

Article

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Satyajit Ray, in His Films



Art reflects life.

Whose life does it reflect?

Does it reflect elements of the life of the artist himself or others! A creator not only expresses or recreates the events, experiences, and experiences of his own life in a refined form, but he also absorbs the experiences of others and reproduces them.

While one creator wants to recreate some experiences, feelings, dreams, and imagination of a different person, he has to go through a complex process of understanding, interpretation and innovations. The creator reveals all those accumulated information as his personal and a spell of transformation engross the creator.

It is not an effortless task for a creator to express the compiled information from other's life through songs, stories, novels, poems or paintings. Difficult even in film

media through these media is a combination of all the vital attributes from the other media. This work is further complicated when another writer writes a film's story-screenplay, and another person directs the same.

When a director selects a story written by others to make a film, the filmmaker's tastes, philosophy of life, etc., undoubtedly come first. There is also the possibility of the film adaptation of the story, the advantages and opportunities. Apart from all such points, the filmmaker wants some autobiographical elements in the story. This element can be not only events but also reactions to events, experiences, feelings or imaginations, even events that did not happen in life that he might have liked to have happened. The reconstruction of these elements is not only emotionally intense—it brings to the creator a

'catharsis'—a 'catharsis' essential to the continuity of the artist's creative process. Every artist carries deep in their heart many hopes, dreams, and aspirations that may not come true. Therefore, it is natural that the artist is eager to see that dream come true amid creation. The expression of these imaginations lightens the heavy burden of the artist's mind and heart, creating a space in the brain to welcome new thoughts.

Satyajit Ray has made documentaries and feature films with a wide variety of plots, narratives, themes, backgrounds, characters, tastes, etc. However, sometimes clearly, sometimes mysteriously abstract, like the last light of the evening. Ray's family heritage, family and social status, various events in his personal life, feelings, experiences, dreams and images emerged in his films. Many of these reflections cannot be directly marked as autobiographies. Still, on closer inspection, the structure and appeal of the scenes in the movie and the tone behind its social and personal events are close-knit to his world.

The fundamental similarity between the two films 'Jalsaghar' and 'Shatranj Ki Khilari' is the decline of vastness, a sad form of the piteous fall. The reason for making 'Jalsaghar' was - "The fact was that in late 1956, after the failure of 'Aparajito' at the box office, Satyajit Ray knew he needed a winner. As he said in a letter, 'I am more or less back where I started from. The bank balance is low, and the future looks not too rosy... One thing is certain—I have to make money on it (his next film). I am to continue as a filmmaker and not revert to advertising.'"

Elsewhere, Ray says-".....Aparajito was a failure at Box-office. Since it was a failure, I had to think of doing something

completely different..., and I made a film about music and dancing, the conventional sort of formula that the Bengali public was used to, although in developing it, it became a completely different film."

It is easy to understand from these two quotes that Ray's primary goal was to make a film that would entertain the audience and earn two pennies by combining dance and song.

What encouraged Ray to make 'Shatranj Ki Khiladi'? 'I saw the king as an artist, a composer who contributed to the form of singing that developed in Lucknow. He was a great patron of music—one redeeming feature about the king.'

The story of 'Shatranj Ki Khiladi' takes place during the reign of Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Lucknow. Although the conspiracy and its background to the clever takeover of the kingdom of Wazid Ali Shah, who was absorbed in dance and song, is an essential part of Indian history, this aspect did not influence Ray. Ray focuses on the hopes, aspirations and disappointments of the Nawab's personal life and, in parallel, the private affairs of two drowned Uzirs. Ray, himself says of this attempt to paint a picture of the individual mind in the changing social and political context: "also, to establish the idea of obsession—which is the basic development of the story—with an abstract game and intellectual. If it had been gambling, there'd be no problem. But, the beauty of the story lies in the parallel lines Prem Chand draws between the game and the moves of crafty Raj, leading to the capture of the king."

According to various quotations, both films' dance songs were Ray's major

attraction. Ray's words do not suggest that he paid much attention to the decline and fall of vast zamindari and empires, but the primary appeal of both films is sadness and compassion.

Shatranj Ki Khiladi's dominant story is a heavy pain of decay and compassion. But why did the level of sadness and devastation prevail in 'Jalchaghar' when making films with dance and song? A closer look at the various stages of Ray's life provides a simple answer to this question.

Ray was born into a wealthy, heritage-rich family. The family, which flourished from all angles during the tenure of Upendra Kishore Roy Chowdhury, suffered economic decline within a short period. Upendra Kishore's son and Ray's father, Sukumar Ray, died untimely just a few years after his father's death. The vast empire then collapsed, and eventually, the child Ray was forced to take refuge with his mother in his uncle's house. It is only natural that the child Ray could not understand the reasons behind this tragic outcome of a wealthy situation, but much of that wealth occupied a considerable part of his mind (note: *When I Was Young*/Ray). Advancing age made Ray realise the heritage and prosperity of his family. The accumulation of those realisations and memories gave birth to feelings of sadness and compassion in his mind. Accumulated in mind, it found its way into the films 'Jalchaghar' and 'Shatranj Ki Khiladi'. The similarity between the two films is that Ray does not look for the cause of decay in either movie. As he did not find out the reason for the economic decline of his family (Then the business folded up for reasons which I never found out—Satyajit Ray to Shyam Benegal.)

In the film 'Pather Panchali', Apu's father, Harihar, the poor Brahmin, expresses his longing to earn fame by writing poems. It looks like a minor point and doesn't have much to do with the dominant story—because it doesn't matter anywhere else in the film. So, why does a frugal director like Ray need to pay attention to this brief dialogue? Ray comes from a family in which two generations before him spent much time and effort on literature despite business and abundance. Even when his father, Sukumar Ray, was lying in bed with black fever—when his family business was deteriorating—he continued to write many memorable works of Bengali literature, busy overseeing the printing of his book 'Hoybaral'. Sukumar Roy's passion for work is reflected in Ray's life. Sukumar Roy's spirit of love for literature is expressed in the dialogue of Harihar in 'Pather Panchali'

One of the most notable features of Ray's films is the portrayal of female characters. Overall, there are a few female characters in Ray films. There are almost no significant female characters in the films *Sonar Kella*, *Jaibaba Felunath* and *Gopi-Bagha*. Although a few female characters Ray created reflect the director's respect, sincerity and deep compassion for women. Even when he portrays characters considered obscene from the point of view of social decency, Ray shows deep sympathy and sincere love for those characters. Ray never judged such characters on the scales of morality or wounded them with the arrows of criticism. Ray's female characters are usually stable, tolerant, determined, and able to adapt to life's sorrows, laughter, and tears. These female

characters bravely fight the battle of life instead of admitting defeat.

Two women have profoundly influenced Ray's life. One is his mother, and the other is his wife. The lives and works of these two women fascinated him so that their presence is noticeable among the many female characters created by Ray.

Apu's mother Sarvajaya appears in 'Aparajito', not 'Pather Panchali', and her emotional bond with Apu seems to mirror Ray's relationship with Suprabha Devi.

After the death of Sukumar Roy, Suprabha Devi was forced to return to her mother's house, and her only concern was to provide for her son Ray's education. She shouldered all kinds of hardships and responsibilities for this. After losing her husband, Suprabha Devi, who lives with her only son as her support, she feels mentally lonely after leaving her son in Shantiniketan. Ray, who lost his father in childhood, spent his adolescence in his mother's affection, became eternally curious to satisfy his thirst for knowledge, and had to leave his mother for education in his youth. There is no difference. Ray has rewritten a chapter in his life through Apu-Sarvajaya in the film.

'Mahanagar' is the story of the struggle of Aarti, a middle-class woman who defies adverse family and social circumstances to meet her economic needs and goes out to work. Aarti went out of the house to work in 1955 when it was unthinkable for a daughter-in-law from a prestigious family to go out for ordinary work, even from a joint family.

This appearance of the heroine of 'Mahanagar' coincides with the life of Ray's mother, Suprabha Devi. Ray, himself says, 'I remember her as working. She was a very

hard worker. She was very particular that I should be sent to a good school and eventually to a good college to have the best education. She took a job later.' There is no doubt that Ray's mother's hard work, struggle, determination, and self-confidence inspired him to make 'Mahanagar'. Not only Suprabha Devi but also another daughter-in-law of her family, Kadambini Ganguly and Ray's wife Bijoya Ray, took refuge in jobs to make a living. This confident appearance of women has influenced Ray's female characters. The story of 'Mahanagar' is by Narendra Nath Mitra. It is easy to imagine that Ray was attracted to 'Mahanagar' because he found a reflection of his emotions in the story.

Ray's mother's affectionate, protective nature and friendly relationship with her son—these qualities are not only expressed through Sarvajaya but also through the character of the daughter-in-law in 'Jan-Aranya'. She has also appeared in the role of mother in Kanchanjanga, wife in Seemabadha, doctor's wife and daughter in Ganashatru.

The relationship between the hero and the wife of his elder brother in the film 'Jana Aranya' and the youngest son's relationship with his elder brother's wife reflects the affection and protectiveness of the 'mother-son' combination. It is also a reflection of Satyajit Ray's mental status. These are prominent examples of the philosophy of the relationship between Ray, and his mother is expressed through different characters.

Most critics of 'Ray's film' say without hesitation that the character of Apu is none other than Ray. Apu's life, thoughts, thoughts and behaviour are so similar to Ray's that this character created by Bibhuti Bhushan comes

alive on Ray's camera, unforgettably. In an interview with Shyam Benegal, Ray said:

Shyam: Was there a kind of autobiographical resonance in this film (*Aporajita*)?

Ray: Well, not in 'Pather Panchali' frankly, because I know hardly anything about the village. I was a city-born and city-bred person, and I did not know the village at all till the age of thirty-twenty-five of thirty- but in the second part, the fact of Apu's adolescence and the mother being a widow- the mother and the son relationship that can have autobiographical elements in it certainly because I was in a similar situation.

Benegal: Did you identify with APU?

Ray: I suppose one does. One has to do, particularly when you deal with a character through three films from childhood to adulthood. You do identify. Otherwise, there is no getting under the skin of the character.

Ray, who found similarities with Apu's mental world, tried to keep Apu's physical appearance similar to his own. Therefore, he chose Soumitra Chattopadhyay as the actor for the role of Apu. In terms of the story, Apu is an ordinary, physically unique Bengali youth. Soumitra, whom Ray chose for this character, is of an easily noticeable physical height, higher than the average height of a typical Bengali youth. The intelligent appeal of Soumitra's bright eyes, the profound loneliness and the introversion on his face bear more resemblance to Satyajit Ray's appearance than to Apu.

Just as every director seeks the satisfaction of freedom by expressing his feelings and experiences through the events of the film, he seeks an actor or actress through whom he considers the appropriate vehicle to express himself to intensify that satisfaction.

Therefore, many directors repeat the same actors to describe things as they visualise. Toshiro Mifune and Akira Kurosawa, Max von Sydow and Ingmar Bergman, Jean-Paul Belmondo in Jean-Luc Godard, Harrison Ford in Steven Spielberg, etc., are simple examples of such associations. Each director discovers his reflection or feels him as his alter ego in some particular actor and bring that specific actor to the silver screen to express that reflection.

With Ray-Soumitra, it cannot be said that every character that Soumitra plays reflects Ray. However, most of the characters played by Soumitra reflect Ray. This attachment with Soumitra once put Ray in trouble. Soumitra did not fit in with the role of taxi driver Narasimha in 'Abhiyaan'. According to renowned critic Chidananda Dasgupta, the film was marked as a 'complete failure' because of this mistake in casting. Evidence that Ray liked to imagine Soumitra as an 'alter ego' in his detective novels. The behaviour, curiosity and thirst for knowledge of the detective Feluda, the main character of this mystery series, reflect Ray's persona. Feluda's stories reflect Ray's travel experiences and passion for travel in his childhood and youth. Almost every novel has Feluda's travel plans, and eventually, he has to travel to different places in search of mysteries. Travel plays an essential part in Feluda's mystery stories, and most times, the elements of travel enhance the beauty of the novel, although they have little to do with the main story. The journey and the story of Feluda reveal rebirth, e.g. H.S. P, transcendentalism, etc., are many curious topics. Ray, who expresses a deep interest in such subjects, says:

I don't disbelieve in things like spiritualism, or seance or planchette or extrasensory perception.... I have been reading a great deal about dreams, about memories, about ESP, and rebirth and memories of previous birth and all that I can't bush it all aside (S. R. in Sight and Sound, summer '70).'

These study experiences, Ray's recourse to pen rather than painting, are often expressed through Feluda's mouth. In fact, Ray reveals himself as Feluda. Ray made two films based on the story of Feluda.

When Feluda's stories are published in print, the accompanying illustrations show similarities between Soumitra and the picture of Feluda. Soumitra was inevitably called upon to play the role of Feluda in the film. Ray says of the similarity of Feluda's appearance to his own:

'I'm sure there's a lot of me in him, but I can't tell you to what extent.' Ray's physical similarities with Feluda, Feluda with Soumitra, Soumitra with Ray—these professional relationships quickly show that Ray chose Soumitra to express himself or that Ray appeared physically on the screen through Soumitra.

The film 'Nayak' is often left out of the discussion because of its limited artistic success. Ray's 'magic, the simple poetry of his images and their emotional impact' (Martin Scorsese) cannot be found in this dialogue-dominated film. The film is an expression of the thoughts, feelings, hopes, aspirations, frustrations and anger of the artist Ray. The film seems to express Ray's view of the people in and inside the film industry and their work.

Arindam, the main character or protagonist of 'Nayak', is primarily involved in commercial films. Therefore, it is expected that people from different parts of the film business have flocked to 'Nayak' Ray's position in the film industry is at the opposite pole. Nowhere in 'Nayak' does he satirise, criticise or even belittle the commercial film industry. He only pays harsh attention to the outside catalysts that have polluted the inner world of the commercial film industry.

Ray has never expressed a hostile attitude towards commercial and popular films. He himself has been sponsoring films that entertain the audience and make it easier to understand. However, Ray made 'Nayak' to oppose the mentality of transforming film from art to commodity, against the exploitation of famous filmmakers by other privileged people, and to tell the price of popularity paid by those who become famous through film.

The so-called 'elite' artists and intellectuals have always had a pessimistic view of popular art or artists. Ray expresses this with sharp satire as follows: The editor of a feminist magazine sees the hero Arindam in the train dining car. The editor wants to take advantage of the opportunity to meet the hero for the magazine's or her profession's sake. He asked for an autograph to start the conversation. It would be disrespectful for him to ask for an autograph for himself—so she doesn't forget to say that she wants it for her sister-in-law!

Several veteran directors tried to disturb Ray during the production of Pather Pachali; many veteran directors also ridiculed him for his working methods. This incident is portrayed in the film Nayak as follows: A

veteran actor makes fun of the young actor (the hero) in front of a 'full house'. The gentleman is a veteran actor, so the hero says nothing to him in front of the people. "The gentleman is old, so I didn't say anything. But I know that his acting style is old, obsolete today." The excited hero slaps the table and says, "I'll go to the top... to the top...to the top." It is easy to understand that the hero's reaction is a reaction to the ridicule Ray received during 'Pather Pachali'

Some of Ray's friends were involved in leftist politics. A few of them came and asked Ray to make a film about workers' lives. Ray could not grant the request to make the film because he did not have enough knowledge of workers' lives. After a long time, this incident appeared in a scene in the movie 'Nayak'. In one scene, the hero is coming from somewhere, passing a factory - the factory workers are on strike - a labour leader who is an old friend of the hero saw the hero. He came to the hero and asked him to stand near the striking workers. There is no external similarity between the hero's rejection scene and the pain of not being able to fulfil his friend's request when his social status, the glamour he has gained through the film, etc., prevent him from appearing physically. This scene apparently used to express a subtle part of the hero's character, is significant in terms of Ray's feelings.

Many scenes and dialogues in 'Nayak' reflect the experiences of filmmaker Ray. These autobiographical events so overwhelmed Ray that the film's structure was forced to loosen, as many such scenes did not help the film's main plot. Therefore, the film did not reach the level of many other films of Ray. Looking at Ray's life and

expressions rather than his art, the film will open new doors to the experiences and feelings of those interested in Ray.

People have childhood days in their lives. Childhood does not come; childhood comes with those memories that remain engraved in the corner of the mind. It comes back and is reflected in life and art.

Ray spent his childhood days on the three-storey roof of the house on Garpar Road—where he enjoyed the sight of flying kites. Seeking to express the joyful mood of Lucknow city in the 'Shatranj Ka Khiladi', Ray went back to his childhood and picked up those Garpar Road experiences. Upendra Kishore Roy Chowdhury's famous press was located in that building on Garpar Road. Inside that press, child Ray spent many evenings. - "I think the most vivid memory is of the printing press and block-making department. Because I used to spend my afternoons there..... the department of the compositors and I would just walk in ..., and there was a process camera which used to fascinate me a great deal..."

To present Apu working in the press in Aparajito, Ray recreated scenes of Apu working on a treadle machine out of many other press elements.

Ray says again, '.....and the smell of turpentine which I had forgotten, but I smell it again when I went to a press. When I was in advertising and, immediately all the memories of Garpar came rusting back. Immediately I remembered that dialogue of Bhupati in the film '*Charulata*'— 'I have a very favourite smell! The smell of printing press ink.

In his childhood, Ray used to visit with his mother '..we used to spend holidays...very

exciting holidays in hill-stations in Bihar, and we spent long holidays in Darjeeling and the first sight of Kanchenjunga was really just unforgettable.. ...' It was this memory that drew Ray to Darjeeling to make 'Kanchenjunga'. The film's last shot is exactly the same as the one Ray saw as a child – 'There were the snows, red-pink, with the sunlight, with the snow catching the sunlight.'

In the character of Feluda—which we can call Ray's model role—Feluda is a capable young man, but he does not express the slightest intimacy with women. Is this possible for an average young man? Why did Ray strategically avoid this aspect of reality despite being an utterly realistic artist? Or is there no place for women in his model role?

On the other hand, there are hardly any memorable love scenes in Ray's films. Ray portrays the amazing scenes of the beautiful, loving relationship between husband and wife in their post-marriage life in a compassionate manner. Still, he seems to want to avoid the scenes of pre-marital love. There are love scenes in films like 'Jan-Aranya' and 'Kanchanjanga', but they do not have any positive conclusion.

In his personal life, Ray fell in love with a girl from his family who was older than him. Ray had to overcome many obstacles to establish this relationship through marriage. Why can't Ray, who shows so much courage in his personal life, show courage in painting love scenes in films? Or is it the memory of the obstacles he faced in his personal life that deter him from doing so?

On the other hand, the forbidden love story of post-marriage life has taken an important place in several of Ray's films. 'Piku', 'Charulta', 'Shakha-Prashakha', and 'Ghare-Baire' are examples of this. Ray is generous and courageous in these scenes and does not judge the events from a moral standpoint. Instead, these scenes are filled with empathy and compassion.

The question is, did Ray have post-marriage relationships that he wanted to express through films that he could not speak about in reality? 'Charulata' actress Madhavi revealed in an explosive interview that she was in love with Ray. There is no evidence to support Madhavi Mukherjee's claim. If Madhavi's words are true, we will know the answer to our question about Ray's post-marriage love scene.

Two distinct aspects of the mind always influence conceptualising and creating artwork. One is a reaction to a personal life event, and the other is an imaginary scene form of unfulfilled aspirations in life. Ray's films reflect both forms of the individual Ray.

The quotations used in the article are taken from the following sources:

1. Andrew Robinson- Satyajit Ray- The Inner Eye book.
2. Summer '70 issue of Sight & Sound magazine.
3. Satyajit Ray is an interview-based documentary and screenplay published in book form by Shyam Benegal.
4. Satyajit at seventy – Nimai Ghosh.

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