

Paper

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## Ray's *Monihara*: A Re-examination of the Horrific Wife



### Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore is considered a true visionary when it comes to the women he has written about, particularly in his short stories and novels. But as scholars have pointed out, the apparent conservatism of his times and the people he was addressing often resulted in a tendency to compromise. “Tagorean creativity manifests a ‘betweenness’ by its location within the conflicting impulses of his time” (Mukherjee T., 2013), and an inquiry into the ‘uncanny’ is where often this liminality is visibly explored, through the portrayal of women and their desire in these stories. As pointed out by Somdatta Mondal, though:

Tagore’s feminist beliefs and treatment of women characters were not consistent throughout his writing career. As far as the point of view of women was concerned, it moved between conservatism and radicalism, and so, in some stories, the marginalized

woman finds a voice and challenges her position, while in others, she is compelled to conform to patriarchal boundaries. (Mondal, 2015)

In several of his *Galpaguccha* short stories, Tagore carved a space where an “unusual female protagonist” could exist. She would be strong-willed, sensitive, moral, and an independent woman with the capacity to challenge or question “the dominant patriarchal ideology and pose an alternate notion of female subjectivity outside its prescriptive norm” (Mondal, 2015). In others, particularly in the context of situations that could be termed as ‘uncanny’ (Freud, 2017), the same women and their lack of association with their assigned societal roles and duties were represented negatively in the text, manifesting in the “woman’s figuration [as] femme fatale” in these stories (Mukherjee T., 2013). “*Monihara*” (Bereft of Moni/Gems) is one instance where the female protagonist is described in the harshest of terms, both in her role as a woman and a

wife, failing in her domestic and domestic marital duties. Her failure culminates in her haunting her lovelorn husband over jewels.

Ray's work and his adaptations of Tagore's stories, particularly that of Tagore's women, their nuances, and their perspectives, have earned him the title of Tagore's greatest disciple. (Sengoopta, 2012) However, as posited by Sengoopta and based on many of Ray's personal interviews, it is evident that Ray was a "critical and creative interlocutor more than an ardent and devoted follower." His treatment of Tagore's characters is at the forefront of this argument. They are often altered to provide them dimension, give them agency, a voice, and, most importantly, make them contemporary. Through exquisite set design, camera work, blocking, and writing, Ray highlighted some of Tagore's women, critically engaging with their contexts through all other aspects filmmaking as a medium allows, providing them more than their original creator had initially afforded.

While there is an extensive discourse on this relationship in general with a special focus on films like *Charulata*, 1964 (Chaudhuri M., 2013), *Ghare Baire*, 1984, etc. *Monihara* (The Lost Jewels), 1961 adapted by Ray as part of his anthology *Teen Kanya*, 1961 remains largely ignored. This is more noticeably so because of the extensive literature and engagement, both academic or otherwise, that exists on the other two shorts, which form part of the anthology, *Postmaster*, 1961 and *Samapti* (Conclusion), 1961 (Hemphill, 1998). *Teen Kanya*, made in honour of Tagore's 100<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary, explores the various stages of women's lives and their changing roles in society. All three stories explore a woman's relationship with the men around her.

It is well-known that Ray removed *Monihara* from the anthology for its international release. The final film was distributed under the title of "Two Daughters" (Bhattacharyya, Bhattacharyya Panda, & Mondal, 2014). This anecdote, Ray's interviews stating *Monihara*'s treatment being similar to that of *Charulata* in its setting (Chaudhuri S., 2017), and it being Ray's only horror film seem to be the extent to which discourse around it begins and ends. However, on further reflection, the film may be read as an

exploration of gender roles and marriage inflected through the genre of the horror film, beginning with but going far beyond mere jump scares.

The upcoming sections examine *Monihara* beyond the limitations of the current and existing literature, exploring aspects of desire, mental health, and relationships that the original story only hints at. Through close readings of the film with references to Tagore's original, this paper attempts to interrogate how, in the process of adaptation, Ray relocates the horror from judgment and greed to the loneliness of an increasingly helpless woman and her lacking marriage.

### The Ideal Relationship

As Ray's narrator, schoolmaster Sri Gobindolal Chakraborty, states, often reading lines directly quoted from Tagore's story as dialogue, a man and woman's roles are strictly defined and bound. Any deviation is predictably a cause for the collapse of the relationship and then the marriage. In *Monihara*, this is explained simply.

'Traditionally, women like raw (sour) mangoes, hot chilies, and stern husbands.' The implication is that if a man does not make demands on his wife, he is considered weak, lacking in masculinity, and does not command respect from his wife. (Chakravarty, 2011)

To further explain this, a woman is compared to a deer who needs a strong trunk to sharpen antlers on. A weak man, much like the 'banana tree,' is ignored. The man's incapability of being a brute leaves a woman fatigued and with nowhere to devote their attention and affections to. Women, it is explained, are born with an innate need to pry affection out of their husbands, who are meant to be their only world. When affection is easily provided, they become dissatisfied, and their lives and desires become unfulfilled.

While there is extensive detail in this regard in the original story, Ray's adaptation cuts through this focusing only on the husband's presumed folly of

loving his wife too much. Phanibhushan is charged with the crime of allowing Monimalika too much agency and spoiling her with jewellery, yearning for love he doesn't receive, making his wife bear the burden of their unhappy association through marriage.

However, on further inspection, one notices that this may not entirely be the case. From the moment we see the female protagonist, she is distracted, lost in thought, and looking out through a window at the outside world. There are several instances between the spouses that range from affection to flirtation but never beyond that. At every hint of her husband getting uncomfortably close, Monimalika shrinks back, often hiding discomfort at her husband's physical touch under the garb of being coy.

Through her husband's candour in expecting love in return for presents and Moni Malika's questioning of his intent, the narrative reveals a marriage that is happy on the surface, with a devoted husband, but one in which the wife's position and needs are disregarded repeatedly, outside of the material and quantifiable. There is deep disregard for her consent, concerns, or desires, even though their marriage entered its tenth year.

Ray's camera follows Moni (Malika) around in her quarters, the cinematic space providing her with an agency of expression that Tagore's synoptic storyteller and his descriptions do not. Here she becomes much more than the heartless beauty only concerned with material things. She becomes someone grappling with the complex nature of a long-term relationship that exists outside of her control, one that uproots her from the known and unpleasant into a kind of solitary existence where expectations from her begin and end at being *pativrata* in her thoughts and actions.

The narrative, the *mise-end-scene*, the uncomfortable music all point towards a discomfort, but one in which the woman is experiencing it rather than orchestrating it. Even with all the affection received, is this then an ideal marriage?

### Companionship, Love, and Lack

This superficial glance at a less than ideal marriage is given more dimension and context when Moni one day discusses her childless state with her husband. She tries to communicate to him her loneliness and how their relatives' dismissal of her as an 'unlucky' woman affects her, but he ignores her worries, calling her 'pegol' or mad.

Throughout the setting, she is placed alone for long periods of time, without company to engage her in any way, except the framed photo of her husband's bejewelled aunt and her possessions. Her perfectly acceptable, childless, and loveless marriage becomes one that no longer is enough. She is forced to experience the outside world through a window or only when her husband or cousin enters at their whims and needs, always without her consent. These are the only instances where she finds herself in the company of others, but most of these entrances are framed as an intrusion into her private space, where the men are often voyeuristically framed from the back.

All of this circumscribes her existence at the periphery of her husband's life. She is simply an object of her husband's desire and one-sided affection without any of her own. She is her cousin's (or former lovers, as Madhuja Mukherjee reads it) means of getting a job with her husband. Playing out in the confines of her elaborately furnished room, which she is constantly dismantling and putting back together, her existence becomes nothing more than an extension of what the men surrounding her deem fit. This room becomes symbolic of her changing state of mind, initially tidy and with lots of open spaces but slowly becoming unkempt as she comes undone. "Haunted by an unresolved past and troubled by an uneasy present, the uncanny in her life represents the reality of the home and its dark chambers" (Mukherjee M., 2015).

At this stage, with time and in her captive state within the confines of her prettily decorated chambers, she finds solace in her jewels and her quest to preserve her fading beauty. These are elements that are only hers and under which she may exert complete control outside of her imposed roles. It is with these objects that she is afforded the freedom to

be herself, and it is in this exploration she finds purpose and her desire.

While her failing mental health is dismissed as her being a frigid woman who refuses to acknowledge her husband's affections in her greed, in reality, her husband becomes the means to acquire more of what she truly comes to desire and an important association she cherishes, in a manner that is different from all her other roles—one where there are no expectations from her at all, beyond what she chooses.

This culminates at a crucial point in the film, where her loneliness is in full display but which her husband does not take notice of, despite his intrusive and ill-timed entry that takes away her privacy without her knowledge. Moni stares outside and sings Tagore's *Baje Koruno Shure*. The lyrics and the sole tanpura paint a picture of the turmoil in her head and heart, her restlessness, and the estrangement she feels towards her situation and the people she is meant to love. This is in stark contrast to the music used throughout the film otherwise. The song serves as a final severance of the fast-dissolving bond between her husband and her.

### **Horrors of Failing Mental Health and Unusual Desires**

From here onwards, her desire transforms into an urgent need that is obsessive, looks at all others with suspicion, and depicts Moni's mental unravelling. From a yearning for motherhood, her attention becomes fully devoted to the jewels she zealously guards and covets. Her husband remains oblivious, misunderstanding her detachment as disregard for his affection. So instead of choosing to see his wife, he continues to believe in his perception of her: a greedy woman wooed simply by the jewellery she seems to care for so much.

Moni starts to suspect those around her as people who wish to separate her from her belongings. When her husband dismisses her misgivings about the manservant Bhagirath, and as external issues bring forth financial trouble for him, Moni, in her suspicion, tests even her devoted husband's intentions. She feels betrayed when he relents to the

idea of selling her jewellery—the only source of reprieve from her dull existence. In her haste to get away from a husband she unfortunately and “grossly” misunderstands, she places her trust in her cousin in an attempt to keep her jewellery safe at any cost. She is ironically betrayed by the only man she chooses to trust, dying and losing her possessions in the process (Chakravarty, 2011). Her metonymic relationship with the jewels takes precedence over her marriage. She protects them to the exclusion of everyone else and is parted with them only in death.

This is not a matter of simple greed and suspicion. This is the story of a woman who—unlike how she is made out to be by the men in her life and the ones telling her story—is capable of desire, affection, and protection, one that is selfless and the kind she is willing to risk losing her life over. She is also, unfortunately, someone who is denied the chance to fully explore these aspects of herself in a manner she wants: a manner society sees as unfit, or as it happens through the progression of the film, horrific. Her insistence in the wake of this prohibition to pursue her object of desire beyond the death that the world of her narrative deals with her becomes the subject and occasion for the entry of the horror genre into the story.

There are many ways the incidents that occur after her death in the story might be read. One is through the lens of desire itself. This deep sense of longing for company, which she fulfils through possession of objects, culminates into her staging a return even after her death to retrieve the remaining pieces of jewellery she knew her husband would procure for her. To be reunited with her lover to which she feels bound outside of the physicality of earthly existence, at the expense of her husband, towards whom she felt nothing, she returned in the dead of night, searching ceaselessly for her objects of desire.

The second part is from Phanibhushan's point of view. However well-intentioned and ill-formed, his love is one that he believes knows no bounds. Thus, lost at the loss of his wife, much of what happens after her death is more about Phanibhushan's perception of her coming to the forefront of his mind.



He is grieving but also angry about his wife's choice and desire for material objects over him.

He is overcome with a complex array of emotions ranging from grief to jealousy as he grapples with his existence in their relationship so far, where he firmly believes he has been wronged. However, he is consumed by his beloved's loss, which becomes the crux of the haunting he feels he is exposed to. Much of the haunting may also be his interpretation of his state of mind, where he imagines what he has envisioned of his wife, coming to life in his mind in ways that people surrounding him do not seem to notice.

The story ends with the man to whom the narrator tells the story revealing himself as the ghost of Phanibhushan before disappearing into thin air. This twist ending is more than a trope for mere entertainment in an era when horror was still a fledgling genre in Bengali cinema (Dhusiya, 2018). The alleged spectre of Phanibhushan's spirited (pun unintended) objection to some of the facts of the storyteller's narrative before he vanishes underlines this sensational aspect of horror cinema of the time. Was his wife the ghost, or is he? Did either of them come back from the dead? It does not matter, for the horror that Ray's adaptation is interested in exposing and exploring is the one that is made of their marriage.

### Conclusion

Objects like the jewels in *Monihara* are extremely crucial in critical analyses of narratives of desire. "Things and the preoccupation with them" (Mukherjee M., 2015) point at greater complexities within characters and the stories themselves. But as this reading of the film and its approach to the narrative reveals, there is much more to the story than the cautionary tale of a woman's uncanny affection for objects.

The horror is contextualized further by the deeper questions it poses tied to society and the socio-political environment within which the film was made and distributed. This must also take into account the film's placement between two other stories, that both stories work to reinvent Tagore's

original tales into interpretations that move away from stereotypical portrayals of women as weak, offering to generate sympathy by providing them nuances and dignity much beyond what is seen in the originals. This is important because:

As [Ray] deliberately de-emphasized the father-daughter relationship in each story, the girls are then daughters of India, sharing traits that Ray sees as integral to Indian womanhood in post-independence India. (Hemphill, 1998)

On initial exploration, this seems true for only two of the three stories in the film anthology; however, even within *Monihara*, a period piece, there is a clear criticism of the institution of the arranged marriage with a portrayal aimed to scare the viewer into considering its many demerits, delving much deeper than the melodramatic portrayal of a bejewelled skeleton's arm.

It is also important to note that *Monihara* wasn't marketed as a horror film. It is an exploration of a woman's life, love, and existence in a stale unsatisfactory marriage that is placed between two others which also explore relationships and various kinds of love. This is important because it further acts to establish its narratorial intent in a Nehru-led post-independence India. Ray greatly admired Nehru's vision for a new India, and many of his films have themes that align with the ideas of women's emancipation and the critique of feudalism (Ghosh, 2016). The two-tiered structure Tagore used in his short story becomes an occasion for Ray not only to pull off a masterful twist that did not exist in the source text but also a tool for him to expose the invalidity of dominant notions of marriage and companionship.

Tagore's initial interrogation of the arranged marriage system "and the entrapment and enslavement of women as wives" is expounded upon more viscerally. Although caring "husbands provide shelter, security and sustenance" (Mondal, 2015), the women live in loveless marriages and, in some instances, like Moni's, is driven to extremes to fill the void of their lonesome existence. Thus, even as horror becomes the centre of attention, "*Monihara*

oscillates between the assertion of feminine independence and crises of masculinities” (Dhusiya, 2018).

Tagore’s stories explore the ‘afterlife’ of desire being played out in which earthly emotions get rerouted and intensified in death. The childless woman, “with the intrusion of the uncanny” presents a scenario where the men encounter the women as not what they know and deem frivolous, but as “terrifying,’ ‘unhomely’ and ‘bizarre’ and it is in this

experience, that a subtle, temporary but unexpected subversion of power relations occurs between these men and women (Mukherjee T., 2013). *Monihara* is at the centre of this discourse. Ray’s only horror film, a period piece that was a part of a cinematic experiment in honour of Tagore’s ideas, examines gender equations of the time in a very different form from “the mainstream portrayal of love” (Dhusiya, 2018).

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