



A Deconstructive Reading of Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*)

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ABSTRACT:

Satyajit Ray remains one of India's remarkable film-makers that ushered in films with multi-faceted dimensions and themes. In Ray, India unearthed an artist who created films that were a confluence of European and Indian aesthetic sensibilities. Realistic in approach, his films serve as an apparatus that fused the different elements to drive home a plethora of significations. This paper makes a deconstructive analysis of the film *Pather Panchali*, the first of the *Apu Trilogy* that won Ray international acclaim. On the one hand lies the Promethean theme and on the other the theme of social change. Neither recognizing the hierarchy nor looking for a possible prioritization of the theme, has this paper attempted to arrive at a plausible interpretation that would draw the essence of the film.

John W. Hood, a scholar of Indian art cinema and a translator of Bengali literature, in the preface to *Beyond the World of Apu: The Films of Satyajit Ray* ridicules the "Bengali Bhadrolok" (Bengali "gentlemen") who consider themselves "pillars of culture and thinkers of India," and who, in spite of being a Bengali, "would know far more Bombay commercial films than films of Satyajit Ray, and yet be quick to defend him as one of their cultural giants" (2). He goes on to write, "...there is a small minority of intelligent, sensitive and well-read aficionados of cinema (in India) whose knowledge of Ray" is "often profound and acutely perceptive," and who "appreciate sound criticism and readily admit that not every film is a masterpiece" (3). Such comments allude to the paucity of a critical understanding of Classical and art films, the art of film-making and the methods and motives of a film-maker. Hood's comments would definitely question the target readership, albeit these grounded remarks would divert one's attention to the relatively less explored facets of film-making in India. Absolute film *auteurs* as Akira Kurosawa, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, Jean Renoir, and Satyajit Ray who have questioned, challenged, and pursued unknown paths are exemplary in their outlook on the need to provide a wider dimension to the art of film-making.

The University of California at Santa Cruz and the American Film Institute published a list of books about Ray. *Portrait of a Director: Satyajit Ray* (1971) by Marie Seton and *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* (1989) by Andrew Robinson, written by journalists or scholars of literature or film are influential works that adulate Ray but lack critical exploration of his oeuvre. However, Chidananda Dasgupta, a film critic and an occasional filmmaker has provided fresh insights into Ray's unique stance in making films. Yet, this long list is deficient in its true appreciation of Ray's works with great insights into cinematic questions like one observes in Francois Truffaut's homage to Alfred Hitchcock or in Andre Bazin's and Truffaut's bio-critical homage to Orson Welles. At this juncture, it would be worthy to enunciate the contribution of Satyajit Ray who envisaged in Indian cinema a novel approach to encapsulate the rustic beauty, the natural delicate moments, stark revelations and intimate emotions, within the cultural gamut of the artist.

Ray's films are the product of a fusion of the British colonial intrusion and the European rationalism and values that formed an inevitable part of his consciousness. Ashis Nandy observes this

personality as a “bi-cultural component” partly due to his cultural heritage, and partly due to his upbringing (241). Ray was essentially a Calcuttan “babu” whose true bi-cultural self expressed itself peacefully in art as in life. In dealing with religion, superstition, and even death Ray was rational (241). In general, Ray tended to avoid melodramatic and sentimental approaches when dealing with these delicate issues. This technique of synchronous adaptation of two cultures has now become a character trait of Bengalis and Indians in general, says Nandy. Nandy hypothesizes that Ray's guiding principles of aesthetics and core values of his life were intrinsically drawn from the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries and remains sceptic to call Ray a true Indian film-maker. Apart from Renoir, the Italian Neo-Realists gripped Ray's imagination. He found that the universality of the themes, the effectiveness of the treatment and the low-cost production in neo-realist films could be used as a model by the Indian filmmakers.

In Calcutta, Ray often used to hold lengthy discussions with Renoir on European films and filmmakers. Renoir would point out the distinctive and specific features of the landscape of Bengal which symbolised the essence of Bengal. For instance, “a clump of banana trees, a small pond in a village or a waving paddy was quintessentially Bengal to Renoir” (Seton 144). Seton contends that “Like in Renoir's *The River*, the placid Ganges is a recurrent symbol” in Ray's films including *Aparajito* (144). The film, shot in Benares, continuously shows man's dependence on the river as a source of life. Renoir even told Ray that “if Indian filmmakers could get Hollywood out of their system, they would be making great films” (Seton 145). True to Renoir's advice, Ray focused on details which typified the city and the village in Bengal. The vast plains of Bengal, the rivers, the monsoon rains, and heavy moisture-laden clouds formed the backbone of Ray's earlier films.

In *Pather Panchali*, Ray introduced the neo-realist tradition of using non-actors and actually shooting on location while using an unadorned style of photography. The details of speech, behavior, habits, customs, rituals, substantiated the very simple structure and the narrative line. The film, almost a documentary, was simple enough to be comprehensible at all levels. *Pather Panchali* is an adaptation of an eponymous semi-autobiographical Bengali novel by noted Bengali writer Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay. While work began on *Pather Panchali* in 1950, the first footage was not shot until October 1952 and continued over the next two years on weekends and holidays. The production had a minuscule budget with a mainly amateur crew and cast. In fact, Sabrata Mitra, Ray's cinematographer, had never made a film before and the only experienced members of the production were the editor, art director and an eighty -year-old retired theatre actress, Chunibala Devi. The film was finally completed, after a one-year interruption when Ray ran out of funds, with a grant from the West Bengal government. It was released in India in August 1955 and screened the following year at the Cannes Film Festival where it won the festival's Best Human Document Award. This international recognition allowed Ray to quit the advertising agency and devote the rest of his life to filmmaking, literature and art. The success of *Pather Panchali* allowed Ray to begin work immediately on *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished), also based on a Bandhipadhyaya novel, which was completed in 1956 and won the Golden Lion award at the 1957 Venice Film Festival. This film is more complex in terms of plot and characterisation compared to *Pather Panchali* and set new standards for Indian cinema actors. Ray produced two films *Paras Pathar* (The Philosopher's Stone) and *Jalsaghar* (The Music Room) between 1957 and 1959 before deciding to make *Apu Sansur* (The World of Apu) the last of the trilogy in 1959. Before he died in 1992, soon after receiving a Lifetime Achievement Oscar, he had made twenty-nine features and several documentaries chronicling different phases of Bengali social life and history, stories about the rural poor, the urban middle classes and the wealthy. These include: *The Goddess* (1960), *Three Daughters* (1961), *The Lonely Wife* (1964), *The Hero* (1966), *Days and Nights in the Forest* (1969), *Distant Thunder* (1973), *The Chess Players* (1977), *The Home and the World* (1984), *An Enemy of the People* (1989), *Branches of the Tree* (1991) and *The Stranger* (1991). He was also a fiction writer, publisher, illustrator, graphic designer, and film critic. His other writings on cinema include the best-sellers *Our Films Their Films* (1976) and *Speaking of Films* (2005) Ray received many major awards for his work, including thirty-two Indian National Film Awards and the Bharat Ratna, the highest civilian award from the Government of India in 1992.

In the essay “Four and a Quarter” from *Our Films, Their Films*, Ray brilliantly analyses the work of four of his contemporaries, M.S.Sathyu, Shyam Benegal, Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani, who he admired and respected for their indomitable efforts in reaching the international audience. Without the slightest of a trace of professional jealousy despite some severe criticism of the artistic merits of their output, Ray succinctly delineates the true characteristic abilities of these doyens of Indian cinema. Ray’s films are distinct in their themes and methods of production. Having imbibed the spirit of his time, Ray often left the audience to interpret and evaluate his films. In this sense, most of his films are post-modern as they are open-ended. This paper attempts a deconstructive analysis of the film *Pather Panchali* (1955) and is perhaps one perspective of the innumerable interpretations that the film proposes.

When the novel *Pather Panchali* was adapted by Satyajit Ray, changes were made to the traditional form of the novel as Ray always believed that cinema, as a medium of artistic expression, is entirely different from literary works such as novels, short-story and drama. He firmly believed, “the more you probed, the more was revealed” (34) and restructured the entire story, and deleted what he thought was superfluous or unwanted in the novel which heightened the beauty and the compactness of the film. Now, after fifty years of its premiere, the work is still chaste and endeavors something new. Kurosawa, after watching the movie comments, “I can never forget the excitement in my mind after seeing it. I have had several more opportunities to see the film. Since then and each time I feel more overwhelmed. It is the kind of cinema that flows with the serenity and nobility of a big river” (qtd. in “The Apu Trilogy”19). He would probably have been referring to the myriad sensory perceptions and the visual effects that captivate the depth and intensity of emotions that run throughout the film. Ray’s insight into the art of film-making is a potent force that drives film-makers into creating a range of emotions that allow the onlooker to perceive and comment on an artistic accomplishment.

The focus, if one could say, of *Pather Panchali*, is man’s struggle as he moves forward in search of something better by overcoming or ignoring the upheavals including the untimely death of dear ones. Man never surrenders to fate. Quoting Eric Rhode on Satyajit Ray, “The director posed the question, in what way can man control the world and what is the price he must pay for trying to do so?....This ...is the Promethean theme” (134). *Pather Panchali* is the first film of *The Apu Trilogy*, the others being *Aparajito* (*The Unvanquished*, 1956) and *Apur Sansar* (*The World of Apu*, 1959). While *Pather Panchali* depicts the boy learning to understand, and perhaps eventually master his environment; the next film, *Aparajito* focuses on restlessness and shifting of interests that does not explicitly state or clarify the growing difficulty of mastering the conditions of life. There is further uncertainty, along with moments of revelation, in *Apur Sansar*. If one accepts that *Pather Panchali* centers on the theme mentioned above, then the interpretation of the film being political, which speaks for a forthcoming social change offers fresh grounds for assay.

At the centre of *Pather Panchali* lie two elements – the Promethean theme and suggestion for social change. Instead of a single of being or ‘essence’ one finds a division, a sort of difference, an inherent plurality in the structure of the centre of the film, which neither individual readers nor film critics generally neglect. Following them, most of the readers or viewers either ignore or miss the dichotomy inherent in the film. This practice helps Derrida to introduce his theory of deconstruction. Tracing the course of poststructuralist theories, Selden and Widdowson write:

Derrida’s paper, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences’,...virtually inaugurated a new critical movement in the United States. Its argument put in question the basic meta-physical assumptions of Western philosophy since Plato. The notion of structure, he argues, even in structuralist theory has always presupposed a centre of meaning of some sort. This centre governs the structure but is itself not subject to structural analysis (to find the structure of the centre would be to find another structure). People desire a centre because it guarantees being as presence. For example, we think of our mental and physical life as centred on an ‘I’; this personality is the principle of unity which underlies the structure of all that goes on in this space. Freud’s theories completely undermine this metaphysical certainty by revealing a division in the self between conscious and unconscious. (144)

So the centre of the structure has been deconstructed finding newer structures with their respective centers. Derrida writes:

It became necessary to think both the law with somehow governed the desire for a centre in the construction of structure and the process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence, but a central presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled for itself into its own substitute. The substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it. (Structure 280)

This kind of Derridian deconstruction been taken up to analyze the movie, leaving the film at this point, is to find its covert structure of difference, dichotomy and contradiction.

The Promethean theme/strong suggestions for social change form the core elements of the central thematic structure of *Pather Panchali* that cannot be hierarchised. It cannot be said that the Promethean theme should precede the strong suggestions for social change or its reversal. Attempts to do so would have to be done with violence. This notion of hierarchisation and “violent hierarchy” form the core of the Derridian concept of deconstruction. Derrida elaborately exemplifies this notion of “violent hierarchy” with speech/writing. To him writing a species of speech and writing is a contaminated form of speech. Speech is original, pure and the bearer of the presence whereas writing lacking presence, is repeatable without its original context, the writer and the intended readers. But in some cases speech has also been contaminated with some writerly features and sometimes can be repeated without the original context and the intended readers. So speech and writing cannot be hierarchised distinctly. Like speech and writing, nature is also hierarchised with civilization. It is also said that there is no pure nature as it is always contaminated with civilization. The myth of pure nature is only in our mind. In the deconstruction of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, God is charged with the revelation that it is wrong to believe that God is always with goodness. God created “Pride” for which Satan had to be banished from Paradise God has made angels and humans free to sin. Therefore, God and goodness do not always exist together. Unarguably, it would not be wrong to comment that goodness comes after evil. Blake thought Milton was on Satan’s side and Shelly considered Satan superior to God. For reversal or “violent hierarchy” there remain almost all the elements from our culture like God/Satan, goodness/evil, speech/writing, and conscious/unconscious. In *Dissemination*, Derrida lists some oppositions that have sustained the metaphysics of presence in the western tradition – speech/writing, life/death, father/son, master/servant, first/second, legitimate son/orphan –bastard, soul/body, inside/outside, and seriousness/play (85). In the essay “White Mythology” he adds the binary, literal/figurative (associated with philosophy/literature), though it would be easy to extend the list as they saturate the texts of contemporary culture, high and popular (235).

The structure of the centre being hierarchised with the Promethean theme or suggestions for social change in rural Bengal, the reversal of the hierarchy been deployed, the effort is to identify further hierarchies that suffer reversal. Other elements in the core or centre of *Pather Panchali* are for instance, poetry (the lyrical quality of the film) or poverty in this film. Nargis Dutt, the celebrated Indian film actress would have unknowingly hierarchised the film with poverty/art (poetry) when many years ago she commented that *Pather Panchali* was just selling Indian poverty to the rest of the world, “He portrays a region of West Bengal which is so poor that it does not represent India’s poverty in its true form” (qtd. in “The Apu Trilogy” 327). But film critics would definitely have put art (poetry) before poverty in the film. The unfocussed centre of the film is non-visible with the coexistence of art or poverty in its nucleus. Art and poverty have to be deconstructed separately to find out their respective central structures. To deconstruct art in *Pather Panchali*, the language and history of cinema, aesthetics, the socio-cultural background of the film and the like have to be looked into.

To deconstruct poverty in the film, analyses of the socio-political conditions, neo-realism in cinema and so on need to be addressed to deconstruct each element requires meticulous study and substantiation to locate newer central structures of the existing structures. If the process of deconstruction continues, the search for renewed centers would go to the depths of our culture.

The dominance or reversal of hierarchy is inevitable in existence and the elements deployed in the centre of our contemporary culture would reverse them. *Pather Panchali* speaks of a way or path through the course of realization. Apu walks through this path (in the whole *Apu Trilogy*) without bending his head in spite of the severities in life. The movie searches for a path or way and we are in the centre of our contemporary culture. Therefore, *Pather Panchali* or contemporary culture form a hierarchy in the centre of the structure of film and civilization. Though this structure cannot be hierarchised, its reversal and counter-reversal takes place from time to time.

The film, it can be said, has deconstructed the time and culture represented in contemporary culture. Roland Barthes, in "The Death of the Author" (1967) mentions that a literary text turns the world it represents into a text, and locates the structure of the image or iconography of women that opens up India as text. Nature is another structure in this film whereas nature and women are in the deeper structure. Finding structures within structures "sensing the structurality of the structure" as well as centers within centers is the essence of the process of Derridian deconstruction. Derrida would not like the word 'essence' as it is used here like the traditional western philosophy since Plato had everything as an essence, or everything has a centre or being of presence which is assumed to control the whole structure. But Derrida argues that the center needs to be analyzed revealing the micro-structures of the centers.

From the context of *Pather Panchali*, the totality of the film is not pin-pointed in any of the individual centers noted – the Promethean theme, suggestions of social change, poverty, lyrical quality or any other centers. Moreover, any single centre is not part of the totality of the film. Its centre of the totality may be found somewhere else; therefore, the individual centre of the film is at the same time inside and outside the structure of the film. As Derrida clarifies:

Nevertheless the centre also closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible. As centre, it is a point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible. At the centre, the permutation or the transformation of elements is forbidden. Thus it is always been thought that the centre, which is by definition unique constituted that very thin within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurally. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the centre is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The centre is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality (is part of the totality) the totality has its centre elsewhere. The center is not the center. ("Structure" 278)

Film today is considered as discourse which means that the structure of the film is in the form of a structure of discourse. To reach at the notion of discourse, Derrida believes that language has invaded the universal problematic and in the absence of a center everything becomes discourse. The absence of the transcendental signified hence extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. As a result, *Pather Panchali* is devoid of a unique center.

The film blends a harmonious play of cinematic images and sounds. For instance, in the death sequence of Durga, a random substitution of signs is seen. The cyclonic wind as envisaged in the interior of Harihar's poor house, the shaking of the idol of Ganesha, the outburst of wind through the window and Sarbojaya's panic-stricken movements are some of the substituting signs. The portrayal of the image of women in the film and the series of signs, borne out of the film maker's treatment of Durga, Indir Thakrun and Sarbojaya are ready for signification. The infinite number of structures and centers in the film moments arise when a feeling of absence of a certain center or origin becomes obvious and all the elements in the film become discourse.

Saussure, in the context of signs says that the identity of signs depends on the difference of it with the other signs rather than its own identity. The identity of the theme music of the film, in the Derridian sense, is relational. Its 'presence' is relational and is related to the 'absence' of some other things. Music is played while displaying the titles of the film, at the time of Apu and Durga's trip to visit the train, the railway tracks, and in the last sequence where Harihar Ray and his family leaves Nischindipur and his ancestral house. The audience is stirred again in astonishment when the theme music is played out again when Sarbojaya and Apu are returning home again by train in *Aparajito*. As the

train enters Bengal the theme music resonates. Its ‘presence’ reveals the ‘absence’ incorporating everything in the film.

A film is like a language that speaks to the audience with its potential signs. Some consider the signs of a film like the figures of speech of English rhetoric. *Pather Panchali* displays an array of expressive signs in difference with the other signs projecting the absence as well as the presence of different signs for better communication and fuller meaning. Watching the film is a prolific tracing of absence/presence. Such a moment has been clearly expressed with the example of an arrow by Culler in his essay “Jacques Derrida”. He says:

Consider, for example the flight of an arrow. If we focus on a series of present states we encounter a paradox: at any given time the arrow is at a particular spot and never in motion. Yet we want to insist, quite justifiably, that the arrow is in motion at every instant between the beginning and the end of its flight. When we focus on the present states, the motion of the arrow is never present, never given....All account of what is happening at a given instant requires reference to the other instants which are not present.... The motion of the arrow is never given as something simple and present this could be grasped in itself: it is always already complex and differential, involving traces of *not-now in the now*. (161)

The motif of the train in *Pather Panchali* completes its process of signification throughout *The Apu Trilogy*. Once the train is presented in its full appearance, Apu and Durga wonder at its motion in the middle of the field. The presence of the train could suggest the progressive way of civilization, social transformation and the emergence of industrialization responsible for the changing texture of the future society in Bengal and much more. Tracing of the moments of the passing of the train suggests the interplay of Derridian presence/absence or Saussurian relational identity of signs. The motif of the train involves us in the traces of *no- now in the now*. Before the death of Durga, the hissing sound of the passing train can be traced with the Derridian notion of the *not-now in the now*. Instances where Apu discovers Tunudi’s *motirmala* after Durga’s death calls for her penetrating presence even though she is figuratively absent. The loss of innocence/desire of a young married rural girl of that time traces many other moments to find out the inner structures instead of a single essence of being or centre.

Differance, the key word in Derridian deconstruction means both ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’. Derrida also uses the word *spacing* or *espacement* in a language which signifies the absence of something or the presence of absence in the formation of meanings. The play of differences involves syntheses and referrals which prevent them from being at any moment or in any way a simple element which is present in and of it and refers to itself. *Difference* is a structure and a movement which cannot be conceived on the basis of the opposition ‘presence /absence’. It is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences by which elements refer to one another. This spacing is a production, both active and passive as the *a* of *differance* indicates that which cannot be governed or organized by that opposition.

Such paradoxes of signification and the role of difference prepare the reader for further exploration in films with the process of prolific tracing of the signs potentially inherent in it. The structures within the structure, the centers in the center, the ‘violent hierarchy’, the interplay of ‘presence/absence’ and *difference* lead us through the deconstruction of *Pather Panchali*. The film not only bears the Promethean theme or the strong suggestions for social change but also examines the various ways through which one arrives at a possible juncture to reach the far contours that the film extends to.

Ray’s films abound in themes that are either socially or politically committed, yet he denies the artist’s onus for such a responsibility. In the concluding part of the essay “What is wrong with Indian Films?” Ray neatly summarises that “The raw material of the cinema is life itself. It is incredible that a country which has inspired so much painting and music and poetry should fail to move the film maker. He has only to keep his eyes open and his ears. Let him do so” (24). Ray’s suggestions bear neither the reformer’s zeal nor the critic’s enthusiasm for an interpretation for a remarkable societal change. His films objectively portray the India and its condition during the post-colonial period. Film-making was at its infancy when Ray cast a fresh outlook with his novel approach to common Indian themes. The true

mark of a genius as Ray lies in his ability to open the doors for divergent thinking through a medium that remains open in itself.

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