

Centenary Tribute: Satyajit Ray

Devapriya Sanyal

**Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar*:
The Weakening of The Patriarchal Family**

Jean Renoir who was to have a lot of influence on Satyajit Ray's filmmaking believed that a filmmaker need not show a lot of things in a film but to show only the right things. Ray diligently followed the same advice that Renoir offered him in 1952 in almost his entire oeuvre namely, that one didn't have to have too many elements in a film, but whatever the director chose to use must be the right elements, the expressive elements. (1) From Renoir, Ray learnt that there was nothing more important to a film than the emotional integrity of human relationship in the film. No doubt technique was important but he said that it should not become the dominant force. "In America," Renoir said, "they worry too much about

the technique, and neglect the human aspect." (2) Needless to say then that in *Mahanagar* just as in other films Ray looks at the various human relationships especially familial as well as professional as they come to be forged, re-forged and also broken. In this article I wish to explore the various relationships that play out in the course of the narrative and how Ray deals with them alongside a comparison of how Narendranath Mitra the author of the novella on which Ray had based his film deals with the question of woman.

Narendranath Mitra's short story from which Ray adapted *Mahanagar* is a dour rendering of how such a change in the role of women in the home and the world,

driven by economic necessities and how various relationships get played out by the change in stature of the erstwhile housewife Arati and now a working woman. When Ray adapted this novella onscreen in 1963 he showed these changes as inevitable, given the changing times. Ray's focus changes, for at the heart of the story which he adapts from Mitra is a woman, Arati, who *very willingly* transgresses the normative rules prescribed by society as well as the men in her family. Ray displays his characteristic brilliance in capturing on celluloid the 'essence' as well as the 'construct' of the ideas of femininity as well as that of female sexuality.

Right from the first scene in which Arati appears on celluloid, it is apparent that beneath the countenance of a naïve and demure woman—a housewife, lurks the spark of self awareness and self-determination. But for the time being deeply ingrained in Arati's consciousness is a double standard of social conventions for men and women. This makes the men in the family who are accorded the privilege of education, social eminence and financial independence – Subrata, Arati's husband, an accountant in a local bank (the bread winner of the Mazumdar family) and his father Priyogopal, a retired school teacher take Arati's, as well as Bani's and Priyogopal's wife Sarojini's servitude and secondary position in the household for granted. Arati is aware of this and sympathises with her young sister-in-law Bani when Subrata questions her desire or need to study further. However up to this point in the narrative, Arati revels in heart-felt contentment in rendering service to the various members of the household.

The film begins with a typical day in the daily routine of the family—

Subrata's return from the office. Their house is a dingy ground floor affair with just three small rooms, a small courtyard and a makeshift kitchen that sets the tone of the story of a lower middle class Bengali family in Calcutta. Subrata's worries that are largely centred on money to run his family comes alive when his father enquires about the pair of glasses which he is hoping Subrata will buy him and which he finds difficult to answer.



In the next shot we find Subrata playfully telling his sister to give up studying as the only road towards the future leads to the kitchen. All his worries are somehow set to rest when his wife Arati enters the room as Andrew Robinson puts it, "Radiating femininity, 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 Arati's actions there is no display, no ego; she is the family's anchor, not its figurehead" (3). Till then, she is quite content to be just that.

In Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* it is a woman's struggle that we encounter as she tries to muster courage to change the values by which her world lives. This is unquestionably a first not only in Bengali cinema but Indian cinema as well, where

the woman's story has never found a place before, mirroring only the patriarchal values at work even on celluloid just as in society. A regressive idea of the woman has managed to find a place in the public psyche in India due to constant usage of such images in popular Hindi cinema as well as the largely circulating Hollywood films. The identity-politics inherent in the stereotyping of women's image make it mandatory for the woman to be a perfect combination of typical traits and idiosyncrasies. Since the art and craft of representation has a definitive role to play in the perpetuation of and resistance to power relations, the cinematic image of woman as someone who is not a mere spectacle or an object of dominant cultural discourse (in the hands of an intelligent, sensitive director) will also be analysed in this film. Ray uses the film medium as a powerful tool for intervention in the way women's images were produced and circulated as well as in the way gender and sexuality came to be understood by later generations.

It is however in the comforting privacy of the bedroom, having got Subrata all to herself at night that Arati informs his sleeping form that she has made up her mind to work. The camera in a close-up, reveals a determined Arati who has taken a great psychological leap by making up her mind. Arati is not highly qualified – she is just a matriculate who has not even been to college but she displays amazing courage and determination for a woman of her status and times.

From now onwards, Arati not only occupies the centre of Ray's narrative but the audio visual medium as well. Arati's young sister-in-law Bani even though brought up in a conservative household

and hedged in by the still narrower strictures of a patriarchal society displays an open-mindedness that is rare even among the men of the family. She is obviously surprised but delighted that Arati is looking for a job and promises to keep the information a secret from her parents. We will notice such instances of female bonding in later parts of Ray's film as well. In fact Ray conjures Bani up from thin air as it were, since in the short story Arati is shown to have two younger brother-in-laws and a young sister-in-law Neela. Perhaps Ray felt that only a woman would be able to display such unprejudiced belief in another woman's abilities.

Bani with her arms wrapped around Arati's neck displays female camaraderie and which is largely dominant on screen. They are obviously on very good terms with each other. Bani even makes a suggestion that Arati become a film star (even more unheard of in the lower middleclass family to which they belong). This idea inserted by Ray and missing in the literary text makes one think of it as yet another instance of a subversive text within the main framework to help or rather encourage women to think beyond the prescribed both in those days as well as for his later audience.

The sister-in-law in fact highlights the glamour quotient by mentioning items that are tabooed—"dark glasses, lipstick" and as an afterthought "one lakh rupees per film". By drawing on such things Ray makes us sit up and think, for this is exactly what the film audience feeds on—both within the idea of Bani's "film" within the film and without. While Bani sits weaving impossible dreams for her sister-in-law Arati, the prosaic, down to earth Subrata scanning the newspaper for a suitable job for Arati suddenly alights on

one that demands “a smart and attractive young woman to serve as a salesgirl”. As he reads it out he looks at his wife, exchanging a significant smile with her. This shot like the previous shot is momentous. Subrata is secure in the belief that all right’s with the world for it does not question his abilities as a man as yet.

At an interview given at the AFI (American Film Institute), Ray told the interviewer that the slow pace of the narrative in his films developed out of necessity -- the necessity of portraying the subtle and complex relations among the human characters. (4)

Satyajit Ray's films usually deal with the human that under cuts all cultural and spatial divides and *Mahanagar* is no exception. As the well-known American film critic Pauline Kael observed, “We see (Ray’s) characters not in terms of good or bad, but we see ourselves, in terms of failures and weaknesses and strengths, and, above all, as part of a human continuum-fulfilling, altering, and finally accepting ourselves as part of this humanity, recognizing that no matter how much we want to burst the bounds of experience, there is only so much we can do. This larger vision of human experience-the simplicity of DeSica at his best, of Renoir at his greatest- is almost miraculously present in Ray’s films” (5) The woman is still not judged on the basis of her worth or talent but merely as an object of the placation of male desires and wishes both within the filmic text as well as for the male audience without. In the course of the film it is seen that Arati manages to acquire the job and very soon learns to carve out a niche for herself professionally. Before exploring Arati’s public and professional space one finds it

absolutely essential to study some shorts earlier in the film.

In the office, it is seen that the ladies (mostly middle class Bengali women with the exception of one-Edith, who is an Anglo Indian, but who is also an integral part of their group) in the firm have a space designated all to themselves and all of their creation (this is something that they do not enjoy in their families). Here again we come across further examples of female bonding – they discuss things which they come across in their professional life which they cannot share or discuss with anybody else other than their lady colleagues. Though they might seem emancipated (on a simplistic reading of the film) it is interesting to note that they are not yet ready to make their demands heard and are not yet confident in approaching the opposite gender. Instead they send their Anglo Indian colleague Edith with their demands to Mr Mukherjee, their boss and the proprietor of the firm. Ben Nyce sums up the situation succinctly when he says, “The Anglo Indian, Edith Simmons, wears high heels and a skirt, while the other saleswomen wear saris. She speaks English and asserts the demands of the salesgirls that they receive a commission for their work. She represents a westernised femininity, both friendly and assertive. Arati sees her as a role model and likes her. It’s no accident that she resigns when Edith is fired; she sees herself in Edith.” (6) The boss, Mr Mukherjee is a typecast of the typical Bengali male, with all his prejudice and prevalent notions of xenophobia and his ideas of what an ideal woman should be like. He admires Arati’s work and is willing to put up with her demands as long as they come from a woman who is a Bengali. He on the other hand, cannot

stand Edith's westernised ways and her assertiveness. When he fires Edith later in the course of the narrative he displays a sexist prejudice earlier displayed by Subrata and his father Priyogopal.

On a careful reading of the film, one notices that Ray has subtly set up a play of contrast between Arati and her father-in-law Priyogopal. In *Mahanagar* as well as 'Abataranika'(7), Priyogopal stands as a symbol of patriarchy. Ray also portrays him as a man with confused ideals. Early on in the film, as a concerned Arati asks her father-in-law to visit the neighbouring park for evening walk as a remedy for his ill health he cites the fact that there are elderly men who come and indulge in small talk which disgusts him. What Priyogopal does in fact is much worse, he goes about visiting his old students and asks them to help him either in cash or kind by citing the fact that his son does not look after him anymore. Priyogopal prefers to term it as his *gurudakshina* but what he really is doing is nothing less than begging, at the same time refusing to take his daughter-in-law's first salary when she presents it to him as an offering on his birthday. Through this possibly Ray wanted to bring to light the underlying double standards of Bengali society.

What Ray chooses to focus on is Arati and therefore he has built up his entire narrative focussing on her growth as a woman and he shows this through various instances in the film. When Arati receives her salary for the first time she can't help going into the washroom which she has designated as a private space – in a telling medium shot we see her image reflected in the mirror while a myriad of emotions flit across her face, which is caught by the neutral gaze of Ray's camera

as she holds the money she has earned beyond the learning provided by the "domestic science" which she has been taught and which has been a part of her psyche for so long.

It is for the first time since 1962 when Ray filmed *Kanchenjunga* that the concept of the "New Woman" (8) has found a place in celluloid. For the first time the woman has dared to flout the social codes laid down by a patriarchal society. She has found a new voice and a new freedom albeit hard earned. For although Subrata cooperates with his wife in getting her things that will make her look and feel "fashionable" in her work place he is also of the old school who believes in the maxim that a wife's place is at home. Subrata deep down in his psyche has been unable to accept his wife's transformation from a housewife to a working woman.



Arati continues holding the money to herself—the scene in itself is wordless but it seems as if Arati is holding a dialogue with her other self -- reflected in the mirror.(9) She has probably handled currency notes (it is she who used to manage the finances of the Mazumder family before, having handled Subroto's salary) before but they don't seem to have felt so sweet nor she so euphoric. This shot reveals a new Arati to the audience - the lighting is soft to bring about a contrast in which the human face is foregrounded and

we read a million different things through it. As Arati stands lost in her thoughts, Edith comes in and tells her about the prejudice displayed by her male colleague in giving her dirty and crumpled notes as her salary while Arati has been given nicely smelling new ones. Arati who shares a bonding with Edith at once decides to exchange them with hers. Over the months that Arati has shared a working as well as friendly relation with Edith she realises that underlying the superficial differences—she a Hindu, a Bengali and Edith a Christian, an Anglo Indian, there are many things that bring them together—their financial constraints, their shared nature of work, and more importantly, the fact that they are women. Her friendship with Edith makes her question the way her husband (in the literary text) and Mr. Mukherjee categorise Edith without a moment's reflection into the stereotype of the 'loose' Anglo-Indian woman, although neither man knows her well or even makes an attempt to do so. (10)

Edith pleased with the new notes and Arati's generosity, wants to gift Arati a lipstick but Arati who is still trapped in the stranglehold of beliefs and ideas that forbids her the use of a red lipstick and deemed as improper by the male members of her society and especially by her husband hesitates at first. (11) But very soon she overcomes that to comply with Edith's wish to apply the lipstick but only after she has secured the washroom door. She is still scared of societal values and its members even though she has actually consciously or unconsciously transgressed many of its diktats laid down for women. Edith adds that besides making Arati look good, it is also good for business. This is something Arati is to remember and put to use later.

As Arati brings home presents for everyone in the family with her salary, Subrata remarks in self pitying and melodramatic tones, "exit husband, enter wife" he is naturally concerned that his wife will replace him as far as economic power is concerned. As Ben Nyce puts it, "her gain in power seems to him to diminish his own." (12) Later he makes Arati throw out the lipstick Edith has given her.

In keeping with his agenda of foregrounding and highlighting the woman Ray uses the medium of cinema to conjure up a very powerful image in which Arati is seated in Subrata's place at brunch before heading out to work while Subrata sits in a room reading the newspaper (he is unemployed because the private bank he was working in has crashed) implying that she has actually replaced Subrata as the bread earner of the Mazumdar family. While Subrata has lost his job, Arati has not only managed to keep hers but is a success at it and has also managed to get a pay raise. (13) In the film, Subrata does not manage to acquire the part time job which makes their situation much more desperate. Through this perhaps Ray wants to highlight Arati's sacrifice much more. Her relation with her husband changes because of her job and success but even then she doesn't want to leave her job. Economically independent and self reliant that it makes her there is also the fact that she is running the family with Subrata unemployed. Ray's Arati displays great reserves of strength.

It is purely by chance that Subrata hears Arati support him in a conversation with a friend's husband at a tea shop in which Subrata is also present. The incident helps him understand that Arati is not trying to overthrow him. Ray's camera

gazing on Arati after she unwinds at home after work manages to bring out the depth of her beauty-both external as well as internal. She tells him that she is still his “ghorer bou” (14) and that he must never misunderstand her even though she had claimed earlier that he would be unable to recognise her at work.



Arati is able to be wife, mother, a dutiful daughter in law, a loving sister-in-law as well as wage earner without enormous stress or conflict within herself. She is also able to display herself as a spectacle in the public eye to utilise the appreciative male gaze in order to get a pay raise when Subrata loses his job and the mantle of providing for the family is donned on by her happily and willingly. In fact, it is now inconceivable for her to simply go back to her old domestic chores-when Subrata (feeling threatened) in a bid to assert his masculinity tries to force her to give up her job she refuses, for now she has come into her own and realises her own worth and independence.

It is for the first time in Ray's oeuvre that we notice such a bold statement being made - the woman character flaunting her sexuality. This key element added by Ray is again missing from Mitra's text. However in Ray's cinema this idea is to find a place again later in *Pratidwandi* (1971) where Sutapa,

Siddhartha the protagonist's sister goes a couple of steps further, unabashedly.

It is Arati's growing sense of confidence as a valuable worker in this money coded world of male dominance that enables her to resign when Mr Mukherjee fires Edith acting out his sexism and prejudice towards her sex.

When Arati announces to Subrata that she has resigned from work protesting Edith's unfair dismissal Subrata for the first time seems at last to have come to an understanding about his wife Arati and even manages to see her in a new light when he concedes that it would have been impossible for him to act in such a selfless manner. But it is my reading that he is still at a loss in understanding this unique bonding which Arati shares with Edith and which enables her to take such a bold step.

Arati's character in Ray's oeuvre is an interesting one—on the road metaphorically and sometimes even literally she realises that as a woman she has no place in the political economy which is grossly male dominated (occupied by people like Mr Mukherjee, her husband, her father-in-law) which leads to the space she is designated in the house along with her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. However, the space that Arati wishes to occupy in society is money coded and it is only as a working woman defiant of all norms and taboos imposed on her by society can she at least try and occupy that space within the narrative of the film *Mahanagar* and Narendranath Mitra's *Abataranika* at least.

With her external accoutrements of femininity such as the lipstick or the application of it (she is an attractive woman even without those – as we are informed through a dialogic exchange between the husband and wife and also

through Ray's images) she gains confidence and comes to recognise a new side to herself.

It is thus through the subtle shifts in expression captured by Ray's camera as well as the deep searching of the human face which seemed to suggest more than it revealed, that one came to understand and look at individuals in Ray's films in a more humane way. The individual range of feelings of a 20th century woman from a lower class middle class family spanned a complex interplay of several emotions which goes a long way in resisting any conventional reading of it, at the same influential in giving rise to a new discourse.

On the other hand, the evolution of the characters specially Arati's and to a certain extent Subroto's as well, is also conveyed in a different way. Arati emerges neither as a rebel nor as a conformist but if one reads Ray's film cautiously one will find that it was really the change coming through an inner realisation of a lower middle class Hindu Bengali housewife who otherwise may be quite well ensconced in her role to the point of being profoundly and genuinely involved in it (to be fair to Arati) and as we have seen Arati do at the beginning of *Mahanagar*.

Ray's film shows the simultaneous existence of various elements, of social-personal histories, as well as the gradual eclipse of the old ways in favour of new ones. Analogous with Arati's growing self-confidence and self-assertion, the second half of the film exhibits a more explicit sense of centrality. Yet the film manages to convey a subdued, almost nonchalant realisation of the fact that somewhere along the way Arati's world with its archaic but piquantly wondrous web of tradition is now a thing of the past. Even

the evolution of the new is underlined by the realisation of the harsher realities of city life, travelling in trams and buses, as well as a potentially hostile environment of customers and office colleagues (in the literary text Arati is indeed insulted by one of her lady customer's family members) which is surfacing even amidst the optimism which later partly accounts for her success at her job and later her resignation in favour of a colleague and friend. Her husband does emerge in the film as a liberal patriarch but with little understanding of the deeper workings of the mind and the latter's sensitivity is severely compromised by an inability to cope either with the pressures of the old or challenges afforded by the new. But only Arati, Ray's modern woman carries the strength to face the consequences of her own actions and her assertion comes through more as part of a deep but instinctive urge underlined by a deeper understanding and bond existing between the couple now.

All these factors combine to make Ray stand in peculiar relation to Indian reality. What one observes is that a studied distance from the world of politics did not come in the way of an honest appreciation of pressing social and political problems plaguing not only the Bengali society but the country at large. Ray seemed to enlighten us, specially his female audience of a diverse way of looking at reality. His characters appear as thinking and feeling, who nevertheless correspond to a particular socio-historical category. The fact that Ray uses a linear narration to show us that thus makes it easier for us to notice the subtle and not so subtle changes taking place within Arati with whom as a woman other women as well as I can easily identify.

In his film Ray shifts the balance in favour of modern democratic and egalitarian values, departing significantly from the patriarchal-paternalistic, brahminical kind of a traditional humanism so prevalent in the Indian social framework and contrasting it with the more dominating but less humane tendencies of the male figures in the film which the author Narendranath Mitra fails to do.

The choice that Arati makes very early on in the film as well as in the literary text takes her family out of one temporal and social register to another or atleast there is an attempt at that. It is not a private choice but a history of choices that leads down a certain path—that of emancipation both for herself and the women who will follow in her wake both cinematically and in society. Cinematically speaking, it is from *Mahanagar* that we see Ray's representation of women taking a certain trajectory.

The filmmaker and the author:

As in other points, Ray's ending is yet again different from the writer Narendranath Mitra's which is reflective of Ray's worldview about women and the changing dynamics of the many relationships or the roles they have to traverse. As the critic Chidananda Dasgupta put it, "The ending with its mild and charming assurance of one of the two finding a job in the vast city, is a little four square, a shade too glib, as a solution to a problem that is going to plague us for a long time"(15). Both the author, as well as Ray, leaves the ending open-ended but Ray's ending I find is different—there is hope, reconciliation, awakening and more specially understanding. Hope for a better future, reconciliation between the two -

Subroto and Arati who were experiencing difficulties in their marriage because of Subroto's unemployment and Arati's success, awakening of the woman into a realization of her self-worth and value in her own eyes as well as in the job market and in achieving economic independence are the key highlights of Ray's ending. By understanding, I mean Subroto's realization that he would never be able to act as selflessly as Arati, when she resigns from her job, protesting Mr. Mukherjee's unjust dismissal of Edith as well as his iniquitous words about her character. In the novella Subroto remains as insensitive about Arati as he was at the beginning, he fails to see her what she is and snidely passes a comment on his wife's apparent stupidity.

Ray is able to pack historical elements and individual growth successfully tracing the linear growth of an individual's character and the more probing inner emotions in his film from his adaptation of a novella by Narendranath Mitra who had simply traced the life of a lower class family from east Bengal in the city of Kolkata. He is able to transform a pared down novella moving in a singular direction into a human saga capable of existing at various levels through not only the parameters of aesthetics set by Ray but by his political as well as social vision. In achieving this unique feat Ray effectively realised the potential of the film medium to be able to create images adept at generating identification beyond merely the specifics of time and space.

Notes and References:

1. Marie Seton's 1974 book on Satyajit Ray is the first of the biographical studies to be made of the director and in which Ray discusses his family, childhood,

influences, his cinema etc. See *Satyajit Ray the Portrait of a Director* London: Oxford University Press, pg 145.

2. Satyajit Ray wrote a piece for Sequence on Renoir whom he had met in Calcutta. Renoir was in the city to shoot his film *The River* in 1950.
3. Andrew Robinson, *The Inner Eye*: New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, pg 152.
4. See Sight & Sound, Sp.1982; vol. 51, no.2.
5. Pauline Kael. *I Lost It at the Movies*, Boston: Little Brown, 1965, pg 247.
6. Ben Nyce. *Satyajit Ray: A Study of his Films*, New York: Praeger, 1988, pg 85.
7. Narendranath Mitra's short story 'Abataranika' is the inspiration for Ray's *Mahanagar* but in many ways it transcends the ways it portrays and understands women. Eventually, Mitra re-wrote his short story in the form of a novella and called it *Mahanagar*.
8. The "New Woman" concept in this film is in keeping with the Victorian idea of women's emancipation. Here Ray refines the concept and makes the case for economic emancipation which he believes would lead to social emancipation. In *Kanchenjunga*, made the previous year Ray made the case that education is a portal for emancipation for women.
9. This particular scene in the bathroom is very telling. Not only is the gaze that of the woman but she is also its object. It could also be read as a subtle play on Laura Mulvey's idea of the gaze in cinema. But this scene also highlights the fact that the bathroom is the only space in which she is able to play out her innermost desires and also display them.
10. The relationship between Arati and Edith as explored and represented by Ray is an excellent example of female camaraderie in cinema.
11. The conservative, patriarchal Subroto has very definite notions of make-up and especially the reddening of the lips. In an earlier scene he discourages her from reddening her lips even as she eats *paan* as that makes her sexually alluring.
12. Ben Nyce, *Satyajit Ray: A Study of his Films*, New York: Praeger, 1988, pg 86.
13. Ray raises the pertinent point that identities are after all social constructs. For at the point in time in which Arati sits in Subrata's place she crosses over to become the 'man' of the family. This point is made by Ray in his film and missing from the Mitra's short story 'Abataranika'.
14. Arati emphasises the fact that even though she is now a working woman she has not changed an iota and is still his wife and to qualify further, the housewife he knew.
15. Chidananda Dasgupta. *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray*, New Delhi: National Book Trust 2001, pg 79.

Dr. Devapriya Sanyal has a PhD in English and Film from JNU, Delhi. She is the author of 'Through the Eyes of a Cinematographer: The Biography of Soumendu Roy'. She has written various articles on the written and visual medium. She is based in Delhi.