

Robert A. Rosenstone's *Revising History: Film & the Construction of a*

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The Home and the World

THE INVENTION OF MODERNITY IN COLONIAL INDIA

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My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centering to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate.

—*Sahana Rashtie*, Shame

The Home and the World (in the original Bengali, *Ghare Baire*) was one of the last (1984) in a long line of extraordinary films by the Bengali director Satyajit Ray, who died in April 1992. The film recapitulates many of the central themes in Ray's cinematic worldview as well as in that of the work of Rabindranath Tagore, Ray's frequent source of stories and inspiration. *The Home and the World* contains many echoes from Ray's earlier *Charulata*; both films are based on stories by Tagore.

The film begins with a fire, which when the camera pulls back is revealed as that of a funeral pyre. The camera pans from the fire to the face of a dazed and grief-torn woman whose tears and immobile features signify mourning. A voice-over glosses the image: "I have passed through fire. What was impure in me has been burnt to ashes." The beginning is the end, and thus the tension becomes not how the story will unfold but why. The foreknowledge of tragedy frames in advance the notions of destiny and inevitability, of free will and determination, and ultimately of the immense risk and danger inherent in the collision of tradition and moder-

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ny. The voice, and the story of the film, belong to the mourning woman, Binhalá; the tragedy is simultaneously that of her marriage and that of her motherland, the nation.

The film is set in rural Bengal in the traumatic year 1905. Lord Curzon has just divided Bengal presidency into eastern and western halves, in what was simultaneously a classic act of divide-and-rule and a clear assault on the administrative fortunes of the politically all too conscious Hindu elite (or *bhadralok*) of Calcutta (not to mention the administrative basis for the creation first of East Pakistan and now Bangladesh). The partition precipitated the swadeshi movement, in which foreign commodities, particularly cloth, became the symbols of colonial domination and the cry *swadeshi*—meaning "of our own country"—became the principal focus of nationalist politics. Political symbolism followed from economic analysis, in particular the contention that India's raw materials and markets had been used to service the English industrial revolution with the direct result of impoverishing and further enslaving India.

The image of fire occurs not only at the scene of the funeral pyre but also to depict two critical features of the swadeshi campaign: the burning of foreign cloth in what was the central political ritual of the swadeshi movement, and the chaotic destruction and frenzy of a communal riot. The movement began with rallies held throughout Bengal where political leaders encouraged citizens and merchants to dump all foreign cloth into a large fire, a fire that both consumed the cloth and symbolized the death of colonial domination. But within a year of the euphoria of political action that was part of the early days of protest, Bengal was the scene of serious communal riots that led figures such as Tagore to reconsider the movement and prefigured the tragic association of nationalist politics in India with social ruptures between Hindus and Muslims.

At one level the conventionalized story of a lovers' triangle, the film is almost allegorical in its clear reference to a set of homologized antinomies: home/world; woman/man; private/public; love/politics; tradition/modernity—all put within the larger classical frame of the struggle between free will and determinism. Although the story in its original textual form could perhaps be read without the rich texture of implied significations, the film—with its insistent images from that of fire to the much-photographed corridor between zenana and drawing room—ineluctably impregnates the story with multiple meanings. Ray's use of cinematic graphic images allegorizes what is otherwise a simple story set in a highly specific historical and social landscape.

After the opening scene of final conflagration, the story begins with Nikhil, a young and progressive landlord (zamindar), reading an English poem to his beautiful wife while boating on the river. It is a scene that

could have taken place in the lake country and certainly evokes the colonizer's culture of romantic love. Only the scene is set in India, and the young woman understands not a word of this language of love. Nikhil chooses this moment to ask if his wife would like to learn English. She protests, as the voice-over says, in vain; for—in a demonstration of his own traditional authority—he prevails and hires an English governess. The governess teaches Bimala not only English but also piano. English singing, even how to pour tea. The young pupil makes splendid progress until the English governess suddenly must leave town, the victim of rocks thrown by a group of politically excited and inspired students.

Politics enters even more graphically with the arrival in town of Nikhil's oldest and dearest friend, Sandip, who has now become a leading swadeshi activist. He delivers an impassioned (and, for a feature film, a remarkably long and detailed) speech about swadeshi. The historical setting is thus given specificity and political content, and the rally ends with the song by the Bengali poet Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Bande Mataram* (later rejected as the national anthem of India because of its strong Hindu associations). With Nikhil's approval, the rally takes place in the courtyard of the landlord's house. From the safety of the zenana, Bimala listens, and is deeply moved.

Later that evening Nikhil tells his wife that he would like her to meet Sandip; over the years he has told Sandip all about her, but since her marriage she has remained within the confines of the zenana and spoken with no man other than her husband. Meeting Sandip thus also means coming out of the women's quarters, entering into a male world of public intercourse. That her coming out should engage both the "male" and the "political" in the person of Sandip is, of course, no accident. But Nikhil's impulse to bring his wife out appears somewhat mysterious from the start; he tells her about Sandip's many affairs (even with "non-swadeshi" women), and he makes it clear that he disapproves of Sandip's politics.

It is evident that Nikhil wishes to do more than simply show off his beautiful and accomplished wife. He incites her interest in Sandip and politics in equal measure. When Bimala tells Sandip that she believes in the cause of swadeshi, Nikhil says, "Now you are a free agent." Nikhil believes he can bring his wife not only out of the zenana but out of the traditional world, which, through the arrangement of their marriage, dictated both her exclusion from his public world and her love for him. At the same time, Nikhil makes clear his sense that Sandip is not as much of an idealist, nor swadeshi politics as ideologically sound, as they might seem on the surface. He further says that the emotional appeal of "Bande Mataram" is best suited for women: "I can't think like that." And he

wryly observes that the more one gets to know Sandip, the less one likes him. The "Home" and the "World" seem equally problematic; and Nikhil wants his wife to learn about both so that she can choose, as he has done, a kind of middle ground. But, perhaps even more than this, in tones that subvert the promise of freedom he holds out for her, he wishes his wife to choose him.

As the story unfolds, Nikhil's altruism and deep faith in rationalism appear increasingly admirable—not only does he argue against swadeshi measures because they hurt the poor Muslim merchants far more than the British (or the rural landlords and urban bourgeoisie) but it emerges that he had, by trying to manufacture soap and other commercial goods locally, been a swadeshi before his time. He is by all accounts a very good man. But something is not quite right. Sandip, with whom Bimala does develop a passionate if short-lived love, may be a crass opportunist, but Nikhil is ironically most impetuous when he compels his wife to choose him and his ways out of her own free will. Nikhil's commitment to rationalism seems overzealous, ill-conceived, hopelessly romantic. The conceit of freedom is played out against the backdrop of predestined tragedy and overwhelming fatalism. By the time Bimala returns to her senses, realizing that her husband is a genuine treasure—far more the political hero than his rival in love—the die has been cast. Communist riots, set off by swadeshi agitation, engulf the estate in flames. And Nikhil, compelled by his own sense of nobility and responsibility, no sooner knows that his wife has returned to him than he rides off to quell the riot that engulfs him, too. Bimala's last words, "I knew I would be punished," leave little doubt that her freedom has not only underscored the determinations in her life but also made her the most unhappy of traditional Hindu women: a widow in the prime of life, just like her spiteful and unattractive sister-in-law, who spends most of her time glowering at Bimala from the moral purity of her bitter fate.

In the penultimate scene of the film, Nikhil's body is solemnly marched down the path leading back from the estate to the landlord's house. The image recalls the earlier scene of the corridor between the zenana and the drawing room; both are powerful sites of passage and transgression. Each oppositional world is metonymized in Ray's obsessively choreographed cinema. Even the beautiful textiles that play such an important role in creating the visual fabric of the film become signs of the relations between home and world. When Bimala is in her bedroom she spends her time incessantly folding and admiring exquisite cloth, saris as well as the blouses she designed to blend European and Bengali fashion. These textiles, though based on Indian colors and designs, are sensuous symbols that mark the infiltration of the traditional zenana by the West, for the

cloth was all loomed, as Nikhili reminds her, in English factories. The swadeshi fire that burns foreign cloth never reaches Binola's wardrobe but instead becomes the fire that consumes her husband, consigning her to a world of plain white cotton.

The costs of transgression seem now to be signified in this ultimate scene of sadness, the funeral procession and the widow's grief. The final scene, juxtaposing an image of flame from the communal riot and the woman—transformed before our eyes from a bride to a widow shorn and in white—evokes the memory of sati, the ceremony in which the widow mounted the funeral pyre and followed her husband to the next world. A century before, sati had become the symbol of oppressive tradition in Bengal, where the great reformer Rammohan Roy had argued for the abolition of the rite and the British had asserted their civilizing mission through the condemnation of this horrible cruelty to women. But like so many other episodes in colonial history, the controversy over sati raised the contradictions of colonial rule to a new level and revealed that women's bodies could be used for a variety of purposes that in the end, like Nikhili's fatal gesture, accorded neither freedom nor agency to women.

Modernity, less in the form of colonial denunciations of Indian tradition than in enlightened Indian efforts to reform a society in which women often bore the brunt of caste and custom, is perhaps the more critical focus of Ray's cinematic scrutiny than the nationalist politics he seems so readily to dismiss. For if Ray worried that the development of nationalism subjected women to modernity's most virulent contradictions, he was neither an avid traditionalist nor a modernist retreating altogether from the harsh and horrific politics of the contemporary world. *The Home and the World* seems at one level a self-conscious aesthetic reflection on the antinomies I listed earlier. These concerns are not new to Ray, for they were clearly depicted in *Charulata*, made twenty years before. But whereas *Charulata* ended with the possibility of hope, with public and private, politics and poetry, male and female, united in the final—if still provisional—reconciliation and collaboration of a political newspaperman and his poetic wife, this film ends with death and widowhood. No doubt this shift could be construed as the difference between the India of Nehru and that of postemergency politics, with its resurgent communalism and corruption. But whatever Ray's specific intention, history has taken on epic proportions. Destiny, inscribed in character, plot, and image, seems like fire to be engulfing the history of nonlinear development and liberal optimism. Modernism—with all its assumptions about history, politics, and society—is subjected to radical doubt. This film is about history in more than one sense. Although critics have justifiably complained that Ray's politics, perhaps even more than

Tagore's before him, seem dangerously reactionary, the film ends, as it begins, by calling into question the very categories we use to think about politics, and its relations to both art and life.

If Ray frequently took his narrative and aesthetic inspiration from Tagore, it is not without importance that the two figures lived in very different historical moments and contexts. Tagore's literary career (born in 1861, he lived until 1941) spanned much of the modern period; and both his prose and his more literary works reflected his changing though always complex relationship to the political whirl around him. He always emphasized the importance of education, and the need to use the mother tongue not only to cultivate an autonomous domain for the arts but also to bridge the chasm between the elite and the masses; he also was consistently concerned with forms of extremism that either neglected the costs of obsessional politics or abandoned the distinctive strengths of Indian civilization. But in the first two decades of the twentieth century his concerns underwent a series of changes in large part because of his involvement in and reactions to the swadeshi movement and its aftermath. In the years between 1901 and 1906 Tagore emphasized the "essential distinctness of oriental civilisation and its superiority over the European."¹ In so doing he began providing a very different reading of Indian social customs than he had earlier enunciated. For example, he wrote poetically about the Hindu past, he discovered virtues in the functional differentiation of caste and traditional village social life, and he even articulated justifications for child marriage, restrictions on widows, and accorded sati a certain kind of past honor.² This new poetics of the past was also accompanied by a critique of elite politics, which he saw as cringing in the deracinated shadows of colonial intrusion. Above all, Tagore stressed self-help, or "atmashakti," and thus was tapped into the collective resolve that built into the swadeshi movement of 1905. As Sumit Sarkar has noted, "In retrospect, it is Rabindranath Tagore rather than the professional politicians who stands out as the most vivid and remarkable personality of those stirring 1905 days—participating in the rough-and-tumble of politics as never before and after, suggesting far-reaching schemes of autonomous rural development . . . bestowing with the vision of a poet a rare beauty and imaginative appeal to the whole movement . . . and composing at the same time a magnificent series of patriotic songs."³

The Hindu Muslim riots of 1906–7 not only marred the enthusiasm of many avid supporters of swadeshi but also brought home the contradictions of mass politics and the socioeconomic conditions of colonial India. Although the riots reflected the tensions between a landed Hindu elite and

largely landless Muslim peasants, they also revealed the extent to which nationalist reliance on indigenous production was ironically a luxury for the rich, local merchants and traders, many of them Muslim, were committed to selling foreign cloth and goods because they were more readily available, better produced, and far cheaper than swadeshi brands. A swadeshi economy would have to await the massive investment of independent India's five-year plans in order to become even partially viable. And during the heady days of swadeshi agitation, even though moderates made sincere efforts to achieve communal amity, considerable numbers of extremists, often viewing Muslim rioters as mercenary agents of the British, exacerbated communal feelings and threatened to turn any form of mass nationalist politics against itself.

Tagore's initial response to the extreme turns of swadeshi politics was silence, but by late 1907 he was writing important essays that indicated decisive shifts from his earlier positions. First, he attacked the prejudice of Hindus against Muslims, arguing that the problem was one not of political manipulation so much as of the fact that religious difference could be used at all as the basis for social conflict: he wrote, "Satan cannot enter till he finds a flaw."⁴ Tagore further suggested that prejudice was predicated on unacceptable social and economic disparities; he wrote that the boycott had not taken into account the economic position of the masses—indeed, that it had been imposed on them through methods of social ostracism that were clearly part of the problem rather than the solution. To remedy these structural impediments to any genuine national movement, Tagore, anticipating Gandhi's constructive program, emphasized social reform and village work. More generally, Tagore no longer advocated a return to the glorious traditions of Hinduism but argued instead for the upending of caste divisions, religious intolerance, and social snobbery. Having witnessed what he took to be the dangers of reinvoking traditional religious values in swadeshi agitation—the symbols, songs, and rituals of the movement—he began to call for the modernizing of India.

It could be argued that Gandhi's emphasis on social reform and the constructive movement some years later was tolerated only because he also established for himself a remarkably astute command over the political organization of the Congress party and the reputation as the only leader who could genuinely mobilize mass political action. In any case, Tagore's disillusionment with politics led him to disavow any involvement in formal political action, and his call for constructive rural work ended up, devoid as it was of any complementary political platform, sounding tame and irrelevant. By the time he wrote *Home and the World*,⁵ he was aware of his growing marginalization from the mainstream politics of nationalism. And so Nikhil became a symbol of Tagore's own predicament; though he was a progressive zamindar who had

attempted to introduce self-reliance and home manufactures long before it had become fashionable to do so, he was seen as politically naive and hopelessly idealist by the political figures of the time, most dramatically through the contempt and ridicule of the figure of Sandip.

Ray's film is remarkably faithful to Tagore's novel, though it inevitably fails to capture the discursive reflectivity that Tagore achieved by telling his story through the consecutive and overlapping first-person stories of the three characters of the triangle. Perhaps the greatest cost of the translation from novel to film is the loss of the power and autonomy of Binmala's voice, her self-conscious sense of the tortured passage to the outer world of politics and passion. Binmala seems fully aware that she is being pulled toward something both dangerous and deceptive, that Sandip's power over her makes her misrecognize the goodness of her husband and the manipulateness of Sandip's attention. And Tagore demonstrates how Binmala's voice struggles against momentous odds to speak itself; one of the most powerful lines of the novel comes when Sandip's speech is repeated by Binmala. The tropes of nation, deity, and woman fold together, collapsing the dangers of religious rhetoric and the power of Sandip's sexual attraction, when Binmala reports Sandip as saying, "Have I not told you that, in you, I visualize the Shakti of our country? The geography of a country is not the whole truth. No one can give up his life for a map! When I see you before me, then only do I realize how lovely my country is."⁶ Some pages later Binmala confesses, "When, in Sandip's appeals, his worship of the country gets to be subtly interwoven with his worship of me, then does my blood dance, indeed, and the barriers of my hesitation totter. . . . I felt that my resplendent womanhood made me indeed a goddess. . . . Why does not my voice find a word, some audible cry, which would be like a sacred spell to my country for its fire initiation?"⁷ And so the real transgression Tagore decries is revealed; the slippery movement between desire, devotion, and demagoguery is the result of the precipitant passage down the corridor leading from the home to a world that has been shaped without any of the moral protections of the home. Tagore's despair about the direction of nationalist politics is expressed clearly even in Sandip's reflections about his own political strategy: "With our nature and our traditions we are unable to realise our country as she is, but we can easily bring ourselves to believe in her image. Those who want to do real work must not ignore this fact."⁸ Tagore's own sense of the costs of this strategy, as also its fundamentally European origins, emerges most poignantly in Nikhil's conversation with the master, the local schoolteacher who defends Nikhil and yet cautions him against his own self-destructive faith in Binmala: "I tell you, Nikhil, man's history has to be built by the united effort of all the races in the world, and therefore this selling of conscience for political reasons,—this making a fetish of

one's country, won't do. I know that Europe does not at heart admit this, but there she has not the right to pose as our teacher. . . . What a terrible epidemic of sin has been brought into our country from foreign lands."⁹ The easy linkage of Nikhil's vision of the modern and its apparent genealogical connection to Europe is thus dramatically disrupted: it is Sandip who is most fully, most corruptly, Westernized—not Nikhil. And it is in the very fetishization of the figure of the nation through religion and sexual desire that nationalism too betrays a foreign pedigree; thus the horrible confusion of mother India and erotic lover spills the sin of lustful adultery onto the canvases of modern politics in India. Religion and sentiment bear the burden of Sandip's tragic misrecognition. India's glory—and its nationalist apotheosis—is now rendered inaccessible and unknowable.

And so the passage from the social constraints of a determinate traditional world to enlightened reason, framed in the national terms of freedom and self-discovery, is hijacked by shortsighted and self-absorbed forms of venality and exclusion that grow out of reason itself. Tagore's novel is in part a critical reflection on the European Enlightenment's relationship to nationalism and colonialism, which both curtailed the possibilities of the new universalism and justified forms of oppression and exploitation that made a mockery of Europe's modernity. Closer to home, the passage provides a powerful allegory of the shift from the Enlightenment terms of the Bengal Renaissance to the political opportunism of terrorism, extremism, and communalism. Nevertheless, Tagore's biography suggests his final sense of the futility of either returning to a traditional Indian world or assuming that the Bengal Enlightenment's enthusiasm for things Western was still acceptable. Instead, Tagore seems to suggest the need to negotiate new relationships between tradition and modernity, between women and men, between the home and the world, formulated in Indian terms. But he does so in the context of his nuanced delineation of the pathos of Nikhil's ambition: not only was his attempt to manufacture soap and cloth ill-conceived; his assurance that freedom and love could be the instant product of enlightenment becomes the tragic precipitant of his own downfall.

Nikhil's faith in the emancipatory project of modernity is reflected early on in the novel; he says, "Up till now Bimala was my home-made Bimala, the product of the confined space and the daily routine of small duties. Did the love which I received from her; I asked myself, come from the deep spring of her heart, or was it merely like the daily provision of pipe water pumped up by the municipal steam-engine of society?"¹⁰ But soon he finds the "the passage from the narrow to the larger world is stormy." When he discovers the effects of freedom on Bimala, he blames her, expostulating that her "infatuation for tyranny" was not socially

produced but "deep down in her nature."¹¹ As time goes on, he discovers that the situation is more complicated, although he never loses faith in his ideal vision, he enigmatically laments, "My house, I now see, was built to remain empty, because its doors cannot open."¹² But he can never understand the paradoxical character of Bimala's ultimate revelation; at the very moment she has completed her passage, she knows that she is lost: "But women live on the trust of their surroundings,—this is their whole world. If once it is out that this trust has been secretly betrayed, their place in their world is lost."¹³

So much for the world to which Nikhil had tried to entreat her; even he is not sure at the end of the story whether the devastating misunderstandings between him and Bimala might ever be made good.¹⁴ The evacuation of the home has led to the hollowing out of her world, and at the moment she falls back at the feet of her husband as her god he disappears forever; modernist narrative turns into epic in the overdetermined moral tragedy of the conclusion.

Tagore's use of desire to drive the tension and action of the novel ironically works to conceal Nikhil's own relentless and imperious desire to shape Bimala in the image of his own modern god, both to fulfill himself (assuring him that she loves him genuinely) and to liberate her in his own terms (he compels her to submit to this plan). The displacement of male desire onto women, even when women's interests are most eloquently at stake, becomes, whether Tagore, or for that matter Ray, is fully aware of it, a paradoxical recapitulation of the limits of tradition so excoriated by Bengali modernizers at the same time that it reminds us of the contradictory position of women in the projects of social reform and cultural modernity in India since the nineteenth century.

Although Ray's film is not an intervention in contemporary political debates in the same direct sense as Tagore's novel so clearly was, the film raises many of the same questions about the relationship of women—and by extension the nature of the home, understandings of marriage, the predicament of love, the meanings of caste, and the reinventions of tradition—to the project of modernity and the history of nationalist politics. Significantly, in the ten years that have passed since Ray released the film, these issues have become even more pressing, and the threats of communalism, as well as the related risks of mass political mobilization, lend further urgency to the historical problematic of both novel and film. And, with renewed debates over sati, secularism, and Muslim personal law, the role of women has achieved critical currency in the cultural politics of South Asia once again.

Ray's allusion to sati was meant to symbolize the pathos of Binmala's position; despite her excursion outside the home she must return with a vengeance, to the lot of the traditional widow. But if sati is now used to establish the terms of tradition in cultural debates in India, it is important to stress the extent to which tradition itself is a category that could come into existence only with modernity. This is not to argue that nothing changes in history, or that a variety of "traditional" practices did not take place, or even that "modernity" has only a phantomlike existence either in India or in Europe, but rather to note that the idea of a static traditional world as antonym to the dynamic modern world could emerge only with the modern world, at the precise moment it began to present itself as new, progressive, universal, and—perhaps both most important and most contradictory—Western. This is so both in a general categorical sense and in a wide variety of substantive historical cases. I have elsewhere argued that caste—as a traditional, essentially Indian, foundationally religious, aristocratically hierarchical, social and ritual institution—was a colonial construction; which is to say that it was produced out of the entwined discursive projects and historical effects of colonial rule.¹⁵

The very terms used to define tradition have themselves been changed dramatically by colonial history. Religion, for example, often taken to be the key sign of difference between old and new, tradition and modernity, East and West, became only an autonomous domain and specifically privileged category under the weight of colonial efforts to contain difference and control what were seen as the most disruptive consequences of colonial rule. Lata Mani has convincingly argued that religion became mobilized both as an explanation for sati and as the domain in which any effort to suppress it had to seek official sanction.¹⁶ When the British sought to prohibit sati to assuage their own horror at the rite and send a clear message about the civilizing mission of colonialism, they established a scripturalist method for assessing the question of religious justification, exposing myriad contradictions in the social and cultural performance of sati at the same time that it gave unprecedented and ostensibly unified authority to certain texts and their interpreters for advising government about a range of extremely important issues.

If sati is no longer a transparent trope for the traditional subjection of women, and its abolition no more the story of the modern march of progress, an examination of Binmala's predecessors in the walk out of the home into the world can further deepen our sense of the contradictions of colonialism's impact on women in India. Although a major source of difficulty in the Indian context is the mutually embedded character of Westernization and modernization, we must not forget that feminist historiography has made the liberation of women in relation to the emergence of bourgeois social forms in the West a similar tale of contradiction.

Modernity was not a problem in India merely because it was linked to colonial rule.

Nevertheless, when eminent Bengali intellectuals and activists advocated social reform in areas related to women, they necessarily echoed colonial denunciations of Indian society. Given the colonial linkage of a modernizing, universalizing, reformist discourse with British condemnation of Indian society in cases such as sati, no Indian reformer could fail to feel a kind of civilizational ambivalence when arguing for progress in women's issues. If women were used as a measure of civility, they also became the fundamental symbol of tradition. The colonial collision of tradition and modernity took place in a succession of contests over women's bodies.

After sati, the two major issues confronting social reformers in nineteenth-century India concerned prohibitions on the remarriage of widows, and the problem of child marriage, contested principally through attempts to legislate the raising of the age of consent. Directed to the opposite ends of women's lives, the issues were related in the sense that many women were widowed at an early age, some even before they cohabited with their husbands. Both these issues provided platforms for a variety of concerns about women, feeding them from the worst abuses of traditional institutions that ironically seemed to grow stronger in the early years of colonial rule, both because of reaction to the West and because the escalating character of social mobility led increasing numbers of groups to emulate upper-caste mores, the very ones most restrictive to women. At the edges of these debates came calls for changing the character of marriage itself, making the wife a loving and supportive companion to her husband rather than a servile subordinate in an extended family network of relations whose principal status accrued from motherhood. Thus Nilkhal was rehearsing a critical trope of modernity in his own passionate efforts to force Binmala to love him freely as well as to share his life and his agency. But the obstacles to companionate marriage throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth were multiple, ranging from the inscription of male anxiety onto virtually every status position accorded to women in the household to significant age differentials, the lack of emphasis on female education, and the very solidity of the gendered boundaries between the private and the public.

In the early nineteenth century, attempts by missionary groups to provide opportunities for women to gain some education only deepened concerns that education would lead to conversion and the loss of traditional values. Partha Chatterjee has noted how salient, in much of the literature on women in the nineteenth century, were concerns about the "threatened Westernization of Bengali women."¹⁷ In particular, there was a great deal of ridicule about the idea of a Bengali woman trying to imitate the

ways of a *memsahib*, wearing Western clothes, cosmetics, and jewelry, reading novels and romances, riding in open carriages. But as time went on, it became clear that education could be controlled and adapted to indigenous needs. Education could be used to train women to become better mothers and homemakers, fulfilling the domestic and reproductive projects of bourgeois Bengali society. Women could leave the home, but only to make the home a far better place than it was before.¹⁸

This resolution differed markedly in details, and was never fully satisfactory. But it is striking how a bourgeois cult of domesticity worked to displace the centrality of women's issues to nationalist politics. Whereas the nineteenth century had put such issues as widow remarriage and the age of consent at the forefront of public debate, women emerged in the twentieth century as Gandhi's self-sacrificing helpers in a movement dedicated now to political emancipation on the one hand and the abolition of such institutions as untouchability on the other. Partha Chatterjee has argued that the explanation for this phenomenon is that nationalist politics consigned women, and women's issues, to a new kind of inner sphere to be kept closed off from the colonial gaze. The new nationalist patriarchy justified itself by using refigured oppositions of home/world, inner/outer, spiritual/material, and so on, to contain the threat that women's issues, and women's emancipation, posed to nationalist politics.¹⁹ Civilizational ambivalence not only undermined the career of social reform but also helped to reinvent traditional India by making women guardians of the transformed home, with the responsibility to protect the integrity of the men who trafficked in the deconstructed discourses of the nationalist world.

But if the nationalist imaginary freed modernity from its nineteenth-century commitments to social reform and the cultural politics of private spheres, Tagore refused to follow suit. For Tagore, the linkage of modernity with both Nikhil and Sandip—with imperious and misplaced idealism in the first figure and cynical, manipulative, explosive materialism in the second—suggests precisely the failure of colonial nationalism; the narrative closure of death and widowhood in *The Home and the World* marks out the inevitable limits of the career of modernity in India, the likelihood that misreadings and rereadings of tradition will swallow up the promise of modernity through the relentless narratives of fatal appropriation and misrecognition. For artists such as Tagore and Ray, working in extremely different historical milieus and political contexts, the only discernible bottom line to this predicament seems to rest in the compelling project of artistic production itself, the sense that art must contest politics and complicate the categories used to think about contemporary India. When read literally, this position has affiliated Tagore and Ray to reputations of political conservatism; but it now seems possible to discern a disturbing critical vision in their work. For when art is opposed to politics

in the same way that terms such as *tradition* and *modernity*, *women* and *men*, *home* and *the world* are set against each other, we can recognize that the categories themselves are under interrogation. It is time to return both to Ray's film and to the contemporary discussion about the character of modernity in India that necessarily frames our viewing of this film today.

In this, our postmodern, age it is fashionable to critique the modern. With all the pieties that are mouthed about the slippery surfaces, depthless interiors, nostalgic pasts, referential simulacra, and fragmentary particles of the postmodern world, and their connection to the critical assessment of modernist totalizations, master narratives, liberal mystifications, universalist rhetoric, scientific hubris, and so on, it is useful to remember that the critique of the modern began in the colonial world. The terms in which this critique was developed often parodied Western characterizations of India: the spirituality of India was turned from an indictment to a claim for affiliation with higher powers and values—the economic success of the West, the triumph of colonialism itself, was attributed to the baneful influence of materialism and self-interest. But the point is that the Indian encounter with the West led to sustained criticism of the West itself and culminated in the colonial period with the well-known assertions by Gandhi that India should not blindly mimic the colonizers, that India had much to offer the West in its inevitable crises and moral bankruptcies.

Criticisms of the modern West, from Vivekananda to Tagore to Gandhi, are today being echoed, even as they are deployed in a new contemporary theoretical idiom, by social critics such as Ashis Nandy.²⁰ Nandy, who turns his aim both at the legacies of colonialism and at the postcolonial conceits of modernism, has written that "it has become more and more apparent that genocides, ecodisasters and ethnocides are but the underside of corrupt sciences and psychopathic technologies wedded to new secular hierarchies. . . . The ancient forces of human greed and violence, one recognizes, have merely found a new legitimacy in anthropocentric doctrines of secular salvation, in the ideologies of progress, normality and hyper-masculinity, and in theories of cumulative growth."²¹ Nandy uses as one of his examples Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–91), who though profoundly influenced by Western rationalism committed himself to the formulation of dissenting positions in indigenous terms—although Mohandas Gandhi is the figure who usually makes the ultimate point. Nandy seeks to follow these examples by formulating an "unheroic but critical traditionalism: . . . the tradition of reinterpretation of traditions to create new traditions."²²

Nandy's position provides an important critical sense of the limits of

Nehruvian socialism in postcolonial India; much of his argument trenchantly identifies the uses made of science, technology, and ideologies of progress by state power that too rarely interrogates its own continuities with colonialism, its inevitable partialities and excesses. Nandy is also particularly good when he insists that much of the ethnic and religious conflict in contemporary India is not the result of the resurgence of precolonial traditions but the specific outcome of postcolonial processes of state formation and political mobilization, interestingly echoing Tagore's critical sense of swadeshi politics. But Nandy treats on extremely dangerous ground when he goes on to link secularism, as an ideology mandating state exclusion of religion from politics and civil respect for all religious faiths, with the worst excesses of postcolonial modernism in India. He proposes that secularism was "introduced into Indian public life in a big way in the early decades of the century by a clutch of Westernized Indians—seduced or brainwashed by the ethnocidal, colonial theories of history—to subvert and discredit the traditional concepts of inter-religious tolerance that had allowed the thousands of communities living in the subcontinent to co-survive in neighborliness."²² In an article in which he declares himself not to be secularist, he makes the charge that "to accept the ideology of secularism is to accept the ideologies of progress and modernity as the new justifications of domination, and the use of violence to sustain these ideologies as the new opiates of the masses."²³ This seems to be not simply provocative but irresponsible, given the fact that it is the critics of secularism, in contexts such as the dispute over the mosque in Ayodhya, who have advocated violence in the name of religion. Although he engages the Enlightenment project with the combined theoretical firepower of Mahatma Gandhi and Michel Foucault, Nandy's concerns about modernity make him in the end disturbingly uncritical of tradition and naively unaware of the impossibility of recuperating old traditions of religious tolerance in the postcolonial context that is India today.

Thus perhaps we can appreciate all the more in retrospect the degree to which the residual idealism of Tagore and Ray, as well as their clear sense of the inevitable loss associated with any nostalgia for the past, maintains the necessary edge for their extraordinarily critical vision of modernity. Neither Tagore nor Ray would share the conviction of those unnamed villains of Nandy's polemic who might continue to feel, whether sincerely or not, that rigorous adherence to secularist values will provide sufficient grounds for the avoidance of communalist conflict.

But they also know that tradition can no longer be recuperated without coming to terms with the myriad effects of modernity. Nikhil fails because of his overzealous and fanatical faith in freedom, not because of his secularism and his clear distrust of the uses made of religion by political

leaders. And Sandip makes it clear that the dangerous politics of unconditional nationalism depend not upon allegiance to secularism, contra Nandy, as much as on complicity in the proliferation of devotion, deflection, and displaced desire that requires a modern nationalist language of religion. And so it is art rather than tradition that can hold modern reality at an angle to itself, that can provide the grounds of critical distance without abdicating the responsibility of staking out these grounds in the first place.

Tagore's art was celebrated even as it frequently played an important role in discussions and debates within India, and particularly within Bengal, about the way to define what was most distinctive about India, as well as how to chart out a course in the struggles against the forces of poverty, exploitation, colonialism, and modern change. Once Tagore began to opt out of direct political struggle, roughly at the same time that Bengal became less visible than other newly important regions in defining Indian strategies for nationalist politics, his work continued to be heralded as a symbol of Indian artistic glory and as textual solace for the daily traumas of the colonial predicament. Tagore continues to this day to be seen as the major cultural figure of India's nationalist struggle, though he has been strangely ignored in most recent writings on nationalist intellectual history.²⁵ And yet few Bengali intellectuals and artists could conceive of their own cultural practices without paying elaborate tribute to the influence of Tagore in their life and art.

Satyrajit Ray's relationship to his times, to contemporary politics, as well as to the issues of tradition, modernity, art, and nationalism, is far more difficult to characterize than in the case of Tagore. Although Ray was born into the same Bengali elite background, that of the bhadralok, he came of age in the final years of the Raj, and always stayed away from politics. Tagore was clearly a towering presence in his life, and he studied at Tagore's rural University in Santiniketan for several years before joining a British advertising firm in Calcutta in 1943. Working as a commercial artist, Ray honed his drawing and design skills and supported himself in the difficult years of the war. Although he clearly had great talent in graphic art, his great passion was music, a passion later reflected in his meticulous attention to the musical scores of his films. Soon after India's independence, Ray organized a film society in Calcutta and began for the first time to imagine putting art and music together. As early as 1948, Ray had begun a project for a film by writing a script for *The Home and the World*, a plan that fell apart because Ray was concerned that his collaborators were too influenced by Hollywood. In 1949 Ray met Renoir, who was in Calcutta to make the film *The River*, and he hung around the set and gave advice to Renoir on the script. By 1950, Ray had committed himself to the project of filming *Pather Panchali*, though it took five years

of heroic effort and extraordinary adversity to make what most observers still believe is his most haunting and beautiful film.²⁶

The first showing of *Pather Panchali* was in New York, at the Museum of Modern Art. Ray's success in film, and indeed his reputation in India, was due largely to the enthusiastic acclaim his films received in the West, though Ray resolutely remained in Calcutta and conceived of himself as an Indian filmmaker. And Ray continued to work through the extraordinary influence of Tagore on him and his cultural milieu through filming *Charulata*, *Three Daughters*, *The Goddess*, and finally *Home and the World*. Bengalis have often claimed that Tagore's influence was always limited by the difficulty of translation; and interestingly, only Ray has fully succeeded in transcribing Tagore's genius in another language, the language of film.

It is difficult to emphasize the beauty, and choreographical exquisiteness, of Ray's films, the way narrative is inscribed in architectural interiors, lighting angles and physiognomic close-ups, musical scores and the lyrical pace of cinematic story. Drawing upon diverse influences, Ray made films that were very much his own, formulating his own version of Indian modernist cinema. Ray has always worked against formidable odds—small budgets, inadequate technology, limited audiences, and an unaccommodating film industry—but has used these odds to maintain maximum control over the making of his films and the development of his projects. He has frequently written the script, sketched the scenes, held the camera, and composed the music for films that bear his personal imprint in ways that seem virtually unthinkable in the present age of Hollywood.

Although Ray quickly became recognized as a postcolonial artist of world renown, he stayed at home and worked most comfortably, and powerfully, out of his home. Writings about Ray depict him either behind the camera on the studied and scripted sets for his films or in the cluttered comfort of his central Calcutta flat. Unlike other postcolonial figures such as Naipaul and Rushdie, Ray's postcolonial predicament has never been lodged in his homelessness. Whereas Naipaul's modernist lament has always seemed aimed at his own postcolonial inability to claim an authentic genealogy for his own civilizational ambivalence, and Rushdie's postmodernist critique directed at the inchoate displacements of both the traditional and the modern in the contemporary diaspora of South Asia, Ray has looked comfortably inward, and backward, with the help and inspiration of Tagore. But in this era of the transnational dislodgement of identities, when postcoloniality seems to stand for everything except the quiet desperation of those who have never left their homes for the world, it is perhaps high time to revision the world through Ray's cinematic sensibility. For it is still the case that for many in places like Calcutta the world continues to be that contested terrain where the promises of the

New World are soured by the contradictions of modernity, mired in impersonal markers, perpetual poverty, alienating anonymity, the disparities of class, and the tragic constraints of free choice. For many the postcolonial world lives out its off-centered excesses within the very homes that Ray has so powerfully explored in his films.

Ray's modernist realism may seem old fashioned in an age of magical realism, but films such as *The Home and the World* continue to possess extraordinary power at the same time that they remind us that the agonistic relationship between tradition and modernity is as troubling today as it was in earlier eras. Ray's cosmopolitan perspective makes it clear that the old worlds of zamindars and court artists are not used to measure the depravity of the new in order to argue for the old. On the contrary, these worlds make it especially clear that there is no going back, even as it is never clear where one should now set one's sights. Ray may have been criticized for his apparently unprogressive and anti-utopian tendency to emphasize what was being lost in the old and sacrificed in the new, and he may be increasingly ignored for his dated perspectives, but he raised concerns that are now at issue in the most contemporary of postcolonial critiques.

At a time when critical studies of colonialism insist that we attend to the ambivalent status of any colonial subject, situating the colonial predicament in a moral narrative of European responsibility, I should perhaps put more emphasis on reading the complex play of power and domination in the figuration of modernity as a kind of impossible object—a utopia idealized through exclusion rather than failure—for characters such as Nikhil and Sandip. At the same time, Ray seems to argue, obsessive attention to colonialism as a monolithic and overdetermining presence tends also to obscure the linkages between colonial and postcolonial predicaments, ironically allowing the idealization of modernity while diverting critical attention away from it.²⁷ Tagore anticipated this concern by worrying that political nationalism too readily lost sight of more wide-ranging critiques of the colonizers, their reemerging though complementary cultural inheritance and their alluring though contradictory political institutions. And Ray's reading of Tagore leaves out the political not only because he rarely took on explicitly political subjects but also because he cared more passionately about the ambivalence of his position as a modern subject, a subjectivity not unrelated to his growing up in late-colonial Calcutta but also part of his love of Beethoven, John Ford, and Eisenstein. Neither Tagore nor Ray disavowed the pervasive reality of colonialism—it is the distant thunder behind much of the paths they surveyed—but their own sense of ambivalent alterities engaged colonialism in ways that critical colonial studies have only dimly prepared us for.²⁸



Pleasure and politics, intimacy and commitment, tradition and modernity—all are reflected in the mirror of Bimala's gaze.

Ray's film asks powerful questions about the character of India's nationalist past—about the costs of revolutionary politics, the nuances of dispassionate reflection, the nostalgia for lost pasts, and the contradictions of modernity in India today. The film also evokes the problematic relationship of the political to those private realms of experience and action that until recently were kept outside the focus of discussions about nationalism and postcoloniality. By cinematically depicting how the world infiltrates the very fabric of the home—both the furnishings of the innermost zenana and the intimate scenes and dramas around domesticity, familial relations, love, and sexuality—Ray not only allegorizes but also disturbs the boundaries and constituent categories of the modern. Bimala's body—her shorn head, her sari-draped figure, the fervent devotionism of her feelings for the nation and the clumsiness and ultimate disavowal of her passion for Sandip—becomes the victimized bearer of the great betrayal of modern nationalism. Bimala's devastated face in the final shot of the film, when she turns into the sad reflection of her widowed sister-in-law, expresses personal tragedy at the same time that it reveals the unbearable cost of neglecting the irreducible banality of India's contemporary disaffection.

When Nikhil entreated Bimala to come out of the home and enter the world, he was confident he could contain the danger of her passage. His failure to transcend his own self-absorbed ambition, and his ultimate in-

ability to control the apotheosis of her enlightenment, recapitulates the failure of modernism itself. Instead of release we see new forms of confinement, expressed both by the specter of communal violence and the reiteration of traditional enslavement. Instead of enlightenment, we encounter the reactive dialectic of modernity's double, tradition gone bad. We lose both the promise of the new and the solace of the old. In this allegorical tale told by Tagore and Ray, we run aground against the limits of national modernity and the excesses of fundamentalist ideology.

At the end of the story, Bimala loses her voice for the last time. Her pleasure in playing out the mimetic drama of modernity, shown so vividly when she was singing with her English governess a sweet song about the impossible fantasy of recovering lost love after years of wandering, is disrupted first by Nikhil's own intrusiveness in her life—his narcissistic relationship to both love and the home—and much later by Nikhil's peculiar heroism—his final but selfish sacrifice. Pleasure and politics, commitment and courage—the home and the world—become the ultimate victims of what in the end is a very old story. Bimala's body carries the burden of this story, and she is punished despite Nikhil's well-meaning assurance that she had done nothing wrong. And so the early images of Bimala's ornamentation and experimentation fade away, and the opening image of fire flashes up over and over after the lights come back on. The film, at times painfully slow and sternly theatrical, leaves us in crisis over the dilemmas of modernity, gender, politics, love, and narrative—dilemmas that we academics would no doubt rather control with the dispassionate apparatus of our professional trade. But as we do so, perhaps we do nothing more than control the extent to which our own art, such as it is, can engage—at a slight angle—the fractured realities of the postcolonial world shown to us so brilliantly by Ray.