



Locating the Shifting Sphere of Gendered Identity Construction through the Cinematic Adaptations of Tagore's *Ghare Baire*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to look at the larger socio-political discourse that informs the two cinematic texts *Ghare Baire Aaj* by Aparna Sen and *Ghare Baire* by Satyajit Ray. Ray's adaptation of Tagore's novel explores the gendering of the public and private domain within the framework of the nationalist ideology. The film temporally embedded within a colonial context imagines the nation metaphorically through the woman whose possible transgression from private to public domain challenges both nationalist and colonial construction of the titular binary. Counterpoised against this, Sen's deconstructive post-colonial and post-global adaptation challenges further the dichotomy of the public and private to expose its fault lines. Sen's film brings to the fore the contemporary ideological contradictions interpellated within the construction of secularism and liberal discourses of gender. The genderization of popular discourses of nationalism, colonialism and identity constructing the core of both Tagore's novel and Ray's film has been further extended and problematised by Sen through the Dalit identity of the central woman character of her movie. The paper then will try to unfold these critical nuances manifested through the dialogical engagement of these texts to unfold the influence of their multi-layered 'sites' on the gendered identity construction in the respective cinemas of Satyajit Ray and Aparna Sen.

Keywords

dichotomy, private/public domain, gender, identity construction, geopolitical space

[Gender] is never a primary identity emerging out of the depths of the self, but a discursive construction enunciated at multiple sites.

– Sherry Simon (Simon 1996, 6)

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire* was first published serially in the Bengali *avant garde* journal *Sabuj Patra* during 1915-1916. It was translated by Surendranath Tagore and was published again serially as *At Home and Outside* in the *Modern Review* during 1918-19 before being finally published as a book titled *The Home and the World* in Great Britain by Macmillan in 1919. The problematics of translation has always remained a significant part of the controversies around this novel right from the time of its very first translation. In fact, the quality of this translation has been frequently censured with the charges of attracting initial vituperative critiques by many Bengali readers. Debates around the translational choices made by Surendranath Tagore that were initiated with a cogent immediacy began to be suspended gradually with the disclosure that Rabindranath himself had closely monitored the translation. Likewise, the directorial choices remained the crux of debates around the cinematic version of Satyajit Ray.

Ray, while retained the title of the Bengali novel, followed the English translation in making the directorial choices. Ray's movie *Ghare Baire*, though was made during post-independence India of the 1984 is both temporally and spatially embedded within the colonial context of undivided Bengal. The temporal and geographical shifting in the plot and the milieu of Aparna Sen's 2019 movie is captured through its titular modification to *Ghare Baire Aaj* where the word *aaj* contextualises the movie to the contemporary post-colonial, post-globalised India, particularly Delhi. Ray's adaptation of Tagore's novel explores the gendering of the public and private domain within the framework of the nationalist ideology. The film imagines the spatial entity of the nation metaphorically through the woman whose possible transgression from private to public domain challenges both nationalist and colonial construction of the titular binary. Counterpoised against this, Sen's deconstructive post-colonial and post-global adaptation challenges further the dichotomy of the public and private to expose its fault lines. Sen's film brings to the fore the contemporary ideological contradictions interpellated within the construction of secularism and liberal discourses of gender in which spatiality (especially, the binarisation of *ghare/baire*) is of utmost importance. The genderization of popular discourses of nationalism, colonialism and identity, constructing the core of both Tagore's novel and Ray's film, has been further extended and problematised by Sen through the Dalit identity of the female protagonist in her movie. This paper thus seeks to juxtapose these critical nuances manifested through the dialogical engagement of Tagore's novel and the cinematic adaptations to explore the politics inherent in the construction of gendered identity and the role played by the geopolitical space in such formations.

Contextualising the Spatio-temporal Milieu of the Protagonists

The major transitions inducted in Aparna Sen's movie from the earlier renditions of *Ghare Baire*, apart from the contemporaneity of the plot, is the spatial

contextualization of the protagonists. Tagore's Bangla novel along with the English translation by Surendranath Tagore and Ray's translation have presented all the three protagonists namely Nikhilesh, Bimala and Sandip as members of the Bengali *bhadralok*. More specifically, Nikhilesh is carved out by the novelist as the emblematic representative of the upper class feudal gentry of colonial Bengal. Bimala as the wife of the feudal lord or *zamindar* has also been attributed with the stereotypical dispositions specified by the contemporary society. Ray, as has been pointed out by Shohini Ghosh, "wrote his first serious screenplay in 1948" in the form of an adaptation of Tagore's *Ghare Baire* to be directed by his friend Harisadhan Dasgupta (Ghosh 2003, 82). In 1983 when Ray finally directed the film himself he preferred to retain the spatio-temporal axes conceived by Tagore as far as the socio-cultural milieu of the characters is concerned¹ (ibid).

In her movie, one of the major alterations incurred by Sen is by locating the identity of the female protagonist in a completely different religious and social milieu. Vimla², unlike Tagore's novel or Ray's movie, is neither an upper caste Hindu nor was born in the Bengali *bhadralok* family. Rather she is the Dalit girl from Bihar's Jharia village, a coal mining belt in Bihar. She is orphaned during one of the blasts in the mines and is forced to get shelter at the house of the Chowdhury's in Delhi where her grandmother used to stay as a household help. This sudden change in fortune necessarily disassembles her and relegates her to an unfamiliar environs. Nevertheless, the Chowdhury family augmented her emancipation by ensuring her education in a boarding school. Consequently they appropriated her to this new socio-cultural ethos by providing her the new identity of Brinda. The caste identity of Vimla, however, is never completely shunned rather it has recurrently been foregrounded by Tuhina Das through her performance in that character. She has constantly retained the accent and the tonal quality of the dialect that she was using in her early childhood till the end of the movie. In contrast to the vulnerable yet enigmatic presence of Swatilekha Sengupta playing the character of Bimala in Ray's movie, Tuhina in Sen's movie has been depicted as the fragile persona with some diffidence. Moreover, Bimala in Ray's movie overcomes her vulnerability to achieve certain sense of autonomy in discarding both Sandip's politics and his love though the trajectory of her 'growth' culminates with disastrous consequences (Sarkar 2003, 38). Brinda in Sen's movie lacks the socio-economic-political inheritance to emulate the accomplishments of Bimala who is firmly rooted in her self-assured nature being the respected upper caste Hindu wife of a feudal gentry.

Locating the Major Shifts from *Ghare Baire* to *Ghare Baire Aaj*

Bimala in Ray's film transcends the inner space of the 'home' by literally walking through the extended corridor to the outer space of the drawing room for the first time. This transition culminates in her encounter with the 'world' incarnated in the figure of

¹ In the words of Shohini Ghosh, Ray "felt fortunate [that] the film was never made in 1948 as the script that he had written then had been 'superficial, Hollywoodish and entirely not true to the spirit'" (Ghosh 2003, 83). This commentary explicitly captures Ray's intent while finally making the film in 1983.

² She pronounces her name in Sen's adaptation like this demarcating her different geopolitical locatedness from Bimala, the protagonist in Tagore and Ray, through her dialect.

Sandip. In a carefully crafted scene Ray meticulously captures this symbolic transgression which is also called ‘historic’ by Sandip. Ghosh has elaborated upon the importance of this particular scene in the following words:

Ray underscores the significance of this ‘cross-over’ in what is perhaps the most lyrical sequence in the film. In poetic slow motion the doors of the *andarmahal* (inner quarters) gradually swing open as Nikhilesh and Bimala step out to start their ‘journey’ towards the outer quarters....Using slow motion in combination with a variety of shot sizes and angles, Ray edits the shots on overlapping action thereby imposing a screen time that is much longer than the real time it takes to cross the corridor. The consequent elongation of time invests this simple action with iconic significance. (Ghosh 2003, 88)

In the context of colonial Bengal Nikhilesh is the liberal revolutionary force that not only encouraged and motivated Bimala but also emboldened her with the necessary agency to embody the social revolution of transgressing the boundaries of the *andarmahal*. The resonance of this scene gets heightened if juxtaposed against Sandip’s introductory scene. In that scene Ray’s lens captures Sandip brazenly motivating the common people of Sukhsayar in the quadrangle of Nikhilesh’s house through his inspirational speech on nationalism and swadeshi ideals. In a continuous movement the camera shifts towards a close shot of Bimala standing behind the bamboo screen demarcating the inner/outer space binary defined for women by patriarchy. Bimala evidently is mesmerised and convinced by Sandip’s intricately contrived narratives. This indirect encounter with Sandip and his grand narratives of nationalism paves the way for Bimala’s ultimate transgression denigrating the imposed restrictions on the spatial movement of the contemporary women. Nevertheless, the extended family represented by the widowed sister-in-law was critical of such a drastic step in *Ghare Baire*, both the novel and the movie. Contrarily in *Ghare Baire Aaj* the extended family, the parents-in-law in particular, are very supportive and are the champions of Brinda’s ‘education’ and appropriation to the ways of the world. However, in the post-colonial and post-globalised Indian society, amidst the socio-cultural milieu of the progressive upper class liberals more precisely, that gendered divide of the inner/outer space seems redundant.

Furthermore, Bimala is positioned by Tagore as the foci of the narratives around colonialism, independence and the nation. Right at the helm of the Swadeshi movement she is intensely personified as the crowning embodiment of the enlivening slogan of the revolutionaries i.e. *bande mataram*. Purposefully manifested as the gendered incarnation in the form of ‘mother nation’ Bimala is celebrated both as the muse as well as the beloved by Sandip. The upper caste woman Bimala could be essentially imbibed in the extremist revolutionary narrative of Sandip for affecting inclusivity in his form of politics. In Sen’s movie Bimala can easily play the inspirational cadences for Sandip. However, her caste identity seems incommensurate with the gendered conceptualisation of the nation in his contemporary majoritarian Hindu identity politics.

In her discussion Tanika Sarkar has rightly pointed out that “In the retrospective opening of *The Home and the World* Bimala seems to evoke her mother’s tradition-bound aesthetic of Hindu womanhood to suggest... a privilege: mode of *being* (emphasis mine)

that she too had inherited from her mother” (Datta, 28). In her opening remarks of the novel *Bimala* reminisces,

MOTHER, today there comes back to mind the vermilion mark at the parting of your hair, the sari which you used to wear, with its wide red border, and those wonderful eyes of yours, full of depth and peace. They came at the start of my life’s journey, like the first streak of dawn, giving me golden provision to carry me on my way. (Tagore 1985, 1)

The privileges recounted by *Bimala* here unambiguously ascribe the Hindu wife with the virtuosity of attaining freedom in perpetrating the role of the defender of the conjugal bond by the Hindu code of conduct. By detracting *Brinda* the privilege of inheriting the Hindu tradition or for that matter any tradition that she can feel affiliated to *Sen* has problematised the question of the contribution of the wife in conserving both the institutions of marriage and nation as understood by the Hindu tradition. Hence, at the backdrop of political conflicts between progressive liberal reformers and Hindu majoritarian ideologies *Brinda* with her caste identity is situated as the complicated site of the engagement and negotiation of the two contradictory ideals.

Construction of Gendered Identity as art of Social Consciousness

The contradictory and contesting ideologies clearly demarcated in their embodiment through the two male protagonists. Posited between the two principle male characters of her life *Bimala* in *Ray’s* movie dwindles initially to finally reach to a decision of preferring one over the other. While the two men are portrayed with utmost clarity over their own ideologies along with each other’s, it is the woman at the heart of these conflicting ideologies located to carve out a niche for herself. This process of unearthing the latent truth behind the appearances through a tumultuous emotional journey that offers *Bimala* with the opportunity of constantly negotiating and carving out the dimensions of her own gender. In the words of Sherry Simon, “Gender is an element of identity and experience which, like other cultural identities, takes form through social consciousness” (Simon 1996, 5). *Bimala’s* transgression to the outside world, her interaction with *Sandip*, *Amulya* and *Miss Gilby* paves her path towards gaining that social as well as political consciousness that finally shapes her character and accentuates her gendered identity.

The fragility in *Brinda’s* character seems to be the outcome of the awareness of her double marginality rooted in her caste identity and her essential ‘feminine’ qualities as part of her social consciousness. Undoubtedly, the geopolitical situatedness of *Vimla* in coal mining belt of *Jharia*, *Bihar* during her early childhood had little imprint left on her persona in the later years. Evidently, the powerful resentment exerted by her against the proposition of changing her name is absolutely missing in the mature *Brinda*. *Brinda* declares her preference for the ‘home’ as part of her choice given that there is no restriction imposed on her movement to the outer space. It is probably the transition of her spatial surrounding in the form of her boarding school or the posh locality of *Delhi*³

³ She was forced initially to migrate to the *Chaudhury* household in one of the posh areas of *Delhi* where her grandmother used to work.

that generated a sense of alienation resulting in the awareness of her humble origins. Brinda's preference for the domestic sphere, in spite of her husband's repeated insistence on going out to mingle more with the outside world, seems to be the direct consequence of this feeling of alienation. The gendered nature of her identity construction, hence, is indisputably determined by her immediate sphere of existence.

In fact, the gender dynamics shared in the families living in the coal mining area of Bihar does not restrict the women within the domesticated walls of a *ghar* (home). Sometimes it is the lack of privileges, like owning a home, as a consequence of the long history of their marginalisation that leaves the women of such poor background with the opportunity to contribute in the family income by participating in physical labour of the *baire* (outside world). Unlike the middleclass *bhadralok* families that have kept their women domesticated within the sphere of the four walls, with the excuse of retaining family honour, these families were forced by the state and the market forces to withdraw any such restriction even if that existed earlier. Vimla's mother⁴ contributing as a field labour and her grandmother working as a household help miles away from her 'home' are examples of women going out to earn for their families. Brinda, on the contrary, with all her educational qualification prefers to work from home for Oxford University Press. It would have been interesting to know what her decision would have been if Brinda was also pressed under any such need of going out to earn money. Nevertheless, these changes wrought in the identity of the female protagonist inform the crux of Sen's interpretation of the contemporary Indian society in comparison to the India during the Swadeshi movement. Sen's directorial decision to complicate her narrative additionally with these intricacies around Vimla's identity expands the possibilities of unearthing some innate characteristic revelations of both the male protagonists, Nikhil and Sandip, as well. Sandip's final denial to accept her after the revelation of her pregnancy citing her caste to be the reason has been counterpoised as a foil to her wholehearted acceptance through marital bond by Nikhil and his family.

Structurally also some important creative decisions are taken by both the directors delineate the shifting spheres of their respective movies to foreground how that affect the gender roles. The novel follows a tripartite structure each part attributed to one of the three protagonists. These are called 'atmakatha' or self-revelation through the diary entries both beginning and concluding with "Bimala's story". In the final chapter the turmoil and remorse devastating Bimala internally has been captured through her following remark –

I continually had the feeling that, if only I could die, all this turmoil would come to an end. So long as I was alive my sins would remain rampant, scattering destruction on every side. I remembered the pistol in my box. But my feet refused to leave the window in quest of it. Was I not awaiting my fate? (Tagore 1985, 203)

In Bimala's case her dilemmas and corresponding choices both in her personal and public/political sphere are inextricably interlaced. Tagore leaves the conclusion open-

⁴ This character never appears on screen rather information about her death along with her husband is imparted through the dialogue of another character.

ended even when portraying a repenting Bimala accusing her own self for committing the sin of failing to uphold the sanctity of her marriage as a Hindu wife. On the contrary, taking a drastic shift from the novel Ray conceived the culmination of the conflict within and outside the family in the form of Nikhilesh's death for which he has been immensely criticised (Ghosh 2003, 100). With her deconstructive stance Sen improvised the culmination of all the conflicts in the death of both Nikhilesh and Sandip. If the novel culminated in depicting Bimala's delusion with the politics of the two men around her, in Ray's movie she ends up as the passive receiver of her fate.

Gender as a 'site' of Conflict:

As quoted at the beginning of this article Sherry Simon defines gender as "a discursive construction enunciated at multiple sites" (Simon 1996, 6). Her remark has been made in the context of translation and gender to address the intricate politics of gender involved in the process of translation. The same can be applied in a much broader context to understand the nuances of the gendered identity construction. So, translators across languages and cultures have critiqued the "historical viability of discourses of gender" (ibid) to identify the role played by language in defining these discursive constructions. In the cinematic form of translation, the translators use the cinematic language to explore the variegated sites of discursive construction of gender. According to Simon Aparna Sen has successfully executed the use of her cinematography and the camera angles to differentiate her cinematic language from her predecessor Ray. Here it is imperative to mention the particular scene revealing Brinda's pregnancy. It has been captured through the same camera angle that was used to depict the marginality of her as a child during her initiation in the family and the city life for. The revelation to Nikhilesh has metaphorically been portrayed to evoke her fallen position within the family structure. This portrayed her being relegated to the margins again as a result of her deviation from the sacrosanct conjugal bond only to rise again through Nikhilesh's liberal humanist understanding of the scheme of things.

In *Translation and Conflict* Mona Baker has stated that "...translation and interpreting are essential for circulating *and* resisting the narratives that create the intellectual and moral environment for violent conflict in the first place, even though the narratives in question may not directly depict conflict or war" (Baker 2006, 2). Any adaptation or recreation of a text is undeniably a form of interpretation. Thus Aparna Sen, the woman translator, in interpreting both the book and Ray's cinema through her own narrative has resisted some of the gendered portrayals of characters. The ability of exerting the sexual preference freely by Brinda is one of those key concerns in which Sen has resisted and transgressed from the shaping of the female protagonist's gender. In the context of colonial Bengal of 1905 where women were married off early, it was impossible for women of upper class and caste in the Hindu families to come in contact with other adult men. Bimala's act of transgressing the *andarmahal* is thus defined as 'historical' by Sandip. Hence, when Ray depicted Bimala being passionately kissed by Sandip that created quite a furor among the contemporary audience accusing the kisses to be forced and unwanted to the screenplay. Sen possibly could imagine Brinda indulging in sexuality with Sandip and in the process exerting her choice or sexual urge because of

her positioning as an educated, emancipated woman located within the sphere of a liberal household. She, unlike Ray's Bimala, is financially independent and through her interaction with Sandip and his world frees herself from her emotional overdependence on Nikhilesh. However, like Ray's Bimala, she too is initially charmed by Sandip's flattery and grand accounts of the nation to finally become disillusioned. Nevertheless, Brinda's sexual intimacy with Sandip, her eventually getting pregnant and deciding to leave the Chaudhury household emerges out of her consciousness about her self and realising the potential agency that she remained unaware till the end. As an auteur Sen not only resisted the conceptualisation of Bimala's gendered subjectivity but also ended up "womanhandling the text", to borrow the phrase from Barbara Godard (Godard 1990, 89).

Conclusion

Evidently, Sen has taken creative decisions that juxtapose her film in a dialogic engagement with both Tagore's novel on the one hand and Ray's cinematic adaptation on the other. By doing so she has tried to explore the gendered nature of identity formation in the contemporary society of twenty first century India. Interestingly, at the backdrop of the struggle for freedom the conjugal relationship has been cultivated from variegated perspectives in a series of contemporary novels by Tagore such as *Nastanir* (1903), *Chokher Bali* (1903), *Jogajog* (1929) etc. In these novels he consciously kept the problematics of caste out of the purview. The caste question in the nationalist framework has been elaborately dealt with in the novel *Gora*. Sen, however, imbues the caste question in her narrative to debunk the hypocrisy and hollowness of Sandip's grand narratives of the nation in the first place. Additionally, conceiving the female protagonist with a problematic caste position pitted against those grand narratives, unlike the complicated case of the male protagonist in *Gora*, Sen has successfully raised the question of uniformity of the subject position seeking liberty. In fact, this contextual change has retrospectively enhanced unravelling of the intricate nuances of the female subjectivity within the violent scenario of the colonial Bengal. The politics of Sen's conceptualisation lies in her depiction of Brinda's emotional journey from being a fragile woman to gaining agency at the end. Consequentially, she kills Sandip to put an end to his hypocritical self-proclamation before the press on Nikhil's death. Sen's interpretative directorial decisions, we can conclude, are thus the expressions of her deconstructive commentary on the narratives of conflict of the genders within the sphere of both conjugal and patriotic love. Hence, it would not be an exaggeration if we conclusively remark that Sen ultimately wanted to revisit the pertinence of liberty for the female subject with a Dalit identity, and question the inherently gendered nature of identity formation by shifting the geopolitical sphere of the characters.

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