



From Nature to Gustation:(Re)Mapping Ecological Aesthetics in Satyajit Ray's Films

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Abstract

Despite the remarkable studies that have come up on Satyajit Ray's films, the deep ecological focus that the films possess remain as a relatively less studied area. Arguably this is the result of an impeccable synthesis of a green morality with a strong cinematic agenda that attempts to transgress the conventional notions of ecological literacy. The films polarise notions ranging from 'wilderness' to the never-ending 'play' between culture and nature with a powerful representative politics that contribute to the ecological footprints in literature and cinema. The paper attempts to (re)read the films from an ecocritical perspective focusing on the representation of nature and sustenance in these cult Indian Movies that exercise a pastoral nostalgia that projects human experiences which contradict and complement to the anthropocentric mainstream dialectic. The manifestation of 'Food Fetish' and the representation of natural environment with villages, rivers and forests are used to establish a strong contemplation of the life condition and the inward spirit of the characters. When art nurtures nature, the ecological aesthetics demands a rethinking which is the need of the hour. Apart from adding to the academic realm, the paper critiques how the cinematic representations play an important role in creating a new aesthetic sensation which is intentionally cultural. The thematic impulses of the films get nourished with multifarious agglomeration of various natural and cultural environments that hold a powerful cinematic and ecological insight.

Keywords: Synthesis, Wilderness, Green Morality, Ecological literacy, Play, Ecocritical, Pastoral nostalgia, Mainstream dialectic, Ecological Insight.

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Arguably the study of the relationship between physical environment and literature acts as the crux of ecocriticism. The paper attempts to re(read) the select films of Satyajit Ray from an ecocritical perspective and evaluates how concepts such as Deep ecology, Ecofeminism and Gustation are represented in these films. The challenging notions of celluloid ecocriticism as put forth by environmentalists such as Adrian J Ivakhiv polarises the director's and character's use of space and time within the realms of anthropocentrism. The paper also advances with similar notions and reflects the environmental aesthetics through the cinematic discourse. Envisaging food onscreen possesses an agenda beyond responding to the gustatory and representative conditions, it also manifests itself as a thoughtful entity that marks the ethnic and spatial reality. Food onscreen could convey us ideologies on the economic standard, ethnic identity, situational idiosyncrasies, relationship strategies, social ladder, cultural specificities and even psychological preoccupation. Hunger, gluttony, bare tables and feasts have been common cinematic motifs that portrayed as how appetite and its satiation are constructed onscreen.

Ray's *Pather Panjali* is an adaptation of Bibhuthibhushan Bandopadhyay's novel of the same name and forms the first film of The Apu Trilogy. The film is set in a rural village of Bengal and the action takes place in the first half of twentieth century. The film is acclaimed for visualizing the power and aesthetics of Indian cinematic experience to the World audience. However the film was also criticized for romanticizing India's poverty which was a grim reality to the world viewers. As epoch making Parallel Cinema, his films were close to life and struggles of Bengali mass. Both these films show strong influences of Italian Neorealism and De Sica's influence over Ray is obvious. In most of these films the central characters experience hunger in one way or the other. Durga and Pishi look at the food items with hunger and yearning. This 'gaze' is political and cinematic. This eternal appetite becomes a metaphor that gets vindicated through the master's lens.

Categorically this hunger functions as one of the central experiences that contributes to the thematic depth of the movie. The fruits that Durga steal from the neighborhoods are gifted to Pishi. Shijobavu who complains about this act of Durga curses her for her thefts and thus create a conflict among the viewer's mind regarding the notions of right and wrong. Ray dexterously places an array of emotions with the assistance of these food metaphors and the actions merge to this situation. On one hand when Sarvojaya scolds Durga for stealing fruits from the neighbor's yard, on the other hand she is forced by the grim reality to steal a coconut from the neighbor. The bond between the characters is also substantiated through the way in which they handle and oversee food. The food kept apart by Pishi for Durga, the sweet gifted to Durga by her friend, the children who run behind the ice candy man, the children playing in the rain, the raindrops falling on the flowers, the tamarind fruit enjoyed by Durga and Appu have all specific functions to perform within the realms of cinematic

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experience. The last scene of the film evinces the villagers gifting the family, mangoes out of their hospitality and love. Their longing to get back to Varanasi gives room to certain shifts in the film that captures brilliant moments of cinematographic excellence. Even though the characters are so close to nature, the scenic beauty of the villages, rivers and the forest appear plain and hollow to them. Thus the film evinces a number of instances where ecology is employed as a powerful Signifier amidst various life stages of cultural and natural reality.

The film *Apur Sansar* also portrays ecology in a similar light. Here the poverty of the graduate is strikingly remarkable for the advancement of the plot and hence the ecological metaphors employed have a strong connection with the hunger of the protagonist who finds it difficult to fill his instinctual hunger and spiritual quest. His friend who buys him food invites him to a different turn of life. After the long walk and good food the satisfaction that Appu experiences gives him courage to speak about his longing to pen a novel. Situations turn topsy turvy and Appu is forced to get married. He reluctantly takes his bride to his shabby apartment and the camera focuses on the empty plates lying on the floor on the threshold. The food that the bride makes for Appu serves as a metaphor of love. She feeds him and works in the clumsy congested area which problematises the concept of kitchen that shows their poor living condition and absence of raw materials as well as cooking area. The poignant pictures of food displayed have a strategy to convey. After Aparna's death, their son is abandoned by Apu and he is also forced to live under miserable life condition. The solitude and the pain experienced by the child is conveyed through his interaction with nature and animals. This again underscores the idea that the dissatisfaction experienced by them is not an abstract feeling rather is a ubiquitous reality and social experience.

Aparijito is a sequel to *Pather Panjali* and it chronicles Apu's life from childhood to adolescence in college and is instrumental in showing some of the intensely compassionate scenes. The relationship between the mother and the son forms the crux thematic notion of the film. The paper argues that the film attempts to show the bond with the aid of ecological sensibility incessantly. The initial scene of the film that portrays the pigeons pecking grains thrown by Harihar with temple bells in the background is symbolic. Thus the first scene itself becomes instrumental in portraying the inherent relationship in the universe between plants and animals. Moreover the untimely death of Harihar is portrayed poignantly and the next shot captures the pigeons flying over Varanasi's buildings. Thus the frame often focuses on the animal community and the scenes have a deep ecological ideology that demands an interconnected and balanced relation between the human world and natural world. The film exhibits recurrent conversations between the mother and the son on food. Sarvojjaya constantly asks Apu if he had food and Apu lies to her about the *peda* and the Bengali sweets that he consumed during the day. Amidst all the small happiness of their daily life, poverty and hunger haunt them. Thus the ecological

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symbols function as Polysemous Signifiers throughout the film. The film also shows characters like beggars and priests who are also suffering from poverty. Similar to *Pather Panjali*, here also food and the desire for food function as a vehicle to express strong childhood emotions and family dynamics. As Plato puts it in his *The Republic* “the first and greatest of necessities is food, which is the condition of life and existence”, this necessity is employed as a weapon to contribute to the visual culture by presenting the condition of life in its ups and downs. The film can be read in a transcultural context as well. *Ashani Sanket* the 1973 Ray film can actually be placed along with *Pather Panjali* for it features the evil effects of second world war and the great famine of 1943 on the Bengali villages.

Hunger and starvation form the thematic concerns and it shows how the class and caste politics act on the verge of a calamity. The green and tranquil village get collapsed with the onset of manmade famine and the world war’s terrible effects. The rice shortage becomes the biggest concern and surviving it becomes a challenge. The food shortage becomes instrumental in creating certain compassionate relationships that questions the social ladder of society. In both these films food functions as the motivating factor and becomes a necessity, desire and destination. The paper argues how Ray as a Filmmaker could show the various phases of life and hunger being a reality of history demands itself to be visually captured and creatively interpreted.

The film *Charulata* which is an adaptation of the novella *Nastanirh* functions as a contrast to the Apu Trilogy by showing sumptuous food being served throughout the film. Food is a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behavior” (Counihan 29). *Charulata* portrays characters suffering from dissatisfaction within different realms. This discontent is placed along with the abundance of food metaphors suggesting economical extravagance that contrasts with the mental disappointments and familial indifference. Charulata, the intelligent yet dissatisfied wife leads a monotonous life with her husband Bhupati who is an upper-class Bengali intellectual. The space that she fits in is far away from the characters of Apu Trilogy and Ray through his skillful craft shows this gap deftly. The film displays instances where Charu serves food to Bhupati where she constantly ignores the eyecontact and the conversations they have is mechanical. The very same incident when portrayed in the film *Apursansar* takes a different spin. The sense of belongingness that the couple experience is conveyed through the scanty food which is served and shared between the couple in a single plate. The same situation indicates the familial reality of two households set in different cultural, political and economic states. The *mise en scene* differs and this underscores the skill of Ray to convey a trivial everyday incident in two different lights as two powerful cinematic experiences. The repressed and buried bitter experience of poverty and hunger is reminded of by showing the extravagance that addresses the memory and social past. The ‘Pleasure’ derived from this remains as powerful everlasting quest in the minds. Thus the food

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metaphors manifests 'Voyeurism' underscoring Freud's notions. These can actually be seen as initial attempts of food fixations that still pertains through the legacy of a vast consumer culture. The films thus cater to the demands of popular culture focusing on the hidden dreams of India's mass. Here the episode of serving the food is deliberately used so as the viewers could easily relate to this everyday incident. The background of these two films further polarizes the incident. Furthermore the crude and insensitivity of Charu's sister in law, Manda is shown through her eating habits where she is constantly found having food all around the house which contrasts to Charu's mannerly food habits. The kulfi brought by Amal is denied by Charu which polarizes questions of social position to sexual desire that later complicates their relation. The female presence in the films with its constructed idiosyncratic transgressions also poses certain questions. These Films that have won international recognition in various film festival platforms for its concise and subtle account of the politics of cinema, human desire and social problems illustrate female voices that eventually fade through the perpetuated incident of death. This escapist strategy adopted by all the female characters in the film poses questions of female existence and deliberate silence that dominate the macho film realizations. Despite the subtle and powerful ideas that the film attempts to convey, the graceful suffering and sudden disappearance of female characters feed onto the voyeuristic pleasures of the mass. This marginalization or subsequent 'invisibilisation' of female voices and their presence around the natural spaces also underlines the intricately interwoven relationship between ecology and women in all these Ray films.

Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne series which is considered as a milestone in Indian Cinema for merging fantasy and comedy in Indian Cinema can also be read from a similar light. The film become significant by standing apart from the hitherto mentioned Ray films with a surrealistic plot. Gopinath Gyne or Goopy is the son of a poor grocer is sent on an exile for his bad voice and Bagha for playing his drum badly. The circumstances take them to the king of ghosts who is fascinated by their coarse music and grants them three boons. The first boon is that they can get food and clothes wherever they want by clapping their hands and they are also given the boon to travel anywhere and to make people motionless. The story ends in a happy note and the film became popular among children. Here Ray presents the Food of Magic and hence there is abundance and variety. This was appealing to a mass who had many desires in their heart among which sumptuous food on table was a primary and significant one. The magic is thus sprinkled through the aid of food. Being a grocer's son the food he is used to was scarce and was meant to satisfy the hunger but the food that he is exposed through magic is opulent and princely. The viewers also find a momentary solace in these sumptuous meals offered to them. The power associated with magic is used for getting something impossible in the real world. The Bengali society had to encounter bitter experiences of famine and the very sight of luxurious food was hence gratifying to the audience.

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When analyzing the representation of environment onscreen what concerns the director may not be the ecocritical implications rather the major concern would naturally fall on the synthesis of thematic impressions and ecological knowledge. In all these films the locale authenticates the plot and elevates the deep ecological perspective that the films hold. The eco conscience of the films caters to the spectator sensibilities at different levels. The camera lens which is inherently a dominating construct have the power to master, colonize and rationalize certain 'images of ecology'. The selected films also underscore certain ecological notions of urbanity and serenity critically.

The paper attempts to strongly assert the fact that nature is not a passive object of scrutiny and hence only contributes in substantiating the content. The inevitability of food to humankind has travelled beyond the nuances of necessity and have reached a platform where it functions as a persistent symbolic device. Apart from acting as a powerful literary and filmic device it sufficiently feeds onto the plot's development by complementing and contradicting the thematic impulses of the text. Contemporary Film Studies host many schools of thought and often act as strong source for manifesting ideologies on Post Structuralism, Postmodernism, Multiculturalism, Queer Studies and Subaltern Studies. After the emergence of academic film studies, films are treated as texts with strong Ideological Politics. Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Metzian Semiotics and even Postmodern Feminism becomes a part of films and its interpretations. It is at this juncture that ecological film representations become significant by analyzing the degree to which anthropocentrism acts in the film. The human mind was always fascinated by moving images, the shades of colours, lights, shadows and darkness. This fascination contributed to the art of Ray's Filmography and the urge for representation has found myriad forms of expression, assertion, dissemination, communication and articulation of ecology. To sum up, it is at this point that Ray films addresses the vantage point of cinephilia or passion for cinema in general in an ecological context.

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