

Aparna Sen's *Ghare Baire Aaj*: A Postmodern Discourse for Indian Cinema

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Aparna Sen's *Ghare Baire Aaj* (2019) is an adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire* (1916) and re-adaptation of Satyajit Ray's film (1984) with the principal characters re-moulded in a contemporary setting. She retains the subtitle *The Home and the World* as it captures the shift from a modern into a postmodern world. Disturbance lies in the creation of background stories for those in the love-triangle, caught in the vagaries of time, questioning innocence, honesty, selfishness, desire and recognition of character. The backdrop of nationalism in the shadowy presence of the British Raj changes to a debate between new-found religiosity of Hindutva values versus Hindu idealism, atheism and left liberal thoughts versus Godly worship, but most poignantly the question of humanism and ultimately who is a human being. The surprise ending is that of a thriller—a conclusion going beyond the earlier texts puts the film in its context of post modern discourse.

What could happen to Tagore's novel lies in the word "Aaj" meaning what is happening today or the recent past? When the journalist Gauri Lankesh was killed by unknown assailants, the director sunk her disturbed thoughts to make the movie. As she described in its launch at the 10th Jagran Film Festival in New Delhi on 18th July, 2019: "It is not necessarily the Hindutva voices, it is also the Islamic fundamentalist who silence the moderate voices. Any kind of fundamentalism silences the voices of reason and moderation. That is a big concern and should concern anyone who has a regard for

healthy democracy," (qtd. Basu, 2020). Business Standard has called it her "most political and outspoken work" till now.

*Aaj*¹⁵ becomes the darker text, adhering to most elements of postmodernism, especially with its predilection for irony, intertextuality and magical realism. Its thriller-like ending hinted in the trailer, throws into chaos the feelings of the unreal, of value systems in-built into human nature, shaped by family which totally subverts the thoughts of the audience on social justice. As Ghosh Roy (2003) opines, "Cinema as a corollary to Indian psyche can make an interesting study and help us in reconstructing history" (p. 1185). Sen challenges the norms outlined by contemporary culture and suggests solutions for the prevailing unfairness in socio-political conditions. Thus she develops cross narratives that remake the characters of Nikhilesh, Sandip, and Bimla/Brinda who is Binnie and Bee, respectively to the two men in her life. By giving her a name, each man—husband and lover—appropriates her thoughts and affections until she discovers herself amidst tragic consequences. Shortened names like Nick, Sandy and Sammy (for their other college friend) portrays an Anglophone text, moving comfortably between several languages, meant for an elite audience reared on English education.

Humanism always central in Tagore's writings is countered by Posthumanism which comes in the wake of Postmodernist philosophy as Brinda becomes all-powerful. She destroys Sandip who has destroyed her, and symbolically destroyed Nikhilesh--and will destroy honesty/honour to preserve his own stature as a political leader. Both Tagore's novel and Ray's film *Ghare Baire* gave an account of a "real world" being shredded by debates on Nationalism where Bimala was metaphorically the silent India. Lyotard (1984) believes that the state of knowledge "makes no claims to being original or even true," and that assumptions made "should not be accorded predictive value in

¹⁵ The short title will be used subsequently to keep it separate from the other two texts and also to emphasize its relevance to happenings in the immediate present.

relation to reality, but strategic value in relation to the questions raised" (p. 7). *Aaj* challenges modernism by questioning what is the real merit of truth; can self-determining human beings simply drift with the tide or can they take control of particular events in their own life in order to overturn social reality?

Bimala's silence in the end reflects an individual's actual knowledge surpassing conceptual ideas which leads her to make a violent choice between the façade and the real in a scene fractured by the gunshot that kills Sandip. The irony is heightened because in an intensely romantic moment he had given her the gun for safe-keeping. He said he would ask for the gun if he needed it, unlikely because the house was giving him protection from "lumpen elements." When she begged him to be careful, "Khub sabdhane thakben...Katha din" thus extracting a promise, he held her hands and replied: "See I've put my life in your safe-keeping. Only you can kill me." The fact that she actually does so is magical realism as there is no exchange of words between them in a room full of people; no one stops her as her intentions are completely unpredictable; and the audience is left with a need to protect her because a moral dilemma has been resolved. Brinda could have chosen suicide instead of committing murder. Her stony, inexpressive silence continues as she resumes her place in the high backed chair, waiting for retribution to come to her.

Mabrol (2017) analysing Postmodern western films, recalls "the *unheimlich* becomes *heimlich* (literally German for unhomely and homely – two words used by Freud in his essay *The Uncanny*, to give a sense of something we thought was safe, homely, turning into something terrifying that we do not recognize, something uncanny)." The very "home" which Sandip had assumed would give him protection from threats, and from where he had successfully drawn out his "Mokkhi Rani" or Queen Bee from her cloistered world of Maharani Bagh, now sounded his death knell.

Aparna Sen has several times connected Bangla cinema into the avant-garde movement which is part of the Postmodernist discourse. She exercises her creativity in this movie when the "Internationale" is sung alongside "We Shall Overcome," both in Hindi by the protestors at the candlelight vigil in India Gate. Yet the moment is rooted to Indian culture by including a well-loved song of Tagore's "Ekla Cholo Re" also sung in Hindi. The words resonate in the chorus to demand justice for the killing of a young Muslim boy, Junaid. He had been beaten to death on a train while returning from Eid shopping, an extension of an incident that his friend Amulya had reported earlier--because he had been unable to chant the religious slogan "Jai Shree Ram" as his tongue was not familiar with these words. As Satyajit Ray stated, "The raw-material of Cinema is Life itself" (1976; 27). It is awe-inspiring that Sen lifts this incident from news channels, reporting on it which could have had it axed by the Censor Board. Sen further conceals the actual violence but encapsulates the time between this incident and another--the high handed deletion of the Ramanujan essay of the hundred Ramayanas from a history course in Delhi University.¹⁶ This happened more recently than when Nikhilesh and Sandip were fiery young college students in Delhi. The slight but deliberate distortion of political time is highly significant in this postmodern conversation as she wants her contemporary audience shocked by the change in Sandip. A youthful Sandip who had fought passionately for the restoration of the essay with his college Principal cannot now sympathize with his protégé Amulya. He berates him for not thinking about the pilgrims who had been blasted on their way to Amarnath, thus balancing revenge for terrorism as justifiable action for the common person. The word "Islamicate" from Kesavan's essay (1994, p. 246), embraces the tragic separation between childhood friends in a different way than the director's previous films on a similar theme.¹⁷ An unacknowledged kind of love is stressed where earlier Amulya's "samaskara" or

¹⁶ 15. Oct. 2011—"Ramanujan's great essay on the Ramayana is banned by the Central University of Delhi." www.thehindu.com.

¹⁷ See Mr. and Mrs. Iyer (2002) and Arshinagar (2015)—two alternative love-stories.

religious norms could not be mitigated in Nikhil's profound question about the descendants of the Partition Era: "They chose to live in a secular country" so would it not be a "terrible betrayal of the people?"

Professor Mitra, who wears the shoes of Sandip and Nikhilesh's teacher in the novel but is now primarily Nikhilesh's guru, has occasion to make a statement on Sandip's metamorphosis: "He is brilliant and persuasive but he has sold his soul to the Devil." As the review in *Indian Express* stated, "Aparna Sen's contemporary interpretation of the text takes the viewers through a time they have grown up in and a time they are living now, experiencing a gradual saffronisation of the country's political landscape."

Aparna Sen's choice of music binds the intertextual elements of contemporary history and political frames seamlessly together. She uses colour for the present and keeps flashbacks in black and white where the movement is sometimes abrupt but exceptionally smooth in the last scene. Ray (1976) speaking on music in the context of Hindi films had called it "a sort of Brechtian alienation device...Something which purposely makes the spectator aware of the artificiality of the whole thing" (73). In his own film *Ghare Baire*, he has Sandip sing two patriotic songs written by Tagore for the First Partition of Bengal in 1905 where Bimala listens enraptured. Sen's characters do not break into solo-singing but both songs portray the monsoon clouds to signify romance, betrayal and despair. "Bhara bador" is more tragic as a background score for the alienation of the lovers and Nikhil's departure for the second time to the forest (Sen, 1:26:55). He is partially escaping from the coils of his own home and Binnie's defiance that she has finally found a man she likes which had been denied to her in her hasty marriage to Nikhilesh. He also needs to understand subaltern life first hand which further puts him poles apart from Sandip who has already accused him of "armchair politics." The contrast is acute for Sandip only talks of "sewa" but Nikhil is actually engaged in the sufferings of the poor in distant Bastar. "Bhara bador" and the emptiness of "shunya mandir" echoes symbolically that "the monsoon clouds hang low" as a

storm of “parakiya prem/forbidden love” has already wrecked the home. “Adultery is a fact of life,” Sandip had told Brinda, affirming how much more beautiful it sounds in Bengali, citing allusions to Radha escaping folks at home to tryst with Krishna: “The darkness of the deepest night is rent with lightning/ Vidyapati asks O Radha, how will you bear this long separation with Krishna.” The complete song in its video clip shows a replay of the three principal characters—Binnie mentally exhausted but still wearing the red and white saree that Sandip had given her; Sandip alone now in his room at the University hostel, drinking; and Nikhil out in the forest. The camera pans on the *tehai* when the dancing peacock is reiterated three times: “Mayur nachata, mayur nachata, mayur nachata—matiya!”¹⁸ The wild crescendo picks out the bird-shaped lamp below which Binnie rests her head and Sandip as he resurfaces from his heavier thoughts and attempts to call her.

It is not mere coincidence that the same Vidyapati song is sung by a young Robi Thakur in the film *Kadambari* (1915) where Aparna Sen’s daughter, Konkana Sen plays Tagore’s tragic sister-in-law in the nuanced title role. There too the rain beats down on the couple sharing a close but platonic relationship (Ghosh, 42:10). When the monsoon showers have passed, the couple is seen engaged in a playful game of chess. The beauty of the song is enhanced by Rashid Khan’s resonant voice and it ends with twilight and the couple walking—always apart, hands never touching. Even during the beautiful *tehai* of the dancing peacock. The actor (Parambrata) playing Tagore turns towards his *Bouthan* blissfully, but she does not face the audience.¹⁹ Sen is of course intensely aware of both Tagore and Ray in the film she is reconstructing as this Maithili verse was set to music by Tagore himself. In her translation of the famous lines, she inserts the name of Radha

¹⁸ In Indian classical music, for instance in *kheyal* or *thumri*, the *tehai* is a phrase in words or musical notes repeated three times to come back with resounding vigour to the first beat, *som* denoted with a cross +.

¹⁹ In this film as in Tagore’s own life—his elder brother Jyotirindranath Tagore’s wife and his childhood playmate, his literary Muse—commits suicide because she feels rejected by both her husband and Robi. It is a theme Tagore often debates in his writings such as *Ghare Baire* and *Charulata*, both made into unforgettable films by Satyajit Ray.

although the separation that is imminent for Brinda is with both Sandip and Nikhil, real in the actual present- and more painful in terms of the final denouement.

Binnie's pregnancy lies heavy upon her and when Sandip comes, but he rejects her desire of escaping to his homeland with him on many counts. He immediately offers her the reprieve of abortion as there is "no dearth of doctors in Delhi." The damning alliterative ring is further enhanced when he tells her to pass it off as Nikhil's baby. The ultimate condemnation lies in the fatal words that she is a Dalit and he cannot afford to tarnish his "career... image... [it would be] political suicide." As he rants, the audience's dislike of the "cheating" Sandip is heightened when Amulya comes in distraught to announce that his Muslim friend, Junaid has been beaten up by Hindu boys in their neighbourhood.

The systematic *tehai* or the mystical number three is brought out in different ways in Sen's film. For instance, during the triad of patriotic songs being sung at India Gate, a distant chant breaks through the singing voices—"Bharat Chhoro." It is a reminder of the chant for Independence during the British Raj, chilling now because it is breaking up the candle-light protest with "Anti-nationals! leave India, leave India, leave India." A stone hits Sammy, she starts bleeding. Nikhil tries to protect her, insists that she must go home but she refuses just as he does when the malevolent crowd and the police action starts. Home has indeed become an elusive place for all of them as they stand out there in the open—exposed and confronting danger.

An analysis of Tagore's novel, Rays's film and Sen's reconstruction of the original plot is incomplete without considering Sammy, presumably Bara Rani in the original. She is Nikhilesh's widowed sister-in-law, dependant on his bounty but also his childhood playmate. At the end of Tagore's novel when Nikhil and Bimala are preparing to leave for Calcutta to escape the troubles that Sandip has left behind in his strident call for Nationalism, Nikhil does not consider Bara Rani as she will be more comfortable in the familiar surroundings of the palace. He finds, however, she has packed her bags and

plans to go with them because she says in a superb understatement: "... it is just as well to be on the banks of the Holy Ganges before it is too late" (Tagore 2002, 149). That is when Nikhil recognizes "the true voice of home" (149).

She was his childhood friend who came to their home as a bride for his older brother. He romped in the grounds climbing trees and eating pickles with her on summer afternoons while she lavished love as well as home-made delicacies upon him behind the backs of the elders in the household—a parallel from Tadore's own life shown in the biopic, *Kadambari* (1915). Despite their relationship not being the conventional romantic duo that Sandip forged outside her marriage with Bimala, Bara Rani loved and protected Nikhilesh as much as his teacher Chandranath Babu did. The jealousy between Bimala and the Bara Rani is left out in *Aaj* for Brinda shows herself jealous of Nikhil's past girl-friend in Oxford. Photographs she can burn but his honesty makes him admit that the memories are not so easy to destroy.

Brinda has no cause to be jealous of Sammy although she accompanies Nikhil to Bastar on their first visit where they discuss plans to build a hospital on the disputed site of a temple-mosque—an oblique reference to Ayodhya. Although Sammy does not suspect Brinda of her affair with Sandip, it is obvious that she is aware of his devious personality. She warns Nikhil not to let him stay in the house. Sammy is the one who discovers that Brinda is pregnant and brings Nikhil home to be with his wife. She is the earlier Nikhil's sister-in-law recast with all the compassion for his suffering even as she is stronger, and far more independent now, no longer childless as she has opted for single parenthood. This has a sense of hyperreality when Nikhil admires her as a "serious columnist...social activist" before Sandip, while they are recapturing the sights of their campus with posters of Che Guevara and Picasso's *Guernica* in the background.²⁰ Sandip's mocking remark on implant, of Sammy's "child without the

²⁰ The campus being shown exhibits the red brick structures of Delhi University whereas the actual shooting took place at the India Habitat Centre, Lodi Road.

complexities of marriage” he explains, is reflective of her lack of understanding of the “Indian value system.” This is one of the first solutions that Sen offers in the film which patriarchal Sandip cannot accept because “...beliefs, especially where they are ancient and systematic and embodied in organizations, have a great power of delaying desirable changes of opinion and of influencing in the wrong direction people who otherwise would have no strong feelings either way” (Russell 1968, p.136).

The director keeps the utterances of the moderate, liberal Nikhil quite simple. There is obvious negative parallelism in the fact that although Sandip rejects the baby Brinda is expecting, Nikhil is able to accept it “The baby is my Binnie’s. Isn’t that enough?” His generosity of spirit comes through like the earlier Nikhilesh, blaming himself for not protecting her. When Brinda affirms that she doesn’t love Sandip and it was only infatuation, Nikhil makes space for her in his life again. Again it is a gentle series of questions that makes him the true romantic: “If you don’t love anyone else...why do you want to leave me? Leave this house? Would it be so unbearable to live here with me?” His acceptance of the baby is followed by a chaste kiss on her forehead as he talks of the candlelight march that is coming for Junaid. Although he has forgiven her and asks her if she would like to go on a vacation with him, the audience realizes from the fictional history that their time together is almost ending.

Tagore’s novel (1916) kept the relationship with flamboyant Sandip totally platonic as was required for those times, although among the three narratives, Bimala’s voice takes precedence while and Sandip’s ceases. Sandip did manage to insert a picture of himself in a double photo-frame that Bimala has of her husband.

In Ray’s film (1984), there’s an immense leap forward with Sandip grabbing Bimala and kissing her passionately on the lips in full camera focus which caused Indian critics to denounce the scene. Finally in this film, Sen takes the relationship to its natural conclusion with erotic love scenes against monsoon songs. If Radha had to go on *abhisar*

to meet her Krishna²¹, Brinda and Sandip need no secrecy for tours of the city, monuments, museums and markets because he is rediscovering his youthful haunts through her eyes. Moving into the world of Sandip's politics is in fact limited. Beyond being likened to the Goddess Annapurna (a form of Durga/Shakti) as in the original book, Brinda accompanies him to a couple of lectures (where his voice is muted) and finally to a Hanuman temple where they are blessed by the priest. Although Sandip exultantly claims, "I've converted your wife," Nikhil later asks Brinda if she went to the temple out of "genuine belief" or for Sandip.

In terms of clothes, Sandip is always seen in Indian dress, white or beige with a customary waistcoat, especially a red one when they visit the temple. Brinda wears Sandip's gift, a fabulous red-bordered, white saree several times in the film—certainly during the temple visit and again in the scene before she discovers her pregnancy and the "Bhora bador" reverberates in the background. Amulya wears yellow when he bursts in on the lovers to tell them about the threat to Junaid's life. Only Nikhil is clad in jeans and shirt throughout the movie, subdued but waiting for his "Nemesis" as he thinks of Sandip when they first meet after their prolonged absence in his home. It is indeed bold scripting when Brinda becomes Sandip's Nemesis and she finds the strength to kill him.

It is her silent, underplayed emotions which brings the scene rolling back to the beginning of Tagore's novel where another Bimala remembers her mother clad in red and white, with a vermillion mark adorning her forehead. Ray's Bimala is also in a prominent red and white saree during Sandip's first kiss, but the end of the film shows Bimala in widow's garb while the the flame from Nikhil's funeral pyre etches the sky. Sen replaces Amulya's death with Junaid's, and Bimla the Dalit girl of a family retainer

²¹ These are illicit meetings as Radha is a married woman and she has to escape the precincts of her home where her mother in law and sister in law may be spying on her. It is interesting to note that it is not Sandip but Brinda who introduces the story of Radha's love when they go to the Hauz Khas ruins. Even when they are shopping for her saree, she continues to hum the lines of the song "payal baaje re..." / "but the sound of my anklets give away my love."

is transformed to a Brinda who not only learns English in a boarding school, but kills to vanquish evil. Baudrillard (1981) conceives of hyperreality as the final stage of simulation where an image has really no image to reality but provides "its own pure simulacrum" (p.6). There the audience is left to imagine Brinda as part of the symbolic process of the Goddess eradicating evil, although shock and disbelief in that on-screen killing may or may not lead to acceptance of the idea. There is certainly some poetic justice along with a feeling of catharsis.

There is actually dispassionate violence in the end of the film, *Aaj* from both Sandip and Brinda that blurs the lines between what is the crime and what will be celebrated. Sandip had wanted "Dhamki" or a verbal threat but it is not clear whether he could have prevented the assassination. He is the first to reach the body of his friend riddled with bullets, but takes control of the situation very soon. As the reporters clamour for sound bytes (which almost turns into a press meet), he forgets that he has just told Brinda that Nikhil was his only true friend. He describes Nikhil as a "political adversary" who may have been gunned down by Maoist bullets. Mazumdar (2011) analyses such fear and refers to the "memory archive for its conspiracy narrative...this new form of urban cinema [which] deploys the aesthetics of surveillance to evoke an effective world of anxiety" (p. 148).

Aparna Sen undoubtedly remembers that Ray's script for his film was already complete in the 1940s but he waited a long while to make the film, In fact Ray had observed the Naxalite movement that ripped apart the city of Calcutta in the '60s and '70s. He said to Andrew Robinson of the gathering violence during the earlier Partition: [Nikhilesh] represents Tagore's attitude towards the terrorist movement and its ultimate futility" (qtd. Das Gupta, 2019).

In fact, Jameson (1991) establishes that "throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and terror" (Chap.1). Sandip's psychosis begins perhaps from his own Maoist days. A grim flashback of the experiences that make up today's

Sandip includes images of terror in jungle guerilla warfare where jeeps are blown up and he himself has to wield the gun against an innocent man to prove his loyalties. In his early confession to Nikhil in the film, his theoretical stand of “armed revolution” and “no faith in the Constitution” had led him into a jungle path where he had seen his heroes as Gods with clay feet. To answer Nikhil’s derisive comment, “So you have blood on your hands” he brings up his patriarchal grandfather, highly deserving of respect who despite his frailties saved his grandson from the police. Thus working for the Gram Panchayat as he was already the *Chhote Sarkar* (young lordship), then moving towards Hindu Nationalist politics and desiring/deserving of a nomination to a seat in the Rajya Sabha was a trajectory of events that had to happen. According to Nikhil, Sandip had signed a “bond to [his] grandfather.” It may be argued that he could have practiced a great deal of sincerity and uprightness of character in his service to the nation than living in his friend’s plush home when he had alternate accommodation, making love to his friend’s wife and then abandoning her in her time of need. This is not necessarily the merit of a political leader, whichever party he might belong to.²² He succeeds therefore in breaking apart irrevocably his friendship with Nikhil as he takes the noble religion of Hinduism and as their teacher says, seeks to “Talibanise it.”

Similarly, he takes selfishly a woman whom he can never fully accept because her roots are of the Dalit caste and he is ultimately a high born Hindu. His schizophrenic transformation belies the fact that once upon a time he had saved his friend Sammy from his village goons and brought them to justice before his grandparents, breaking the hands of one, making them beg pardon at Sammy’s feet before kicking them out of their courtyard. When Sammy had fainted during the buffalo sacrifice at the Durga Puja in his own home, both friends had moved her away from the bloody scene. Yet Sandip

²² When Sandip argues with Nikhil about his concept of the “real India,” he uses strong expletives that they are living in “two separate bloody continents.” He had given up Maoist politics because of its demand for “unquestioning obedience.” He refused to see what Prof. Mitra was trying to show, that a certain brand of Hinduism also demanded “unquestioning faith.” The teacher cites the Creation hymn-Nasadiya sukla” which is teeming with questions rather than statements and the verse in the Rig Veda affirms: The Gods came afterwards with the creation of the Universe.”

had obviously subscribed for his grandparent's dictum that a woman must know her place and protect her jewel for one special person. This flashback from the early part of the movie, his reluctance to re-awaken his friendship with Sammy, and his ultimate rejection of Brinda suggests that he might even be sneering at her for taking his advances seriously. It is forbidden love that excites him, not loyalty to those who have loved him.

The discourse in *Aaj* is reflexive in nature because the people watching are not looking for entertainment in genre cinema which has risen far above its popular counterpart. Reading Foucault (1977) reminds the audience of "counter –memory... a transformation of history into a totally different form of time" (160). A new sense of reasoning takes place where it is power, truth and identity coming from within. Although madness is not supposed to speak out, it can dominate the understanding of a relationship, in this case Brinda's as she was--and what she has become. Foucault (1965) explains: "What is originitive is the caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason; reason's subjugation of non-reason, wresting from it its truth as madness, crime, or disease, derives explicitly from this point" (x). Brinda sees truth in another kind of reason which supplants non-reason, when the difference between them unleashes a freely moving power within her, where her mind takes unknown shape beyond social norms.

The digressive narrative structure and fragmented cinematic images in *Aaj* bring together several loose threads of the earlier narratives but open up some more. So the audience is left with three more questions: What will happen when Nikhil's parents return from Mukteshwar? Will Brinda be arrested and given bail? What will happen to the unborn child? None of these can be answered through conventional morality or with any certainty. *Aaj* remains a film without closure.

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