

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## JALSAGHAR (THE MUSIC ROOM) 1958

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

**Contents** (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

### OVERVIEW

*Jalsaghar (The Music Room)* is Ray's homage to a bygone era of Bengali culture. Set in the 1920s, it narrates the slow decline of a wealthy and cultured landlord (*zamindar*) named Roy, who is confronted by the crass modernity of his upstart neighbour. Vain, indulgent and proud, Roy is so absorbed with his own aesthetic pleasures and maintenance of status that his wife and only son die as an indirect result. The eponymous music room is the most important part of Roy's decrepit manor house, a space where he can relive the glory and opulence of the 'old days.' There are few dramatic incidents of note in the film (except for the death of his wife and son), which focuses instead on the performance of music and dance. The central character, Roy, is neither hero nor anti-hero, but rather a sad and lonely old man trapped in nostalgia but capable of one last grand gesture.

### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

This film is important for its depiction of a society, or at least a sliver of a society, that had died off decades earlier. The art forms that are celebrated in Roy's music room are associated with a glorious past that is most often symbolised by the Mughal Empire, which came to an end a hundred years before Satyajit Ray made his film. But the social context of those arts, and the aristocratic tastes that patronised them, lived on among the zamindars who still ruled estates in the countryside in the 1920s, when the story is set. The zamindar's mansion in the film is a massive imposing structure, comparable to a historical monument that archaeologists study. And within the mansion, the music room is a space with its own tale to tell. There, with the glittering chandeliers and heavy oil portraits, the ornate chairs and plush sofas, the classical arts of north India continued to be performed. Only in the 1950s, did that room finally give way to another darkened interior, the cinema, in which audiences would gather to enjoy music, song and dance. Ray was often criticised in some circles for being too much a product of western influences, of appealing to the international art-house audience. But in this film, he shows just how deeply he is imbued with traditional Indian culture. It is a culture he loved and yet was still able to criticise. That is what makes his own art sublime.

### STORY

*Detached* The opening sequence shows Biswambhar Roy lying on a couch on the roof of his mansion near the banks of a river. He is a rich landlord, or *zamindar*, and the time is the 1920s. The beginning of the end of colonialism may have begun in the metropolises of India, but here in the countryside it might as well be the 1820s. Puffing on his hookah, he pauses for a moment to nonchalantly ask his servant what month it is. The servant not only has to inform him of the month but also the season. Roy is so far detached from the present that he does not even keep an eye of the agricultural cycle, which is the source of his income. Roy hears the sound of a *shehnai* (a traditional reed, woodwind instrument) and learns that his neighbour is celebrating the sacred Brahmin thread ceremony for his son.

*Reverie* At this point, Roy closes his eyes and drifts back four years when he performed the same coming-of-age ritual for this son, Khoka. Right before the ceremony, his new and prosperous neighbour, Mahim Ganguly, came to ask permission for his property development and money-lending schemes on Roy's feudal estate. In contrast to the serene and sophisticated Roy, Ganguly is nervous and common, even stamping out his cigarette butts on the polished floor of his host's house. Although he is bored with Ganguly's financial schemes, Roy grants him permission to pursue them.

*Concert 1* Next comes the first of three elaborate musical concerts. This first is one that Roy proudly arranges for his son's sacred thread ceremony. It is a serious classical performance by a woman singer to a male-only audience, as was customary at the time. After the elaborate event, Roy's wife,

Mahamya, criticises him for squandering the dwindling estate income on such opulent things from the past. She would be even more angry if she knew, as we do, that Roy has been funding his extravagant life-style by selling off his wife's marital jewellery. She insists that he close up the 'music room', but he doesn't register her demand. Then she asks permission to take their son, Khoka, to visit her ailing father. Although they will be travelling in heavy monsoon weather, Roy is oblivious to any danger and more interested in his next concert, so he consents.

*Irksome new neighbour* Left alone, Roy hires a sitar player to amuse him, but the private concert is interrupted by a racket coming from the new electric generator installed in Ganguly's house. Next, the upstart neighbour invites Roy to his house-warming party. In the course of their conversation, Roy is happy to learn that although Ganguly's new mansion is fitted out with the European fashion, it does not have a music room. In order to humiliate his neighbour, Roy forces him to postpone his ceremony because he (Roy) has already planned another concert in his music room. This sudden decision alarms his estate manager, who knows that the cost of this gala event will sink the estate further into debt. Roy ignores his caution and sends a message to his wife and son that they must return for the concert.

*Concert 2* The second concert performed in Roy's music room is a vocal performance by a Muslim male singer. The music is elegant, but Roy is disturbed by the flashes of lightning he sees outside the music room and he is further annoyed to find a large insect crawling around in his wine glass. These are portents of what he learns in the morning: his wife and only child have drowned in the river during a storm. Shocked, Roy orders his servants to shut the music room for good.

*Back to the present* Now we return to the present, where Roy is idling on the roof of his mansion. The closure of his music room heralded the end of his opulent life. He has no income and few servants. Walking downstairs and then outside, he gazes on an elephant and a horse, the remains of his once-grand estate. Roy loved his animals and gave them names. Now, even this pleasant nostalgic moment, however, is sullied by the sight of Ganguly's modern tractor ploughing up the land.

*A modern music room* The upheaval of the modern world is then illustrated further when Ganguly comes over for another visit and tells Roy that he has added a music room to his own mansion. He will open it with a grand concert, and announces the name of the performer, who is a famous dancer. Infuriated by this pretentious fool, Roy orders his servant to hire the same dancer for a concert in his music room on the very next day. A grand final gesture, for everyone knows that this will liquidate his cash and he will be destitute.

*Concert 3* This final concert elevates Roy into supreme aesthetic pleasure but drops him into irreparable debt. When the concert concludes and Ganguly attempts to shower the dancer with a load of coins, Roy intervenes regally and asserts his right, as patron, to make the ceremonial payment to the performer. The coins he puts into the dancer's hands are the last that he owns.

*Climax* After the concert, Roy is in good spirits, revived by the performance and the wine, but also drunk with pride. He strolls around his music room, gazing at the portraits of his wealthy ancestors, almost drinking in their status. But then he has a vision of the candles in the room burning out, one by one. His light, too, is fading fast.

## THEMES

**Loss** This is a film about loss, about looking back to what has gone and vainly attempting to create it. At the beginning of the story, Roy is already a ruined man, idly lounging in his crumbling mansion, enjoying his hookah, one of the few things he can still afford. Then, we follow the aging man as he reverts back to an earlier period and we understand how he has come to this state of loss. Time has moved on outside the music room, while within it Roy maintains a culture suspended in the past, in which he can appreciate fine paintings, music and dance. He takes pride in that fact that while Ganguly has electric lights, his music room is illuminated by candle-powered chandeliers. However, his tastes are out of step with the present. Gone also is his income from the estate, which he frivolously spends on lavish concerts in his music room. Roy also loses his wife and son simply because he is so absorbed with planning his next extravagant event that he fails to notice the coming storm. Set in the 1920s, when economic changes were fast overhauling Indian society, the film is a lament for a glorious (and illusory) past when aesthetic appreciation was more important than profit-making. Roy never wants the music to stop, but, of course, it had to.

**Music** The other dominant theme of *The Music Room* is, of course, music. We have already noted that the film is punctuated by three separate musical performances (one of them featuring a dancer). But we need also to emphasise that for Ray, the film-maker, it was not just music as art form that he wanted to show us. It was music as a cultural tradition that mattered. Not just the sounds and the skills of the performer, but the performance as an event, with an audience and patrons inside the music room of an aristocrat's mansion. That is why the film focuses not on the performers but on the patron, on Roy and his mental world. This is not to suggest that the music and dance are themselves anything other than sublime. Like his character, Satyajit Ray was himself a connoisseur of the arts, especially music (both Indian and western). The music in his film was not just a decorative element, a background soundtrack. It was, in fact, the centrepiece of the film. And for that reason, Ray hired the very best talent among Indian instrumentalists, singers and dancers to perform in the film.

## CHARACTERS

**Roy** Biswambhar Roy is the aristocrat at the centre of the film. Roy is sad and lonely. but not pathetic. Although private, indolent and grumpy, he has enormous pride and feeling of self-worth. He may represent the decadent past, a feudal society ruled by men with little merit, in which inherited privilege stifled innovation, but Roy is also a man of refined tastes. He is neither cruel nor stupid, neither a hero nor a villain. He is a complex figure, for whom, despite his obvious flaws, we feel some sympathy.

**Indolent** Perhaps the worst of Roy's undesirable traits is his indolence. He never lifts a finger to do anything, except to slip the hookah into his full lips for another puff. The iconic moment for this character trait is the subtle opening scene, in which the aged landlord is resting in a huge chair on the roof of his feudal mansion. He is dressed in a richly embroidered robe, wears white bejewelled slippers and holds his walking stick by his side. He is so completely engaged in his reminiscences that he must ask a servant, one of only two remaining members of his once-vast staff, what month it is. When told it is Phagun (in spring), he asks again, 'Is it spring?' Nothing could indicate more clearly that Roy lets the world outside his mansion drift by. Spring is the season when the planting must begin, when a landlord like Roy should be keeping a close watch on his tenants and their agricultural duties. Then Roy hears the sound of a flute and is sent back into the past.

**Sensitive** Compensating, perhaps, for Roy's decadent laziness, he is also shown to be a sensitive man, kind if a little proud. His love of the arts is deep and sincere, not just showing off in public. If his indolence dominates the first scene, his sensitivity is illustrated in the final scene. The third and final concert is over, and with it the income of the estate. The music room is closed, but Roy visits his haven from crass modernity one last time. He is alone, and there is no dialogue. From a distance, we see him enter the darkened room, as if it is his own mind. He walks slowly, leaning on his cane, past huge pillars and below elaborate chandeliers, up to the performing stage, where the instruments lie silent. A close up of him, dressed in his royal robe, shows him scanning the portraits of his ancestors on the wall. Next, he kneels down at the stage and looks again at the paraphernalia of the concert, the ruins of his life, bowing his head in defeat. Or is it in devotion? And, finally, he goes toward an enormous mirror on the wall and polishes it with his shawl. Now, he can see himself more clearly.

**Pride** Another one of Roy's dominant traits is his pride, which again can be viewed as either positive or negative. We see this throughout the film, but the most dramatic example occurs at his last concert. As the dancer moving to drumming, Roy puffs on his pipe and shows his appreciation. His face is creased with intense attention to every detail of the movements and the music. At the finale, Ganguly, who is sitting next to Roy, claps his hands and screams boisterously, 'Bravo! Well done!' But when he attempts to hand the dancer a handful of coins, Roy uses the crook of his walking stick to pull back his outstretched hand. Ganguly looks aghast and Roy, with a stern face, says, 'The owner of the house has the privilege of making payment for the performance.' Then, with a smug smile, he pulls out a bag of coins and gives it to the dancer. He knows that the money he has surrendered is the last he has. But he has had the satisfaction of asserting his right as a patron of the arts.

**Ganguly** Mahim Ganguly is Roy's 'modern' neighbour. Ganguly, Roy's neighbour, provides a convenient contrast to the aristocrat. Ganguly is a businessman, the new type of ruler, who, instead of owning land, is engaged in property development. He knows little about classical Indian music but is the first in the district to install electric lights. He also has an electric generator, which spoils Roy's appreciation of music. And he drives around in a car, which forms a curious contrast with the

elephant and horse that Roy owns. If Roy complains about servants, Ganguly complains about his car being scratched. Again, however, like Roy, Ganguly is not evil or excessively greedy. He is considerate and polite, as far as he understands these qualities. He may be low-caste and vulgar, but he is hardworking and ambitious.

*Crass* A good illustration of Ganguly's crass behaviour occurs in an early scene, which takes place within a flashback. The new neighbour visits the old zamindar's mansion and asks for an audience with the 'lord of the manor.' As Roy sits and sips a glass of wine, the businessman is forced to stand and ask his permission to allow him to engage in a property development scheme and to practice money-lending on his estate. Ganguly is dressed in clothes similar to Roy's, but he smokes cigarettes (considered low-status at the time) and even grinds them out on the landlord's expensive marble floor. Ganguly lacks the polish of his neighbour and his floor.

*Ambitious* Ganguly's ambition is evident from the very beginning of the story, when he installs his new generator. But he displays his ambitions in a more striking scene that occurs much later. The first of the three concerts has taken place, to which Ganguly was not invited, and now he plans an event of his own. He decides to host a 'party' (he doesn't call it a 'concert') to celebrate the opening of his new, garish house. In order to invite Roy, who is after all the lord of the manor, Ganguly visits him and is shown into the parlour. Although he doesn't intend to annoy his aristocratic neighbour, Ganguly announces that he will hold a grand event and invite the most famous dancer of the day. Roy simmers inside with hurt pride and asks if he has built a music room. 'Oh, no, nothing like that,' Ganguly says, to Roy's relief. 'But I've done something much more grand.' Roy holds his breath and then Ganguly explains, 'I've installed electric lights. First in the whole district! It's progress.' It is difficult now to appreciate just how pioneering electricity was in the early part of the twentieth century in rural India. Ganguly's ambition is not to be derided.

Mahamaya	Mahamaya is Roy's wife, who dies early in the story.
Khoka	Khoka is Roy's son, who also dies early in the story.
Steward	The unnamed steward is the manager of Roy's estate.
Ananta	Ananta is Roy's servant.



(a concert in the music room)



(Roy is visited by his neighbour, Ganguly)



(Roy surveying his land, with elephant and tractor in the background)



(Roy surveying the ruins of his life, in the music room)



(Roy's imposing mansion)



(Roy uses his walking stick to hold back Ganguly's hand when he attempts to pay the dancer)