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REALMS OF REALITY

Social Realism and Female Representation in the Cinematic Worlds of Kim Ki-young and Satyajit Ray

ABSTRACT

The onset of the twentieth century witnessed a notable surge in cinematic realism, spurred by the contributions of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer in the 1930s. This movement profoundly influenced filmmakers worldwide, as seen in Kim Ki-young's *The Housemaid* (1960) and Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (1964). These filmmakers share commonalities in their approaches, reflected in elements such as mise-en-scène and character portrayal. However, a gap persists in scholarly discourse regarding social realism and women's depiction in their oeuvres. This research study employs qualitative methodology to explore these factors, focusing on female character portrayal through Freudian psychoanalysis. A comparison of *The Housemaid* and *Charulata* reveals how social dynamics shape narratives, highlighting class disparities and

gender roles, and offering insights into human relationships within diverse cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS

Realism, Kim Ki-young, *The Housemaid*, Satyajit Ray, *Charulata*, psychoanalysis

The selection of Kim Ki-young and Satyajit Ray for comparative analysis finds its rationale in their significant contributions to social realism in cinema within their respective cultural contexts. Kim's *The Housemaid* and Ray's *Charulata* offer nuanced portrayals of societal dynamics and intricate characters, making them compelling subjects for examination. Kim's exploration of class struggle and gender inequality in 1960s Korean society is juxtaposed with Ray's examination of marital dynamics and gender roles in colonial Bengal. This approach provides a rich framework for investigating how social realism manifests across diverse cultural landscapes. The comparative study aims to discern how Kim and Ray employ social realism in their films to explore the inner conflicts of female protagonists within distinct cultural contexts. This study will draw deeper insights into the universality of human experience, and the unique influence of culture and society on narrative construction and character development.

In realism, the camera is not just an observer, but a participant in the narrative, capturing life as it unfolds with unflinching honesty.

-- Abbas Kiarostami.¹

¹ Abbas Kiarostami, quoted in *Abbas Kiarostami*, expanded second edition, edited by Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2018).



As an art form, cinema has long been a mirror to the realities of society, and perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of social realism.² Rooted in a desire to capture the essence of everyday life with authenticity and honesty, social realism in cinema has evolved over time, shaped by cultural, political, and artistic influences. This article begins with a journey through the annals of cinematic history, exploring the origins, key elements, and notable examples of social realism.

1. The Genesis of Social Realism

The quotation, “The real and the natural purpose of the cinema is to create a life on run,” by the Lumiere brothers aptly captures the essence of realist cinema, emphasizing its fundamental purpose: to breathe life into the screen, capturing both the tangible and intangible elements of human existence.³ Social realism emerged as a necessary response to the romanticism and escapism that dominated early cinema in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, seeking to offer audiences a more authentic reflection of society and human experience. In this vein, realist filmmakers aim not just to entertain but to provoke thought and reflection, presenting narratives that resonate with the complexities and realities of the world around us.

1.1 The Dogma 95 Movement

The Dogma 95 movement, initiated by Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in the late 1990s, represented a radical departure

² André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol.1* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2004).

³ Michael Allan, “Deserted Histories: The Lumière Brothers, The Pyramids and Early Film Form,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 6, no. 2 (2008): 159-170. Also see, Dan Geva, “1895: The Lumière Brothers,” *A Philosophical History of Documentary, 1895-1959* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2021), 33-49.

from conventional filmmaking practices.⁴ Its primary objective was to challenge the artificiality often associated with cinema and to advocate for a return to raw, unadulterated storytelling. At the heart of Dogma 95 lay a commitment to cinematic realism, emphasizing authenticity and immediacy over polished aesthetics and elaborate production values. Under a strict set of rules outlined in the Dogma Manifesto, filmmakers were encouraged to embrace simplicity and spontaneity in their approach. This included the use of handheld cameras, natural lighting, and location shooting to create a sense of intimacy and immersion. By stripping away the trappings of traditional filmmaking, Dogma 95 sought to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, inviting audiences to engage with stories on a more visceral level.

While the Dogma 95 movement may not have endured in its original form, its legacy persists in the ongoing exploration of realism and authenticity in cinema. Filmmakers continue to draw inspiration from its principles, experimenting with innovative techniques and pushing the boundaries of traditional storytelling in pursuit of a deeper, more meaningful connection with audiences.

1.2 Key Elements of Social Realism

At the heart of social realism lies a commitment to authenticity and truthfulness in storytelling.⁵ This movement, whether considered a cinema subcategory or a philosophical movement, aims to portray life as it is, without embellishment. Key elements include:

Authenticity in Dialogue and Acting: Social realist films often feature naturalistic dialogue and understated performances with actors

⁴ Jean-Pierre Geuens, “Dogma 95: A Manifesto for Our Times,” *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 18, no. 2 (2001): 191–202.

⁵ David Forrest, “Social Realism: A British Art Cinema,” PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2009.



conveying emotions in subtle, nuanced ways that mirror real-life interactions.

Location Shooting and Natural Lighting: Filmmakers often eschew studio sets in favor of shooting on location, using real places to create a sense of authenticity and immersion. Natural lighting is preferred, lending scenes a raw, unfiltered quality that enhances the film's realism.

Ordinary Characters and Stories: Social realist films typically center around ordinary people facing everyday challenges, rather than larger-than-life heroes or villains. Plots often revolve around universal themes such as poverty, class inequality, and social injustice, making them accessible to a wide audience.

Attention to Detail: Realist filmmakers pay meticulous attention to detail, from the costumes and props to the background elements of each scene. This attention to detail helps create a sense of verisimilitude, immersing viewers in the world of the film.

2. Kim Ki-young: Master of Korean Social Realism

Kim Ki-young, a towering figure in Korean cinema, left an indelible mark on the landscape of filmmaking with his uncompromising exploration of social themes during his career from the 1950s to 1998. Renowned for his ability to dissect the intricacies of Korean society, Kim's masterpiece, *하녀* (*The Housemaid*), stands testament to his artistic vision and unwavering commitment to social commentary.⁶

하녀 (*The Housemaid*) is a cinematic tour de force that delves into the complexities of class dynamics and gender inequality in Korean society. Set against the backdrop of modernity, the film follows the tumultuous journey of a young housemaid who becomes embroiled in a

⁶ Nikki J.Y. Lee, and Julian Stringer, "Remake, Repeat, Revive: Kim Ki-young's Housemaid Trilogies," in *Film Trilogies: New Critical Approaches* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 145-163.

web of desire, manipulation, and betrayal within the confines of a wealthy household. Through his masterful storytelling and deft characterizations, Kim exposes the dark underbelly of Korean society, challenging societal norms and conventions.

Central to Kim's approach was his application of Freudian principles to explore societal issues.⁷ Drawing inspiration from Freud's theories of psychoanalysis, Kim journeyed deep into the psyche of his characters, unraveling the hidden desires, fears, and traumas that lurked beneath the surface. By peeling the layers of social decorum, Kim revealed the inner workings of the human mind, shedding light on the psychological forces that shape our behavior and relationships.

Through *하녀* (*The Housemaid*) and his other works, Kim demonstrated a remarkable ability to hold a mirror to society, confronting viewers with uncomfortable truths and challenging them to face the realities of the world around them.⁸ His unflinching portrayal of social issues earned him both critical acclaim and controversy, cementing his legacy as one of Korea's most influential filmmakers.

2.1 Kim's *하녀* (*The Housemaid*): Reading Gender Dynamics and Class Struggles through the Camera

The Housemaid, a seminal work in Korean cinema, is known for its provocative themes and bold storytelling.⁹ Released in 1960, the film is a dark and gripping tale that explores the complexities of class dynamics,

⁷ Robin Chapman, "Passing Through the Pane: Genre, Art and Meta-textuality in Kim," *White Rose Student Journal*, no. 3 (2017): 49.

⁸ Chris Berry, "Scream and Scream Again: Korean Modernity as a House of Horrors in the Films of Kim Ki-young," in *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*, edited by Frances Gateward, 99–113 (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007).

⁹ Chris Chang, "The Housemaid," *Film Comment* 47, no. 1 (2011): 72. Also see, *The Housemaid* (1960) – Hanyo" uploaded 2019, https://youtu.be/J_HTZFC32s?si=gwnUbyywjFu3u2Ch

gender relations, and the human psyche. *The Housemaid* opens with the introduction of the Housemaid, played by Lee Eun-shim, as she arrives at the affluent household of a music teacher, Mr. Kim Dong-sik and his family. This scene sets the stage for the unfolding drama, establishing the Housemaid as a mysterious and enigmatic figure who will disrupt the lives of the family members.



Figure 1. A romance scene in *The Housemaid* (1960)¹, <https://images.app.goo.gl/GRTBvDb996hsPKJr7>

The Seduction of Mr. Kim: One of the most iconic scenes in the film is the seduction of Mr. Kim by the Housemaid. In this scene, the Housemaid uses her seductive charms to entice Mr. Kim, ultimately leading to an illicit affair that has far-reaching consequences for both parties. The tension and sexual chemistry between the characters are palpable, adding depth and complexity to their relationship.

The Discovery: The affair between Mr. Kim and the Housemaid intensifies, and tensions within the household reach boiling point. In a climactic scene, Mrs. Kim discovers her husband's infidelity, leading to a

confrontation that exposes the dark side of their seemingly perfect lives. This scene is important in driving the narrative forward and unraveling the façade of respectability that the family had maintained.

The Revenge: Fueled by jealousy and betrayal, Mrs. Kim seeks revenge against the Housemaid, unleashing a series of twisted and diabolical acts that culminate in tragedy. This scene is a harrowing depiction of the lengths to which individuals will go to protect their own interests and preserve their social standing.

The Final Confrontation: The film reaches its climax in a tense and dramatic showdown between Mrs. Kim and the Housemaid. As their feud escalates to a fever pitch, secrets are revealed, and the true extent of their mutual animosity is laid bare. This scene is a powerful culmination of the film's themes of power, desire, and the destructive nature of human relationships.

The film offers a segue to explore the complexities, social dynamics, and psychoanalysis of the female protagonist and antagonists, which are presented below:

2.2 Social Dynamics

The Housemaid masterfully portrays the intricate social dynamics and underlying tensions prevalent in Korean society in the 1960s.¹⁰ Through the lens of the affluent Kim family and their interactions with the housemaid, the film probes the themes of class struggle, gender inequality, and the corrosive effects of desire and jealousy.

A prominent element of Korean social dynamics depicted in the film is the stark divide between the wealthy Kim family and the impoverished housemaid, highlighted by the lavishness of the Kim

¹⁰ Eunhye Kim, "A Comparative Study on Discourse Analysis of Korean Movie 'The Housemaid' – Focused on Films in 1960 and 2010," *International Journal of Korean Humanities and Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2020): 57–79.



household with its opulent furnishings, expensive artwork, and ostentatious display of wealth, standing in contrast to the modest living quarters of the housemaid. The juxtaposition serves to underscore the vast disparities in social status and economic power that existed within Korean society, emphasizing the inherent inequalities that permeated every aspect of life.¹¹

Furthermore, the film explores the complex power dynamics at play within the Kim household, particularly between the male head of the family, Mr. Kim, and the female members of the household, including his wife and the housemaid. Mr. Kim's position of authority as the patriarch is challenged by the arrival of the housemaid, whose presence disrupts the traditional power structure and threatens to upend the carefully constructed façade of respectability that the family had maintained. The power struggle unfolds subtly through the film, manifesting in moments of tension, manipulation, and betrayal.

Symbolism and objects play a crucial role in conveying the social dynamics at play in *The Housemaid*.¹² For example, the Housemaid's uniform symbolizes her subordinate position within the household, serving as a constant reminder of her status as a servant. Similarly, objects such as the piano, a symbol of the family's wealth and social standing, are used to underscore the disparities between the Kim family and the Housemaid

¹¹ Kyung Hyun Kim, "Lethal Work Domestic Space and Gender Troubles in Happy End and The Housemaid," in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema*, edited by Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

¹² Hyo-Sik Choi, et al., "A Study on the Modernism Characteristics of Spaces in Contemporary Korean Cinema," *Korean Institute of Interior Design Journal* 22, no. 4 (2013): 65-73.



A powerful symbol in the film is the house itself, which serves as a microcosm of Korean society at large. Just as the Housemaid is relegated to the margins of the household, so too are marginalized members of society relegated to the fringes of Korean society, denied access to the privileges and opportunities available to the wealthy elite. Through these symbols and objects, *The Housemaid* offers a searing critique of the social hierarchies and inequalities that define Korean society, challenging viewers to confront the uncomfortable truths lurking beneath the surface of polite society.

2.3 Psychological Understanding of the Female Protagonist

The Housemaid is a classic Korean film that explores the psychological complexities of its characters.¹³ One of the central figures in the movie is the female protagonist, the housemaid herself. To analyze her character through a Freudian lens,¹⁴ we can explore her psyche in terms of key Freudian concepts¹⁵ such as the id, ego, superego, psychosexual stages, and defense mechanisms.

The Id, Ego, and Superego: The housemaid's actions and motivations can be understood through the interplay of these Freudian constructs. The id represents her primal desires and instincts. In the movie, the housemaid is depicted as a young woman with dreams and aspirations, but her circumstances force her into a role of servitude. Her

¹³ Ed S. Tan, "A Psychology of the Film," *Palgrave Communications* 4, 82 (2018). Also see, Jean Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997).

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, and Harry W. Chase, "The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis," in *Sigmund Freud's Lectures at Clark University, 1910, Clark University, Worcester, MA, US* (New York Modern Library, 1925). The five lectures were delivered by Freud at Clark University. The lectures were translated from the German by Harry W. Chase and revised by Freud.

¹⁵ Pamela Thurschwell, *Sigmund Freud* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).



id-driven desires for freedom, power, and validation clash with societal norms and expectations. Her motivation is evident when she seduces Mr. Kim, the head of the household, despite knowing the potential consequences of engaging in an affair with a married man who is a music teacher. This action reflects her primal instinct for freedom and validation, as she seeks to assert control over her own life and break free from the confines of her servitude. However, her pursuit of these desires directly clashes with societal expectation of fidelity and respectability, ultimately leading to a series of catastrophic consequences for both herself and the household.

The Housemaid, Myung-sook, blurts to Mr. Kim: “Don’t get angry. We’ll act if nothing has happened when your wife returns. I’m not a virgin anymore. I can’t get married to anyone else.”¹⁶

The ego acts as a mediator between the id and the superego, balancing the Housemaid’s unconscious desires with the constraints of reality. The Housemaid’s ego is depicted when she engages in a forbidden affair with the head of the household, Mr. Kim. Despite her intense desire for freedom and validation, her ego struggles to reconcile these impulses with the potential consequences of her actions, as seen in the following dialogue.

Myung-sook (Housemaid): I’ll do whatever you say. I don’t want to cause any trouble for you.

Mrs. Kim: Then do as I say.

Later, Mrs. Kim says: I won’t cook for a concubine, even if today is the last day of my life.¹⁷

¹⁶ *The Housemaid* (1960) – Quotes, IMDb, accessed on March 27, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0150980/quotes/?item=qt6311530&ref_=ext_shr_lnk

These dialogues show how the Housemaid's actions are influenced by her ego, which mediates between her desires (id) and societal norms (superego). Initially compliant to avoid trouble, she struggles with her desires when faced with the consequences of her actions, highlighting the tension between her instincts and societal expectations.

The Housemaid is torn between her passionate impulses and the societal norms that dictate her role as a subservient member of the household. This internal conflict is exemplified when she weighs the thrill of the affair against the risk of being discovered and the potential fallout for herself and others in the household.

The superego is the ethical component of her personality that provides the moral standards by which her ego operates. She internalizes societal norms, moral values, and internalized parental authority. The Housemaid's superego is likely influenced by the oppressive societal structures and the expectations placed upon her as a woman in a patriarchal society. Her internal conflict between her desires and societal expectations drives much of the film's tension, as seen in the following dialogues.

Myung-sook (Housemaid): I'm your mistress now. I deserve to be treated better than a maid.

Myung-sook adds: I can't bear the thought of you and your wife sleeping together.¹⁸

¹⁷ *The Housemaid* (1960) – Quotes, IMDb, accessed on March 27, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0150980/quotes/?item=qt6311553&ref_=ext_shr_lnk

¹⁸ *The Housemaid* (1960) – Quotes, IMDb, accessed on March 27, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0150980/quotes/?item=qt6311531&ref_=ext_shr_lnk

When she enters into a forbidden affair with Mr. Kim, her internal conflict between her desires and societal expectations is visible. Despite her passion for Mr. Kim, she struggles with guilt and shame due to the moral standards instilled by society.

Psychosexual Stages: Freud's theory of psychosexual development posits that individuals pass through distinct stages of development, including the oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital stages.¹⁹ An example of this behavior is seen in the intimate scenes between the Housemaid and Mr. Kim, where their desires for each other are clear, indicating the awakening of sexual desires and impulses characteristic of the genital stage of development.

Each stage is marked by the emergence of specific conflicts and fixations. The housemaid's character can be analyzed in terms of her unresolved conflicts and fixations related to these stages. For example, her submissive behavior and desire for validation from authority figures may stem from unresolved conflicts in the phallic stage, characterized by the Oedipus or Electra complex.²⁰

Myung-sook: Give me the piano lessons and hold me like you held Mrs. Cho.

Dong-sik Kim: You're out of your mind.

Myung-sook: I don't want to be second Mrs. Cho.

(Throws herself towards Mr. Kim).

Dong-sik Kim: Let go.²¹

¹⁹ Hassan H. Elkatawneh, "Freud's Psycho-Sexual Stages of Development," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (January 2013), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272219091_Freud's_Psycho-Sexual_Stages_of_Development

²⁰ Martin M. Winkler, "Oedipus in the Cinema," *Arethusa* 41, no. 1 (2008): 67-94.



These dialogues reflect the Oedipus or Electra complex as the Housemaid, Myung-sook, expresses her desire for affection and attention from Mr. Kim, her employer. Her request for piano lessons and comparison to Mrs. Cho indicate her wish to be favored like a daughter figure, akin to Electra's longing for her father's attention. Myung-sook's actions suggest a subconscious desire for intimacy with Mr. Kim, symbolizing the complex dynamics of familial relationships and desire for parental figures.

In several scenes, the Housemaid is depicted as willingly following Mr. Kim's commands and displaying eagerness to please him, suggesting a strong urge for validation and acceptance from a paternal figure. Additionally, her entanglement in a forbidden affair with the head of the household may reflect unresolved conflicts related to the genital stage, where sexual desires become more pronounced.

Defense Mechanisms: Freud proposed various defense mechanisms that individuals employ to protect themselves from anxiety and distress. The Housemaid's character likely utilizes defense mechanisms such as repression, denial, and displacement to cope with her internal conflicts and desires. Repression may manifest as the Housemaid's suppression of her true feelings and desires in order to conform to societal expectations and maintain her role as a subservient housemaid. Denial may be evident in her refusal to acknowledge the consequences of her actions or the power dynamics at play in her relationships. Displacement may occur as she redirects her repressed desires and frustrations onto others, leading to destructive behaviors or actions. In a scene while conversing with Mr.

²¹ *The Housemaid* (1960) – Quotes, IMDb, accessed on March 27, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0150980/quotes/?item=qt6311487&ref_=ext_shr_lnk

Kim, the Housemaid Myung-sook declares, “Die with me, make me the happiest woman of all,” which shows her repressed desire.

In the film, the main character, the Housemaid herself, deals with her feelings and struggles using different methods. One way is repression, where she hides her true feelings to fit in with what society expects of her. Even though she wants freedom and power, she acts obediently as a servant, not showing any signs of being unhappy. Another way is denial, where she refuses to accept the bad things that could happen because of her affair with Mr. Kim. She ignores the possible problems it might cause for her and the family. Lastly, there’s displacement, which is when she takes out her hidden frustrations on others like Mrs. Kim, blaming her and seeking revenge when her affair is discovered. These ways of coping help the housemaid deal with her emotions and challenges, even though they might not be healthy in the long run.

3. Satyajit Ray: Maestro of Indian Social Realism

In the realm of Indian cinema, few names command as much reverence and admiration as Satyajit Ray.²² Widely regarded as India’s greatest filmmaker, Ray’s sensitive and nuanced portrayal of social realism earned him a place of honor in the annals of cinematic history.²³ His magnum opus, *Charulata*, stands as a shining example of his artistic genius and profound insight into the human condition.²⁴

²² Satyajit Ray, *Satyajit Ray: Interviews* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

²³ Darius Cooper, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity* (New York: University Press, 2000).

²⁴ Bhaswati Bhattacharjee, “The Bird in a Gilded Cage, Her Trials and Tribulations: Perspectives on Satyajit Ray’s *Charulata*,” *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 5, no. 4 (Jul-Aug 2020):1113-1117.

Charulata unfolds against the backdrop of nineteenth-century Bengal, painting a poignant portrait of a lonely and neglected housewife who finds solace and purpose through her husband's cousin. Through the lens of *Charulata*'s journey, Ray explores themes of love, desire, and the constraints placed on women in traditional Indian society. With exquisite symbolism and rich character portrayal, Ray captures the complexities of human relationships and the subtle nuances of emotion with unparalleled depth and sensitivity.

Beyond *Charulata*, Ray's oeuvre is replete with explorations of poverty, caste discrimination, and the challenges faced by marginalized communities in traditional Indian society. Through films like *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, and *Apur Sansar*, Ray offered a searing indictment of social injustices while celebrating the resilience and dignity of the human spirit.²⁵ Ray's approach to social realism was characterized by his profound empathy for his characters, his unwavering commitment to authenticity, and truthfulness in storytelling. Whether depicting the struggles of a young boy growing up in rural Bengal or the aspirations of a young couple navigating the complexities of modern life, Ray's films resonate with a timeless relevance that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries.

3.1 Ray's *Charulata*: Loneliness, Desire, and Social Dynamics
Ray's *Charulata* (1964), based on Rabindranath Tagore's novella, *Nastanirh*,²⁶ explores themes of loneliness, desire, and the changing dynamics of relationships in nineteenth-century Bengal society. The

²⁵ Vijay Mishra, "Satyajit Ray (1921-1992)," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 5, no. 2 (May 2009): 385-389.

²⁶ Bithi Mojumder, Rubaiyan Asif, and Fatema Akter, "Charulata as an Adaptation of 'Nastanirh': Satyajit Ray's Craftsmanship in the Recreation of Tagore's Work on Celluloid," *Language in India* 20, no. 11 (2020): 5, 7, 11-17.

film begins with a panoramic view of a sprawling mansion set in the picturesque landscape of Bengal. The camera then zooms into the interior of the house where we are introduced to Bhupati, a liberal-minded intellectual, and his beautiful, young wife Charulata. Their relationship seems distant, with Bhupati engrossed in his newspaper, and Charulata feeling neglected.



Figure 2. The Lonely Wife (Madhabi Mukherjee as Charulata in *Charulata* (1964), <https://images.app.goo.gl/rar7u8pGtdNMemNt5>)

Charulata's Loneliness: Charulata is shown wandering aimlessly around the house, indicating her sense of isolation and boredom. She gazes longingly out of the window, yearning for companionship and intellectual stimulation.

Bhupati's Newspaper: Bhupati is immersed in his newspaper, absorbed in his work as the editor of a liberal English-language newspaper. His dedication to his profession leaves little time for his wife, further exacerbating Charulata's loneliness.



Amal's Arrival: Amal, Bhupati's cousin, arrives at the mansion. He is a charismatic and charming young man with a passion for literature and writing. Charulata is instantly captivated by Amal's youthful exuberance and intellectual depth.

Intellectual Discussions: Charulata and Amal engage in stimulating conversations about literature, politics, and life. Their shared interests create a strong bond between them, leading to a deep emotional connection.

Charulata's Growing Attraction: As Charulata spends more time with Amal, her feelings for him intensify. She begins to experience conflicting emotions, torn between her loyalty to her husband and her burgeoning attraction towards his cousin.

Bhupati's Obliviousness: Bhupati remains oblivious to the growing intimacy between Charulata and Amal. He is preoccupied with his newspaper and fails to notice the subtle changes in his wife's demeanor.

The Swinging Chair: One of the most iconic scenes in the film, Charulata sits in a swinging chair on the veranda, lost in thought. The gentle swaying motion of the chair reflects her inner turmoil and indecision.

Charulata's Confession: Unable to contain her feelings any longer, Charulata confesses her love for Amal. She pours her heart out to him, revealing the depth of her emotions and the emptiness she feels in her marriage.

Amal's Response: Amal is taken aback by Charulata's confession but handles the situation with sensitivity and grace. He acknowledges her feelings but makes it clear that he cannot betray his cousin Bhupati.

Bhupati's Realization: Bhupati finally realizes the depth of his wife's loneliness and unhappiness. He confronts Charulata about her feelings for Amal, leading to a moment of reckoning for both of them.



There is no explicit portrayal of intimacy and the focus is primarily on the emotional dynamics and conflicts within their relationships.

Resolution: In the final scene, Charulata and Bhupati come to terms with their emotions and the complexities of their relationship. While their bond may have been strained, they reaffirm their commitment to each other and to their marriage, finding solace in their shared understanding and mutual respect.

The film provides a pathway to discuss the complexities, social dynamics and psychoanalysis of the female protagonist and antagonists.²⁷

3.2 Social Dynamics

Setting: The characters in the film, set in nineteenth-century Bengal during British colonial rule, inhabit a society deeply influenced by British imperialism, where traditional Indian values clash with modern Western ideals. The backdrop shapes the social dynamics portrayed in the film, influencing the characters' behavior, aspirations, and relationships.

Gender Roles and Expectations: *Charulata* vividly depicts the rigid gender roles and expectations prevalent in colonial Bengal.²⁸ Charu, as a woman, is confined to the domestic sphere and expected to fulfill her duties as a wife and homemaker.²⁹ Her husband, Bhupati, embodies the

²⁷ Teresa de Lauretis, "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory," *Semantic Scholar* (1987), <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:192931092>

²⁸ Injamamul Sarwer, "Investigating the Roles and Struggles of Women in Jane Eyre and Charulata," *Jagannath University Journal of Arts* 9, no. 1 (January-June 2019): 244-247.

²⁹ Keerthana Ramesh, R. Umadevi, V. M. Anandhaeashwar, R. J. Charulatha, and V. Nithya, "Exploring the Pathway towards Depression among Working Married Women – A Qualitative Study Done in Urban Area of Kancheepuram District, Tamil Nadu," *National Journal of Community Medicine* 13, no. 2 (2022): 90-95.



patriarchal ideals of the time, focusing on his work and intellectual pursuits while neglecting Charu's emotional needs. The film explores the limitations imposed by these gender roles and the impact they have on Charu's sense of identity and fulfillment.

Marital Dynamics: The dynamics of Charu and Bhupati's marriage serve as a focal point of the film's exploration of social relationships.³⁰ Despite their apparent affluence, their marriage lacks intimacy and emotional connection. Bhupati's preoccupation with his work and Charu's sense of isolation within the confines of their home contribute to the strain in their relationship. The film portrays the complexities of marital dynamics in colonial Bengal, highlighting the challenges faced by couples in navigating societal expectations and personal fulfillment.

3.3 Psychoanalysis of the Female Protagonist, Charulata

The Id, Ego, and Superego: Applying Freud's structural model to Charu's character, it is seen that her desires for intellectual stimulation and emotional fulfillment represent the impulses of her id, the unconscious part of her psyche driven by instinctual desires. Charu's attempts to suppress these desires in conformity with societal norms reflect the negotiation of her ego, the conscious part of her psyche that mediates between the id and the superego. The superego, influenced by societal expectations and moral values, manifests in Charu's internalized sense of duty and guilt, often leading to feelings of repression and emotional conflict.

In a scene Charulata is seen sitting alone in her study, surrounded by shelves of books and papers strewn over the desk. As she gazes out of the window, lost in thought, her husband Bhupati enters the room and

³⁰ Supriya Chaudhuri, "Space, Interiority and Affect in *Charulata* and *Ghare Baire*," *Journal of the Moving Image* 6 (2007): 1-20.



notices her melancholic demeanor. The following dialogue explains their relationship. In a tone of concern, he asks, “Charu, is something troubling you? You seem lost in your thoughts.” Charulata, with a heavy sigh, responds, “No, Bhupati, it’s nothing. Just some trivial matter’s bothering me.”³¹ Despite her inner turmoil, Charulata conceals her true emotions out of a sense of duty towards her husband and their societal roles, reflecting the burden of guilt and obligation she carries within.

As in the film, Charu’s passion for literature serves as a sublimated outlet for her suppressed emotions, while her conflicted feelings towards Amal showcase the tension between her desires and societal expectations.

Repression and Sublimation: Charu’s repressed desires find expression through sublimation, a defense mechanism where socially unacceptable impulses are channeled into socially acceptable activities. Her passion for literature and writing serves as a sublimated outlet for her suppressed emotions and desires, allowing her to explore her innermost thoughts and feelings in a constructive manner. Charu’s engagement with intellectual pursuits becomes a means of seeking fulfillment and escape from the constraints of her marriage and societal expectations.

Unconscious Desires: Freudian psychoanalysis unveils Charu’s unconscious longings and desires, particularly her growing attraction to her brother-in-law, Amal. This attraction, which she may not fully acknowledge or understand consciously, manifests through subtle gestures, longing gazes, and emotional connections. Charu’s unconscious desires for emotional intimacy and intellectual stimulation

³¹ *Charulata* (1964) – Quotes, IMDb, accessed on March 26, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057935/quotes/?item=qt4672105&ref_=ext_shr_lnk

drive her interactions with Amal, highlighting the complexities of her inner world and the tensions between societal expectations and personal fulfillment. Ray portrays Charu's unconscious desire through subtle gestures and emotions. For example, Charu's lingering gazes and subtle smiles towards Amal during their intellectual discussions suggest an underlying attraction that she may not fully acknowledge consciously. Additionally, her excitement and enthusiasm in Amal's presence coupled with her moments of introspection and longing, hint at her unconscious longing for emotional intimacy and intellectual stimulation. Ray skillfully captures these dynamics through nuanced performances and evocative cinematography, allowing viewers to discern Charu's unconscious desires beneath the surface of her interactions with Amal.

4. Findings of the Comparative Study of *The Housemaid* and *Charulata*

In both films, *The Housemaid* and *Charulata*, social dynamics play an important role in shaping the narrative and character interactions. Set against the backdrop of distinct societal contexts, each film offers a glimpse into the complexities of human relationships within their respective cultures. In *The Housemaid*, the stark class disparities of 1960s Korean society are vividly portrayed, with the affluent Kim family contrasting sharply with the impoverished Housemaid, highlighting broader societal inequalities. Meanwhile, *Charulata* probes colonial Bengal where traditional gender roles confine the protagonist, Charu, despite her intellectual potential.³²

Both the films were crafted during the 1960s, a period marked by significant societal changes and global cultural shifts. Despite their different cultural backgrounds, both films reflect the prevalent social norms and values of their time. The 1960s witnessed widespread discussions and movements

³² Srijita Roy, "A Sociological Insight into the Dimensions of a Husband-Wife Relationship in the Post-Modern Era as Portrayed in the Movie *Dosar: The Companion*," in *Rethinking 21st Century: Covid-19 Special Edition*, 142, vol. II, Kultali Dr. B.R. Ambedkar College, 2020.



surrounding gender equality and class struggles globally, which inevitably influenced the portrayal of women and the poor in both Korean and Indian societies. While specific social structures may have differed between the two countries, both faced challenges related to gender inequality and class disparities. However, the exact treatment of women and the poor varied depending on the unique historical, cultural, and political contexts of each society.

Marital dynamics are intricately explored in both films, with *The Housemaid* depicting the strained marriage of the Kims due to neglect and infidelity, while *Charulata* showcases the lack of emotional intimacy between Charu and Bhupati, exacerbated by Bhupati's preoccupation with work. Freudian psychoanalysis offers insights into the inner conflicts and desires of the female protagonists. The housemaid's id-driven desires clash with societal norms, leading to a struggle between hopes and expectations, while Charu struggles with conflicts between unconscious desires for fulfillment and societal expectations.

Both protagonists employ defense mechanisms to cope with societal pressures; the housemaid's repression manifests in destructive behaviors, while Charu sublimates her emotions through literature. The character's repression is depicted through her submissive behavior and suppression of her true feelings. She is constrained by societal expectations and the rigid class structure, which force her to repress her desires for freedom and empowerment. Ultimately, the films plunge into the unconscious longings and conflicts of their protagonists, highlighting the tension between individual desires and societal norms.

A comparative analysis of Kim's *The Housemaid* and Ray's *Charulata* provides fascinating insights into the complexities of human relationships, societal dynamics, and the portrayal of female protagonists in cinema. While both films explore themes of desire, power, and social constraints, they do so within distinct cultural and historical contexts.³³ *The Housemaid* offers a searing critique of class struggle and gender inequality in 1960s Korean society,

³³ Devapriya Sanyal, "Apocalyptic Desires and Possessing the World through the Gaze," *The South Asianist Journal* 7 (July 2020), 71-81, <http://www.southasianist.ed.ac.uk/article/view/4275>

highlighting the oppressive social structures that shape the lives of its characters.³⁴ Through a Freudian lens, the housemaid's character emerges as a poignant representation of the unconscious desires and internal conflicts that drive her actions. On the other hand, *Charulata* investigates the intricacies of marital dynamics and gender roles in colonial Bengal, revealing the constraints imposed by traditional values and patriarchal structures. Through Freudian psychoanalysis, Charu's character emerges as a complex portrait of repressed desires, and yearning for personal autonomy and fulfillment within the confines of her marriage.

A comparative study of these two films underscores the universal themes of desire, power, and identity, while also highlighting the unique cultural nuances and historical contexts that shape their narratives. Through a lens of psychoanalytic theory, we gain deeper insights into the psychological motivations of the female protagonists and the societal dynamics that influence their lives.³⁵

Note on the Author

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³⁴ Soyoung Kim, "Questions of Woman's Film: The Maid, Madame Freedom, and Women," in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema Attribution*, edited by Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

³⁵ Arif Rohman, "The Changed and Unchanged Situation in the Representation of Women in Contemporary Cinema," *Humaniora* 25, no. 2 (2013): 175-183, papers.ssrn.com



on a journey to explore different mediums of artistic expression, be it poetry, painting, or cinema. As someone interested in both foreign language its culture and cinema, he aims to delve deeper into understanding how different societies reflect their culture and their imbibed values and how effectively movies capture that essence.