



NAVIGATING MODERNITY AND LIFE'S FATALITY THROUGH RESILIENCE: WOMEN CHARACTERS IN SATYAJIT RAY'S FILMS

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Abstract

Satyajit Ray's works often depict the struggle between individual agency and the broader forces of destiny, fate, and societal structures, making them ideal for a critical evaluation. The present study explores Ray's portrayal of life's struggles and the resilience and fortitude displayed by his female characters during the transition from tradition to modernity. This study is exploratory and uses the nuances of cinematic techniques to critically analyse the selected films such as *The Apu Trilogy*, *Devi*, *Charulata*, *Mahanagar*, and *Ghare Baire*. The study argues that Ray's female characters are not merely passive recipients of fate but active agents who assert their identity, navigate modernity, and challenge the patriarchal norms that seek to limit them. Their endurance in the face of poverty, silent resilience under the weight of religious superstition, and moral and economic agency in a patriarchal society all highlight the varied dimensions of resilience in Ray's cinematic world. Also, his films offer a complex portrayal of traditional Indian fatalism, neither fully endorsing nor entirely rejecting it. While his characters often appear bound by fate, Ray simultaneously highlights their struggles for agency, suggesting a more dynamic interplay between destiny and personal choice. By doing so, Ray's films not only reflect traditional fatalistic beliefs but also challenge them, offering a more nuanced view of human existence in the context of Indian culture. This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender, resilience, and modernity in Indian cinema, offering a deeper understanding of how Ray's films reflect and critique the cultural and social dynamics of their time.

Keywords: Resilience, Fatalism, Modernity

Introduction

“Dominus Omnium Magister. It means God is the master of all things.” —Satyajit Ray, *The Complete Adventures of Feluda: Vol. I*

Satyajit Ray, the first filmmaker to represent India globally and contribute to its recognition internationally, is said to have introduced the neo-realist movement in filmmaking in India through his directorial debut with *Pather Panchali* in 1955. The film was highly acclaimed abroad and received several national and international awards, including a Lifetime Achievement Oscar for Ray from Hollywood. Satyajit Ray's films showcased the trials and tribulations of the people of Bengal in a period dominated by the transition from tradition to the modern period. The Indian society with its beliefs, rituals and practices-good and evil- are carefully delineated without passing any judgement. His representation of realism, be it the Bengal famine, the Bengali Renaissance, the practice of Sati, worshipping of idols or the decline of the zamindari system, to name a few, is so deft that it has a universal appeal to the lives of people across the state, country and continent. He was a classicist, and his films reflect fatalism in several contexts. In Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, huge Rice (2023) defines the word 'fatalism' as an "attitude of resignation in the face of some future event or events thought to be inevitable". However, many philosophers usually associate the word to refer to the idea that we are powerless to do anything other than what we do, and this concept is commonly called "Theological fatalism". In the Indian context, Rgveda and Upanishads see Man as a speck in the vast expanse of the infinite cosmic World. As Dasgupta opines, "It is only by perceiving oneself as a minute fragment in the universal consciousness which envelops all that the individual begins to realise his/ her destiny" (Dasgupta 7).

Satyajit Ray used a traditional Indian approach to art. His films reflect his beliefs in traditional Indian 'fatalism', i.e., a sense of detachment or watching an event from a distance. It is a belief system rooted in the idea that one's life and experiences are primarily predetermined by fate or destiny, often seen as an unchangeable force beyond human control. In this worldview, individuals may accept suffering, hardship, or even success as a result of past actions (from this life or previous ones) and view them as part of their fate. Individual characters in his films resign to the ultimate Providence but fight through tough times and struggles in life. There is a sense that a man cannot decide his fate, i.e., he cannot choose where and at what time he will be born; neither can he choose the circumstances favourable for the same; everything is predetermined in the circle of life and death. Man becomes noble when he becomes knowledgeable of this fact and, with his total effort, struggles to exist and make something of his opportunities. Ray's works celebrate life and death equally with this fatalism approach, and his films reflect the joy in birth or life and even in death by accepting it with grace and as something may be ill-timed yet inevitable. This inherent knowledge in his films brings detachment and freedom from fear and restlessness. There is simplicity in his art of filmmaking with subtle aesthetic nuances. This unusual combination of detachment or watching from a distance combined with compassion and simplicity makes Ray see reality and represent it on his large canvas of film screen, being inspired by world-renowned directors such as Vittorio de Sica, Fellini, John Ford, Orson Welles and others (*Our Films Their Films* 209).

Discussion

Women characters in his films play a pivotal role in Ray's films, which are a blend of the sociological and the artistic world to depict traditional Indian fatalism at a time when the whole country was undergoing social change, a movement from tradition towards modernism

was going on. In most of his films, he upheld the heritage of the Bengal Renaissance and the Brahmo movement. Placed in a sociological frame, Ray's women are on a journey through struggle and resistance from the male or Bengali society in particular and any male-dominated society in general. Ray addresses real questions and challenges women face and how they deal with such situations. Women are portrayed as individuals trying to reconcile various aspects of life, viz., family, traditions, individuality and career in a rapidly changing society through remarkable resilience. On the one hand, Ray's women are simple yet complex, vulnerable yet resilient individuals.

Ray's films, particularly his Apu trilogy (1955-59), comprising of *Pather Panchali* (A Song of the Little Road), *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished) and *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu), offer a rich tapestry through which to explore traditional Indian fatalism. Ray's women characters are often depicted as resilient beings struggling between individual agency and the broader forces of destiny, fate, and societal structures, making these women ideal for a critical evaluation through this lens.

Ray's films portray these women characters as profoundly embedded in environments where fate plays a crucial role in their lives. In *Pather Panchali*, the characters' lives are dictated by unsurmountable rural poverty and hardship beyond one's control. The death of Durga, for example, is portrayed with a sense of inevitability, and the family's suffering appears to be a part of their unchangeable destiny. Sarbjaya, the protagonist in this film, is a woman of great strength and dignity. Through her, Ray has showcased the towering over of good and eternal in human nature over the evils of reality. In his films, beauty is not different from truth and goodness. Sarbjaya in *Aparajito* is sometimes projected as selfish, but this evil in her results from a mother's selfless concern for her children's good and well-being. Through Harihar and Sarbjaya's life, Ray has projected fatalism, true to the spirit of the

original novel by Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay. Poverty in the trilogy, especially *Pather Panchali*, is grim, unornamented and natural; the characters' suffering is not only the family's suffering but also symbolises humanity in general. Poverty, as presented in his films, is heartbreaking because of the mother's (Sarbjaya's) innate sense of grace and fortitude in taking care of her children. This is portrayed very effectively through some remarkable and memorable scenes. Sarbjaya's first verbal duel with the older woman, Indir Thakrun, shows Sarbjaya's struggle for her children's share and the latter singing to herself in her long wait for death and struggle to live, with the central musical theme played on a bamboo flute is extraordinary. The song she sings makes the whole scene ironic as the song refers to the crossing of the river at the end of the day by one who has no money to pay the boatman, which is evocative of the crossing over from life to death. Birth and death, affection and anguish, pettiness and joy in the midst of grinding poverty leave indelible images in the mind. The old lady dies when the children are excited over their viewing of the train, facing the reality beyond comprehension. Ray shows a chain of events to express life's fatality. In the heat, Indir Thakrun sits by the pond, and Durga calls out to her; not getting an answer, she pushes the old lady, and her body falls over. The water pot from Durga's hand flies from her hand and falls into the water. Moments later, we see her bier being silently carried away along the path leading away from the house, two to three silent shots depicting brief sadness before life moves on. Here is one extraordinary way of storytelling with so much economy. Children see death as mysterious to them, as if it were the giant of a train shaking up the countryside. A stark reality of the profound cycle of birth and death, evoking the cosmic view of mortality and fatalism embedded in Indian tradition, is presented with excellence.

Sarbjaya's endurance in the face of relentless hardship, her attempts to maintain

dignity, and her efforts to keep her family together highlight her inner strength. Sarbajaya's pride keeps her aloof from sympathy. She is prominent in both *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito*. In *Pather Panchali*, she has a prominent role, with outstanding qualities of forbearance, selflessness, and silent suffering, which enable the family to survive. Her smile is rare- only seen once after the birth of Apu. Her emotions are always controlled, and her frustrations are forced upon Indir Thakrun and Durga. Severe poverty has made her complain about petty matters, which Ray skillfully depicts in the scene of the old lady's demand to eat chillies and Harihar's expense on tobacco. Her complaints and meanness are minute flaws or effects of her sustained efforts to provide medicine, food for feverish Durga and clothes for Apu to go to school. Her fondly covering her children at night and selling utensils to buy rice is very artistically shot and shows her fortitude against adverse circumstances. She is a fighter and will go to any extreme, even to drive the old lady out of the house to feed her children.

In *Aparajito*, Sarbajaya's sorrow is as inevitable as her son's indifference. After Harihar's death, Sarbajaya works as a servant, and so does Apu. She has the offer to live with a relative but does not take it. She is shocked to see her son's future when she sees him lighting the bowl of the boss's waterpipe. Ray shows her shocked face overlapping with the sound of a train cut to the train entering the bridge over the river. Both are going to the village Mansapota, where Apu can study and make a better life at his uncle's house. Ray's storytelling has a beginning, middle, and end corresponding to the Aristotelian exposition sequence, rising action, and climax. As such, Ray's storytelling differs from the classic Sanskrit literature, which has a more open and discursive plot.

Even though *The Apu Trilogy* is about Apu's life, the female characters are crafted carefully. The elder sister, Durga (Uma Dasgupta), is portrayed as inquisitive, caring and a soul close to nature. The mother,

Sarbajaya (Karuna Banerjee), is seen in the first two films as a complete character who maintains her dignity through the ordeals of poverty-stricken village life and is later reduced to grief by the loss of a child. The wife, Aparna (Sharmila Tagore), brings conjugal bliss to Apu's life in *Apur Sansar* and is seen scribbling a message on her husband's cigarette packet, reminding him to smoke less. All these women affect Apu's life and learning in various ways. Indir Thakrun is no less spirited than Sarbajaya, as she vehemently supports Durga against Sarbajaya, packs a few belongings and leaves the house after several insults from Sarbajaya. Ray inspires pathos and pity by showing her in a close shot, trying to thread a needle to mend her tattered shawl. Her wistful singing of a folk song in which she beseeches a boatman to take her to the other side of the river reflects her anticipation of approaching death.

Durga, Apu's sister, dies young and seems a great fighter and survivor. Her skills of surviving even in petty matters like stealing fruit and escaping her mother's wrath emerge from her love for her old aunt. Her childlike activities and innocence make her very uncomplaining and optimistic. However, she is very much aware of her position in the house, being a girl child in comparison to her brother and goes through her regular dose of prescriptions and proscriptions from her mother for behaving and acting like gender-stereotyped roles defined for her in society.

Satyajit Ray shows Durga's battle with fever through association and careful camera movements. The house is lit mildly by the candlelight, crude shadows formed from it, and the fierce wind outside hitting the door ominously anticipates Durga's worsening condition leading to her death. The mother-daughter duo is shown holding on to each other on that windy night, and the next shot shows the daylight and material damage caused by the storm. No announcement of Durga's death is made, and Sarbajaya is shown holding her daughter in her lap, as is pretty evident from

this series of shots. The magnitude of this loss is intensified by situational irony when a neighbour comes and genuinely wishes good health for the child without knowing that the child is no more. However, Hood believes that "Sarbjaya's pride keeps her aloof from sympathy" (14).

At the centre of *Aparajito* lies the great bond of love between a mother and a son – Sarbjaya and Apu. This bond is depicted in the very first lines of Sarbjaya concerning Apu. She seems to be worried about his education, which is ironic as education will later on create a gulf between the two. Despite her constant efforts to see her son succeed, she is unhappy because his success means that Apu will leave his mother. Apu's determination to leave and her requests to stop him create tension between the two, and this tension is brought about very artistically by Ray using just a globe and hurricane lamp in the shot. The globe is a motif which represents 'Apu's vision and the extent of his freedom to which he aspires.' Meanwhile, the hurricane lamp represents the storm in his relationship with his mother, which is brought about by his plan to leave the house. For Sarbjaya, this storm is momentary, for her motherly affection and sacrificial nature, against her wish for him to stay; she bravely frees him to go and even manages funds from her meagre savings.

Ray's fatalism is very well reflected and not highlighted in this film, for he believed in saying things subtly. As J. W. Hood (44) opines, Ray has great sympathy for individuals' small victories, their battles with their circumstances, their courage and perseverance in troubled times, and their vulnerabilities. He shows this without highlighting it but by showing it with simplicity. Words are used minimally, and the camera can capture various shades and ranges of moods and emotions of individuals and the setting. In *Apur Sansar*, times changed from tradition to modernity, but tradition did not lose its force. Aparna is presented like other Hindu girls who worshipped Lord Shiva from childhood, prayed for a husband like him, and

believed that correct behaviour meant following the husband to the ends of the earth in happiness and sorrow. Aparna's behaviour in leaving her affluence to go and live with her husband in his attic was quite natural. When she is, for a moment, alone in the attic, she cries as the reality sinks in. This scene is pictured with the camera focusing on the left side of her face through a large keyhole in the tattered curtain. She then recovers herself in a point-of-view shot of a woman and a small child in the yard.

Ray's portrayal of women in films like *Devi* (1960) and *Charulata* (1964) showcases a different dimension of resilience and fortitude. In *Devi*, the young Doyamoyee is thrust into an unimaginable situation when her father-in-law, Kalikinkar, dreams that she is an incarnation of the goddess Kali. This belief, driven by his religious fervour, leads to her deification, where she is worshipped by villagers and treated as a divine figure. In *Devi*, the title music sets the film's pace and allows the audience to anticipate the impending doom. The music associated with heavy cymbals garbs the gloom under the external and visible joy of annual worship rituals. These rituals at the film's beginning are associated with the immersion of the Goddess Durga, which sets the drama to be unfolded later in the film. Its effect is of a pervading gloom in a fatalist fashion, with most scenes shot at night. Dark silhouettes and loud temple music add to this effect; scenes shot in long establishment shots, wide angles, big close-ups, heavy movements and multiple perspective shots all add up to the drama and grandeur of the film.

Despite the overwhelming psychological and societal pressures placed upon her, Doyamoyee's tragic endurance and her quiet suffering reflect a stoic resilience in the face of a patriarchal society's irrational beliefs. Her endurance is marked by silent suffering as she struggles to reconcile her sense of self with the god-like status that others have forced upon her. Doyamoyee's fortitude is particularly evident in her interactions with her husband, Umaprasad,

who initially tries to rescue her from the clutches of superstition. Her inability to break free from the situation, despite her husband's urging, reflects the depth of her internal conflict and the strength required to navigate the immense pressures her family and society placed upon her. Her tragic end—marked by the death of a child whom she was believed to have the power to heal—underscores the destructive impact of the role she was forced to inhabit. However, it also highlights the extent of her resilience and endurance until her breaking point. Harasundari, Doyamoyee's sister-in-law, represents another facet of resilience and fortitude in *Devi*. Although she is a secondary character, her quiet strength and support for Doyamoyee are significant. Harasundari's fortitude is also evident in the way she upholds her familial responsibilities despite the chaos that ensues. She does not openly challenge the patriarchal structures, but her stoic acceptance of the situation while offering compassion to Doyamoyee demonstrates a subtle yet profound inner strength. Fatalism is a dominant force running through the film where Doyamoyee and Harasundari, despite having strength, cannot stand up against the forces of nature and society, leading to Doyamoyee's tragic end. Through the characters of Doyamoyee and Harasundari, Ray not only critiques the superstitions and patriarchal norms of the time but also portrays the resilience and fortitude of women who navigate these oppressive structures. The film highlights the psychological and emotional toll that such beliefs can exact on women while also showcasing their capacity to endure, even in the face of overwhelming odds.

In *Charulata*, Ray explores the emotional and intellectual resilience of a woman trapped in a lonely marriage. There is a kind of distance in the relationship between Bhupati and Charulata until the arrival of Amal. Lakshmi Pradeep's article published online in 2015 in *Economic and Political Weekly* states, "Ray introduces silence to represent the articulations of difference and statements of resistance and

protest" (*Rays of Hope* n.pg.). The opening scene, which uses the metaphor of looking through the opera glass without dialogue for the first eight minutes, expresses Charulata's loneliness and thoughtfulness. A kind of cultural tension is shown in her married life through the décor of the house. Bengali novels are on the bookshelves, but the furniture, paintings, the piano, and sculpture in the garden are Western. The tension between Indian and Western does not end here. Charulata is a reader of Bengali books and Bhupati is an anglophile. In this sense, Hood believes that "Charulata's position is a metaphor for a colonial possession struggling for freedom from an imperial power, making Amal's bridge quite inadequate to the task" (263). The use of moods of nature to reinforce human emotions is stunningly employed in *Charulata*. The storm in the movie is a metaphor for the storm brewing in Charu's mind. Her resilience is seen in her pursuit of intellectual fulfilment and emotional independence. Ray presents her with fortitude, and despite her circumstances, Charulata finds strength in her creativity and intellect, which gives her a sense of identity beyond her roles as wife and companion. As Shohini Ghosh states, "Multiple images from her growing up years in the village are superimposed over a close-up of Charu's face as she undergoes an intensely synaesthetic experience" (93). Ray cleverly uses a swing motif in the garden where Charulata and Amal discuss their literary creativity. Ray's characters seem to be flowing rhythmically, with the rhythm of their destiny guiding them. Charulata is shown sitting on the gently rocking swing where the camera glides towards the ground, capturing the crumpled pieces of paper, her rejected efforts of literary endeavour lying along with dead leaves. The camera then tracks her arms to her face with the garden and the sky in the background as a symbol of freedom—here, freedom of literary expression and creativity. After Amal's departure, Charu leaves her bedroom to cry in her personal space, where she is shown "reconciling herself to her loss by constructing a wholly private, inner mental

space like a dungeon or a tunnel or a cell, where she can yield herself entirely to her grief and love" (Chaudhuri 105).

In *Mahanagar* (1963), Ray explores the resilience of a middle-class housewife, Arati, who steps out of the domestic sphere to work and support her family. The in-laws and husband struggle to come to terms with this cultural shock. The film depicts the modern woman's resilience and the sense of achievement, independence, camaraderie and conflict that comes with the work-life scenario. It is a testament to Arati's fortitude as she navigates the challenges of balancing work, family expectations, and societal norms. Her resilience is not only in her ability to work but also in her moral courage, as seen in her decision to resign from her job when her principles are compromised. Arati's journey reflects the quiet strength of women who challenge traditional roles while maintaining dignity and integrity.

In *Ghare-Baire* (1984), adapted from a Rabindranath Tagore novel of the same title, shot in the backdrop of the Swadeshi movement, Bimala is a woman caught between tradition and modernity during the Bengal Renaissance. Her resilience is seen in her struggle to reconcile her loyalty to her husband, Nikhil, with her attraction to the charismatic nationalist leader, Sandip. Bimala's journey is one of self-discovery, where she learns to navigate the complexities of her emotions and the socio-political forces around her. Although her fate is tragic, Bimala's character arc highlights the resilience required to question and ultimately break free from the confines of traditional gender roles.

In *Samapti*, part of the anthology film *Teen Kanya* (1961), Ray portrays the resilience of Mrinmoyee, a young woman with a free-spirited nature who is forced into an arranged marriage. Initially resisting her role as a wife, Mrinmoyee's journey is one of gradual acceptance and adaptation, where she asserts her independence while learning to navigate her

new life. Her resilience is seen in her ability to maintain her individuality and spirit despite the constraints of marriage, ultimately transforming the relationship on her terms.

Findings

Satyajit Ray's use of realism, minimalist dialogues, and long takes in his films underscores life's slow, inevitable unfolding, mirroring the concept of fate as an omnipresent force. The pacing and visual storytelling often evoke a sense of life's continuity, with individual stories being just a part of a more significant, inexorable flow. This aesthetic choice enhances the portrayal of traditional Indian fatalism, making viewers feel the weight of the characters' predetermined lives. His films offer a complex portrayal of traditional Indian fatalism, neither fully endorsing nor entirely rejecting it. While his characters often appear bound by fate, Ray simultaneously highlights their struggles for agency, suggesting a more dynamic interplay between destiny and personal choice. By doing so, Ray's films not only reflect traditional fatalistic beliefs but also challenge them, offering a more nuanced view of human existence in the context of Indian culture. This dual approach makes Ray's films deeply resonant and thematically rich, inviting viewers to contemplate the balance between fate and free will in their own lives.

Satyajit Ray's portrayal of women's resilience is marked by a deep empathy and understanding of the complexities of their lives. His female characters, whether enduring poverty, loneliness, societal expectations, or emotional turmoil, are depicted as possessing a quiet but profound strength. Ray's films celebrate women's fortitude, highlighting their ability to survive, adapt, and assert their agency in a world that often seeks to limit them. Through these characters, Ray critiques the societal structures that constrain women and illuminates women's power and resilience, even in the most challenging circumstances.

Conclusion

Resilience and fortitude are central to Satyajit Ray's films, providing a counterbalance to the themes of fatalism and hardship. His characters, whether in rural or urban settings, male or female, young or old, are often portrayed as enduring immense challenges with quiet dignity and strength. Ray's exploration of these themes offers a deeply humanistic perspective, celebrating the enduring spirit of individuals who, despite overwhelming odds, find ways to survive, adapt, and sometimes even triumph.

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