

***Charulata* (1964): Satyajit Ray's Feminist Adaptation of
Rabindranath Tagore's "Nastanirh"**



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***Charulata* (1964): Satyajit Ray's Feminist Adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's
"Nastanirh"**

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

Mohammad Zaki Rezwan

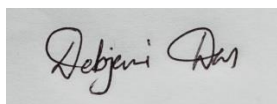
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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature is written in a cursive style and appears to read "Debjani Das".

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Abstract

Satyajit Ray's film *Charulata* (*The Lonely Wife*, 1964) is an adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's novella "Nastanirh" ("Broken Nest", 1901) which portrays the isolated life of a 20th century Bengali woman named Charulata. The central character of this film Charu despite being a typical housewife is quite unconventional. She has many aspirations which are overlooked by her workaholic husband. Ray emphasizes how this negligence provokes Charu to take some debatable actions like adultery. The aim of this paper is to find out how Ray used different camera techniques, symbolisms, music and distortion to add feminist aspects to this film. This paper also aims to investigate the post-colonial feminist influences in Ray's adaptation of the novella.

Keywords: Feminist Adaptation, Female Gaze, Postcolonial Feminism, Female Sexuality, Feminist Film.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Ray's *Charulata*, having a female lead with a personality much ahead of her time, is undoubtedly a feminist film. It is set in early 20th century Bengal when women were deprived of fundamental rights like education or voting. Through this film, Ray retold the story of Rabindranath Tagore's novella "Nastanirh" (Broken Nest, 1901), which historically created a much more accurate portrayal of Bengali women through Charu's character. Ray's Charu, however, is much more emancipated than the novella's. She is educated, dares to explore her sexuality, and believes in her capabilities. As both the novella and the film have a plot centered on an illicit relationship between Charu and her brother-in-law Amal, many people criticize it. However, if critically analyzed, Charu's tendency to be transgressive is an intentional addition to make her an audacious and unconventional character. She does not fit the stereotypes of 19th-century Bengali homemakers.

Numerous scholarly articles provide a feminist reading on Tagore's "Nastanirh" or analyze *Charulata* as a feminist film. Some of them conclude that "Nastanirh" is a feminist novella (Krishnapriya et al., Mandal), whereas; others find it to be an actual representation of Bengali women in a 20th-century Bengali context (Cooper, Bose). A few articles also include comparative studies of the novella vs. the film (P.Sil, Rahman, and Islam). However, there are no available researches on the intentional feminist adaptations brought by Ray while retelling Tagore's story in *Charulata*.

Despite being set in a similar timeline, there is a gap of 63 years between the publication of "Nastanirh" (1901) and the release of *Charulata* (1964). When Tagore wrote "Nastanirh," Bengal was undergoing socio-political changes, and the ideas of gaining

independence began forming within the nation. These changes also brought concern to the women of Bengal. However, under imperial power, women were viewed as victims or objects by the western eyes. Education was starting to spread only among higher-class Bengali women but with a hidden agenda of improving the family status only. With the help of the men in the house, the daughters or the wives of the Bengali *bhadralok* society could access western education. (Krishnapriya et al.) Tagore's Charu is a victim of the same situation.

Nevertheless, Ray's Charu is a much more complex character. Being produced in a postcolonial Indian setup, it reflected many postcolonial feminist ideas that have also not been researched. Ray's creative use of music, symbolism, camera techniques, alteration in the characters, and distortion with the plot all together brought a feminist aspect to the typicality of Charu from "Nastanirh." My paper focuses on this gap and tries to look for the adaptations or alterations brought in this film to make it a feminist film.

My paper investigates the differences between "Nastanirh" and *Charulata* using postcolonial theory and feminist film theory. It discloses the reflection of the doubly prejudiced life of Bengali women in a patriarchal society under colonial dominance that Tagore showed in "Nastanirh." In addition, it analyzes *Charulata* as an adaptation of "Nastanirh" and investigates the alterations made by Ray. Lastly, using feminist adaptation theory, it tries to present an argument whether Ray's alterations are feminist adaptations or not.

This paper addresses the research question, "How did Satyajit Ray adapt Tagore's "Nastanirh" into a feminist film?" To answer this question, my thesis had to elaborate on the major and minor differences that Ray brought to the characters and plot of *Charulata*. In addition, it required a detailed examination of "Nastanirh" from a feminist perspective. From

these investigations, a perspective appeared that “Nastanirh” was reflective of feminist ideas from the lens of a colonial India. *Charulata*, however, resulted in a much more complex creation due to the feminist adaptation and the manifestation of Ray’s postcolonial feminist ideas.

Chapter 2: Methodology

For writing my thesis on the topic "Charulata (1964): Satyajit Ray's Feminist Adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's "Nastanirh," I have used the qualitative method. To conclude, I had to go through multiple pieces of research done on both Charulata and "Nastanirh" using feminist theories. I have also taken help from a few articles/books written on the condition of early 20th-century Bengali women in colonial India to properly understand the social context of these two works.

The theories I used here are postcolonial feminism and feminist adaptation theory. Tagore's "Nastanirh" was set and written in 1901, and Ray's Charulata was released in 1964. Despite being set in the same timeline, Charulata reflected many postcolonial feminist ideas like the rejection of the "satihood" (Al- Wazed 157), the Indian women's exploration of female sexuality, etc., which I analyzed using postcolonial feminist theories. I have used feminist adaptation theory to decode the film in detail by analyzing the camera angles, music usage, symbolism, and alteration. My paper investigated these adaptations to conclude that this film is a feminist adaptation of Tagore's novella "Nastanirh."

Chapter 3: Literature review

Charulata (1964), a Bengali film directed by Satyajit Ray, was based on Rabindranath Tagore's novella "Nastanirh" (The Broken Nest, 1901). This film depicts the life of a lonely housewife called Charulata and her husband, Bhupati, who has no time for her. Being ignored by her husband, she dares to fall in love with her husband's cousin while spending time discussing their shared love for literature. Much research has been done on *Charulata* and "Nastanirh", which analyzed these two works from a feminist perspective both together and individually. On the other hand, multiple pieces of research on *Charulata* focus on studying it from an adaptation perspective. My research, however, is based on feminist adaptation theory that will analyze how "Nastanirh" as a written piece reflects few feminist ideologies but how Ray made specific alterations to its film to give the character of Charulata more significance and strength. This literature review has been organized in topical/theoretical order which evaluates the related scholarly articles relevant theory books which will support this research.

The article "A Critical Reading of Ray's *Charulata*: Transforming Words into Images" is written by two English lecturers from Green University, Mohammad Aminur Rahman and Md. Mohiul Islam. Here they argued if Satyajit Ray's film *Charulata* is a successful adaptation of Tagore's "Nastanirh". This paper used adaptation theory to analyze how Tagore's words were transformed into images by Ray. They discuss how Ray rejected the traditional uncreative adaptation style and incorporated his individual ideas into this film. The paper discusses how Ray kept the thematic appeal untouched and stayed close to the original story but still managed to give the film his unique touch through his creative endeavor. This paper does not dive deep into the character analysis of the film or emphasize the original text "Nastanirh". Instead, it solely focuses on the adaptation techniques, which are partially similar to my topic.

But my research will also bring equal focus on Tagore's "Nastanirh", and along with adaptation theory, it will also apply feminist theory, which is not present in this article. However, it has elaborated discussions related to Ray's adaptation of *Charulata*, which will be very resourceful for me.

Similarly, Narasingha P. Sil, a European and English history professor at Western Oregon University in his article "Tagore's Broken Nest vs. Ray's *Charulata*: A Critique" explained how this adapted film is substantially different if compared to Tagore's "Nastanirh" ("The Broken Nest"). Sil emphasizes Ray's distortion of multiple characters in this film, like Bhupati, Amal and Manda. This aspect of this paper will benefit researchers who want to understand this film from an adaptation standpoint. The author here used adaptation theories to support his arguments about the film, however, but did not necessarily see Ray's personal inputs and alterations to this film as a feminist adaptation. The reflection of post-colonial feminist attitude in the film is not discussed here. From the output of his paper, it can be understood that Ray's intention behind this can be to bring more emphasis on *Charulata*, the main character. Researchers who want to interpret this film from an adaptation perspective may find this article helpful as it talks about the film's major and minor differences from the original text.

In addition, the author of "'May You Be the Mother of A Hundred Sons!': Barrenness vs. Motherhood in Bengali Cinema" Somdatta Mandal, a professor of English at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, discussed multiple Bengali movies like *Devi*, *Monihara*, *Teen Kanya*, *Ghare Baire* *Chokher Bali* of renowned Bengali producers like Satyajit Ray and Rituparno Ghosh. This article focuses on how accurately these films reflect feminist ideologies through childless female leads.

It elaborates on how being in a patriarchal Indian setup where the status of women depends on marriage and motherhood, where childless women stand. This article has used previous research work related to it to aid its arguments. It is a qualitative study using feminist theories. However, this paper does not focus much on Ray's personalized touch to *Charulata* and does not include other relevant discussions related to adaptation. Despite that, this paper will be very useful for my research to see Charu's character from a feminist perspective.

In a similar way, Brinda Bose, the author of "Modernity, Globality, Sexuality, and the City: A Reading of Indian Cinema", an associate professor of English at Jawaharlal Nehru University, talked about the presence of "Non-normative female behavior - particularly sexual" (Bose 35), in Indian cinema. She explained how the portrayal of women's agency and desires in Ray *Charulata* reflects Ray's feminist attitude. This paper has both a feminist and a sociological approach to decode Ray's portrayal of India's postcolonial independence through female emancipation in his movies like *Ghare-bahire* and *Charulata*. Even though this paper did not emphasize the adaptation of *Charulata* from Tagore's "Nastanir", it can aid researchers who want to analyze *Charulata*'s character from a feminist perspective and understand the historical background or timeline of this film.

Furthermore, the author of "The Indian Woman in the Bengali/Hindu Dollhouse: Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (1964)" Darius Cooper, a professor of English at San Diego Mesa College, discussed how Ray used filmic silence and different camera techniques to portray the monotonous and confined life of Charu in *Charulata*. He also mentioned how Ray used zoom-in and zoom-outs to portray the internal state of Charu's mind. She is shown to spend her time doing feminine activities like sewing, embroidery, playing cards, decorating the house etc. Even though *Charulata* was an upper-class housewife in the 19th-century Indian setting, her

unconventional aspects were reflected by her yearning to create an identity for herself. The way she published her own poetry in a newspaper without any help from her husband Bhupati or brother-in-law Amal indicated that she is no typical 19th-century Indian woman. This article is heavily focused on the film *Charulata*. It emphasizes the filmmaking techniques Ray used here to tell the audience about Charu's internal and external world. Cooper used feminist and film theory in this article to decipher *Charulata* as a feminist film. However, there is no focus on Tagore's text "Nastanirh" here. This article does not discuss how Ray made multiple alterations to the text, adding more feminist aspects to it. As my research includes a feminist analysis of *Charulata*, this article will be resourceful for me.

Comparably, the author Suranjan Ganguly in his book *Satyajit Ray: In Search Of The Modern* talks about ideas like human subjectivity, importance of education, women's emancipation reflected in Ray's films. He refers to multiple films in this book like *Devi*, *Tin Knaya*, *Mahanagar* and many more which also includes *Charulata*. He elaborates how Ray's *Charulata* is a film about "the woman's eye" (Ganguly 55). In its original version which is Tagore's "Nastanirh," the main focus was on Charu's marriage or the family whereas Ray's version of it is about Charu herself. Even though it does not talk about the adaptation techniques or elaborate much on "Nastanirh", this book can aid my research by helping me understand *Charulata* as a feminist film.

Similarly, Bhaswati Bhattacharjee, a guest faculty of English at Bethune College, Kolkata, compared the character of Charulata in both Tagore's "Nastanirh" and Satyajit Ray's adapted film *Charulata* in her article "The Bird in a Gilded Cage, Her Trials and Tribulations: Perspectives on Satyajit Ray's *Charulata*". This paper is mainly focused on the character development of Charulata in Ray's film from a typical 19th-century Indian housewife

to a woman with her own identity. Bhattacharjee emphasized how Ray's portrayal of Charulata was unconventional compared to films of other filmmakers of his time, which strongly reflected their male subjectivity. She talked about the Bengali Renaissance, India's independence and its impact on Ray's adaptation of this film. She added that through *Charulata* Ray represented "the nabeena or the modern woman" (Bhattacharjee 1115). The paper also analyzed the use of music and its significance in this film and compared Charu's character with other female character's of Ray like Bimala from *Ghare-Baire* and the wife from *Mahanagar*. It also highlighted the use of symbolic motifs along with music that indicates Charu's yearning for freedom. This article uses feminist theory to decode the character of Charulata, which will aid my research in many ways. However, it did not analyze Tagore's "Nastanirh" or include any discussion related to Ray's alteration in the adaptation process, for which I will need other resources to support my ideas.

In a similar way, the author of "Apocalyptic desires and possessing the world through the gaze: Satyajit Ray's *Charulata*", Devapriya Sanyal, a professor of English at Jawaharlal Nehru University talked about how Ray's *Charulata* reflected contrasting ideas compared to Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" (Sanyal 71). She stated that *Charulata* features Charu's plea for freedom and her longing for identity in a male-dominated world. She elaborated on Charu's appreciation for modern Bengali writers like Bankim. She stated, "Perhaps, boredom makes her dream and imagine a life different from the one that she leads, largely encouraged by the copious amounts of books she reads." (Sanyal 75). The author emphasized that the characters in these books may have even inspired her to engage in the rebellious and forbidden act of being in love with Amal. The author also added that Amal and Charu's shared interest in poetry and literature was also a driving factor. This article talked about how Ray used a reversal of the male gaze in this film to portray the psychological world of

Charu. There are multiple scenes in this film that are wordless but reflect Charu's gaze at her own world confined inside the house and towards Amal. According to Sanyal, initially, Charu's gaze towards Amal is innocent but it slowly results in Charu's self-realization that it is sexual. She referred to this as an "introspective gaze" (Sanyal 78), which indicates a woman's self-knowing. This article did not discuss Tagore's "Nastanirh" or the adaptation theory. However, it did use feminist theories to decode Charu's character in the film. As my research is to analyze both the text and the film, this article will partially aid my work.

On a different note, "Relocating Colonial Women in Resistance: An Interpretation of Rabindranath Tagore's *Nastanirh* and *Chaturanga*" is an in-depth analysis of Tagore's female characters from "Nastanirh" (1901) and "Chaturanga" (1916) in colonial Bengal. The authors of this article T. K. Krishnapriya are a Junior Research Fellow and Padma Rani on the other hand, is a professor at Manipal Academy of Higher Education. Lastly, Bashabi Fraser is an English and Creative Writing professor at Edinburgh Napier University. The authors here addressed the problematic aspect of western feminism, which has perceived Indian women or third-world women as mere victims compared to their women. Being aware of this stereotypical "victimhood of colonial women" (Krishnapriya et al. 1), the authors decoded the feminist aspects of these two texts by Tagore. The authors used theories related to third-world feminism to support their statements which will be very resourceful for my research. However, as my paper will analyze both Tagore's "Nastanirh" and Ray's *Charulata* from a feminist and adaptation perspective, it may not be entirely related to my topic.

In addition, I have selected the book *Feminist Film Studies* to get theoretical support. The author of this book Karen Hollinger is a professor of English in the Department of Literature, Languages, and Philosophy at Armstrong Atlantic State University. Her areas of

expertise are Film Studies, Literary and Film Theory, Gender and Women's Studies, Television Studies and Popular Culture Studies etc. Her book *Feminist Film Studies* is a simple but detailed conceptual book for introducing feminist film theory and criticism to readers. It is a comprehensible overview of the involvement and representation of women in film. Every chapter has a "Films in Focus" section where the author analyzes vital texts related to the central topic. These films are from the contemporary period, classical Hollywood and world cinema. I have chosen this book because its detailed introduction to the subject of feminist film theory and criticism can provide me with insight into film and gender studies. To conduct my research on Tagore's "Nastanirh" and Ray's feminist adaptation of it called *Charulata*, this book will be handy for me to understand the fundamental theories I need to use in my paper.

In a similar way, *Gendered Modernity and Indian Cinema: The Women in Satyajit Ray's Films* by Devapriya Sanyal, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Women's Studies of Jawaharlal Nehru University is a book that includes seven articles by Sanyal with detailed analysis of the female characters of Ray's films like Sarbojaya from *Pather Panchali*, Doyamoyee from *Devi*, Charulata from *Charulata*, Bimala from *Ghare Baire*, Seema from *Pikoo*, Aditi from *Nayak*, Aparna and Joya from *Aranyer Din Ratri*, Tutul from *Seemabaddha*, Arati from *Mahanagar*, Mrinmoyee from "Samapti", Monisha, Anima and Labanya from *Kanchenjunga*, Karuna from *Kapurush*, Sutapa from *Pratidwandi*, Kauna and the prostitutes from *Jana Aranya*, Aparna from *Apur Sansar*, Gulabi and Neeli from *Abhijan*, Ananga from *Ashani Sanket*, the wives from *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* etc. The author has grouped these female characters into categories like the receding mother figure, transgressors, beacons, the new woman, the amoral woman and women at the periphery. She placed Charulata, Bimala and Seema in the transgressor category. She stated, "This is a significant category in itself because

the women pursue illicit love in spite of obstacles that society sets up for them" (Sanyal 26). Each category is elaborated through a chapter in this book and among which Charulata's character is analyzed in the 3rd chapter titled "Transgressors:Charulata, Bimala and Seema". Here the author discussed the loveless marriage between Bhupati and Charu and how it further gets damaged upon Amal's arrival. She added that "What we see in *Charulata* is not transgression ruining family life as much as an act leading to an awakening" (Sanyal 49). Researchers who want to understand the character of Charu and human relationships portrayed in *Charulata* will find this book very helpful. As my research is based on feminist and adaptation theories applicable to the study of Ray's *Charulata*, this article further will be handy.

On the other hand, the author of the book *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, is a feminist theorist and a professor of Sociology, Women's and Gender Studies, and the Cultural Foundations of Education at Syracuse University. The phrase from the title "without Borders" refers to the condition of women from different "nations, races, classes, sexualities, religions, and disabilities" (Mohanty 2). It mainly focuses on feminism under western eyes regarding third-world women. She brings up colonial and postcolonial female conditions and western politics with feminism. This book tried to shed light on the western hypocrisy of third-world women or colonized women disguised by the name of feminism. Here the rights of women in the developing world are discussed in relation to political development, economic development, and feminist theory. It decolonizes feminism by connecting theory, pedagogy, and concerns for women's daily lives in developing countries. As my thesis includes discussion related to the female condition in early 20th century colonial India and both "*Nastanirh*" and *Charulata*, despite being set in that same time, were released in two different timelines, this book will aid my research by providing the historical and

political context that inspired both the author and the producer in the making of the two works. As *Charulata*, despite being set in colonial Bengal, was made in postcolonial India, this book will help me find the postcolonial feminist ideologies that were reflected in this film.

Similarly, Umme Al- Wazedi, Professor of English at Augustana College, in her article “Postcolonial Feminism,” provides a basic understanding of what postcolonial feminism is. Her areas of expertise are third-world films and cultural studies, translation theory, postcolonial feminism, British and Black British literature, Asian-American literature, etc. This article attempts to trace some of the most significant postcolonial feminist theorists. It discusses their concerns regarding the recognition of women in the Western imagination, where these women mostly appear as mere objects. In this article Al- Wazedi presents the argument that the representation of non-Western women, colonial and dominated Euro-American women, discourses have neglected the intersectionality of race, gender, class, caste and religion, and sexuality. The author touches on the problematic western idea of “Satihood”(Al- Wazedi 157) and the marginalization of colonial women in 19th and 20th century India.

Similarly, Sutanuka Ghosh, in her Ph.D. thesis paper "Becoming a Bengali Woman: Exploring Identities in Bengali Women's Fiction, 1930-1955" studies the representation of women in Bengali fiction written by women. This paper talks about the revolutionary potential of middle-class Bengali women in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s through their engagement in politics, the Bengal famine, the country's freedom, and partition. Despite this, women's identity was absorbed under the idea of the "complete" woman whose expected roles were to be a mother, wife or a daughter. This article uses the qualitative method to decode feminist writings by Bengali female authors and does not include any discussions related to "Nastanirh" or *Charulata*. However, this article is very resourceful in accurately understanding the historical

context of "Nastanirh" or *Charulata*. This paper will aid my research by providing contextual information related to history, politics, women's condition, and gender roles of 20th century colonial India.

Likewise, Judith Walsh's reviewed work of Meredith Borthwick's *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905*, published in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, gives a short overview of the original text. It talks about the position of women in the 19th and 20th-century colonial Bengal and their lack of access to education. This article can help readers understand how Bengali women's education entirely depended on the wishes of their fathers, brothers, and husbands. The intention behind educating women with western education was only to upgrade their family statuses. Emancipating women through education was not at all a concern at that time. This article can help readers deeply understand both *Charulata* from "Nastanirh" and *Charulata*. It can help researchers decode Ray's Charu who was an educated and emancipated woman despite belonging to such a backward time.

Satyajit Ray's film *Charulata* tells the story of an artistic, intelligent and young housewife named Charu who feels lonely and confined inside her home space. Even though initially, this story was written by Rabindranath Tagore as a novella titled "Nastanirh," Ray's clever use of metaphoric cinematography has given it a different outcome. With the help of the previously described books and journal articles in this literature review, this research aims to evaluate both "Nastanirh" and *Charulata* using a feminist and post-colonial feminist lens and find out the feminist alteration made by Ray using adaptation theory.

Chapter 3: Analysis

Rabindranath Tagore's "Nastanirh" (Broken Nest, 1901):

Rabindranath Tagore's novella "Nastanirh" (Broken Nest, 1901) is set in the early 20th century colonial Bengal when India was undergoing some changes. Western ideas like humanism were recent imports into the higher-class Bengali society. During this time, social reformists and organizations were starting to address gender-based social issues and evil practices like dowry, child marriage, female infanticide, the sati tradition, the purdah system, and polygamy. Despite the effort, colonial India was not at all a happy place for women. To the British government Indian women were like imperial projects who were nothing but "the carriers of tradition" (Al-wazedi 157). And as India was notoriously prejudiced for its class and caste systems, women of this time were doubly prejudiced under colonial and patriarchal dominance. About this Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her book *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* elaborates that "patriarchies were not systems that were added on to class and caste but were intrinsic to the very formation of and transformations within these categories." (C. Mohanty 61).

Krishnapriya et al. in their article "Relocating Colonial Women in Resistance: An Interpretation of Rabindranath Tagore's *Nastanirh* and *Chaturanga*" discusses how "Colonial women under the eyes of the western feminist scholarship is improbable as it constructs third-world women as its mere beneficiaries." (Krishnapriya et al. 3). They were either portrayed as victims or heroines, but never as emancipated women. Tagore's women and their stories accurately reflected this prejudiced socio-political context of that time. Tagore's "Nastanirh"

(Broken Nest, 1901) captures these social dilemmas through its characters, who juggle traditionality and newfound modernity.

"Nastanirh" (Broken Nest, 1901) portrays the dysfunctional marriage between Bhupati and Charulata. Here Bhupathi is a man educated in western education who advocates for both democracy and western ideologies. He is said to be "a man of the world" (S. Mohanty 21). He enjoys spending most of his time doing work related to his newspaper, occasional discussions with his friends about politics, handling his accounts and receiving empty praises. Tagore's depiction of Bhupati is intentionally in a satirical manner. In the novella it is mentioned that "To get a wealthy man like Bhupati into their group, political leaders would praise him profusely, and so Bhupati's idea of his own abilities in English had become well-nourished and full" (S. Mohanty 3). Through his character, Tagore tried to mock the narcissism and phoniness of the so-called Bengali aristocrats or *bhadraloks* of the colonial Bengal. Bhupati being one of them is no different. Nothing holds place in his heart except for his newspaper, desire for compliments and wealth. Charulata, on the other hand, is his dutiful wife who spends her "endeavourless, endless, days and nights" (S. Mohanty 4) confined inside the four walls. Bhupati's excessive involvement outside the home has created an emotional distance between them. In this story the narrator is distinctly more sympathetic towards Charu than her husband. Through the narrator Tagore beautifully portrayed Charu's marginalized life filled with boredom and loneliness. For Charu education is a way to get rid of this monotony. Regarding this Krishnapriya et al. comments how Charu's interest for books is not because she wants to acquire knowledge. It rather is an effort to brighten her boring days. Even though there is no direct mention of Charu and Bhupati's problematic conjugal life, such overt portrayal of Charu's dull and confined life gives the reader a clear hint of it. Bhupati once tells her "See the way I understand you, but for that do I have to

read *Meghnad Badh* or *Kabikankan Chandi* from beginning to end?” (S. Mohanty 21). He does not hesitate to admit that he has no desire to give the effort that is required to understand Charu.

To keep Charu accompanied Bhupati brings Manda, her brother’s wife, to their house. But Charu fails to bond with her due to their differences. In this novella Manda’s character serves as Charu’s foil. Manda is a typical 19th-century Bengali housewife who does not share the same knowledge and interests with Charu. Compared to Charu, she is greedy, materialistic and illiterate. They spend their days together playing cards and talking about things that do not excite Charu at all. Charu’s mundane days however get brighter when she is with Amal whom she lovingly calls *thakurpo*. Amal is Bhupati’s college going cousin to whom Bhupati has given shelter. Him and Charu bond very well due to their shared love for literature.

In Amal’s free time he teaches Charu on various subjects upon Bhupati’s request. English educated men providing education to the women was a common practice at home in Bengali upper-class households. These Bengali aristocrat men ensured female education to only enhance their familial identity. It is said that “It is characteristic of women's position in late nineteenth-century Bengal that women were not the primary actors in reshaping their own roles in that society. The pressure for change came first from British foreigners and British culture, second from women's Western-educated fathers, husbands, and sons, and only a very late third from the women themselves.” (Walsh 422). Bhupati’s desire to have an educated housewife is what facilitated Charu’s education in this novella. About this Sutanuka Ghosh in her “Becoming a Bengali Woman: Exploring Identities in Bengali Women’s Fiction” wrote illiteracy or lack of western education was a common feature in making the image of colonial Indian women of that time. She also added how “This ‘making’ or ‘image’ itself is problematic because of the number

of people with their different agendas who have a stake in the ‘making’ of women.” (Ghosh 80). Women had no control over developing their image. It was men who had to give them the exposure or provide identity. Tagore’s Charu was no different. It was Bhupati’s willingness to provide her education that gave her access to it.

Even though in the beginning education was a way to pass time for Charu, as it progressed her motivation to acquire knowledge also increased. Through discussing literature and poetry with Amal she could mentally escape from her inner-space and experience the outer world. She slowly started transferring into a new woman and transgressive desires for Amal started developing inside her. Amal here is a foil of Bhupati. He showers Charu with attention and willingly accompanies her in her inner-world. He gives Charu the emotional support that she seeks from Bhupati. In return Charu also fulfills his demands like arranging feasts for his college classmates and making him handmade items like embroidered handkerchief, jacket, slippers, mosquito net and armchair cover.

This story features an imaginary garden which symbolizes Charu’s unattainable desires. It is mainly an abandoned space inside Bhupati’s large property. This garden is a shared space only between Amal and Charu where they can discuss their uneconomic and ambitious plan of redecorating it. They talk about unattainable ideas like building a pond, keeping pet deer and swans in it which adds a liminal aspect to this garden. This garden will never exist just like the adulterous relationship Charu desires to have with Amal. This garden signifies Charu’s transformation, transgression and also symbolizes the impossible and imaginary relationship between Amal and Charu.

In this story Charu is a muse to Amal for his writing. He shares his unpublished poetry and ideas with her. However, Charu prohibits him from publishing his work as she fears that would give Amal a public exposure. Her insecurity is that just like Bhupati; he will also become too busy with the outside world leaving Charu at her inner-space alone. Charu also enjoys having a certain type of control over Amal which she cannot have over her own marriage, Bhupati or even her own fate. But as Amal publishes his writing ignoring Charu's condition she feels completely betrayed and heartbroken. Meanwhile the sudden betrayal of Umapada leaves Bhupati bankrupt. In this novel Umapada was Bhupati's trusted personal assistant and Charu's older brother. To help Bhupati's deteriorating finances; Amal marries the daughter of a rich man and leaves for England. This completely shatters Charu's inner-space. However, Amal's departure in a way strengthens Charu. She refuses to repair her estranged relationship with Bhupati and disagrees to move to Mysore with him. She finally finds her peace in solitude, which once used to upset her a lot.

Somdatta Mandal in his "May You Be the Mother of A Hundred Sons!": Barrenness vs. Motherhood in Bengali Cinema" discusses how Tagore received adverse criticism from the Bengali community when he published "Nastanirh". The way this story distorted the image of the stereotypical family life was not appreciated by the readers. The traditionalist expectation from Chau was, she would be a faithful loving wife and a mother. Instead Tagore used extramarital affair here to portray the conflicting marriage between Charu and Bhupati (Mandal 334). Through this novella Tagore tried to portray the lives of Indian housewives in a colonial setup. He tried to reveal the patriarchal and colonial prejudices that kept women trapped inside the four walls ignoring their abilities, dreams and desires.

Satyajit Ray's *Charulata*:

Tagore's novella "Nastanirh " was published in 1901, and more than a half-century later, Satyajit Ray released its adaptation called *Charulata* in 1964. Even though both the novella and the film are set in a similar timeline, Ray's input has brought newness to this film. In an interview with Udayan Gupta, Ray said *Charulata* is his favorite to which he would not bring any changes if he had to remake it. This film, with the character of Charulata, features "the archetypal Ray woman" (Gupta 26). The naming of this film indicates its focus, which is its female lead Charulata. The second important character in this film is Bhupati, Charu's husband, and, thirdly, Amal, Bhupai's cousin. "Nastanirh " is roughly set around the 19th-century Bengali Renaissance period. Tagore did not pinpoint the timeline in his novella. In *Charulata*, however, there are mentions of the election between William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli in 1880. Another clue of the timeline is the mention of *Bangadarshan*. The film mentions Bankim Chandra's publication in *Bangadarshan*, a weekly literary paper on which he started writing in 1879. Both of these mentions determine that the movie is set in 1880, a very unsettling time between the native Indians and the British government before gaining independence. (Cooper 98)

Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* starts with a scene where Charulata (Madhabi Mukherjee) is embroidering the letter B on a handkerchief for her husband, Bhupati. In the background, a piece of instrumental music is being played of the famous Bengali song *Momo Chitte Nite Nittey*. Bhaswati Bhattacharjee in her article "The Bird in a Gilded Cage, Her Trials and Tribulations: Perspectives on Satyajit Ray's *Charulata*" mentioned how this song has huge significance in Bengali dance. Due to its upbeat nature, young Bengali dancers are often trained using this music to move their feet with the beat of *ta ta thai thai*. This music symbolizes Amal's future arrival

which will let Charu “outstep her spatiotemporal placement within the narrative.” (Bhattacharjee 1115). Then it is shown that Charu is humming and walking around the house, peeking through the windows with a pair of opera glasses. These scenes are intentionally made at a slow pace using “cinematic language” (Cooper 192). By cinematic language Cooper referred to the camera angles and movements in this film. Such as zoom-ins, zoom-outs, focus on multiple objects, using a combination of slow and fast pace and emphasis on the visual representation of the inner-space of the house.

Ray tried to show Charu's boring, confined, and monotonous inner world with the camera following her as she walks around the house. A pair of opera glasses appears multiple times in the film which becomes a quintessential part of her character. Through these glasses Ray portrays how Charu is a caged woman who desperately wants to experience the outer world. At the beginning of the film, she peeks through the window and sees a chained monkey dancing on the streets, then moves to another window and sees a bride being carried on a *palki* (palanquin). These two scenes symbolize Charu's marriage. Just like the new bride on a *palki*, Charu also once came to this house with lots of dreams but similar to the chained monkey, she is now shackled inside the house and stuck in a loveless marriage. Charu does not need to do basic household chores due to Bhupati's affluent status. Everything is done by their servants and housekeepers in their house. This leaves her even more bored searching for purposes every day. The portrayal of the *antar-mahal* in a slow pace with Charu wandering around Ray tried to make the viewers understand the meaninglessness of her life.

Ray gave subtle hints throughout the movie to indicate the dysfunctionality of Charu's marriage. There are also two different scenes where Bhupati walks by Charu without even noticing that she is there, while Charu stands still waiting for a simple nod or smile from him. He

walks by her as if she doesn't exist while being lost in his own thoughts. From the very beginning of the film Ray made sure the audiences understood the unnatural distance between Charu and Bhupati. In this film Bhupati owns a newspaper and desperately wants to break “The Idle rich” (Ray 26:56- 27:08) stereotype. He is often seen in the movie talking against the British government but ironically he himself is a pro-British man. His way of talking, fashion sense and the way he decorated his house reflects his British ideologies. It is seen in the movie that he also encourages Amal to go to England for further education. He also manages to find Amal a marriage proposal where the bride’s father is willing to bribe Amal with a sponsored degree at a university in England. Through Bhupati, Satyajit Ray critiques this hypocritical tendency among freethinkers of that time in a respectful manner. His relationship with Charulata is hampered by his over-involvement with the newspaper. A scene captures their dinner together where Bhupati had nothing else to discuss with Charu except about his newspaper. Even when Charu tries to start a conversation about something of her interest, Bhupati silences her saying he does not have proper knowledge about it to have a discussion.

Amal’s character, on the other hand, is a complete reversal of Bhupati’s. He is sensitive and youthful and is interested in Charu’s conversations. Unlike “Nastanirh,” Amal in *Charulata* enters the scene as a college graduate in need of a temporary home until he finds a stable job. Ray portrayed Amal not as selfishly in the film. He does not demand anything from Charu like the Amal in the novella. Instead, Charu, from her own wish, gives him handmade gifts. In the novella, Bhupati tells Amal to give Charu tuition on general education, whereas in the film, Bhupati tells him to guide her literature/poetry writing without making her feel inferior. These striking differences make Charu from *Charulata* a much more educated, independent and self-

aware individual. It seems like she knows her self-worth better, speaks for herself and does not take orders from anyone.

In this film, Amal's arrival is very symbolic. He enters the house singing and dancing like a clown when a storm starts. At the same time, Charu runs towards the corridor to order her servants to close the window and sees Amal entering the house with the storm wind. Similar to the wind, Amal also enters Charu's heart and destroys her home, marriage and mind. Through this type of symbolism in *Charulata*, Ray made many wordless silent moments significant. Rahman and Islam in their article "A Critical Reading of Ray's *Charulata*: Transforming Words into Images" comments about this storm that "It works there as an imagery of an upcoming disaster to be taken place in Bhupati's family which might take a heavy toll on its tranquil ambience." (Rahman and Islam 512). Amal slowly becomes a friendly figure to Charu due to their shared love for literature. The garden outside the house becomes their spot for discussion where Charu swings in her swing and Amal lies down on a mat facing towards the sky to find literary inspiration. Being impressed by Amal's literary ideas Charu embroiders a notebook for him to practice but gives it to him under a condition that whatever he writes here will only stay here. This cannot be published anywhere and can only be read by him and Charu.

One day Amal refers to Charu as *naabena* (modern woman) and in contrast calls Manda *praachina* (traditional woman) as Manda fails to understand the literary discussions between them. During this conversation Charu mentions that she likes the writing style of Bankim Chandra, who at that time was a new writer with an unconventional writing style. Through these scenes Ray tried to indicate that just like Charu's literary choices she is also unconventional. Later in the movie it is shown that disobeying Charu's condition Amal publishes his writing in a newspaper that features amateur writers. Feeling heartbroken and disrespected she also publishes

her writing in a renowned literary newspaper of much higher rank than the one that published Amal's as an act of rivalry. But after receiving the paper with her writing published in it she instantly runs towards Amal's room and embraces him in tears. This act strikes Amal's intuition about Charu's feelings towards him. He congratulates Charu on that scene but after that day he slowly starts to distance himself from her. Later it is shown that Bhupati gets to know about Charu's writing being published from his friends.

Meanwhile Umapada, Charu's brother whom Bhupati hired as his personal assistant abruptly leaves their house with his wife Manda with a false excuse. Few days later Bhupati realizes how he has been deceived by Umapada financially. He took personal loans on Bhupati's name and removed money from the newspaper fund. Being so badly cheated Bhupati falls into depression and one day he calls Amal to his office to share these burdensome thoughts. Hearing about Umapada's fraud, Amal feels ashamed. His consciousness rises and he realizes that he has been doing the same. Despite being aware of Charu's feelings towards him he has been staying under the same roof with them. As Bhupathi laments "*Trust, faith, ei shob ki tahole bhul? Shotota boley ki kicchu nei?*" (Ray 1:36:56- 1:38:08). Only in this scene the camera zooms towards someone other than Charu. This zoom- in onto Amal's face depicts his realization that even he has been deceiving Bhupati. The next night Amal leaves their house leaving a letter that said he got a good job offer which is untrue. After hearing this news from Bhupati Charu feels hurt but acts annoyed to conceal her true feelings. She immediately shouts at her servants and tells them to clean the guest room Amal was staying at all these days.

In the next scene we see Charu and Bhupati sitting on a sea beach where Charu proposes to Bhupati again start publishing the newspaper. She gives him an idea of collaboration where

Charu will write in the poetic section and Bhupati will work on the politics section. This scene depicts Charu's attempt to fix their broken marriage. After returning from the trip Bhupati receives a letter from Amal. Telling Charu to read it too he leaves home. Seeing Bhupati leaving, Charu starts to read the letter and discovers that Amal has got married and moved on. At this moment a storm starts similar to the one that happened while Amal entered this house. She bursts into tears lamenting "*Thakurpo tumi keno choley geley? Amay keno bole gelena thakurpo?*" (Ray 1:50:17-1:50: 28). At this very moment Bhupati also enters the room failing to go out due to the storm and overhears Charu's lamentation. He understands everything, runs out of the house and goes on a carriage ride. Charulata on the other hand, wipes her tears and fixes herself. As Bhupati returns home she forwards her hand for him to hold to which Bhupati also forwards his. This wordless scene gives the viewers a hope that their marriage still has possibilities to be saved. At this scene the word "Nastanirh" appears in the scene and the movie ends.

Throughout the entire film there are no mentions that this is an adaptation of Tagore's "Nastanirh" until the movie ends with the word "Nastanirh" appearing at the last scene of the film. Even though Ray kept the story line unchanged in this film many alterations were made to add a feminist aspect to it. Starting from the naming of the film to the usage of different cinematic techniques, music, symbolism and slight modifications of the characters, Ray's personal inputs have given this film a feminist outcome. The time gap of 63 years between the novella's publication and the film's release as well as India's liberation from the British manifested in this film through Ray's feminist adaptation.

***Charulata* as a Feminist Adaptation of “Nastanirh”:**

Karen Hollinger, in her book *Feminist Film Studies*, talks about the characteristics of feminist films, where she elaborates how feminist films tend to cater to female audiences and have female protagonists. She also explains how feminist films do not fit the criteria of utopian male expectations of the female. These films do not show adoration for the feminine, helpless, pure, and innocent females and rather portray unconventional images of women. She further discusses how filmic adaptations with feminism manipulates images, provides views on female perspective, female identity, female body and female sexuality. To understand the films with feminist adaptation she suggests knowing the political and historical context is also very important. (Hollinger 9)

Now if we evaluate how Ray adapted Tagore’s “Nastanirh” into *Charulata* it can be noticed that he made multiple adjustments to transform it into a feminist film. The naming of the film, the focus on Charu’s character, adjustments made on her character, minimization of other important characters and the way he portrayed Charu's views, desires will remind the audience that also read “Nastanirh” that this is a women centric film. About this Suranjan Ganguly in his book *Satyajit Ray: In Search of the Modern* said that Ray’s *Charulata* is a film about “the woman's eye” (Ganguly 55). In Tagore's "Nastanirh," the main focus was on Charu’s marriage or the family whereas Ray's version of it is about Charu.

Devapriya Sanyal in her article “Apocalyptic desires and possessing the world through the gaze: Satyajit Ray’s *Charulata*” talks about Ray’s attempt of role reversal in *Charulata*. This film has reversed the idea of “male gaze” according to her article. She argues how conventionally the media portrays women as objects of male desire or as mere victims and depicts the image of women from perception of male eyes. In *Charulata* however, we oppositely

see how Amal is viewed by Charu as a subject of interest. The scene from the garden where Charu was viewing Amal laying on the ground from her moving swing is an ideal example of it. Besides this, there are multiple scenes in the movie where Charu's face is focused while she uses her opera glasses to zoom into things.



Figure: (1) Charu and Amal in the garden (2) Charu with her opera glasses.

In this film, unlike the novella, Amal does not necessarily feel attraction towards Charu. It is Charu and her loneliness that diverts her into having transgressive thoughts towards Amal. These types of perspectives are commonly shown to be male perspective which Ray has reversed in this film and this adds a feminist aspect to it. Devapriya Sanyal has referred to this as the “female gaze” (Sanyal 72). She further said “Here the act of gaze is not only reversed but directed at the male himself.”(Sanyal 76). According to Sanyal, *Charulata* is a film that depicts a series of Charu's thoughts and feelings that lead to her self-discovery. She becomes an emancipated woman who takes the initiative to desire men, which in her case is Amal. Even though her feelings towards Amal are incestuous and forbidden, it indicates her unwillingness to fit the criteria of the conventional obedient woman.

Hollinger in her *Feminist Film Studies* discusses how gender and sexuality are linked with control, power, and subjugation. For this reason in patriarchal setups, women are subsided with no powers over their bodies and are victims of controlled sexuality. Women's pleasure is a taboo topic as women are objects of pleasure to men in a patriarchal society. Feminist films, however, tend to portray female sexuality to indicate empowerment. It shows the authority women have over their bodies and minds. It is evident that Ray in *Charulata* tried to show his support for women's right to pleasure. Charu belonging in a time and setting where even education was not equally given to women, her venture towards exploring her sexual freedom is quite striking. Devapriya Sanyal in her book *Gendered Modernity and Indian Cinema* comments regarding this aspect of *Charulata* comments "Ray by doing so with a nineteenth-century woman can be seen as portraying the earliest stages of feminine emancipation." (Sanyal 46)

There are other incidents where the camera tries to capture scenes that represent Charu's psyche. Ray frequently used the zoom-in and zoom-out techniques to indicate to the viewers that this film is about Charu's vision. Darius Cooper in his article "The Indian woman in the Bengali/Hindu Dollhouse: Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (1964)" comments about these cinematographic techniques elaborately. He mentions the camera following around Charu while she meaninglessly wanders around the house in the starting scene and then the camera fixes at the spot where Charu stands beside busy Bhupati with her pair of opera glasses. In this scene she looks at unaware Bupati with these glasses which apparently may seem meaningless but carries heavy significance. To emphasize this moment the camera does a zoom-in into Charu's face.



Figure: (1 and 2) Charu looking at Bhupati with her opera glasses.

According to Cooper here “The use of the zoom doubles our perception of Charu, not only as a bored unloved wife but as a woman on the verge of losing her identity as a wife.” (Cooper 194). This scene silently tells the viewers how lonely and unnoticed Charu is in her marriage.



Figure: (1 and 2) Beautiful zoom-in moments from *Charulata*

There are multiple instances of zoom-ins throughout the film about which Cooper comments:

“a pure form of poetic consciousness is expressed via the zoom which takes us beyond Charu's subjective vision. It reflects not only the content of Charu's precarious emotional state, but also the form of Ray's aesthetic consciousness” (Cooper 194)

Another aspect of feminist adaptation that Ray made in this film is the distortion and minimization of other characters to keep the main focus on Charu. Narasingha P. Sil in his article “A Satyajit Ray Symposium: Tagore's Broken Nest vs. Ray's *Charulata*: A Critique” elaborates how the character of Amal and Bhupati is intentionally minimized by Ray in *Charulata*. He comments “Amal and Bhupati behave like castrated males whose made-up manliness does not really proclaim their manhood.” (P.Sil 132) Other scholars also discuss the distortion of characters in *Charulata*. In “A Critical Reading of Ray's *Charulata*: Transforming Words into Images” it is said that in “*Nastanirh*” Umapada's betrayal is unpredictable and sudden. Whereas in *Charulata*, Umapada is portrayed as a villain from the beginning. Ray intentionally did this so that the audiences don't get distracted by a sudden climax related to Umapada's betrayal. (Rahman et al.) Another character is also minimized in this film and it is of Manda's. In “*Nastanirh*” her character had a huge impact in building up Charu and Amal's relationship. Her overly flirtatious behavior with Amal in many ways caused Charu from “*Nastanirh*” to get jealous. In the film however, Manda is a quite marginalized character. Her typicality and dullness accentuates Charu's emancipated character in the film.

P.Sil also says *Charulata* is a perfect film due to its exquisite usage of lighting, camera movement and acting. However, it is not an adaptation that restores a piece of fiction. The distortion of plot and characters make it a special kind of adaptation. He elaborates how in Tagore's “*Nastanirh*” *Charulata* is “a lonely, sensitive, selfless sister-in-law”(P.Sil 134) to her “greedy and bratty young college-going brother-in-law.”(P.Sil 134) Amal, who helps her with studies upon Bhupati's request. In *Charulata* however, Charu's character has a lot more dimension. She is already educated and Amal is her companion when it comes to discussing literature. The power dynamics between the two are equal.



Figure: Charulata spending her free time indulged into reading

The naming of the film as *Charulata* is also very significant if we want to see it from a feminist adaptation viewpoint. Devapriya Sanyal in her book *Gendered Modernity and Indian Cinema* discusses how Tagore titled his story as “Nastanirh ” which translates at the broken nest. But after adapting it as a film, Ray names it on the female lead Charulata which absolutely shifts the film’s focus “from the family to the woman.” (Sanyal 46).

Brinda Bose in her article “Modernity, Globality, Sexuality, and the City: A Reading of Indian Cinema” said:

“Charulata is given the privilege of gazing - upon the world around her, and upon the young man who storms into her placid house-hold and unleashes a fury of passion in her that leaves her breathless and broken at his departure. As she is empowered by a pair of opera glasses that she trains on all whom she gazes upon, it does appear that at one level at least it is her gaze that controls the action of the film” (Bose 49)

By reversing the idea of male gaze, distorting the plot, minimizing other important characters, rebuilding Charu's character and using specific cinematic techniques Ray changed the traditional styles of adaptation and introduced a new style adaptation in Indian cinema called feminist adaptation.

Charu from *Charulata* challenges the colonial stereotype of the traditional and obedient "sati" (Al-wazedi 157) women that the Charu from "Nastanirh" oppositely embodies. Even though it is set in a time prior to India's independence from the British, the fact that it was produced in a postcolonial time may be the reason behind the manifestation of postcolonial feminist ideas in it. *Charulata* is undoubtedly a feminist adaptation of "Nastanirh" but there are further scopes of analyzing this film from a postcolonial feminist perspective.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The concept of ideal womanhood in the 20th century India was associated with being someone's wife or mother. Western scholars also have seen women of the Indian subcontinent as mere objects of desire or victims of patriarchal Indian society. Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* challenges these problematic patriarchal and colonial concepts. Even though it was adapted from Tagore's novella "Nastanirh", published in 1901, Ray cleverly used multiple techniques to reverse the patriarchal and colonial Idea of femininity in this film.

Ray's Charu is an educated, independent woman who knows her aspirations and is aware of her sexual rights. My thesis was aimed to evaluate both *Charulata* and "Nastanirh" using feminist lenses and to also examine the alterations brought by Ray in the film. My thesis lastly reached a verdict that *Charulata*, due to Ray's alterations like role reversals, distortions and minimizations of other characters and usage of different camera techniques, symbolism and music is a feminist adaptation of Tagore's 'Nastanirh'.

Tagore's "Nastanirh" also reflects feminist concerns, but it is mainly focused on Charu and Bhupati's marriage or family. Ray's *Charulata*, despite being set in the same timeline, was released in 1964 and reflected many postcolonial ideas like female emancipation and challenged the female stereotypes established by the west. Numerous pieces of research have been done on "Nastanirh" and *Charulata* using feminist theory, but no research evaluated this film from a postcolonial perspective. Further research is possible on this movie to decode it from a postcolonial feminist adaptation perspective.

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