIT RAY THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

The Music Room (Jalsaghar)

Mon 1 Aug 20:40; Sun 14 Aug 18:15

Charulata (The Lonely Wife)

Fri 5 Aug 18:20; Mon 8 Aug 18:15; Mon 15 Aug 14:30; Wed 17 Aug 20:40;
Sat 27 Aug 12:00; Wed 31 Aug 20:45

Devi (The Goddess) + Pikoo

Sat 6 Aug 14:30 (+ pre-recorded intro by Sharmila Tagore); Sun 14 Aug 14:45

Teen Kanya (Three Daughters)

Sun 7 Aug 17:35; Sat 13 Aug 14:50

Kanchenjunga

Tue 9 Aug 18:20; Mon 15 Aug 20:50

The Expedition (Abhijan)

Wed 10 Aug 20:10; Sat 20 Aug 14:30

Kapurush (The Coward) + Mahapurush (The Holy Man)

Thu 11 Aug 18:00; Sat 20 Aug 20:20

Satyajit Ray Documentaries Programme 2

Tue 16 Aug 20:40; Wed 24 Aug 18:20

The Hero (Nayak)

Wed 17 Aug 18:10; Thu 25 Aug 20:40

Days and Nights in the Forest (Aranyer Din Ratri)

Thu 18 Aug 18:15; Sat 27 Aug 14:40

The Home and the World (Ghare Baire)

Sun 21 Aug 17:50; Wed 24 Aug 20:20

The Chess Players (Shatranj Ke Khilari)

Tue 23 Aug 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro by Shabana Azmi); Sun 28 Aug 14:40

Distant Thunder (Ashani Sanket) + Deliverance (Sadgati)

Sat 27 Aug 17:30; Mon 29 Aug 14:40

Enemy of the People (Ganashatru)

Sun 28 Aug 12:10; Tue 30 Aug 18:15 (+ intro by Ashvin Devasundaram)

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