The Cinema of Satyajit Ray

Between Tradition and Modernity

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge cb2 2ru, UK http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, ny 10011-4211, USA http://www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

First published 2000

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface Sabon 10/13 pt. *System* QuarkXpress® [mg]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Cooper, Darius, 1949–
The cinema of Satyajit Ray : between tradition and modernity / Darius Cooper
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in film)
Filmography: p.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
isbn 0 521 62026 0 (hb). – isbn 0 521 62980 2 (pb)
1. Ray, Satyajit, 1921–1992 – Criticism and interpretation.
I. Title. II. Series
pn1998.3.r4c88 1999
791.43´0233´092 – dc21 99–24768
cip

isbn 0 521 62026 0 hardback
isbn 0 521 62980 2 paperback

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Introduction

In his very revealing 1963 "Calm Without, Fire Within" (from his collection of writing on films entitled *Our Films, Their Films*), Ray refers to his formative years at Rabindranath Tagore's university in Santinikitan. In order to learn the rudiments of Chinese calligraphy, Ray writes:

> We rubbed our sticks of Chinese ink on porcelain palettes, dipped our bamboo-stemmed Japanese brushes in it and held them poised perpendicularly over mounted sheets of Nepalese-parchment. "Now draw a tree," our Professor Bose would say. (Bose was a famous Bengali painter who made pilgrimages to China and Japan). "Draw a tree, but not in the western fashion. Not from the top downwards. A tree grows up, not down. The strokes must be from the base upwards. . . ."[1]

The aim of this study is to situate and evaluate the cinema of Satyajit Ray from an Indian aesthetic as well as an Indian social and historical perspective. His rich and varied filmic oeuvre arises, I intend to show, from within the Indian tradition itself. He drew his cinematic tree along the very same lines as designated by his teacher, Professor Bose, in the above citation. Now, this does not mean that Ray deliberately shunned or avoided any influences derived from his profound knowledge of Western art forms. A closer look at his vast array of films confirms, in his own words, the parallel

> existence of an art form, western in origin, but transplanted and taking roots in a new soil. The tools are the same, but the methods and attitudes in the best and most characteristic work are distinct and indigenous.[2]

Lest Ray be falsely accused of being self-congratulatory here, the above remarks were made by Ray in relation to Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. This study, however, aims to single out both the Western and the Indian influences in his films, thereby laying bare a truly indigenous style and

vision that makes his cinema receptive and accessible to the Western as well as the Indian spectator.

It was *The Apu Trilogy* (*Pather Panchali,* 1955; *Aparajito,* 1956; *Apur Sansar,* 1959) that established Ray on the international film scene. While many critics celebrated it as a eulogy of third-world culture, others criticized it for what they took to be its romanticization of such a culture. In the wake of modern critical theory emphasizing that artistic production be seen in its historicity and not be celebrated merely as an isolated phenomenon, Ray came in for some severe criticism. He was charged by critics like Robin Wood with being "less interested in expressing ideas than in communicating emotional experience."[3] They also singled out his apparently overriding "concern with nuances of character relationships and character development."[4]

In this study, I hope to provide a deeper understanding of Ray's nexus with Indian society and his own position as artist and spokesman in relation to it. One of my critical concerns is to show how, beneath the variety of narrative discourses that he develops, Ray is intent in telling us another story. In film after film, he investigates India's social institutions and the power structures to which they give rise, or vice versa. He works out, in concrete terms, the conflicts and issues of his times, both in his own state of Bengal and in the larger Indian nation. To quote Ashish Rajadhyaksha, from his excellent essay "Satyajit Ray, Ray's Films, and Ray-Movie":

> [In] Ray's early realism of *The Apu Trilogy* . . . key characters are each assigned a highly idealized, even mystical, set of privileged spaces. . . . Those spaces are occupied by objects that for the characters resonate with primal emotional appeal; and a virtual rite of passage. . . .[5]

In *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room,* 1958), Ray's concern shifts to the fading away of the feudal era in India. In the women's films, Ray establishes their sensitivity, integrity, and their triumph amid unjust patriarchal surroundings. He demystifies the revered Hindu ideals inscribed in their roles of mothers and wives and shows how they achieve their emancipation. In his portrayal of Indian men, on the other hand, he reveals to us their cowardice and shallowness as they take shelter in male-dominated social institutions and hegemonic structures. In *Shatranj-ke-Khilari* (*The Chess Players,* 1977), Ray depicts feudal irresponsibility and a self-obsessed nobility lost in its own mythic roles, and in *Sadgati* (*Deliverance,* 1981), he indicts religious spirituality by showing the antihuman doctrines of hierarchy and Untouchability on which a cruel and unjust Hindu caste system is based and run. Whereas the Brahmin priest's spiritual supremacy is ordained and ensured by religion, Ray shows us how he is materially dependent on

the labor and donations of the Untouchables and how he uses the Hindu-assigned principles of exclusivity, pollution, and hierarchy to perpetuate the continuance of the caste system.

This book, apart from the Introduction, is divided into five chapters, which should be read as five distinct movements. Through these I intend to show how Ray's cinema comes not only to enunciate new and controversial themes but also to inscribe powerful meanings through the compelling and innovative fashioning of varied discourses that he forges out of Indian as well as Western forms of expressions and resources.

Ray's cinema began with children, nature, paddy fields, and a village. Geeta Kapur, in her excellent essay "Cultural Creativity in the First Decade: The Example of Satyajit Ray," alerts us to what could have been Ray's impetus in his very first film:

> But then *Pather Panchali* and the *Apu Trilogy* as a cycle could also be seen as answering, in some unprecedented sense, a contemporary and most immediate need for a suitable visual solution to the question of representing everyday life in India. The perennial and the everyday. . . . Now, as a film-maker, he seemed to resolve with exemplary economy the question of image, iconography and pictorial narrative.[6]

In his 1957 essay "A Long Time on the Little Road," Ray maintains that when he "chose *Pather Panchali*, for the qualities that made it a great book: its humanism, its lyricism, and its ring of truth,"[7] considerations of "form, rhythm or movement did not worry me at this stage."[8] However, in the making of the film, he soon discovered the emotion-centered form of the *rasa* theory that enabled him to both represent and present what Kapur classified as "everyday life" in India in *The Apu Trilogy*. Hence, in Chapter 1, I begin my study of *The Apu Trilogy* and *Jalsaghar* (which he made in 1958, just prior to the trilogy's completion) by examining them through the intricate theories of *rasa* laid down by three Sanskrit theoreticians – Dandin (seventh century), Anandvardhana (ninth century), and the most important scholar of them all, Abhinavagupta (tenth century).

Bibhuithibhusan's novel *Pather Panchali* was cinematically translated by Ray along the lines of *rasa*, defined by A. K. Ramanujan as follows:

> In each man's history there are feelings (*bhāva*) of all sorts, and the poeticians single out eight of these: love, mirth, grief, energy, terror, disgust, anger, and wonder. Each of these is, in the poetic context, transmuted into a corresponding mood (*rasa*). . . . They carry with them all the physical phases of their expression, their allied feelings, their dominants and their consequents in emotional behaviour. Each mood has a characteristic set of these, and it is on this fact that the whole analysis of dramatic performance is based. . . .[9]

Ray is quite aware of this when he tells us in his same essay:

> I had my nucleus: the family . . . whose characters had been so conceived by the author that there was a *constant* and *subtle interplay between them*. I had my time span of one year. I had my *contrasts-pictorial* as well as *emotional:* the rich and the poor, the *laughter* and the *tears*, the *beauty* of the countryside and the *grimness* of poverty existing in it. Finally, I had the *two* natural halves of the story culminating in two poignant deaths. What more could a scenarist want?[10]

The italics, all mine, highlight words directly relate to *rasa*-conceived critical principles. More *rasa*-related concepts are offered by Ray as he continues with his meditations:

> While far from being an adventure in the physical sense, these explorations into the village nevertheless opened up a new and fascinating world . . . you wanted to observe and probe, to catch the revealing details, the telling gestures, the particular turns of speech. You wanted to fathom the mysteries of atmosphere.[11]

Rasa's complicated doctrine centers predominantly on feelings experienced not only by the characters but also conveyed in a certain artistic way to the spectator. The duality of this kind of a *rasa* imbrication was not lost on Ray; indeed, Ray's awareness of it shows in his very first film. The following utterance bears eloquent testimony to it: "Experience tells us that the subtlest of emotional states affects a person's speech and behaviour and such revealing speech and behaviour is at the very heart of cinema's eloquence."[12]

At the end of *The Apu Trilogy* and *Jalsaghar*, Ray found himself at a critical crossroad. *Pather Panchali* had won Best Human Document at Cannes in 1956, the President's Gold and Silver Medals in India in 1955, and ten prestigious international awards. *Aparajito* walked away with the Golden Lion and Critics Award at Venice in 1957 and collected four additional international awards. *Apur Sansar* added five more international awards, and *Jalsaghar* completed the tally with two.[13] However, once his cinema left the paddy fields of *Pather Panchali* and the *zamindar*'s crumbling *haveli*/mansion of *Jalsaghar* and, after a brief sojourn to Benares, entered the city of Calcutta with *Aparajito* and *Apur Sansar*, the form and content of Ray's cinema changed dramatically. What became noticeable was a determined effort on Ray's part to move into more contemporary concerns and work more consistently in the realm of ideas rather than the framework of feelings. As Geeta Kapur accurately observes, in this new stage of Ray's cinematic unfolding:

[T]he wager on the contemporary surfaced as a vestigial presence in the reflective films [that followed]. The contemporary became a pressure on the cinematic figuration of his narratives; it left traces which allowed themselves to be read as secular. . . . He did this . . . , by handling directly and to his advantage, the relations between civilizational motives and historical affect. Letting the one and then the other outpace each other he filled the "ideal" role of an Indian artist within the progressive paradigm of the first decade.[14]

Ray's ideological stance, in fact, is spelled out very clearly in his 1958 essay "Problems of a Bengal Film Maker." Mapping out the kinds of films a truly serious and socially conscious Bengali/Indian filmmaker should *not* make (which he defines as the mythological, the devotional, and the social melodrama), Ray comes to the conclusion that the authentic Bengali/Indian filmmaker "must face the challenge of contemporary reality, examine the facts, probe them, sift them, and select from them the material to be transformed into the stuff of cinema."[15]

The material he chose to transform into cinema, taking his filmmaking in new directions, dealt with two distinct ideological concerns. From 1960 to 1985, Ray embarked on a series of woman-centered films in which he traced, with a remarkable feminist sensitivity and historical insight, the troublesome *yatra* or journey the trapped Bengali/Indian woman had to make under the patriarchal gazes and threat of a conspicuously Bengali/Indian masculinity. This forms the central thesis of Chapter 2. Since any worthwhile examination of women and their struggle must include a parallel investigation of men and their problems, Ray shifted his critical focus, especially in his films of the seventies and eighties, to male trauma and problems of a divided *purush* (male) subjectivity. This is explored in Chapter 3. His ideological period climaxed, it seems to me, with his political and historical examination of Indian bourgeois nationalism and British colonialism in his 1977 film *Shatranj-ke-Khilari* (*The Chess Players*) and the evils of the Hindu caste system in his 1981 film *Sadgati* (*Deliverance*). These were his only two non-Bengali films, and they are scrutinized in their relevant political historical context in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 deals with Ray's final trilogy: *Ganashatru* (*An Enemy of the People,* 1989), *Shakha Proshaka* (*Branches of the Tree,* 1990), and *Agantuk* (*The Stranger,* 1991). There I try to show how Ray partitions (to use Ashis Nandy's terminology) his *bhadralok* (middle-class Bengali sensibility) self and tries to create new "marginal" selves who can, on his behalf, assault the bastions of the middle-class Bengali "center" in an attempt to bring it to its knees. Although the first attempt, *Ganashatru,* in my opinion fails, confidence is regained rapidly with *Shakha Proshaka,* and by the time he arrives at

Agantuk, Ray is all set to demolish the cultured Bengali gentry through a nomadic vagabond whose tribalized weapons both wound and enlighten his victims and show them the folly of their insular ways.

Ray's choice of filmic material was to a large extent also determined by what was happening in India at the time. In his perceptive review of Chidananda Das Gupta's study *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray,* Professor Gautam Kundu points out:

> From *Pather Panchali* to *Jana Aranya,* Ray's films record, sometimes ruefully and sometimes dispassionately, the inevitability of change ("progress") and all that it entails. But even if there is nostalgia for the past, there is no sentimentality in Ray's rendition of the gradual movement of one era into another. If over the years, Ray's vision of life has progressively darkened, it is because the realities that he confronts in post-Tagore, post-colonial India are harsh and unsettling.[16]

Ashish Rajadhyaksha indicates how the changes in Ray's cinema were directly inspired and instigated by the political changes erupting in India from the 1950s to the 1980s. He points out how Bibhuti Bhusan Banerjee, author of *Pather Panchali* (1929), showed

> a whole trend of pre–World War II fiction working with a realism of minute description of the everyday, but inventing simultaneously the scale of an epic, of changing season and vast landscape, death and the struggle to live. . . .
>
> It was this novel, then, that Ray updated [in the 1950s] through his formal and technical apparatus. It was as if he looked back on the novel, and through the novel its prewar world, and through that to India's near-century-old history of encountering the modern. Now, finally, the fumbling, the anticipation [of Ray's 1950 filmic efforts] could find contemporary form – and ideological stability.[17]

In the 1960s and 1970s, Rajadhyaksha tells us that Ray, along with most Indian artists of his generation,

> shared the classic liberal nationalist discomfort . . . when the "Naxalite" Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) appropriated for itself the voice of radical change. Its student agitations and consequent state brutality informed his Calcutta films (*Pratidwandi*/*The Adversary,* 1970; *Seemabaddha*/*Company Limited,* 1971).[18]

Indira Gandhi, reelected Indian Prime Minister in 1972, openly declared a state of emergency in 1975 at the center in Delhi. With the state capitals "demanding an increasingly fascist state intervention," Ray, "having no sympathy for the Indira regime" – and almost in retaliation – "set out on

a politically determined critique that he spelled out in his adaption of the two Premchand stories, *Shantranj-Ke-Khilari*/*The Chess Players* and *Sadgati*/*Deliverance*, 1981."[19] So disgusted was Ray, Rajadhyaksha continues, that

> in indirect response, Ray quit making films set in the contemporary for the next fourteen years, withdrawing into children's stories (at least one of which, *Hirok Rajar Deshe*/*The Kingdom of Diamonds*, 1980, made veiled allusions to the Emergency) and period movies including his trusty Tagore (*Ghare-Baire*/*The Home and the World*, 1984).[20]

There is currently a surprising paucity of critical scholarship on the cinema of Satyajit Ray. Eric Rhode's study of *The Apu Trilogy*, published in *Sight and Sound* in the summer of 1961, is the earliest. In 1963, Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy included a long chapter on Ray in their book *Indian Film*. Eight years later, Marie Seton's biocritical monograph, *Portrait of a Director*, and Robin Wood's auteurist monograph, *The Apu Trilogy*, followed. Another nine years were to pass before an Indian film critic, Chidananda Das Gupta, was to publish a hurriedly written critical book on *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the release of *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*) at the Indian film festival Filmotsav 80. Henri Micciollo came out in 1981 with the first French full-length study, *Satyajit Ray*. Recent additions have been Professor Ben Nyce's *Satyajit Ray: A Study of His Films*, released in 1988, and yet another biocritical effort, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* by Andrew Robinson, published in 1989.

Part of my desire to undertake this study arose from numerous lapses I discerned in the works of these critics. In order to demonstrate the pitfalls into which Ray scholarship appears regularly and repeatedly to fall, I would like to dwell briefly on some critical insights offered by a few of these critics. With all due respect to their efforts, I have to maintain that most Western readings of Ray's films seem to suffer from a very serious lack of critical understanding of the social, historical, and cultural traditions of India within which Ray's films predominantly function. Wood, Rhode, and Nyce, for example, often tend to cover up this ignorance by lapsing into hazy, almost mystical notions, like India's "spirituality." Such notions as spirituality are nothing less, it seems to me, than convenient labels arbitrarily imposed by Western theoreticians to explain many of the differences in a culture totally unfamiliar to them. When Rhode examines, for instance, Apu as an avatar of Krishna in *Apur Sansar* (*The World of Apu*), he makes the following misleading statements:

Krishna, you will remember, was allowed for a brief time to love a milkmaid Radha; and so for a brief time Apu is allowed to love Aparna, his wife. . . . After Aparna's death Apu descends into the underworld, where he is imprisoned with his own echo in a landscape of salt.[21]

Since Krishna is the supreme God, responsible for the creation of the universe – man, woman, nature, and everything else in it – the idea that he could be "allowed" to love Radha is completely misconceived. No force or destiny controls Krishna. There is no descent by Apu into the underworld either: His retreat from the outside world into his garret is because of his timidity. He has the Krishna attributes but fails to use them in his relations with women.

In the early sections of this study on Ray, Nyce seems to come up with similar "spiritual" attributes that he heaps on Apu. As an Indian myself, I am rather tired of seeing this word "spiritual" uttered so carelessly and freely by Western critics and commentators. Ray never puts halos around his characters; it is his Western critics who persist in doing so. In Nyce's review of *Apur Sansar,* he tends to explain the Apu/Krishna fusing in the following way:

It doesn't seem too farfetched to suggest that Apu himself has elements of the God Krishna within him and that he himself is going through stages of regeneration which can be likened to incarnations. Ray's need to use different actors to play the growing Apu even makes a contribution here. As Apu's spirit moves through its various growths, his body takes different forms. He is both single and multiple. He is the same Apu throughout the trilogy, and yet he is in the process of becoming different from his prior selves – or, more accurately, of becoming more and more himself.[22]

This is completely erroneous and adds a metaphysical dimension to the film that is never there in the first place. Apu's Krishnacity is seen only on the level of his physical attractiveness. Women are attracted to him, but his shyness always makes him fail to take advantage of his resemblances to Krishna. By insisting on all this redundant business of incarnations and regeneration, Nyce seems to promote an exotic third-world looked-at-ness for Ray's presentation of Bengali culture. My study wishes to free Ray's cinema from such unnecessary contextualizations. Ray is not a great user of myths in his films, but when he does use them, it is for a specific aesthetic purpose (like the death scenes in *The Apu Trilogy*) or to highlight a specific "flaw" in a character (as in the case of Apu's timidity).

A close reading of Wood's *The Apu Trilogy,* while often stimulating and rigorous (especially in his treatment of the psychology of the child's vision

of the universe, or the use of the train as a recurring thematic motif, to cite only a few examples), is often marred by arbitrary references to the music of Mozart, the films of Renoir and Bergman, and the nature poetry of Wordsworth. Wood does not critically elaborate these references, nor does he indicate their purpose. He doesn't even in the Forsterian dialectic "connect" them. What is one to make of the link that Wood tries to establish, for instance, between Apu's flinging of the stolen necklace into the pond in *Pather Panchali* and Johan's hiding of the old waiter's funeral photographs under the carpet in Bergman's *The Silence*?

> But no sooner has one made the comparison than important differences spring to mind: the associations of the necklace are much more present and personal to Apu then those of the photographs to Johan, and are consequently felt as closer to conscious formulation; and the more conscious the associations the less explainable the actions in terms of blind instinct.[23]

Surely a more detailed explanation, especially of Johan's conduct, is required here to make such a comparison work. After all, these are two *boys* performing similar actions but under different circumstances and in two entirely different cultures. Wood, however, offers no explanations. Instead, he plunges into the proverbial "metaphysical" side of Ray, which by *not* accounting for Apu's motivation in this scene "seems to me a strength in the film rather than a weakness. . . . Ray is representing the essential mystery and integrity of the individual psyche. The effect is of psychological density not thinness."[24] Since the reference is never developed, one wonders why Wood uses it at all.

Another disconcerting characteristic I often find in Ray's Western critics is a reckless kind of hyperbolization that fails to give any redeeming insight into either Ray or his cinema. Pauline Kael, for example, ends her review of *Ghare-Baire* (*The Home and the World*) by claiming: "When it comes to truthfulness about women's lives, the great Indian moviemaker Satyajit Ray shames the American and European directors of both sexes."[25] From Kael's narrow perspective, Western filmmakers like Michelangelo Antonioni, Krzysztof Zanussi, Marta Mazoras, Agnès Varda, John Cassavetes, Robert Altman, Woody Allen – all seem to have toiled in vain to establish the truthfulness of their European and American womens' lives.

Hyperbole and eulogy of this kind is what mars Marie Seton's book on Ray as well. It concentrates, by and large, on the biographical aspect of Ray, commemorating him as the most accomplished Indian Renaissance man of his time, but offers little critical evaluation of his achievements in

Indian cinema. The second part of Seton's book very often deals with mere summary sketches of plot narratives. In her analysis of *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room*), for instance, she observes:

> This first performance [of the *jalsa*] establishes the music room as the dominant central focus of Roy's [the *zamindar,* or feudal landlord] inherited way of life in which he is petrified. The vast room itself is the microcosm of the enclosed, leisured, luxurious society of inherited privilege which Ganguly is determined to blast his way into as his lorries [trucks] hint the ruthless energies of his activities in the distance.[26]

Such a reading implies that while a music performance is about to be enacted in the music room, Ganguly's trucks are planning some mischief outside. There *is* a scene with a lorry in the film, but it takes place elsewhere and has really nothing to do with the music room. The scene to which Seton alludes occurs earlier in the film, where first we see the *zamindar* watching his feudal possessions, his horse and elephant, as they graze in the distance. The next shot shows one of Ganguly's clattering trucks bursting upon the scene and destroying the nostalgic mood of our protagonist by swirling dust all over the scene. By simplistically juxtaposing Ganguly's truck with Roy's music room, Seton is offering us an incorrect pair of cultural signifiers to delineate the conflict between the feudal *zamindar* and the nouveau-riche industrialist Ganguly. Although one anticipates that Seton will next critically discuss how Ray's mise-en-scène establishes the music room as the dominant focus of Roy's inherited way of life, on the screen itself, we get instead an account of all the *problems* that Ray had to overcome behind the scenes while this particular shot was being filmed. She describes the furniture of his set and how various objects had to be loaned by a member of the Tagore family because the production had run out of money, and so on. We learn a lot about Ray's working habits, his family ancestry, and his tastes in art, music, and literature. What we don't learn is how all this is reflected in his films. My study intends to do just the opposite: to explain the artist *through* the evidence of his art and what one can critically discern in it.

Andrew Robinson's critical eyes fail to open any inner eyes on Ray's filmcraft. Not only does he perpetuate Seton's gushing approach to Ray; he progressively worsens it by constantly offering us someone else's confirmation of Ray's genius. Thus, Akira Kurosawa's praise of *Pather Panchali* is lavishly inscribed on page 91:

> 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 over-

whelmed. It is the kind of cinema that flows with the serenity and nobility of a big river. . . .[27]

Robinson erects this adulatory scaffolding over Ray and gets so carried away with its imposition that the one person constantly referred to in a self-congratulatory vein is none other than Satyajit Ray himself! On page 118, for example, he cites the following remark by Ray in reference to *Jalsaghar:*

> The idea of the candles going out one by one was devised on location while we were shooting. I was working like I usually do; every evening I was sitting with the script and thinking in case any fresh ideas might come for the next day's shooting. And this suddenly came to me in a flash and I described it to him (Chhabi Biswas, who plays the central role of the *zamindar*). He was terribly excited; he said, "I have never come across such a brilliant and fresh and expressive idea."[28]

The book is full of such narcissistic utterances, often attributed to Ray. This is how Robinson scrutinizes the sweet-seller scene in *Pather Panchali:*

> . . . the tripping sweet-seller yolked to his swaying, bobbing pots, pursued with eager innocence by the children and their canine accomplice. This brief wordless interlude of lyrical happiness belongs uniquely to the cinema; it is the kind of peak in Ray's work that prompted Kurosawa to say: "Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon."[29]

Nothing of any critical value is offered by this kind of an adulatory approach. Robinson seems to have inherited this nagging and reverberative corroboration method of what Ray said/wrote/told me not only from Seton but also from earlier Ray commentators like Barnouw and Krishnaswamy. Their chapter on Ray, entitled "Wide World," indulges in a lot of this. Ray's statement of "Villains bore me," for example, immediately produces from the authors a grocery list of "many figures of Indian Society [in Ray's films] representing power and privilege, and those who willingly or unwillingly accepted the dominance."[30] But this list displays a lot of misinformation. According to the authors, Ray scrutinizes the world of the husband in *Charulata* (*The Lonely Wife,* 1964) as one of these figures. Had he done so, Bhupati would emerge as a willing or unwilling chauvinist to Charulata, which he, most decidedly, is not. Ray depicts him as someone who loves his wife in spite of neglecting her. In *Aranyer Din Ratri* (*Days and Nights in the Forest,* 1970), they feel Ray takes a hard look at businessmen. There are no tradesmen in the film, however: Ashim is a corporate executive, Sanjoy is a Labour Officer in a jute mill, Hari is a

sportsman, and Shekar is a jobless parasite. They also pick out only Ray's scrutiny, in *Shantranj-ke-Khilari,* of the colonial commander (i.e., General Outram). Why are the two Lucknowi landlords and Wajid Ali Shah, the ruler of Oudh, not mentioned? Didn't these people represent and practice the twin doctrines of power and privilege as well?

What is very conspicuous in Barnouw and Krishnaswamy is that they first indulge in long passages of impressionistic description alluding to important moments in Ray's films and then quickly offer us a one- or two-line critical summation. For instance, they give us in eighteen lines what the eponymous wife sees and does in the silent opening tableau of *Charulata* and then proclaim in the end: "Via such suggestions" (which, please note, have all been descriptive and completely devoid of any evaluation) "a *Charulata* world takes shape around her." No commentary is forthcoming, however, as to how this world is shaped by Ray's mise-en-scène, camera movement, editing, and so on. What follows breathlessly is the usual adulatory coronation: "Few film-makers have matched Ray in this building of evocative detail."[31]

Chidananda Das Gupta's study of Ray's cinema is the first by an Indian critic, and although it offers very interesting background material on "the Bengali Renaissance and the Tagorian Synthesis" and the influence both had in shaping Ray's liberal-humanist values and in molding his craft, it disappoints when it actually concentrates on particular films. In his perceptive review of the book, Professor Gautam Kundu suggests its scope very accurately. According to him, Das Gupta divides Ray's cinema into two distinct periods. The first begins with *Pather Panchali* (1955) and ends with *Charulata* (1964). Das Gupta calls this Ray's "searching and finding phase" where, according to him, Ray seems to have made his most artistic and aesthetically satisfying films. The second period commences from *Kapurush-o-Mahapurush* (*The Coward and the Holy Man,* 1965) and seems to be, in Das Gupta's estimation, characterized by "an emptiness and spiritual exhaustion."[32] There are, Kundu continues, exceptions in this second period: notably, *Aranyer Din Ratri* and *Seemabaddha.* Such an evaluation, however, exhibits an unwillingness on Das Gupta's part to accept Ray's new concerns and very clearly demonstrates his preference for the aesthetic vision and classical style of the earlier Ray. Kundu is very right when he concludes that

> There is one aspect of Ray's work that Das Gupta does not discuss at all: his politics. . . . To ignore the class question and the fact that Ray's cinema expresses itself in the forms of bourgeois culture is to attempt a "purely aesthetic appreciation" of his films, an approach that Das Gupta wants to avoid; at least, that is what he says in the introduction.[33]

Though Das Gupta is eloquent and penetrating in his analysis of the classical Ray films, he is ill at ease and often misleading when dealing with the filmmaker's more innovative cinematic expressions. In his analysis of *Pratidwandi* (*The Adversary*), for example, he dismisses most of Ray's newly acquired cinematic vocabulary in the film as "gimmicks," concluding, "It is as if Ray is out to prove that when it comes to gimmicks, he can invent them just as well as anyone else, perhaps better."[34]

Ray deliberately jettisons his classical style in *Pratidwandi,* however, because the nature of his film's central protagonist dictates a fragmented style of filmmaking. The switch to negatives, the dream sequences, the abrupt flashbacks and the playful flash-forwards – all express very suggestively and accurately Siddhartha's hesitant and inarticulate character. The conflicts, doubts, and problems that continually assail him find their most relevant cinematic expressions through such a style.

One gets the impression that Das Gupta does not want Ray to abandon the artistic conservatism of his earlier films. This is why a film like *Aranyer Din Ratri* appeals to Das Gupta: "In every way so different from *Charulata,* it has the same perfection of structure and a musical rhythm with melodic themes, varied repetitions, exactness of proportion."[35] But this film is one of Ray's most critical attacks on the contemporary Indian middle class, and its strength lies not in its classical structure alone. Ray's later work, in fact, has been increasingly drawn to concerns such as the middle class, the status of Indian woman, the paralysis of Indian men, and caste and class divisions – concerns that Das Gupta pointedly chooses to ignore.

In the final analysis, Das Gupta fails to express critically what his introduction had promised:

> In a tradition that equates the beautiful with the good and the true, the relationship of the sociological to the artistic plays a vital role. This saddles Indian critics with a duty they have so far done little to perform.[36]

The relationship of the sociological to the artistic is what the present study of Ray is largely about.

Finally, let me mention one predominant area in the Ray oeuvre that I would have wanted but have not been able to evaluate in this study. It involves Ray's retreat into children's stories, namely:

Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne (*The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha,* 1968)
Sonar Kella (*The Golden Fortress,* 1974)
Joi Baba Felunath (*The Elephant God,* 1979)
Hirok Rajar Deshe (*The Kingdom of Diamonds,* 1980)
Pikoo (*Pikoo's Day,* 1981)

I have not been able to see any of these films as they are very rarely shown abroad or, for that matter, even outside Bengal. It would have been worthwhile to examine how different these films are reported to be and find an adequate theoretical framework to see what interesting insights they have to offer about Bengal and India, both through their mythical recreation of history as well as all the veiled allusions made to contemporary India.

Ray's final triad marks his return to the India of the 1990s, namely:

Ganashatru (*The Enemy of the People,* 1989)
Shakha Proshaka (*The Branches of a Tree,* 1990)
Agantuk (*The Stranger,* 1990)

Ray's last films prompted widely disparate critical reactions. Amaresh Misra, on the one hand, felt that Ray had become

> an armchair liberal functioning as a simple humanist who now viewed social reality in terms of a naïve individual-versus-society conflict and placed his hopes and disillusionment either in some grassroots cultural activity or the travails of innocent children, sensitive, but mentally retarded figures and maverick outsiders.[37]

On the other hand, despite Ray's being old-fashioned in his understanding of Indian society, could one still discern in these films what another critical voice defines as

> the inner health and durable values he stood for and his unique distillation of Indian and western values and forms [which] continues to overwhelm one with their balance of breadth and power (as for instance, in the ending of *Ganashatru*).[38]

Through a close examination of these three films in my last chapter, I attempt to arrive at a clearer understanding of who Ray finally was and where his extraordinary vision was taking him.