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Gender Performativity and the Politics of Female Representation in Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar*: A Study

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Abstract:

During the 1960s and 1970s, Satyajit Ray's films addressed the citizens of newly-independent India who sought to comprehend, like him, what it might mean to be 'modern'. Ray's films from *Pather Panchali* (*The Song of the Road*, 1955) onwards become an extended study of an emerging nation as filtered through the experiences of men and women who seek to define themselves in relation to the larger forces that were transforming their world. This paper attempts to study Satyajit Ray's film *Mahanagar* (*The Big City*, 1963) and explore the impact of modernity and globalization on man-woman relationship and marriage as social institution in post-colonial India. Non-normative female behaviour – particularly sexual – has always constituted a liminal space, a site both of empowerment through transgression and containment through regulation. This paper locates Ray's cinematic oeuvre as central to illustrating the ongoing tension among modernity, globality, sexuality and the city in India, and reads his film *Mahanagar* as signifier of the liminal space they propose to explore.

Keywords: Modernity, Globalization, Post-Colonial India, Empowerment, Sexuality.

Western feminists, like critic Toril Moi, despise the effort made by men to speak out in women's defense: "Since this is precisely what the ventriloquism of patriarchy has always done: Men have constantly spoken for women, or in the name of women." But India needs artists like [Satyajit] Ray, since the country still exercises in the man-woman contract what French feminist Helene Cixous defines as "[t]he insistence on the proper, or a proper return, [which] leads to the masculine obsession with classification, systematization and hierarchization."

It is fit to say that Satyajit Ray rescues his women by making them live in a state of authenticity, or what the existentialists called "good faith", in spite of being denied the right to their own subjectivity and responsibility for their actions. Simone de Beauvoir's celebrated utterance – "One is not born a woman; one becomes one" – accurately applies to the Indian woman.

Still, there are those like Satyajit Ray, who give their women voices of their own in an effort to make them distinct, unique, and triumphant in this all-encompassing process of *becoming*. Ray's giving, too, is from spontaneous generosity, and not a subtle means of aggression. (Cooper 132-133)

– Darius Cooper, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity* (2000)

Satyajit Ray (1921-1992), the maverick Bengali filmmaker transformed filmmaking in post-Independence India through twenty-nine films spanning four decades, starting with the celebrated *Pather Panchali* (*The Song of the Road*, 1955). Ray has been hailed as the filmmaker who ushered modernity into Indian cinematic culture. His cinema was inspired, in fact, not by Indian filmic traditions at all but by European cinema, and his early work particularly by Jean Renoir, Akira Kurosawa, John Ford and Vittorio De Sica. A well-known Ray critic Chidananda Dasgupta has pointed out, 'Seldom has a film director's work chronicled the process of social change in a country over a long span of time as Satyajit Ray's. The subjects of his films range over the shifting social scene in India for over hundred and fifty years' (Dasgupta 3). It may be said that Ray used his realist cinema to interrogate notions of modernity that he discovered embedded in social, political and cultural patterns of the past hundred years, chronologically determined as archaic, ancient, obsolete and conservative. In doing so, Ray achieved both a re-visioning of what was assumed to be archaic and obsolete in sociological history and a re-questioning of the equation between the contemporary and the modern.

Satyajit Ray's 1963 film *Mahanagar* (*The Big City*) is a gendered representation of the tribulations of an economically and socially challenging big-city life. The film contains traces of the best of Ray's cinematic strengths, the ability to be so nuanced in its depictions of sexual/gendered tensions in the developing urban landscape of post-colonial India that it is possible to make a great deal of its symbolist values and miss its fraught realism altogether. The plot of *Mahanagar* constitutes a very interesting set of responses to the idea of the 'New Woman' in the social register of the urban educated middle class in the history of post-Independence Bengal. The narrative explores the spaces available to the urban educated Indian woman to reconfigure her own identity. The female protagonist in *Mahanagar* enters the public spaces of Kolkata's streets and workplaces to come to terms with the promise of 'independence', and the compromises she must make in order to partake its pleasure. During the 1960s and 70s, it is in Ray's films based on the city that a riveting montage of Kolkata caught between its post/colonial past and its post/modernist present is mounted. Ray's *Mahanagar* is a significant precursor to the three films that make up his 'Kolkata Trilogy': *Seemabaddha* (*Company Limited*, 1971), *Pratidwandi* (*The Adversary*, 1972) and *Jana Aranya* (*The Middleman*, 1975). Analysing the contemporary significance of Ray's Kolkata films, Prof. Supriya Chaudhuri in the article "In the City" observes:

These are driven, haunted films; films recording the spectrality of the modern city, a place of memories, desires, ghosts. This quality, a quality of being intensely present, located in the material world, and for that reason, being an aspect of its unreality, its relegation of existence to non-existence, distinguishes all the films. (Chaudhuri 254)

The context of Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* is noteworthy. Ray chooses to set the film a few years earlier than when it was made, in the mid-1950s when Indian banks were experiencing troubles, an experience that impinges acutely on the second half of the film. At this time, independent India was only seven or eight years old and its economy was still struggling with the enormous and complex ramifications of the dramatic jump from Colonialism to Independence. Many parts of India, and especially Kolkata, were still trying to cope with the horrendous social upheavals brought about by the Partition, the most obvious lingering consequence of which was the sudden inflation of population with the massive influx of refugees from what had become East Pakistan and the inadequacy of the economy to provide jobs for all who sought them. We might note, incidentally, that the Mazumdars – the family on whom the film focuses – are from Pabna in the former East Bengal, now East Pakistan, as indeed is Arati's later boss, Himangsu Mukherjee. It is interesting to refer to Prof. Supriya Chaudhuri's observations in the book *Apu and After: Re-visiting Ray's Cinema* (2006) in this context:

Looking back at the historical situation within which these stories, these films, were produced, it would be wrong to underestimate, in the interests of a shallow morality or a shallower theoretical sophistication, the desperation of their protagonists. Unemployment, hunger, madness, degradation, urban terror... Ray represents the threatened, fearful, self-betraying bourgeois [who] sees not an alternative as such... but individually unacceptable modes of surrender. [And] because he places us, and his own gaze, within the field that is criticized, he will not permit us the satisfaction due to the satirist, the privilege of exemption. (Chaudhuri 272)

Mahanagar begins with a typical moment in the family's daily routine: Subrata's return from the office. The very first shots, under the titles, establish the workaday mood of the story. They show something that is part of the fabric of Kolkata existence – the intermittent flashing and popping of an overhead connector on a moving tram, the kind in which Subrata must travel every day to get to his bank and back. Subrata's financial worries harass him the moment he steps into the house: his father wants to know what news he has of the pair of glasses he has been requesting. Privately he hopes that one of his many ex-pupils in Kolkata, who has made good as an optician, may provide the pair of glasses, since Subrata apparently will not buy them. A moment later we see Subrata's sister Bani studying while he tells her playfully that she will only end up in the kitchen like Arati. When Arati comes into the room

a moment later, radiating femininity, she is, as we expect, wrapped up in her household duties: giving medicine to her father-in-law, feeding and putting to bed their petted son, helping her mother-in-law cook or doing it herself, making tea for her husband, and a hundred other little things. In the film; Subrata's aged parents, his unmarried young and sprightly sister, his beautiful but unsophisticated wife Arati, and small son yet remain happy and united, until Subrata and Arati decide on a desperate measure to surmount their financial problems, and Arati applies for and procures a job as a saleswoman in a sewing machine company. Arati's desire to join the work-force does not arise as much out of the necessary self-denial of their condition as it does from seeing the stringent self-sacrifice shown by her husband. Her admiration and her pity for Subrata move her to determine herself to stand beside him somehow as a share of the burden. Arati's foray into the world of sales and salaries under the tender gaze of her proud husband slowly changes tenor as she gains confidence and begins to assert her new knowledge of the city's life beyond her household walls. Eminent film critic, Chidananda Dasgupta in the book *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* (1994) opines:

It is in *Mahanagar* that, for the first time, we come across a woman who awakens to the possibility of determining the course of her own life. Typically enough, the awakening touch comes from the husband, for men have traditionally liberated, just as they have enslaved, women. But traditionally too, they have retracted when they have seen the consequences of their action. (Dasgupta 78)

In *Mahanagar*, Arati's emergence as a salaried, newly-made over working woman dislocates her prior position as a traditional Indian wife, mother, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law – a disjuncture recognized as symbolically representative of the disorienting effects of the new and disruptive urbanism of 1960s India. The moment Arati gets a job and proves herself to be good in it, she becomes the central troubled object of her household's gaze. Her job is an outdoor one, selling sewing machines, and through work she discovers a whole new world. She begins to enjoy her job, the company of her sister-saleswomen, and her professional visits, which often take her into the houses of the affluent Bengali upper class. Edith, an Anglo-Indian girl with whom she strikes up a close friendship, presents her with her lipstick and a pair of stylish sunglasses. Even the boss, Mr. Mukherjee – the only other male in the office beside the clerk – takes a liking to Arati and expresses his admiration for her sales efforts. On the days she works late, he even drops her home in his car. While success characterizes her in her professional space, her hitherto warm-and-cozy domestic space at home undergoes a dramatic change. By stepping beyond her family's rigid, middle-class, Bengali threshold, Arati seems to whip up a turmoil within her own family *angaan* (courtyard). Her father-in-law refuses to speak to her. Her mother-in-law does the same, while secretly envying Arati's liberated position. Her little son sulks. The one most affected is her accountant husband, Subrata, who had forced her, in the first place, to take up the job when his bank salary fell short of the family's increasing needs. He views Arati's transformation of personality with grave anxiety and concern. Significantly, Arati is neither

defiant nor destructive in her quiet bid to redraw the boundaries of her sheltered existence, and is in fact visibly troubled when her husband begins to withdraw his support for her new enterprise; and it is only in the subtlest of changes in lifestyle, attitudes, dress and speech that both the promise and the problem of suspected female overreaching lies.

At the beginning of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler states that '[W]ithin the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be' (Butler 24). Gender is an act that brings into being what it names: in this context, a 'masculine' man or 'feminine' woman. Gender identities are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language. It is not that an identity 'does' discourse or language, but the other way around – language and discourse 'do' gender. There is no 'I' outside language since identity is a signifying practice, and culturally intelligible subjects are the effects rather than the causes of discourses that conceal their workings. It is in this sense that gender identity is performative. In the film *Mahanagar*, Arati disrupts and displaces the traditional position of the Hindu woman from within the periphery of the family. Ray's camera makes the spectator identify with the predominantly male gazes objectifying Arati on the screen. To her silently pained husband, she appears suddenly confident and radiant. Her vocabulary, to his alarm, changes its gender: She no longer discusses domestic feminine issues with him but traditionally masculine issues like 'sales', 'salaries', and 'commissions'. She mentions Mr. Mukherjee's name more often than her son's. By emphasizing these details, Ray calls attention to Subrata's troubled male gaze which observes Arati's rapid metamorphosis. Her new presence as the salaried woman makes her a secondary wife, a secondary mother and a secondary daughter-in-law. In this context one may refer to Simone de Beauvoir's observations in *The Second Sex* (1949) where she examines the difficulties faced by women who try to live autonomously and their behaviour often judged by sexual and professional double standards:

...[T]he independent woman of today is torn between her professional interests and the problems of her sexual life; it is difficult for her to strike a balance between the two; if she does, it is at the price of concessions and sacrifices which require her to be in a constant state of tension. (Beauvoir 707)

The one object that Ray features as culturally threatening Subrata's myopic gaze in *Mahanagar* is the lipstick Edith has given Arati. Ray shows Arati applying her lipstick only in her professional role as a saleswoman, since it adds to her inherent traditional Indian beauty just the right touch of Westernization so necessary in her job of selling sewing machines to the wealthy, Westernized, bourgeois Bengali housewife. It is interesting to refer to Laura Mulvey's observations in this context:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female

figure. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.

The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favourite cinematic form – illusionistic narrative film. The argument returns again to the psychoanalytic background in that woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat.

(Mulvey 351)

In the essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey uses the Lacanian interpretation of the visual objectification of woman to argue that the super-abundant iconicity of the female image threatens an eruption of extreme unpleasure – castration. Classic Hollywood cinema has developed various devices and structures to give the male hero and, by proxy, the male spectator, control over her enchanting and threatening image. Given the crucial role of the female representation in patriarchal culture, these forms control the material of any film. In Ray's *Mahanagar*, when Subrata discovers the lipstick in Arati's purse, however, he is shocked: From his strict and narrow-minded Hindu point of view, the lipstick is a threat, signifying his wife's liberation from her traditional role as the Hindu wife. She wants her husband to have faith in her new liberated self, to refocus his gaze on her so that he can accept her as a joint breadwinner of this house. She wants, in this new version of herself, to be seen as someone who participates in the outside world and has therefore to make radical adjustments, even improvements, over her traditional makeup and roles of the accepted Hindu wife, mother and daughter-in-law at home. That Arati is caught in a conflict that positions her newly sexed self in opposition to her prior pliant personality is, of course, clear. This confrontation is reflected in the film's juxtaposition of the city's public spaces (where Arati traverses confidently as a working woman) with the demarcated boundaries of her family home (in which she functions as wife, mother, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law – but not as an autonomous woman with an income, friends and desires of her own). Ray's cinematic vision appears to employ this juxtaposition to portray the nature of Arati's conflict as she grapples with the onslaught of modernity in the form of her own incipient sexuality.

The only constant source of validation for Arati is her Anglo-Indian colleague Edith, a potent force and symbol both for Arati and for the film itself. Edith is representative of the cultural and ideological contradiction that was been faced by Arati and all Indian women in Arati's position. The "Anglo" – emancipated, working, enlightened, modern woman; "Indian" – dominated, submissive, servile housewife. In the film, Edith introduces Arati to lipstick and sunglasses, subversive and forbidden articles, symbols of modern woman. This clash between modern and traditional forces is masterfully handled. The use of English

phrases that pop up in the middle of a Bengali conversation, the jazz record that is being played at the home of a rich, modern Bengali woman whom Arati visits professionally, even the use of elevators instead of stair-wells in certain scenes, all of this gives an undertone of conflicting forces. When the girls elect a representative to their boss to request paid commission, it is Edith they elect; they feel she is more capable because she is a symbol to them of what they aspire to be but what they have not become.

Meanwhile, things are in a state of great tension in Arati's home. Arati has been doing so well on the job that it becomes intolerable for the family. Subrata applies for a part-time job for himself and insists that Arati may quit her job. Actually Subrata as a male member of the prevalent patriarchal structure cannot accept a separate social location of a woman. When Arati asks her husband why he does not like her taking up a job, Subrata replies, 'If you had been less attractive, I could accept it. If a woman like you works in an office, it impairs the official activity of other male employees'. In other words, Subrata cannot rise above feudal thoughts about women. Not only middle-class men, even upper-class men like the boss of Arati look at the position of woman from a narrow angle of vision. According to the dominant belief and ideology, the company's boss Mr. Mukherjee does not hesitate to take advantage of Edith simply because he is an Anglo-Indian girl. Edith was not looked upon as a social person.

Edith's dismissal from employment has brought a turn in the screenplay. Subrata, who was against Arati's joining an employment, forbade Arati to tender resignation when the bank was closed down. Later on when he was thrown out of employment, he unnecessarily suffered from an inferiority complex. But this kind of vacillation is totally absent in Arati. She protested against Mr. Mukherjee's decision of dismissing Edith. Although she was assured of a raise while she was going through difficult times, she did not accept the injustice; rather she lodged a protest with honesty. She gave up her job without the slightest hesitation and having entrenched into the dark uncertain future stood on the city pavement. Once she had decided to give up her job because she had realised that her job had given her recognition as a social being. However Arati noticed that a woman's social position was at stake in the outside world as in the confines of the household.

A crucial issue of Feminist film criticism is the examination of the fact that 'women as women' are not represented in the cinema, that they do not have a voice, that the female point of view is not heard. Recognition of this fact unites all attempts at a Feminist critique of the cinema. Sharon Smith, in the first issue of *Women and Film* (2002) writes, 'Women, in any fully human form, have almost completely been left out of film...That is, from its very beginning they were present, but not in characterisations any self-respecting person could identify with'(Mast, Cohen and Braudy 93). Naome Gilbert in the second issue of *Women and Film* (2002) develops a notion of the female image as representing the male 'Other':

The female is portrayed with an archetypal ambivalence. The "Eternal Feminine" has been aesthetically more a principle for realizing male objectives than a person in her own right. Thus

the dynamic of myth and reality when converging upon a female aesthetic has been quintessentially objectifying... the terms of the female aesthetic have been imposed on the basis of man's fears and desires. (Mast, Cohen and Braudy 93)

Claire Johnston in the essay "Woman's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" introduces the notion of fetishism into his argument:

Within a sexist ideology and a male-dominated cinema, woman is presented as what she represents for man...The fetishistic image portrayed relates only to male narcissism. Woman represents not herself, but by a process of displacement, the male phallus. It is probably true to say that despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent. (Mast, Cohen and Braudy 94)

In the film *Mahanagar*, Satyajit Ray seemed to debunk the dominant ideological perceptions about the portrayal of women in contemporary cinema. In *Mahanagar*, Ray situates the character of Arati within the grave socio-economic turbulence created by Partition and displacement, which somehow thrust on her the compulsion to go out of the confines of her home and be bread-earner. She journeys from the shelter of the home to the more complex world of conflicts, challenges, tensions and responsibilities while coping with the politics within home too. In the last reel of Ray's *Mahanagar*, we see Arati standing not behind Subrata but with him. Sending in her resignation after a heated dispute with her boss over the unfair dismissal of her co-worker Edith, Arati descends the staircase where the now-unemployed Subrata waits. Subrata has lost his job because there was a run on his bank; Arati, on the other hand, loses hers because of her principles. The film ends on a brilliant note where Arati, the woman, makes Subrata, the man, reconcile to the fact that one needs to protest against injustice. Ray consciously locates this reconciliation in an open space outside the family home. Standing in the open space of the cityscape, Subrata acknowledges Arati's strength to protest, for the first time, and even acknowledges her status to be equal to his own. Linking her hand with his, Ray has Arati and Subrata set out together to find their future in the 'mahanagar', or big city, of Kolkata. Although their future is now gravely uncertain, hope comes from Subrata's agreement with Arati's words, 'It is such a big city, with so many different jobs. There must be something for us.' There is something positive in her declaration that she has found a new confidence in life, a confidence that to some extent must stem from her confrontation with patriarchal tradition at home and at work, while Subrata is bolstered by a greatly enhanced admiration of his wife. It is in this mood that the two of them are shown to stride purposely together and merge into the view from Himangsu's office. It is an interesting ending encompassing a submission, a victory and a reaffirmation of the strength of marriage.

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