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Spirit of Bengali Renaissance in Satyajit Ray's Films

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Abstract:

Bengal Renaissance is an awakening in 18th and 19th century Bengal which influenced each and every aspect of Bengali life including cultural, social, religious and spiritual arenas. Eventhough it ended with the death of the great seer Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, an ardent admirer of Tagore highlighted the elements of Bengal Renaissance through some of his films. Therefore, the echo of Bengal Renaissance is reflected even after Tagore's death. The Bengal Renaissance has brought with it the spirit of nationalism, emancipation of women, rational thinking and abolition of injustices and superstitions. It isalso reflected in the wide variety of Bengali literature. This paper tries to examine how Satyajit Ray has captured and portrayed the elements of Bengal Renaissance in his films.

Keywords: Bengal Renaissance, Nationalism, Emancipation of Women, Bengali Literature

Introduction

The culture of a particular region is reflected in the films produced from that region. Culture is an all-encompassing term which includes music, literature, dance, architecture, cuisine, festivals etc. Sociologists and anthropologists commonly define culture as the social product of a human group or society which includes values, languages, knowledge and material objects. In India, there are multitudes of culture and still we call it Indian culture. The awakening of culture happens in every culture and it is simply the rebirth or revival of the existing culture. This awakening called Renaissance happened in 15th century Europe. A Renaissance occurred in Bengal culture in the 18th and 19th century and it is called Bengal Renaissance. After the Bengal Renaissance, the Bengalis, from intellectuals to common man woke up from a deep slumber. During this period, literature, music, painting and all art forms flourished and it touched its watermark with the creativity of Rabindranath Tagore.

Film is an integral part of culture studies. The impact of regional culture is seen in every Indian film. The culture of North India is depicted in most of the mainstream Bollywood movies. Likewise, the vivid and rich culture of Bengal is well captured by the great director Satyajit Ray.

Bengal Renaissance and the Reasons for Its Flowering

The term Renaissance means rebirth or revival. The Bengal Renaissance indicates the awakening of Bengal in social, cultural, religious and spiritual dimensions during the 19th century. It also refers to a social-religious reform movement during the 19th and early 20th century in West Bengal in an undivided India during the Colonial rule. The era can be said to have started with Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1775-1833) and ended with Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). The cultural and intellectual awakening of Bengal has been compared with the European Renaissance. The seeds of Bengal Renaissance were sown during the advent of British in Calcutta. In 1765, the English East India Company took control of Bengal from the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam. Thus, Bengal became the first province to be under the direct control of British. The ideas and culture of the West influenced Bengal and it soon became a rich culture that flourished and spread to the entire nation. When British started administration in Bengal, transportation, communication, education and technology advanced. In 1836, The National Library of India was established in Calcutta and this helped to trigger English education in Bengal.

According to historian Romesh Chunder Dutt, “The conquest of Bengal by the English was not only a political revolution, but ushered in a greater revolution in thoughts and ideas, in religion and society... From the stories of gods and goddesses, kings and queens, princes and princesses, we have learnt to descend to the humble walks of life, to sympathise with the common citizen or even common peasant... Every revolution is attended with vigour, and the present one is no exception to the rule. Nowhere in the annals of Bengali literature are so many and so bright names found crowded together in the limited space of one century as those of Ram Mohan Roy, Akshay Kumar Datta, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Hem Chandra Banerjee, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Dina Bandhu Mitra. Within the three quarters of the present century, prose, blank verse, historical fiction and drama have been introduced for the first time in the Bengali literature...”

When British came to Bengal during the 18th century, India was tormented with social evils such as Sati, Polygamy and Child marriage. British administration did not take initiatives to wipe away the age-old customs of Hinduism, instead it took a non-interference stand. The first major exponent of Bengal Renaissance who took initiative to fight against these social evils was Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833), followed by Iswar Chandra VidyaSagar. Raja Rammohan Roy strongly objected to the idea of education through the medium of regional languages and advocated the need for English education. The year 1817 became a landmark in the history of Bengal Renaissance when Dwarkanath Tagore, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, and other members of Bengal intelligentsia established Hindu College in Calcutta, the first institution of Western education in Asia. Thus, the people of Bengal got a gist of Western philosophy, English Literature and the scientific advancements.

The establishment of BrahmoSamaj in August 20, 1828 was a landmark since it propagated monotheism and universal religion. The ideas of BrahmoSamaj played an important role in moulding the Renaissance ideas of Bengal. BrahmoSamaj took initiative to abolish dowry system, Sati, encourage education and liberation to women. Brahmoism played an important role in the literary works of Sarat Chandra Chadopadhyay. The BrahmoSamaj was dedicated to the "worship and adoration of the Eternal, the Unsearchable, the Immutable Being, who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe". The Samaj was open to all without the distinction of colour, creed, caste, nation, or religion.

The impact of education and rational thinking is well expressed in the Bengali Literature of this age. After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, Bengali literature reached its zenith. The impact of Bengal Renaissance is seen in the works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Sarat Chandra Chadopadhyay, Michael MadhusudanDutt and ToruDutt. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 and the Indigo Revolt of 1859-60 had a tremendous impact on Bengali literature. Bankim Chandra's *Anandmath*(1882) and Dinabandhumitra's *Nil Darpan* were produced after these revolts. The national song of India, *Vandemataram* is taken from Bankim Chandra's *Anandmath*. The aura of these writers dominated until the emergence of Rabindranath Tagore who got Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for *Gitanjali*. The Tagore family played a multifaceted role in the development of Bengal. The intellectuals from this family contributed to education, literature, religio-spiritual reforms and socio-cultural reform movement.

The fourth estate of Bengal played a crucial role in the awakening of Bengal. It spread the ideas of liberalism and nationalism. During the time of Bengal Renaissance, the press was critical about the policies implemented by British Government and raised voice against the bourgeoisie reforms. In 1780, the first newspaper of India Hickey's Bengal Gazette was published in Calcutta. The Bengali journalism begins with *SamacharDarpan*, the first newspaper in Bengali language published by Serampore Mission Press in 1818. In 1839, *SambadPrabhakar* became the first Bengali daily newspaper, patronized by Ishwar Chandra Gupta. The early Bengali newspapers such as *SomPrakash*, *GrambarthaPrakashika* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* stood for the cause of oppressed peasants and indigo workers. The Bengali press propagated the ideas against injustice and racial prejudices. It boosted the winds of Bengal Renaissance by pollinating the ideas even to the remote villages of Bengal. The ideas of great leaders like Raja Rammohan Roy and Iswar Chandra VidyaSagar received wide acceptance through the journals and newspapers. It also helped in bonding the people against British Empire and to trigger patriotism and nationalism

The scientific advancements in Europe influenced the notable Bengali scientists like Jagadish Chandra Bose, SatyendraNath Bose, MeghnadSaha and UpendranathBrahmachari. They made path breaking research works in science and technology during the Bengal Renaissance. The after effects of Bengal Renaissance are

- Spread of English education and modern ideas.

- Rational thinking
- Liberation from religious customs and superstitions
- Spread of Nationalism
- Growth of Bengali Literature

Satyajit Ray: The Master Craftsman

Satyajit Ray (1921 – 1992) is a genius who created his own niche in the arena of world cinema, through his films like *PatherPanchali*, *Devi*, *Charulata*, *Aparajito*, *Mahanagar* etc. Ray directed 36 films including feature films, documentaries and short films in his career of 42 years. *PatherPanchali* (1955), Ray's first film, won eleven international prizes, including Best Human Documentary at the Cannes Film Festival. *PatherPanchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956), and *ApurSansar* (1959) form The Apu Trilogy. Ray was awarded India's highest award in cinema, the DadasahebPhalke Award in 1984 and the Government of India awarded him with 'Bharat Ratna' in 1992. Satyajit Ray has treated various subject matters with craftsmanship. He once remarked in an interview: "Somehow I feel that an ordinary person — the man in the street if you like — is a more challenging subject for exploration than people in the heroic mold. It is the half shades, the hardly audible notes that I want to capture and explore... In any case, I am another kind of person, one who finds muted emotions more interesting and challenging."

As Lindsay Anderson, the British filmmaker and critic once said: "I would compare Satyajit Ray to Eisenstein, Chaplin, Kurosawa, Bergman and Antonioni. He is among the greatest in world cinema." In 1978, the Berlin Film Festival committee adjudged him one of the three all-time masters of the cinema, a rare honour he shared with Chaplin and Bergman, the same year Oxford University conferred on him an honorary doctorate.

Satyajit Ray was born and brought up in Calcutta, which in 18th and 19th century was the pivotal point of the British Empire in India. The unification of Indian and the Western culture gave birth to the Bengali Renaissance and the fusion of the East and the West is woven together in Satyajit Ray's films. Rabindranath Tagore himself was the principal leading spirit of the Bengali Renaissance and Satyajit Ray was a student of Tagore's art school at Shantiniketan. Satyajit Ray got the flavours of the traditional Indian culture and some significant aspects of contemporary Western art and culture. David Ansen (Newsweek, 1981), the film critic of the Newsweek once wrote that few film artists could equal "the Renaissance man" for sheer cultural depth, which Ray possessed innately. Through his films, Ray projected the essence of Bengali Renaissance.

Portrayal of Bengali Renaissance in Satyajit Ray's Films

1. Spread of Western education and Modern ideas

The liberal ideas of the West played a crucial role in the awakening of Bengal. Modern ideas substituted the age old customs and it began with the establishment of BrahmaSamaj and the

spread of English education. The concepts and ideas from the West forced the educated youth to think in a rational manner and they started despising everything that is traditional. In this concern, the historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar puts it, "Reason and judgement took the place of faith and belief; superstition yielded to science; immobility was replaced by progress, and a zeal for reform of proved abuses over powered age-long apathy and inertia, and a complacent acquiescence in whatever was current in society." This conflict between rational and irrational ideologies is seen in literature and films of Bengal. Satyajit Ray's *Devi* and *Mahanagar*, even though set in two different centuries, discuss the clash of modern and traditional value systems.

When western education was introduced in India, the well-educated young generation embraced modern ideas whereas the old generation adhered on to the rituals and traditions. This dichotomy, especially in a joint family led to occasional clashes. This is portrayed in Satyajit Ray's *Devi*, an adaptation of Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee's short story published in 1899. The backdrop of the film is at Chandipur, Bengal in 1860. Kalinkar, a local landlord had a strange dream that his daughter-in-law, Dayamoyee is an incarnation of Kali, the Goddess of destruction. The fanatic and devout father-in-law began to worship Daya as a Goddess. Kalinkar mould his daughter-in-law to a Goddess to satisfy his imagination. Daya's husband, Umoprasad, who has been in Calcutta to pursue Western education, accuses his father for his irrational behavior. In this film, Kalinkar symbolizes the stubborn, blind faith patriarchal society and Umoprasad stands for the rational mindset. Umoprasad does not have the courage to wage a war against the deep rooted superstitions. Ray collocates rationalism and superstition to highlight the ignorance of the society.

On Satyajit Ray's *Devi*, Pauline Kael, an American film critic says, "Ray's feeling for the intoxicating beauty within the disintegrating way of life of the 19th century landowning class makes this one of the rare, honest films about decadence." Umoprasad, an ardent follower of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar supports his friend who decides to marry a widow. But when a situation came to raise voice against a patriarch, he miserably fails. Umoprasad takes pride in his English education which he calls "new learning" as opposed to his father's "old learning" based on the studies of Tantra and Shastras.

In the scene where Umoprasad watches a play with his friend in Calcutta, Satyajit Ray uses 'play within a play' technique used by Shakespeare. The play that Umoprasad watches serves as a prophesy to his own predicament. This technique reinforces the foolishness of Kalinkar. A character in that play says, "Hit my father with a slipper on his head." By using subtle and novel techniques, Satyajit Ray contrasts the traditional and modern ideas.

The spread of education forced Indians to embrace modern outlook and western ideas. After Indian independence, the role of women underwent a paradigm shift. Gender equations changed to an extent that women were forced to take up jobs in cities. In India, it was not a rebellion but a necessity. When the final partition of Bengal took place in 1947, the economic activities were centered on Calcutta. Therefore after independence, people from East Bengal were forced to

move to Calcutta in search of jobs. This crisis on the economic level, in turn, affected political, cultural, social and on personal levels. Satyajit Ray based his script of *Mahanagar* on NarendraMitra's story 'Abataranika' (1943) with slight alterations in the story by changing its end from pessimistic to optimistic. In *Mahanagar*, unlike a stereotyped housewife, Arati decides to take up a job by seeing the financial crisis of the family and this is not so common in traditional Indian families of the 1950's. Arati, a matriculate and her husband, Subrata hunt for a job in the advertisement columns of newspapers. A man searching for a job for his wife is a new phenomenon in India and this is as a result of Western outlook. After the Indian Independence, cities began to flourish and women stepped out of domestic sphere in search of job. This phenomenon occurred due to the influence of Western ideas and Modernism.

2. Spirit of Nationalism

The search for identity of our nation is a direct byproduct of Bengal Renaissance. Most of the intellectuals who moulded the socio-cultural awakening of Bengal were patriots who stood against the dominance of British Empire and they actively took part in Indian National Movement. In 1905, Lord Curzon divided Bengal into East and West, subsequently dividing the Hindus and Muslims. Swadeshi movement was launched against the decision of the Partition of Bengal and it demanded the boycott of foreign goods. It compelled India to encourage the products made in India and to boost the identity of India. The products made in India were expensive and of poor quality whereas the products from Great Britain were of low price and good quality. The poor merchants often preferred foreign goods since it is affordable. The Bengal bhadralok divided over this issue and debated over the consequences of Swadeshi movement.

The historical backdrop of Satyajit Ray's *GhareBaire* is the repercussions of Swadeshi Movement. In the early 19th century, Bengal Renaissance has wiped away almost all the injustices in the society. The title of *GhareBaire* has two symbolic implications: the metamorphosis of a simple house wife from Ghare (home) to her involvement in Swadeshi movement (Baire). It can be a symbolic tile of the turmoil in the home and the world. The plot revolves around NikhileshChaudhary, a broad minded wealthy landlord, his wife Bimala and his friend Sandip, a revolutionary leader of Swadeshi Movement. Both Nikhil and Sandip belong to Bengal bhadralok. While Sandip is ready to do violent activities to enforce Swadeshi among people, Sandip is skeptical about it because he is concerned about the poor Muslim merchants of his village. By promoting Swadeshi, the impact is felt on the poor merchants. Sandip is least bothered about all the consequences for he gives importance to his goal, whereas Nikhil seems to be a bourgeoisie but is concerned for the oppressed.

Tagore has intricately woven the theme of patriotism into narrative of *GhareBaire*. AmartyaSen inquires the various parameters of the theme of patriotism in the thought of Tagore and also points out to its practical demonstration, through, the characterization of Bimala in *GhareBaire*. Sen writes:

Tagore's criticism of patriotism is a persistent theme in his writings. As early as 1908, he put his position succinctly in a letter replying to the criticism of Abala Bose, the wife of a great Indian scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose: 'Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live.' His novel *GhareBaire* (The Home and the World) has much to say about this theme. In the novel, Nikhil, who is keen on social reform, including women's liberation, but cool toward nationalism, gradually loses the esteem of his spirited wife, Bimala, because of his failure to be enthusiastic about anti-British agitations, which she sees as a lack of patriotic commitment. Bimala becomes fascinated with Nikhil's nationalist friend Sandip, who speaks brilliantly and acts with patriotic militancy, and she falls in love with him. Nikhil refuses to change his views: 'I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it'. Satyajit Ray has done justice to Tagore's *GhareBaire* by highlighting Tagore's idea of nation, 'Where the mind is without fear.'

3. Liberation of Women

With the Renaissance of Bengal, women were liberated from the conventional role of a subservient housewife to that of an independent woman with an identity of her own. It happened with the establishment of schools and colleges for girls and the abolition of polygamy and child marriage. When this change occurred in the social level, it was reflected in the literature of Bengal by the shifting of focus of authors and poets from conventional mind-set to a modern one. Even though Bankim Chandra's *Durgeshnandini* (1865) is set in a historical background discussing the conflict of the Pathans and the Rajputs, the three female characters, Ayesha, Tillotama and Bimala are portrayed with great importance. All the three women characters represent the liberated spirit; Ayesha, the brave; Tilottama, the beautiful and Bimala, the courageous. Bankim Chandra's *Kapalkundala* (1866), *Mrinalini* (1869) and *Debi Choudhurani* (1884) also deal with female protagonists in a patriarchal society. Rabindranath Tagore vividly explores the psychology of women through the role of Charulata in *Nastanirh* (1901); Bimala in *Ghare-Baire* (1916) and Damini and Nanibala in *Chaturanga* (1916). Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay has portrayed women as the main protagonist of the existing social order in his novels like *Baradidi* (1907), *Parineeta* (1914), *Debdas* (1917), *Choritrohin* (1917), *Srikanto* (1917-1933), *Nishkriti* (1917) and others.

Satyajit Ray has always given equal screen space to men and women. He liberated women from the stereotyped Indian 'Sati-Savitri' who were obedient to men and he boldly pictured women as emotionally stable individuals who resisted the patriarchal set up. While discussing Ray's women characters, the utmost importance goes to *Charulata*. Charulata, the protagonist is a beautiful, educated woman who loves to write poems and has a sense of aesthetics. She is a voracious reader of Bengali Literature and adores the works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. She imbibed the true essence of Bengal Renaissance and believes in her self esteem. The concepts of

Identity and Self are alien to women of pre independent India. The film starts by depicting the boredom of Charulata. She reads books and does embroidery works to get rid of her boredom. Even though her husband Bhupati loves her, he seldom has time to spend some moments with her. He is running a newspaper and actively involved in the socio-political scenario. Bhupati's young cousin, Amal arrives on a visit. A deep friendship is born between Amal and Charulata who share common interests. Charulata's intimacy with Amal develops into love. However, Amal is overcome with guilt since he has betrayed Bhupati's trust. Amal plans to pursue education from abroad and marry a girl. The relationship between Charulata and Amal is the one that people of similar interests share. *Charulata* is considered as a masterpiece because it highlighted the choice of a married woman in pre independent India. She possessed the courage to love a man other than her husband. The right to choose is still denied to Indian women. Even though Charulata lives in boredom and loneliness, she is not the victim of fate. Charulata establishes the fact that she is an individual and has an identity of her own.

Satyaji Ray's *GhareBaire* is the cinematic adaptation of Tagore's story of the same name, *The home and the World*, set against the historical background of Swadeshi Movement. The central character of *GhareBaire* is Bimala, a subservient housewife from the 'bhadraloksamaj' of colonial India. Bimala's husband, Nikhil takes initiative to teach her English and Western education. Nikhil is a progressive young man who does not want a traditional stereotyped wife but a companion to share his views. He appoints an English tutor for Bimala and he even forces her to step outside the 'andarmahal' (inner chamber) of the mansion which is exclusively meant for women. Nikhil, denies all the traditions, takes Bimala outside the inner chamber and introduces her to his friend Sandip, a revolutionary leader of Swadeshi Movement. Bimala is attracted by the charisma of Sandip and a relationship develops between them. Nikhil is a mouthpiece of the ideas of Tagore who always stood for the equality and education of women. Bimala in *GhareBaire* is an icon of liberated woman who stepped outside *Ghare* (home) and moves *Baire* (the outside world).

Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* takes place in post Independent India. The emergence of Calcutta into a metropolitan city forced women to take up jobs outside home. In Mahanagar, Arati, the protagonist decides to work because it is necessary for her to save her joint family from absolute poverty. In a patriarchal set up, men controlled the lives of women. With education, employment and financial independence, women dominated their own fate. In *Mahanagar*, it was Arati's idea to go for a job and earn money. This financial dependency has withdrawn women from taking crucial decisions. In *Mahanagar*, Arati move out, takes up a job and proves successful. Even though financial crisis in the family forced her to take up a job, she subsequently realizes that she gets not only money but also satisfaction and prestige of being an individual human being.

4. Influence of Bengali literature

Bengal Renaissance brought in a new sense of writing for the Bengali writers. By neglecting the Hindu scriptures like Shastras and Puranas, they experimented with English literary genres like

novels and short stories. The socio-cultural and spiritual awakening of 19th century Bengal is well reflected in the 19th and 20th century Bengali literature. There was a conflict between the new Western learning and the revived Sanskrit Classics. The Bengali writers combined the best of the East and the West. Many writers from Bengal adopted English as the language to explore their imagination. Michael Madhusudan Dutt has been called the 'Milton of Bengal' and Bankim Chandra adhered to the style of Romantic writers of the West. To Sisir Kumar Das, Toru Dutt 'composed her songs only in English; but the fragrance of the Sanskrit past pervades all her works & makes them a national possession.' The writers of Bengal, in spite of their passion towards English, remained true to the ancient literary heritage of India. These writers tried to portray the subtle elements in the culture of Bengal.

Rabindranath Tagore entered into the arena of literature while Bengal was flourishing with poetry and novels. Rabindranath Tagore who inherited the spiritual and literary legacy from his father Debendranath Tagore, made every Indian proud when he got Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. The beauty of Bengali village life, beauty of nature and concern for women is seen in the works of Rabindranath Tagore. Satyajit Ray, who has been in Shantiniketan inherited the ideology of Tagore and Brahmo Samaj.

The films of Satyajit Ray cannot exist without Bengali literature. The skeletal framework of his films was taken from the works of the stalwarts of Bengali literature. Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, *Apur Sansar* and *Asani Sanketare* based on the novels by Bibhutibhusan Bandhopadhyay. Ray has taken Tagore's novels for his films like *Teen Kanya*, *Charulata* and *Ghare Baire*. Satyajit Ray's *Jalsagar* and *Abhijan* is based on the works of Tarashankar Bannerjee, *Aranyer Din Ratri* and *Pratidwandi* on Sunil Ganguly's works, *Seemabaddha* and *Jana Aranya* on Mani Shankar Mukherjee's works, *Chiriyakhana* on Saradindu Bannerjee's novel, *Mahanagar* on Narendra Mitra's story, *Devi* on Prabhat Mukherjee's novel and *Parash Pathar* on a short story by Parasuram. Therefore, Ray's films cannot exist without the rich Bengali culture and literature. Ray adapted stories from Bengali literature and made scripts for his films, thereby projecting the prosperous Bengali literature to the entire world.

Conclusion

The Bengal Renaissance had a long lasting impression on the people from Bengal and it is well expressed in all the art and literary forms. Since Satyajit Ray is a Brahmo, he is one of the products of Bengal Renaissance and his films cannot neglect the gist of the renaissance. This study focuses on the aspects of Bengali Renaissance that forced people to accept the revolutionary and liberal ideas, which helped to change the face of society from traditional to modern outlook. Films of Satyajit Ray cannot exist without the rich and vivid Bengali literature, which in turn is a product of Bengal Renaissance. This research paper attempted to link the various aspects of Bengal Renaissance in the films of Satyajit Ray and the reflection of the Renaissance spirit in the films and personality of Ray.

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