

# Clashes of Womanhood: Concepts of True Woman and New Woman in Satyajit Ray's *Devi* and *Mahanagar*

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Indian cinema has been inspired and influenced by many literary works including the plays of Kalidasa and the novels of Chetan Bhagat. Indian filmmakers have directly or indirectly taken narratives from various mythological and regional texts in order to make their films. Adaptations of books into cinema are not a recent phenomenon for Indian cinema because the impact of literature on our films is as old as the cinema itself. The first ever Indian film *Raja Harishchandra* is an adaptation of a story taken from the great Indian epic *The Mahabharata*. This trend is observed even today as we can see many literary adaptations in films like *Guide*, *Devdas*, *Omkara*, *Hello*, *Two States*, *Three Idiots* etc. Different theories of literature like Modernism, Feminism, Colonialism, Post-Modernism, Structuralism are applied in films also.

Even though the mainstream film focuses on male-centered plots, the treatment of women has always been a favorite topic for great directors like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Rituparno Ghosh. The picturisation of women taken from literary texts into films like Binodini in *Choker Bali*, Paro in *Devdas* and Rosy in *Guide* have been accepted widely by Indian audience. Many film makers shattered the traditional image of Indian women through their novel concepts and techniques.

Through this research paper we are trying to highlight the concepts of True Woman and New Woman, and clashes encountered by women through Satyajit Ray's literary adaptations of *Devi* and *Mahanagar*.

## Satyajit Ray and his portrayal of women characters

Not to have seen the cinema of Satyajit Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon - Akira Kurosawa.

Satyajit Ray (1921 – 1992) is a genius who created his own niche in the arena of world cinema, through his films like *Pather Panchali*, *Devi*, *Charulata*, *Aparajito*, *Mahanagar* etc. Ray directed 36 films including feature films, documentaries and short films in his career of 42 years. *Pather Panchali* (1955), Ray's first film, won eleven international prizes, including Best Human Documentary at the Cannes Film Festival. *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956), and *Apur Sansar* (1959) form The Apu Trilogy. Ray was awarded India's highest award in cinema, the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1984 and the Government of India awarded him with 'Bharat Ratna' in 1992. He was awarded honorary doctorate by the Oxford University. 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."

Woman always had a special place in Satyajit Ray's films. Satyajit Ray, known for having the "director's gaze", nurtured respect for women and portrayed them as having more moral strength than men in various roles other than the stereotyped idea of a "woman belonging to the kitchen". Interestingly, Ray does not project his male characters as negative or hollow to show his women as strong and powerful. Not one man in his entire collection of films is a perpetrator of oppression or humiliation of women. In a cinematic sense and narrative sense, Ray structures the script to give almost equal space to male and female characters.

Satyajit Ray's approach on women spanned a wide variety of backgrounds and characterizations. Whether it was the upper middleclass woman in 19th century Calcutta or the lower middleclass housewife in a 1960s home or a Dalit woman in rural Uttar Pradesh, the Ray woman had a personality of her own. The strongest characterizations came when Satyajit Ray worked on Rabindranath Tagore's works, possibly because both adhered to the ideologies of Brahma Samaj, came from culturally rich homes, and had highly talented women in their families.

Any discussion on Ray's women would have to begin with Charulata. She is an educated woman who makes the most beautiful embroideryworks, writes poetry and has a sense of aesthetics. Confined to her upper-middle-class home in Kolkata as her husband keeps busy with politics and social reform in pre-independent India, she is a lonely woman who yearns for company. This eventually leads to an affair with her brother-in-law, in whom she finds a person with similar interests and tastes.

Bimala in *Ghare Baire* is a woman who emerges out of her shell when her upper-middle-class husband defies social norms to arrange an English education for his wife. This leaves her yearning to learn more about the world outside her home. When her husband's opportunistic friend arrives, and starts telling her with impressive stories of the Swadeshi movement, she gets drawn to him and is trapped in an extra-marital affair.

*Seemabaddha* looked into the dubious goings-on in the corporate world against the backdrop of a Kolkata troubled by labour unrest and a violent naxalite movement. The character of Tutul is the voice of sanity and integrity that troubles the executive who has made it to the top post by engineering a strike with the collusion of the labour union to save his company's reputation in the international market.

Through these illustrations we can see that the concepts of "True woman" and "New Woman" are deeply incorporated in Ray's films. To highlight this fact we have taken two movies *Devi* and *Mahanagar* in relation with above stated concepts.

### **Satyajit Ray's 'Devi':**

Satyajit Ray's *Devi* is an adaptation of Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee's short story published in 1899. It was released in 1960 and bagged President's Gold Medal in 1961. When *Devi* was released in India in 1960, it created a turmoil and it was seen as an attack on Hinduism. However the film is multifaceted. It is not just an attack on religion, but also speaks about feminine psychology, superstition versus rationalism, religious mysticism and fanaticism. Ray collocates rationalism and superstition to highlight the ignorance of the society.

The backdrop of *Devi* is in Chandipur, Bengal in 1860. The film opens with the scene of Durga Puja and we are introduced to the main characters Umaprasad (Soumitra Chatterjee) and Dayamoyee (Sharmila Tagore). Uma's father Kalinkar is a feudal landlord and they are living in a luxurious estate. Uma discusses with Daya about his departure to Calcutta for university studies. They are living in a joint family along with Uma's father, elder brother, sister-in-law and his nephew Khoka. After Uma departs to Calcutta, Daya performs all her duties faithfully. She charms the entire household to such an extent that even the family parrot keeps repeating her name.

Kalinkar an ardent follower of Goddess Kali regularly does his puja and Daya accompanies him in that. Kalinkar dreams that Daya is an avatar of Goddess Kali. This is a classic scene in *Devi* where the bindi on Daya's forehead lays over the insightful third eye of Kali's. It presents the core visualization of the mysterious hypnotic connection between the feminine and the Divine. The villagers led by Kalinkar start worshipping Daya as a Goddess. Daya is shocked but she could not resist the insane actions of Kalinkar. These incidents startles Daya's sister-in-law and she writes a letter to Uma to return home immediately. Reaching home, Uma argues with Kalinkar. The news of Daya spreads far and wide and villagers come to seek blessings from her. The miraculous power of Daya is established when a sick child is cured. The desperate Uma meets Daya at night and they decide to elope to Calcutta. But when they reach the riverside, a crisis is sprouted in Daya and she asks Uma, "What if I'm the Goddess?" Uma reluctantly dropped the plan to escape. Meanwhile, Khoka becomes sick and his mother decides to call a doctor. But the priest who worships Daya asks Khoka's mother to seek blessings from 'the avatar'. Khoka, in an unconscious state murmurs the name of Daya and the child sleeps with Daya that night. Uma's sister-in-law asks Daya to cure her son; however, unfortunately, Khoka passes away. Daya was unable to accept the untimely death of Khoka. She acts like a mad woman and runs into meadow and fades out of sight.

In *Devi* Kalinkar symbolizes the stubborn blind faith and Umaprasad stands for rational mindset. Uma is influenced by the teachings of Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar and encourages his friend in Calcutta to marry a widow. But Uma does not have the courage to wage a war against the existing age old superstitions. The film traces the transformation of an innocent girl into a 'Goddess' and finally to an insane person. As Pauline Kael, the famous American critic puts it, "Ray's feeling for the intoxicating beauty within the disintegrating way of life of the nineteenth century landowning class makes this one of the rare, honest films about decadence."

### **Concept of 'True Woman' in *Devi***

The Cult of Domesticity or Cult of True Womanhood was a prevailing value system during the nineteenth century which emphasized new ideas of femininity, the woman's role within the home. The four cardinal virtues supposed to be possessed by True women were piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. The Cult of Domesticity revolved around the fact that a woman is the center of the family. Women were supposed to inhabit the private sphere, running the household, rearing children, and taking care of the husband and public sphere was totally denied to her.

True Women were supposed to devote themselves to unpaid domestic labor. The division between the domestic and public spheres had an impact on women's power and status. In society, particularly in political and economic arenas, women's power declined.

True women were to hold the following cardinal virtues:

1. Piety – Religion was valued because unlike intellectual pursuits it did not take a woman away from her “proper sphere,” the home, and because it controlled women's longings.

Ray's *Devi* centers on the concept of the Deification. From the opening scene to the concluding scene images of Durga and various symbols associated with religion recurs. Daya performs puja regularly and her dedication to Goddess Durga prompted Kalinkar to identify Daya with Durga. The dream of Kalinkar and its consequences denied Daya the bliss of marital life. The story is centered on the theme of incarnation and ends with the sufferings caused due to superstitions. Daya transforms from a normal human being to a Goddess, without any emotions, and was subsequently treated as an object. The objectification of Daya is well captured in the scenes where the male worshippers gather around her and the dominance of “male gaze” is reflected in these scenes. In relation to the concept of male gaze, William L. Bilzek states, “In addition to the plot and to the scenes in which religious rituals are shown, *Devi* is a beautiful visual exploration of the meanings of darsana. The film begins with the symbolic three eyes of Kali, giving a sense of the Goddess's intensity and presence. Throughout the film, the glance (another meaning of darsana) of Dayamoyee is lingered upon. Viewing (darsana) of and offering before, the murti (statue) of Kali are shown repeatedly in the film. Finally, Dayamoyee/Kali herself becomes an object of darsana, at least for a time.”

2. Purity –The concept of chastity is associated with Indian culture. The stories from Indian mythology highlighting the concept of ‘Pativrata’, was circulated in the domestic sphere to maintain the chastity of woman. In *Devi*, Daya is portrayed without any blemishes. The love and trust of Daya and Uma is subtly captured in the sequence where they are in bed and discuss about their future. Even though Uma is away in Calcutta, Daya is totally dedicated to him and keep in touch with him by writing letters on a daily basis. When Uma is not at home Daya is engrossed in domestic affairs and she is totally devoted to her family.

3. Submission – Submissiveness is the most feminine of the virtues possessed by women. *The Young Ladies Book* summarized for the unknowledgeable, the passive virtues necessary in women: “It is certain that in whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind are required of her.” The entire movie is based on the submission of Daya to her father-in-law. Daya acts like an innocent, immature child without raising any protest. She is a person without any opinion. Her father-in-law takes decisions for her and she is ready to accept it. She was asked to live in a separate room and the local men did puja on her, calling her “Mother Goddess.” The modest Daya silently suffered everything without a word of protest. In the closing of the film,

where, the psychologically disturbed Daya running in to wilderness is suggestive of the fact that she freed herself from her present existence.

4. Domesticity – The traditional concept of femininity was centered on the Cult of Domesticity. A woman's actual sphere was the home where a wife created a refuge for her husband and children. They were not allowed to do anything other than household chores like embroidery, cooking, cleaning house and doing regular Puja. These were considered as actual feminine activities whereas reading anything other than religious scriptures was discouraged. Daya is a symbol of domesticity. Other than some scenes of Uma in Calcutta, the entire plot revolves around the mansion where Daya lives. Before, Daya becomes a Goddess, she is a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law. She has created affection for everyone in the family. Her domestic life influenced her to such an extent that when she got an opportunity to escape from her sufferings she has chosen to remain at home.

#### **Satyajit Ray's 'Mahanagar'**

The theme conceived by Satyajit Ray in *Mahanagar* is antithetical to what he portrayed in 'Devi'. 'Devi' is full of negativity and darkness as it has total absence of gender equality, whereas in contemporary setting 'Mahanagar' is easy and light. It is positive, arguing for individual liberation, social enlightenment and marital benefits that gender equality can bring. Satyajit Ray based his script of *Mahanagar* on Narendra Mitra's story 'Abataranika' (1943) with slight alterations in the story by changing its end from pessimistic to optimistic.

The film opens when Subrata Mazumdar, who is a bank employee, is returning home from work. We are introduced to his dingy middle class apartment and his joint family, where we find his wife Arati, his five year old son Pintu, his father Priyagopal who is a retired schoolmaster, his mother and his younger sister Bani. Subrata is the sole bread winner of his family.

Due to financial crises in the family Arati decides to take up the job. Initially Subrata is reluctant; however he is convinced by Arati's enthusiastic commitment. With this decision her family is no longer supportive as they stage a cold war against her; even her son doesn't like the fact that his mother is not there at home to take care of him. Arati proves herself to be confident and successful, and gains self-confidence as she owns her own money. The status of Arati is lifted from a house wife to a working lady and this causes friction in the family. Subrata feels threatened by the confidence of Arati and insists her to resign from the job. The reluctant Arati is about to handover her resignation letter but she learns the fact that Subrata has lost his job and she has to hold on to her job. Arati and Subrata begin to drift apart.

Arati soon becomes proficient and manages to raise her salary by fifty percent. This annoys Subrata. Arati gains psychological independence through her acquaintances with other sales girls and this expands her social perspective and boosts her confidence. Arati's new friend Edith, an Anglo Indian, provides her with lipstick and sunglasses to appear more sophisticated for her upper-class clients. These developments disturb Subrata a lot but he is helpless and feels insecure. Arati's boss Himanshu promises to help Subrata to find a good job. Afterwards Arati learns that Himanshu who is scornful

of Anglo-Indians, has terminated Edith for allegedly slacking off. Arati is moved by the injustice done to her friend and demands Himanshu to apologize. When he refuses to do so, she resigns from her job abruptly. Arati confesses to Subrata that she had stupidly resigned from her job. Subrata is shocked by the fact that both of them are jobless but at the same time he praises her for sticking to her moral values. Arati is overwhelmed by the fact that her husband is very understanding. They realize that their marital situation is dire. The film closes with an optimistic note that they are living in a "*Mahanagar*," which is filled with opportunities.

### Concept of 'New Woman' in *Mahanagar*

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, intern affected political, cultural, social and on personal levels.

Satyajit Ray projected the reality of women on big screen at a time when most of the main stream directors highlighted male centered plots where women played a secondary role. The rise of New Woman in India during post-colonial era is significant in the works of Satyajit Ray. The concept of Henrik Ibsen's New Woman is fully materialized in *Mahanagar*. The term new woman was used at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe women who were trying to expand their horizon of activities.

Ibsen, who stood for the liberation of women, asserted in his notes for *A Doll's House*, "A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society; it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view."

The new woman in post-colonial India is a perfect blend of western influences as well as her own culture. The conventional ideal women who silently tolerated physical and mental oppressions were replaced by confident straightforward and educated women. In *Mahanagar*, Arati represents Ibsen's New Woman. The characteristics of New Woman that are reflected in Arati's character are as follows:

**1. Education and Employment-** 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 Subrata hunt for a job in the advertisement columns of newspapers. On the very first day of her employment, she takes breakfast along with her husband; the last time they had their food together was on their wedding day. Arati's status is raised from an ordinary housewife to an efficient employee. This is well captured by Ray in the scene where Arati's mother-in-law feeds her by sitting beside her as if she is feeding a man. Arati does not bother to take her plate after having food and this is unusual for a woman from a lower middle class existence.

**2. Control over Destiny-** The term New Woman refers to women who exercised control over their own lives whether it personal, social, or economic. Control over

one's life is crucial in maintaining the identity of a woman. 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. Towards the end, she resigns when she felt that she couldn't cope with the professional environment.

**3. Economic Independence and Decision making power-** Financial independence is an important aspect in the concept of New Woman. Financial independence is directly linked with decision making power. Traditionally, men handled money and provided women with the basic requirements of life, except the right to handle money. This financial dependency has withdrawn women from taking crucial decisions. After the Indian Independence, cities began to flourish and women stepped out of domestic sphere in search of job. In *Mahanagar*, Arati move out, takes up a job and proves successful. Eventhough 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. Concern for other women-** Raising voice against the injustice meted out to other women is another characteristic feature of New Woman. In *Mahanagar*, Arati associates with many women especially with Edith, Arati's Anglo Indian friend. Edith, fluent in English and who has her own view is symbolic of a liberated woman. She acts as a foil to the subservient Indian women. When Edith falls prey to the racial prejudices of Himanshu, Arati questions him for his wrong decision. This suggests that Arati gives priority to moral values than money. She sacrifices her own job for the injustice done to Edith. Arati proves that she is a true friend and a bold woman.

### **Analogies in *Devi* and *Mahanagar***

The story of *Mahanagar* is set in Calcutta, approximately 100 years after the setting of *Devi* in rural Chandipur in 1860. During 19<sup>th</sup> century, many intellectuals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati and Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar tried to eliminate socio-religious injustices; however, the Bengali society did not accept their ideas due to the ignorance and blind faith in religion. The learning of English and Western education was confined only to the affluent class. Gradually, it was narrowed down to the middle class as well. By the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, women belonged to upper class started learning English. Finally, when India got independence in 1947, women were also liberated to some extent and the rise of cities forced them to go for work for a livelihood. This gradual change is witnessed in the transformation of womanhood from Daya to Arati. Even though *Devi* and *Mahanagar* projects entirely different concepts about women, this research paper attempts to find some points where both of these films coincide.

1. Satyajit Ray has given utmost importance to project the situation of women in *Devi* and *Mahanagar*. The pathetic situation of women in the clutches of patriarchal society is pictured with utmost care. Dedication to family is a common trait of Daya and Arati. Daya becomes an 'avatar' for the family and Arati decides to do job and earn money for the wellbeing of the family members.

2. Umaprasad and Subrata are strong male characters even though the films are centered on female characters. Umaprasad in *Devi* and Subrata in *Mahanagar* are educated and support their wives. They support their wives and stand for the cause of women. They symbolize the young generation of men who cares for their life partners. Both Umaprasad and Subrata support the changes and reforms in the society. In *Devi*, Umaprasad questions his father for his irrational behavior. A debate takes place between them on superstitions and religion, and he tries to rescue Daya from her present condition. In *Mahanagar*, Subrata also stands against his father to protect and encourage Arati who wishes to go out and take up a job.

3. In *Devi* and *Mahanagar*, the fathers-in-law symbolize the old patriarchal set up. Both Priyagopal and Kalikinkar represent typical stereotyped fathers-in-law where they pose a threat to Daya and Arati. Kalikinkar forces Daya to become a Goddess to satisfy his imagination. In *Mahanagar*, when Arati decides to do job outside home, Priyagopal silently protests against her decision. He even denies the gift that she brought for him with her first salary.

### Conclusion

Women always played a vital role in domestic life. But when it comes to public sphere, they were treated as secondary individuals. In this concern, J. P. Saikia rightly says, "Evil social practices, dogmatic religious beliefs, inhuman superstitions and sinister customs caused the maximum degree of deterioration. Child marriage, Devdasi, Sati, enforced widowhood, purdah, dowry, female infanticide and the practice of polygamy made the Indian society static." However, Satyajit Ray focused his theme and narrative around female characters. Through this study of Satyajit Ray's literary adaptations, *Devi* and *Mahanagar*, we have tried to focus and analyze two literary terms, New Woman and True Woman. We have tried to relate these concepts with two characters, Daya and Arati. Daya is a stereotype of True Woman whereas Arati is a New Woman. In this study, we have also found some interconnections between these two adaptations. With the help of this research paper, we can also infer that different literary theories are successfully incorporated in films of all the times.

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