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Unravelling the Historical Tapestry of 'Ghare Baire'

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ABSTRACT

'Ghare Baire' is a captivating political tale set against the backdrop of an era of transition, when the widespread movement popularly known as the 'Bengal Renaissance' was at its peak. Satyajit Ray, through this film, adeptly incorporates Rabindranath Tagore's vision of India during the Swadeshi Movement which began as a reaction to the Partition of Bengal. During this period, Bengal witnessed a multitude of occurrences which led to a shift in not only the political landscape but also the mindset of the people. There was a transformation in the role of women, where they finally crossed the boundaries of their homes to actively participate in the Indian National Movement. Several clashes between the Indian tradition and modernity were also perceptible and the question of nationalism versus religious fervour became louder. This article explores these different themes as depicted in the film with close reference to other literature. By examining the thematic depth of "Ghare Baire," this article aims to illuminate the historical significance and enduring relevance of this remarkable film.

Keywords: *Ghare Baire, Partition of Bengal, Nationalism, Swadeshi movement, Tradition, Modernity, women.*

I. INTRODUCTION

During the nineteenth century, Bengal saw a wide range of events which led to a shift in not only the political situation but also the mindset of the people. Various psychological, cultural, social and intellectual changes took place, eventually leading to a widespread movement popularly known as the 'Bengal Renaissance' or 'Indian Enlightenment'. This was the time when the Indians actually started revolting against not only the British and their principles but also against the religious practises prevalent during that era. The period after the Revolt of 1857 saw a striking outburst of Bengali intellectuals. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar were among the pioneers of this movement who had an influence on various fields such as education, religion and most importantly the emancipation of women. Various scholars have published literatures with their views and interpretations on the idea of Indian

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Enlightenment. One such novel is the “*The Home and the World*”² written by Rabindranath Tagore, set during the peak of the Swadeshi movement which began in 1906 as a protest against the Partition of Bengal. “*Ghare Baire*”³, directed by Satyajit Ray, is an Indian film based upon this novel. It subtly portrays the political turmoil present during that era, blended with elements of nationalism and highlights various other ideologies like ‘Swadeshi’ and ‘Boycott’. This movie has won the critical acclaim at various cinema festivals. This paper will attempt to give a general overview and a critical review of the movie. It will progress to highlight the important themes depicted in this movie including the emancipation of women, etc. This paper will examine the themes with close reference to two texts written by Sophie Tharakan, Michael Tharakan and Anil Ray, respectively.

The story is set in the chaotic aftermath of the Partition of Bengal, which was done on the basis of religion and language. Lord Curzon reorganised Bengal, into Muslim and Hindu States as a part of their ‘Divide and Rule’ policy. This largely outraged the Indians, ultimately giving rise to the Swadeshi movement, one of the most successful movements against the British rule. The movement went hand in hand with the Boycott of foreign goods and the promotion of Indian goods. The wonderful cinematography of the film subtly accentuates the ideologies present during that era. The movie revolves around three main characters namely Nikhilesh (Nikhil), his wife Bimala and his childhood friend Sandip. The story presents a very interesting conflict between the ideologies of Nikhil and Sandip and the impact that it had on Bimala. Nikhil is an educated, mature and a revered man who believes that harming the people of the country in the name of patriotism is in no way justified. Sandip on the other side has a magnetic personality and believes in revolting against the British rule through the Swadeshi movement without considering the impact it might have on certain sections of the people. Bimala is portrayed as a traditional and innocent woman. At first, Bimala seems to be confined to the traditional Indian female role who loves her husband, but things take a different course when she is drawn to Sandip and his ideas, due to his charismatic character. It is only towards the end of the movie that she realizes the true nature and motive of Sandip.

II. EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

Throughout the film, the transformation of the role and status of Bengali women, and Indian women in general, is depicted in a striking manner. The position of women prior to the nineteenth century was far from being satisfactory. They were completely secluded and did not

² Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World* (1916).

³ GHARE BAIRE (Satyajit Ray dir., 1984).

have a voice of their own, which also brought about their mental deterioration. One scene in the film that alludes to the woman's place in the society is when Bimala is asked her opinion during the argument between Nikhil and Sandip. She finds this to be very unusual and states that she had never gotten an opportunity to voice her opinions in discussions before. This shows the fact that there was no place for women in real world conversations. In the beginning of the film, Bimala is portrayed as a very traditional woman who had seldom crossed the boundaries between the inner courtyard and the outer section of the house. She identifies herself as Nikhil's wife and does not have an identity of her own. According to Sophie and Michael Tharakan in their text "*Status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective*"⁴, to understand the role of women it is crucial to know about the social structures present around them. The text gives an overview of the evolution of the status of women right from the Medieval Age. The reform movement in the nineteenth to twentieth century was the time when most of the changes for the elevation of women occurred. The Bengal renaissance brought with it the partial emancipation of women. Revolutionary leaders like Ram Mohan Roy and Vidyasagar, who were influenced by the western thought, played a pivotal role in elevating the status of women. Various evil practises like 'Sati' were banned and widow remarriage was legalised. Even in the film, as it unfolds, Bimala's emancipation takes place. Nikhil encourages Bimala to have a life not only inside the house but outside as well, a controversial stance in that era. Bimala's perception changes and she starts to engage herself in the Swadeshi movement. Nikhil's widowed sister-in-law disapproves of the freedom given by Nikhil to Bimala. This shows how the women internalized the patriarchal structure set by the society.

III. CONFLICT BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

One of the major themes in this movie is the conflict between India's tradition and westernization. Nikhil, a wealthy man enjoyed the use of modern/British goods and lavishes his wife, Bimala with them as well. She wore foreign clothes and used foreign perfumes. Although Bimala was a traditional woman, she seemed to enjoy modern products as well. She was even tutored by a foreigner named Miss Gilby. However, things do not remain the same. When Sandip talks about nationalism, she finds herself drawn to the ideologies of the Swadeshi movement as well. She starts to feel the urge to shun foreign goods as she believes them to be a threat to her way of life.

Nikhil does not seem to accept the spirit of 'Bande Mataram', as propagated by his friend Sandip. But he repeatedly asserts that he is not against the cause of the Swadeshi movement, but is against

⁴ Sophie M Tharakan & Michael Tharakan, *Status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective*, 4 Social Scientist 115-123 (1975).

the use of boycott as a weapon. Few years back, Nikhil tried to get products such as soaps and towels produced locally as well. But he soon realizes that the costs far outweigh the benefits. The Indian products were far more expensive to produce than the foreign ones due to the lack of factories and industries. He realizes that certain sections of the people such as the poor and marginalised will not be able to afford them. This shows the true nature of Nikhil. He valued the citizens more than the spirit of freedom. He believed that nothing was worse than one section of the population suppressing the views of another through force, in the name of nationalism, against their will. Sandip on the other side, had a whole different view. He did not have real interest in the welfare of the people and was stubborn to achieve his goals. He would not let anything stand in the way of reaching his goals. All he truly wanted was 'power' and hence, forced the people to comply with his ideology of boycotting foreign goods. Tagore believed that boycott movement inevitably alienated the marginalised and the poor and that nationalism could do more harm than good. To him, 'Swaraj' was not political freedom but was freedom from slavery, ignorance and hunger. Throughout the film, it is visible how Bimala struggled to find an identity. She is stuck between supporting the ideal for the progress of the country she loves, or working towards supporting her husband in all circumstances like a traditional woman should. India was symbolically represented as Bimala, caught between both the opposing ideologies. One which might lead to the slow progress of the country while the other might have catastrophic consequences in a society.

IV. INDIAN NATIONALISM VERSUS RELIGIOUS FERVOUR

This film also portrays the communal violence between the Hindus and the Muslims initiated after the Partition of Bengal. The then viceroy of India realised that by splitting Bengal, he could build a wedge between the Hindus who were a majority in the west, and the Muslims who were a majority in the east. The British partitioned Bengal in the name of administrative efficiency. Initially, the Hindus and Muslims came together revolting against this move. But slowly things started to change. The Swadeshi movement did not yield much of an effect on the British government and hence they resorted to political terrorism. But this terrorism failed to enlist any support from the Muslims present in Bengal due to various economic, social and religious reasons. This is similar to what Anil Ray holds in his text "*Communal Attitudes to British Policy: The Case of the Partition of Bengal*"⁵. In this text, Ray analyses the aftermath of the Partition of Bengal and the communal violence that it resulted in. He believes that the nationalist movement had a Hindu character to it. The leaders of the movement were Hindus. They forced the poor Muslims to give up on foreign goods and buy Indian ones, which they could not afford. The terrorists who belonged to the middle

⁵ Anil Baran Ray, *Communal Attitudes to British Policy: The Case of the Partition of Bengal 1905*, 6 Social Scientist 34-46 (1977).

class, as opposed to the Muslims who were peasants, worshipped the mother land as goddess Kali. Moreover, some Muslims even supported the partition. The British tricked them into joining hands with them. As not many Muslims were educated, they held only 41 of the high appointments under the government compared to the educated Hindus who held about 1235. This was another reason for opposing the Hindus. Even in the film, towards the end a poignant scene unfolds. Sandip stocked communal tensions between the Hindus and the Muslims by inciting violence against the Muslim villagers. Nikhil overhears a Muslim leader talking to the Muslim farmers near a mosque about how they should stand against the Hindus. He fears that a riot will break out and hence begs the assembled Hindu gentry to do something and prevent it. He claims that 'we have no right to interfere in the religion of others and that there is no India without Muslims'. Nevertheless, the riot breaks out and Nikhil, who went unarmed to stop the riots, returns dead while Sandip escapes to another town. Thus, as Anil Ray claims, Hindu-Muslim communal tension was intensified by the Partition of Bengal which eventually led to the Partition of India in 1947.

Overall, the film 'Ghare Baire' is a remarkable piece which deals with various aspects of the nineteenth century in a comprehensive and splendid manner. Master filmmaker, Ray, really takes his time to unravel the story and clearly explains the relationship of the characters with the political scenario. It highlights the two of the most contested topics in India, the division of Hindus and Muslims as well as tendencies towards nationalism versus liberalism, during the Bengal Renaissance. Apart from the above mention themes, the film also gives a sense of what true love is, as expressed by Nikhil and not by Sandip, towards Bimala. This movie also projects the negative repercussions that the Boycott movement had on certain sections of the people, something that is not usually written about. Some critics claim that the execution and cinematography of the novel written by Tagore could have been better. A combination of the brightest mind in Indian literature and the greatest gem of cinema could have resulted in a better piece. Nevertheless, it was truly a mind-blowing film and one of a kind.
