

Passive to Progressive Representation of Three Female Characters in the Movies of Satyajit Ray

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Abstract: *This article explores the intricate relationship between women's status and patriarchal ideologies in Indian society, particularly in the 19th century Bengal, as depicted through the cinematic lens of Satyajit Ray. It delves into how women's identities and roles were shaped by societal norms, caste, and class, and how these norms were deeply rooted in historical institutions. The article critically examines the representation of women in three of Ray's films *Devi*, *Ghare-Baire*, and *Mahanagar* highlighting the transformation of female characters from mere reflections of male dominance to assertive individuals with distinct identities. It discusses how Ray's films transcend textbook feminism by portraying strong female characters who challenge and navigate the patriarchal setup, reflecting a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in traditional Indian society. This analysis provides a comprehensive view of women's evolving roles and the complex interplay of culture, tradition, and gender in Indian cinema.*

Keywords: Satyajit Ray, Indian Cinema, Patriarchy, Feminism, 19th Century Bengal, *Devi*, Dogmatism, *Ghare-Baire*, *Mahanagar*, Modernisation

Women's status is always determined by her relation with men, she is always a reflection of the caste and class she belongs to, and is judged according to her genius in performing the mannerisms and abiding by the social norms associated to the class. And all such norms and ideologies are inherited from historical institutions, whether it be social relations or relations among gender, all are the result of it. Patriarchy too is a result of historic institutional inheritance. It is understood variously as a "symbolic male principle" depicting the superiority of the male and an institutional framework of male domination. Patriarchal ideology is deeply embedded in the Indian Culture and was graver during the 19th century. The new born female was shackled into womanhood with her first breath in the society, she was tied into how to's and what to's before realising their justifications and her identity.

Women were expected to "fit in" to the ideal model of femininity designed by the society which was meek, submissive and an angelic image who was considered the soul of the house and thus was restricted to the same. The 19th century Bengal was no different in this case. Women had a very structured life, every pedestal was predefined and decided she had a short childhood infected by illiteracy and societal norms, wedded early and mostly became widow before understanding the marital institution. She always remained in the '*Andromohol*' a secluded part of the house, looked after the domestic chores and bore children. The condition of widows was even worse they were confined to spirituality, wore white, wasn't allowed to play with the children of her age, basically lost all tastes of her life. Only the process of respiration was spared to women by the abolition of Sati, rest the society never allowed her to sense life after her master's death. She was an all-white walking corpse. Even for the married women, independence wasn't even a far-sighted dream, she was structured in a way that she considered her life as a means to serve her male counterpart be obedient to them and submit to their wishes, rationality had no meaning for her. This male eventually became the '*Bhodrolok*' who now added a new image of superiority into their masculinity, the image which was

associated with the western influenced lifestyle and western education. They now treated women according to their understanding of this new ideology, they either accepted, rejected or negotiated with it but never felt the need to ask the lady of her opinion. Such a diverse Bengal was covered from its root to top by the aesthetic camera of the great filmmaker and the pioneer of Indian Cinema Satyajit Ray leaving no leaf untouched. Satyajit Ray is one of the greatest auteurs of 20th-century cinema, born on May 2, 1921, in Calcutta (now Kolkata) to a Bengali family. His grandfather Upendra Kishor Ray Chaudhari was one of the founding members of the Bramha Samaj and his father was renowned Bengali poet who pioneered the use of nonsense verses in any Indian language, Sukumar Ray. Ray was an only child whose father died in 1923. His grandfather was a writer and illustrator, and his father, Sukumar Ray, was a writer and illustrator of *Bengalinonsense verse*. His characters are real to the ground and portrayed in a way to give a clear image of the age. He never hesitated from depicting the real world. His strong female characters deserve appreciation and deliver strength till date. They were not confined to the walls of their room but they fearlessly expressed their emotions, their sexual desires, and conflicts. Among the many changes that Satyajit Ray introduced in the Indian cinema, arguably the most revolutionary has been the way he portrayed women on-screen. There was nothing conscious about his understanding of women and the way he presented them on-screen. One can easily relate to them, he made them the centre of the narrative and allowed his audience to understand the society they live in through them. These movies cover diverse stories where women are in different situations and react to them differently and this is where the study begins, to trace the origins of these reactions followed by an attempt to establish an analysis of the women characters and the discrimination they faced in the society as well as within the women folk according to their age, caste and class and also on the basis of their marital status in three movies of Ray the '*Renaissance Man*'.

Devi: The Journey of Unenchantment

Devi, written by Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay talks about the colossal spread of superstitious and mystic believes in the 18th -19th century Bengal and how a little girl fell prey to it. The story takes us to the great house of a revered Landlord Kalikinkor Choudhuri who also was an ardent devotee of Goddess Kali. He was very fond of his newly wedded Daughter-in-law Dayamoyee, a sixteen-year-old girl who soon became his nurse. One-night Kalikinkor dreamed of Dayamoyee seated in his temple in the place of the goddess and considers her to be the same. The movie reveals the victimisation of Dayamoyee and the blind faith of the Hindu patriarchal ritualistic society over such a delusion. Satyajit Ray and Rabindranath Tagore both were members of the Brahmo samaj, 'founded by Raja Rammohan Roy, an eminent intellectual of the 19th century, (who) rejected idolatry and caste They were both eager to express antipathy blended with pity for the caste system and its inherited prejudice. *Devi* is set in a society when social liberalism and other ideas that had driven the European Enlightenment in its time were beginning to gain a pinch of identity within the community. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, legislated in the teeth of fierce Hindu upper-caste resistance in 1856, had been an important step forward in social reform, though it had perhaps managed to popularize public opinion even more than the *Sati* Act of 1829. At the time the essence of change almost exclusively across the urban landscape, while rural Bengal strictly remained out sight to change Thus, while Umapasrad (Soumitra Chatterjee), as a graduate student in Calcutta, has imbibed a measure of the modern spirit, his father Kalikinkar (Chhabi Biswas), the classically-educated *zamindar* of a large estate nestled deep in the agrarian countryside, never felt the need to develop or accept the changing times. He is an ardent devotee of the goddess Kali, too. He is extremely fond of Dayamoyee, who is the perfect daughter-in-law. one night he dreams of being visited by the deity – who seems to indicate to him that Dayamoyee (Sharmila Tagore), Umapasrad's young wife, is an incarnation of the goddess – he quickly persuades himself and everyone around him that Dayamoyee is indeed the goddess herself. From here on, the narrative moves inexorably towards catastrophe, and this is presaged pretty much at the moment of the epiphany itself. As Kalikinkar, in manic fervour, places himself at her feet, Dayamoyee shrinks from him in silent revolt, her fingernails crushed into a wall she desperately presses against, her toes crumbled hoping to get away ,the young woman's world – sunny and blissful till a moment ago – falls in a deep dark valley. *Devi* portrays the birth of the quintessential symbol to the mask, and from the mask to the temple, where she becomes a living Goddess, disappearing in the muddy waters of the sacred river and connects it with the passage of Doya from a young innocent girl to a living goddess, adorned and worshipped by a male crowd. The patriarch system of exploitation, represented by her father-in-law, makes her to wear the social mask of 'MA', becoming a living extension of the mask. On one hand when Doyamoyee was considered as the reincarnation of Devi Kali and was installed in place of her to fulfil the wishes of people and cure their illness and disease, her sister-in-law remained behind the curtains secluded from the outer world. There also exists an internal conflict between these women born out of jealousy due to the great attention which uplifted Doya from the rest. Her

fate too was no better than Doya due to her feudal father-in-law whose actions can be equalled with a dictator she loses her only son. There are perhaps two cultural misconceptions among non-Indians critics that hinder appreciation of the film. First being the idea of worship in both the communities, where in the west male god is worshipped, where as in India feminine God is worshipped rather the feminine aspects are the base of religious thinking. Thus, she is *Devi*- The Divine Mother. *Devi* is was a giver, victim of greed which eventually ate the emotions inside the installed carcass. The movies strike the clash between the new and old ideologies. The father and son duo in the Ray's movie depict the same. . The western education ignited disbelief among the youth against the religious beliefs. They questioned the orthodox and its validity but their base wasn't strong enough to sustain such a great revolution. Their new gained knowledge failed to prove its potential on ground. This led to the inharmonious clash. To the modern audience, Kalikinkor's belief can be labelled as sheer 'superstition'. Calling him superstitious would be the easiest way to describe the situation but this would be one dimensional because the teaching of Hinduism tells it to accept it. His faith is based in his Sanatan (traditional) way of acquiring knowledge. His learning process guaranteed him that religion is unquestionable. All his life he keeps this in his heart. His profound devotion assures him the presence of almighty god. He also believes that the goddess may come down to earth in a human figure. Sometime she reveals her presence to her admirer, deeply rooted in the Hindu traditions. The goddess and Doya may share the same gender but no other context is similar between them. The goddess is sovereign of the cosmos, she acts fearlessly and autonomously has full freedom as seen in the mythological tales whereas Doya's experience is very limited in the mansion she is tied by submissiveness and humility even when asked by her husband to come along with him to Calcutta she seems hesitant and obligated by her father-in-law even in her so-called incarnated form is subjugated to a single room from the day break to its end. Though the worship of the goddess uplifts the pervasive imagery of females, the men clearly govern the religious and social realms. Stern priests command the prayers. The conclusion suggests firstly that nothing can replace, the ultimate power, the human feminine if collapse with the divine feminine I huge devastation is doomed for the human, the divine remains unaltered in glory. This gulf between the embodied and the metaphorical is strongly supported by the patriarchal society. As the human tries to transforms into divine, she loses her womaness. This new identity is endorsed to the woman and her real identity as a woman is blurred and this artificial identity and its consequences suffocates her till the extent that only death could liberate her.

Ghare-Baire: Trespassing The Boundaries

Ghare Baire (1984), narrates the story of a Bengali household which got crumbled between the liberals and the conservatives in the Swadeshi movement of Bengal. Based on Tagore's original novel (1919) with the same name, the story shows the journey of three individuals and how their life took a turn due the movement. It establishes a relationship between the nationalist movement and Indian women. Ray believes that Tagore's dedication, perfection and achievements were always his driving force and it is

because of the poet laureate that he won his Oscar. The movement gave Indians the chant of 'Vande Matram' which immensely impacted the political discourses and persuaded people to the movement. At its backdrop it weaves a narration through the dairies of three people, from a Bengali household. Bimala is at its centre who is married to Nikhilesh, a wealthy liberal zamindar, he can be categorised as a typical 'Bengali Bhodrolok' but is not blind for the western ideals. The final character of the movie is Sandip, a fierce regional swadeshi leader and a friend of Nikhilesh who arrives at their house to spread the movement further. Bimala is formerly shown as an ideal housewife who has never set a foot outside the andormahal after marriage. Nikhil, understands the nuances of the Swadeshi movement he himself tried to propagate constructive swadeshi, He was the one who persuaded his wife to come out of the cage of seclusion and be a free agent of herself. As the purdah system saw a downfall people started talking about the liberation of women but this liberation too had its own facets. They were first was equality between the women community. This contrast was again highly visible in Ray's creation through the character of Bimala and her sister-in-law. Bimala's sister-in-law exemplifies the image of early widowed women who are the victims of child marriage. Though saved by life due to the abolition of sati she is completely an insignificant member of the family who seems to hold no value in the house. She is always in white, her hair-cut, no jewellery has the right to embellish her all were broken and discarded with her husband's last breath. A wife according to her is meant to serve her husband and look after his wellbeing, she should not try to get out of this sphere in the unknown world where she cannot fit in.

A wife according to her is meant to serve her husband and look after his wellbeing, she should not try to get out of this sphere in the unknown world where she cannot fit in. Since Nikhilesh was 'modern' and had the western education, he opposed the observance of purdah and thus got her wife out of it, he also realised her need to be educated. After the spreading of the Bhodrolok identity among the specific class, education of women was the topic of importance. Western ideals and English education gave birth to a new class of women namely the 'Bhodromohila'. However, both the types were mostly based in their homes, they preferred "zenana education" provided by the English Memsahibs at the Andormahal. A scene present Mrs. Gilby playing an Allison (a piano made at London) and teaching Bimala English Songs The following scene portrays Bimala before the mirror modelling her new west style blouses. This suggested the influence of Miss Gilby on her.

As Ray tells his biographer Andrew Robinson, many of Tagore's essays on the militant movement found their way to the mouth of Nikhilesh in the novel, published in 1915. It is highly argued that through Nikhilesh, Tagore wanted to establish his idea of constructive nationalism and how gradually this movement derailed due to leaders like Sandip who terrorist the pious spirit of the protest. Their characters can be inspected through binaries Nikhilesh as stability whereas Sandip as instability. The character of Sandip is a fierce aggressive leader of the swadeshi movement. He is charismatic and knows well the use of words to manipulate people and their thoughts. While projecting Nikhilesh

Tagore had actually suggested an alternative conception of masculinity different from the mainstream aggressive one (as projected through Sandip). Further, here it must also be noted that the contrast characterization of Nikhilesh and Sandip however shares a common aspect, if studied carefully. Both tried to construct Bimala thereby ignoring her autonomous subjectivity. It also seems that both forms of nationalism as projected through these characters tried to treat Bimala as their extended colony where each in a way created their own sphere of influence and expected Bimala to act in accordance to their wishes. Bimala is the most complex created by Tagore. She is a very minute portrayal of womanhood by Tagore. Unlike the other woman characters in Indian Literature, she has two facets in her character. On one side, she is a domesticated housewife who is happy to serve her husband and on the other she is eager to step out these boundaries and speak out for her people. that during the initial phase of the novel Bimala was a meek, dutiful and devoted housewife who worshipped her husband, took care of his needs and remained in the inner courtyard of the house, such was considered to be an ideal woman at the time However not being a flat character, she changes in the due course. Sandip's impact seemed to hypnotize Bimala till the extent that she imagined him to be the hero of the movement and herself as the epitome of womanhood in Bengal. His magnetic speech caused tremors in her tranquil heart and she replaced her identity from a well sheltered aristocratic wife from a conservative family to the inspired champion of the swadeshi in the wide world outside. The call of Swadeshi, like a mysterious call from a faraway horizon, makes her restless. Bimala neither realises nor deciphers the meaning of that call, but feels a kind of disturbance inside her: Sandip calls her 'mokkhi' or the queen bee who would handle the whole consequence from the domestics. She will be the centre of his revolution and he wants to be near to her while he works. . Sandip on the other hand uses Bimala as an article to satisfy his ego against Nikhilesh who talked highly of his wife and also to satisfy his monetary requirements to fulfil his desires more than to spend them for the movement. But at that moment when Sandip glorifies her image and exaggerates her potentials, she loses herself. When she realises her mistake and recognises the real face of Sandip of which her husband had alarmed her much earlier and interprets the deeper aspects of this toxic swadeshi, she still describes the time as magical. She calls Sandip a snake-charmer and a demon who under the camouflage of Nation and nationalism tried to seize her real true self out of her through his charms. Through Bimala and her minute habits and the transition from a childlike limited fantastical mindset to that of a matured lady, Ray drew a portrait of a 'new woman' a Bhodromohila, who is more educated, sophisticated and holding on to the Victorian ideals unlike common women who were more "course, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome" and devoid of any superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous and subjected to brutal physical and moral oppression by men. Though after her disillusionment Bimala returns to her husband realising her wrong decision and the complexity she faced falling prey to this dichotomy. She returns back to her husband with her real identity and a bosom full of love and not devotion and as his balanced and wise wife, a judicious Bhodromohila and not a devotee.

Mahanagar: The Transformation

Mahanagar based on a short story by Narendranath Mitra, director Satyajit Ray depicts the relationship between an urban lower middle-class husband and a wife living in 1960s Calcutta and their conflicting anxieties of modern and traditional values of living in an emerging and developing postcolonial metropolis almost twenty years after Independence, it talks of a middle class Bengali joint family residing in post-colonial Kolkata who is struggling to establish itself amidst the pouring population and the increasing needs. It reveals the social well as the individual crisis Aarti a housewife faces when she steps out to work. The story starts by introducing Subroto, a bank accountant who lives in the slums around Kalighat with his wife, ageing parents, a sister and a son. His salary isn't enough to fulfil the needs of his family, the crisis is introduced very symbolically his old father who was earlier a tutor fails his spectacles due to which he is unable to solve the crossword which comes up in the newspaper. The glasses here can be suggestive of his age-old perspectives and ideologies which are now lost or broken due to which he is unable to solve the crossword of the modern world. His mother is a typical orthodox Bengali wife for whom her husband is no less than lord and her life in front of him is nothing. His sister is seen very interesting in studies, Subroto asks his sister the use of her studies since at the end she has to take care of the household. . Since the family was going through such a crisis, Aarti playfully asks her husband if he wants her to work on which his husband replies,

“A women's place is at home”

He adds that she is so attractive that if she goes to work it will turn the employees less efficient, since their attention will rest on her beauty also, he tells her that he is a very conservative husband just like his father but gradually as the financial pressure builds, Aarti poured with guilt of not being able to support her husband finally decides to take up a job on which her husband agreed, they search a job in the paper and finally chose one, which needed a salesgirl. Her husband types a letter for her and asked her to sign. This act of signing in the application frightens her, she hesitates to sign as she never had such an importance or such feeling of ownership over anything. . It is her act of signing which reveals her name to the audience and also metaphorically starts her journey of owning this new identity. As she exposes herself to the world of sales and salaries, the tender gaze of her proud husband slowly changes tenor. She gains confidence and begins to assert her knowledge of the city's life beyond the four walls of her household. Aarti neither reacted defiant or violent when she decides to move out of her sheltered existence, rather seemed disturbed when understood the fact that her husband is now trying to withdraw his support from her. Since he now realises the changes in her lifestyle, attitude, dress and even the regard she gets from other, to be precise she was modernising. The incident and Subroto's joblessness increase Aarti's respect in the home, she is now the sole breadwinner of the family, this new identity loaded her with responsibility and also with the tired jealous and suspicious gaze of her husband. Alongside a bunch of female characters Mahanagar also has a variety of male counterparts. We have a male from each segment of ideology, the orthodox conservative Father-in-law, the

supportive yet resentful conservative at heart husband and a modern boss. Aarti seems to share a cordial relation with each of them, but at last each of them realises her real value and place. Aarti's father-in-law is shown as a highly conservative teacher of his age. An aged and mentally anguished retired school teacher, who laments at the cursed luck of meagerly-salaried teachers in this country. When with her first salary Aarti buy's him a pair of specs and tries to gift him a sum of money he clearly states that he can't be a part of their celebration. He says,

“I am too old to change my views”

The old man later realised his mistake and surrendered to the modernisation and he sensed that his ideas are now wrecked as even his expectations from his own students failed to meet his needs. He realised that the world has changed and so he needs to change his glasses too.

Mr. Mukherjee, Aarti's boss at first seems to be a gentle liberal man with a very professional and economic mindset but soon it is realised that within him sits a biased man who distinguishes people based on their religion. He is highly discriminating towards Edith, an Anglo-Indian Girl, he accepts himself that it was just his necessity that made him take her into the job. Subroto Majumdar, husband of Aarti too faces a self-identification through her journey. Subrata's character has been beautifully portrayed as well. Mahanagar shed light on the dual character of Aarti, a perfect housewife at the beginning but also capable to step out and successfully support her family financially. This dual gender role taken up by Aarti proves her to the 'Nabina' the new woman. fiercely independent, strong, confident and ethically upright young woman, who knows how to stand up against injustice by the end of the story. The film is completely set in Kolkata and Ray through his lens portrays the daily rituals and habits of a 'moddhobitto', a section of upper caste Bengali middle-class family, for whom honour in the society is a crown which is very dear to their heart. Arati faces this patriarchal barrier, however she has managed to succeed at her work and gradually receives extensive recognition from her boss, Himangsu Mukherjee about her abilities, through the movie Arati's active involvement in work and close association with her Anglo-Indian colleague Edith is highly suggestive. Ray through Edith channelized Aarti's way towards modernisation. With Edith this transition seemed smooth and not a drastic one. At this point we can see that Ray's Mahanagar presents a more optimistic view of the individual's ability to harness and channelised social change. The truth that Ray chooses the character of a woman to foreground this idealistic vision includes an unconventional edge to the issue encompassing sex within the movies of the social and verifiable setting but this modern move in her life and fashion leads to a hint of doubt in her husband's and father-in-law's intellect and so they begin to address questions. Their only concern being that this modern change in a women's life may deprecate their familial roots and ultimately the historical hegemony of male dominance. . Ray places a struggle in Aarti, representative of a woman trying to balance her diverse identities within and outside the household and is essentially lonely in the task. Similar to Devi, Ray puts the generation conflict conscious throughout the conflict. We also experience conflict between binaries

such as those between modernity and the western ideals and conservativeness and its traditionalism. This long sequence in the movie in which Aarti is first taught by Edith to apply lipstick in the office washroom is a sign of positive physical transformation. From then onwards in the movie the lipstick becomes the signifier of freedom and independence. Also, she tries to pull up and liberate every female character in the movie in their own limited spaces. She refuses her mother-in-law when she asks if she needs to call-off the maid's service, she asks her sister-in-law to continue her studies no matter what and she'll look after the finances and also Edith at the end from her boss's oppression. She argues with her boss about the injustice of Edith. So here, Aarti resigns in protest, this proves that Aarti is completely turns into be the modern-day woman image, because she has guts to combat for the injustice and questions about male domination in public sphere. Finally, the film ends with emotional note, where Aarti is crying after coming out from her workplace and there her husband Subroto is standing and she tells him that he has to apprehend her precise in all the time. At last, Subroto recognize his wife Aarti's daring selection and they return to their home with new hope of existence of face the further economic pressure. In Mahanagar, Ray suggests that if women's modernisation was once fueled by means of economic imperatives rather than with the aid of a greater deep-seated rejection of patriarchal methods of thinking, how this movement could preserve itself where there was neither aid for women at home, nor was there plenty hope for overall economic betterment overtime. The husband firmly agrees to his modern wife and they realise they constitute an indivisible whole, and together they would fight and survive.

Indian cinema always tried to objectify the female character either to support the male protagonist or to cater audience, they make them decorative pieces for viewers even today. Thus, at the time where Indian women were domestic entities portraying them with such ease and viewing them equally with men needed creative courage and also impeccable knowledge of Art. Satyajit Ray was a man who depicted that, women had the same needs and desires as men had, through his simple subtle films which provoked thought. His movies being open ended with an element of ambiguity brought the audience closer to the plot and made them a participant of the narrative. Even today when every male character is the 'hero' who comes with a must charm and has to be a macho and the female is someone to be acquired and lured by him with his qualities and is judged by her physical appearance and beauty. The balanced approach and focus on the emotion which needs to be instilled in the audience is nowhere. Cinema has today turned out to be a one-way conversation, where audience are mere viewers. Ray's movies are far from the textbook feminism but determinately feminist. All the movies analysed in the paper are underpinned by the idea that true feminism uphold the rights of the women but not at the expense of the men.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the article affirms that Satyajit Ray's cinematic portrayal of women in 19th century Bengal offers a profound insight into the complexities of gender dynamics

within Indian society. Through his films *Devi*, *Ghare-Baire*, and *Mahanagar*, Ray masterfully depicts the journey of women from being subjugated and confined figures to empowered individuals challenging societal norms. His work transcends traditional feminist narratives, presenting a balanced view that recognizes the struggles and strengths of women without vilifying the male counterparts. Ray's films are a testament to the evolving nature of Indian cinema, where women's roles are not merely decorative or subservient but are pivotal in driving the narrative and provoking thoughtful engagement with the audience. His nuanced portrayal of female characters and their transformation reflects a deep understanding of the societal changes and the burgeoning feminist movement in India, making his films relevant and influential in the contemporary discourse on gender equality.

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