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Voicing the Unheard in the Indian Celluloid: A Comparative Study of “Sadgati” by Satyajit Ray and “Shunyo Anwko” by Goutam Ghosh

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Abstract:

The representation of the subaltern in Indian films is a recent phenomenon, beginning particularly in the post-independence period. India has been the hot bed of a stratified and hierarchical social system since the Vedic times. This has been well configured in various cultural productions, be it literature, painting, and other forms of art. Indian cinema has not been an exception to its representation. The paper ventures into a comparative analysis of an award winning film “Sadgati” by Satyajit Ray and “Shunyo Anwko” by Goutam Ghosh. It traces the detailed nuances of a contrasting time of three decades separating the two films which hardly revamped the socio-political existence of the Dalits and Adivasis. Ray’s “Sadgati” is concerned with the plight of a single man representing the *Chamar* in contrast to the Bengali movie “Shunyo Anwko” where the clash between the corporate world and the vulnerable world of the Adivasis is highlighted. The subaltern’s dichotomy of their internal and external conflicts within the fabricated societal existence of the upper caste is discussed in this paper. It delves deep to foreground the marginal and peripheral representation and the poignant insensitivity of the privileged class to the pitiable condition of the subaltern is mediated through this cultural mode of production.

Keywords: Chamar, Sadgati, Shunyo Anwko, conflict, subaltern, marginalization, socio-political existence.

The media forms like cinema often voiced the liminal space of the marginal sect in our society. Ray was one of the pioneer humanists who subsumed in his art forms the necessity to represent the social conflicts and the internal dilemma of the characters and the age. The genre of Indian films often evolved gradually being affected by the surrounding conflicts and ambiguities and for the need of reconstructing the society by their realistic depiction. Apart from being a source of entertainment, it also reflects a society, whose norms and ill-effects like the caste based discrimination and antagonistic behaviour towards the Dalits had a pervasive effect both on the minds of the creator and the receptor. From the time of the production of Indian cinema about a century ago, this issue of marginal representation was taken up by very few directors. Ray being one of them, the experience of visualization and its subtleties as offered by him often focuses his humane side to the audience. In the modern times, there are very few directors who follow Ray’s legacy in the Indian Cinema. Goutam

Ghosh, being one of the influential film-makers of this era often canonises similar voice of the marginal through his films like Ray. This paper proposes to make a comparative study of two films *Sadgati*-by Satyajit Ray and *Shunyo Anwko*-by Goutam Ghosh dealing with similar issues though they were separated by a period of almost three decades. It is interesting to find that both the films belonging to two different periods of time converges at a point where voicing the ‘unheard’ finds a vent through these pioneers’ projection.

Satyajit Ray being influenced by the neo-realist movement made his films a mouth-piece, where the audience would indulge in the characters of ordinary people reshaping the ideals of realism aesthetics with contemporary influence. Ray not only ventures into ‘the linear development’ of characters but also tries to probe into the intricate emotions displayed by them. In the movie, *Sadgati*, he tells tale of Dukhi’s saga as a *Chamaar*. He recreates the story by Munshi Premchand into a visual form where the protagonist tries to resolve his own scuffle with the miseries. The film is a representation of Ray’s social consciousness- a burning example of the liaison between the oppressor and the oppressed highlighting the narrative style. Like the other movies Ray defers from using his poetic expertise and musical brilliance. When enquired about the need to make this film, Ray concludes that the moment he read the short story by Munshi Premchand, he realised that the story is an ideal subject for a short film and has abundant cinematic elements in it. Moreover he thought he had not focused much on the rural areas and it was important for him to concentrate there. (Chakraborty 15)

Dukhi Chamaar is a daily waged labourer who represents the farmer clan in India. Poverty forms the structural theme of the story where the tormented angst of the lower sects of a stratified society is manifested by the protagonist Dukhi. He belongs to the Harijans and is often considered as an untouchable who is deprived because of biased religious orthodoxy and the societal norms set by the upper class religious heads. Their monetary status is also governed by the so called Mahajans and they are left hunger stricken inspite of their intense labour. Dukhi has a marriageable daughter for whom the auspicious date of her marriage is needed to be fixed by upper class Brahmin. The Brahmin being religious head of the village does not refuse to visit Dukhi’s house. But instead of his minimal favour, a hefty remuneration is required to be paid to him making it troublesome for people like Dukhi and his wife. Moreover they are untouchables and they need to take care of where to make him sit and what to provide him when he arrives so that his status is not violated. These minute things itself forms a burden for them apart from their own agony. In spite of everything, Dukhi cuts grass and takes it as a gift for the Pandit where he is made to run errands which would be returned by the Pandit’s visit. Its heart rending to see Dukhi Chamaar being treated like a menial creature when he asks for fire to light his tobacco and the lady of the house rather than giving any food to him throws the burnt charcoal to injure him. This clearly demarks the caste based disparity and etches the margin between the very human’s state of existence. Ray is often termed as an ‘auteur’ whose social concern enables him to give a picturesque projection of the dilapidated condition of the poverty stricken subaltern section of the society. It is interesting to note how Ray marks the contrasting feature of each of this class by the cinematic delineation of their everyday chores, where we see the Pandit

embarking upon worshipping the deities, having a pious diet and finally teaching the students. On the contrary we see Dukhi's life to be stricken by poverty and illness, running errands the whole day in return of a simple favour. The name 'Dukhi' is also symbolic of his state of melancholy.

The movie reaches its climax when Dukhi is meant to break a huge piece of wood into small pieces. A neighbour warns him against the impossible but his stubborn attitude instigates him to fulfil the unforeseen task. The scene where Dukhi strikes the log with all his might in a futile attempt to break it shows the internal rage of the impoverished class' clash with the supremacy of the upper caste. Dukhi dies as a consequence of the intense hard work. Now the Mahajan is troubled about who would remove his body from his garden. The sight of the big piece of log and the axe stuck at it is the sign of the rigidity of the upper class norms and their conformist attitude to the society. The dead body of the untouchables can only be removed by themselves. The pandit's request to the untouchables for removing the corpse is returned by their silent eyes and muted self representing their silent protest against the murder of Dukhi. Ironically in the end, under the veil of the dark night, it is the Pandit himself who drags Dukhi's body to disposal.

The contrasting feature that is revealed through the story, expresses the grim reality through the visual rendering of the situation where the upper caste pandit who is forbidden to touch the lower caste has to remove his dead body himself. Religion for them acts like a shell which camouflages their humane self making them the acquirer of the real wealth in the society. On the other hand the ultimate destiny these Harijans are entitled to is suffering. This pitiable condition contradicts the statement that 'Our Nation is on Move' after fifty years of independence.

Commenting about the cinematic structure of the movie, the aesthetic representation of the minute nuances like picturizing the village, their poverty stricken condition along with the proficiency of the director, makes the movie a worth watch. It is also interesting to note how the director executes the film in an ordinary manner to excavate the brilliance through the acting and gives a realistic approach to the movie. There is a scene where Dukhi is seen walking through the village, tired and exhausted, carrying the bunch of grass on his head as if bearing the load of his existence as a *Chamaar*, he is seen crossing a huge statue of *Ravana* who symbolises evil in the Indian mythology which might be the embodiment of the Pandit he is about to visit. In this scene the director gives a naturalistic feeling by not focusing at the statue of *Ravana* which any other mediocre film composer would have intended to do. Moreover the scene where the slow motion of the activities that takes place in the Pandit's house is in contrast with the untiring struggle of Dukhi to break the logs into pieces heightens the contrasting lifestyle of the two castes evading the fact that both can be threaded together within humanity.

The importance of the narrative's storyline reckoned in the film is often neglected by the cinematographers. But Sunil Gangopadhyay in his essay "Sadgati", states that any art without a distinct storyline is a waste. It is the mere mediocrity of the cinematographers that makes them think that storyline is insignificant to the success of a film, but it is the structural

development and the techniques involved, that helps in the popularity of the movie among the audience. But in Ray’s story it can be wonderfully noted how the realist depiction of the cinematographic elements merges with the storyline making it difficult for the viewers to differentiate the gap between the real story and its cinematic deliverance.

Critics have often tried to find out the flaws by stating that even Ray’s socio-realist movies often contains poetic elements which is a sign of his inordinate brilliance. This is similar to Leo Tolstoy’s narratives where even hardcore realities are touched by poetic brilliance negating the notion that poeticism can only exist within poetry. Quite contrary to the other movie to be discussed here, it is important to note that this movie was an adaptation of Premchand’s novel *Sadgati* while the other movie *Shunyo Awnko* was not. Both Ray and Premchand were sympathetic to the cause of the Dalits, the most culturally marginalized in India, yet their portrayal differs in terms of tone and rhythm, which in a way transmutes the content. The chapter also considers Ray’s non recognition of the issue of untouchability in West Bengal.” (Asaduddin et al. 1-2). Whereas the other movie *Shunyo Awnko* (2013) specifies the region to be Bengal and Chattisgarh where the political unrest of the suppressed class are highlighted unlike *Sadgati* where the creator narrows down the portrayal to a particular person’s suffering as the embodiment of the agony of the class as a whole.

In an article titled *Dalit Representation in Bollywood* published in the *Mainstream Weekly* the author Harish Wankhede draws a clear picture of the Dalit’s rendering in the Hindi cinemas over the century. The picture evolves from an obscure portrayal of the minority to a very vibrantly dominant representation as in *Sadgati*. Sidelining the history of Hindi cinema, if we consider the representation of Dalits in Bengali movies, we clearly notice that the outcome wasn’t prominent enough to be studied. Over the years certain film-makers from the time of Satyajit Ray, experimented with controversial issues through their cinematic projection.

In the movie *Shunyo Awnko*, the chief character Agni is a corporate being who is entitled to clear the tribal villages for mining project. A subtle clash between the corporate and the natural world is painted through the movie’s backdrop. Agni meets Raka, who gives up her journalism to work and report for the cause of the Dalits and Maoist attacks in the interiors of Chattisgarh. Ghosh in this film produces a layered structured at various personal levels. At first the clash between the corporate and the Adivasis is countered by the projection of a distorted personal relationship between Agni and his wife. They arrive at a home stay in Manali where they come across a retired couple affected by the onslaughts of Modernism. Though they live the life of a recluse, yet are not spared by the sorrow of their lost son which makes the lady of the house schizophrenic and compels the man, played by Soumitra Chatterjee to device a hacking system that would deactivate all weapons of super powerful countries restoring peace. Through the various layers it permeates to us that mankind, inspite of the conflicts that they come across; there is an eternal quest for seeking peace both in their internal and external world. The complexity of existence is more vivid in this film which harps on the discrepancies between human relationships due to the onslaught of modernism.

Addressing the core issue of the paper we reckon the fact that, in the movie *Shunyo Awnko*, the plight of the Advasis are juxtaposed with the modern interim between the corporate and individualistic needs of existence. Ghosh crafts it brilliantly by depicting no bloodshed in the conflict between the military forces and the Adivasis where their native innocence is at stake. While in *Sadgati*, the inner resentment comes out when Dukhi *chamaar* is seen striking the dead piece of log, here the predicament of the Adivasis comes alive when they indulge in their tribal dance. The scene when they are shown stealing weapons after killing the jawans affects the audience and makes an indelible mark. The director tries to create a link between the urban and rural through the character of Raka played by Konkona Sensharma, who is a journalist trying to approach the causes of the marginal section by voicing their unheard struggle through her pen. The maker of the movie shows that there are still souls concerned about the upliftment of this sect, which are still untouched by civilization. The doctor in the movie working in these rural areas portrays the humane nature of mankind still believing in doing good which is quite contrary to the film *Sadgati* where caste system was projected as one of the sternest and most orthodox ritual which robs men folk of their humanity.

These contrasting elements exist within the two films though they nurture the same theme of subjugating the subaltern. But the gap of three decades is abjectly visible in the films where we see that the condition of the subaltern has only evolved in terms of the fact that these suppressed class has taken up protest as their weapon to battle against the age-old tradition of class discrimination. The inner agony in the film *Sadgati* gives its vent through Dukhi's silence which finds a voice through protest in the film *Shunyo Awnko*.

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