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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reframing the Lens: Textual Analysis of Satyajit Ray's *"Devi"* through Laura Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze

***Arunima Dey[1], Eldhose Thomas[2], Prof (Dr.) Mahul Brahma[3], Shayantan Roy[1]**

Assistant Professor, School of Media, Bhawanipur Global Campus, IN[1]

Assistant Professor, Krupanidhi Degree College, IN[2]

Visiting Research Fellow, Bath Business School, Bath Spa University, UK[3]

Corresponding Author: adey038@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The foundation-setting of narrative cinema has been one of patriarchy since its very inception. As cinema is a highly voyeuristic medium, the male gaze became one of its most conspicuous types of visual pleasure rather quickly. Satyajit Ray is one such auteur of Indian cinema who has passed the test of time due to having a sensitive eye that was able to skillfully focus the narrative gaze more on female-centric narratives. This paper is a reinterpretation of Satyajit Ray's film, *Devi* (1960) in terms of the critical approach of the theory of the male gaze proposed by Laura Mulvey and the way in which Ray has made the female subject matter somewhat difficult to enjoy as a patriarchal spectacle. The paper is also an attempt to combine Western Feminist Film theory with Indian socio-cultural contexts to find out how the sanctification of Doyamoyee, the protagonist of the movie, turns her into both a goddess and a victim. The chapter uses textual and visual analysis to show how Ray uses silence, mise-en-scene and empathetic framing to subvert patriarchal systems and prefigure female subjectivity in an extraordinarily patriarchal environment. *Devi*, turns out to be a proto-feminist work that prefigures modern discussions on representation, sanctification, and agency in South Asian cinema. Expanding the argument that goes beyond Euro-American paradigms, this book makes the cinema of Ray an essential point of intersection between gender, spirituality, and visual politics - forcing audiences to reconsider the way reverence, silence, and gaze work within the cultural imagination of womanhood.

Keywords: *Satyajit Ray, Male Gaze, Laura Mulvey, Feminist film theory, Indian Cinema, Devi (1960).*

INTRODUCTION

The history of Indian cinema has been a witness to a visual culture that has only moved within the realms of idealization and marginalization of women. Bollywood has always confined female characters to binaries – either the virtuous mother or the submissive wife, and on the other hand the sexualized temptress (Chakravarty, 1993; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004). Women in Hindi mainstream cinema have been rendered as symbolic figures such as mother of the nation, moral anchor of the family, or even a divine figure yet rarely allowed full subjectivity or agency within narrative arcs (Kaplan, 1983; Vasudevan, 2000). Their desires were supressed, and choices were subjected to patriarchal structures (Dwyer, 2006; Butalia, 2002). Even in regional cinemas

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such ideological depictions were common. A female character was typically scripted dedicated towards the service of the male protagonist, whether it is his growth or redemption (Mazumdar, 2007; Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999).

Satyajit Ray changed this well-accepted, conventional, and patriarchal context, with cinema layered with empathy, emotional spaces, and psychological complexity. In *Devi* (1960), Ray explored a disturbing entanglement of patriarchy and religion. He portrayed divine reverence as a method of control. The film deals with her transformation into a sacred symbol, ultimately striping her of her humanity, exemplifying spiritual objectification.

Summary of the film Devi (1960)

The movie *Devi* tells the story of a young married woman named Doyamoyee. Her father-in-law, Kalikinkar Roy, a wealthy village landowner, in a dream sees her as Kali and started believing her to be a reincarnation of the goddess. The movie depicts the conflict between the devout faith of Kalikinkar and the villagers in her reincarnation and the suffocating ordeal of Doyamoyee. While Kalikinkar embodies the feudal authority and unquestioning devotion, his son and Doymoyee's husband Umaprasad represents a Western-educated, reformist mindset influenced by colonial modernity. The distinction between superstition and veneration becomes hazy, trapping Doyamoyee between femininity and divinity. The projected divinity of the protagonist becomes even more powerful after a miraculous recovery of a child with her 'blessings', a character named Khoka, a precious child of the family. However, misfortune strikes when Khoka suddenly passes away. Faith disintegrates into sorrow as the miracle becomes a curse. Doyamoyee eventually loses her mind and runs away into the mist, signifying the fate of a woman who was eventually buried under the weight of patriarchal deification and blind faith. The movie is set against the backdrop of the Bengal Renaissance, a period of social reform and religious questioning. It also creates a tension between modern rationalism and orthodox religiosity. In the late 19th-century Bengal this film is a profound exploration of faith, patriarchy, and the destructive power of blind devotion within a traditional Bengali household. The film unravels the consequences of spiritual glorification imposed on a living woman-a theme that is disturbingly resonant even today (Chaudhuri, 2012).

Summary of Feminist Film Theory: Importance of Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema

Laura Mulvey's seminal essay titled 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) provided a radical tool for examining the politics of looking in movies. Mulvey argued that classical Hollywood films were structured around a 'male gaze' that objectified women, turning them into passive spectacles for the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer (Mulvey, 1975). Her theory restructured definition of female bodies, emotions, desires, pleasures visualized and consumed in film narratives. Mulvey's concepts scopophilia, voyeurism, and fetishization laid the foundation for decades of feminist film critique (Modleski, 1988; Doane, 1991). However, her primary focus was on Western cinema which sparked global feminist re-readings of cinematic texts, including the Indian content. Satyajit Ray's *Devi* strongly connects with Mulvey's worries, though the film was released 15 years before Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. In *Devi*, Doyamoyee is the target of a governing sacred gaze that is a type of religious scopophilia, not erotic. The way she is viewed, honoured, and dehumanized is very similar to Mulvey's explanation of patriarchal visual pleasure.

Ray challenges the dominating gaze with slow camera movements, intimate silences, and sympathetic framing. *Devi* provides a potent platform for exploring not just functioning of the male gaze but also how it might be contested within a cinematic context.

Examining *Devi* again provides historical context and current relevance in a time when gender discourse is becoming more global and intersectional. The film highlights the psychological effects of being deified, a state that many women today endure in religious, domestic, and public spheres. Be it is the moral pressure on mothers, the symbolic burden placed on wives, or the aesthetic policing of female bodies, the legacy of "ideal womanhood" remains deeply embedded in South Asian cultures (Banerjee, 2003; Uberoi, 1990). *Devi* provides a fundamental cinematic grammar for comprehending the oppression against women and resistance as India's media landscape changes with the rise of digital platforms, feminist web series, and new auteurs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

By developing the idea of the 'male gaze', Mulvey's essay revolutionized the study of visual tales. She argued that mainstream cinema positions women as passive objects and men as active agents, a structure rooted in psychoanalytic theory, particularly with respect to the pleasure of looking or Freud's notion of scopophilia (Doane, 1991; Heath, 1982).

As Mulvey explains, women in film serve two functions:

1. As erotic objects for characters within the narrative.
2. As erotic objects for the spectator.

Narrative cinema revolves around male protagonists, whose actions advance through their desire for and control over women (Mulvey, 1989). The woman's role

becomes one of "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11), with the camera complicit in enforcing this patriarchal gaze. Despite being published in 1960, prior to Mulvey's framework, Ray's *Devi* provides a vivid example of how it was disrupted. Doyamoyee is the visual focal point through religious devotion, not eroticization. She is nonetheless dehumanized by this as well, which erases subjectivity and imposes masculine authority on her sanctification. Importantly, Ray's camera avoids the scopophilic ritual by emphasizing her psychological paralysis and loneliness rather than aestheticizing her pain. If this is to be put in alignment with Mulvey's theory, Ray subverts aesthetic pleasure by emphasizing spiritual claustrophobia and emotional suffering. Doyamoyee is the embodiment of what happens when female subjectivity is erased by any gaze, even sacred.

However, Western feminist frameworks like Mulvey's require critical adaptation in non-Western contexts. Mohanty (1988), in *Under Western Eyes*, critiques the universalizing tendency of Western feminism, arguing that it neglects local histories of caste, class, colonialism, and religion. Mulvey's observations on *Devi* present Doyamoyee as an upper-caste Hindu woman bound in a web of religious orthodoxy, domesticity, and reverence, rather than just as a woman subjected to the male gaze. Ghosh (2002) emphasizes Indian audiences interpret films in ways that can subvert patriarchal readings. She draws attention to the ways Indian cinema uses dramatization and symbolism allowing room for emotional criticism. Ray uses quiet, mood, and symbolism in *Devi* to challenge gendered dominance without resorting to overt didacticism.

Feminist Film Theory in India: Expanding the Frame

Indian feminist film theorists like Lalitha Gopalan (2002), Madhava Prasad (1998), and Uma Chakravarti (1993) have explored how cinema in India serves as both a space of ideological reinforcement and potential resistance. According to Gopalan, identified moments of rupture in conformist narratives when female characters step outside the frame of patriarchal expectation.

Devi is one example of such a rupture. The idea of religious sanctification as a means of empowering women is rejected. Instead, it provides a sombre reflection on the price of elevating symbols without subjectivity or consent. With its expressive close-ups, extended shots, and leisurely pace, Ray's visual sensibility lets viewers linger on Doyamoyee's breakdown.

The fusion of Western feminist theory (Mulvey, Spivak, Crenshaw) with Indian feminist critique (Ghosh, Mohanty, Gopalan) creates a dynamic and multilayered lens for reading *Devi*. Indian feminist critique recognizes that although the male gaze is a potent theoretical instrument, it needs to be modified and extended to incorporate the caste-bound, cultural, and religious realities of Indian femininity. *Devi* is revealed through this framework as a film that not only anticipates feminist concerns but also calls for a hybrid theoretical engagement that is sensitive to both the textures of Indian gendered experience and global discourses of visual politics.

CRITICAL TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF *DEVI*

The Construction of the Female Subject: Doyamoyee as "Goddess" and Victim

Devi's storyline revolves around Doyamoyee's journey from a young wife to a revered deity. Her identity is no longer her own because of the projections of the patriarch Kalikinkar, who thinks she is a reincarnation of the goddess Kali. This change of a divine claim is a symbolic critique of the ways in which patriarchy, religion, and visual culture can work together to remove a woman's subjectivity; it is not just a thematic device. Doyamoyee, portrayed by Sharmila Tagore with painful restraint, represents the psychological disintegration of a woman who is both sanctified and then erased.

Kalikinkar's dehumanization starts the instant she dreams of Doyamoyee's divinity. She is then seen making divine gestures with her body, her miraculous touch, her deeds, and even her silences. This is spiritual objectification, a sacred counterpart of Mulvey's erotic objectification (Mulvey, 1975). The film shows how religious reverence, often viewed as empowering, can in fact be as disempowering as overt sexualization when it denies a woman her voice, will, humanity, and even existence.

Long shots that capture Doyamoyee's withdrawn gaze, gloomy lighting, and her seclusion in cavernous spaces are some of the subtle yet dramatic mise-en-scène that depicts her mental decline. In contrast to the scopophilic visual pleasure Mulvey criticized, these cinematic approaches create empathy by letting the audience into her emotional world. The sad thing is that once the sanctification process commences, Doyamoyee never speaks for herself. As her internal conflict worsens, she turns into a conduit of faith and other people's beliefs. Ray is brilliant because he demonstrates how imposing divinity without free will results in a psychological prison.

THEMATIC AREAS FOR CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Gender and Spiritual Power

The fundamental contradiction of *Devi* is that Doyamoyee's sacred elevation is annihilating rather than

uplifting. Spiritual authority is frequently the sole accepted form of female power in patriarchal countries, although it is still dependent on male belief rather than a woman's volition. Doyamoyee's body, intellect, and personality are controlled theologically by Kalikinkar's dream, which interprets her as Kali's reincarnation, not dissimilar to men's fantasies fetishizing women.

This power is performative, not participatory. Though revered, Doyamoyee lacks agency: she cannot refuse prayers or rituals, nor escape imposed expectations. This embodies what Uma Chakravarti (2003) terms the "symbolic trap of the sacred feminine," where the divine woman becomes a submissive vessel legitimizing male authority. Thus, *Devi* critiques sanctification as a mechanism that strips women of subjectivity. Mulvey's (1975) 'male gaze' operates here not erotically, but reverentially, the spiritual gaze, equally depersonalizing.

Caste, Class, and the Feminized Divine

Class and caste hone this criticism. The servant Kali, who is named after the goddess herself, is confined to service and stays invisible while Doyamoyee, an upper-caste woman, is deified. The irony emphasizes how the real Kali is hidden while the aristocratic woman's divinity is acknowledged. Gopal Guru (1995) describes this as the "graded inequality of reverence," where lower-caste women are excluded from sacred symbolism unless abstracted into divine ideals, never acknowledged in lived realities. This disparity is reflected in Ray's filmography, where Kali is shown in the background with low lighting while Doyamoyee is framed in shrines and other hallowed places. In India, veneration is caste specific as well as gendered, and this visual hierarchy reflects an ideological one.

OBSERVATIONS

Relevance of Mulvey's Theory in Analyzing Non-Western Cinema

Although it was first based on psychoanalytic interpretations of Hollywood film, Laura Mulvey's idea of the 'male gaze' is still essential to feminist film theory. It requires theoretical translation to apply to *Devi*, who is ingrained in Bengali culture and Hindu customs. Here, the camera enshrines Doyamoyee rather than stripping her; the gaze is religious rather than carnal. However, objectification-a type of 'spiritual scopophilia'-remains the result. Devi therefore demonstrates how Mulvey's paradigm can be extended to encompass institutions of power, sanctity, and silence that are culturally particular. This resonates with Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's (1993) call for feminist theories to be "glocal"-globally informed but locally situated.

Contributions of Devi *to Feminist Film Discourse in India*

Devi is less a manifesto than a lament. It enacts feminism through its form, gaze, and tragedy rather than over ideology. Ray presents gendered trauma without naming it, creating what Shohini Ghosh (2007) calls a "feminist affect"-an aesthetic space where viewers are compelled to confront injustice emotionally. In this way, *Devi* functions as a proto-feminist text: critiquing patriarchal religiosity, questioning the sanctification of women, and exposing the emotional labor of obedience. Its contribution lies not in reactionary discourse but in anticipation of feminist critique in Indian cinema.

Art Cinema and Women's Subjectivity

Devi by Ray is part of the parallel cinema tradition in India, which is renowned for its psychological depth, social commentary, and realism. Ray is able to examine female subjectivity in this situation with a level of empathy that is uncommon. Doyamoyee is sanctified and broken, trapped not by desire but by devotion, in contrast to popular heroines who are portrayed as seductresses or sacrificing mothers. With close-ups, dissolves, dark interiors, and quiet moments, Ray depicts the disintegration of a mind weighed down by religious exaltation.

The movie defies conclusion. Rather than ending in victory, Doyamoyee runs away into the night, her identity permanently shattered. This rejection of resolution challenges cinematic norms that aim for neat conclusions and represents aesthetic resistance. Devi argues that reverence is not always respect, silence is not acquiescence, and sensitivity is not weakness.

The importance of engaging Mulvey with Indian realities of caste, religion, and colonial legacies is ultimately illustrated by Devi. Mulvey describes how patriarchal systems influence the enjoyment of films, while Indian feminist interpretations show how holiness itself turns into a source of power. In addition to deepening this critique, Ray's art cinema style leaves a legacy that permeates feminist film discourse in India and beyond.

CONCLUSION

Devi, directed by Satyajit Ray, is still regarded as one of the most moving films that examines the dangers of patriarchal adoration masquerading as devotion. Doyamoyee is seen as both a character and a cinematic symbol when viewed through the lens of Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory. She is caught between erasure and veneration. As her body and spirit are taken by male fantasies, religious traditions, and familial demands, what starts out as veneration swiftly turns into violence. Her journey from bride to goddess to wounded spirit illustrates how holiness frequently hides power.

Devi has unquestionably contributed to feminist discourse, even though Ray never called it a feminist film. By centering female psychological trauma within a

patriarchal-religious framework, Ray created what Shohini Ghosh (2007) calls "a feminist affect", a space of quiet devastation that provokes grief and resistance. The film's intimate framing, shadows, and silences force spectators to see suffering rather than the pleasures of the male gaze.

We must view philosophy as care for context, character, and culture rather than just criticism if we are to respect movies like Devi. Ray's film foreshadows current feminist narratives in grassroots narratives, Indian art cinema, and over-the-top platforms. Devi survives in this continuing conversation as a text that was a precursor to feminism and as a challenge to reconsider the ways in which women are revered, suppressed, and viewed. It also entails realizing that movies like Devi are a part of a living conversation rather than separate relics. A conversation that is still present in contemporary female filmmakers' works, A conversation that opposes the masculine gaze, religious fetishization, and caste patriarchy is evident in modern feminist film, over-the-top (OTT) platforms, and grassroots narratives.

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