

BOOK EXCERPT

Madhabi Mukherjee on ‘Charulata’, its enigmatic last scene, and the sea that returned an offering

On the occasion of Satyajit Ray’s birth centenary, a flashback to one of his masterpieces.

Madhabi Mukherjee
May 01, 2021 · 10:30 am



Madhabi Mukherjee in Charulata (1964) | RD Bansal

The last day of shooting for Mahanagar took place on a street in the Alipur area of Calcutta. When we were done Manik-da said, “When do you think we can work together again?”

The phone call came a few days later.

“Read Noshtonir.”

“I’ve read it.”

“Read it again. I’m sending you a copy.”

I used to live on Grey Street Extension in Hatibagan, which was where Manik-da sent me the book. I read it once more; then Manik-da sent for me to read the script to me. It didn’t, however, spell out the last scene. “How will the film end?” I asked. “I’ll tell you later,” he said.

But he didn’t. When we went directly to shoot the final scene, we performed the way Manik-da instructed us to. Shailen-babu held out his hand, and I held out mine. “There must be a small gap,” Manik-da said. “Your hands mustn’t touch.” That was how it was.



Madhabi Mukherjee and Sailen Mukherjee in Charulata (1964). Courtesy RD Bansal.

I didn’t understand then just what the director was trying to say. Afterwards, when the entire film was played for us in the projection room, complete with background music and dialogue, I understood the whole thing.

As with many films, so it was with Mahanagar – I no longer remember which scene we shot on the first day. I do remember for Charulata, though. Charu’s essay has just been published in the well-known magazine Bishwobondhu. She keeps hitting Amol on his back with a copy of the magazine, saying, ‘Look, look!’ This was the first scene we shot.

I had snatches of song in the film. A fragment of Rabindrasangeet, “Phuley phuley dholey dholey,” another song, “Badasi yadi kinchidapi dantaruchi kaumudi,” and a piece of dialogue I had to sing out – when Amol says, “How fortunate Dada is,” Charu croons, “You will be too.” Manik-da had said that if I sang in another film of his my songs would be released as a record. Not that it happened, however.

Eventually we were done with the shooting. Manik-da said, “The film is a good one, you know, but I cannot tell whether people will like it.” Charulata not only won accolades at home and abroad, it also commanded enormous popularity. But I was reduced to tears by some of the criticism. How could people be so twisted?

If you look closely at the appearance of the three characters I played in Mahanagar, Charulata and Kapurush, they won’t seem to be the same woman at all. I wore no make-up in Mahanagar, nor in Charulata – only pancake. So it was all the doing of the camera – Subrata-babu’s and, of course, Manik-da’s skills.



Madhabi Mukherjee in Charulata (1964). Courtesy RD Bansal.

The outdoor shooting for Charulata was done in Gopalpur. The scene featuring Charu and Bhupati sitting on the sea beach was to be shot. We were staying at Palm Beach Hotel. That was where I saw a casino for the first time. Babu, that’s Manik-da’s son Sandip, used to play in the casino constantly.

On the first night they couldn't arrange for a separate room for me, so Monku-di (Manik-da's wife), Babu and I shared a bed. An extra bed was laid out for Manik-da in the same room. Sometime later Monku-di said, "Wake up, Manik. Babu's kicking me so much I can't sleep." Manika-da came to our bed, I moved to his.

The next day I was given a huge room, which had been occupied by the American ambassador. I had been rather uncomfortable sharing a room, now I breathed a sigh of relief.

Of course, we had all our meals together. Monku-di would order for all of us. There would be salami at breakfast, which I don't normally eat, but would add to my plate out of courtesy. Monku-di would tell Manik-da, "Your heroine isn't eating at all." Manik-da didn't comment, though.

We were in Gopalpur for a very short time, but I developed a sinus problem. Some people said you're dehydrated. I bathed in cold water. Fotik-babu advised me to make a little bundle of black cumin and sniff it. It didn't help. Nothing was available in Gopalpur, there was no Otrivin nasal drop in nearby Behrampur town either. Manik-da used to inhale Phenox, which he gave me. I got some relief. But I couldn't possibly keep asking for it, so I had to suffer.



Soumitra Chatterjee in Charulata (1964). Courtesy RD Bansal.

After shooting was done for the day we would play cards, twenty-nine. Fotik-babu and I would be partners, pitted against Manik-da and someone else. I used to cheat, Manik-da too. There were all these signs, touching the ear or the nose to convey to the partner what cards one was holding.

After the game Subrata-babu would say, “Let’s go for a walk.” I’d usually go out with a torch, which threw a powerful beam. I was used to this, having encountered snakes while shooting for Baishe Srabon, and both snakes and scorpions when shooting for Subarnarekha. Subrata-babu didn’t want the torch.

“Switch the torch off, Madhabi.”

I wouldn’t agree. Bhanu-babu from the production team would say, you should switch it off when asked to. Subrata-babu would say, “Look upwards, find out for yourself what a sky full of stars looks like. You’ll never see such stars in Calcutta.” He would gaze at the stars too, wondering how to film them should the need arise.

It was in Gopalpur that a strange incident took place. I was walking by the sea one day, all by myself. Suddenly I remembered being told the sea never claims anything, it returns everything. I wanted to see if this was true. So I took off one of my slippers and launched it in the water, staring at the sea to find out if I could get it back.

Suddenly I was startled by a baritone. “Well, did it work?” The slipper returned on the wave. I was trembling all over, I was too thrilled and overwhelmed to be able to speak.

Excerpted from Madhabikanan, Madhabi Mukherjee, Chorchapod.
Translated from the Bengali.

Reference:

<https://scroll.in/reel/993675/madhabi-mukherjee-on-charulata-its-enigmatic-last-scene-and-the-sea-that-returned-an-offering>