

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## BOAT WRECK (NOUKA DUBI) 2011

Rituparno Ghosh

Bengali Language

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

### OVERVIEW

*Boat Wreck* is adapted from a novel of the same name published in 1906 by Rabindranath Tagore. It is a tragic story of frustrated love and unconsummated marriage that begins with a storm, in which two boats carrying newly-wed couples are capsized. Ramesh survives but not his bride (Sushila). Dr Chatterjee and his bride (Kamala) both survive but are separated. When Ramesh sees Kamala washed up on the shore, he thinks she is his bride and she accepts that he must be her husband. This case of mistaken identity drives the plot. Additionally, before his forced marriage, Ramesh had been in love with Hemnalini. The film then follows the story of these four intertwined people, the gradual revelation of their true identities, their sense of betrayal and their sacrifices. At the end, Kamala is reunited with Dr Chatterjee, and Ramesh with Hemnalini, but it is far from certain that they will be happy.

### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Inspired by Tagore, who was inspired by Shakespeare (especially the trope of mistaken identity) and reimagined by one of India's most talented directors, this film is a heady mixture of sumptuous colonial-era interiors, atmospheric locations and poems of forlorn love. Although the central premise (that bride and groom would not have seen each other until after the wedding) is stretching Indian culture a little too far, it still works as a plot device to explore the dynamics of love in and out of marriage. There are numerous cultural references to Tagore (whose face appears in framed photograph more than once) and other writers, as well as to the famous legend of Shakuntala, which is another story of losing and regaining a wife. Tagore's novel has been adapted for the screen several times, but never with its human tragedy evoked with such stunning cinematography.

### STORY

*Love* The story begins in late nineteenth-century Calcutta. A young man (Ramesh) is in love with a young woman (Hemnalini). He is a law student from a rural family, and she is the only daughter of a widowed man, the head of a sophisticated urban family. The father now begins to doubt the wisdom of bringing her up in the 'modern' way, as an educated woman. She is twenty years old and still not married, but he does not consider marrying her to a penniless student like Ramesh.

*Ramesh's absence* Hemnalini has a lavish party to celebrate her twentieth birthday, but Ramesh, though invited, is absent. 'Just like him,' one of the guests says, light-heartedly, 'so careless.' Ramesh has even ordered the cake but forgotten to put a date on it. Hemnalini is upset and even more worried when she is told that Ramesh has been summoned by his father to his native village.

*Forced marriage* Ramesh is shocked when his father tells him that he is to be married to Sushila, the daughter of a widow. The wedding will take place immediately because there is no other auspicious date for the next three months. Ramesh refuses, saying it is absurd and that he is already committed to someone else (Hemnalini) in Calcutta. But his father has given his word to a 'poor, helpless widow' and the horoscopes match. 'She isn't educated,' the father explains, 'but she is a good girl. Knows how to keep house, to look after a husband.' Ramesh still refuses and says he is returning to Calcutta. His father says, sadly, 'Goodbye. But do not ever come back to this house.'

*Widow's request* Ramesh marches out of the house but is stopped by the widow. She explains that all the arrangements have been made and that she has spent all her savings. If the wedding is not

held, she and her daughter will take poison. Deciding that he must spare her, Ramesh acquiesces to his father's wish and agrees to marry Sushila. The wedding takes place a few days later.

*Wreck* When Ramesh and his bride are returning to Calcutta, a fierce storm overturns their boat. Ramesh is knocked unconscious and regains his senses hours later, lying on a deserted riverbank. Not far away, he sees the inert body of a woman dressed in bridal clothes. Her face is unveiled but he has not seen the face of his bride. Nor has this bride seen the face of her husband. Ramesh fears that the woman is dead but discovers that she is breathing. He calls out to her, 'Sushila! Sushila!' Finally, she opens her eyes and the two of them board a train and arrive in Calcutta.

*Hemnalini* Hemnalini is unaware of these events and still wonders why Ramesh went away. He tried writing letters to explain but didn't post them. Outwardly happy, especially when her brother is accepted to study law in London, inside she is lovesick for the absent Ramesh.

*Ramesh and bride* Elsewhere in the city, Ramesh and his bride set up house in a modest apartment. As a village girl, she is surprised to see an electric fan and electric lights, but she cooks and looks after him. They are polite together, but not intimate. Ramesh looks at a photograph of Hemnalini, which he keeps in a drawer, and cries. Soon, though, he realises that she is not Sushila; she is Kamala.

*Kamala* Kamala was married to Dr Chatterjee. Their marriage was celebrated on the same day as Ramesh's and their boat was also wrecked in the storm. She is an orphan, having lost both parents and being raised by her uncle. Ramesh realises that she is not his wife, but, out of kindness, does not tell Kamala. Ramesh puts a notice in the newspapers seeking the whereabouts of Dr Chatterjee. He and Kamala begin to develop a tender friendship. He sends her to a Christian missionary school to learn basic literacy.

*Hemnalini* Ramesh also meets Hemnalini for the first time in months, but he does not reveal that he is married or that he is living with Kamala. She is hurt and baffled by his distant manner. On another visit, Ramesh asks Hemnalini to marry him. She says that they cannot marry for at least a year, when the mourning period for Ramesh's recently deceased father is over. When Ramesh warns her not to believe things that might be said about him, she says that he should explain what he means. He says he will, later.

*Akshay* An admirer of Hemnalini, named Akshay, finds out that Kamala is Ramesh's wife, or is living as his wife. Akshay tells Hemnalini's father, who then tells Hemnalini, who won't believe it. When positive proof is brought to her by her brother, she falls into a bed-ridden depression. Arrangements are then made for her to marry Akshay; while she does not object, neither does she consent. But her father puts a temporary halt on the arrangements, saying that she must consent. Hemnalini is crushed; she cannot give consent because she still loves Ramesh but she does not want to cause others to suffer.

*Benares* Hemnalini's father takes her away to Benares to regain her mental health. She is treated by a Dr Nalinaskha, with whom she forms a friendship that develops into an engagement. This doctor is actually Dr Chatterjee, Kamala's real husband.

*Kamala's discovery* Ramesh escapes from the scandal by moving with Kamala to another city. It is there, however, that Kamala discovers that Ramesh is not her husband. She sees an old newspaper with Ramesh's notice asking about Dr Chatterjee and saying that his wife is under his (Ramesh's) protection.

*Suicide?* Kamala is as devastated as Hemnalini and attempts suicide. She is rescued by a prostitute and put in the care of Nalinaskha's mother. Believing that Kamala is dead, Ramesh travels to Benares to perform her last rites (without the body).

*Meetings* There Ramesh meets the widow whose daughter (Sushila) he married and who died in the boat wreck. The widow speaks of her unending grief that her daughter died without having a married life, and she urges Ramesh to marry again. Ramesh also sees Hemnalini, who is caught

between her love for him and her deep affection for her fiancé, Nalinaskha. Eventually, Kamala meets Dr Nalinaskha (Chatterjee), who is her real husband. Kamala is a servant in his mother's house and overhears him telling the story of the boat wreck, which allows her to identify him. Further drama occurs when Dr Chatterjee's mother meets Hemnalini and explains to her potential daughter-in-law that her son was married and that his bride died in a boat accident. Hemnalini then reveals that she is still in love with another man.

*Revelation* The doctor finally discovers the whole truth when he finds Ramesh's newspaper notice tied into a corner of Kamala's sari. The doctor contacts Ramesh, who comes to his house, where Kamala is bedridden with grief. Ramesh tells Kamala that he had kept the truth from her and that he has come to return her to her real life. 'What is real and what is imagined?' she asks.

*Farewell* Ramesh takes his tearful farewell from the ailing Kamala and goes to Hemnalini, although the future is left uncertain for all of them.

## THEMES

**Tradition and modernity** The most obvious, but perhaps the least original, theme of the film is the conflict between tradition and modernity, which dominates much of nineteenth and early-twentieth century Indian fiction. This contrast is dramatised in the juxtaposed characters of Kamala and Hemnalini. Kamala is an orphaned village girl/young woman, while Hemnalini is the daughter of a sophisticated Calcutta family. Kamala can't spell; Hemnalini is an accomplished singer. The key battleground between past and present is the intractable issue of love and marriage. Ramesh's father expresses a traditional view when he says, 'I don't know my son at all. I assumed that I had the right to choose a bride for him.' This is a clever twist on the more usual position of a father forcing a daughter to marry someone. On the other side, Hemnalini's father grants her complete freedom to choose her husband, even when her brother has chosen one for her. The father knows that his daughter loves Ramesh (who has disappeared), but the brother insists that 'silence is consent.' The father challenges this argument, saying, in 'Christian weddings, the priest chants the sacraments alone; but in our Hindu weddings, the priest, groom and bride must chant the verses together. She cannot be silent.' The father takes a similar line when Hemnalini becomes engaged to the doctor and Ramesh reappears. Again, Hemnalini's father says that she must follow her own heart. This modern point of view does not solve the problem, though, because 'her heart is silent.' Another expression of the conflict between tradition and modernity is articulated by a woman at the funeral pyre in Benares. Speaking to Ramesh, and referring to the boat wreck, she says, 'An accidental death brings bad luck [for everyone in the family]. But all of you are educated. All of you are modern. You don't believe in these things.' Certainly, the boat wreck brought misfortune to everyone in the film.

**Rivers and boats** A more poetical, and deeper, theme of the film is the metaphor of rivers and boats. River travel was the main means of transportation at the time of the source novel, and the monsoon meant that boats often capsized with loss of life. In the film, there are several boat journeys to Benares and other cities. Even when not travelling, the river and its boats are visible since most of the action takes place in towns and cities beside the Ganges. The power of the river as metaphor is reinforced by several songs (mostly composed by Tagore) that are sung by characters or as a voice-over. Hemnalini, for example, sings a song with these lyrics: 'There are no boundaries for you; you keep on flowing. Even though there is pain, you must keep moving on.' She is suffering after learning that Ramesh is married, or at least, living with a woman. On another occasion, after Ramesh reappears, she sings: 'Every boat has a destination, but what of mine? Will my boat ever reach its destination? My boat is sailing near the shore, but it is somewhere out at sea.' The most dramatic use of the river metaphor comes from Ramesh, when he says goodbye to Kamala for the last time at the end of the film. Although she knows that the doctor is her real husband, she has developed a love for Ramesh. He, too, is caught between her and Hemnalini. When he leaves, he tries to comfort her by quoting lines from a Bengali poet (Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a near-contemporary of Tagore): 'Life is a river; once it flows away, it doesn't come back.' Ramesh is also speaking to himself. He and Kamala must let the past go.

## CHARACTERS

**Ramesh** Ramesh is a law student, who loves Hemnalini but is forced to marry Sushila; after the accident, he mistakes Kamala for his wife. Ramesh is a kind and thoughtful person. A law student who does not believe in god, he has an independent spirit but also treats everyone with respect. He

is unselfish and makes sacrifices ('my dilemma' as he puts it) to ensure the happiness of others.

**Independent** Ramesh is a modern man, who believes he is not bound by superstition and traditional practices. He expresses his independence in an early scene when he is summoned from Calcutta to his family house in a village. There, he is told by his father that he will marry the daughter of a poor widow. His reaction is firm and immediate: 'That's absurd. I've already promised to marry someone else [Hemnalini]...There's only one life and it's my life. I will follow my own choice.' He is even more incensed when he is told that the wedding will take place in a few days because there is no other auspicious date for the next three months. 'Besides,' his father adds, 'your horoscopes match.' That sort of astrological argument strikes Ramesh as 'barbaric.' He agonises over his decision to reject his father's arrangement, but he remains firm that he alone has the right to choose his wife. He leaves, knowing that his father will disown him. It is a courageous decision.

**Compassionate** Ramesh is not, however, an insensitive or arrogant person. And, in the very next scene, we see that he has deep compassion. Having left his father with his defiant statement, he is stopped by the widow whose daughter he has been asked to marry. She explains that she will not allow her daughter to come between him and his father; instead, she will swallow poison. She has no other choice: she cannot find another husband for her daughter and all the arrangements to marry him [Ramesh] have been made. If the ceremony is called off, the humiliation will be too great. Hearing that, Ramesh changes his mind and agrees to marry the daughter. The widow asks if it is true that he has already promised to marry someone else. 'Yes, I have,' he says with sad eyes, 'but you should not take poison. I will marry your daughter.' It is his own decision, but it is taken out of compassion for someone else.

**Tender** More than compassionate, Ramesh is tender-hearted. This quality is revealed slowly as he begins to live with Kamala and becomes even more poignant when he realises that she is not his wife. He doesn't have the heart to tell her this news, knowing that it would crush her and confirm her belief that her life is destined for sorrow. There are several moments, but one stands out. While Ramesh is reading, Kamala (who still does not know he is not her husband) sidles up and shyly asks if he likes her (they have not consummated the marriage because Ramesh does not want to compromise her). Ramesh sighs and says, 'I think you are very nice.' She complains that he does not care for her, but he reassures her that he will look after her. 'I will look after you' he says. 'I promise.' The words are few and somewhat trite, but the scene is powerful because of the pauses and silences. He is trying not to hurt her while, at the same time, trying not to deceive her.

**Hemnalini** Hemnalini is the daughter of a well-off Calcutta father; she is in love with Ramesh, is confused by his absence and consents to marry Akshay. Hemnalini is a young woman raised in a progressive Calcutta family. She is well-educated, a talented singer-musician and enjoys the indulgence of her forward-thinking father. She, like Ramesh, is kind and tries to avoid hurting anyone in the tangled tragedy that unfolds.

**Loyal** Hemnalini is unwavering in her love for Ramesh, no matter what others might think of him. She is mystified when he disappears without explanation and when she receives no letters from him. The real test, however, comes when her father tells her that he has been told that Ramesh is married. Hemnalini, with her back turned, shakes her head. 'It doesn't matter what you say, father,' she says. 'I won't believe it. Unless he tells me himself, I will not believe it.' From her voice and her manner, it is clear that she is shaken, but she has grabbed onto the solid rock of her love and clings to it as she listens to this horrible news. Her loyalty appears all the more virtuous to the viewers because we know that the news is (at least) partially true and that she will receive a grave shock.

**Devastated** The depth of her shock, when it is proved that Ramesh is living with another woman, is enough to send her to bed. Her devastation is such that she does not eat or talk for several days. The humiliation of knowing (or thinking) that her fiancé has betrayed her and married someone in secret is too great to bear, for her and for her family. She is numb, unable to think or feel. The doctor comes and fears for her life, but she pulls through and recovers slowly.

**Selfless** Following her recovery, her brother arranges a marriage for her with Akshay, her long-time admirer and friend of the family. He is a nice-looking, polite young man, and everyone agrees that he would make a good husband. Everyone except Hemnalini herself. This causes a conflict in the family. Her father is adamant that she should decide herself whom she will marry, while the brother is equally convinced that this marriage is best for her. In the end, Hemnalini decides to sacrifice her happiness. In a bedroom conversation with her father, she agrees to marry Akshay in order to save

the family's reputation in society. To maintain any connection with Ramesh, who is seen as a cad, would compromise the family's honour. Reluctantly, she says, 'You have all suffered a lot. Brother has been distracted from his studies. I will marry Akshay.'

**Kamala** Kamala is married to Dr Chatterjee, but after the boat incident mistakes Ramesh for her husband. Kamala is the most complex character in the story. She is an orphan, who lives in a village with her protective aunt. She is docile, fearful and shy, especially toward her 'husband' Ramesh, but she also possesses hidden depths. She has been told that she is an 'unlucky person' and, by the end of the story, it is her situation that seems the most unforgiving.

**Shy** Kamala is an uneducated village girl, thrown into the role of Ramesh's wife in Calcutta. She is overwhelmed by the situation, afraid that she will make mistakes and acts like a traditional wife by demurely deferring to her husband. Since we know what she doesn't (that Ramesh is not her husband), her shyness is all the more affecting. A good example is a scene when she musters the courage to speak to him. 'I know a girl doesn't have the right to like or dislike,' she says. 'But can I say something?' Ramesh puts down his book and listens. 'I like you a lot,' she says turning away and hiding her face with a corner of her sari. 'When the doctor from the city [that is, you] came to marry me, I thought maybe he had a separate life back there. A woman. But now that I'm here with you, I see that this is my world, too. Shared with you.' The words, spoken almost in a whisper, are sweet and tender, the opening of a bashful heart to a man she is learning to love.

**Perceptive** As their close (but non-sexual) relationship develops, we begin to see that Kamala is also a perceptive person. Uneducated, but emotionally intelligent, she feels her husband's physical distance and finds a witty way to tell him. Just before this scene, he had corrected her pronunciation of the word for 'woman' (*stri*, which she pronounced *istri*, as is common in rural dialects). Now, she offers to give him a gentle head massage, but he pushes her hand away and tells her to go to bed instead. She responds by saying, 'I said the right thing by mistake. I am iron (*istri*). You get a jolt when I touch you.' Kamala seems backward, but she has her wits about her.

**Fearful** From the very beginning, Kamala is afraid that her life will be one of suffering. She is an orphan, and her aunt tells her that unhappiness is her destiny. That prediction seems to come true when the boat capsizes and she almost dies. But then she regains consciousness and (thinks she) sees her husband. Still, her fear is not banished and is expressed in a scene with Ramesh in Calcutta. One morning, as she serves him breakfast, she looks at him and says, 'You could treat me like a slave. I know that. I was born an unlucky person.' Ramesh looks at her, not knowing what to say. She is afraid that he does not like her because he does not treat her as a wife in bed. 'You won't send me away, will you?' she asks, afraid to hear his answer.

**Dr Chatterjee** Dr Chatterjee (later Dr Nalinaskha) is Kamala's husband, who survives the boat disaster and later falls in love with Hemnalini.

**Akshay** A friend of Hemnalini's family and is later engaged to marry her.



(Kamala after the boat wreck)



(Ramesh and Hemnalini)



(Hemnalini and her father)



(Kamala comes to terms with the truth)



(Dr Chatterjee and Hemnalini)