

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN SATYAJIT RAY'S FILMS

With special reference to Aporajito and Charulata

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Abstract

The present study attempts to explore the transition of traditional women characters towards modernity or how modern they are in Satyajit Ray's films or are they oscillating between the tradition and modern. Many scholars have found Nehruvian aspirations and visions for a modern India in Satyajit Ray's early films made up to 1964. Further both these men have one thing in common, the aspirations for fusion of east and west. So, the researcher has chosen APORAJITO and CHARULATA to examine Satyajit Ray's vision of transition of 19th century women from tradition to modernity.

Statement of the Problem

Satyajit Ray's filmmaking career began when India was emerging as a new post-colonial independent country under the leadership of first Prime minister Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru envisaged India as a progressive, secular and as an industrial democracy. He has firm faith in inclusiveness. To him India's modernity lay in its dynamic fusion of past and present and its ability to assimilate highly divergent traditions and ideologies while remaining single and unified nation. Ray's notion of culture almost coincides with that of Nehru. His notions of culture as hybrid with diverse historical and social components retain their separateness while forming an integrated whole. In an interview he admired Nehru "*liberalism...a certain awareness of western values and fusion of eastern and western values*" The films during the life time of Pt. Nehru are the films made up to 1964, endorse Nehru's nation building vision and aspiration. In these films Ray upholds a vision for modern India. Ray seeks to uphold the values of education in (*Aporajito*), the family as a social unit in (*Pather Panchali*), emancipation of women in *Charulata* and *Mahanagar*. On the other hand he critiques progressive modernity. In *Jalsaghar* Ray critiques feudalism and in *Devi* critiques orthodoxy and superstition. Satyajit Ray's negotiation with modern is to be discussed taking six of his major films made between 1955 and 1970. These are – *Pather Panchali*, *Aporajito*, *Apur Sansar*, *Charulata*, *Aranyer Din Ratri* and *Pratidwandi*. The first four films were made during Nehru era. The last two of the list were made in the political turbulent seventies. While observing the films made by Satyajit during Nehruvian era Suranjan Ganguly enquires "*Some of the questions that Ray's films possess are: Is it always possible to distinguish the modern from the traditional or are they just two sides of the same coin? Does the modern simply embody the contradictory nature of the contemporary Indian experience? Or is the modern all about becoming the modern – always in the making – at best, a form or acute self-consciousness?*".

Methodology

To carry out the proposed study a comprehensive analysis of the content and narrative of the cinematic works of Satyajit Ray - *APORAJITO* and *CHARULATA* semiotic tools such as dialogue, cinematography, characterizations and music have been employed.

Sarbojaya in Aporajito

The film begins with Apu's family getting settled in Benares. His priest father Hariharo dies after a short illness. In his absence; it becomes the responsibility of Sarbojaya the mother of Apu to earn money for the family. She starts working as a cook. A relative invites them to return to their ancestral village Mansapota.

Apu asks his mother to send him to a school. Apu studies diligently and receives a scholarship to go to Kolkata. Sarbojaya does not want to let her son leave. Finally she gives in and Apu leaves for Kolkata. Apu starts working at a printing press after college. Sarbojaya expects his visits, but Apu manages to visit only a few times and feels himself out of place in Mansapota. Sarbojaya becomes seriously ill, but does not disclose her illness to Apu. When Apu finally comes to know about her poor health, he comes to village and finds that his mother has already died. A relative requests him to stay back there and to work as a priest. Apu rejects the idea. He returns to Kolkata and performs the last rites for his mother there. After the death of Hariharo when Sarbojaya took up the job of a cook she termed it a *chakri* and not as *jhi* (maid servant). This shows that Satyajit is trying to usher in new believes in contrast to the 19th century believes and awareness, pushing it to a new era where profession will be termed as Chakri (job). Here, Sarbojaya is his medium of expression for the film maker and is ahead of her time.

Sarbojaya finds Apu is losing interest in his study and gradually becoming the helping hand of her master. He is acquiring bad habits in this atmosphere. Thus she decides to leave the job and takes Apu away to Monosapota where Apu will no longer be a servant. To her, at that point, in the context of survival, priesthood is preferable to be a servant. Though Apu does not like the profession of priest and get admitted to school. She, in face of poverty, does not disallow Apu from perusing study. It is not just the love or affection for Apu, or the giving up to the pressure from the son. It is her silent ascent to the changing time. When Apu decides to go to Kolkata for college education, initially she tries to resist. In this sequence, when angry Apu gets out of the house and Sarbojaya is standing on the threshold looks at the globe laying on the floor and goes out to looking for Apu. In next two shots, in first one she concedes his going to Kolkata and on the second shot she brings out petty saving saved for years. In this sequence Satyajit Ray hints her progressive outlook through the motif of globe lying near the lantern and she is on the threshold of the door. Later in the film when she fell sick she does not inform Apu about her illness. Because, she does not want to affect his study. During those days, it was hard to find a mother, who will not inform her son about her illness. Therefore, Sarbojaya is ahead of her time.

One can easily discern that Ray wanted to translate his idea and aspiration of modern India through Sarbojaya and Apu. This film aspires for education. Both Sarbojaya and Apu aspire for a new life. In this film Satyajit Ray forsakes the traditional Indian professions having roots in *Varnasharm*. The traditional profession of priesthood ends in both's life with the departure of Apu for Kolkata. Throughout the film Satyajit Ray connects the traditional world with the bigger world and universe, meaning progress, through various motifs – rail, globe and the reference of *Kalpuras Nakhshatra*. In addition to these the shots of science laboratory clearly indicate the transition from tradition to modern.

Charu in Charulata

Based on a novella by Rabindranath Tagore the film is set in Kolkata, around 1880. India is under the British rule and Bengal Renaissance is at its peak. Bhupati, an upper class Bengali intellectual with a keen interest in politics and in the freedom movement, edits and publishes a newspaper. His childless wife Charu is interested in arts, literature and poetry. She is alone though Bhupati loves her yet he cannot give her company as he is busy with his upcoming newspaper. Bhupati invites Charu's elder brother Umapada to live with them and help him in running him the press. His wife Manda is also invited to live with them to give company to lonely Charu. Manda with her silly and crude ways is no company for the sensitive and intelligent Charulata. Bhupati's young cousin Amal comes to live with them, Bhupati asks him to encourage Charu's writing skill. He provides her with much needed intellectual companionship and attention. An

intimate relationship develops between Charu and Amal. Meanwhile Umapada embezzles the funds supporting the paper and destroys Bhupati's hopes for his enterprise. Now, all he has left is the trust he has placed in Charulata and Amal. On the other hand Amal realizes that Charulata is in love with him but is reluctant to reciprocate due to the guilt involved. Afraid of being the another source of betray he leaves the house without informing anybody.

This character of Charu has been depicted by Satyajit Ray as his vehicle of aspiration for a changing time of history, nineteenth century on the threshold of twentieth century. Ray's aspiration embodied in the character of Charulata is so subtle that it requires a very meticulous and careful reading. It is the first Indian film which tries to formulate a feminist standpoint. Throughout the film, film filmmaker's POINT OF VIEW coincides with that of Charu and converged in a single point.

Charu is intelligent, connoisseur of arts and literature, she is romantic, she is serious and creative. Taking these outlines Satyajit explores Charu and builds her in the backdrop of Bengal's Renaissance. She is not conservative like the nineteenth century housewife of western educated well off urban families. In contrast to Charu, Ray depicts another character – Manda who is happy with the status quo of women in family and not into any intellectual or creative pursuits, although the history is on transit. The transition of time does not make any impact on her. On the other hand Charu, as Chidananda Das Gupta describes (in *sight and sound*) "whose *inner seismograph catches the vibration waves reaching from outside into her seclusion*".

The film opens with wordless visual descriptions of Charu's loneliness and boredom. This sequence continues for almost seven minutes and the filmmaker creates a feel that her life is one long routine of endless repetitions. Slowly and with exceptional subtlety Satyajit unfolds Charu's solitude and boredom showing her spending long afternoon lounging in bed, doing embroidery, flipping through the pages of books unmindfully and looking out of the window blinds through a pair of opera glasses to the world outside. But she is restless – like a clock – just after the credit title the clock strikes 4 0' clock - she orders the servant to serve evening tea for the master, her husband. Ray writes the preamble of the film and of the changing time which he elaborates later on many occasions. But the clock tower and clock in the room remain invisible except in one occasion.

Against the condition of the women of well to do families of last part of nineteenth century Bengal one finds that Charu is different. She is not the prototype of the malady of time like Manda. Manda personifies the malady of time where the women are fully dependent on their husbands. They are illiterate, crude and narcissist, no dealing with outside world, lolls in bed, pass time by playing cards .But they could not conceptualize boredom and accept as normal. Studying the opening sequence and as the film progress it is observed that her boredom, though paradoxical, provokes her in thinking, feeling and induced her for self-expression. Her solitude perhaps helps her imagine and dream a life different from that which she lives on. On many occasions, the filmmaker suggests that her solitude helps her to discover and commune with her life, outside the male-defined universe.

In the opening sequence, the compositions, camera movements and Charu's movements all together create a subtext. In one layer, the sequence describes her loneliness, and boredom. The second layer is the subtext of the sequence which suggests that Charu does not like boredom. This is evident from her vigorous and confident and purposeful movements within frames and out from the frame, her presence in frames, her coming to living room looking for a book from the cupboard - in all these shots one observes not so much of

Charu but of the moving figure of Charu within space. After the exit from her living room even in long shots her face is not seen prominently but her confident and purposeful walk and finally crossing the limit of the space defined for her - the space defined for the women of the time, to the drawing room – to pick a book from the cupboard. This is not possible for Manda or her counterparts in the last part of nineteenth century. In this sequence one comes to the conclusion that Charu is on move to explore a space for her in the changing time. Charu moves from one widow to another with her opera glass and sees people on move. Ray suggests her restlessness and the moving world outside the window.

The opening seven to eight minutes of the films describes the dialectic between her inertness and vigorous mobility in the space. This suggests that she seeks to reconcile her two facets of personality. In this sequence, on the balcony, she is standing on the threshold of her room and the husband comes looking for something and crosses over her without any single gaze, and comes back. But Charu gazes his movement and finally through opera glass looks at him, his going out and the distance between them. Looking glass, though as property, occupies a significant place in the film. Bhupati wears spectacles, in a shot in the press Amal takes up a magnifying glass. In case of Bhupati and Amal the glass are not for long distance use but for close distance use whereas the use of opera glass by Charu is meant for long distance use. Thus Satyajit, in one sense, suggests Charu is looking beyond her confinement or limitation. She tries to foresee the course of history on move. This explanation seems to be justified as in this film Satyajit critiques the shortsightedness of the young educated Bengali men in general and the shortsightedness of Bhupati and Amal in particular. This opera glass becomes a means for Charu's voyeurism as well. From first sequence to the swing scene she uses the opera glass for gazing at men, barring a single shot where she looks at a mother-son duo. Another significant property in the space is a bed, which denotes and defines her sexual or maternal space. But this important space fails to contain her for long. There is not a single shot showing her sleeping rather she uses this space for his embroidery and writing or reading. The other important property is a clock almost set in a doorway. In opening sequence the clock strikes 4 O'clock and Charu orders the servant to serve tea for her husband Bhupathi. This signifies her awareness about time and the changing time. The references of clock and time come repetitively although on screen the clock is visible only once. Amol calling her as *Nabina* and Manda as *Prachina*, Ray suggests that Manda is a typical woman of the time, against her Charu is on move, inquisitive and literate

Charu's love for reading and passion for embroidery has been emphasized by Satyajit times and again in this film. Love for reading suggests her need for intellectual stimulation and embroidery points for her creativity. Her love for reading may also enable her to write herself into persona. Her love for looking through opera glass is also very significant. Looking through Opera glass becomes her "gaze". Neither of the three men - Bhupati or Amal or the servant gaze at her - as there is not a single shot showing her from any of these men's point of view - barring a shot in swing sequence from Amal's perspective and in the last sequence before the freeze from Bhupati's perspective. Reading, writing and gazing paves a way to intuitively find her way out of the male labyrinth of her time. All these shape her most transgressed act - falling in love outside marriage. The woman in her remains invisible to the men around her - husband Bhupati and Amol. But she makes them feel her presence in a new space which always is the domain of men - her writing, her gaze, her voyeurism, and her incestuous desires for Amol. All these have been described either in an understated manner or hinted through suggestion. The cinematic expressions of Satyajit Ray are always very subtle and understated so he depicted Charu defining her in new space without any rapture to the tradition. Charu's suggestion to her husband to bring out a Bengali daily to be edited by her is undoubtedly a progressive outlook. In final analysis of Charu's character defines herself as a conscious individual when

the society is on the threshold of new century of awakening. Therefore, Charu is a modern woman but negotiate with modernity within the traditional setup without any rapture to it.

Conclusion

Sarbojaya of *APORAJITO* understands the value of education but she cannot change the circumstances dragging her and Apu into tradition due to poverty. She cannot change anything significant of her time and space. But she never stands on the way of progress rather helps the wheel move forward and responses to the awakening. Sarbojoy herself does not determined her course of life .One the other hand Charu in *CHARULATA* determined her future life even after knowing that her relationship with Amal has been revealed .She does not suffer any crisis of conscience for her relation with Amal. She is awaken and significantly changes the time and her space. So; if Sarbojoy is a bud of aspiration for modern then Charu is full blown aspiration of modernity.

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