

**Women, Nationalism and the Historical Concern of ‘Gaze’
in Satyajit Ray’s Devi and Charulata**

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Abstract: This paper explores the gendered politics of gaze and representation in colonial Bengal through Satyajit Ray’s (1921-1992) films Devi and Charulata. It discusses how these films provide a lens to examine how nationalist discourses deified women and their bodies for patriarchal aspirations while stripping them of their agency. It argues that these films bring to light female subjectivity in the context of colonial Bengal and shows the lost female perspective on these deeply political issues. When discussing gender norms in relation to historical events, it is common to encounter the problem of authentic depictions of women’s experiences. This paper takes into account the Feminist Film Theory and suggests that these two films specifically deal with the most debated concept presented in it, the problem of the ‘male gaze’ and links it to the historical deification of women during the emergence of nationalist feelings in Bengal.

Keywords: Colonial Bengal, Cultural revival, Feminist, Films Nationalism, Women etc.

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Introduction

In the cultural and political imagination of colonial Bengal, narratives surrounding women often occupied a paradoxical space, sometimes venerated and sometimes suppressed. Sacralization of the feminine figure and putting it at the heart of the moral and cultural revival of the Indian

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nation activated by the male gaze (perception) caused severe dilemmas on the parts of women who became passive participants in this bigger nationalist experiment. Satyajit Ray, in his classics *Devi* (1960) and *Charulata* (1964) questions this very specific dilemma while also creating alternate spaces for rediscovering the otherwise lost female voice.

Satyajit Ray, the auteur and a filmmaker with a humanistic approach to cinema holds a unique position in the contemporary history of India. He is often considered a visionary filmmaker and a pioneer of the Indian New Wave or Parallel Cinema movement. Ray’s pedigree and background set him apart from his contemporaries in the Indian film industry.

It is interesting to note how Ray started making films in the 1950s, the heydays of the Nehruvian era, when India was chasing a new modern, internationalist idiom. Nehru’s emphasis on the importance of education and industrialization, legislative reforms for women such as the introduction of new marriage and inheritance laws (The Hindu Code Bills, 1955-61) – all makes this phase an important one for a nascent independent nation.

Women’s position in cinema is one of the most popular themes in Film Studies research today. Cinema, no more considered to be just a medium of entertainment, is a tool of expression and is powerful enough to influence society and culture. Feminist film theory, which operates within the fields of Feminism and Film Studies, traces the ‘female voice’ in cinematic representations of women. Feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey and Ann Kaplan suggest mainstream films have always been patriarchal in their construct. The studies following their work gave rise to the concept of Women’s Cinema¹. Women’s Cinema essentially is cinema that is made by women, for women and talks about women. It is not a separate genre or movement in Film Studies. Women’s Cinema has quite a complex theoretical framework that suggests that women’s stories are best told by the female filmmakers².

However, while female filmmakers do have the technical advantage in this case, it would rather be inappropriate to claim that only female filmmakers can offer a deep insight into the female psyche. Over the years, several male directors have successfully given their female characters a distinctive voice and identity. Satyajit Ray stands out simply because he was practicing Feminism in his cinema way before the Feminist Film Theory was even born.

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Ray may not have explicitly identified himself as a feminist, but his work and life certainly suggest a deep understanding of feminist issues and a commitment to portraying women as complex and multi-dimensional characters.

I think, women by and large have a stronger fiber, a stronger character, possibly because the nature has built them physically less strong, in order to balance that, they have been endowed with a stronger character. There are weak women also, but by and large, if you compare, I am more impressed by the natural integrity of women.³

This statement of Ray was translated effortlessly on screen in most of his films. Ray chose to tell stories of women, who were simple and complicated at the same time. They were powerful anchors, yet vulnerable human beings.

When discussing gender norms in relation to historical events, it is common to encounter the problem of authentic depictions of women’s everyday experiences. Instead, the focus tends to center around normative expressions of sexual differences, with an emphasis on explaining the perpetuation of patriarchy rather than examining women’s experiences. In the late 19th century Bengal, these gendered notions regarding the nation, culture, and society played a crucial role in nationalist thought, with representations of womanhood serving as a symbol of the nation.

The emergent nationalism in colonial India in the late 19th century was seen giving enormous importance to the divine ideology of motherhood in the arena of politics that sought to challenge colonialism and bring the nation into being. The specific image of the mother began to embody nationalist aspirations. It sought inspiration from the age-old mother cult of Bengal, which was a cultural phenomenon seeking to mythologize the power of women to assert one’s identity, an identity which was strictly native, as opposed to their western rulers. This particular shaping of the feminine image was essentially an object of the male gaze and an act of patriarchal control. Representing the nation as a mother goddess and elevating the women to the pedestal of divinity eventually deprived women of their agency.⁴

Despite scholarly examinations of the idealized portrayals of women in these discussions, there remains a dearth of exploration into the subjective experiences of women who may have resisted these gendered ideological perspectives, sometimes actively, sometimes silently. That is precisely when cinema becomes a tool of historical reconstruction. Especially in an age when feminist and gender researchers are seeking innovative ways to understand women’s experiences

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in the past, cinema when seen and used as an archive can explore the representation of female subjectivity.

Examining Satyajit Ray’s works as a filmmaker provides just the scope of juxtaposing contemporary India with its socio-cultural past, as majority of Ray’s films were set in the most significant phases of Indian history and raises important questions regarding the same. Through his films, Ray created a space where a conversation could take place between the objectification of women as archetypes of femininity in history and a more nuanced perspective that emerges through his cinema.

Now, to address the conflicting realities of ‘male’ and ‘female’ gaze in Ray’s films, one must take into account how world cinema in general had normalized the controlling power of the male gaze and how the female beings had always been subjected to that. The idea of the ‘male-gaze’ was first broached by Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*⁵, pointing out the disturbing sexual imbalance in this act which reduces the woman into a sexual object. This phenomenon has deep patriarchal roots that historically positioned women as subjects of male desire rather than independent individuals. These practices often get translated into the everyday lives of men and women and shape the very contours of society and its gendered roles.

In the case of India, the 19th century had witnessed the growing male concern of determining spaces for women where they can practice their roles as wives and mothers e.g. the inner spaces or homes; *ghar*, while the men dominate the outer spaces e.g. *bahir*, as the deciders of more important aspects of society and politics. As Partha Chatterjee in his seminal work *The Nation and Its Fragments*⁶ argues, the widely discussed women’s reforms that characterized the very nature of the socio-political scene in 19th century Bengal was entirely a male discourse that utilized women and kept reshaping their fate suiting their changing political agendas. In my opinion the male gaze translated invariably into the radical nationalism of the early 20th century when the female body became the symbol of the nation (e.g. the popularization of *Bharat Mata* and its subsequent effect on the *Swadeshi* movement) awaited to be rescued by the brave sons of the country. As Sumathy Ramaswamy argues that the very fact that the Indian nation has been visually represented as a divine female figure whose body is mapped onto the territorial outline of India shows the strategic move of the nationalists of spiritually and emotionally connecting

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the nation with its citizens.⁷ Because the male sentiment of rescuing the female body and determining its fate raw and palpable and could easily be provoked.

Tanika Sarkar points out that the inspiration for conceptualizing the idea of *Bharat Mata* was taken from the goddess Durga, who despite being a warrior goddess is worshipped in the form of a mother with all her children. In popular culture, she is depicted as a woman with a serene smile despite having demon Mahisasura at her feet and weapons in her hand, indicating a more domestic and gentle feminine form of strength, as opposed to a more radical image of goddess Kali, projected to be half naked, blood-thirsty and fierce. Bengali nationalism appropriated this image as the idea of a mother figure to impose on the cultural fabric of Bengal and its gendered norms.⁸

However, one cannot help but wonder what sort of gendered and societal implications such representations have had. The ‘divine’ imagery might seem to elevate women, but it’s ultimately shaped by the male gaze, rooted in sexualization of the female body, ownership, protection or control. For generations such sentiments got redefined by various arts and popular media.

In cinema, the viewer watches what the ‘gaze’ of the male filmmaker shows: camera shots that focus specifically on the bodies of women giving her a sexualized presence. It was following such critiques from the female perspective that the idea of ‘female-gaze’ arose. However the term has never been explicitly defined in the world of cinema. What was fascinating about Ray’s films though was the fact that he pre-empted such ideas. Reflections of the alternative practice were seen in several of his women-centric films, including *Devi* and *Charulata* and *Mahanagar* (1963). Ray’s cinema very subtly offered a new approach, where his female characters got their own way of viewing things, objects or humans in whatever context they liked. In my opinion, such reversal of historically gendered practices in popular arts counters the practice of exoticizing and fetishizing women for male political aspirations and provides the other side of the narrative e.g. the female experience during such crucial junctures of history.

Ray’s *Devi* and the critique of the colonial ‘male gaze’

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In one of his later interviews, Ray mentioned that *Devi* “dealt with religious dogmatism. It didn’t attack religion as such. It attacked the dogmatism, the extreme form of religion”⁹. I believe, *Devi* was a classic product of Ray’s intellectual curiosity and more than being a critique of religious fanaticism was a more of a critique of the colonial male gaze. It was the clash between traditionalism and modernism which was at the heart of the film’s narrative which seeks to discover what lay at the core of their difference. Ray’s attempt was to question the tenets of orthodox Hindu structure of the society and its beliefs. But in my opinion, *Devi* hinted at way many more unsettling patterns practiced in colonial Bengal. Based on Prabhat Mukhopadhyay’s story of the same name, the film bases itself around 1860 in rural Bengal, during the crucial period of the Bengali Renaissance.

Doyamoyee, the daughter-in-law of a wealthy and influential zamindar who also happens to be a devout worshipper of goddess Kali, Kalinkar Roy, is initially depicted by Ray as a young, obedient and coy bride who carefully follows the traditional role expected of her. Her husband Umaprasad is receiving Western education in Calcutta and rarely stays at home. One night Kalinkar dreams that Doyamoyee is actually an incarnation of the goddess Kali and that she has come to his house in a human form as a prize for his infinite devotion to her. “The third eye of the goddess image becomes the *tilak* mark on Doya’s forehead, the hypnotic eyes of the goddess transform themselves into the eyes of the innocent Doya”¹⁰.

As the film progresses, we see Kalinkar becoming increasingly obsessed with Doya’s divinity and in no time a baffled and petrified Doya is installed as a goddess on a divine platform. She is now elevated to the position of an authority and worshipped as a deity by everyone, except for Harisundari, the wife of Kalinkar’s elder son. Harisundari is strategically placed in the film by Ray as the only female voice who contests this insanity. Feminist Film Theory suggests, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active male and passive male. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly”¹¹. Kalinkar’s obsession is a fitting example of this notion. Sigmund Freud in his *Three Essays of Sexuality* describes how this act of looking at other people as objects, has a deep sensual undertone. This act of deriving pleasure from just looking

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at a person can be categorized as ‘Scopophilia’, which invariably subjects a person to a controlling gaze¹². Kalinkinkar’s deification of doyamoyee and his constant uttering “maa” (mother) have similar undertones. Putting women on a pedestal as goddesses has historically not translated into real-world agency or rights. She is idealized yet her body is the object of male fantasy.

During several points in the film, the camera moves into a close up, we see tears rolling down Doya’s cheeks, as she sits quietly on the goddess’s seat, chin down. Her horrified eyes and tired body-language are firmly indicating her reluctant acceptance of the situation. Now, the very fate of Doyamoyee, in my opinion resembles the fate of every 19th and early 20th century woman in Bengal, forcefully subjected to the male idea of her divine existence instrumental in giving impetus to the nationalist aspirations which also to be protected from the growing western influence of the colonial regime and her pre-determined space in the secluded inner chambers of the traditional homes.

Ray contrasted the superstitions of Kalinkinkar with his son, Umaprasad, who has a more rational and modern attitude towards things. He is deeply influenced by the ideals of BrahmoSamaj and has a very westernized worldview. He strongly disagrees with his father’s claims of Doyamoyee’s spiritual identity. “Ray chose to make the confrontation powerful in the film, than in the original story”¹³, says Andrew Robinson. Uma hence, comes back to rescue Doya from this grave misfortune only to find out that she has lost all her senses. She is increasingly becoming detached from the reality. She is unable to reconcile her spiritual beliefs with the practical realities of her life. “What if I really am a goddess?”, she asks Uma. Doya realizes, it is death which is the only escape at this point. She spots an idol of goddess Durga half-submerged into the river. It brings her feminine dilemma back, as a part of her wants to be rescued but the other part would not let her question her identity as the goddess. She runs towards the river and disappears from the sight, in the meadow.

The last shot of the film shows a clay idol of Durga waiting to be decorated for worship. The actual story ended with Doya’s death by drowning. One must notice that Ray’s film ends with a hope of Doya coming back to senses. Ray ended the film abruptly probably on purpose, her death is only assumed as it was a personal act. Doya’s death becomes her final act of resistance, a radical assertion of agency within a system that had denied her all rights over her

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own body and life. So, she reclaims the agency of her soul. In this final act, she breaks the cyclical nature of patriarchal gaze where death is no longer a passive surrender but an active rupture of the oppressive structures that demands her silent submission.

Doyamoyee’s deification without her consent turning her into an icon, an object of worship parallels the nationalist creation of the mother goddess (Bharat Mata) as women were not consulted or asked to partake in how their bodies and images were used. Ray’s *Devi* and its colonial setting depict a profound sense.

Ray’s *Charulata* and the ‘female gaze’

“Is Charu an archetypal Ray woman?” someone once asked Ray. “Yes, she is”, he replied without qualification¹⁴. Based on Rabindranath Tagore’s novella *Nastaneer*, *Charulata* is probably the most widely viewed and critically analyzed among Ray’s oeuvre of films.

Charulata begins with a long shot of a huge aristocratic mansion in the late 19th century Calcutta. As the camera moves closer, we see a young woman, aimlessly wandering from one room to another, alone. The camera follows her as she passes by the bookshelf, picks up a novel by Bankim, amidst a bunch of other literary classics, that she probably has read a million times. The sounds from the street distract her and she fetches her lorgnette to observe the passersby. Her husband enters the room keenly reading a book and exists without even realizing Charu’s presence. The camera then zooms in on Charu’s face, capturing her inner thoughts, while a haunting melody plays in the background. She is quietly roaming in and around the house, playing the piano in one room and embroidering a handkerchief in the other, only to be left bored of each activity. Then comes a moment when she surrenders to boredom.

This is a typical day of Charu’s life and most of the upper-class Bengali women in the 19th and 20th centuries. The scene is so long that the viewer feels restless to hear a word. I believe, this was Ray’s way of both establishing and giving the audience a sense of the loneliness experienced by women at the time. She is trapped inside a glamorous prison, decorated with Victorian paintings and statues, where comfort and luxury are in abundance, but there is no room for companionship. Ray placed Charu’s character within the context of the set code of feminine

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conduct in a Hindu society, where a woman is only allowed to observe the world from a distance, reclaiming Partha Chatterjee’s *ghar* and *bahir* argument.

Charulata is a young woman living in a conservative, upper-class Bengali household in the 19th century, whose privileged lifestyle and intellectual curiosity are at odds with her traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Charu is a highly intelligent and emotionally enriched woman whose thoughts are shaped by her social and cultural circumstances. Charu is also a voracious reader. Inside her strong and dignified exterior, she has a playful self that finds joy in observing monkey dance outside her window. But she longs for an intellectual companionship. ShomaChatterji observes, “The Charu of Ray’s film is lonelier than Tagore’s Charu in *Nastanee*”¹⁵.

She is married to Bhupati, a typical 19th century Bengali *bhdrolok* who is always preoccupied with criticizing the British government in his newspaper *The Sentinel*. He is an archetypical product of 19th century westernization, someone who claims to be an ardent nationalist, but wears Victorian attires, speaks English in fashion, and takes pride in declaring his distaste for Bengali literature. Bhupati, just like his fellow western educated elites, was a believer of Western rationalism, of half-understood ideas and beliefs. He is an active supporter of women’s education and emancipation but is unable to provide his wife with the intellectual and emotional support she so badly wants, and leaves her vulnerable to the attentions of his cousin, Amal.

Bhupati becomes the living example of the Renaissance elites who were obsessing over the “women’s question” in the public sphere but failed to realize its ideals in the domestic space. This not only reveals the superficiality of their ideals but also powerfully critiques the silent oppressive structures that restricted the creativity and freedom of women (Chatterjee 122-25). Hence, the quest and critique that started by Ray with *Devi*, was extended in *Charulata*.

As per Tagore’s story, Bhupati married Charu when she was a little girl. Bhupati was so engrossed in his newspaper that he never realized that Charu grew up, and the changes in her needs had blossomed into those of a woman. What he also did not realize was, his little bride had outgrown him in terms of intellect. Ray made it transparent through her love for Bankimchandra, the celebrated 19th century Bengali novelist, using the author and his literature as a subtext. Bankim wrote about women who were willing to break free of the patriarchal construct, but

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mostly had to suffer a tragic result. Charu identifies with Bankim’s strong female characters, imbibing a similar sense of autonomy.

Bankim was also the thread that connects Charu with Amal, Bhupati’s cousin. Amal entered the life of Charu on a stormy afternoon, with an umbrella in hand he touches Charu’s feet asking her immediately, “Bouthan, have you read *Andandamath*? (Bankim’s latest)”. In a scene where Charu discusses with Amal Bankim’s essay on *PrachinaebongNabina*(On the conservative and the modern woman), Ray depicted Charu’s struggle for self-expression. Would she be a *prachina* and accept her pre-determined position in this patriarchal society? Or would she fight to be a *nabina*? However, Bankim’s use of the term *nabina*, the “new woman” had a negative connotation. It carried a condemning tone as it meant to attack the westernized, modern *bhodromohila*. Ray changed the narrative here.

Charu finally finds in Amal - a companion and this gradually grows into a very complex, yet passionate feeling of love. Charu’s desire for Amal is more cerebral than it is physical. Spending time with Amal liberates her. They speak in their own language. Amal encourages her creative pursuits and Charu discovers her talent in writing. It was in the cleverly shot garden sequences, where Charu watches Amal write, and realizes that she has developed feelings for him. Every time Charu puts her lorgnette on Amal, Ray shows us the same visuals, enabling us to peak into Charu’s mind. The gaze is reversed. Laura Mulvey says, “As an advanced representation, Cinema poses questions of ways the unconscious structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking”¹⁶.

Mulvey coined the term “male-gaze” in 1975, eleven years after the release of *Charulata*, and as discussed earlier was from this study that the idea of “female-gaze” arose. The practice of the concept of “female-gaze” in mainstream cinema started even later. In *Charulata*, Ray not only shows the female perspective on screen but also highlights the fact that the “female-gaze” is not always the reversal of the “male-gaze”, but a reflection of how a woman looks at the world around her. It was evident from the fact that Ray named the film after the female protagonist, as his film retold Tagore’s story from the female perspective.

Charulata’s gaze shakes the very foundation of the colonial idea of womanhood: the secluded, suppressed woman of controlled desires and zero self-expression, who moves about the pre-

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determined spaces. The historicity of the gaze in my opinion brings to light the female tension of pursuing her intellectual and emotional aspirations while also fearing social ostracism.

What is at play in the film is a woman’s awakening to sensual and cerebral freedom. It was rather daring for Charu to indicate her freedom from the patriarchal societal structure by boldly expressing her feeling towards her brother-in-law. Her feelings for Amal are so private that he himself is not aware of it until the day he realizes it which obviously hurts his Victorian morality and he leaves Bhupati’s house. Bhupati upon knowing how his negligence had resulted in his wife’s transgression is burdened with immense guilt. However he does not hesitate to judge Charu’s morality. Ray departed from Tagore’s novel in many times in the film, but the most crucial one which I cited here is the ending sequence.

In the original story, Bhupati abandons Charu upon realizing her feelings for his brother and leaves for Mysore in both guilt and shame, while Ray ended the film with both Charu and Bhupati attempting to reach out to each other while the frame freezes. Ray himself has written, “The ending was not keeping with the character of Bhupati, as described by Tagore. But is it possible to build a new happy home under the prevailing circumstances? Whatever happens, the situation will certainly take time to resolve. Bhupati and Charu now know each other rather too well, so the gulf between them seems unbridgeable. In the final scene, therefore, the two hands cannot meet. Might they meet in the future? One doesn’t know”¹⁷.

One must notice how in Tagore’s story, the ending did not leave Charulata with a choice. It was Bhupati’s choice to abandon her which now with both Amal and Bhupati gone, would leave Charu, even lonelier. In his film, Charu has the agency to choose for herself whether she wants to rebuild her home or not. In the final scene where both Charu and Bhupati try to reach out to each other, they are equals, acting upon their free will, rather than the man rescuing the woman out of a sense of pity.

What Ray did here demands a careful analysis. Ray’s delving into Charu’s inner world presenting her desires and frustrations brings forth the lost female perspective in 19th century Bengal, free from male objectification and exploitation. What is at display here is the most critical contradictions in 19th century Bengal: the so-called “women’s question”. The reforms that sought to uplift the women were in reality still deeply embedded in patriarchal framework as they were male-defined, morally policed and instrumentalized. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in

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her famous *Can the Subaltern Speak?*¹⁸, refers to the practice of Sati and the “benevolent” reform to establish this very argument, where the British colonizers and westernized Bengali intelligentsia claimed to save Indian women from this barbarity of immolating widows in the funeral pyres of their husbands while Indian men saw it a part of their sacred tradition. In both cases the female voice is absent as the woman becomes the site of debate but never fully a speaking subject. The reforms aspired to realize the male idea of Indian “refined” woman, who is “modern”, “educated” yet “modest” and “domestic”. Women were rarely consulted in shaping what “empowerment” should look like for them. It was still a male gaze where the improved women were imagined as symbols of cultural pride not autonomous beings with individual will or desires. So, in the film, Charu’s intimacy with Amal becomes a quite rebellion, a transgression against the role she has been forced to play in the inner sanctum of the house and in the society. But even in her rebellion she cannot act on her desires.

Conclusion

Across all such examples, from nationalist imagery to *Devi*, to *Charulata* what persists is the male gaze: the construction of women as an ideal or a symbol, never fully a human. Such gazes set the pattern of women’s existences, defining the roles they are supposed to play. While women were deified, reformed and symbolically elevated in 19th and 20th centuries, they remained voiceless and structurally disempowered in both public and private spheres. Ray’s films are about this modern subjugation. By this, I mean, Ray was less interested in presenting a specific vision of what it meant to be Indian or modern than in exploring the psychological and emotional experiences of his female characters. These experiences were modern in the sense that they were products of their times and reflected the changing social, political, and economic context of India. However, they were also authentic, humanist, and grounded in a deep understanding of the complexities of human nature. *Devi* and *Charulata*, when read against the backdrop of nationalist discourse and colonial patriarchy highlights how gendered narratives whether religious, nationalistic or reformist has systematically silenced female autonomy.

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Ray’s cinema challenged the conventional and stereotypical understanding of feminine expression and qualities by breaking away from predetermined templates, but in the attempt of doing so it also brought to life newer perspectives to study the gender relations in colonial Bengal. Rather than portraying women as passive victims of male oppression, Ray’s female characters were active participants in their own stories. In doing so, his films provided a powerful critique of the dominant patriarchal thinking of the time and highlighted the impact that this had on perpetuating gender inequality. Ray was sincere in addressing historical issues and by changing the narratives generated a vision of a new India to be realized in the future.

This paper has sought to unmask the false binary between reverence and subjugation in the context of colonial Bengal, a binary that continues to determine the movements of women in society even today. Ray’s films represented a conscious effort to rediscover the female point of view in Indian society during the period in which women became passive receivers of benevolent reform and idealization. Ray’s *Devi* and *Charulata* sought to provide a voice for women and to create a representational space in which they could assert their own stance on the issues that affected them, outside of the myth, outside of the gaze, and outside of the pedestal.

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