

cinema



* Madhabi Mukherjee in *Charulata*, based on Rabindranath Tagore's *Nashtanir*.

A classic revisited

Satyajit Ray's haunting *Charulata* will be showcased at this year's Abu Dhabi Film Festival as a tribute to Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The Abu Dhabi Film Festival, which starts tomorrow, has several movies from India. Perhaps, the most celebrated of them all is Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* or *The Lonely Wife*. As part of the Festival's special tribute, not to Ray but to Rabindranath Tagore to mark his 150th birth anniversary, *Charulata* in black and white has been my favourite among the legendary director's innumerable features and even documentaries. I have always described the film as sheer poetry on celluloid.

Based on Tagore's novella, *Nashtanir* or *The Broken Nest*, the 1964 movie could while playing as homage to Tagore be seen as Ray's compliment to a breathtakingly beautiful woman and actress par excellence. She is Madhabi Mukherjee.

Born in 1943 in what was then Calcutta during the terrible Bengal

famine in which millions perished, Madhabi (earlier called Madhuri) began her acting career in theatre, before Mrinal Sen found her in 1960 for his *Baishey Shraavan* (The Wedding Day), a film coincidentally set in a famine devastated Bengal village.

Essaying a 16-year-old girl married to a middle-aged man, she adds a bit of zing to his life. But then the turmoil caused by World War II and more significantly the famine ruin the marriage. The wife hangs herself.

Madhabi seems to have been slotted into tragedy. In her next major movie, Ritwick Ghatak's masterly *Subarnarekha* (The Golden Thread, made in 1962 but theatrically released in 1965), Madhabi's Sita is caught in the vicious web of socio-economic ills and is forced into prostitution. As Sita, she gives a classic performance, and, once again, her character kills herself when she finds her estranged

brother as a customer one evening.

However, it was Ray who made Madhabi into a virtual legend. In her first ever film with the master, *Mahanagar* (The Big City, 1963), she portrays a saleswoman knocking on doors to try and sell knitting machines to rich housewives.

Recalling her meeting with Ray, Madhabi wrote: "He read me the entire story, *Mahanagar*. I was stunned. This was the first woman-centred screenplay I had encountered. I was not going to play second fiddle to the main male character as in all plays and movies I had acted in or was familiar with."

And Madhabi as Arti in *Mahanagar*, pressured into working because of financial crunch, is stupendously engaging. Film critic Roger Ebert said that "it might be useful to see the acting of Madhabi Mukherjee in this film. She is a beautifully deep, wonderful actress who simply surpasses all ordinary standards of judgment."

But I do not know whether Ebert saw Madhabi in *Charulata*. I would think that as Charu, it was her finest show — ever — and I would also unhesitatingly say that *Charulata* is Ray's most magnificent work, where, again, Madhabi's role has shades of suffering and even the tragic.

Charulata was but *Nashtanir*, which is autobiographical, if I may dare say. Tagore's beloved sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi, in all probability, inspired the Nobel laureate poet to create Charu in his novella. Her brother-in-law in the literary work and the movie, Amal, could have well been Tagore himself. Amal's elder brother (cousin really), Bhupati, is Charu's husband, naïve and unworlily.

Kadambari committed suicide in 1884, and the reasons are not clear, but that was the first tragedy in Tagore's life. Ray once said that "she was at the back of his mind — there is no doubt of that". In fact, Tagore himself admitted when he was in his 70s that Kadambari's eyes lay behind the hundreds of haunting portraits of women he painted.

If Tagore's *Nashtanir* was not quite welcomed by the tradition-bound, conservatism-driven Bengalis — who wondered why the writer-poet-painter could not have penned a straightforward story on marriage rather than one on an extra-marital affair, Ray's *Charulata* was not beyond criticism either. Though the

film was accepted, a trace of distaste could be felt in social circles for Charu's behaviour.

Charu is the bored wife in the Victorian Calcutta of 1870s, and her husband, Bhupati, busy with his printing press and a newspaper he publishes, pays her little attention or gives her any love. It is then that Amal (superbly enacted by Soumitra Chatterjee) enters. Though the Amal-Charu relationship is not overly sexual, Ray shows the excitement and pleasure the young wife feels in the company of her brother-in-law.

Madhabi is all grace and feeling, a tremendously instinctive actress and certainly an ideal woman Tagore would have had in mind. Charu was also the archetypal Ray woman, so lovely in the movie.

And Ray was in love with her, or so goes the story. Was it just a story? Perhaps not.

The very last scene in *Charulata* is so telling. Influenced in style by Francois Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, it is a freeze shot. Bhupati knocks on the door. Charu opens it. He gently extends his hand trying to reach for hers. Ray freezes the action, implying that the nest is broken. Yes, Charu and Bhupati never quite have reconciliation after the husband gets wind of his wife's feelings for Amal. Amal, of course, leaves, unwilling to distress an already distressed Bhupati, who is earlier financially cheated by one of his men.

The other Indian feature at Abu Dhabi is Umesh Vinayak Kulkarni's *Deool* (The Temple). Set against the anguishing backdrop of a long and severe drought in Maharashtra (now infamous for farmers' suicides), the film narrates how a divine vision drives a village herdsman to build a huge temple. An over-zealous media, superstitious old people and hungering-for-votes politicians all get trapped into this frenzy of raising a temple and transforming their village into a pulsating metropolis.

A satire on India's desperation to get modern and quickly, *Deool* will also screen at the Busan International Film Festival, New York's South Asian International Film Festival and the Mumbai Film Festival apart from Abu Dhabi.

The movie, which was funded by the Rotterdam International Film Festival earlier this year, features Dilip Prabhavalkar, Nana Patekar, Naseeruddin Shah, Sonali Kulkarni and Girish Kulkarni.

Besides, these full-length features, India will have a short 17-minute work, *Shor* (Noise), by Neeraj Ghaywan. In Hindi, the movie follows the lives of a couple from Banaras which is bent on living in Mumbai. While the man, Lallan, leads a carefree existence, Meena turns into a "machine" — almost living a robotic existence, cold and emotionless. But one day, they find each other all over again.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran will be covering the Abu Dhabi Film Festival this year, the second time in succession, and may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in.)