

Satyajit Ray's *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary): A Re-interpretation of Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Pratidwandi*

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Satyajit Ray's movies have always been a chronicle of the vicissitudes of the Bengali existence. However he was always able to transcend the local context of the film to make it a critique / metaphor of a larger universal experience. The American Academy of Motion Pictures had emphasized this unique vision of Ray in their citation on the occasion of bestowing an Honorary Oscar on the Indian maestro. Audrey Hepburn in her speech spoke about Ray's 'profound humanism' and his ability to engage and portray 'the unique in the Indian experience as well as the universal.' (Web) Ray's engagement with the turbulent political scenario of the 1960s and 1970s is showcased in three of his films: *Seemabaddha* (Company Limited), *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary) and *Jana Aranya* (The Middleman), better known as the Calcutta Trilogy. Ray found these texts most effective since they articulated the incertitude and disillusionment which the middle class Bengalis were feeling at that moment in social history. Ray chose Ganguly's *Pratidwandi* since he perceived it as a historicized text which could be effectively transformed into Ray's cinematic idiom. Speaking about his choice of Ganguly's text, Ray remarked:

I happened upon *Pratidwandi* at a time when I was looking not just for any suitable subject, but for a subject of a specific type. This was early in 1970. The urban scene was then dominated by the youth –whether in politics, on the fringe of it, or out of it. Joblessness, cynicism, the clash of generations, seething discontent exploding into violence...one couldn't help reacting to it all and, going one step further, wishing to put some of this into film. It was Sunil Ganguly's *Pratidwandi* which provided the springboard to turn wish into reality. (Foreword vi)

Having remarked upon the authenticity of *Pratidwandi* as a literary text that chronicled the turbulent 70s Calcutta, Ray however, was unequivocal about the decisive factor which led him to film Ganguly's novel. He remarked:

In *Pratidwandi* one finds all these qualities [the visual quality of Ganguly's writing and the latent lyricism of his language], given point and cohesion by the central character of Siddhartha, so endearing and believable in his contradictions, set by turns against his family, his friends, the girl he takes a fancy to, and the society which ultimately drives him to take refuge in a small job in a small town. If I were asked to give one good reason for choosing this literary work, I would say it was Siddhartha. (viii)

Thus Ray's central focus is Siddhartha. As an educated and intelligent Bengali youth he faces the same destiny that was the lot of his peers. Frustrated and angry at the system, Siddhartha does not try to find a political agenda to articulate his discontent. This is the quality that Ray focuses on, in his film. Siddhartha is a modern day Hamlet who suffers from similar phases of irresolution and inaction. He cannot be like his brother who is committed to Marxist politics to change the world. He also does not have the ambition of his sister Sutapa who chooses to defy middle class respectability and use her feminine assets to earn financial freedom. Ganguly characterizes the hero Siddhartha as a rebel but also as a romantic iconoclast. At the

end of the novel we find him ensconced in a remote area of North Bengal working as a petty medical salesman. He has achieved an uneasy peace but dreams of going back to Calcutta to claim his girlfriend Keya. At the end of the novel Siddhartha vows:

'Of course, I'll go back. I'm in exile now. I'll go back not only to Keya but also to have my revenge .All these fellows at the interview who spoke so rudely-I'm going to crush them all and smash that building to bits...As for Ananta Sanyal -I'll gouge his eyes. That police officer, even Keya's father if he takes bribes-I'll line them up against a wall and with my rifle-Oh yes, I'm going back.(103)

Thus a retreat from Calcutta does not give Siddhartha a fresh perspective. He remains angry and entertains fantasies of morbid violence. Ray, however, chooses to interpret Siddhartha's emotional sincerity in a different manner. This is evident in a number of instances in the film but most emphatically in the conclusion. Ray reads Siddhartha's departure from Calcutta as a life-affirming action. Siddhartha reconnects with nature and transcends his anger. Perhaps he does not attain enlightenment but begins his journey towards that end. The manner in which Ray chooses to map the contours of the inner workings of Siddhartha's mind gives the film a different dimension. Also Ray endows Siddhartha with a rare sensitivity which remains unsullied despite his momentary lapses of anger. Siddhartha retains his purity and his emotional sincerity while his brother Tunu becomes a Marxist revolutionary and his sister Sutapa sacrifices her middle-class respectability to climb the social ladder.

Ray was always a firm believer in the craftsmanship of cinema and therefore stressed his partiality for those films which prioritized craft over content. In *Pratidwandi* Ray's Siddhartha represents the plight of the educated Bengali youth in 1970s Calcutta. But Ray also characterizes him as a man who is on the quest for his real self. He does not have his brother's political idealism and neither does he have it in him to compromise his integrity. Ray uses the sound of a birdcall to represent Siddhartha's elusive quest. Operating as a refrain, and audible to the protagonist at crucial moments, it gives Siddhartha's character an universal appeal as it gives his search a transcendental significance.

Suranjan Ganguly has remarked on the manner in which Ray has characterised Siddhartha. Ganguly makes it clear that Ray invests him with something singular so his enchantment with the bird call does not come as a surprise to the viewer. In his article 'Pratidwandi: The Nature of Inaction' Ganguly opines that Siddhartha's portrayal is very different from those of the youth in *Aranyer Din Ratri*. From the beginning of the film Ray observes the chaotic and politically turbulent Calcutta but it is Siddhartha who is primary focus. Ray makes dramatic changes in his cinematic idiom to visually represent Siddhartha's inner turmoil. Thus Ray's adaptation of Ganguly's story tries to project Siddhartha as a youth who suffers from inaction, indecision, anger as well as frustration but is searching for some meaning which would redeem his struggles. Somnath (the hero of the next film of the trilogy, *Jana Aranya*) and Siddhartha are both idealists and despite being caught in the morass of the 70s Calcutta try desperately to retain their own brand of idealism and honesty. Ganguly writes:

Ray turns Siddhartha into a brooding , introspective man with a smoldering vitality that often breaks out in flashes of anger ...he takes on the city with all the vigor, confusion, and terrible vulnerability of youth. As Ray's first deeply troubled man ...Siddhartha's vacillations and inner contradictions ,which extend to all spheres of his life ,are symptomatic of an entire class that has succumbed to misguided idealism...

Thus Siddhartha provides Ray with an opportunity to engage in a complex meditation on the nature of action and its antithesis-inaction. In fact, Ray's preoccupation with modernity in the film centers around his crisis-to act or not to act.

...Ray sheds his classicism and adopts a jagged, disruptive style that subverts the framework of the conventional narrative. *Pratidwandi* is full of jump cuts, freeze shots, ellipses and hand-held camera work as Ray tries to see Siddhartha on Siddhartha's terms. He also turns increasingly to his protagonist's memories, dreams and fantasies to find an entry into his unconscious.(115-'16)

In order that the viewer gets to understand Siddhartha's integrity and emotional honesty Ray has picturized an interview towards the beginning of the film. When Siddhartha is quizzed on the most significant achievement of mankind in the twentieth century he chooses the victory of Vietnam against the U.S.A. over mankind's landing on the moon. Siddhartha tells the interview board that he found the victory of Vietnam quite inspiring since they used indigenous weapons and techniques for self-defence. One of the interviewers asks Siddhartha whether he is a Communist. This interview is inserted into the script by Ray and does not appear in the novel. Again the manner of filming the interview and the scripting makes it evident that Ray wants to critique the system where an individual with integrity did not stand a fair chance at survival. This interview is contrasted with the other interview towards the end of the film. In this case Siddhartha's protest is much more violent and visceral. He protests against the way the candidates are forced to wait in a stuffy corridor in the stifling summer heat. After an interminable wait Siddhartha marches into the room when recess is announced. In a fit of anger he overturns the table and smatters the ink from an inkpot onto the wall. At this moment he becomes an agent of resistance. The daring that he displays makes him a renegade figure who cannot battle or outwit the system effectively.

Suranjan Ganguly has cited Ray's own comments regarding the ending as the most explicit. Ray was criticized for making his protagonist lapse into a violent outburst where he should have shown him to resort to political activism. Ray, however, disagreed with this view. He felt that Siddhartha's growth should occur in a 'private region' (135). While answering a question in this regard Ray tells Nyce that he sees Siddhartha's revolt as an 'emotional gesture' and not an ideological one. Ray further adds that Siddhartha's protest arises from a personal level and he finds this remarkable because 'it comes from inside and not as an expression of political ideology' (135) Thus Ray celebrates Siddhartha's anger as he finds it cathartic and liberating. This interpretation is definitely not suggested by the literary text. Ganguly remarks:

His outburst is not merely a calculated political gesture but a supremely individual one, backed by thought and feeling...Thus Ray applauds the power and integrity of such a profoundly personal gesture...Siddhartha is a better man for having dared ,for finally having broken out of his apathy.(135-'36)

Thus Siddhartha's movement away from Calcutta is an affirmative one as he has redeemed himself in his own eyes. His protest liberates him to start on a new journey of self-knowledge and thus he starts hearing the elusive birdcall once again. In Sunil Gangopadhyay's text there is no mention of an elusive birdcall although Siddhartha is nostalgic about those vacations spent in Deogarh in his childhood with his siblings. Ray takes this detail from the text and invests it with metonymic significance. In the film Siddhartha first hears the bird call in his childhood and it is pointed out to him by his sister Sutapa. But ironically enough, Sutapa and Tunu have changed radically whereas Siddhartha still nurtures something of his earlier innocence. He keeps hearing the birdcall in moments of alienation and one cannot help but conclude that this sound exercises a profound influence on him. It is almost as if the birdcall is like an aspect of nature was to Wordsworth. It not only arouses pleasure but permeates his consciousness to become an anchor of his purest thoughts and the moral guardian of his thoughts. It may also be compared to the Nightingale's song in Keats' Nightingale Ode. Like the song of the nightingale in Keats' poem, the birdcall is at once ethereal in his charm and life-affirming in its vitality. On a deeper level it perhaps signifies Siddhartha's urge to escape the drudgery of urban existence. Ray himself has commented that the bird 'evokes the feeling of wonder, of the potentiality of life, of first sight and first meaning.' (136)

To complete Siddhartha's journey or perhaps to herald his journey to his new existence and consciousness Siddhartha hears the birdcall once again at the end of the film, interspersed with the funeral chants from the Hindu scriptures. According to Suranjan Ganguly:

...the bird call becomes a sign of a deeper inner accomplishment. In a sense, it becomes a vindication of what he has achieved through the choice he has made. Siddhartha may have lost out to the city and to Tunu's notion of political change, but he has gained within. And at this moment of self-growth and revival the bird sings to him. Freed from the malaise of the city, he regains a lost link with nature that will revitalize him.

...Now as the bird call merges with funeral chant, opposites are reconciled in a dynamic fusion. As Nyce explains "Something is dying in him and something is being reborn." Siddhartha's "death" has led to a symbolic rebirth away from the city, and the bird's call heralds it. (137-'38)

The author Sunil Gangopadhyay himself lauds Satyajit Ray's ending in the following manner:

It's a great ending, when I detach myself. The dead man and the sound of the bird carry a sense of eternal life. It is elevated to another level. Siddhartha becomes immaterial at that moment. The director shifts away from him and says:

"Now we can leave Siddhartha here and life goes on. And in life and death the world moves. And Siddhartha is just...a dot." (214)

Ray's ability to transcend the contextual parameters of the text has therefore been lauded by none other than the writer himself. Siddhartha thus transcends the milieu of 1970s Calcutta. Although Siddhartha's anxieties and his frustration makes him a 70s youth, his sensitivity and idealism gives him a universal appeal. Perhaps this is

what the Academy meant when they felicitated Ray for portraying all that was local as well as universal in the Indian experience. Siddhartha is an Everyman but he is also Eliot's Prufrock, roaming the streets of Calcutta and observing the panorama of life. In the final scene he reaches a point of self actualization where his earlier anxieties are put to rest and he is empowered enough to start the journey of his life afresh and without his earlier emotional baggage of aggression, frustration and self-righteousness. It is in this film of the Calcutta Trilogy that Ray's optimism and faith regarding individual idealism comes to the fore. Siddhartha is redeemed or gets a chance at redemption but no such fate is reserved for the protagonists of the earlier *Seemabaddha* and the later *Jana Aranya*. The human spirit is comprehensively defeated by a corrupt society.

In his essay 'The Making of a Film: Structure, Language and Style' Ray makes an interesting observation regarding films and other art forms like literature. He writes:

There is no doubt that cinema includes elements of literature and other forms of art. The conflict shown in drama, the narrative description in a novel to establish its plot and set its atmosphere, the interplay between light and shade in a painting...-each has found a place in cinema. But the language that consists of image and sound -which has no existence unless it is seen and heard -is a completely distinct language. As a result, even when the message being conveyed is the same, there is bound to be a difference in style. That style is exclusive to cinema. That is why, even when it bears elements from other art forms, cinema remains unique.(29-30).

In *The Adversary* Ray therefore showcases his superior craftsmanship as he harnesses the medium of image and sound to narrate and interpret Siddhartha's consciousness-how he graduates from being a commoner to an Adversary.

Works Cited

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