

## Loitering Women and the Nationalist Sentiment: A Study in the Portrayal of Women in Indian Parallel Cinema

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### Abstract

The exploration of the 'woman subject' has incontestably formed an important feature of the Indian cinema. However, the portrayal of its dynamic emergence coupled with the rising wave of nationalism can be more specifically attributed to parallel cinema. Through a study of four films, namely: 'Ghare Baire' (Satyajit Ray), 'Charulata' (Satyajit Ray), 'Mirch Masala' (Ketan Mehta) and 'Ahalya' (Sujoy Ghosh), and, by extension other contemporary art films, this paper aims to explore the dynamic clash between the macrocosmic external world and the microcosmic space of home inhabited by women while trying to establish a link between the emergence of national identity and the emergence of an independent feminine identity. The shy beginnings of the modern flaneuse could also be traced back to a collective screening of the chosen movies as they span over diverse social classes. It isn't the case that parallel cinema has borne any dulcet tune to captivate the Indian masses which further challenges our fixed notions of what constitutes the 'norm' and makes it imperative to delve into the still irking question of whether these 'loitering figures' bear the potential to achieve the end of history, whether they can possibly find their home.

**KEYWORDS :** Feminism, Indian Parallel Cinema, loitering women, Male gaze

The question of the status of women has often been the ground over which struggles for dominance and leadership have taken place in India. The question of the rights of women, their movement, their body, their sexuality, their gaze, their confinement, their womb, their nature, their behaviour, their sartorial propriety have always been decided and imposed upon by that 'supreme' other – the patriarchal society, however, it would be entirely wrong if one were to understand such an imposition in a homogenous, monolithic sense. Given this case, it can be safely assumed that the question of women in India has always been about more than that of women. Gender is the site for asserting a community's affluence or its backwardness, when caved into, it is precisely its most coveted and consecrated spot and hence the most vulnerable to defilement and impotency. It isn't a surprise when this domain spatially intersects with several others; challenging Indian feminists to simultaneously deal with other deeply rooted biases. Feminism in India thus has been both an intellectual and a political agenda.

Indian Parallel cinema, emerging as it did in the initial half of 1950s was not completely uninfluenced from the coeval revolutionary and progressive movements going on to consolidate an identity for the Indian nation. The ideology of 'nationhood' and the Nehruvian rhetoric of all that it should signify, namely a sense of belongingness, equality and the call for an equal, fraternal participation by all sections of the society was deeply realised and its effects noted in the nascent women's movements in some parts of the country and yet, certain aberrations were always

recognised and bounds of legitimacy specified. As Nivedita Menon suggests, sexual identities in India must be understood as relational, situated and political.

The latter half of 2015 saw the popularization of an unusual campaign called ‘#Why Loiter?’ This movement, initiated by women, was aimed at making public places safely accessible to women of any part of the country, at any point of time. It zeroed onto several factors that makes unhindered loitering and strolling of women in public spaces and at night difficult and almost impossible; factors such as unavailability of basic sanitation facilities, male gaze fixation and a virtual impossibility for women to sit alone and ponder over things at Mumbai’s chai tapris or Delhi’s dhabas- places more famously occupied by men. In short, it wanted us to rebel against the hegemonically established norm that women ‘don’t loiter’; their movement has to be always with a purpose, an aim. ‘There is an unspoken assumption that a loitering woman is up to no good. She is either mad or bad or dangerous to the society’ (Phadke, vii). Such notions make the idea of an inclusive citizenship even more problematic and strike at the very core of the nationalistic ideology that was responsible for initiating women’s movement outside the confines of home.

If the desire to loiter did and still exist amongst women, the widespread influence of cinema should be instrumental in consolidating and validating her presence. Thus, through an analysis of four films namely Satyajit Ray’s ‘Ghare Baire’, Satyajit Ray’s ‘Charulata’, Ketan Mehta’s ‘Mirch Masala’ and Sujoy Ghosh’s ‘Ahalya’, this paper aims to explore the ways in which notions of nationalism and women’s emancipation are tied together, such that only the fulfilment of one can imply a fulfilment of the other.

## II

In consonance with the ideas laid down by Chandra Talapade Mohanty, this paper works against the most common ‘assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic, racial location, or contradictions’(Mohanty, 21). What Bimala and Charulata – belonging to the Bengali Bhadrakalok society- experienced and desired could never be equated with the lived lower middle class reality of Sonbai in Ketan Mehta’s ‘Mirch Masala’ or the rebelliously devious intentions of Sujoy Ghosh’s Ahalya. However, through a subtle subversion of ‘norms’ and ‘myths’, all these women achieve what they desire but with consequences erstwhile unanticipated.

Women, in India, as Kumkum Sanghari and Suresh Vaid puts it, were first aggrandized and mobilised under national-political causes. The realization of the need for a more pan-Indian reach across the delusional boundaries of class and caste led to the criss-crossing of the personal and the political which provided a favourable ground for the recognition of such marginalized subjectivities. The ongoing swadeshi movement provided Bimala with a purpose to step outside the confines of her ‘antarmahal’ and thus begins her first tentative encounter with the public space in Satyajit Ray’s ‘Ghare Baire’<sup>1</sup>. This confluence of the inside and outside proves

<sup>1</sup> Ray’s ‘Ghare Baire’ is based upon Rabindranath Tagore’s 1916 novel originally titled ‘Ghare Baire’ (‘The Home and the World’). Similarly, Ray’s ‘Charulata’ too is based on Tagore’s 1906 novel originally titled ‘Nastanirh’.

devastating for her life in the long run but is highly revelatory of what a woman who has been moulded in a restrictive, patriarchal frame for 30 years of her life would do when suddenly made to confront the outside reality – her awkwardness, immature emotional development and hesitance to hold opinions in front of men are all reflections of the ‘type’ of self-deprecating being she was conditioned to become.

The historical build up of the woman-as-nation<sup>2</sup> artefact during the initial half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was used to legitimize a specific type of femininity and classify the ‘other’ as ‘whore’ or lesser feminine and was the most common rhetoric used to assuage and keep in check women’s movements inside and outside the home. Bimala’s widowed sister in law for ex. presents a picture of wasted beauty and is an ex. of an ‘unwomanly woman’ with virtually no rights and independence. She therefore functions as an agent of checks and balances on Bimala’s movements. Patriarchy also necessitates that Bimala pays for her transgression. Whatever self-development her still limited and scrutinized freedom could afford is immediately taken away as she becomes a widow.

Certain masculinities during the colonial times were the result of a direct confrontation between the upcoming ideologies (Modern views) and a desire to hold onto the traditional belief in all that elitism signified. Since the educated society was the first to come under the influence of these newer fervours, this tussle became even more definitive, and at times exerted itself in shades of grey. Sandip’s brand of militant nationalism for instance draws upon the idea of ‘aggressive masculinity’ which runs starkly in contrast to Nikhilesh’s more sensitive and cohesive outlook. Having lived with one for nearly 10 years, Bimala is instantly enraptured by the other. Caught between the baronial and manipulative rhetoric of Sandip and sensitive, cohesive arguments of Nikhilesh, Bimala had to decide for herself as a ‘free agent’. Her initial forays might be shy but, by the time things start unfolding, Bimala develops autonomy and is able to appreciate the criticality of the situation she has landed up into. Nikhilesh’s refusal to treat his wife as an appendage or an inferior is instrumental in bringing about such a change. The public space, when seen in this capacity, becomes her bildungsroman.

Charulata is another example of a lonely, sensitive and dissatisfied woman. In the very beginning of the film, we see her ‘loitering’ alone in her luxurious home, framing and re-framing certain specimens of the outside space – which remain intriguing and out of reach for her- with a pair of opera glasses. When her husband wanders past, barely a couple of feet away, and being too engrossed with one of his nationalistic paper does not notice her, she turns her opera glasses to him as well – another specimen from the space that remains unattainable for her.

Charulata’s literary and philosophical outlook meets its soul mate in her brother-in-law Amal. Her husband, Bhupati, sees such interests as softer and not equally worthy of an intellectual’s pursuits. However, he encourages his wife’s

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<sup>2</sup> One can recall the various images of Bharat Mata created by several poets and artists of the time where India as a nation was depicted as essentially female with all the virtuous attributes of femininity. Women thus became the socio-cultural repositories of an age thereby making the need to control and direct them even more intense.

interests while he continues to maintain up to the discourse of ‘maturity’. In a much shorter scene where Charulata and Bhupati, resting on the sea shore, decide to collaborate both her aesthetic pursuits and his supposedly more rational, nationalistic ones in the form of a new press, one glimpses hope which was unfortunately not meant to be.

Where there are several definitive stages of incubating ‘sudden’ changes, Ray or rather Tagore subtly eschews them as he realized their impossibility in a society that still held on to the practice of immolating widows alive. In other words, these efforts being the first ones necessitated them to be tepid.

Differences pertaining to class and region make Sonbai’s movements outside the home more acceptable and necessary in Ketan Mehta’s ‘Mirch Masala’. However, in tune with Shilpa Phadke’s argument, this movement is always one with a purpose, an aim. It is to be traversed only from one ‘protected’ space to another. Sonbai and other women of her village, living in pre-independent India, have to consistently move out in order to get water, wash clothes or work in the mirch masala factory as they are forever in debt and their lands have been forcibly captured by the village’s Mukhi. Interestingly, this movement is also a marker of their lower status as the Mukhi’s wife never has to indulge in such loitering and is therefore more respectable amongst them.

‘Every time a woman steps out of her home, it is the spectre of violence she must confront rather than any anticipation of pleasure’ (phadke et.al. 57). Even as Sonbai and her likes have the liberty to step outside the home, it is imperative for them to walk in groups as it forges a sense of communal security. Men sitting around and ogling at women is taken for granted as outside places are not ‘supposed’ to be safe for women thereby asserting male monopoly over female sexuality. This sees it’s most evident and violent fructification when Saraswati mobilises a group of women to march against the decision taken by the men folk of the village to forcibly hand over sonbai to the subedar. It also has the effect of what Foucault has called the ‘disciplining of the body’ as once the women become aware of being watched all the time, they internalise the omniscient gaze and do not need to be watched anymore which is the reason why some women out rightly refuse to join Saraswati.

The oppressive masculinity of people like the village subedar draws its uncontested power from the as yet unquestioned colonial regime. Instances of custodial rape abound as women literally have no choice but to submit to the forever increasing whims of this colonial agent. Amidst such forces, Sonbai’s resistance and radical step of slapping the subedar prove to be hugely revolutionary. Defying the abstracted image of a woman “jo bhar nikle toh paio ko bhi dhak ke chale”, Sonbai moves confidently in blouses with deep back cut. This defiance makes her even more vulnerable to male gaze and objectification.

By the end of the film, a community of sisterhood is formed where all the women collectively battle against the oppressive and manipulative subedar with chilli powder. In an ironic twist, when almost all able-bodied men of this community have surrendered themselves and proved inefficient in the face of an external threat, it is women who realize their responsibility and move out of the comfort of their hearth to partake of and instead take over the public places.

Women's access to the public space is denied largely through the rhetoric of the concerns for safety; however, turning the safety argument on its head Phadke and others propose 'that what women need in order to maximize their access to public space as citizens is not greater surveillance or protectionism but the right to take risks. For... it is only by claiming the right to risk, that women can truly claim citizenship. To do this we need to redefine our understanding of violence in relation to public space – to see not sexual assault, but the denial of access to public space as the worst possible outcome for women'. Sonbai's resilience and courage makes her the only one to have escaped from the clutches of the subedar. Thus, by taking risk she literally does what was only being aimed at i.e. to mobilize the people against a single oppressive force which becomes an extension of her role as a woman. As Phadke and others further argues, 'Hindu nationalists today see the family as a location of resistance where the woman becomes the crucial pivots that holds the family together. By identifying the nation as a family, the role of women in the public sphere is seen as an extension of their domestic duties' (note 28).

By the time one comes to *Ahalya*, released in 2015, one witnesses a complete collapse of the extreme binaries of wife/whore, public/private, virtue/vice and tradition/modernity. Sujoy Ghose's epic thriller uses and subverts the ideologically upheld view of women as the cultural repositories of a community. The mythic notion of ideal womanhood validated by patriarchy which stresses upon sartorial and behavioural propriety for women is shattered and one witnesses the emergence of perhaps one of the most radical 'female' figure in the history of Indian cinema. And now, she loiters, she sways, she entices and she frames.

'*Ahalya*' depicts how gaze need not be uni-directional. Defying the ingrained idea of women-as-spectacle, she turns any man who is lured enough to frame her, into framed puppets. Significantly, in an ironic and a completely radical twist vis-a-vis the original *Ahlaya* myth in Hindu mythology, her said husband helps her to entangle 'weak' men through a mere enactment of some of the 'socially validated' gendered differences i.e *Ahalya* being a woman moves with a slight swaying of her hips, she attends to guests, serves them tea, sits on the floor, is mainly confined to her bedroom and is depicted in all possibilities as a sexual object, exactly the way society views women to be; thus portraying how such restrictive rhetoric could be turned back onto itself.

Underlying similarity between all the films discussed is that the lead women here are all married but childless, in patriarchal terminology; they are all 'barren' or 'infertile'. Symbolically, this could be read as a microcosmic reflection of the general infertility of Indian society. Though brewing with a revolutionary fervour, society had to still unify its motives under one umbrella and channel diverse ideologies towards one aim. It had to still mould the aesthetic with the supposedly 'rational' and cultivate sensitivity within the aggressively unsparing methods of revolutionaries like Sandip. Until it succeeds to eliminate the manipulative efforts of colonial agents as the 'subedar' and belittle the cowardice of people like the village Mukhi, its growth cannot be ensured.

The barrenness of these women also increases their vulnerability by two fold as it once again works against the forged myth of an ideal womanhood. As several critics have argued and I second, the concept of nationhood in itself is a 'myth', created to forge an arbitrary sense of oneness through ideologies and the potentially powerful

use of language. The basic human desire for what Derrida labels as the absolute signified, something that could channel our otherwise existential state<sup>3</sup> into arbitrary moulds of 'habits' and 'purpose', leads to the forging of such intangible concepts. While it does succeed in providing some meaning to human life, the concept itself is open to manipulation, subject to its willing submission by the masses. This submissiveness could be either coerced from or ideologically instilled<sup>4</sup> into the subjects. Just as the idea of a nation, the very notion of womanhood too is a construct based upon years of acceptance and validation by the masses. Gender, as Butler argues, is created by the everyday repetitive performance of acts that produces the effect of a stable gendered persona.

### III

However, contrary to the much hyped commercial cinema, Indian parallel cinema has received lesser viewer's validation and despite being globally acclaimed and intellectually motivated, it has always registered a lower box office phenomenon. That despite its portrayal of socially simulating and problematic themes, it has remained largely unconnected with the masses is a sad comment on what has been normalized and is thought to be acceptable. However, with rising consciousness and the emergence of avid, dedicated producers this trend is taking a slow, albeit a steady turn.

The experiences of modernity being largely associated with males, these films were not so welcome a reprieve for the masses. Exclusion of women from ownership or control of property had ensured that they remained forever subordinate to the male subjects. However, one realizes that in order to form a true nationalistic consciousness, it is essential to forge a sense of cohesiveness and oneness even amongst the erstwhile marginalised subjectivities. It is in this sense that a true notion of nationhood can be forged only when a true emancipation of women is achieved.

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<sup>3</sup> Existentialism as a philosophy deals with the 'doomed freedom' of mankind. As it propounds, human beings are essentially doomed to be free. All the activities that we indulge in are essentially meant to fill in time between the only two temporal certainties of birth and death.

<sup>4</sup> Althusser talks about the two state apparatuses used to used to maintain the hegemony of the dominant classes – the RSAs (Repressive State Apparatuses) include the state machinery of the police and other agents of coercive forces, the ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses) include education, religion, family, culture etc. and works predominantly through ideology.

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