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ABSTRACT

This curriculum guide was developed to assist high school students in understanding the contributions of Tagore and Ray in the literature and film of India. The film "Rabindranath Tagore" by Satyajit Ray illustrates the life, times, and works of Tagore in Calcutta. Vignettes of Tagore's life are enacted, incorporating actual photographs and films of Tagore. Selected short stories of Tagore are incorporated into the lessons. Contains 12 references. (EH)

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**Brothers Creating Sisters:
Two Short Stories by
Rabindranath Tagore and Their
Representation in Film by Satyajit Ray**

by

Diana I. Rahm

A Curriculum Project Developed During the 1996
Fulbright-Hays Seminar Abroad Program: India Seminar

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**Brothers Creating Sisters:
Two Short Stories
by Rabindranath Tagore
and
Their Representation in Film
by Satyajit Ray**

**Diana L. Rahm
Fulbright: India and Her Ethos
July and August 1996**

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Rationale

Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore

and

Films of Satyajit Ray

As the world daily grows smaller, we have an increasing need to understand every part of the world. Particularly, a chasm continues between Western and Eastern understandings. In the United States, few courses exist which honestly explore Indian literature, history and culture without oversimplification. Yet, if we are to begin international understanding, we as teachers must wrestle with the unfamiliar. If we don't, how will our students?

These few study aides are offered to high school teachers as an introduction to the complexity of Indian experience. Yet these materials should not be considered to speak for the history of India nor even the experience for the entire country at a given time period. Each person and each state experiences life differently, just as we do here in the United States.

Tagore and Ray themselves are unique among Indian writers and filmmakers. Both received recognition in the West — Tagore with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 and Ray with awards at Cannes, Venice, Berlin, and a special Academy Award for "Lifetime Achievement in Film" in 1992. Therefore, their works share the somewhat dubious distinction of being accessible to Western understanding while sometimes being questioned by their own homeland.

Reading Tagore and watching Ray must be accomplished with an open mind and an open heart. If so, each will serve as an hors d'oeuvre leading toward a more sumptuous banquet of the Indian experience.

Rabindranath Tagore **(1861-1941)**

Rabindranath Tagore was a poet, musician, playwright, novelist, and artist. His background was a colorful and intellectual family in Calcutta. At age fifteen Tagore first began publishing his writing. In 1912 when Tagore was 51, William Butler Yeats "discovered" Tagore's collection of poems, *Gitanjali*, and brought him to the attention of the "Western World." The following year Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first Asian to win the award. He was knighted in 1915 but four years later returned the honor in protest of the Amritsar Massacre.

"Rabindranath Tagore has been proclaimed as perhaps the greatest literary figure in history. In sheer quantity of work, few writers can equal him. His writings include more than 1,000 poems and over 2,000 songs; in addition, he wrote thirty-eight plays, twelve novels, 200 short stories, and innumerable essays covering every important social, political, and cultural issue of his time."

— Narayan Champawat in "Rabindranath Tagore,"
Great Thinkers of the Eastern World

Satyajit Ray **(1921-1992)**

Satyajit Ray was also a multitalented man from a colorful family in Calcutta. His grandfather wrote stories and illustrated them himself. Ray's father also wrote and illustrated his own works. Ray himself began exploring audiovisual effects with light and mirrors even in his childhood. Although he received an honors degree in economics from Presidency College, he did not pursue that area. Film inspired him. With his mother's approval, Ray attended Santiniketan, the university established by Rabindranath Tagore. There Ray's interests and talents in fine arts exploded. The results of his writing, music and vision are recorded in his films which have won numerous accolades world-wide.

Film: *Rabindranath Tagore*

Black and White Documentary

In English

Script and Vocal Commentary by Satyajit Ray

Produced by the Films Division of the Government of India

1961

54 minutes

This documentary illustrates the life, times and works of Rabindranath Tagore beginning with the establishment of the setting in the historical context of Calcutta, the British capital of India.

Through art and still photographs, Ray establishes the mood of Tagore's highly artistic family from Tagore's flamboyant grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore, to his more philosophical father, Debendranath, and finally to the influences of the family on the ideas and work of Rabindranath himself.

Once Ray establishes time and mood, he utilizes acting vignettes of Tagore's childhood and adolescence, further developing Tagore's private development. As the film progresses, Ray incorporates actual photographs and films of Tagore exploring his views of education, Western culture, Indian nationalism and independence, as well as a universal spirit.

By telling Tagore's story, Ray is also able to illustrate the tumultuous movements involved in the struggle for India's independence.

Historical Occurrences in the Film

1850s	British government established in Calcutta
1861	birth of Rabindranath Tagore
1877	Queen Victoria proclaimed Empress of India
1905	Protest against partition of Bengal
1913	Tagore wins Nobel Prize for Literature
1914	India in World War I
1915	Tagore begins relationship with Mahatma Gandhi Tagore receives Knighthood
1919	Amritsar Massacre Tagore rejects his knighthood in protest
1924-1936	Tagore travels extensively
1941	Tagore dies
1940s	ending footage of World War II

Tagore: "I had at one time believed that the springs of civilization would issue out of the heart of Europe but today when I'm about to leave the world, that faith has deserted me. I look around and see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in man. I shall look forward to a new dawn, to a new chapter in history, when this holocaust will end and the air will be rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice. Perhaps the dawn will come from this horizon, from the East where the sun rises."

Classroom Usage for *Rabindranath Tagore* Film

For a mature class, this film can be utilized in entirety to not only establish the concerns and talents of Rabindranath Tagore, but to also explore the cultural milieu in which he became a major figure.

This film would work particularly well in a course which combines literature and history.

For more general classroom usage, clips from the film would be helpful to illustrate the music, climate, dress, etc. of India during Tagore's period. The section which addresses his move in 1890 to the villages to take care of the family estates is particularly useful since this period is the time when Tagore wrote "The Postmaster" and "The Conclusion." Ray's commentary about the moods of people and nature being interwoven is directly applicable to both stories.

Tagore's Inspirations

“The Postmaster”

“‘The Postmaster,’ written in 1891 (and filmed by Ray in 1960-61), was among Tagore’s earliest stories. Its main character is a bored, desperate Calcutta boy, posted to the back of beyond . . . to run a post office. As Rabindranath made clear in another letter, a real postmaster existed who used to tell him ‘the most improbable things in the gravest possible fashion.’ What was more, a second letter revealed that the real postmaster read the story, recognized himself and bashfully referred to the fact. Though he was not from Calcutta he shared the fictional postmaster’s disdain for the locals and his yearning to escape. Tagore liked the man: probably a part of himself — the part that needed Calcutta life — identified with the postmaster’s predicament.”

— Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson
Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man

“The Conclusion”

“. . . there is a letter describing a young bride standing at the ghat and trying to bring herself to leave:

At last when it was time to leave I saw them trying to coax that girl, with her cropped hair and big round armlets and bright and innocent beauty, to get on to the boat; but she didn’t want to go. Eventually they managed, with great difficulty, to pull her aboard. I realized that the poor girl was probably going from her father’s house to her husband’s. When the boat set sail, the other women stood watching from the bank: one or two of them were gently wiping tears away from their noses with the ends of their saris. . .

It was an incident that obviously made a special impression on Tagore: in interviews on the stories he cited it as a source for *samapti*.”

— William Radice
Introduction to *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories*
Translated by William Radice

Summary

“The Postmaster”

by Rabindranath Tagore

A dreamy postmaster from Calcutta is assigned to the village of Ulapur where he is cared for by a young orphan girl named Ratan. To amuse himself, he begins to teach her to read but when he contracts malaria, the growth of their friendship ends. The Postmaster applies for a transfer from the village back to the “civilization” of Calcutta. When that is denied, he quits. As a parting gift, he tries to give Ratan money, not realizing that his friendship would be the true gift. He momentarily thinks about taking her with him but his warmth of feeling is swept away by the “monsoon current.”

Vocabulary for “The Postmaster”

metropolis p. 25
contemplation p. 25
meagre p. 26
hookah p. 26
languid p. 27
plaintive p. 27
guava p. 28
emeritus p. 31
consolation p. 32

Study and Discussion Questions

“The Postmaster”

1. Characterize the Postmaster.
 - What is his attitude about Ulapur?
 - What is his attitude about Calcutta?
 - What are his wishes?

2. Characterize Ratan.
 - What is her family background?

3. How does the Ulapur differ from Calcutta?

4. Describe the relationship between Ratan and the Postmaster.
 - What does Ratan do for the Postmaster?
 - What does the Postmaster do for Ratan?
 - What is the Postmaster's attitude toward Ratan?
 - What is Ratan's attitude toward the Postmaster?

5. How does nature influence the story, particularly monsoon?

6. How and why does the tone of the story shift after the Postmaster recovers from his illness?

7. In the final paragraph, Tagore writes, “Alas for the foolish human heart!” In what ways does each of the characters have a foolish heart? Which is more foolish? Support your reasoning with detail from the story.

Summary

“The Conclusion”

by Rabindranath Tagore

Apurba Krishna returns to his village after receiving his BA at a university in Calcutta. His dignity is hurt when he slips in the mud while disembarking from his boat and Mrinmayi, a simple village girl, witnesses the event. Her laughter mocks yet intrigues him.

Apurba's mother wishes to arrange a marriage for her son now that his degree is finished but he is so charmed by the mystery of Mrinmayi that he prefers her over the girl his mother has chosen. Apurba and his mother disagree over the suitability of Mrinmayi due to her rejection of traditional female roles. Mrinmayi runs in the forests and plays tag with boys rather than cooking and taking care of her home.

Finally, Apurba and Mrinmayi are married but the confines of marriage seem to break Mrinmayi's spirit. In an effort to appease her, Apurba takes her to visit her father where the three of them are happy learning to keep house together.

When Apurba and Mrinmayi return home, there is increased tension with Apurba's mother. Apurba decides to return to school in Calcutta, leaving Mrinmayi behind at her own request.

When he is gone, Mrinmayi realizes her life has changed and that she loves and misses him. Her relationship with her mother-in-law improves when they both understand that Apurba is their focus. Mrinmayi writes a letter to him but it is lost. Both Apurba and Mrinmayi are hurt by the misunderstandings that linger between them.

Eventually, Apurba's mother decides to go to Calcutta and Mrinmayi accompanies her. Mrinmayi and Apurba are reunited and finally are able to explore their love without the inhibitions that had haunted them before.

Vocabulary for “The Conclusion”

wayward p. 81	brazen p. 86	reproof p. 94
biddable p. 81	rustic p. 87	reproach p. 94
scourge p. 81	abashed p. 87	mortified p. 95
deference p. 81	vehement p. 87	earnest p. 96
coyness p. 81	dogged p. 87	contrition p. 98
more p. 82	auspicious p. 88	apprehensive p. 100
farce p. 83	minatory p. 89	repentant p. 100
erudite p. 84	allay p. 92	acquiesce p. 102
bumpkin p. 84	alacrity p. 94	
reproach p. 86	pique p. 94	
nymph p. 86	exonerate p. 94	

Study and Discussion Questions

“The Conclusion”

1. Characterize Apurba Krishna in Sections 1-4.
 - What is his attitude about his education?
 - What is his attitude about his home village vs. Calcutta?
 - Describe his relationship with his mother.
 - How does he feel about tradition, particularly marriage?
 - What does his choice of clothing reveal about him?
 - What attracts him to Mrinmayi?

2. Characterize Mrinmayi in Sections 1-4.
 - Describe her appearance, particularly in Section 1.
 - Explain why she is referred to as Pagli.
 - Analyze her values. What does Mrinmayi love?
 - How does Mrinmayi feel about marriage? Why?

3. What do the other women of the story reveal about beliefs and tradition?
Consider:
 - a). Apurba’s mother
 - b). the prospective bride in Section 2
 - c). Mrinmayi’s mother

4. How does the marriage affect Mrinmayi and Apurba differently? Why?

5. Contrast the role of Mrinmayi’s father to the early role of Apurba’s mother. How does each react to the marriage? How does each affect the marriage?

6. How does the trip to see Mrinmayi’s father change their relationship and their relationship with Apurba’s mother?

7. In Sections 6 and 7, Mrinmayi and Apurba attempt to come closer to each other at different times. What personality traits does each still have which continue to get in the way of a true relationship?

8. What finally allows Mrinmayi and Apurba to be happy? What must each sacrifice?

9. Water plays a role throughout “The Conclusion,” particularly the waters of the monsoon and the waters of the river. Explain the significance of these waters in each section.

10. Explain the significance of the last sentence: “Then he knew that the half-kiss interrupted by fits of laughter was at long last being concluded among uninhibited tears.”

Using the Stories Together

In both stories, Tagore sets up many dichotomies. Consider how the stories together develop the following pairs of opposition:

formal education	little or no education
books	village knowledge
city (Calcutta)	villages
city	forest
money	poverty
helplessness	helpfulness
disdain	warmth
adult	child
sun	rain
"modern" dress	traditional dress
individual power	unity of group
male	female
arrogance	humility
tradition	"bending" tradition
inhibitions	freedom
order	chaos
discipline	disorderliness
age	youth
reason	emotion

Suggested Areas for Comparative Discussion

Both girls have little structure in life. Ratan has no family. Mrinmayi's father is absent and her mother allows her to run freely. Although Ratan seeks structure, Mrinmayi tries to avoid it but only finds adult happiness through embracing it.

Both men are educated and arrogant. Both women are more wise.

Both men represent the city life of Calcutta and speak English. Both women represent the village and tradition although they are not formally educated.

Both stories take place during monsoon season. Weather and the natural elements are in control more than the people. Weather often ends up harming people or making them look foolish, particularly when the characters attempt to ignore nature's power.

Both men are in better financial and social situations than the women.

Both men must learn to be warm and open rather than cold and arrogant. Postmaster doesn't learn this. Apurba does.

**Film: Satyajit Ray's *Teen Kanya*
(*Three Daughters*)**

**Released in the United States as
*Two Daughters***

1961

**Produced by Satyajit Ray
Screenplay by Satyajit Ray
Music by Satyajit Ray
Black and White
English Subtitles**

“One might see a thousand well-intentioned documentaries about India, yet learn less from them than from either of the two stories in *Two Daughters*. . . . Every frame in this film proclaims his love for his people and their environment.”

—Tony Mallerma in his article “Two Daughters”
from the June 1963 *Films and Filming*, pages 29-30

“Postmaster”

based on the story by Rabindranath Tagore

Black and White

56 Minutes

English Subtitles

Ray's film is faithful to the tone and theme of Tagore's story. There are a few changes in detail which emphasize the Postmaster's feelings of loneliness, isolation and confusion with village life. Changes in detail also enhance the relationship between the Postmaster and Ratan by showing her strength in his weaknesses. Ray has added a madman whose voice continues to haunt the Postmaster throughout the film illustrating the Postmaster's lack of understanding of his surroundings and his feelings that the village is outside the realm of rationality. To show the Postmaster's disdain for village customs, Ray has him walk to the water ready to bathe. When the Postmaster sees a snake skin, he quickly returns to post office, asking Ratan to bring well water offering the excuse that the bathing water is dirty. His fear and subsequent lies to hide his fear lie reveal the truth about him. His isolation and feelings of superiority over the village people are more strongly illustrated one evening when some men are visiting. They genially ask him questions about Calcutta and invite him to play music with them. He shows his aloofness by coldly commenting that he spends his evenings studying English and reading a book by Sir Walter Scott. It is clear that he does not fraternize with these men.

There are moments of warmth between the Postmaster and Ratan, particularly when he realizes that she is an orphan and after he writes a poem for her saying what she wishes to hear: that she is like his sister. However, true to the story, these moments are brief. Ray adds dimension to Ratan by showing how hard she works to prepare food, sweep the post office, carry water and look after him when he is sick. He also adds segments showing her washing her sari to please him although he barely notices when she is clean but is quick to point out when she is dirty.

The film concludes with Ratan walking by the Postmaster on the road. He intends to give her a rupee yet she doesn't even look at him. He is left on the muddy road to contemplate his relationship with her. Although the short story ends with Ratan having parting words and Tagore adding final commentary about their relationship, the film's end also imparts loneliness and self-examination.

Comments about Satyajit Ray's "Postmaster"
from
"An Art Wedded to Truth"
by Michael Sragow
The Atlantic Monthly
October 1994
pages 116-122

From the changing of the guard that begins the story—with the outgoing postman using what looks like a religious painting to help him preach the use of quinine to ward off malaria—Ray defines, in sharp, ticklish brushstrokes, both the country girl's modesty and reticence and the city man's queasiness and softness.

The village madman is a visual as well as a comedic marvel. A bristle-haired scarecrow with a wild stare, he's something out of a shipwreck movie; he squats accusatorily, his fishing rod lying in the road like a flattened plant. When the postmaster first sees him, Ray conjures an intimate slapstick portrait—Nandalal's cigarette falls out of his mouth and he drops his match as the raggedy man watches him smoke. The laughter that results is a tribute to Chatterjee's—and Ray's—comic timing *and* to the connection Ray makes between the audience and Nandalal. Suddenly we're all strangers in a strange land. When Ratan shoos the madman away with the quiet threat "Do you know how strong my master is?" it's a crystalline comic coup—besides a grasp of the situation, she displays how much strength she will lend Nandalal and how much her job instills in her. It's also a painfully ironic moment: Ratan is repeating something the outgoing postmaster told *her* so that she would obey Nandalal.

. . . . Nothing could be simpler on paper than the postmaster's passage from being a naive aspiring writer who believes that his poetry will bloom in rural solitude to being the disillusioned soul who decides that he must return to Calcutta. What is surprising is that the audience feels a sense of loss when he does return—because Ray suggests that by staying in town and nurturing Ratan, or by taking her with him to Calcutta, he could have achieved a profound self-transformation, becoming empathic and confident. At the end Ratan is the graver, wiser character.

“Samapti”

based on “The Conclusion” by Rabindranath Tagore

Black and White

56 Minutes

English Subtitles

In the second part of *Two Daughters*, Ray again maintains the tone and themes of Tagore’s short story yet he manipulates the plot and recurring images for the purposes of film. Most noticeably, he omits the section where Apurba (Amulya in the film) and Mrinmayi visit Mrinmayi’s father. Apurba decides to go back to Calcutta on the day after his wedding instead of after he has been married for a longer period. Finally, Apurba is tricked into coming back to the village rather than his mother and Mrinmayi coming to him in Calcutta. His coming back is a ploy created by his mother and another woman in his village.

Ray adds symbolism through a picture of Napoleon Bonaparte which Apurba keeps in his bedroom, perhaps the cherished photo of a conqueror which Apurba attempts to be in his marriage to Mrinmayi. Likewise, a symbol for Mrinmayi is the squirrel she keeps in a cage. In the scene where Apurba is visiting a prospective bride, the squirrel creates havoc just as Mrinmayi creates havoc in the village by ignoring traditions. Once Mrinmayi is betrothed to Apurba, the squirrel, Chorky, is caged much as Mrinmayi feels her freedoms are taken away. Finally, when Mrinmayi realizes she loves Apurba and is willing to leave her childish endeavors, Chorky dies, a symbol of her wildness and childhood that she has chosen to leave.

Apurba is proud and rude throughout the film, both to his mother, their servants, and to Mrinmayi. His childishness appears in his disdain for tradition and his touting of his college education. He arrogantly asks the prospective bride what she has studied. Indeed, in the first scene, he arrives reading a book of Tennyson. His second arrival is marked by concentration and a look of worry indicating perhaps that he is a changed man.

In his first arrival, he chooses to ignore a boy’s help getting out of the boat and then foolishly slips in the mud. The rain and mud continue to make him appear foolish when he chooses to wear polished shoes to visit his prospective bride. Mrinmayi laughs each time. It is only at the end of the film when Apurba goes into the rain, allowing himself to be soaked and not caring about his appearance that his change of heart is apparent.

Likewise, Mrinmayi’s wild appearance, mocking laughter, cutting of her hair and constant attempts to escape the confines of adult life mark her as immature and self-centered. Ray illustrates her change of heart through smoothed hair and mature dress, a tilak and gentle smiles.

Although the end differs from Tagore’s story, the viewer is certain that both Mrinmayi and Apurba are now ready to give up their egocentrism which has stood in the way of a happy relationship. Mrinmayi is ready to forego climbing trees and Apurba is willing to enjoy her spirit.

Classroom Usage for Satyajit Ray's *Two Daughters*

For a mature class, this film can be shown in entirety as follow-up for each short story.

Discuss how and why Ray changes the stories. Discuss how he **shows** what Tagore reveals through exposition.

If using both films, compare and contrast the main characters. Only in the film, how do the men compare? How do the women compare? Why would Ray choose to use these stories in conjunction? What is Ray's theme created by combining them?

For more general classroom usage, clips from the films will be helpful to help students experience the culture of Tagore's stories.

Aspects of Bengali life students may experience through *Two Daughters*:

In "Postmaster"

tropical trees
bed with mosquito netting
concern about malaria and quinine pills
Bengali script
Bengali spoken language
music — violin
 harmonium
 tabla
 singing
hookah
sari
dhoti
food preparation

In "Samapti"

boats on river
marriage arrangement
marriage ceremony
sacred thread
garlands of flowers
incense
ankle bells
tilak
karma
bangles
kurta

Additional Notes

Selected Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore translated by Krishna Dutta and Mary Lago has notes and a glossary. These notes may add additional clarification.

Cutting of woman's hair - Traditionally, women do not cut their hair unless it is a spiritual offering. Woman's hair is a treasured part of her beauty.

Ghat - a Sanskrit word which denotes steps
In "The Conclusion," a ghat is a flight of stairs that leads to a bathing place along the river. The cremation ghat is a site for human cremation and funeral rites.

Harmonium - a musical instrument similar in principle to the accordion. It is a box with bellows, black and white keys and reeds in an air chamber.

Karma - "Action" - a basic belief of Hinduism. It is the accumulation of good and bad deeds through one's lives.

Lakshmi - goddess of wealth, also associated with beauty. She is the consort of Vishnu.

Marriage age - Official age of marriage in India is 18 for women and 21 for men although marriages are arranged for women much younger. Marriage of children is punishable by law yet it is still practiced in some states. Tagore himself married a 10-year-old girl when he was 22.

The auspicious day for a marriage (as in "Samapti") is determined by noting the horoscopes of bride and groom. Priests set the date for the marriage by determining the influence of the planets.

Peepul Tree - also known as the Bodhi Tree under which Buddha meditated. The tree is sacred to Vishnu. It is considered to have magical powers because it lives for hundreds of years, therefore symbolizing continuity in life.

Sacred Thread - Men wear the sacred thread after initiation into manhood. It is a sign of spiritual strength. It consists of three strands tied together to signify his determination to unite his earthly personality with the divine.

Tabla - a two-piece drum set played with the hands

Tilak - a mark on the forehead indicating the eye of wisdom. In Ray's film "Samapti," Mrinmayi wears a tilak as a sign of her solemnization of her marriage contract.

Resources

The short story book which contains both "The Postmaster" and "The Conclusion" is **Selected Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore** translated by Krishna Dutta and Mary Lago.

If it is unavailable locally, it can be obtained through:

South Asia Books
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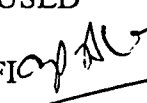
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From : O.P. Bhardwaj, Director (Admin. & Finance), USEFI 
Subject : 1996 Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad Program: India Seminar

As per terms and conditions set forth in the award for the subject seminar, each participants is required to complete the curriculum project which is relevant to his/her school's/college's use on an individual or small group basis. As required, we are submitting herewith the following curriculum projects submitted by participants of 1996 Indian seminar:

Patricia Barry ✓
Anne Holland
Melissa Kantor
Diana L. Raham
Julia Rockett
Kimberly Roen
Robert G. Shamy
Robin Weaver
Ronald Wolfson

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