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ISSN 2349-4948

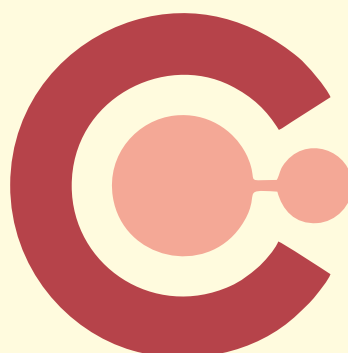
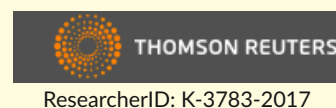
THE CONTEXT

International, Peer Reviewed & Indexed Journal of English Studies

Volume 11 Issue 4, October 2024

Editor

Wamankumar Wani



Published by



Parbhani 431401. MS, India.

www.thecontext.in

ISSN 2349-4948



THE CONTEXT

Quarterly e-journal of English Studies

International, Indexed & Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal

Publication details and instructions for authors:

www.thecontext.in

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The Emergence of Narrative Realism: Ray's Narrative Theory of "Pathar Panchali"

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ABSTRACT

"Pathar Panchali" is a paradigm shifting film in the mid-fifties that changed the attitude of film critics towards Indian Cinema. Satyajit Ray, the master creator has set a milestone with his maiden film that delineates the simple life of then rural folks of Bengal, their pangs and pleasures, their struggle for existence. He brought about a passive revolution in the language of films. The images that he created in this classic film are immortal and emphasize human values and human existence. The evolution that took place in the realm of Indian Cinema through "Pathar Panchali" lies in its narrative which is realistic as well as post-modern in its approach to cinephiles.

Keywords: *Language, evolution, realistic, films, Cinephiles, etc.*

FULL PAPER

According to a view that evoked much discussion in the 1970s, any text postulates a reading position which determines the production of the meaning of that text. The western monocular perspective, almost exclusively dominating painting, photography and moving picture, position the viewers in a fixed location in respect of the image, thereby determining the production of signification. In film theory, this was termed as “apparatus” approach, first broached in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinema* in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which dominated the debate on the politics of representation in subsequent years. This view was largely influenced by the structuralist notions of ideology in the Marxist thought of Althusser and his followers, as well as by the post-Freudian psycho-analytical theories of Lacan. Feminist film theories followed and the image of a woman as a passive entity, acted upon and not acting, assuming often enough the status of a fetish, decides for us the ways of seeing the woman in the image. Popular cinema, of the dominant Hollywood variety for instance, was intensively studied in order to bring out the ideological underpinnings of market-driven visual entertainment.

The theory of textual determination of reading and seeing has been extensively revised in recent years. Post-structuralism has moved away from the model of abstract structural properties of the text to the notion of reading, so that the production and reproduction of discourses can be seen in a more flexible and complex social setting. Reading is seen as context specific, and history enters the picture under assumptions of what has been called ‘cultural materialism.’ While cultural codes in the wider sense have been seen as the proximate determinants of subject positions, the Marxist theory of class struggle has made its appearance through the influential notions of ‘hegemony’ and ‘passive revolution’ enunciated by Antonio Gramsci. The current view appear to assume that ways of seeing are generally flexible and plural, allowing a choice among a very large number of reading codes, and that negotiated as well as oppositional readings are possible, depending upon the location of the viewer in terms of class, gender, race, culture etc. In any case, the classic idea of a unique text, independent of the reader’s or viewer’s position, appears to be doomed. The famous announcement of the death of the author, made by Foucault and Barthes but with different reasons, has been floating in the air for quite some time, and seems to liberate the reader from the ‘authority’ going on to ‘authoritarianism’ of the author.

Roland Barthes proposes that there is a continuum of textual structures which goes from the ‘readerly’ to the ‘writerly’ on a graduated scale. In other words, valuation of the text, derived from cultural and intellectual ambience, induces to respond to the demands of the text in a way which may transcend the assumed primacy of the reader’s interpretive autonomy. While it is entirely legitimate to say that one does not enjoy ULYSSES, one has in all fairness to engage in a discussion with someone who does. The ‘writerly’ text has therefore a different address from the ‘readerly’ text, which is much less demanding, and which is the staple of any culture one can think of these

days. Popular cinema, pot-boiler fiction, chart-busting music and similar things---one must not forget football at large part of the world and cricket on the sub-continent--- appeal to a massive number of people because of their easy and untroubled access through the market. The text, by convention or consensus or its inner power, obtains a willing collaboration from the reader to explore its meanings and graces in terms of the demands set by the text itself. The reader's autonomy may not be as absolute as often thought.

What really happens when we go to a cinema for a Hindi film or sit before the TV set to watch a Hollywood blockbuster? What sense does make of what one sees? It has been the custom in film studies to look into what makes up the film: the individual images and shots as well as the connected narrative were examined in terms of camera position and movement and focus, duration of shots, *mise-en-scene*, montage, acting, sound track, and so on. This is still a fairly indispensable way into the film text. But the question comes up: does everyone see the same film? The emphasis has shifted from the structure and content of the text as they are available to an ideal reader to the variable reading process which in reality takes place. It is now accepted that each of us reconstructs a different text as we do our viewing and that assumed collectivities marked by class, gender, ethnicity, language, culture, age and so on have a bearing on the process of reading.

Ordinarily, we assume that making sense of what we see is a natural and spontaneous activity and that we require no special training to be able to understand either events or representations. Nothing could be farther from truth. While the kind of learning needed for reading, writing and counting is not a pre-requisite in the case of visual understanding, a training process is nevertheless a precondition for all of our mental operations dependent on eyesight. The eye sees what the brain directs it to see and the sense we make of what we see is dependent on the training we have received in ways of seeing.

Everybody must agree with the view that "*pathar panchali*" changed the history of Indian cinema. But just precisely what this revolution consisted in is not always very clear. Its humanism, its outdoor shooting style, its handling of actors, its evocation of a Bengal countryside in the historical past---all these factors were new no doubt, but the most important element is the narrative style which is in marked contrast with the way films had been made all over India so far. It proposed a narrative devoid of the traditional hero-heroine-villain structure and of the non-diegetic song-and-dance routine, it eschewed melodramatic events and representations, it adopted a secular causality and a linear narration to a different way of telling stories in the cinema was in line with the changes which had already taken place in literature and drama, at least in Bengal. This should, in turn, be related to the project of modernity, subject of heated debates under the rubric of post-colonial studies. The global scenario was almost the same, but the sequence was not identical. The realist text in European and American cinema is of course related to the development of the high bourgeois novel, from which many of the narrative habits of Hollywood were derived, and there was a period which valued spectacle much more than narrative, just as in India and continue

to so in film and television, the spectacular mode did not last very long in the west, realist narrative assuming the dominant position. The market for realist cinema in India has been very weak for reasons which have a great deal to do with the uneven development of modernity in this country. The recent tendency towards postmodernist textual practices in western film and television has brought a degree of convergence between India and the West, with a consumerist ethic promoting the circulation of spectacles.

Globalization of culture should not be viewed in the context of any unilateral and unproblematized theories of cultural domination, to be led from these to a post-modernist position where the overdeterminations are multiple, totally unpredictable and embodying equal pulls towards homogenization and differentiation, towards the metropolis and the periphery. In other words, we should not see globalized culture as 'chaos culture.' What we may rather say is that it makes sense to talk of an imperialist agenda in culture in the era of globalization so long as we are focusing on transnational capital's project of conquering and owning cultural spaces so far outside its purview in order to transform it into a market for its own monopolistic operations. Noam Chomsky's powerful projection of a 'propaganda model' to explain the working of American mass media all over the world to 'manufacture consent' is built on this assumption and there is no need to reject it. In fact, empirical work done on television and social change in India will support this work. Media globalization may find a leeway through genuine aspirations of the people targeted for greater democracy and freedom from the oppression of the state or of the fundamentalism, but it is none - the-less an imperialist agenda. This takes us back to Antonio Gramsci and to theories of cultural domination linked with Gramsci which has been propounded at different times by diverse scholars like Raymond Williams, Frederick Jameson and Stuart Hall. Imperialism is the ultimate form of domination based on ownership, and the thinkers mentioned above have offered forceful arguments to show how owners of cultural resources may have a homogenic influence over those who do not possess them. As Hall says, homogeny refers to the 'limits ---mental and structural ---within which subordinate classes 'live' and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them. All of them analyze 'mass culture' as part of this agenda of domination. On the other hand, all of them constantly emphasize the fragility of such hegemony, the persistent presence of 'counter-tendencies' within cultural forms and habits and the reinvention of official messages to create a space for resistance. This resistance may move towards the evolution of counter hegemonies and new strategies of compromise to thwart the resistance. These arguments, applied to the context of globalization of media, may be most useful for us.

More than five decades ago, a single film ushered in a new age in the cultural universe of India. The claim is neither immodest nor exaggerated. Nearly everyone will agree that *Pather Panchali*, released in 1955, marked not only the emergence of a cinematic genius, but also the beginning of a new era in film making. There has been a great deal of discussion on the newness of *Pather Panchali*. Internationally, its

authenticity and realism were hailed, critic and ordinary lives in the Indian countryside. Its lyrical quality, harder to define, was equally valued. People noted the relaxed but complex rhythm to narrative, the spatial configuration of man-nature relationship, the deep sympathy for the underdog, the unvarnished portrayal of meanness as well as joys of living, the subtle historical meta-narrative, the deep insight into the arc of desire and fear which marks the child's entry into the world. International recognition is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for judging a film's worth, but it does provide an index to thresholds and breaks. Apart from friendly gestures from the Soviet Union and parts of the communist camp, consequent upon independent India's leading role in the Non-Aligned movement during the cold war, hardly any notice was taken of Indian cinema at the time. The popular Hindi cinema in particular was a curiosity, because it came from one of the largest entertainment industries in the world, but in terms of the world scene, it was one of those national cinemas which dotted the landscape and hardly mattered. This was the view from Hollywood, which was of no value or consequence because Indian cinema was financially as well as culturally autonomous, but what did matter was the studied indifference of the film-making and film-reading avant-garde, in the west as well as elsewhere, towards what was on offer from the melodramatic repertoire of Indian cinema. *Pather Panchali* made the international fraternity of cinema to sit up and take notice. The pathetic gloating which is in evidence in the newly emerging nation, just into its eighth year of independence. There was a sense that something of a break had taken place in the humdrum round of "mythological" and "social" and that one should share one's joy and pride with the rest of the world.

The world was generous in its praise: Cannes, Edinburgh, and the Vatican in 1956; San Francisco and Berlin in 1957; the roll of honour continued. But the most important thing about the reception of *Pather Panchali* was the response of Bengal, and later on, the rest of India. The president's Award for the best feature film of 1955 merely recognized what the film-going public had already decided for itself in the very first week after release. Those cinephiles who lived through the momentous months from August, 1955, onwards will remember the sense of excitement and fulfilment which the film generated. There were rounds of reception and open seminars and discussion—group sessions; reviews, interviews, articles and leaders appeared all over the place. It became a talking point at university tea-rooms and coffee houses. Much prestige attached to those who had gone and seen *Pather Panchali* at its first run. One is talking probably of a small fragment of the articulate middle class, primarily based in the huge sprawling city of Kolkata, perhaps predominantly Hindu, but this fragment contained the intellectually active avant-garde who took the lead in expressing the wonder and pleasure of viewing the film. And the viewing was not confined to the elite. Large numbers of ordinary people went to see the film and were moved by the movie. In a sense the international elite and the Bengali common viewers had congruous as well as differing reasons for admiring *Pather Panchali*. The realism, the humanism, the lyricism appealed to everyone. But the Indian, particularly the Bengali common viewers had special reasons for feelings that the film addressed some of the deepest concern and values of one's existence. People were living in very difficult

times in the partitioned Bengal of the fifties. Poverty, joblessness, scarcity, disease, hunger, injustice and oppression stalked this part of the country in particular. Ray had not intended to mirror the contemporary in the evocation of the not-so-lost historical past. But he sensed the turmoil of the times in the story of a small family in a small village around the turn of the century. He was proposing that it was important to look at the conditions for the production of anxiety and despair, pleasure and hope, solidarity and division. He placed the ordinary man and woman at the centre of his narrative and brought children to the fore; the girl-child fulfils her destiny by dying, but the boy survives to carry on the grim struggle with the mother by his side. The contemporary audience had a great deal to find in this film, and though one or two of the later films failed initially, the Bengali viewer can be said to have stood by their foremost artist in the second half of the century.

The artistic and technical conditions for *Pather Panchali*, stark at one end and startling on the other, have been documented with great good humour by Ray himself. The camera of Subrata Mitra and the sets of Bansi Chandragupta, mavericks of enormous innovative talent, came up with technical solutions to the rigorous demands of Ray's imagination. He was charting an artistic path untrodden by any Indian filmmaker so far. Lighting up an old broken-down house, for instance, or getting complete novices to face the camera, needed formidable ingenuity and aplomb. Ray's job was to think up ways of forging a new consensus on the protocols of realism with his projected audience. He had no hero or heroine or villain or fighting or melodrama or clowning or sexy dances or lilting songs or lavish sets on offer. Therefore, he had to persuade the viewer to adjust her sights and her narrative desire to the new representational regime. This was done by offering a richness of details---both natural and social---which the film-goer had seldom seen represented. Ray was teaching us how to discover our own world which we had lost to the conventions of studio melodrama. A kind of defamiliarization was taking place in the process of watching the film-text in 1955; the available conventions of film-making had been abandoned and something rich and strange had taken their place. This meant that the older ways of seeing had to be jettisoned. Ray, in fact, prepared the Bengali audience to be ready for the new Indian cinema. The history of subsequent decades would bear this out. Ray's revolution may be called unfinished because only a small part of the Indian film-going public has remained loyal to its radical vision. There are of course historical reasons why melodrama and mimicry have continued to dominate the scene in Indian cinema.

The international context of Ray's new artistic break is pretty well-known; Ray himself repeatedly acknowledges his debt to the modern masters like Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Renoir, De Sica, Ford, Orson Welles and others. He was generous, perhaps too generous, to old Hollywood, because most of his work flatly contradicted the standard Hollywood procedures. It is also recognized that Ray's cinema, like Mrinal Sen's and Ritwik Ghatak's, is a major contribution to cultural modernity in India. The cinema comes of age in their hands. What is not very often kept in mind is the trajectory of cultural modernity of Bengal, which describes a separate curve from most

of the rest of India. One even sees fairly ludicrous attempts to link the state-convened modernization of the Nehruvian era to the cultural goals of modern Bengal. In fact, Ray was engaged in bringing cinema in line with the revolutionary developments in Bengali culture from the nineteenth century onwards. Consider the single example of Ray's own family. The grandfather came to settle in Kolkata and immediately started several modern enterprises in education and culture; printing, publishing, children's literature, scientific and technical works, photography, women's education, social and religious reform. The father was a genius who extended the possibilities of children's literatures in radically new directions. The elite—largely the educated middle class and predominantly Hindu—were extremely innovative in these areas, and what happened was not because of British rule. The first modern novel, *Durgeshnandini* of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, was published in 1865 and became an immediate trend-setter. The lyric poetry of Tagore—as also his fiction, drama, music and painting—set the standards of cultural modernity in the 20th century. The best modern novelist, Manik Bandyopadhyay, and the best modern poet, Jibanananda Das, had lived till the fifties. The political turmoil of the freedom movement, itself an index to modernity, had generated vigorous cultural activities, and this was true of the later leftist movements which emerged out of the armed freedom struggles and workers' and peasants' movements. It is not possible to separate Ray and *Pather Panchali* from this history. He was, in fact, the latest pioneer in a prolonged struggle to achieve an Indian version of modernity. That he had chosen the tenth muse is a bit of luck for the world of cinema.

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