

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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CHARULATA (THE LONELY WIFE) 1964

Satyajit Ray

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

Considered by many to be Ray's finest film, *Charulata* is a delicate documentation of pent-up emotions, literary ambitions and miscommunication in late nineteenth-century Calcutta. *Charulata*, retitled *The Lonely Wife* for its release with English subtitles, is based on a short story by Rabindranath Tagore ('The Broken Nest'). All three titles reveal something of the drama. Essentially, it is a domestic drama, in which the bored wife falls in love, or at least develops a deep rapport, with her husband's cousin. The male characters, sleepwalking in their own self-defined worlds, wake up to the emotional damage that they have created. But is it too late?

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Charulata is not only one of Ray's most popular films, it is also his own personal favourite. This is probably because it is the first film on which he had complete authority to make decisions not only on the camera but on every other aspect of film production, from the story to sets and music. In that sense, it is his most accomplished aesthetic achievement.

The film is also significant because it is based on a story by Rabindranath Tagore that appears to be autobiographical. Like Amal, Tagore had a deep artistic rapport with his brother's wife, who was closer in age to him than to her husband. (In the film, Amal is a cousin, but in Bengali society male cousins are treated like brothers.) After Tagore himself married, his sister-in-law committed suicide, and some people believe that she killed herself out of grief at losing that close relationship with Tagore. However, that possibility is not often openly debated because Tagore is practically a saint to Bengalis. Ray was also bold in setting his film in exactly the historical period in which Tagore lived and in using literary references that point toward him. It is said that when Ray examined Tagore's manuscript for the story source ('The Broken Nest'), he found Tagore's notes, which strengthened his belief that the story was autobiographical.

STORY

The lonely wife The first section of the story focuses on Charulata, Bhupati's young and bored wife. The film opens with shots of Charulata wandering through a large, upper-class family house in Calcutta, looking for something to amuse herself with. She reads a lot, mostly the novels of a well-known nationalist writer, but she is not happy. Her husband, Bhupati, is so preoccupied with his newspaper business that he scarcely registers her presence. Even at meals, he noisily chews through his food without taking much time to engage his wife in conversation. We get the impression that Charulata is little more than a companion to him because she was married at a young age. In one shot, we see her looking longingly at a servant woman holding a baby, and we wonder if she is childless for medical or domestic reasons. Whatever the reason, we understand that she is unfulfilled.

In-laws Bhupati then invites Umapada, Charulata's brother, and Manda, Umapada's wife, to live with them. He hopes that Umapada will help him with the financial side of his newspaper business and that Manda will provide Charulata with company. It doesn't work out that way, however.

Cousin Amal This languid domestic atmosphere changes with the arrival of the last person in the set of five characters. This is Amal, Bhupati's cousin, who is an unemployed college graduate with a deep love of literature, music and art. While Bhupati and Umapada discuss finances, Amal and Charulata discuss poetry. Amal is also a free spirit, and openly discusses the question of the 'New Woman' with Charulata and the others.

Forbidden love Bhupati encourages the budding rapport between his wife and his cousin, hoping that he will encourage her literary interests and make her less lonely. Soon, however, Charulata and

Amal become more than friends. And when they take walks in the gardens around the house, admiring the beauty and fecundity of nature, it is obvious that they are falling in love. She swings joyously on a swing hanging from a tree, while Amal composes poems dedicated to her. Charulata gives Amal a notebook in which to write the poems that he says she inspires in him. She treasures those poems as private words and urges Amal not to publish them, since that would spoil them in her mind.

Crisis Charulata's inner happiness is then destroyed. First, she feels angry that her husband, Bhupati, has told Amal to amuse her. Second, she feels betrayed when she finds out that Amal has, against her wishes, published the poems he composed for her. Amal is shown to be an ambitious person, like her husband, and again she comes second in competition with a man's ambition. The widening gap between them is revealed when he is thrilled at seeing his poems in print (his first publication) and she is angry by the same sight.

Success Far from being rendered passive by Amal's publication, however, Charulata is spurred on to write and publish her own poems. And when they appear in a literary magazine superior to that in which Amal's appeared, it is clear that they are at least equals. Emboldened by her literary success, she becomes more open in her affection for Amal. She gives him a pair of slippers she had been embroidering for her husband, and, in an unguarded moment, she embraces him.

Betrayal Oblivious to this emotional drama in his own house, Bhupati faces his own crisis. He is moving forward in his nationalist politics and is excited when political changes in Britain signal a more tolerant attitude toward eventual independence. To celebrate, he sponsors a concert party. With everyone preoccupied, his brother, Umapada, steals his money and runs away. Later, Bhupati discovers that Umapada has been embezzling funds all along and that he is bankrupt. Amal and Charulata are too absorbed in their developing love to realise Bhupati's despair. Then Bhupati tells his cousin that although he is bankrupt it is the personal betrayal by his brother-in-law, and not the financial loss, that bothers him most. Unwittingly, Bhupati has opened Amal's eyes to his own betrayal of him with Charulata. Amal is filled with self-loathing, realising that if he continues seeing her, he will destroy his cousin's marriage. Without telling anyone, and writing only a brief note, he leaves the house.

Ambiguous end Charulata is stunned and then crushed by Amal's unexplained departure. She is thrown back into her earlier, passive wandering and gives up any literary ambitions. She is once again an observer and no longer an active agent in life. Although she attempts to hide her despair, Bhupati walks unannounced into her room and finds her crying. Slowly, he realises what has happened and is appalled and bewildered by this apparently second betrayal. Now he fears that he will lose his wife as well as his newspaper. He spends time outside the house trying to understand what to do in order to win back her affection. The final scene is ambiguous. When he returns, he is received by a frowning Charulata, who stretches out a hand. The freeze-frame final shot shows the hands not quite touching.

THEMES

Ambition This drama has several layers, but tying them all together is the power of ambition, both to motivate and to destroy. At the beginning of the film, Charulata is the only major character in the love triangle without ambition. Her husband pursues journalism and politics, while Amal is devoted to literature and art. Even Umapada and his wife, Manda, though lesser figures, have personal agendas. Bhupati's unflinching devotion to his newspaper and its progressive aims blinds him to his wife's condition and directly leads to a breakdown in his marriage and its near-dissolution. Bhupati's ambition to publish a paper dedicated to the nationalist campaign is laudable, but that same virtuous purpose overpowers his domestic obligations. He is blind to the developing relationship between Charulata and Amal, and he doesn't see that Umapada is cheating him. A similar single-minded devotion to art and poetry also prevents Amal from realising what he is doing with Charulata. He may think he is simply revelling in nature and composing harmless love lyrics, but those activities end up coming close to destroying a marriage. Literary and political ambitions, their intrinsic merits notwithstanding, have the potential to undermine and eventually ruin domestic happiness.

Communication Perhaps a somewhat more subtle theme concerns the degree to which people can communicate their feelings. All three of the main characters—Charulata, Amal and Bhupati—are involved in expressing themselves through the written and printed word. They work hard at perfecting

their skills, while at the same time failing to articulate their feelings to others in speech. The house is filled with noisy literary work, while at the dinner table husband and wife are silent. There is also the transition from writing to speech, from public literature to private words, that proves difficult to negotiate. When Amal's poems cross that line, they create a misunderstanding about the contract between him and Charulata that causes agony to both. Finally, there is the visual medium of film that Ray utilises in order to convey the characters' feelings. Many shots are virtually wordless but communicate through subtle facial expressions and gestures.

The new woman For many, however, the dominant theme, and certainly the most overt issue, is the question of the 'new woman.' Modernity is often defined by the social status of women, and India was no different in this regard. The public sphere in the late-nineteenth century was filled with a vigorous debate about the role of women, child marriage, divorce, *sati* (a widow cremating herself on her husband's funeral pyre) and widowhood itself. The characterisation of Charulata presents a complex picture of the modern woman. On the one hand, she is a static figure, sweet and chaste, without a hint of a thought of betraying her husband. On the other, she is educated and intelligent and unfulfilled by her domestic role. Although Charulata finds no solace in the restricted domestic space, when she does express herself in poetry, she wants to keep it private, outside the public sphere. She seems to inhabit an in-between space. She never really crosses the line into infidelity, at least in her actions, although her awkward embrace of Amal comes close. Inside, however, we wonder how deeply she 'loves' Amal and how much that affection has displaced the feelings she had for her husband. Again, Ray depicts these subtle social and psychological issues with consummate skill.

CHARACTERS

Charulata Charulata is the young wife of Bhupati. As the eponymous heroine of this story, Charulata is its most fascinating character. She is the young and intelligent but bored wife of a wealthy man who is completely absorbed by his own political and literary projects. At first, Charulata appears to float through the large house, which should be her sphere, without aim or direction. She is a spectator rather than an actor. But she has hidden depths and talents, which are brought out by Amal, her husband's cousin. Although married, she is emotionally immature and cannot stop herself falling in love with Amal. Now, we see that she is not only a discerning reader but also a talented writer. And this flowering of her talents puts her in competition with the men for the first time.

Passive A vivid illustration of her early passivity and boredom occurs early on. She picks up and puts down her embroidery, she orders tea, she glances at a book, she tinkles the piano keys and she picks up a pair of opera glasses. Standing at the shuttered window, she looks at the street life outside, beyond her domestic sphere. What she can see is anyone's guess, but clearly she is cut off from the world outside. Then, standing in a doorway, she sees her husband pass by and not notice her. As he leaves the shot, she picks up her opera glasses and watches him disappear down the stairs. That is the extent of her engagement with the world and her marriage—viewed through long-range glasses.

Stimulated That passive spectating comes to an end when Amal, the cousin, enters the house and encourages Charulata's artistic talents. A key scene that illustrates her new-found spirit occurs in the garden. The location itself is telling: only outside the house is she able to express her dormant desires. Charulata sits on a swing hanging from a tree and asks Amal to give her a push. When he gives her a curious look, wondering about the propriety of such an action, she says, 'Just once. After that I can manage.' That statement can be read on two levels, the physical and the emotional. Next, we watch Charulata swing back and forth, going up high and coming back quickly, as she sings a song about nature and its beauty. Her perpetual frown is gone, swallowed by a bright smile. She is no longer inactive; she is in motion. She is free.

Bhupati Bhupati is a wealthy man who decides to start a new, political newspaper. Bhupati is a wealthy man, who can fund his own projects. Ignoring his beautiful wife, he throws himself into establishing a newspaper that will support the nationalist cause. He is a thoughtful man and a purposeful one. Although not unkind, he lacks sensitivity toward his new wife and fails to understand that she also needs space to follow her own ambitions. He is the classic 'absent-minded professor,' so engrossed in his books that he fails to see the world around him. His good intentions are never in doubt—indeed, he asks Amal, his cousin, to encourage his wife's literary interests—but he lacks

understanding. Ironically, it is Amal's attention to Charulata that very nearly destroy his marriage. His naivete, or perhaps lack of worldliness, also contributes to the disaster that befalls his publication venture. Trusting his brother-in-law, when he should be wary, he is left bankrupt. Still, his underlying humanity shines through in the end, when he finally grasps Charulata's situation and tries to effect a reconciliation with her.

Self-absorbed A blatant example of his self-absorption is shown in the famous opening sequence of the film which follows Charulata around as she cannot find anything to satisfy her in the large house (see Illustrative Moments above). At the end of her wandering, she stops in a doorway that leads onto a corridor. Then we see Bhupati enter from the far left, head bent toward the book in his hand. Walking slowly toward the camera, he pauses for a moment, as if he's found something significant in the book, and stands directly opposite Charulata in the doorframe. He reads, nods his head in satisfaction and continues to walk away. She is standing within touching distance, yet he does not notice her presence.

Principled Bhupati's virtuous character is later revealed when the film comes to a conclusion. He has discovered that his brother-in-law has swindled him and ruined the newspaper that had been his life's work. Even then, he does not get angry with Umapada, but rather reflects on the nature of betrayal. 'It is not the money I've lost that pains me most,' he says. 'If a man I put such trust in shows not the slightest respect . . . then what have we got? Is there no honesty? Is it all just sham and lies?' Bhupati's ability to rise above the pettiness of personal anger and consider the social consequences of betrayal marks him out as a man of unusual principles.

Amal Amal is Bhupati's cousin and a young graduate with literary ambitions. Amal is a complex person, who can be seen as combining elements of the other two in the love triangle. He is young and artistic, like Charulata. They care nothing for profits and politics and can spend hours reciting poetry and enjoying natural beauty. Amal is also self-absorbed, like his cousin, and lives without much understanding of the possible effects of his actions. But, again like Bhupati, he has a moral core that will prevent him from betraying his cousin and, indeed, from compromising Charulata.

Naïve Amal is naïve in matters of the heart. Although he has no intention of starting a love affair with his cousin's wife, he openly encourages her affections toward him. They share literary and aesthetic interests; they like lying around in the garden and reciting love poetry. He is either unable or unwilling to see that such moments can only act as an aphrodisiac on the young and beautiful but ignored Charulata. That is because he believes in the intrinsic merit of poetry and music, without understanding that they also exist in a social context, such as the house he shares with others.

Loyal Despite all this, Amal remains loyal to Bhupati, at least in his actions. A clear demonstration of his loyalty occurs toward the end. When it becomes obvious that Bhupati is disturbed, Amal and Charulata fear that he has discovered their covert intimacy. Amal steels himself and says he will talk with him. Charulata begs him to promise that he will not leave her 'no matter what happens.' He replies that he will see what Bhupati says. Again, she pleads with him to promise that he will not leave. Again, he does not promise. She grabs hold of his arm, and leans on him, begging again for his promise. 'Let go of me; let me go,' he says. With those words, he shakes himself free of her. He finds out that Bhupati has been betrayed by Umapada, and Amal decides he must leave the house or risk betraying him by his relationship with Charulata.

Umapada Umapada is Bhupati's brother-in-law, who steals from him.

Manda Manda is Umapada's wife, who is supposed to become a companion for Charulata but whose low-brow tastes repel her.



(Charulata and Amal)



(Charulata and Amal)



(Bhupati and Charulata, passing like ships in the night)



(Charulata and Amal share a joke)



(Charulata and Amal in the garden)



(Charulata confronts Amal over his publication of poems)



(Bhupati explaining to Amal, in the background, his pain over the betrayal by his brother-in-law)



(The ever-frowning Charulata)