

## 'MANASHI' OR 'MANUSHI'- SATYAJIT RAY'S TREATMENT OF WOMEN

Dr.Saumitra Chakravarty\*

### Abstract

*This paper attempts to analyse the de-mythologisation of Indian and particularly Bengali womanhood, that in the author's opinion, is to be found in Satyajit Ray's movies. These myths have been erected by the male ego, the male conscience and the male gaze. Diverse factors have contributed to the build-up of these stereotypes in pre- and post-Independence periods. These factors have been studied during the course of this paper.*

*Yet Ray never consciously espoused Causes, not even feminist ones. His women, chosen from different strata of Bengali society, wage a silent, sensitive battle of their own, without compromising their essential femininity. He also shows several women at the crossroads between two worlds embodying different levels of liberation—between the 'pracheena' and the 'nabeena', the lower class and the upper class, childhood and adolescence. Ray's women, despite the overwhelming odds, sometimes battle with and survive and are creatures of superior moral sensibility. They often act as conscience keepers to their men. Never is it a spectacular triumph nor a strident moral statement that they proclaim. Ray simply lets human nature run its course, his camera's gaze, gentle, subtle and significant.*

The transition from 'manashi' to 'manushi', is a translation of a dream woman into her flesh and blood counterpart. It is, to my mind, the essence of

---

\* Dr. Saumitra Chakravarty is currently Head of Dept of English and Vice-Principal of V.V.S. First Grade College, Bangalore. e-mail: saumitra@postmark.net

Satyajit Ray's treatment of women in his films. It leads to the mythologisation of the concept of woman as she has been treated in life and viewed on the screen. This issues a poignant challenge to a series of myths created through the ages by the male ego and the male conscience and since the advent of the silver screen and the media, by the male gaze.

Any social analysis of the problems of a community is normally a monolithic one in so far as it discusses with one voice, the broad generalised face of the experience of suffering and enslavement. The historic reality of the nationalist struggle in India had tended to devalue and discourage attention to the gender issues within different strata of Indian society. And if the woman's issue was at all in centre-stage, it was through the spectacular facets of 'sati', child marriage or child widowhood, which would titillate the public's seditious appetite for suffering. Roger Marvell notes that even in Hollywood, the earliest films used woman as a prize for virtue. Quick money for a successful film could be got through offering substitute sexual indulgence of three hours in the theatre watching bathing belles and sirens on the silent screen. In India, in the nationalist struggle itself, woman was often exploited as a symbol and a power, as Mahasweta Devi notes in her short story, *Mayer Murti* (The Image of the Mother), but never really lent a voice or individual human face.

But Satyajit Ray's camera shifts from the spectacular to the silent, unsung stories that were enacted behind the scenes in humdrum homes, the quiet of the countryside, and the altar of the matrimonial chapel, where the woman's personality was quietly sacrificed or surrendered. For Ray hated labels, and banners alienated him instinctively - even labels of femininity and banners of feminism. His heroines, often chosen from the most unlikely sources, defy conventional notions of what a female lead in an Indian movie looks like or acts or speaks, at a time when alternative cinema was hardly in existence in India. To quote a few examples, for *Pather Panchali*, Ray's all-time classic of 1955, he chose the 80 year old Chunibala Devi, an opium addict for the significant role of Indir Thakurun from the red light district of Calcutta - a little old woman with a bent body, a crooked hip and a surprisingly sharp mind who carried her role even beyond the limits of perfection set by the maestro himself. Chandana Banerjee, Ratan of the film, *Postmaster*, in the Tagore trilogy, *Three Daughters*, was picked up from a dance school and Karuna Banerjee, Sarbojaya of *Pather Panchali* was his journalist friend's wife who had serious reservations about acting in a film. When Ray did choose screen

celebrities like Aparna Sen or Sharmila Tagore, they were de-glamourised to defuse the myth of feminine lure on the screen.

Yet his female characters are intensely feminine and many of them do play what has been decried as stereotyped roles in feminist terminology. Only Ray does not look at them from the male perspective of the stereotype. His films provide a picture gallery of women from all strata of society in different moods at different stages of their lives. One of Ray's most famous scenes is that of Apu and Durga, in *Pather Panchali*, running through the fields of tall white "kaash" flowers to see a train. Durga is a village girl caught at the crossroads between the freedom of childhood and the forced confinement with the onset of puberty. It is the twilight period of a girl child's life that Bengali writer Suchitra Bhattacharya describes in her short story, *Bikel Phuriye Jaaye*. Durga, like Mrinmoyee in *Samapti*, the second of Ray's Tagore trilogy, who is aptly called Paglee (madcap), is wild and rebellious. Durga regularly raids the neighbour's orchards for guavas to the utter humiliation of her mother. Mrinmoyee escapes on her wedding night by sliding a tree to spend the night on her favourite swing by the river with her pet squirrel Chorky. She throws a ferocious tantrum when caught and confined. But marriage eventually matures her and she returns to the fold with the first faint signs of sexual desire stirring in her. Durga does not survive the assault on her childlike innocence by the dictates of society. She dies of fever after getting drenched in a rainstorm in a fit of defiance. Ray makes another powerful point here. Durga may be poor village girl but she is the daughter of a Brahmin priest and has consequently refused to have her freedom circumscribed by the limits of upper caste respectability. As Bibhuti Bhushan Banerjee, author of *Pather Panchali*, puts it:

"Durga was a big girl now, and her mother would let her go to parties away from home. She had almost forgotten what 'luchis' tasted like. Until a little while ago, when the nights were bright with the full moon of September and the paths through the bamboo grove was like a thread woven of light and shade, she used to wander all round the village and come back with her saree full of sweets and dried, pressed and toasted rice, for the Lakshmi festival. At this time of the year conches were being blown in every house and all along the path floated the smell of frying 'luchis'.... This year Sejabou (their neighbour) had said to their mother, 'It isn't right for a girl of a good family to wander round from house to house collecting sweets as if she were a peasant girl. It doesn't look nice.' So from then she was not allowed to go." (Robinson, p.76)

Whereas the peasant girl was simply allowed to follow her instincts, the 'bhadramahila' had her existence severely curtailed by the norms of respectability. This theme acquires further ramifications in a movie like *Asani Sanket*. This movie focuses on the many connotations of the word 'hunger'. With essential commodities rapidly rising beyond the reach of the common man, thousands died of hunger. But the famine excited a ferocious sexual hunger too. Ananga, the beautiful Brahmin wife, is assaulted by a city dweller as she rummages for yam in the forest. But Chutki, the peasant woman, rescues Ananga, who is too helpless and delicate to defend herself. In a violent reaction, Chutki beats the assailant to death. The same Chutki cannot resist the temptation of food and runs away with a scar-faced man from the city who offers a handful of rice. Unlike Ananga, Chutki is practical. She would rather live with dishonour than die of starvation.

On the other hand, characters like Charulata, Sarbojaya, Arati or Ananga are all typical wives from conventional Bengali households of different strata of society, adequately fulfilling the responsibility demanded by their situation. Yet each one wages a sensitive, silent battle of her own in her own way without compromising her essential womanhood. For Sarbojaya in *Pather Panchali*, it is grim battle for survival against dire poverty. In her red bordered white saree drawn tightly over her bare body, meagre red and white bangles clicking in day and night toil, she curses and grumbles and battles the neighbour's snide remarks. She generally emerges as the village shrew, particularly in her callous treatment of the old crone Inder Thakurun, that extra mouth in her destitute household. Her relentless chastisement of her rebellious daughter Durga, drives the girl to more and more daring antics. Yet as she sits with the feverous and hallucinating Durga in her arms on the night of the storm, Ray pours into the spectacle of those large, haunted eyes, all the emotion a mother can conceive. And at the moment of Durga's death with the storm raging on, Ray substitutes the human cry of the mother with the high wail of the 'tarshenai', thus transcending the limits of individual grief into what noble Laureate Saul Bellow has called, 'the cry of the universal mother'.

The image of Charulata peering out through the shutters of a large Victorian mansion at the monkeyman performing his antics on the streets outside, is that of a woman encapsulated in an incompanionate marriage. Victorian mansions strewn with expensive bric-a-brac were common settings in Ray's movies, in *Charulata*, in *Monihara* of the Tagore trilogy, and much later, in

*Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World). They convey what Mrinalini Sinha calls in her essay, the notions of bourgeois domesticity and the ideals of Victorian womanhood, introduced through British rule in India. They were part of the '*bhadramahila*' code imposed upon the hapless woman by the upper middle class in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She, with her new gift of literacy, was defined in opposition to the women of the lower economic strata, who had fewer norms to abide by and enjoyed a greater degree of freedom. That is an issue I have already discussed in an earlier section of this article. Charu, like Arati of *Mahanagar*, is caught in the dichotomy between the *pracheena* (the conventional woman) and the *nabeena*. The emergence of the new woman shows us sensitive intelligent young women caught in a conservative environment. As Charulata flits from room to room, through the vast spaces of the mansion, she pauses to embroider a "B" into a handkerchief for her husband or to order a meal to be sent to his workplace - all conventional wifely duties. The resonant chiming of the grandfather clock accentuates her loneliness, however. And then she abruptly picks up a volume of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's works from the shelf as she playfully sings out his name. It is all so naturally done, but it defines a dramatic moment in her identity. Bankim becomes the emotional link between the sensitive Charu (played by Ray's most finely attuned actress, Madhabi Mukherjee) and her young brother-in-law, who comes visiting. The relationship between the *debar*, the young brother-in-law and the *bowdi*, the elder brother's wife, is a beautiful, sensitive one in Bengali society. Tagore's short story, *Nashtoneed* (The Destroyed Nest), upon which Ray's film is based, was the result of his own relationship with Kadambari Devi, his brother Jyotirindranath Tagore's young wife - two kindred souls in poetry. But here again, Charu becomes the victim of the dichotomy between *manashi* and *manushi*. The lonely Charu draws closer and closer to Amal. Bankim and poetry unite them. The words of the Tagore song *Ogo Bideshini, Tomay Dekechi sindhu pare*, which Ray uses as his leit motif, establishes her as a *manashi*, which the ambitious Amal unconsciously exploits as his poetic inspiration, even as Tagore himself did and then betrays. As he publishes his poems in a literary magazine and rushes in flushed with triumph, he has broken his promise to her not to publicise these poems. She withdraws in quiet anger. And when he leaves abruptly after becoming aware of her growing attachment to him, he is afraid of betraying his brother who is already facing economic collapse due to a partner's treachery. Charu collapses in a paroxysm of grief.

In *Mahanagar*, Arati (again played by Madhabi Mukherjee), is the anchor of

a lower middle class household in post-independence Calcutta. Once again we have the clash between the *pracheena* and the *nabeena*. The husband and the in-laws define a woman's place within the home. But the beautiful, young wife wants to work to lighten the family's economic burden. She takes up a job as saleswoman of knitting machines, having gently won the battle for independence at home. The extra goodies that her salary brings home placate the older generation, but hurts her husband's male ego as sole breadwinner. She cannot bring herself to resign however, despite the marital tensions. Gender harassment in the workplace when her Anglo-Indian colleague Edithe is unjustly dismissed, causes her to slap down her resignation just when her husband has lost his own job. She has fought for economic justice for her sex in the workplace and struggled sensitively with her husband to recognise the labour she performs at home. But *Mahanagar* is no feminist testament. As her jobless husband desperately rushes upto her office, she refuses to retract her resignation. She lays her head upon his shoulder and glances around with wonder at the tall buildings of the *mahanagar*, Calcutta - "Such a big city...so many jobs...there must be something somewhere for one of us." And on that note of choice, Ray ends the movie.

The beautiful Ananga is the priest's wife in *Asani Sanket* (Distant Thunder), a movie based on Bibhuti Bhushan Banerjee's novel about the terrible Bengal famine of 1943 which inspired Amartya Sen's economic philosophy. Western critics had called Ananga (played by the Bangladeshi actress, Babita) too luscious a morsel, for a famine-struck village. But Ray was not perturbed. He set out to define the 'man-made' ferocity of the famine by establishing the contrast between the lushness and bounty of Nature and the cruelty of man. A Brahmin priest's wife is unused to the physical labour that village women are required to do - her husband himself survives on the offerings of the villagers. But as prices of grain soar, Ananga gently breaks social barriers, to the amused disbelief of her husband. Her hands which have been shown in an earlier shot, wafting upon the surface of the vilage pond like beautiful water lilies (*shaluk* and *shapla*) as she bathes, are now engaged in de-husking rice. And by the light of the oil lamp, the same hand holds out a morsel of precious rice, the search for which has frustrated her husband as sole breadwinner.

According to sociologist Partho Chatterjee, quoted in Mrinalini Sinha's essay, "rearticulation of Indian womanhood was crucial in the resolution of the constitutive contradiction in the formation of an Indian identity" (Joan Wallach Scott, p.481). The crux of the problem, he believes, lay in the modernisation of the nation on Western models and at the same time, retaining an Indian identity. On one level, particularly in the period preceding independence, it could also be defined as the clash between the material and the spiritual. And within the confines of the household, that last fraction of uncolonised space, the essential spiritual Indianness was enforced upon the women by their own menfolk. Women, he says, became the guardians of the spiritual self of the nation within the home as they struggled to live out the myths of Indian womanhood. And having an identity of their own was certainly not part of the myth. Subarnolatha, in Bengali writer Ashapura Devi's second novel of her famous trilogy, longs for a balcony in her new home which symbolises for her, free air and a fistful of sky. It is denied to her however, perhaps as punishment for having a mind of her own and for reading poetry. But at this point, it is necessary to state two other related facts that came into play to decide the role of Indian, and particularly Bengali women. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's identification of Desh with Durga in the 5th verse of the *Bande Mataram*, revived the myth of Woman as Shakti. The nationalists were quick to exploit her as a symbol in their movement as shown by Satyajit Ray in *Ghare Baire*. But in practice, freedom from convention remained a myth within the upper class home though many women did join the swadeshi movement triggered off by Lord Curzon's Partition of Bengal. Secondly, the middle class consciousness having suffered a beating in the public sphere - in society and the work place - sought to assert itself in the private domain, where the patriarch's word became law. This is vividly portrayed by Ray in what Andrew Robinson has called his most 'Hindu' movie, *Devi (The Goddess)*. Doyamoyee (played by Sharmila Tagore), is a young and beautiful girl in a landlord's manor in a village, away from her rationalist husband who is studying in Calcutta. As she sits preparing for the worship of Kali in the family temple, her rich orthodox father-in-law has a vision in which the goddess is identified with his young daughter-in-law. The Oedipal connotation of the dream cannot be denied. In the background we hear Ramprasad's *Kalikeertan*. Thus begins the reincarnation of Doyamoyee as Kali, the transformation of a *manushi* into a religious *manashi*, the slaughter of innocence upon the altar of orthodoxy and superstition. Feminist writer Suchitra Bhattacharya uses this idea in her short story *Bikel Phuriye Jaaye*, where a bright young schoolgirl, is installed as Kali by the family godman leading to the tragic death of the child.

With the Bengal Renaissance, goddess cults were common as Hinduism revivalism surged through Bengali society as a counter-reaction to the monotheism of the Brahmo Samaj which many saw as akin to Christianity, the religion of the rulers. The theme of female deification has been used by Mahasweta Devi in her short stories *Jahnavi* and *Sanjh Saakaler Maa* (Dusk to Dawn Mother). Doyamoyee herself comes to contribute to her own myth when a village lad is cured by her to the ringing of bells and the blowing of conches. The myth collapses however, when she fails to save the sole heir to the Zamindari whom her father-in-law has placed in her arms, much against the helpless mother's wishes. It is also in a way the defeat of the fertility symbol in a mother goddess. She loses her sanity, runs away from the mansion and vanishes into the mist as the accelerated drum beats ironically announcing the immersion ceremony of the goddess.

As Robinson tells us, the word 'Ma' becomes a dreaded symbol of victimisation within the zamindar's household. Even the parrot in its cage screeches the words 'Ma, Ma' as Doyamoyee touches the cage. Elsewhere however, Ray uses the theme of motherhood with varying emphasis. In *Samapti* (the concluding part of the Tagore trilogy), Mrinmoyee, the young bride wears paisley shaped earrings as fertility symbols. In *Postmaster*, the orphaned little waif plays mother to the village postmaster and nurses him back to health after an attack of malaria. Sarbojaya in *Pather Panchali*, represents the grief of the universal mother. In the short film *Pikoo*, a woman (played by Aparna Sen), in an adulterous relationship, is above all a mother. As she watches from a bedroom window the lonely little figure of her son in the garden, bent over she and her lover ply him with, tears spring to her eyes. Aparna Sen found no lack of realism in the scene in the clash of relationships. She felt that in an Indian society, women are left with very few sexual choices, a theme she exploited to great effect in her own film *Paroma*. In Ray, Bimola in *Ghare Baire*, Karuna in *Kapurush* (Coward) and Monimalika in *Monihara* (the second part of the Tagore trilogy), are all childless women caught at marital crossroads. Of these, Monimalika alone deals with the problem by directing her passion to ornaments. She emerges as a cruel, avaricious woman probably unique in Ray's gallery. In her large Victorian mansion, she is obsessed with her gold jewellery which her husband plies her with, in a vain effort to win her love. When his business fails and her gold is vaguely threatened, she flees his mansion, adorned from head to toe in her jewels with a crazy gleam in her eye. She never returns. Only a skeletal bejewelled hand shoots out to clutch the jewel box in the mansion, accompanied by manic laughter.



The emergence of the *nabeena* from the old, discarded shell of a *pracheena*, is perhaps best expressed in *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World) based upon Tagore's novel. Set against the Swadeshi movement after the partition of Bengal, the novel offers the conflicting viewpoints of Tagore and Gandhi to the mode of the struggle. It is in the form of the diaries of Bimola, her husband Nikhil and her lover Sandip, the revolutionary. Here, in the movie, Ray shows us how a woman handles the element of 'choice'. Bimola (played by stage actress Swatilekha Chatterjee), is the subject of an experiment conducted by her liberated husband Nikhil to test the strength of their marriage. He brings her out of purdah, introduces her to Western education and above all to his friend Sandip. The experiment is a disaster. Bimola gets physically attracted to Sandip or rather to the lure of the *Bande Mataram* mantra which he exploits for his selfish ends, just as he exploits her. Her husband's brand of nationalism pales in contrast to his fiery speeches. Nikhil's *manashi* cannot handle the element of 'choice'. To quote Nikhil's words in Tagore's novel,

"All at once my heart was full with the thought that my Eternal Love is steadfastly waiting for me through the ages, below a veil of material things. Through many a life, in many a mirror, have I seen her image-broken mirrors, crooked mirrors, dusty mirrors. Whenever I have sought to make the mirror my very own, and shut it up within my box, I have lost sight of the image. But what of that? What have I to do with the mirror, or even the image?" (Robinson, p273)

At the end of the twentieth century, Deepa Mehta carried the question of 'choice' to its logical extreme. If Aparna Sen's *Paroma* showed a purely heterosexual relationship as a way out for a middle aged woman taken for granted in a marriage, in a bond with a much younger man, *Fire* offered the choice of a bi-sexual one.

In *Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama* (Feminist Theatre and Theory), Janelle Reinelt believes that in the feminist perspective, the personal is political and this demands the dramatisation of personal emotional life, drawing on to some extent, the techniques of traditional bourgeois realism. "Epic techniques, on the other hand, place the personal, individual experience of characters within their socio-political context, widening the focus to include the community and its social, economic and sexual relations." (Helene Keyssar, p.46)

Ray uses the first technique in his treatment of *Charulata* and the second in his handling of *Bimola*. Tagore firmly believed that terrorism defiles a movement.

Insane acts of hatred are committed in the name of nationalism. In *Ghare-Baire* as in *Char Adhyay* (Four Cantos), we see the canker eroding personal relationships. Ironically the first victim of mob fury is Bimola's English governess. Robinson humorously informs us that *Ghare Baire* boasted the first full-blooded kiss in a Ray movie. But if the commercial Indian film offers voyeuristic delight to the male gaze by the fragmentation of the female form, Ray can turn a potentially provocative situation into a sensitive or poignant one. In *Nayak*, for instance, as the female journalist approaches the matinee idol for his autograph, she takes her pen out of her blouse, to which she has it clipped, a gesture common among the students of the day. It could have been suggestive in a movie shot. But Sharmila Tagore's brisk, no-nonsense attitude, her thick black framed spectacles turn her into a person rather than just a beautiful body. The bathing scene in *Asani Sanket* (Distant Thunder), shows Babita neck-deep in water in the village pond, head demurely covered and the camera imaginatively focuses on the graceful movement of her hands on the surface of the water. All these could have been sources of exploitation. Similarly in Ketan Mehta's film *Mirch Masala*, Sonbai is desired by the Subedar, but we never see the camera focussing on Smita Patel from his angle of desire. Instead, she emerges as an image of Kali with a sickle in her hand and the blood-haze of chilly powder in the background.

However, not all Ray heroines remain platonic *manashis* in the male imagination. The question of sex does arise in a Ray movie, either subtly or even overtly as in the bedroom scenes of the short film *Pikoo*. An earlier Ray would have simply hinted at the idea. In *Aparajito*, the second part of the Apu trilogy, the oily landlord tries to make a pass at Sarbojaya as she cooks in the kitchen, her husband in his sick bed in the next room. Having taken off his shiny pump shoes, he enters her woman's domain with the words, "Bouthan, are you making *paan*?" The handing over of a carefully made *paan* is loaded with sexual connotations to a Bengali audience. Sarbojaya threatens him with the kitchen blade. In *Aranyer Din Ratri* (Days and Nights in the Forest), based on Sunil Ganguli's novel, the forest robs the young men from Calcutta, of their middle class inhibitions. As Shekhar makes love to a tribal girl, Duli (Simi Garewal) on the forest floor, Sanjay follows Jaya (Kaveri Bose) indoors for a cup of tea. He sits waiting while the coffee gets cold. Suddenly she appears before him dressed in Santhal jewellery bought at the village fair. The scene is dramatic and intense. Beads of perspiration break out on Sanjay's forehead. "Nervous?" she asks him softly. "No", he answers, his tongue dry.

"I am", she gasps and places his hand over her heart. But he lacks the courage to continue. All through the film, Kaveri Bose gives a compelling performance as a lonely widow, with carnal desire barely held at bay. The forest does arouse primeval instincts which lie below the surface of the city-bred conscience as it does in Goutam Ghosh's recent film *Dekha* (Sight), where a young divorcee struggling to support her little boy, suddenly succumbs to her primal hunger with a blind tribal singer in the forest bungalow. In Ray's *Aranyer Din Ratri*, the contrast between the vibrant flesh and blood Jaya and pale, shadowy sister-in-law Aparna (Sharmila Tagore) continues throughout the movie. Jaya emerges as the stronger and more passionate character. Aparna, cold and distant, makes a fetish of her grief for the suicides of brother and mother and cannot bond. In addition, Sharmila Tagore's Bombay-coy, as Robinson puts it and her fashionable hair-do and clothes, for once discernable in a Ray movie, hardly attract the viewer's sympathy and are definite weaknesses by Ray standards.

Unfulfilled sexual desire is a recurring theme in *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary), one of the three films Robinson clubbed as the Calcutta trilogy. Once again, as in *Ghare Baire*, Ray places his characters against the larger background of the political movement in the Calcutta of the 1970's - a movement that saddened and disgusted him. Thousands of bright, promising young men were sucked into the vortex of the violent Naxalite uprising. It was a peasant insurrection that begun in the tea-gardens of North Bengal and spread rapidly to the University campuses and streets of Calcutta. By the early 1970's Calcutta was in flames. While the West Pakistani army committed incredible atrocities upon the people of east Pakistan, bombings and shooting echoed across the streets of Calcutta. The retribution by the Congress Government of the day, was swift and savage. Thousands of young men were rounded up and slaughtered in cold blood or lynched by angry mobs as Mahashweta Devi vividly depicts in her novel *Hazaar Churashir Ma* (The Mother of No. 1084). Refugees poured in from Bangladesh giving rise to a critical situation. Calcutta was virtually a city under siege. The title of a Ray movie dubs it a *Jana Aranya*, where the ferocious survival instincts of the forest predominated. In such a situation, the Calcutta trilogy descends repeatedly into the world of flesh and takes us into the red-light trilogy district of Calcutta. But Ray's camera handles the scenes with great subtlety. Unemployed young men fantasize about sex and spend vague, meaningless afternoons seeing movies which turn out to be damp squibs. Siddhartha, in *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary),

is dragged by a friend to a Nurse's apartment. She is also a prostitute. As she slowly takes off her nurse's uniform, Ray turns the shot into a negative. Siddhartha sees a well-built sexy girl crossing the street. Ray uses the flashback technique and Siddhartha remembers a lecturer in medical college teaching them about the anatomy of the female breast. Innocence had been irrevocably compromised and there is a rising note of anger and cynicism in the characters. In *Pratidwandi*, as the young graduate waits out his turn at interminable interviews which are just an eyewash, his sister Sutapa scoffs at her family's notions of respectability. She does not mind compromising her chastity for a raise from her boss. Siddhartha prepares for an angry confrontation with the man for outraging the family honour, but crumples at the last moment and asks for a job instead. In *Jana Aranya* (The Middle Man), Somnath, the unemployed graduate, having waited out his turn at interviews, takes up the *dalal's* business. Sacrifice of values and conscience is complete when he is asked to provide a woman to satisfy a powerful client. The camera switches from the red light districts to middle class drawing rooms where housewives sell their virtues in the quiet of noon, for a supplement to the family income. When a girl is eventually found, she turns out to be the sister of Somnath's best friend, whom poverty has driven to prostitution. As a salve to his already battered conscience, he asks her to take the money and leave, but she will go through what she is paid for. Somnath gets the contract but has lost the battle with his conscience. In the original story by Shankar, he buys a saree for the sister-in-law he adores with the money from the contract. But as he hands it to her, he asks her to wash it as it had "fallen into the mud". In the movie, Somnath enters the darkened family flat as a tainted adult who will always cover behind his own shadow.

In her book *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity*, Myra Macdonald talks of the changing scenario against which the New Woman is pitched in the media. Just as she has access to a wider variety of roles beyond the age old stereotypes, men's images too "are being spasmodically dislodged from their machismo foundations, destabilising the touchstone against which femininity has been traditionally measured." (Macdonald, p.5) In the era of colonisation, a Bengali male had two choices - either to accept his white counterpart as the norm of masculinity, or to assume the romantic role of the revolutionary. With Independence, he was shorn of both and emerged pale and bland with no dramatic veneer to masquerade in. If a Siddhartha and a Somnath are losers in the battle of society, a Shyamalendu in

*Seemabaddha*(Company Limited), remains locked in his social ivory tower while the city burns below his posh flat in high-rise apartment. Tutul, his sister-in-law from his small town past, is his conscience keeper. In spite of his innate sensitivity, his ambition to be company director gets the better of his conscience. He has a lock-out arranged in the company to save a foreign contract - a bomb is hurled during the consequent chaos and a watchman badly injured. The contract is saved, the directorship is his, but the moment of triumph is soured in a dramatic scene, when Tutul wordlessly returns the watch he has lent her and in the next shot, her chair is empty. A Western critic of Ray's once remarked in *Village Voice*, that Ray's women are creatures of superior sensibility and his men often like helpless children. Indeed Ray did admit to looking at them that way. In *Nayak*, the matinee idol's super-image is effectively deflated by a simple question from Aditi, a female journalist of a serious women's magazine:

"In the midst of having so much, don't you experience a certain loneliness?"

Gently prodded on by Aditi, Arindam, the film star unwinds his murky past. She is the one person he does not have to live out a role with:

"You sound like the part of Conscience in a village drama", he says.

"That's what makes you human", she counters with a certain naivete.

Almost none of Ray's heroines are in epoch-making social roles, but each has a sensitivity, a quiet dignity and a social courage to peel off facades and look at the reality within. In fact, hardly any one of them is even a serious careerist like the classical dancer in Rituparno Ghosh's recent movie, *Unishe April* (19th April) who compromises family for career. Her day of reckoning comes when her young doctor daughter, obsessed with memories of her father, contemplates suicide on the very day the mother wins the Sangeet Natak Academy Award. Much of today's alternative cinema in Bengal is about issues and relationships. *Dahan*, by Ghosh is about the attempted molestation of a beautiful young bride on a crowded metro rail station, the social and familial ostracism that follows and a young school mistress' lonely battle to have the guilty punished. Aparna Sen's *Paroma* and *Ek je Ache Kanya* are both powerful feminist statements about relationships beyond the limits of convention. Ray,

with every social, literary and film award in his coffers and the only Indian with an Oscar for lifetime achievement never espoused Causes. He simply let human nature run its natural course, his camera's gaze, gentle, subtle and significant. And like the mist lifting off Kanchenjunga, in his movie to reveal the snow-capped mountain in all its awesome majesty, his images unfurl human character, even at its most unfathomable. The ripples remain long after the last shot has faded from the eye.

## References

- 1) ROBINSON, ANDREW, [1997]. *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, Calcutta: Rupa & Co.
- 2) KEYSSAR, HELENE, [1996]. *Feminist Theatre and Theory: Contemporary Critical Essays*, Macmillan Press Ltd.
- 3) SCOTT, JOAN WALLACH, [1996]. *Feminism and History*, New York: Oxford University Press
- 4) MURPHY, ROBERT ed., [2000]. *British Cinema Of The 90's*, London: British Film Institute
- 5) MACDONALD, MYRA, [1995]. *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity In the Popular Media*, New York: Edward Arnold
- 6) MARVELL, ROGER, [1946]. *Film*, Pelican Books