

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## THE STRANGER (AGANTUK) 1991

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali Language)

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

### OVERVIEW

*The Stranger* occupies a unique place in Satyajit Ray's filmography. It was his last film (he died in 1992, aged 70); it was based on one of his own short stories; and it was a joint production with a French company. The story it tells is not dramatic and has few 'incidents', but it is nevertheless affecting.

The story begins when Anila receives a letter from a man who claims to be her uncle who had disappeared 35 years ago and has been given up for dead. When the stranger arrives in India, he unsettles Anila's conventional, middle-class family with stories about his adventures across the globe. Only the young son accepts his mysterious 'uncle.' Anila's suspicious husband sets various tests, which the stranger appears to pass. But in the morning, the mysterious uncle is gone. Feeling guilty, the family trace him to a remote village and coax him back to Calcutta, where he remains with them for only a day before vanishing and leaving them with an unexpected gift.

### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

*The Stranger* is Satyajit Ray's most philosophical film, reflecting on the issues of identity, family and civilisation. It presents, perhaps, Ray's final testimony in the form of a man who seeks truth and defies convention. The theme of the stranger is hardly unique to Indian culture, but it assumes a Hindu accent in that this stranger exudes a spiritual detachment in his embrace of the unconventional. He is a man who has travelled the world and knows Greek philosophy as well as the Indian epics. But he must come 'home' for a week before his life is over. One cannot help but remember that shortly after finishing this film, Satyajit Ray died.

### STORY

*The letter* The film begins when Anila Bose receives a mysterious letter from the stranger. She tells her husband that she has no memory of this man claiming to be her uncle because he left India when she was only two years old, right after he got his college degree. He then sent letters only to a family friend every six months or so, from different cities in Europe and elsewhere. 'He writes in very fluent Bengali,' Anila comments, 'with almost religious vocabulary.' The letter ends by saying that the writer has come back to India to see her because she is his only surviving relative. He would like to stay with her and her family for a week or so before 'resuming my nomadic life.'

*Arrival date* Her husband, Suchindra, shakes his head, but the letter continues: 'I know that in today's world my request may seem like an imposition, but I am relying on our traditional habits of hospitality and hope you will receive me.' The writer adds that he will respect her decision and closes by saying that he will arrive in Calcutta from New Delhi by train on the 16th.

*Doubts* Suchindra is sceptical since his wife has no memory of this man and tells his wife to refuse his request. She, however, says that this uncle was her mother's favourite, that her grandfather loved him and that she cannot turn him away. The disagreement between husband and wife is resolved only when their son appears sad that his grandfather won't be coming. Suchindra relents when Anila says, 'Let him come. If he seems like a fraud, I will sweep him out with my own broom.'

*Arrival* The uncle, Manomohan Mitra, arrives wearing a brightly-coloured shirt. He is deferentially received by Anila and Satyaki. The boy is already in awe of this man, who says he will teach him the

108 names of Krishna. When Mitra goes to take his bath, Suchindra calls on the phone and demands to know what the man is like. Anila says she's happy with him, but Suchindra tells her to look at his passport as the best way to determine if he is a fake. Exasperated, she hangs up.

*Mystery* During a meal, she questions Mitra about his past, not aggressively but out of curiosity, and his answers seem satisfactory. He left because he had wanderlust and because he wanted to see the world. Yet, a whiff of mystery remains.

*Entertainment* Mitra mesmerises young Satyaki with his collection of coins from Greece, Poland and elsewhere, and by the German phrase he uses to say goodbye. Later, the aging world-traveller entertains Satyaki and his little friends with tales of Machu Pichu, lunar eclipses and other wonders of the world.

*Confrontation* Husband and wife still disagree about Mitra's identity. Anila maintains that she knows he is her uncle because she can tell by his voice and his eyes. 'Women understand these things,' she says. Suchindra then confronts Mitra, who angrily flings his passport at him, which contains his photograph. Suchindra notes that the distinguishing mark is a mole on the right cheek and that Mitra has that mole. But then Mitra wrongfoots the sceptical husband by pointing out that the passport might be fake. 'You have every right to throw me out,' he says. 'Look, I've not unpacked. I can leave in five minutes.' Ashamed, Suchindra apologises. Later, Mitra entertains the couple and their friends with erudite talk about Greek philosophy and ancient Hindu texts. Is there nothing this man does not know?

*Inheritance* Just as Suchindra relaxes his guard, Anila is bitten by the bug of scepticism. She remembers a will that her grandfather made and suggests that perhaps her 'uncle' (her grandfather's youngest and favourite son) has come back to claim his share of the family assets. This convinces Suchindra that Mitra is a fraud, and he attempts to find the grandfather's will. He tracks down the lawyer who drew it up, but that gentleman is too old to provide clear information about heirs.

*Cross-examination* Suchindra is still not satisfied and invites a friend, Mr Sen, to come by and surreptitiously examine Mitra's claim. Sen cross-examines Mitra in a friendly fashion, which results in a wide-ranging discussion. Mitra says that he left home with his own money and lived with aboriginals all over the world. Sen becomes frustrated with Mitra's vague explanations and issues an ultimatum. 'Either come clean [about your identity] or clear out.'

*Disappearance* Anila and Suchindra feel guilty when, in the morning, they discover that Mitra has left their house. They jump in their car and drive to an isolated village and to the house of the executor of the grandfather's will. He confirms that Mitra is staying with him but adds that he is away at a tribal village. 'Why has he come?' Suchindra asks. 'He said it's about a financial transaction.' This convinces Suchindra that Mitra has come back to India to collect his share of the inheritance.

*Revelation* They find Mitra relaxing in the tribal village, where he feels at home. He announces that he is going to collect his inheritance, a very large amount of money, and leave for Australia. Everyone is happy now. During the tearful departure scene, Mitra gives them an envelope 'to express my gratitude for your hospitality.' He asks them not to open it until he has left. And when they do open it, they find that the stranger has transferred his share of the will to Anila.

## THEMES

*Identity* The theme underlying this subtle and philosophical film is that of identity. Who are we? Most people are defined by family and society, by habits and conventions built up through the past, through genealogy and history. The stranger questions all of this accepted wisdom. What happens if someone leaves their family and their society, and lives outside the expectations of the civilised world? That is the question posed by Mitra, or Nemo, 'no one,' as he calls himself. He has no traceable identity. No one remembers him after 35 years of living all over the world. His passport may be fake. He talks in riddles. He refuses to be pinned down. Then why did he return to India and to Calcutta, where he was born? Because, at the end of his life, he feels 'the pull of family ties.' Anila is his only living relative and he is drawn to her. Staying with her family, he enjoys the pleasures of his native culture—the taste of Bengali food and the sound of Bengali music. He finds a role, that of the wise old grandfather who tells fascinating tales of faraway places to young boys. But, at the end,

after receiving an ultimatum from a man to 'come clean or clear out,' he leaves and seeks refuge in a tribal village. His final act is to transfer all his inheritance to Anila, who is his flesh and blood. Then he disappears again into his element to live among the aboriginals of Australia. The film thus reveals the conflict between the desire to transcend one's roots and define oneself in one's own terms, on the one hand, and the pull of family ties and the sense of belonging, on the other hand.

**Hospitality/suspicion** What about the family that the stranger has left and then rejoins? They are the other half of Ray's exploration of human nature. What is their reaction when a mysterious stranger drops into their world? Here, Ray sets up another conflict, that between hospitality and suspicion toward the newcomer. These two opposing attitudes are correlated, in the film, with gender. Anila, the wife, is more trusting and wants to be hospitable—after all, you might say, the stranger is her uncle. Suchindra, the businessman husband, is suspicious from the very beginning. This so-called uncle may be a fraud. He may steal some of my priceless art collection. Suchindra believes he has good grounds for his doubts: no one actually remembers this man; he appears out of nowhere without explanation; and even after he has arrived, he evades clear answers. Husband and wife argue back and forth, and at times switch positions: he begins to accept the stranger and she realises that he may be after his inheritance. In other words, the film suggests that most people confronted with the mystery of a stranger have both reactions. We are naturally both hospitable and suspicious. However, even hospitality appears to be a defence mechanism that is triggered when we are confronted with mystery. The stranger who defies convention is a perceived threat to our normality.

## CHARACTERS

**Anila** Anila is Suchindra's trusting wife. Anila is an ordinary educated, middle-class wife and mother in Calcutta. Her first instinct is to trust the stranger because he writes such a kind letter. Later, when he addresses her in affectionate terms (Bengali equivalent of 'dear'), she cannot believe that such a man would be a fraud. She is not a patsy, though. She stands up to her husband and argues with his friends about the stranger.

**Trusting** Anila's basic instinct to trust people is displayed in the first scene of the film, when she receives the mysterious letter. Although she has no memory of the writer, she is minded to believe him when she reads the salutation: 'My dear little child.' She is also impressed by his fluent, if flowery, Bengali. She won't listen to her husband's suspicions, in part, because this uncle was beloved by her mother and her grandfather. Even if she didn't know him (he left when she was two years old), the family ties are strong. Her husband comes up with several reasons to doubt the man's authenticity, but Anila will not change her mind. No one could write such a letter and not be honest. As the story develops, Anila will have occasion to question the man's identity, but, in her own words, she has a 'woman's intuition.'

**Cautious** Although Anila is predisposed to accept Mitra's claim that he is her uncle, she is not completely convinced. There are too many questions, mainly raised by her husband, about the mysterious circumstances of this man's life. A good example of her nagging doubt is a scene when she is serving him his first taste of Bengali food in 35 years. Everyone is smiling as he samples fish curry, spinach curry and a fried snack from a specific region of Bengal. As he eats, though, she frowns and says, 'You say you haven't eaten Bengali food for all those years. But there are Bengali families and restaurants all over the world. Surely, you ate something.' He answers, plausibly, that during his wanderlust he avoided such reminders of 'home.' She appears satisfied, for the moment, but it is an illustration that despite her trust she is not gullible.

**Suchindra Bos** Suchindra is the doubting husband. Suchindra is the sceptical husband, who poses a neat contrast with his (largely) trusting wife. He is an executive, educated and well-off financially. He is practical, he is kind to his son and wife, and he appreciates art (though he doesn't know much about it). While he is cast as something of the villain, he is not cold-hearted and shows contrition for his failure to accept the stranger.

**Sceptical** As with Anila, the scene that most clearly reveals Suchindra's sceptical nature is the very first one. He listens as Anila reads the letter from the stranger, who says that he will arrive at their house in a few days if he doesn't receive a letter refusing him. 'Very, very fishy' is Suchindra's initial response. After confirming that his wife has no memory of this man, he rises to his feet, paces

around and announces his battle plan. 'Right, there's only one response,' he says. 'Tomorrow, send a letter, no a telegram. "Regret." No, "deeply regret, leaving for fortnight holiday on 16<sup>th</sup>." Then sign your name.' When Anila challenges this, he replies that everyone goes on holiday. 'Besides, he may be a liar.' He says. 'Fraud is everywhere these days.' The fact that a man who has been out of India for 35 years still writes in elegant Bengali is unbelievable. And if that man gets into his house, he may steal a piece from his expensive art collection. In his mistrust of the stranger, Suchindra is not portrayed as evil or unkind. Rather, he is an everyman. His doubts are reasonable. One must be cautious these days. Scams and frauds are everywhere. In this way, we as viewers are drawn into the mystery of the stranger.

*Intrigued* Despite his doubting nature, Suchindra is not a misanthrope. He is basically a cheerful, kind person. This side of his character is revealed in a scene that occurs after one of his friends has come over, in his own words, 'to examine this stranger of yours.' The friend's examination turns into a lecture by Mitra on various topics from Greek philosophy to astrology. That evening, as the couple prepare for bed, Suchindra begins to laugh. 'You know,' he says to Anila, 'I'm beginning to like your uncle. He completely took the wind out of Chandran's [their friend's] sails. Put him in his place.' Suchindra lies in bed and muses. 'We know nothing about the man. But he's intelligent, knowledgeable. The places he's visited in the past 35 years. What he's done with his life. It's a big question mark. Intriguing.' In these comments, we sense that Suchindra is reflecting on his own life. He is not free, has not travelled and is certainly not a question mark. But at least he possesses the capacity to be intrigued by something out of the ordinary.

**Stranger** (Manomohan Mitra) Mitra's character is the substance of the film. He is the stranger, the restless one who left a comfortable life and wandered into a different life. He is not only courageous but also polite. He is fiercely independent, phenomenally erudite and has an excellent sense of humour. And, at the very end, we see that he is also generous. Is there a flaw somewhere in this gentleman's character? Yes, he is sometimes grumpy. But we can permit that in a man at the end of his life.

*Curious* Above all else, this suave, witty and erudite man is curious about the world. That is why he left home, stricken by a bad case of *wanderlust*. A good illustration of that quality occurs when he is shown sitting on the ground with a group of small boys. He talks to them about mysterious things, for example, that the moon is just the right distance from the earth to make it appear the same size as the sun. Then he tells them about Machu Pichu. A city, high in the Andes Mountains, built entirely of stone. But there is no stone nearby. How is that possible? Curious, Mitra went to that ancient Inca site and explored it. He didn't find any answers, but he satisfied his curiosity to see the city of stone where there is no stone.

*Unconventional* Mitra is not just unconventional. He positively defies convention and revels in transgressing it. The most shocking example of his defiant opposition to expectation comes during a conversation with a lawyer friend of Suchindra's. The lawyer has been called in to test the credentials of the stranger and finds that he is even more extraordinary than he expected. The discussion turns to the definition of civilisation, and Mitra shocks everyone by saying that he is an omnivore but regrets having never eaten human flesh. 'Barbaric! Uncivilised!' cries the lawyer friend. 'Oh, no,' replies Mitra. 'I'll tell you who is uncivilised. The man who with one finger can press a button and detonate a nuclear bomb and destroy this planet!' This is the only moment in the two-hour film when Mitra shows real anger. There is no better illustration of the basic element of his character: he will not be defined by normal rules.

**Satyaki** Satyaki is their young son.  
**Prithwish** Prithwish is a lawyer.



(The stranger with Satyaki)



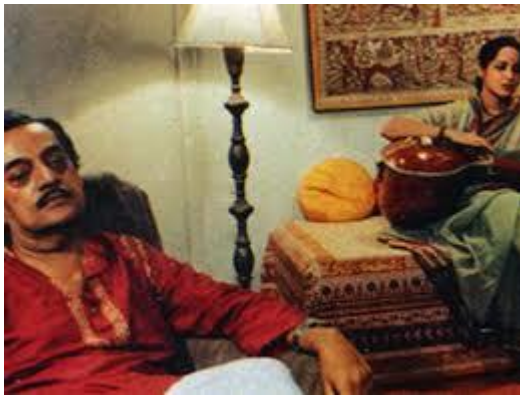
(The stranger talking with Anila)



(Suchindra and Anila at odds over the stranger)



(Suchindra and Satyaki get ready to meet the stranger)



(The stranger enjoys music played by Anila)