

The Fragility of Ray's Cinematic Men

SHREYASI BISWAS

Satyajit Ray, the pioneer of Indian cinema, had once irritably said that he disliked the constant reference to humanism in his work. To him, it is also a structure, a form, a rhythm, a face, a temple, a feeling for light and shade, composition, and a way of telling a story. Despite Ray's claims, over the years, scholars have traversed his works focusing on their humanist aspects while leaving out the minute observations on human experience and the processes that he portrays. Joining the vast collection of notable scholarly works on Ray's films is the latest astute work by Devapriya Sanyal titled *Failed Masculinities: The Men in Satyajit Ray's Films*. Within this extensive academic landscape, Sanyal attempts to take us through a journey of Ray's characters which runs on two parallel themes: Ray's dispositions of the masculine-feminine dichotomy within the characters and their arcs while placing them contextually in a developing nation which is trying to project itself at the world stage through the artistic endeavours of Ray.

The book sprawls over 160 pages and is divided into eight short chapters, apart from the introduction and conclusion. The division does not adopt a chronological format but the chapterisation rests on selections from Ray's filmography and the associated thematic context of the films. The thematic range covers concepts such as modernity, masculinity, and national culture, as well as interpersonal aspirations and the constitution of critical events that shape them. The book begins with a compelling narrative and argues that Ray's works do not follow a destined narrative but his subjects are atomised individuals who are placed in times of change and within a framework of a newly independent nation and its aspirations. His characters are constantly in a process of dialogue with their past which in turn renders a subjectivity to their present forms, and this is a constantly evolving process. In

Failed Masculinities: The Men in Satyajit

Ray's Films by Devapriya Sanyal, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2023; pp viii + 175, ₹960.

support of her arguments, Sanyal explains that Indian films can be categorised as either popular or art cinema based upon distinct differences in their approach to characterisation. While most popular cinema has catered to the aspirations of a budding nation through its characters, who are full of heroism and moral grandiosity, as well as the portrayal of working-class heroes who embody masculine frames, Sanyal posits that Ray was a product of a postcolonial society and while his movies cannot be classified as nationalist, they reflect a culture-building project of the postcolonial nation.

Postcolonial to Modernity: Self via the Nation

The author talks about the way in which Ray's liberal mindset allowed him to connect to Nehruvian ideals and how cosmopolitan liberalism was reflected in his character's arcs. Sanyal asserts that Ray's *Bhadralok* status was chief in building up a world view that was steeped in Western education and notions of democracy, nationalism, and social equality along with the literature on realism and mimesis. This, in turn, renders an internationalist perspective to Ray's works where his characters are woven into their immediate surroundings and their microscopic interactions with their lifeworlds pave their storylines, as opposed to the melodramatic and fantastical narratives of popular cinema. Sanyal talks at length about the interpretation of Ray's films as allegories where the narrativisation of characters like Apu in the *Pather Panchali* trilogy is a marker of the transformation of a literate yet impoverished society steeped in the enduring culture of India.

The book divides Ray's filmography to reflect the journey of postcolonial India, grappling with the remnants of colonial

ideals and the challenges of forging a new national identity or national culture in times of rapid change and development. His characters in *Shatranj ke Khiladi* or *Jalsaghar* portray the decline of the feudal aristocracy, grappling with new changes and the changing perspective on traditions that require demolishing to build up a new nation. However, Ray has been meticulous in positing the challenge of fragile masculinities in the cultural shifts brought about by emerging nationalism and the Bengal Renaissance. His works like *Ghare Baire* and *Charulata* reflect this fragility whereby larger aspirations or societal expectations are overshadowed by personal inadequacies that are brought into the light by equally compelling female characters, reflecting Ray's ability to critique the patriarchal postcolonial society. Further interrogation of his characters in his later works such as *Nayak*, *Aranyer Din Ratri*, and *Seemabaddha*, illustrate his critical engagement with the bourgeoisie of post-independence India. These films depict seemingly successful people whose moral flaws and inner emptiness make us question the shallow moral foundations of success embodied by a rising social class. In his later works, Ray shifts his focus to the post-independence bourgeoisie, providing a critical portrayal of characters such as Indranath Choudhuri and Bimal Gupta in *Kanchenjunga* and *Kapurush* respectively. These characters, emblematic of their class, exhibit a profound nostalgia for the British era, which is reflected in their social conduct and attitudes. Despite their authoritative presence, they are ultimately unable to halt the rise of the vernacular, as seen in characters like Ashok and Amitabh, who embody the changing sociocultural landscape.

The Vacuum of Masculinity

The other theme that the book explores is masculinity and its connotations in Ray's works. Ray's films are known for their nuanced portrayal of human relationships and societal roles, and this book meticulously unpacks these elements. It starts by drawing parallels between colonial and indigenous notions of

masculinity through the trope of the “effeminate *babus*,” typically Western-educated Bengali Hindus, who were a product of traditional cultural paradigms and Western education. The arcs of his characters are steeped in the notion of *Dharma* or worldly duties which most of his characters fail at with the women eventually emerging as leading figures. It examines how male characters are constructed and portrayed in conjunction with the women around them. This relational perspective highlights the complexities of gender roles. It reveals how Ray’s male characters struggle with their identities and societal expectations and are influenced by their interactions with the female characters. The book goes beyond its titular focus on masculinity to offer a holistic analysis of gender relations in Ray’s films. Moreover, the book extends beyond merely cataloguing these interactions. It analyses the broader implications of these gender dynamics within the sociocultural context of Ray’s work. By doing so, it uncovers the subtle critiques Ray embeds in his films

regarding prevalent patriarchal structures and gender stereotypes. For instance, it explores how Ray’s female characters frequently serve as agents of change, challenging traditional roles assigned to them and, in turn, affecting the development and transformation of the male characters. This dual focus on both male and female characters enriches the reader’s understanding of Ray’s films. It highlights the director’s sophisticated approach to storytelling, where the evolution of male characters cannot be fully comprehended without considering the pivotal roles played by female characters.

Women as Agents of Change

To analyse Ray’s portrayal of masculinity, Sanyal introduces a detailed four-part framework which includes: the display of male power and strength, the sexualisation of male violence, authority and normative social behaviour, and the internal conflicts that shape the character’s aspirations and achievements. She presupposes this framework which she later finds untenable in the

face of the argument that Ray’s depiction of male characters reflects a broader commentary on the fragility of traditional masculinity within the sociopolitical context of post-independence India. In Sanyal’s interpretation, Ray’s films articulate a critique of the newly independent Indian nation and its entrenched patriarchal structures. This critique is conveyed through the portrayal of men who, despite wielding power, fail to fulfil the societal roles expected of them. Ray frequently juxtaposes these male characters with women who transcend traditionalist roles and are often responsible for triggering a sense of futility in male characters who struggle with their aspirations and achievements. It is Ray’s female characters who offer a more decisive and pivotal impact on narratives. They challenge the authoritative face of masculinity and the self-importance of male characters which gives Ray’s films a unique perspective on performance and gender. Ray’s films often present characters who are deeply embedded in their specific cultural and historical contexts,

yet they grapple with universal themes of identity, power, and resistance.

In his narratives, women are seen as robust agents of change, resisting patriarchy while establishing their presence and acting as the moral compass who transcend traditional gender roles of passive victimhood. These qualities of the female characters, as well as the representation of their brute inner strength, highlight the failure of the male characters to fulfil the roles society deems them fit for. Such characterisation also questions the superiority of traditional Indian culture embedded in gender roles and the subsequent transformation of agency and assertion on the part of women in a postcolonial society. In movies such as *Charulata*, *Nayak*, *Seemabadhha*, and many others, women become the mirror through which the concept of masculinity and aspirations are reflected back at the male characters who are more often than not, a mere projection of their circumstances and gendered performance.

The Performance of Masculinity

Sanyal's analysis aligns with the broader scholarly discourse on Ray, which recognises his films as sophisticated explorations of human experience and social dynamics. Critiques such as Pauline Kael (1976) while reviewing *Aranyer Din Ratri* noted Ray's ability to portray the intricacies of identity formed and regenerated through societal expectations, moral dilemma, gendered performance, and a sense of historic continuity along with a modern outlook. The work also finds adequate support in Butler's theory of gender performativity as well as Foucault's concept of power and authority. Butler's (2004) theory of gender performativity proposes that gender identities are shaped by repeated social actions rather than being inherent. Ray's male characters often exemplify this performative aspect of masculinity, wrestling with aligning their behaviours with societal norms and personal desires. The authority embedded within masculinity also undergoes a transformation as we come to realise how little authority or power actually resides with Ray's male characters who are caught up in their internal

struggles, never realising the multitude of nodes through which power flows which is often reflected through the pivotal changes that decisive female characters bring. According to Foucault, individuals exercise agency with local strategic calculations, leading to unique power structures as unintended outcomes. These structures are the results of intentional actions but are not themselves intentional constructs, meaning there is no single source of power. Power structures are not explained by other structures or a power elite, but are products of intentional actions without being intentional themselves. Power exists only in action and relations, not as a standalone entity. Power processes shape individuals into social subjects, who are then controlled and defined by this power, limiting their meaningful agency (Foucault 1980, 1983). The Foucauldian framework hence helps us to gauge how masculine notions of power which are direct, brute and hierarchical, differ from the subtle influence and power relations that the female characters employ in Ray's works.

Sanyal's segmentation makes much more sense when we look at Ray's films and reflect on the political processes of postcolonial India, both in the Nehruvian era and the Indira Gandhi regime, the latter of which was directly at odds with the artistic endeavours of Ray. The greatest strength of Sanyal's work is perhaps the lucidity that traverses the questions of nation-building and masculinity in Ray's films, which are devoid of crude references to political structures, barring his later works like *Hirak Rajar Deshe* or *Sadgati* which directly address the caste and communal question.

Conclusions

The book runs the two parallel themes critically, thereby juxtaposing the political question of a national subject as projected to the world to that of subjects of the nation, curated through the transformative process of interactions between past legacies and future aspirations. The book is welcoming to readers because of its enriching details on Ray's films. However, one must question the lack of continuity as can be noted in places

where there is a lack of cohesion between the themes. Further, other apparatuses that become instrumental to the investigation are not dealt with later, even though the same was warranted. The book also briefly touches upon the concept of Ray as a national film-maker who later went on to become a universalist like Tagore but does not offer much on this process of universalisation or how it can be read differently from his earlier works. The author's suggestions that he can be seen as a crusader conforming to his own philosophical dispositions in his later universalist films also require some more thought since Ray's political philosophy is not only confined to his films but can be deduced from his other literary works as well which posit a different outlook than his projections of masculinity and aspirations in his films.

Thus, Sanyal's monograph provides a critical lens to view Ray's exploration of masculinity within the framework of art cinema while contextualising it with ground realities and experiences of everyday humans and the interaction of society with these experiences within a postcolonial structure. The work focuses on Ray's trajectory from a national to a universalist film-maker while looking at his characters and their performance in the overwhelming patriarchal and colonial legacy-ridden Indian society, thereby making it a compelling read not only to film enthusiasts but also to scholars outside the scope of film studies.

The author would like to acknowledge the anonymous *EPW* reviewer who sent in their kind comments and constructive feedback that helped shape the final draft of the review.

Shreyasi Biswas (shreyasi2909@gmail.com) is a doctoral scholar at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

REFERENCES

- Butler, J (2004): "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," *The Performance Studies Reader*, Bial, Henry and Sara Brady (eds), Routledge, pp 154–66.
- Foucault, M (1980): *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972–1977*, Colin Gordon (ed), Brighton: Harvester Press.
- (1983): "The Subject and Power," *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Dreyfus, Hubert L and Paul Rabinow (eds), London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, pp 208–28.
- Kael, P (1976): *Reeling*, New York: Brown, p 14.