

THE COWARD / Kapurush (1965)

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Satyajit Ray (1921-1992), the only Academy Award winner from India so far, directed only 36 films, also writing the screenplay and composing music for most of them. His films cover a wide range of topics and traverse genres – from gritty realism of poverty (*Apu Trilogy*, *Ganashatru*) and fame (*Nayak*), to romance (*Charulata*), to fantastic satires on war (*Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* duo), to the exploits of a detective character, Feluda whom he himself created (*Sonar Kella*, *Joy Baba Felunath*). He received many national and international awards, and is considered one of the foremost filmmakers in world cinema.

Film and Short story- comparison Satyajit Ray's outing after the success of *Charulata*, *Kapurush* is the first of the film duo *Kapurush O Mahapurush*. The two films do not share any plot or thematic similarities, except for the setting in Bengal and the cast of middle-class Bengali characters. *Kapurush* is an adaptation of Premendra Mitra's short story "Janaiko Kapurusher Kahini" ("The Tale of a Coward"), while *Mahapurush* draws on "Parashuram" Rajsekhar Basu's short story "Birinchibaba", both originally in Bengali.

Ray thoroughly adapted Mitra's story, adding scenes and changing the plot. In the story, Amitabha clearly realizes that his love was not enough for a marriage commitment and was instead concerned about Karuna's lost love. So much so, that he rejects a second overture from her at the end of the story when she is ready to leave her marriage for him. His first-person account reveals a much more egotistical and less conflicted/frustrated personality than in the film. Another major change is Bimal's nearly constant presence and dominating personality—he hardly features in the short story. Karuna's honesty, sarcastic/taunting/enigmatic behavior and determination are also more prominent in the film.

Casting *Kapurush* stars three Bengali film icons. Soumitra Chatterjee (1935- 2020), who plays Amitabha, is easily one of the most influential actors in Indian cinematic history. Over six decades of a star-studded career, he worked with the best directors and remains well-loved and highly admired even today. His early career was shaped by Ray over many years, with successes such as *Apur Sangsar* and the Feluda detective films. Second is Madhabi Mukhopadhyay (1942-), who plays Karuna. She acted in several critically acclaimed films directed by Ray, as well as others, including Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Tarun Majumdar and Rituparno Ghosh. She was one of the most sought-after lead actresses of her time and continues to appear in interesting cameos. Together, the Soumitra-Madhabi pairing remains beloved of Bengali audiences. And finally, the third angle in *Kapurush's* love-triangle, Bimal Gupta, is played with elan by Haradhan Bandopadhyay (1926-2013), a "character actor" appearing in over a hundred films. Together, their stardom and off-screen charisma affect contemporary audiences' appreciation of the old black-and-white films.

Reception- *Kapurush O Mahapurush* failed to make an impression both in the domestic and international markets. Outside Bengal, it was dubbed in Hindi, the Tagore songs replaced by Hindi film songs and a different ending added. Ray later said that he had "considerable affection" for and "pretty high opinion" of the films and was "disappointed by the response".

MAIN CHARACTERS

Amitabha Ray	A Kolkata-based screenwriter and cowardly protagonist of the film
Karuna Gupta	Amitabha's former sweetheart, now married to Bimal Gupta
Bimal Gupta	A bored, alcoholic manager of a tea plantation in northern Bengal

SYNOPSIS

The story focuses on the titular “coward”, Amitabha Ray, who, during his college days, began a relationship with Karuna. She is from an affluent family and studies fine arts, while he does not seem to have much social or financial support. On a fateful night, when she suggests that they elope, he turns her down, saying that he cannot support her lifestyle as he is unemployed. Years later, after his car breaks down on a trip to North Bengal, he accepts the hospitality of a local tea-garden manager, Bimal, who turns out to be Karuna’s husband. Amitabha half-expects her to satisfy his egoistic desire of being her center of attention once more. Several times, he tries to engage her in personal conversation out of her husband’s notice. But she, while maintaining the decorum proper to her station as a manager wife, brushes off his advances and proposal to elope. Amitabha cannot understand how she could choose a cynical, alcoholic and perhaps abusive older man over him. But that is what she does, remaining in a seemingly constricting marriage. There are no plot twists or thrills, with most of the action taking place within the minds of the characters and their strained interactions.

PLOT

Stranded A silhouette paces across the screen smoking a cigarette, revealing a young man, who asks a car mechanic whether his **car** would be fixed soon. When the mechanic replies that it is unlikely, the man enters the car shop and converses with the owner about what to do next. The owner tells him that he’s some distance from his destination Hansimara (a tea plantation town), the only available hotel nearby is sure to be fully booked and the next train out is at 6:30pm the next day. An older, overweight, balding man wearing shorts and a trench coat enters the shop. Upon hearing of the young man’s predicament, he decides to give him shelter for the night. They introduce themselves- the young man is Amitabha Roy; the older man is Bimal Gupta.



A short ride back **A short ride back** Amitabha and Bimal climb onto the latter's jeep. Bimal is loud, blunt and inquisitive. He takes charge of the conversation, telling Amitabha how much he enjoys his company and asking him about why he was there and what he does for a living. Amitabha answers that he is a screenwriter, visiting the area for a "firsthand" experience of a film script. Bimal has his own unabashed opinion on film plots, from "local color" to "boy meets girl, boy gets girl, boy loses girl" and that the drudgery is worth it for the money. Money is the only reason why he himself has stuck to the drudgery of a job at a tea plantation. Bimal sings off-key "money money, sweet as a honey", to Amitabha's clear discomfiture. They arrive at Bimal's residence.



REUNION

Surprise! A lady is tuning the radio with her back to the door as they enter. She complains about the reception to Bimal, who states that he's not alone and introduces Amitabha to his wife, Karuna. Amitabha is visibly stunned, while Karuna does a better job of hiding her surprise. She comments on the weather before slowly leaving the room. Bimal shows Amitabha to a guest room and says that the room is reserved for unexpected visitors like Amitabha, who come at least once a year. Amitabha thanks him again and he replies, "the pleasure is all mine", before asking him to join them for dinner. Still shaken, Amitabha walks across the room towards his reflection in a mirror. A few seconds later, Karuna knocks and enters and without acknowledging him, locks up the cabinets in the room and attached bathroom. Amitabha, addressing her with the familiar pronoun, tells her that it's so surprising to meet her there. The bearer interrupts, asking whether he'll be needing hot water for his bath. Karuna addresses Amitabha, using the formal pronoun and informing him of the evening arrangements.



Before dinner Bimal is reading a cartoon magazine and laughing when Amitabha, having freshened up, joins him, along with Karuna, who brings her knitting. Bimal comments that Amitabha is handsome enough to be a hero instead of a screenwriter, forces him to drink some sherry even after repeated refusals, casually mentions that his wife had known someone named Amitabha Roy while in college and offers to take him for a picnic the next day – all of which cause Amitabha not a little discomfort. Karuna says that she has little opportunity to watch Bengali films. Bimal responds by harshly criticizing the Bengali race for their present lack of “moral fiber”. Karuna retorts that he shouldn’t badmouth Bengalis in the company of another Bengali gentleman. Bimal laughingly replies that it’s the only appropriate setting for criticism – he would rather praise Bengalis in the company of non-Bengalis instead. Amitabha only smiles and nods most of the time.

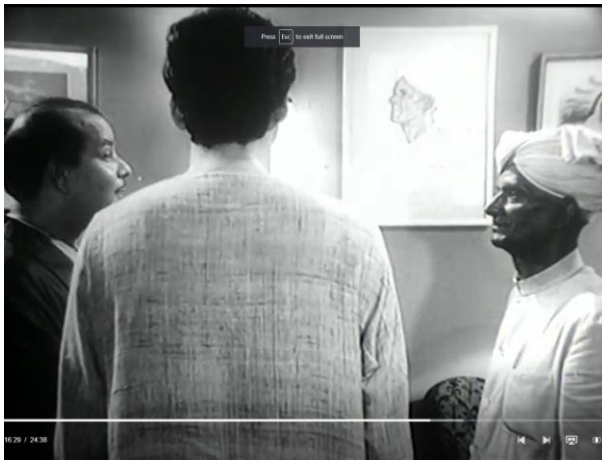


Some drinks later Bimal’s glass is now empty and he slurs while continuing to skip from topic to topic. He mentions that he studied economics and is pleasantly surprised when Amitabha says that his degree is in the same subject. He forces Amitabha to top up the sherry and when Karuna tells him off again, says that one should experience everything and that the hero of Amitabha’s script, at this point in the story, would start drinking. Bimal launches into a monologue about drinking – how he initially hated whiskey, but after a while in the plantation manager job, “every blasted fellow on this blasted plantation, drinks”. The job makes an alcoholic of one – “to forget the boredom, the tragedy”. Karuna asks them to come to the table and goes to the dining room.





Karuna's artistry- "Isn't that a good likeness?" Amitabha and Bimal get up and Bimal suddenly turns to a picture on the wall and calls for the bearer. Posing the bearer in front of it, he says, "Isn't that a good likeness?". Pointing to the adjacent picture of his bungalow, he proudly states that Karuna painted these and while his wife has many talents, she is far too shy. He only discovered that she paints three years after marriage! Karuna banters that he should have said that he discovered her talent just now, to which Bimal replies, "Why will I lie- I don't lie..."you are very reticent" while pulling her chair out for her.



Dinner and after They sit down for dinner and the bearer serves soup. Bimal reiterates his point that Amitabha's "loss is his gain", rather, their gain of excellent company, as it must be tiresome for Karuna to see only his face every day. Karuna pouts and says, "Of course not!" Bimal comments that she's a great actress and asks Amitabha if he needs one for his film. He guffaws at his own wit, while Amitabha and Karuna look down and play with their food. After dinner, Karuna plays patience with a deck of cards while Bimal tells Amitabha about how the taste of the tea from different plantations differs with cultivation styles. He knows each by taste "and it all comes by experience and hard work...bloody hard work, Mr. Roy, come rain come shine". Karuna reminds him that he has planned a picnic tomorrow and tidies up the room. Bimal asks Amitabha if he was bored, to which the latter replies that writers are not easily bored. Bimal wants to know if Amitabha will include him as a character and, after Amitabha's answer in the affirmative, requests him not to make him a villainous character, as it would hurt his wife. Bimal leads Amitabha to the guest room, says "goodnight" and heads to bed himself.



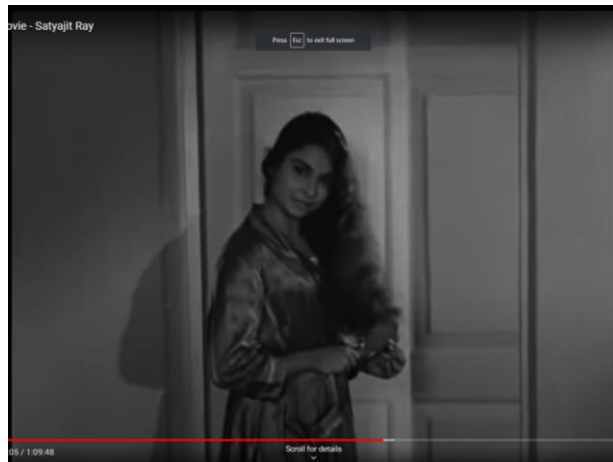
A conversation Amitabha sits on his bed in a pensive mood. There's a knock on the door and Karuna enters with a water flask and glass and sets them on the bedside table. Amitabha rises quickly, blocking the door. He asks why she must be such a good hostess – it's unbearable for him. Karuna, smiling, asks if he would have preferred her to act otherwise. He says he had never imagined they would meet again like this and he would not have come had he known. Karuna replies that he isn't omniscient and asks him if her behavior suggests that he should not have come. She then tells him not to give free rein to his imagination and go to sleep instead. He reluctantly moves out of the way as she leaves the room.



Tortured memories- flashback one Amitabha lies down to sleep. In a flashback, we see him dressed in just a vest and lungi, with plaster on his face from a shaving nick, opening the door to Karuna, who's out of breath and asks for water. Pouring her some, he says he's very surprised and asks what is wrong. Pacing across the small room and alternating between playful and intense behavior, she says that her maternal uncle is taking her to Patna forcibly. She will never be able to return— she's disturbed that they have planned out her life for her. Upon hearing the ultimatum, she has determined to quit art school and take a job; she only needs his support and is willing to brave all obstacles with him by her side. Though Amitabha states that he loves her, he says the city is too ruthless, he is jobless and she might not be able to adjust to a hard lifestyle. He knows that her uncle disapproves of their relationship, but all this is too sudden for him. He needs more time. Karuna realizes that her hope had been in vain and takes some time to compose herself. He tries to stop her as she leaves, but she retorts, "What you really lack, it's not time—it's something else".



Another conversation, and borrowing sleeping pills *Borrowing sleeping pills* Back in the present, Amitabha is drenched in sweat. He rises, washes his face and goes to shut the door, but seeing a breeze blowing the curtains in the living room, steps outside instead. He stares at Karuna's framed picture on the living room wall and then at the closed door of the hosts' bedroom. He sees a shadow of someone pacing inside and bumps into the coffee table. Karuna emerges, dressed in a sleeping gown and robe, brushing her long hair and turns to leave immediately. He calls out to her in a hushed voice and says he just has a single question for her—is she happy in her marriage? When she asks why, he says he must know. He continues, describing how his life had been after that fateful night when she left. He is still unmarried and everything was “so boring and pointless”. He got a job but didn't want it, started his writing career and bought a flat in an elite area in Kolkata, but the one thing he wasn't able to do was love anyone else. He insists that he must know if she is happy, but she says it should remain a mystery. Bimal clears his throat from inside the bedroom, likely still asleep. Karuna turns to leave, but he asks her loudly, addressing her formally again, if she has any sleeping pills. She brings him some, telling him not to take more than two and when he asks what if he takes more, she responds that she doesn't think he would do that, then returns to her bedroom.



The next morning Bimal is playing golf on the lawn outside his picturesque bungalow, when Amitabha joins him. Amitabha comments that his bungalow has a breathtaking view and asks about neighbors. Bimal nods and says that he'll find the closest one 19.5 miles away! Walking back to the bungalow, Bimal says that the car won't be fixed and he should take the train at 6:30pm. He will drop Amitabha off to the station after the picnic. Amitabha says he'll pack up and runs towards the bungalow. Bimal calls out and asks him to give Mrs. Gupta a shout, as she takes a while to get ready. He runs into her inside the house and she jokingly asks him why he didn't call out for her. Amitabha does not answer, but rushes into his room to pack up his things willy-nilly, including the bottle of sleeping pills.



Breakfast Karuna is at the breakfast table when Amitabha enters the shaded veranda. She asks him formally if he slept well; he says he will have only tea for breakfast. When she asks why, he replies that's his habit. She looks at him, surprised and says that there will only be dry sandwiches for their picnic lunch, to which he responds that he doesn't expect anything but dry (behavior) from her. Bimal enters, asks Karuna if everything is ready and continues the earlier topic about neighbors as they sit down. He states that other tea plantation workers and employees live nearby, but they're hardly to be socialized with. Amitabha asks Karuna about her omelet, to which she also replies that she takes only tea for breakfast. Bimal continues by saying that tea plantations have a "rigid caste system" from the 150-year-old British era —"A manager can only mix socially with another manager". Amitabha asks whether they have accepted this system. Bimal answers that he found it difficult at first, but accepting it has made life much easier. He continues saying that having a conscience only causes pain, so "you drown it in alcohol"! He laughs at his own joke, while Amitabha and Karuna exchange uncomfortable glances. He says he will give Amitabha a packet of tea, but the conscience won't sink in it, but swim like a fish.



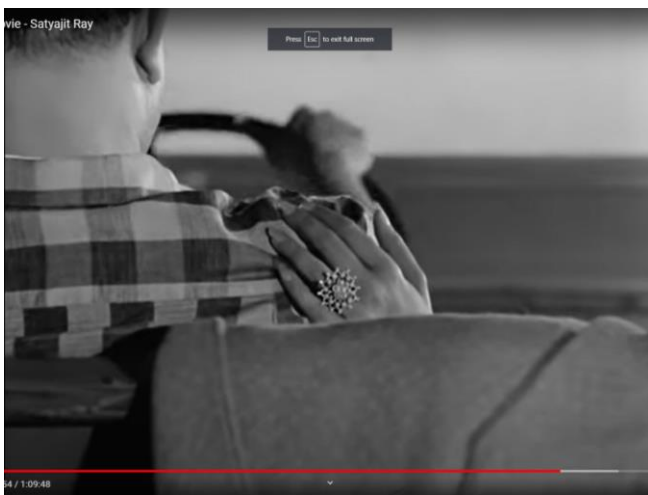
On the way to the picnic They board the jeep, with Bimal driving and Karuna in the front seat, while Amitabha sits at the back. Bimal asks him if he is married, or contemplating marriage or had ever been in love. Amitabha awkwardly answers no. He says that Amitabha looks like a "romantic type", so there's a "guessing game" on between him and Karuna (about his love life, presumably— the dialogue does not clarify). His bungalow is ideal for a honeymoon, should Amitabha decide to visit with his wife in the future.



A first meeting- flashback Bimal sings Frank Sinatra's 'Isle of Capri' as they cover some more distance. The back of Karuna's head prompts Amitabha to remember their first meeting in a crowded bus. She had forgotten her ticket and he pays for her. She gestures him to the empty seat next to her. They strike up a conversation on the pretense of returning the ticket price with interest and plan to meet later with a book he wants to borrow.



Flashback three Returning to the present, Amitabha is visibly distressed as he lights yet another cigarette while Karuna sings "Madhujamini rey" (a Tagore song about the fleeting meeting between lovers lost forever, which encapsulates the action in this film] He notices Karuna's hand adorned with a large ring on Bimal's shoulder. In a flashback, we see him holding her hand with the excuse of reading her palm, seated at a seedy restaurant. He is unhappy to have to make that excuse to hold her hand and she taunts that he doesn't have enough courage. They discuss how the dating spots are unromantic and how relationships outside of marriage and public display of affection are frowned upon. He wishes Kolkata was as open about it as western countries, to which Karuna replies that it would be unseemly. He says he's frustrated by these boundaries, but Karuna focuses on the relationship of the heart where there are no barriers and tells him to take the step when the time comes. He asks for her hand in marriage, only half-serious.





Back to the present Amitabha, his distress clear, asks Bimal to stop the car. They stop near a bridge and Bimal goes to fetch water, whistling “harano sei diner kotha” (Tagore’s reimagining of “Auld lang syne”). Karuna has walked across the road, leaving Amitabha on the other side. They have a strained conversation about whether she was happy in the marriage. Amitabha is convinced that Bimal abuses her and she cannot possibly love him. He suggests that she leave Bimal, as he now has the courage to support her. Karuna brushes him off. A convoy of trucks pass the road between them, followed by Bimal’s return. Bimal offers Amitabha some whiskey and he gulps and gags on it. Bimal grabs his shoulder and says, “Now, you are a man!”.



After the picnic After the picnic, Bimal asks Amitabha for a Charminar cigarette. He lays back on a large rock with the lit cigarette and dozes off while Karuna goes to sit by a nearby stream. Amitabha walks to Karuna and entreats her to look at him but she neither turns nor answers. Amitabha writes on a paper napkin —“I will wait at the station until the last moment. If you love me, please come. Don't disappoint”— and drops it in her lap. The cigarette burns down and stings Bimal, who wakes up. When Amitabha tries to carry the picnic basket, he takes it and says, “Oh no! You're our honored guest.” They ride the jeep again and drop off Amitabha near the train station. Bimal wishes him the best of luck, requests him to include his character in the screenplay and reiterates his invitation to visit again for his honeymoon.



At the station- farewell Amitabha walks to the station and buys a first-class ticket to Hansimara, then goes to sit on a bench on the platform. He dozes off while it is still light, but is woken by the train whistle and it's dark. He turns to see Karuna and stands up with a smile. But she, unsmiling, asks for her sleeping pills back. He gives them to her. She turns to walk away.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Amitabha Ray Emotional

The titular “coward”, Amitabha is seen most often with a conflicted expression on his face, chain-smoking endless packs of the iconic Charminar cigarettes. He is clearly an introvert compared to his much more outgoing and socially adept hosts and performs the bare acceptable minimum of civility in the throes of his (largely imaginary) loss. While he does not have the courage to lay claim to Karuna at any stage, he cannot come to terms with his own desires either. Overall, he is a more pitiful than heroic character.

Romantic Amitabha’s lack of worldly wisdom is seen right from the opening scene, as he has no clue about what goes on under the bonnet of a car or how to secure accommodation if stranded on the road. His sweet nothings to Karuna when they were dating, generally pliant demeanor, occupation as a writer and inability to love or marry anyone else and move on with his life pin him as an incurable romantic. This lifelong attachment to a lost love that he can neither forget, nor ask forgiveness for, nor take action on, however, seals the deal. Given, too, the cultural background of Bengali romantic heroes since Devdas, Amitabha seems to take masochistic pleasure in wallowing in a ruin of his own making.

Conflicted Amitabha spends most of the film’s runtime with a conflicted, frustrated or helpless expression on his face, as if he himself has no agency in all the unfortunate events that occur in his life. Some part of that could well be commitment phobia, even spinelessness, but Satyajit Ray himself excused this “selfishness” as a “concomitant of modern middle-class sophistication” and “stress of modern living”. Adding frustrated sexuality to the mix, this makes for a complex character whose motives and commitments remain unclear, even when his words indicate otherwise.

Egoistical Though not apparently vain in behavior or dress, Amitabha takes pride in his looks and intellectual occupation and subtly looks down at Bimal’s appearance, occupation and alcoholism. But in his jealousy, which he masks as concern, what he simply cannot grasp is how Karuna could choose to be with a man like Bimal instead of him, while failing to understand that steadfastness of character could well be much more attractive to Karuna.

Karuna Gupta- Agreeable

An enigmatic and determined woman, Karuna’s character is nearly as complex as Amitabha. She effortlessly moves between being serious, taunting/sarcastic, playful and dutiful. She dresses and behaves with more sophistication after marriage, but her youthful vivacity is gone, replaced by insomnia and a sleeping pill habit. Even though she may not love her husband, she respects him enough to stay with him rather than shaming him by eloping with an unreliable ex-lover.

Strong-willed Karuna is exceptionally strong-willed, whether in meeting her lover at his all-male rooming house or a seedy restaurant, or in her plan to brave all familial and societal obstacles to elope with her lover, or to take a job to support herself. But given her socio-cultural context, it would have been pointless if Amitabha had not supported her. So she chooses, with equal determination, to follow the path laid out for her by her family and grows to respect her much older husband. Even after meeting Amitabha years later, she chooses to remain in her marriage with Bimal, who has none of her cultural sophistication and is an alcoholic to boot. That she still has lingering feelings for Amitabha is clear from her resistance to engage with his pleas and a final farewell with the excuse of sleeping pills, but perhaps she knows better than to trust him again and be betrayed again.

Honest Karuna’s skill of stating hard truths clearly and alternating between a serious and taunting manner adds to the enigma of her character. From identifying Amitabha’s character flaw as “what you really lack, it’s not time- it’s something else” to telling him to rein in his imagination, to retorting to Bimal’s unfounded (to her) remarks about Bengalis- she does not hesitate to make herself heard.

Loyal She manages Bimal’s household and takes her role as a dutiful wife seriously. From behaving in an appropriate manner towards their guest, even though the situation might have called for theatrics on her part, to organizing the meals they partake of, or instructing the bearer, she is in charge of the household. It may be a boring and lonely life without much company or entertainment, but her husband encourages her hobbies like knitting and painting and is even proud of her many talents. Nothing in the film indicates that they have a troubled or abusive marriage.

Bimal Gupta Agreeable Bimal is an extrovert, an engaging, if opinionated conversationalist and a generous husband and host. As a manager of a tea plantation, he is bound by local conventions to socialize in circles consisting mostly of other British managers and that is perhaps a reason why he uses so much English. He is tremendously bored with his job and, like his peers, has turned to alcohol.

Spontaneous Seeing a fellow Bengali man stranded on the road, Bimal invites him into his own home, spends time getting to know him, provides meals, drinks and a private room, takes him for a picnic and even refuses Amitabha's help in carrying the picnic basket. In short, Bimal is a stellar example of a spontaneous, generous host in his specific cultural milieu.

Double-edged The film leaves a mystery whether Bimal guesses at the past relationship between his wife and the stranger he invited. Many of his words and actions can be interpreted in a double-edged manner, for instance, when he says he knows the taste of each different tea from different plantations (replace tea with woman), or when he advises Amitabha to drown his conscience in alcohol or when he whistles "Auld lang syne" while leaving the stranger with his wife. It remains unclear whether he's a simpleton who doesn't pick up on the tension, or a perspicacious husband who has taken the measure of this cowardly guest and trusts his wife to make the more rational decision.

Uncontrolled Bimal initially hated drinking but was driven into it by his boring, mindless job and he has now settled into the social hierarchies of tea plantations without starting a "one-man revolution", as he mentions at the breakfast table. He uses alcohol to drown his conscience and considers the ability to hold one's drink a mark of manly character, when he tells Amitabha that "you're now a man" after his first gulp of whiskey. His alcoholism does not seem to cause any obvious rift between him and his wife.

THEMES

SOCIETY (Identity, gender, language, culture)

Identity The very name of the film, *Kapurush*, points to a core feature in the formation of postcolonial Bengali male middle-class identity—cowardice. In this instance, it boils down to romantic commitment phobia. Almost every action performed or word uttered by Amitabha is cowardly in some way. His identity as a coward, in fact, is revealed in his general sneakiness in every small action. For instance, he wears a *rakhi* bracelet on his hand, signaling to passersby that he and Karuna are siblings, all the while professing his love and asking for her hand in marriage in a seedy restaurant. Or when he slinks off to write a note on a paper napkin, keeping an eye on Bimal's burning cigarette, after the picnic. The stresses of modern urban life, considerations of "what will people think?" and a romantic inclination to wallow in misery could all be valid reasons for his cowardice. Regardless, his conceit in first rejecting a woman who loved him deeply and years later, imagining her to be in an abusive marriage and asking her to elope with him, all point to an essential lack of trust in himself.

Gender Karuna is a good example of a nonconformist female character within her social context. The film does not mention her parents; she is raised by her maternal uncle — and this certainly added societal obligations on her. Her upper-middle class upbringing is seen in her family letting her study in college and pursue her passion for art, but these privileges do not alleviate the pressures of an arranged marriage, especially where her uncle disapproves of her romantic relationship with Amitabha. Despite these barriers, Karuna is willing to leave the luxury behind and work hard at a job— something not yet normalized in her milieu— just to be with him. She even risks meeting him at seedy restaurants and visiting him in his rooming house, a space prohibited for women. Even after marriage, she maintains a distinct personality and interests separate from her husband and it seems that she's filling the role more by choice than necessity, even though it causes her some inner turmoil, indicated by her dependence on sleeping pills.

Language The use of familiar and formal pronouns in this film reveal a critical angle that would be commonplace to a Bengali speaker, and completely unnoticed by a non-Bengali-speaking audience who watches the film with subtitles. The contrasting use of the familiar "*tumi*" (like "tu" in French) and the formal "*apni*" (like "vous") lends another dimension to the triangular relationship between the three main characters. Bimal always addresses Amitabha in the formal register, and Karuna in the familiar one, as expected with a guest and one's wife, respectively. Amitabha and Karuna also address each other formally when they meet on the bus (flashback two). At the seedy restaurant, while they begin their conversation with the familiar term, Amitabha asks for her hand in marriage with the formal term, half-serious and half-joking (flashback three). They use the familiar exclusively on the fateful night when she all but asks to elope (flashback one). But when Amitabha meets

Karuna again unexpectedly, he uses the formal term in Bimal's presence or earshot, and the familiar term at every other opportunity. Karuna responds similarly. These changes of address, coupled with his concern about *bhodrota* (the proper mode of genteel behavior specific to the Bengali middle class), reveals his conflicted, cowardly character.

Culture- Cinema Beginning with the famous first words, "Boy meets girl, boy gets girl, boy loses girl", a motif that will catch Amitabha unawares, much of the film's less charged dialogue revolves around Bimal's interest in the screenplay that Amitabha will potentially write after his "firsthand" experience at the tea plantation. Many plot ideas run through their conversations. Suggesting that a good use of "local color" would be to make the potential hero take up drinking as it is an inseparable part of plantation life, requesting to include himself as a potential character, twice, but not a villainous one and jokingly referring to his wife as a wannabe actress all indicate that Bimal's engagement with Amitabha's profession supersedes his interest in him as a person. Amitabha, for his part, though stating he's in it for the money, also states that as a writer, he isn't easily bored and enjoys immersing himself in many life experiences, like his first drink of whiskey.

REALATIONSHIP (Marriage, loyalty, sexuality)

Marriage Marriage is the fulcrum on which the relationships of the film hinge. In this specific cultural context, there is little scope of long-term romantic attachments or even friendships with persons of the other gender beyond the confines of marriage. In South Asian cultures, arranged marriages, where families, not individuals, decide whom their relatives will marry— remains a powerful tradition to this day. Some more "progressive" cultures may permit nominal romantic relationships— but those are also bound within strictures of religion, class and caste. Marriage on the basis of romantic love is a marginal practice at best and rarely successful without the blessings of both families. Given this context, Karuna's only hope of a future with Amitabha would be through marriage. Failing that, she is married off to Bimal by her family, whether or not she wished it so.

Loyalty Loyalty in marriage, especially on part of the female partner, is expected and lauded in this context. Women are encouraged and even forced to remain in marriages, and domestic abuse is a common enough occurrence that has few means of redress, even today. Though Karuna's marriage to Bimal is not shown to be abusive, physically or mentally, it could well be so, as Amitabha suspects. Despite that, Karuna chooses to be loyal to her husband in face of the temptation that is her former sweetheart. Amitabha, for his part, could also be suffering from a misplaced sense of loyalty towards his former sweetheart, which doesn't let him move on with his life and form other romantic relationships.

Sexuality Any audience familiar with South Asian cultures is bound to notice the repressed sexuality that permeates almost every facet of interpersonal relationships or cultural expression. Ray, like many other filmmakers of his era, underplayed sexuality and its portrayal in his films is subtle. In that context, public displays of affection and premarital sex are strongly discouraged and few venues are available for lovers to enjoy; even innocent dates at restaurants are scrutinized by nosy passersby. Karuna and Amitabha's body language, especially on the night she proposes they elope, communicates that they have never had sex— indeed, they would be hard-pressed to find a suitable space to do so. Later, when Amitabha meets her as a married woman in a potentially sexually active relationship with someone else, his repressed sexuality and conflicted desires come to the fore— most evident in the scene where he asks her for sleeping pills. But consistent with his character, he is too cowardly to express it to her. Between Bimal and Karuna, however, the sex is likely as placid as their marriage. They have no children, for one thing, and Bimal's addiction to alcohol makes him prone to doze off, leaving Karuna to soothe her unfulfilled nights with sleeping pills.

PSYCHOLOGY (regret)

Regret Amitabha's words and actions after meeting Karuna clearly express his regret about their past. In the pivotal scene when he meets her in the middle of the night, he openly confesses his regret for letting her leave that fateful night years ago. His guilt and regret at his own cowardice forced him to search for her, but her family had relocated and he was unable to track her down to apologize and make amends. His regret is also visually expressed in two key moments/ images— one, when he stares at his own reflection in the mirror as if beholding a strange monster, and two, when he stares at Karuna's picture which seems to haunt him. In another pivotal scene after the picnic— which, incidentally, is the most iconic and oft-cited image from the film— his expression is rife with regret and helplessness while Karuna sits with her back to him wearing sunglasses,

expressionless. A large part of his masochistic wallowing hinges on the regret of not marrying her when he had a chance.

APPEARANCE (secrets)

Secrets Amitabha and Karuna's use of formal and familiar pronouns throughout the film point squarely to their secret past relationship. Moreover, the contrast between the short story and the film is informative here. In the story, Karuna clearly tells Bimal that Amitabha is an acquaintance from their college days; in the film, she employs the subterfuge that she knew someone bearing the same name, but this person was not a famous screenwriter. In both cases, Bimal does not seem to be perturbed by the revelation. For Karuna and Amitabha, who are at odds about breathing new life into their old relationship, there is no motivation to make Bimal any wiser. Even if Amitabha could summon up the courage to do so, Bimal isn't shown as a character who would react favorably. In the context, it is almost unthinkable that a stranger would be allowed to elope with one's wife. The isolated location of the tea plantation and lack of a vehicle would make it impractical, to say the least, not to mention potentially dangerous, as a manager of a plantation is sure to have much clout with local authorities.

PAST (transience)

Transience Feelings change over time, and so do people, as Karuna reminds Amitabha on the stop on the way to the picnic. Amitabha's folly is in obsessively fixating on the memory of his lost love— both the experience and the person, and idealizing/idolizing them so much so that they bear little resemblance to the actual events or persons concerned. His reactions and expressions before and after the three flashback scenes show how his inability to grasp the transient nature of relationships is continuing to cause him distress. So, too, is his repeated nagging about Karuna's genteel behaviour, which is perfectly appropriate for a guest, but too cold and harsh for a former sweetheart. He would have rather preferred the sweet, idealistic and impulsive Karuna of youth over the mature woman who has chosen to behave in accordance to her station in life. Only once does Karuna drop her decorum— at the moment of farewell, she addresses him as "*lokki'ti*"— "darling", a last indication that she, too, holds fond memories; but that is all they are to her. She has moved on.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Looking at the three flashback scenes between Amitabha and Karuna:
 - a) What strikes you most about the social-cultural milieu they are depicted in?
 - b) What strikes you most about the nature of their relationship?
- 2) Do you think Bimal was a good husband to Karuna? Why or why not?
- 3) What do you think of Amitabha's cowardice throughout the film? Are his behavior patterns familiar to you from your culture or films and literature you are regularly exposed to?
- 4) Discuss the setting of an isolated tea plantation. Does this setting help, hinder or remain irrelevant to the development of the story?
- 5) What do you think of addiction in the film— cigarettes, alcohol, sleeping pills? What narrative purpose do they serve?