



THE CELLULOID SAGA OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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ABSTRACT

Cinema and Literature are the two different ways to fascinate and influence human psyche. A successful amalgam of both is inextricably fruitful. Since the inception of cinema, literature has fascinated creative filmmakers endlessly. Most of the notable films which first brought Indian Cinema an International fame were based on the great works of literature. The confluence of the two made the cinematic land rich and fertile yielding plentiful harvest for the cineastes. There is a galaxy of such writers whose works are best for cinematic adaptations and Tagore is one of them. Tagore was a gifted actor and was very enthusiastic about giving a new tone to the Bengali Stage. The present paper tries to highlight the fact that Tagore, who is known more as a writer, a Nobel Laureate is, though unknown to the masses, one of the most cinematically adapted writers of all the times. What makes him so special is his amazing expertise in all the three arts needed for successful dramatic presentation i.e. Music, Writing and Painting (visual quality). There is a tremendous scope in his works to imagine and re-interpret the things resulting in the overwhelming response of the film makers to his short stories and other works. No wonder, More than 100 of his works have been adapted to full length feature films. The paper shows the dynamic relationship between his literature and cinema.

Key words: *Cinema, Literature, Stage, visual presentation, cinematic adaptation, re-interpretation.*

INTRODUCTION

Cinema and Literature are the two different ways to fascinate and influence human psyche. A successful amalgam of both is inextricably fruitful. "If film did not grow out of literature, it

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grew towards it, and what novels and films most strikingly have in common is the potential and propensity for narrative.”¹ Literature, however, came much before the advent of cinema. Traveling through different ages, cultures continents and the contours of religious multiplicity, beliefs and traditions literature reached a point where it could sow the seed of cinema to take its roots and flourish. Since the inception of cinema, literature has fascinated creative filmmakers endlessly. Most of the notable films which first brought Indian Cinema an International fame were based on the great works of literature. The irresistible magnetism that literature holds for the film industry is evident from the way the eminent directors have been making films based on the works of literature and ancient classics. The confluence of the two has made the cinematic land rich and fertile yielding plentiful harvest for the cineastes. The literature of the antiquity has provided endless inspiration, plots and characters for the film makers. There is a galaxy of such writers whose works are best for cinematic adaptations and Tagore is one of them.

Rabindranath Tagore, the Renaissance man, was a versatile and multifaceted personality. He was a poet, a dramatist, a novelist, an educationist, a short story writer, a musician, a painter, a philosopher, a reformer and an actor and director too. He was, in one word “a darling of Versatility” and “Art’s Minion”. But the moment, the word ‘cinema’ comes; it seems to be far-fetched as far as Tagore is concerned. But the fact is, along with being a bright Sun in the sky of literature, Tagore was also a bright and scintillating star of the celluloid. Tagore was a gifted actor and was very enthusiastic about giving a new tone to the Bengali Stage. The present paper tries to highlight the fact that Tagore, who is known more as a writer, a Nobel Laureate, though unknown to the masses, is one of the most cinematically adapted writers of all the times.

If the history of the development of cinema is studied, one may find a clear and strong influence of ‘theater’ on it. Films were based on the plays that were staged. There is a long list of the writers whose works are widely and largely adapted in cinema ,such as the films based on Shakespearean tragedies like ‘Macbeth’, “Othello”, “Romeo and Juliet” etc. ,G.B.Shaw’s “Pygmalion” made into “My Fair Lady”, Ibsen’s dramas ; in Hindi ,Amrita Pritam’s “Pinjar”...the list is long and the enthusiasm endless. However, Tagore stands gigantic and tall among them all .What makes him so special is his amazing expertise in all the three arts needed for successful dramatic presentation i.e. Music, Writing and Painting (visual quality).Cinema is an audio-visual medium wherein we find an alluring amalgam of script, music and painting .Tagore was a virtuoso in music and his Rabindra sangeet inspired a number of lyricists making it an integral part of a number of films. He was a literary giant and also an adept painter. Since these three skills are the foundation stones for cinema, Tagore’s stories are easily adapted into it. In one or the other way Tagore influenced the world of cinema though not getting directly involved in it. The universality of his themes and

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emotions, the simple plots narrated in his stories are not only heart touching but are the perfect masterpieces for visual adaptations and visual interpretations. There is a tremendous scope in his works to imagine and re-interpret the things resulting in the overwhelming response of the film makers to his short stories and other works. No wonder, More than 100 of his works have been adapted to full length feature films.

Tagore was a visionary, a man whose thoughts and philosophy do not belong to just one age but to all the ages. He is not of one time. Breaking the confines of the times, he belongs to all the times. This rare universality and timelessness made it possible for Tagore to influence the film makers of different eras and different lands. It reminds one of what Tagore has said in ‘Gitanjali’,

“Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not

Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own.

Thou hast brought the distant near and made a brother of the stranger...”²

His emotions go beyond time and space and find cinematic adaptations in English too. There is no other writer who could inspire film makers in so many multiple ways as Tagore did. The cinematic touches are sprinkled all over his works. Even before the advent of ‘talkies’, in the silent era, Tagore’s stories are seen being adapted for cinema. The films like “Manbhanjan(1923)”, “Bisarjan(1929)”, “Bicharak(1929)”, “Giribala(1930)”, “Dalia(1930)”, and “Naukadubi” made during the silent era are enough to prove his influence right from the very inception of celluloid. Though these works are lost now, their names will remain immortal in the history of the development of cinema, a nascent art.

The advent of talkies era augmented this influence further. Not just his novels, novellas, plays and short stories but even his poems and songs also came to be adapted for cinema with much success. The notable among them are “Chirkumara Sabha”(1932), “Sodh Bodh”(1942), “Gora”(1938), “Chokher Bali”(1938). These are also lost in the history their mention here is indelible.

In the latter half of the 20th century, this magnetic force of Tagore’s works pulled even Hindi cinema towards it. Along with Bengali cinema, Hindi cinema also records some record breaking adaptations of Tagore. Noteworthy among them are Nitin Bose’s “Milan” (1947) starring Dilip Kumar and Sudhendu Roy’s “Upaharam” (1972) in Malayalam and Kumar Sahani’s “Char Adhyay”, in 1997. “Char Adhyay”, is a political novel and the film shows the destructive potential of any time-honored system followed blindly and placed above the human needs. The central character, Ela, being a part of a group of revolutionaries slowly starts questioning blind patriotism mirroring Tagore’s own departure from Nationalism. With



camera by one of India's most creative cinematographers K.K.Mahajan, the film is a restrained interpretation of Tagore's work.

Tagore's lyrical novel "Sesher Kobita" is turned into Indo-French production, "Mon Amour" by Subrajit Mitra in 2008. Even Suman Mukhopadhyay also made the film on the same novel with the same name in 2015 starring Konkana Sen Sharma and Rahul Bose in lead roles. Film maker Sekar Das' "Jogajog" and Suman Ghosh's "Kadambari" are two of the biggest films showing the charm of Tagore that continues to attract a number of directors even today. Rituparno Ghosh adapted "Chokher Bali" and channelized the rare feministic attitude. Aishwarya Rai in the character of 'Binodini', a widow, refuses to give in the norms and slowly subverts the system.

There are a number of film makers who adapted Tagore's works religiously. Yet there are two film makers, Satyajit Ray and Tapan Sinha who not only adapted his stories but maintained their essence in toto, may be considered as the biggest admirers of Tagore.

Satyajit Ray, an obsessively obsessed film maker adapted a few of Tagore's stories into four films. He made "Teen Kanya" (Three Daughters) in 1961, based on three of Tagore's stories namely "The Postmaster", "Monihara", and "Samapti". Even individual films were already made on these stories by some other filmmakers. "Teen Kanya" was made as a fitting tribute to Tagore on his birth centenary in 1961. The film has become a rare masterpiece of a master writer and a master film maker. "The Postmaster" is a touching tale of meeting and separation of a postmaster who gets posted to a small village, befriends a little girl, teaches her to read and write and one day he has to go away from her. "Monihara" is a story of a woman's obsession for jewels and "Samapti" is the story of a tomboyish girl who realizes the love for her husband too late. In 1964, Ray made "Charulata" based on Tagore's "Nashtoni" and won Second Silver Bear for Best Direction in the Berlin International Film Festival. Ray also won a Golden Palm nomination at Cannes Film Festival for "Ghare-Baire" (Home and the World). The theme of this novel is "women Empowerment" that matches with Ray's passion too. The movie portrays the early 20th century when there was a chaotic situation created out of British people's malign intention to divide Bengal on religious grounds. The film exposes the hypocrisy of some of the leaders of National Movement and makes an appeal for compassion. The love triangle between a progressive Bengali, Nikhil, who wants freedom for his wife, Bimala and a nationalistic leader, Sandip, who uses him and also seduces his wife. The situation is relevant even today and may continue to do so in the coming times also.

Satyajit Ray admired Tagore's works and vision to the extent of making a dramatized documentary on the life of the Poet Laureate himself. The film made in 1961, is a treat for the



lovers of cinema as it shows the deft cinematic touches of a master filmmaker and sets it apart from most of the biographical documentaries.

Another admirer of Tagore, Tapan Sinha visually interpreted four films based on his works, namely “Kabuliwala”(1957), which was later made in Hindi by Hemen Gupta in 1961, “Khudito Pashan”(1960), “Atithi”(1969) and “Kadambari”(2001). “Khudito Pashan” (Hungry Stones), a classic by every standard, is a story of a tax collector who moves into a haunted palace and falls in love with a beautiful ghost. Interpreting Tagore’s works in his own unique style, Tapan Sinha made it a National Award winning masterpiece.

Tapan Sinha even dealt with “Kabuliwala” with an unprecedented success in Bangla which was later on won by its Hindi version made by Bimal Roy. An emotional and touching story of a widower Afghan Pathan who has to leave his daughter in Afgan and come to India. There he finds his daughter in a small girl “Mini”, but the society will not permit this innocent love for the little girl. Balraj Sahni, who taught at Shantiniketan before entering films, enacted the role of Kabuliwala and touched the hearts of the audience with a tender humanism making the film memorable.

While discussing about the adaptations of Tagore’s works for cinema, the mention must be made of the filming of “Natir puja” an adaptation of his poem “Pujarini” as it is the only time when Tagore got directly involved in filmmaking. New Theatres, a Film production company arranged this film making in 1932, on the occasion of Tagore’s 70th birth anniversary. Tagore personally interacted in making it. The screenplay was written under his guidance by his nephew, Dinendranath Tagore and the students of Shantiniketan acted in it. Tagore directed this dance –drama and also played an important role in the film.

Tagore’s contribution to the world of celluloid demands more attention especially by the country that prides itself for making the world’s largest number of cinemas annually. Tagore’s influence surpasses even some of the great directors of all the times. Now it is the time for the cineastes to redefine cinema and get bathed in the glory of this bright star of the celluloid, Rabindranath Tagore.

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- 2 Gitanjali, verse 63