



***Kapurush (The Coward)* is a rather obscure Satyajit Ray feature drama, available as Disk I of *The Satyajit Ray Collection* triple feature dvd release, which appears to be an NTSC transfer, in at least two of three cases, from the Artificial Eye Region 2 PAL release of that set with matching runtimes. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd film. *The Coward* is also available as a bonus feature on The Criterion Collection's *The Big City* dvd release.**

**16 of a total 20 points = a minor classic**

**India 1965 black-and-white 69 minutes subtitled live action feature drama  
Producer: R. D. Bansal & Co.**

**Points:**

- 2 Direction: Satyajit Ray\***
- 1 Editing: Dulal Dutta**
- 1 Cinematography: Soumendu Roy**
- 2 Lighting**
- 2 Screenplay: Satyajit Ray\* from the short story "Janaiko Kapuruser Kahini"  
by Premendra Mitra**
- 1 Music: Satyajit Ray**
- 2 Art Direction: Bansi Chandragupta**
- 2 Sound: Atul Chatterjee, Nripen Paul, Sujit Sarkar**
- 2 Acting**

## 1 Creativity

16 total points

Cast: Soumitra Chatterjee" (Amitava Roy), Madhabi Mukherjee\* (Karuna Gupta), Haradhan Banerjee\* (Bimal Gupta), others

Satyajit Ray's third consecutive film featuring the enormously gifted actress Madhabi Mukherjee, *Kapurush (The Coward)* is a masterpiece of compression. First, it offers viewers a very short feature runtime of merely sixty-nine minutes. Second, only three characters of dramatic significance appear in the cast. Third, wordless scenes convey at least as much meaning as those involving dialogue. Indeed, much conversation skates around the edges of frankness, suggesting rather than stating emotional convulsion bubbling just underneath the surface. Fourth, music motifs appear in abrupt, incomplete bursts, leaving hearers to finish themes mentally from memory. Fifth, only a handful of locations are actually presented materially, though several others evidence themselves via flashbacks.

*The Coward's* foundation is a riff on the time-honored standard love triangle. Its plot bears striking similarity to *Spring in a Small Town*, a 1948 Chinese film directed by Fei Mu. Both films were shot in black-and-white. Each involves a bachelor visitor's unplanned reunion with a currently married ex-sweetheart. However, in Mu's 1948 drama the wife serves as narrator. Her perspective predominates. Ray flipped that, making the male houseguest his film's point-of-view character and employing an omniscient third-person narrator to sideline any gender bias. His female lead remained a mystery throughout, the state of her marriage dubious even at film conclusion.

Played by Soumitra Chatterjee, screenwriter Amitava Roy is traveling towards Assam when his cab breaks down inconveniently in the boondocks. Apparently repair will be delayed by the necessity of sending to a distant dealer for a replacement part. It might even require more than one day to get the vehicle fully repaired and operational again. The only hotel close by has no vacancies. What should Amitava do?

This predicament is quickly remedied by Bimal Gupta, manager of a tea plantation not too far away. Affable in a rather overbearing manner, he offers

transport and overnight accommodation to the stranded Bengali, provided the latter is willing to accept meals and lodging at his bungalow.

Amitava sees no alternative. So he allows himself to accompany the traveler on his homeward trip. Only to discover too late his rescuer happens to be married to Karuna, a former lover with whom he almost eloped.

Is this an opportunity destiny has provided to give him a second chance at love? That's the question haunting the screenwriter as he probes discreetly to find whether Bimal's wife still harbors romantic passion for him of the sort he recalls later that night after dinner.

Inability to sleep leads in a flashback to nostalgic recollection of their last encounter. One where he rejected the girl's proposal of marriage as financially unworkable when she came distraught and alone to his apartment with news of an imminent forced departure to another city. If she leaves Calcutta, Amitava may never see her again. An outcome her uncle avidly desires.

Her fellow collegian is unable to take immediate action. Or even to reach any conclusion about their future. He begs for more time, as if the crisis might resolve itself and disappear without any action on his part. Karuna recognizes that indecisiveness for what it truly is: cowardice and fear of commitment to anyone else. When she leaves his room that night, she shuts the door on their romance forever. Or so it would seem ...

As played by Madhabi Mukherjee, Karuna is not only riddling, but equally intelligent and sensuous. A combination enormously appealing to any university-trained male. She is also now a sinful temptation thrown in Amitava's path. He can't run off with her at present without violating both social convention and his own compromising conscience. To treat a benefactor's guest-friendship with betrayal in return is almost – yet not quite – intolerable. Made even more so by inability to penetrate Karuna's formal reserve and evasive answers to questions about renewing their relationship.

Yes, her husband drinks more than he should. No, that's insufficient cause to deduce their marital unhappiness.

What about the woman's stash of sleeping pills and nocturnal pacings? Surely it can't be very satisfying to live so far removed from any other female of similar social class and education. Whom can she talk with here? A husband content to read humor magazines? One who adopts British pop tunes as personal favorites

and masquerades as successful tiger-hunter? Someone who denigrates her own preferences for Bengali films and Indian classical music?

Just what, if anything, do Gupta and his wife have in common?

Amitava is no dashing Paris. He cannot bring himself to ignore censure from society on a quixotic plunge into an unknowable future. Especially not in partnership with a non-committal female wearing another man's ring. There are so many variables to consider, such pressing time constraints to boot. History just may be repeating itself. Once again, he's overthinking the situation. Failing to assess and plumb feelings of other parties involved. Selfishness remains his guiding beacon. He's at least dimly aware of that.

Still, his social status has improved since school days. He has more money, a job, even a comfortable apartment. No royal palace, but livable enough for a young couple. Hmmm.

After yet another unsatisfying conversation with the lady in question, Amitava returns to his assigned room, no wiser about interlocking relationships among the isolated trio. The past is strangling him because he's unable to let go of it.

Morning brings news the taxi won't be ready for at least one more day. He's stuck with present company.

So off go the threesome for a picnic (shades of Jean Renoir) followed by exit of the third wheel at a pastoral railroad station. During descent to the valley below, the protagonist slides into two additional flashback daydreams. The first depicts an initial meeting with Karuna where he bails her out of a sticky situation involving a missing bus ticket. This is followed shortly by replay of a later date at a restaurant. There Amitava used palm reading as an excuse for holding his beloved's hand and even facetiously proposed to her. Yet he continued to use the formal second person pronoun whenever the pair engaged in public converse.

Bimal starts singing "The Isle of Capri" to regale the others as they continue their downward journey. Was it mere coincidence Karuna then reaches over to him in such a way her wedding ring becomes blatantly evident to Amitava as he sits behind the spouses? Was she telling the writer to respect their marriage?

A final chance at coming to some kind of understanding arises at a roadside stop for lunch and radiator cooling. When the meal ends, Bimal stretches himself out on a rock, cigarette in hand, and murmurs "Boy meets girl, boy gets

girl, boy loses girl.” Then he dozes off. Really? Perhaps he’s just playing a role, making up his own movie story with unwitting assistance from two companions.

Could this be the third act? Again?

It doesn’t help that Karuna persists on wearing sunglasses, making it impossible to see her eyes directly.

In fact, all three characters have been playing hide-and-seek ever since the tourist from Calcutta arrived at Bimal’s plantation. None dares to openly affirm, deny, or declare true feelings. All are actually trapped.

Though Bimal, at least, is willing to joke about it. He has one reliable friend: whiskey. And Karuna can resort to forgetfulness-inducing sleeping pills.

For Amitava, though, there’s no escape. How can he run away from himself?

There’s an ambiguous ending you must watch the film yourself to discover. You’re not likely to be disappointed at making that effort.

Screenplay and lighting are handled with pinpoint precision and reinforced with exceptionally fine acting performances by all three leads.

Sound recording captures birdcalls, curtain rustlings, motor sputtering, and a critical external siren wail at the film’s emotional climax.

Bansi Chandragupta’s art direction splendidly recreates, with a blatant Esso reveal, interior appointments of a rural auto repair garage. It’s equally successful representing the casual, airy appointments of Bimal’s tea-plantation bungalow, with its tiger rug and wall hanging inferring an indomitable adventurer resident within. That hardly squares with either the personality or attainments of Mr. Gupta. Even if he did manage metaphorical capture and taming of Karuna.

Underpublicized and overlooked, *Kapurush* is actually one of Satyajit Ray’s most penetrating and memorable features. Don’t miss it.