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Exploring Rabindranath Tagore's "Samapti" through the Lens of Satyajit Ray

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore is a cosmopolitan writer not only for his Nobel Prize, but also for the wide range of subjects in his writings and his revolutionary mindset moulded, to a great extent, by Western culture. Tagore's story "Samapti", brought to the world forum of cinema by Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray, explores different human emotions and complexities of human relationships. Since replication of a literary piece in its cinematic presentation often makes the latter lose its charm, so Ray has made minor deviations and has included some additional details in his eponymous movie. The present article undertakes a comparative analysis between Tagore's "Samapti" and Ray's "Samapti".

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, Cinema, "Samapti".

Among the writers in Bengali literature whose literary works have been translated into English, mention must be made of Nobel-laureate Rabindranath Tagore. As a visionary, philosopher, thinker, social activist, nationalist, patriot, and a prolific writer, Tagore has touched upon almost every aspect of human life through his writings. His songs, poems, essays, short stories, plays, novellas, and novels critically explore the different realms of human life and emotions. He was a "hodophile", one who loves to travel, and it is evident in his travelogues. Influence of Western culture upon him, blended with Upanishadic effect, is reflected in his progressive mindset which has moulded his literary characters and themes of writings. His deftness and sensitiveness in studying human minds, specifically the minds of women, is explicit in his literary pieces. As a feminist, his sincere commitment towards the women of society is manifested in his sketching of different female characters and the stories of their struggles, failures, and victories.

Among his several writings, the genre of short story occupies a prominent position in literature. Some of his popular short stories are "Postmaster" ("The Postmaster"), "Khokababur Pratyabartan" ("Return of the Little Master"), "Chhuti" ("Holiday"), "Shasti" ("Punishment"), "Kankal" ("The Skeleton"), "Maanbhanjan" ("Resentment Appeased"), "Manihara" ("Woman Bereft of Jewels"), "Samapti" ("The

Ending"), "Kshudhita Pashan" ("Hungry Stones"), "Aparichita" ("The Inscrutable Woman"), "Streer Patra" ("The Wife's Letter"), "Poila Nambar" ("House Number One"), "Laboratory" ("The Laboratory"), "Mussalmanir Galpa" ("The Story of a Muslim Woman"), and many more.

The matter of discussion in this article, however, is exploration of the author's story "Samapti" through the lens of Satyajit Ray. Filmmaker Satyajit Ray's eponymous Bengali movie is actually a part of his trilogy *Teen Kanya*. *Teen Kanya* portrays three unique female characters of Tagore from his short stories "Postmaster", "Manihara", and "Samapti". In "Samapti", the concluding segment of the trilogy, the role of the female protagonist Mrinmayi is played by Aparna Sen (nee Dasgupta) and Soumitra Chatterjee plays the role of her husband. Though these characters in Tagore's story are very interesting, yet some more verve is incorporated into them through Ray's filming of the piece. There can be no debate over the fact that cinema is one of the most powerful tools that is used to narrate any story. Umesh Nana Wamane describes cinema as "crucial to the development, maintenance, and continuance of social structures" (528). With the effects of their lights, sounds, settings, dynamism of characters, and dialogues, movies are capable enough to evoke different emotions and provoke varied thoughts in the minds of their audiences. This form of art has evolved considerably over the years and today it is considered as one of the most important medium for entertainment, voicing protest, social reformation, presentation of literature on the screen, and documentation of different incidents, statistics, and life-stories. Cinema is capable enough to cross every geographical and cultural boundary and, thereby, make a global approach.

Speaking of Indian Cinema, Bengali Cinema has created a new wave in the heart of world cinema through the hands of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Goutam Ghose, Rituparno Ghosh, Kaushik Ganguly, and others. Often outstripping cinema of other languages, Bengali Cinema has reached audiences across the globe. Satyajit Ray has ensured the addition of yet another feather to the cap of Indian Cinema– the feather of the Oscar Award. Ray's cosmopolitanism as a filmmaker is observed in his influence over renowned directors like Wes Anderson, Kelly Reichardt, and Martin Scorsese. Again, his genius as a filmmaker is compared by the British filmmaker and critic Lindsay Anderson to the genius of Antonioni, Eisenstein, Bergman, Kurosawa, and Chaplin (Chakraborty 2433). Jean Renoir's suggestion to Ray to "shake Hollywood out" of his system and "develop his own style of filmmaking" also shaped the filmmaking style of the latter to some extent. (Ghosh and Ghosh 43) Chandak Sengoopta describes Ray as "an Indian incarnation of Robert Flaherty or Jean Renoir" (Sengoopta). "Samapti", as the literary creation of Tagore, has gained much acclaim, but Ray's cinematic presentation of the same has no less credit in its bag.

Satyajit Ray's connection with Tagore predated the former's birth and was rather familial. Satyajit's grandfather Upendrakishore Raychowdhury and Rabindranath Tagore, both influenced by Brahmo Samaj ideals, shared a common interest in writing and sketching for children. Tagore was, however, very affectionate towards Upendrakishore's little son Sukumar Ray (father of Satyajit Ray) and addressed the child as his "jubak bandhu" (young friend). The Ray family, however, continued their relationship with Rabindranath for three generations. Satyajit Ray remembered how Tagore had written a poem in the former's autograph book when he was only seven. In the later years Ray studied art at Kala Bhavana in Visva-Bharati University. (Sengupta P) In 1945 Ray even designed the cover of the book named *Janaganer Rabindranath* by Sudhir Chandra Kar. Then, in 1955 he designed the cover of Amal Home's book *Purushottam Rabindranath*. In 1961, at the request of the then Prime Minister of India Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, Ray made a documentary film on Tagore titled *Rabindranath Tagore*. The 51 minutes 19 seconds documentary commences with the following words of its maker:

On the seventh of August 1941, in the city of Calcutta, a man died. His mortal remains

perished but he left behind him a heritage which no fire could consume. It is a heritage of words and music and poetry of ideas and of ideals and it has the power to move us, to

inspire us today and in the days to come. We, who owe him so much, salute his memory.
(Rabindranath Tagore 00:00:16-00:01:04)

Tagore's influence upon Ray is obvious in the auteur filmmaker's adaptation of Tagorean literary pieces into films– *Teen Kanya* (1961), *Charulata* (1964), and *Ghare Baire* (1984). While *Charulata* is based on Tagore's novella *Nastanirh* (*The Broken Nest*), *Ghare Baire* is based on the author's eponymous novel (English translation– *The Home and the World*). Use of Rabindrasangeet like "Ami chini go chini tomare ogo bideshini" in *Charulata* and "Bidhir badhan katbe tumi emon shaktiman" in *Ghare Baire* also speak of the author's influence upon the filmmaker.

Tagore's story "Samapti" opens with the arrival of a handsome and educated young man named Apurbakrishna Ray at his native village. While Apurba got down onto the muddy bank of the river and slipped and fell down, tomboyish and mischievous Mrinmayi laughed at him in an immature way. Adorably called "Paagli" by the men of the village, Mrinmayi used to roam around the entire village wildly throughout the day. She hated the girls of her age but shared intimate bonds of friendship with the boys of the village. Her closest friend was Rakhal, a little dweller of the same village. Rakhal and Mrinmayi shared many secrets with each other and also played pranks on one another. Roaming around, playing pranks on others, trying different kinds of mischiefs, and playing with boys were parts of her daily routine. She has been described by the author as an "unfettered girl" (Tagore 276).

Apurba got fascinated by her liveliness and mischievousness, though he himself became a victim of her mischiefs quite a few times. He gradually became determined to marry her. His mother was at first unwilling to accept his decision, owing to Mrinmayi's reputation. But later on she surrendered before her son's stubbornness and finally gave her consent. Eventually the wedding took place. But the bride, Mrinmayi, had no consent for the marriage. She had been rather forced to give into it. Immediately after the marriage, conforming to the marital norms (dictated by cruel patriarchy) became a great challenge for tender Mrinmayi. And, on the first afternoon at her in-laws' house, she fled from there.

For a long time Mrinmayi could not be traced anywhere in the house. Actually she was hiding in a chariot of Lord Radhakanta that lay abandoned under the old banyan tree in the village. Finally, with the help of Rakhal, she was brought back to Apurba's house. Intelligent Apurba studied her psychology and understood her childishness. The following day, when his mother locked Mrinmayi up in a room due to her disobedience, Apurba himself opened the door and, with very caring gesture, told her in a low voice, "I've opened the door secretly. Come, let's run away into the backyard garden" (Tagore 283). But now, Mrinmayi, "with force through sobs, shaking her head angrily" (Tagore 283), refused to agree to his words. At that time Rakhal was standing at the door of the couple's room. Now Apurba told Mrinmayi, "Rakhal has come to play with you. Will you go?" (Tagore 283) Mrinmayi refused sternly. Needless to say that this episode of the story presents her as a rebellious and assertive character.

The following day Mrinmayi got a letter from her father. Her father expressed his repentance for being unable to attend her wedding ceremony. The letter, however, spurred in the daughter's mind her desire to visit him. Then one day Apurba took her to her father's residence and the three spent some time together over there. Returning home, Apurba found that his mother was disappointed with them. He decided to leave for Calcutta to pursue his studies in law. Dropping his wife at her mother's place, he left for Calcutta. In-laws' house was a sort of prison for young Mrinmayi, though her husband was quite friendly to her. And now that the young girl got to taste freedom from that imprisonment, she did not find the flavour of this freedom alluring enough. She badly felt the absence of Apurba in her life. She repented for not having accompanied him to the city and wished that her urge to go with him had existed in her mind on the night previous to his departure. She isolated herself from the rest of the

world and mourned his absence in her own little psychological world. She discarded her earlier tomboyish habits and character and stayed morose for days together.

Then one day, as per Mrinmayi's wish, her mother dropped her at her in-laws' house. Before his departure, Apurba had once told her that he would return only if she wrote a letter to him during his stay in the city. Recollecting these words, Mrinmayi wrote to Apurba. Her immature and innocent way of writing the letter is incisively described by Tagore in the following words,

Grabbing the pen very carefully, straying from the line, forming uneven letters, smudging her fingers, without making any salutation, she wrote these abrupt words: 'Why do you not write me letters? How are you and you come home.'... after racking her brains for quite some time, added a few words. 'Now you will write me a letter and write how are you and come home, mother is well, Bishu and Puntti are well, yesterday our black cow had a calf.' With this, she ended the letter. After putting it into an envelope pouring a drop of love on every single letter she superscripted it: Shrijukta Babu Apurbakrishna Ray. In spite of all the love, line was not straight, letters not well formed, and spelling not faultless. That an envelope requires something more than the name was not known to her. (291-92)

Though the letter got posted by a maidservant, yet it never reached his hands due to absence of the destination address.

Again, Apurba did not come home though his vacation had started. While his mother thought that the reason behind it was his anger with her, Mrinmayi guessed that it was his disappointment with her that prompted him to do so. At such a situation, one day the elderly lady decided to visit Apurba's place in Calcutta. She asked Mrinmayi if she was willing to accompany her. The girl nodded her consent. Then they together went to the city without informing him and put up at his sister's house. That very evening, when Apurba, losing every hope of receiving a letter from his wife, himself sat down to write to her, he received his brother-in-law's message that informed him of his mother's arrival at the latter's place and invited him for dinner. In response to it, Apurba went to his sister's house. There his sister and brother-in-law teased him regarding Mrinmayi. Apurba was thinking in his mind that when his mother had come, Mrinmayi, too, could have come along with her if Mrinmayi wished to. But, out of hesitation, he could not question his mother in this regard.

After dinner, seeing the stormy weather, his sister asked him to stay back that night. At first, Apurba expressed his reluctance in the matter, but finally, due to continuous insistence by his brother-in-law, gave in to the proposal. He was taken to his room for rest. As Apurba entered the dark room and was about to climb the bed, "a pair of tender arms with bangles tinkling captured him in a tight embrace, and a pair of lips soft as a flowering bud striking like a brigand smothered him with a tearful barrage of passionate kisses giving him no chance to express surprise" (Tagore 294)– it was his beloved wife. Since her presence over there was least in his knowledge, so he was taken aback by this sudden incident. A few hours before his departure for Calcutta, Apurba had requested a spontaneous kiss from Mrinmayi as his "parting reward" (Tagore 288), but immaturity held her back from doing so. So now this gesture of Mrinmayi seemed to him that "an old unfinished venture once thwarted by bouts of laughter was now accomplished amidst a flood of tears" (Tagore 294).

Satyajit Ray's "Samapti", however, has many deviations from Tagore's story. Ray has also skillfully incorporated certain details which are not mentioned by Tagore. Firstly, Tagore's Apurba becomes Amulya in the movie and consequently "Apu" (as adorably called by his mother) becomes "Amu" on his mother's lips. When Amulya, on arriving at his village in the opening scene of the movie, falls on the mud after getting down from the boat, Mrinmayi bursts into laughter. Here Mrinmayi is seen standing in an abandoned hut and chewing sugarcane. But in Tagore's description, Mrinmayi was sitting on a stack of kiln-fresh bricks "unloaded from a merchant's boat" (Tagore 275) when similar incident happened with Apurba. Ray shows that Amulya's family has a servant named Haripada and a pet cat. Amulya tells his mother that he has come to the village to spend a vacation of two months.

Such details, however, are not there in Tagore's story. While describing the character of Mrinmayi, Tagore writes,

Occasionally, when the boat of some unknown zamindar arrived at the ghat, awe-struck village people would be in a nervous flurry, the women would suddenly drop their veils down to the tips of their noses like curtains descending on the stage. But Mrinmayi popped up at the ghat running, clutching a naked infant picked up from somewhere... (275)

But these minute details are skipped by Ray perhaps for cinematic purpose and time constraint.

After lunch, Apurba had a conversation with his mother regarding his marriage, where his mother informed him that she had already seen a bride for him. The name and clan of the prospective bride or her qualities were, however, not mentioned in this conversation or anywhere else in Tagore's story. But Ray's movie has these details. There is a similar conversation between Amulya and his mother where his mother informs that the girl is the second daughter of Kishori Chatterjee and that her name is Nirupama, whereas Amulya informs the audiences that her pet name is Puntti. The elderly lady further informs her son that the concerned girl is an expert in singing, sewing, and household chores. The audiences also come to know that Amulya's mother's name is Khendi.

Next, when Tagore's Apurba was getting ready to visit the girl's house, he put "a round-shaped puggree" (Tagore 277) on his head. But no such "puggree" is noticed in the apparel of Ray's Amulya. Amulya's mother mentions about "Gopen thakurpo" and "Shibu" who have come to their house to accompany him to the Chatterjees' house. But Tagore does not give such details. Ray deviates from the storyline yet again- in the first part of the story, Tagore writes, "Apurba recognised her: she was Mrinmayi, daughter of their new neighbour" (275), while Ray shows that Amulya comes to know about Mrinmayi's identity from Haripada. While going to Chatterjees' house, Amulya, on his way, sees Mrinmayi swinging under a tree. But this is not found in Tagore's story.

In the literary piece, when Apurba, at Nirupama's house for the girl-viewing session, was interacting with the girl, Mrinmayi suddenly "rushed into the room panting...Without so much as casting a glance at Apurbakrishna, she straight away began to pull the bride's brother Rakhal's hand...when she could not distract Rakhal in any way, gave him a good smack on his back, whipped the veil off the bride's head and stormed out of the room leaving the maidservant growling in futile rage..." (Tagore 278). But Ray, while depicting this episode, shows Mrinmayi, with her pet squirrel (named Chorky) in her hands, peeping through the window into Nirupama's room, trying to draw Rakhal's attention by calling him. Suddenly the squirrel leaps into the room through the window and hides somewhere. Mrinmayi, in search of Chorky, rushes into the room, finds out the animal, catches hold of it, rubs it on Nirupama's face, and speedily runs out of the room. Tagore has described Mrinmayi's tomboyish nature several times in his story, but he has never spoken specifically of her climbing of trees or rearing a squirrel, which are shown by Ray. According to Andrew Robinson, many things that Aparna Sen as Mrinmayi "did in the film- falling off a tree while trying to climb it, releasing her pet squirrel into the 'girl-viewing session' - were not pre-planned; Ray simply liked the way she did them and kept them in." (135) But the interesting thing with Ray was that if he kept them in, he made them more meaningful. For example:

Much later in the film, after Amulya has gone to Calcutta, we see Mrinmoyee in a big close-up lying down quietly for a long time; Ray dubbed this 'the growth of love' in his shooting notebook, writing the phrase in English. In three dissolves, her little brother appears with a fruit he has picked for her, which she rejects; her mother appears, abuses her and then tearfully hugs her while Mrinmoyee cries; and finally, her little brother reappears and tells her that Chorky is dead and dangles the pathetic corpse of the squirrel in front of her face. The catharsis is now complete and she can bear the sight of her dead pet; as she lies there wearing a fresh sari and kohl on her eyes she begins to smile to herself, thinking of her husband. (Robinson 135)

The pet squirrel becomes the prop for catharsis in Ray's adaption. Andrew Robinson further notes that the humour in the movie adaption derives essentially from the institution of marriage-arranged and otherwise...Both Tagore's original and Ray's adaptation abound in the kind of acute social commentary in which Sukumar Ray specialised in his satirical verses." (133)

In Tagore's story, once Rakhal had "sneaked up behind her and run his scissors into her locks" (Tagore 278) and this irritated Mrinmayi. She "snatched the scissors away from him...and snipped off the rest ruthlessly" (Tagore 278). This episode is deviated in Ray's movie where it is seen that Mrinmayi, reluctant to marry, herself cuts off her long hair. On the wedding night, Mrinmayi mentions some Haranda, the milkman of Amulya's family, who tortures his wife. But no such mention is seen in Tagore's "Samapti". Ray indicates that Mrinmayi flees from Apurba's house by climbing a tree from the rooftop. But Tagore does not specify the manner of her escape. Ray's Mrinmayi wants to go to her father's place at Kushiganj because she remembers her father. But Tagore's Mrinmayi wanted to go there, being driven by emotion after receiving her father's letter. In the literary piece, Mrinmayi, in her sleep, even dreamt of going to Kushiganj and, as mentioned earlier in this article, she actually went there with Apurba. But such incidents have been incisively skipped by Ray.

Ray has deviated a great deal in the ending of the movie too. After Amulya's departure, as projected in the movie, his mother writes a letter to him, feigning to be seriously ill. Amulya rushes to her. But then she discloses the truth to him and asks him to come to terms with Mrinmayi. Accordingly, Amulya goes to Mrinmayi's mother's house, where he finds that the mother is searching for her daughter. He, too, starts to search for the young girl. But Mrinmayi is found nowhere. When Amulya, driven by hopelessness, returns home and enters his room, he finds her over there. Transformed Mrinmayi now surrenders at his feet like a submissive wife and the two unite. But Tagore's story has a different ending, which has already been mentioned in this article. Andrew Robinson mentions Ray's direction to Aparna Sen at the end of the movie: "Just put your thumb in your mouth and think of lovely wonderful things," was all Ray told Aparna. Although she was only twelve or thirteen at the time, she guessed what he was trying to convey." (135)

In the movie, Ray has relied upon the use of natural lighting and this has created an authentic atmosphere in the movie. Be in the night scenes or the daytime scenes, the filmmaker has used natural lights to shoot them all. He has also taken refuge to unadulterated portrayal of rural life- the movie highlights the social and cultural realities of rural India, just like Tagore's "Samapti". Moreover, Ray's subtle story-telling technique throughout the movie helps it to maintain the essence and flavour of its eponymous literary piece and speaks aloud of the author's impact upon the filmmaker. Ray has applied innovative techniques such as photo-negative flashbacks in *Pratidwandi* (1972) for instance and montage, for example, in *Charulata* (1964), but he has avoided such techniques in making "Samapti". Instead, he has used methods like naturalistic visual style, deep-focus cinematography, a distinctive use of sound, and an economical editing process in this movie.

Though the two creative pursuits (Tagore's and Ray's) have lots of differences between them, yet they are one in context of storyline, substance, and character sketch. It has to be admitted that Ray has intentionally skipped several details in his movie to accommodate it within the limited time-space. Yet he cannot be criticised for it because he has made up the lapses by incorporating many details from his imagination into the movie. But Ray has, in no way, lost integrity in the process. Rather he has maintained, in this way, his individuality in this venture. Perhaps yet another reason behind these differences is to add a celluloid flavour to the literary work. Like every other cinematic adaptation of a literary piece, this movie, too, becomes effective by translating a written narrative into an audio-visual experience. Ray has artistically explored the complex flow of emotions in both Amulya and Mrinmayi. His "timeless but also immensely liberating" (Podder) narration, along with his deviations and detailing, has rather added an extra spark to the storyline. By restructuring the narrative in his own way, adding music wherever required, and through the use of dialogues, Satyajit Ray has undoubtedly

done justice to the short story. It must be admitted that Tagore's "Samapti" and Ray's "Samapti" share the kinship of intellectual entertainment and show how the literary and the film media express it.

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