



Ghosal and Chattopadhyay:
impressive debuts

■ CHAR ADHYAY

Disturbing View

A Tagore novel adaptation is set to create ripples

Movie: CHAR ADHYAY

Director: Kumar Shahani

Cast: Nandini Ghosal, Sumant Chattopadhyay, Kaushik Gopal

SUBASH CHANDRA BOSE and Rabindranath Tagore are two tender points in the Bengali psyche. Holy cows you don't mess with, legends you don't add post-scripts to. When Tagore's uncharacteristic novel *Char Adhyay* (Four Chapters) was published in 1933, it created ripples: he had questioned blind nationalism and blind adherence to a leader. The British used the novel against the nationalist movement, other forms of political activity and the poet himself. And, after Independence, critics of Tagore used the novel against him. But then, everything was shelved. The novel relegated to the fine print of Tagore's literary legacy, recalled rarely by only the cognoscenti.

Kumar Shahani's disturbing and eloquently constructed new film, which has been produced by the National Film Development Corporation and Doordarshan, awakens the old ghosts and is bound to create ripples again. The leader of this small group of young freedom fighters—interestingly, Shahani has cast psychoanalyst Kaushik Gopal in the role—is a chilling character, almost in the mode of Tom Courtney in David Lean's *Dr Zhivago* with the undercurrent of repressed desire making his unidimensional commitment to the cause all the more frightening. The ugly face of idealism.

At the epicentre of the film is the young woman (Nandini Ghosal), whom the leader uses as a conduit for his writings and views. She is supposed to be the embodiment of the mother or sister for the rest of the members of this militant group, occasionally seen shooting the rep-

resentatives of the British government. The other protagonist is the handsome and rich young man (Sumant Chattopadhyay), who is drawn into the movement because he is attracted to her, but questions the fundamentals of the movement.

Shahani was drawn by Tagore's very different ideas about nationalism. "The novel was written in Kandy and already Tagore was moving towards a pan-Asiatic internationalistic vision," he says. "He believed in the right to self-determination, self-realisation, what was higher than any ethnicised concept of nationalism."

The book didn't have a clearly defined narrative. Many like Shahani consider it the breakdown of the novel. Nor does the film have a linear storyline. Tagore's descriptive passages are in the dialogues. And the director has been faithful to the novel: "My take-offs are in between the four chapters."

Thus there is something dream-like and ambivalent about the film: the past and present flow into each other. Words come embodied as images of startling beauty and mystery. Both Tagore the poet and Tagore the painter appear to inhabit the film. Tagore had begun to paint a few years before he wrote this book and the dialogues, especially of the young woman and man, often spring out of some dark unconscious state, the way Tagore's words materialised into doodles and later into forms and images. There is something else at play here: an element of eroticism which is straining at the leash of all the beautiful imagery. In one of the exchanges between the couple, he tells her a woman is supposed to represent the nation, the mother, but what about the woman as a woman, as a lover?

The film has the standard Shahani signature: those glances into mid-distance, an etherised dialogue, actors choreographed to the auteur's inner rhythms, layered meanings and a pace, which is often slow to the point of stillness. But this time there is an underlying tension to the film, a coiled violence which gives it its dramatic thrust. Jaya Bachchan has provided the heroine a voice which not only lends gravity but almost becomes a character itself. Vanraj Bhatia's music fits like a glove. And Shahani is, as ever, the man pulling the strings behind the scenes: Ghosal is not an actress but an Odissi dancer, Guru Kellucharan Mahapatra's disciple, Gopal an analyst, and Chattopadhyay works in an ad agency and does some acting in theatre.

—MADHU JAIN