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A Reading of Indian Cinema

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the impact of modernities and globalities on cities and sexualities in postcolonial India, arguing that it has taken another monumental movement since colonization—globalization—for us to come to terms with our own modernities. The essay argues that the cinematic representation of our cities—as well as of our ambiguous, multiplicitous sexualities—mark these tumultuous changes in our sociopolitical fabric. The city has occupied an ambivalent position in the Indian nationalist imaginary throughout the process of nation-building. It often occupies a confrontational as well as contemplative space signifying modernity and its concurrent promise, as well as ills relative to the ‘traditional’ ethics of a very old culture, even while representing ‘progress’ and ‘development’. Such progress, seen as necessary but demeaning, is perceived as a moral degeneracy of the nation easily analogous with female sexual transgression/ promiscuity with the nation personified as woman. Yet the same signifier simultaneously reveals a metamorphosed autonomy of the female Indian self. Non-normative female behaviour—particularly sexual—has always constituted a liminal space, a site both of empowerment through transgression and containment through regulation. The newly freed urban space thus assumes the metonymic equivalent of available sexual freedom for women, its powers, and its dangers.

This essay locates Satyajit Ray’s cinematic oeuvre as central to illustrating this ongoing tension among modernity, globality, sexuality, and the city in India, and reads his films *Mahanagar* (The Big City, 1963) and *Charulata* (The Lonely Housewife, 1964) as signifiers of the liminal spaces they propose to explore.

I shall attempt here a reading, through cinema, of certain paradigms of socio-cultural transitions imagined and imaged in India after the departure of the British in 1947. I shall look at the impact of modernities and globalities on cities and sexualities in postcolonial¹ India, arguing that it has taken another monumental movement since colonization—globalization—for us to literally come to terms with our own modernities; and that the representation in cinema of our cities—as well as that of our ambiguous, multiplicitous sexualities—may be read as markers of many tumultuous changes in our social and political fabric. I shall examine the evolution of the Indian city in its postcolonial, globalized identity as a critical site (both imagined and real) for a mapping of the evolution of a nascent postcolonial/postindependent state, emerging from a convergence of anxieties about urbanity, modernity and female/transgressive sexualities; this mapping, I suggest, has been significantly recorded in the register of Indian regional-language cinema, arguably one of the most important ‘location[s] of culture’ in India, to extend Bhabha’s sense of the term.²

The city has occupied an ambivalent position in the Indian nationalist imaginary throughout the process of nation-building, often a confrontational, as well as contemplative space that signifies ‘modernity’ and its concurrent promise as well as ills in relation to the ‘traditional’ ethics of a very old culture, even while representing progress and development (presumably by Western frameworks of evaluation). Such progress has been traditionally perceived in India as a moral degeneracy of the nation (perhaps necessary but nevertheless demeaning), easily analogous with female sexual transgression/promiscuity—with the nation personified as woman (mother, goddess, mistress, prostitute). What makes this signifier interesting, however, is its simultaneous admission of a metamorphosed autonomy of the female Indian self. Non-normative female behaviour—particularly sexual—has always constituted a liminal space, a site of both empowerment through transgression and containment through regulation. The urban space—newly freed up and as yet un-proscribed, assumes the metonymic equivalence of available sexual freedom for women, its powers and its dangers.

The cinema as a text is especially well suited to play with the dynamics of this fraught space of urbanity and sexuality within the impulse of modernity, and it is a text that can be read afresh in contexts of globalization. In this paper, I will locate Satyajit Ray’s cinematic oeuvre as central to such an argument, and offer a reading of modernity, globality, sexuality and the city in two of his films, *Mahanagar* (*The Big City*, 1963) and *Charulata* (*The Lonely Housewife*, 1964), both of which, I propose, identify the film text in itself as a signifier of the liminal space that it proposes to explore.

THE 'URBAN TURN'

For most of the world, India exists—paradoxically perhaps—in its cities, even as it does, in actuality, ‘live in its villages’, surviving its abject rural poverty and backwardness, and celebrating its embarrassingly small victories such as the electrification of remote hamlets or the establishment of political self-rule in isolated districts. It may be said that India’s significant rural life—its huge population, its geographical vastness, and its detachment from the world outside its doorstep—forms a lush backdrop to its cities—Delhi, Bombay/Mumbai, Calcutta/Kolkata, Madras/Chennai, Bangalore/Bengaluru³, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Lucknow, et al.—which stand in stark relief against the spreading villages as well as against each other, bearing histories of evolution and destruction and reconstruction particularly their own.

As is the case with prominent cities of all countries, surely, there can be no generalizations about India’s urban centres without grave mistakes; and this is true even of its first four ‘colonial’ cities of repute—Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, and Delhi—that all developed in the 19th century under the shadow of British governance. Yet, ‘the city’ occupies a particular space in the nationalist imagination of India, an imagining that may be conscious of the specificities of a Delhi or a Calcutta but will, at the same time, apprehend them in the context of their urbanity in the larger history or geography of the country. To do any justice at all to a chronicle of India’s cities, therefore, it is necessary to understand them simultaneously as individual entities with languages and landscapes totally distinct from each other on the one hand, and as occupying a (shared, overlapping) space of notional urbanity on the other. Most often these two understandings are on a collision course, which makes any general sociological study of India’s cities impossibly inaccurate. At best, one can approach the subject at two distinct levels: the notional and the particular.

Because I intend to focus on a conjectural crossroad where cities and sexualities meet in postcolonial India, I will begin by addressing notional perceptions of one in the context of the other, looking at how their evolutions, explorations, and transgressions correspond with overarching speculations about modernity, postmodernity and globalization in a larger understanding of the Indian nation-state. I then intend to particularize these ideas by showing how this perceptual nexus between metropolitan and sexualized consciousnesses is brought into the public sphere in India through its representation in a very popular and vibrant media: the cinema. I hope that this will not seem like a disjunction, a straddling of the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’, for cities (and sexualities, for that matter) are both real and imagined at the same time, places and spaces and happenings both material and immaterial, so to speak. Or, as Ravi Sundaram has quoted from Victor Burgin’s *Some Cities*, “the city in our actual experience is *at the same time* an actually existing physical environment,

and a city in a novel, a film, a photograph, a city seen on television, a city in a comic strip, a city in a pie chart, and so on" (Sundaram 1).

It has been recently commented upon, with some surprise, that despite the significance of 'the city' in the subcontinental subconscious, there is an odd frugality of serious writing on city life on/from the Indian subcontinent, both scholarly and in public discourse.⁴ Certainly, one might have expected that there would be a larger body of work on the sociological aspects of urban development in the 20th century, in tandem with worldwide debates on cities and modernities. However, in India at least, only at the end of the 20th century has the city come into focus as a primary social, cultural and economic organization that both reflects and engenders ways of seeing, and being. According to Ravi Vasudevan et al.,

The rise of the urban in 'our time' was given a certain urgency by globalization. Globalization, with its mixture of enforced commodification, spatial transformations and urban ruin, excavated the city from margins of academic and literary writing to a new public discourse that suddenly assumed the given-ness of urban space... 'Newness', the old battle cry of modernity... was now fused into the sensorium of urban life. (Vasudevan vi)

As I state in my introduction, it has taken half a century and another geo-ecopolitical movement of mammoth proportions since colonization—globalization, that is—for us to begin to confront our own modernities. And it is perhaps not entirely peculiar to the postcolonial situation that modernity is read as analogous with 'transgressive' sexualities, which are in turn reflected in the new intricacies of urban existence.

However, even before we can engage usefully with the idea of the urban as analogous with the 'modern' (as in, debatably, 'progress', or 'development'), we need to contend with fraught connotations of postcolonial modernity itself, with its own long history of definitions and counter-definitions. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has commented, "Modernity is easy to inhabit but difficult to define" (Chakrabarty xix); in India, understandings of modernity have evolved radically in the course of the 20th century. For much of it, Indian intellectuals fell into step with definitions of modernity that had emanated from the European Enlightenment. According to Chakrabarty, it was only after the 1970s,

after anticolonial, feminist, environmentalist, and other new social movements radicalized our sense of democracy... [that] these older definitions produce[d] a moral dilemma. Can the designation of something or some group as non- or premodern ever be anything but a gesture of the powerful?" (Chakrabarty xix)

Along with the significant work of the Subaltern Studies historians, Ashis Nandy's critiques of modernity have problematised the acceptance of popular

definitions of modernity as progressive, rational, developmental. Nandy sees the movement toward the urban from the rural as representative of the desire to be modern, and the city, resultantly, as the repository of modernity's ills. According to Nandy,

In the whole southern world, the beckoning magic of the new colonial metropolis frames the mythic journey to the city... In the official ideologies of conformity and dissent floating around in post-colonial societies, the journey to the city is a journey from a self buffeted by primordial passions and an authoritarian conscience—the village is seen as the repository of these—to a self identified with fully autonomous ego functions. (Nandy viii)

Besides that which he identifies as the (mistaken) dream of total individual freedom for the reasoning self in the city, Nandy is acutely critical of its “cultivated forgetfulness about the violent record of the last hundred years” (viii), asserting that the “imagined city in South Asia symbolizes the belated attempts of defeated civilizations to break into the hard ‘realism’ of the world of winners” (viii-ix). It is, however, the notion of a controlled “return” to the village in the South Asian imagination that Nandy finds more significant, seeing it as a “search for an alternative cosmopolitanism” (ix), and the way by which the cities of the region might become more interesting again, at the least more modest and skeptical about their privileges and monopolies.

Ironically enough, of course, the “return” to the village (notional or real) that Nandy finds significant is marked by ideas that are considered germane to modernity, and by extension, to the city—cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, creative individualism. It would be impossible, then, to take the experience of modernity, and/or the city, out of this return to the rural that Nandy sees as a positive sign, for the return only seems to be possible via encounter with the city—and not necessarily as a turning away from it either, but rather as a development of ideas reverberating in it. According to historians such as Gyan Prakash,

The city occupies an ambivalent space in the Indian nationalist imagination. Most nationalist leaders hailed from towns and cities; and Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras were chief centres of nationalist activity. Yet, the urban experience seldom received any concentrated attention. Indeed, the nationalists looked to the village in defining India. Gandhi's exaltation of the village and village communities is well known, as is his view that cities were places of evil and corruption. (Prakash 3)

Even Nehru, independent India's first Prime Minister, who thought of the village as a place of ignorance and backwardness, conceded that it remained a powerful and authentic symbol of India. Perhaps this emotional resonance that both Gandhi and Nehru found in the village can be understood in terms

of Partha Chatterjee's argument that the nationalists identified the "inner" as the nation's authentic space; and the village stood for the domain where the nation was sovereign, free from the "outer" sphere of politics, economics and science dominated by the West.⁵ Apparently, the city was perceived as a reflection of this "outer" sphere, but as Prakash has astutely suggested, "if... the nationalist discourse divided the village from the city while cross-hatching them in projecting the ideal of the modern nation, then it is also in that manoeuvre that we can locate a discourse of the city" (Prakash 4).

The post-independence, postcolonial Indian city emerges, therefore, as a both confrontational and contemplative space of battles, real and imagined, between understandings of tradition and modernity, stasis and development, "inner" and "outer," soul and body. There appears to have been a general conviction, as prominent cities created personalities of their own, that the urban constituency represented a selling of a pristine, pre-modern soul to a necessary but demeaning 'progress'. This too, of course, is congruent with a Western notion of modernity that was seen as the fallout of the Industrial Revolution: the population shift to cities, the emergence of factories and working classes, and changing family equations and gender roles to what T.S. Eliot evocatively termed the "Unreal City" in "The Waste Land." It is clearly no passing coincidence that one of the most significant symbols of the degenerate modern city, sterile, mechanical, soulless as it is, is the sexually promiscuous woman—a recurrent sign used symbolically, metaphorically, and metonymically across cultures to signify a changed, if not deranged, landscape. What makes this signifier interesting, however, is not its apparent connotation of moral degeneracy but its simultaneous admission of a metamorphosed autonomy of the female self. This admission would, in fact, have been as significant to the urban/modern turn in the West as it would have been in India, even if the changes as they were recorded socially and culturally did not historically coincide.

SEXUALITIES, NON-NORMATIVITIES AND THE URBAN SPACE

Non-normative sexual behaviour, particularly by women, has always in some sense constituted a liminal space, a site of both empowerment through transgression and containment through regulation. The urban space has been increasingly documented as "fragmented, imploding, imaginative, subjective, unknowable and fantastic... linked with power and difference" (Watson "City" 293). Sexing and/or gendering the urban space unpacks the political possibilities for rethinking boundaries of private and public domains within the city as well as in connection with suburban and rural spaces. Foucauldian notions of the panopticon, whereby the invisible but tangible threat of surveillance produces self-socialization and regulation, are reproduced in different ways in the new urban society that engenders a fresh set of social and cultural interac-

tions. Many studies, for example, have explored how the male gaze in the late-19th century eroticized city life and sexualized the spaces it viewed.⁶ Identifying the prostitute as the public face of the new urban woman, doubling up to metonymically represent the (degenerate) city, became a common practice, while later debates have taken up questions such as the location of queer spaces in cities as sites of transgression.

The symbolic organization of gendered urban spaces can be traced from the late-19th and early-20th centuries, working within categories of the public and the private and focusing on the location of the female body in the city. Urban spaces are in fact excellent sites for analyzing how gender works, in Bourdieu's terms, as an "embodied idea," suggesting that spatial divisions within the city—the street, the office, the kitchen, the bedroom—are not always gendered in obvious or given ways, but enacted through embodied practices.⁷ This is then to say that the notion of a gendered space is not restricted merely to the idea that certain locations are mapped as masculine or feminine, but that meanings emerge from a far more complicated interaction between the social and the spatial, and may in fact be universalized or particularized according to need. According to sociologist Fran Tonkiss, in a reading of gendered space in European cities (particularly London) since the late 19th century,

uncertain meanings attached to the figure of the woman in public, who variously signified disorder, danger and desire. By putting themselves out of place, individual women not only unsettled the dominant order of social space, but created spaces of movement for themselves. If the pace, diversity and instability of urban life disturbed established social forms, this included gender roles and codes of gendered conduct. In this sense, the modern city could be seen as a potential site of freedom for women. The metropolis offered women new social and spatial liberties, political visibility as well as the pleasures of anonymity. (Tonkiss 95)

As Tonkiss goes on to say, however,

This relation between being seen and going unseen is critical not only to women's freedoms in the city, but also to their safety... One of the starkest forms in which gender difference and gender inequality appear in the city is in the geography of violence against women... many women's perceptions and use of urban space are restricted by logics of sexual dominance and fear... The gendering of space becomes especially evident in this geography of danger, as women's fear of male violence is manifested as a fear of *space*. (Tonkiss 95)

Since the public woman is so intimately connected to (male) perceptions of disorder, danger, and desire, and the urban space is considered to be representative of dangerous, if alluring, modernities, it is perhaps not surprising that

female sexuality emerges as symbolic of a seductive degeneracy analogous with the modern city. In the Indian context, it has become fairly commonplace to reiterate that the land of the famed Kama Sutra has, perhaps as a result of the colonizing impact of Victorian England, come to view female sexualities as dangerously transgressive. Certainly, as Sanjay Srivastava comments,

Either out of scholarly coyness or through an inability to conceive of *active* sexuality (as opposed to a sphere located in the context of prohibitions) as anything but a masculine concern, discussions of sexuality in the South Asian context have been remarkably focused on men's preoccupations. (Srivastava 5)

It will also not be an exaggeration to say that contemporary understandings of sexual practices in India have been significantly influenced by what have come to be known as Gandhian perspectives on sexuality, which are largely concerned with ideals of renunciation (the necessity to overcome desire) and ethics of 'self-control', apparently inspired by 'semen-anxiety' (the belief that a 'loss' of semen results in a loss of masculine strength and depletion of the masculine 'life-force'). However, it is only a skewed and incomplete sociological scholarship that admits of this perspective and ignores other (sometimes contradictory) social topographies extant in the larger Indian sexual landscape, no less significant for being considered aberrant in this rather more conveniently politicized picture of Indian sexualities. Srivastava calls for a decentering of the search for "'core' values and concerns of South Asian sexualities" (6) and avers that through the 20th-century Indian society has been "shadowed by parallel narratives of *non-reproductive sexual activity* concerned with questions of modern subjectivity and its 'fulfilment'" (6).

Clearly, however, even if the notion of sexual desiring (for non-reproductive sexual activity) were to be admitted, it is more than likely to be conceived of as masculine, with very little significance given to ideas about female *jouissance* or sexual pleasure, subjectivity, and fulfillment. Insisting on the efficacy of such wild notions may even reinforce fears of disorder in the social landscape: female sexual desire therefore emerging in a synecdochal relationship with the modernizing process, which is in turn also equated with the (corrupting, sterile) city of modern times. One could plausibly extend this understanding to suggest that homosexuality would be similarly seen as disorderly and dangerous in the social milieu, and once again representative of the malaise of urbanization and/or modernity.

'PUBLIC CULTURE': MODERNITIES, MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES

On the other hand, it is necessary to note that masculinity itself was a complicated concept in the fraught historical contexts of the Indian anti-colonial

struggle in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, and as has been argued by Nivedita Menon, the new patriarchy that was set up by nationalist discourse produced “a cruel paradox for the modernizing male elite—to continue to be different and autonomous from the colonial order is to repudiate proper masculine roles, to be properly modern and masculine is to be subjugated to colonial values” (Menon, xxiii). The complex determinants of a nationalist/modernist masculinity therefore often produced a great deal of confusion about acceptable and/or desirable gender roles, which extended its tentacles into female spheres of social existence. It was amidst such confusions that the postcolonial Indian city was born and bred, and if the city is the symbolic representation of a historical trajectory that traced the advent of modernity in India, then it is not surprising that gender roles—masculinities and femininities—would act as markers in that process. Sexuality has probably been the most contested site within the notional sociological mapping of the city in India as it has charted its evolution from modernity into post-modernity, both aided and impeded in its search for an original, suitable path by the various impacts of globalization.

There are, of course, various ways in which one may approach an understanding of cities and sexualities in contemporary India, from historical, geopolitical, sociological, psychological, and other intellectual perspectives. I am particularly interested in the production, circulation, and reception of some forms of “public culture” in postcolonial India, using a term made current by Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai among others, in South Asian contexts.⁸ Breckenridge and Appadurai consider “public culture” a zone of cultural debate which is always a contested terrain, reflecting the tensions between national sites and transnational/globalizing processes—and it is this zone of contestation that defines public modernity in India, which is neither a homogeneous ‘public’ nor a uniform ‘modernity’. There are a variety of ways in which public modernity is made visible in India, and cinema is one of them. It is always necessary to remember that each of these sites at which Indian modernities are made public is a zone of contestation, for a public culture in India is nonetheless not a national culture in any unified sense. Within the site of Indian cinema, it may perhaps be argued that popular Hindi cinema—now known globally as ‘Bollywood’—aspires to such a claim. However, despite Hindi cinema’s near-universal appeal, in actuality it is neither representative of a pan-Indian sensibility nor necessarily reflective of the most significant issues of contemporary Indian life at a given time. What popular Hindi cinema has achieved in spectacular measure is an extremely canny grasp of what may constitute the Great Indian Dream, which has then enabled it to make a great song and dance about its disparate, constituent parts. There is no doubt that popular Hindi cinema occupies an important place on the large canvas that is a mirror to public culture in India, as well as a repository of its public modernity. However, it is a mere player in the larger zone of contestation, and it is

only in the tensions—both hidden and apparent—that hold it against other cinemas in India that a larger understanding of the complexities of the sub-continent's culture and modernities may be approached.

Appadurai and Breckenridge have pointed out in their study of public modernity in India that it is the “middle class—both actual and potential—[that] is the social basis of public culture formations” (7), and although they see television as a very real threat to what they term “the cultural hegemony of cinema” (9), they concede that “film is perhaps the single strongest agency for the creation of a nationalist mythology of heroism, consumerism, leisure, and sociality” (8). Quite rightly, the reference here is to commercial cinema which embodies the dream landscapes of the Indian middle class, and, in regional cinema as well as in the more transnational Hindi feature film, breathes life into its many desires. In keeping with the reading of the arena of public culture in India as contested, I will look at a genre of non-commercial, regional cinema that battles for space within those terrains and establishes its place in geopolitical debates on Indian modernities through a visual mapping that deliberately undercuts the dreamscapes of commercial cinema. I suggest that in this cinema, the site (in Edward Soja's sense of the term)⁹ of significantly contested modernities is mapped on the crossroad of cities and sexualities.

RAY'S CINEMA

For my purposes here, I will confine myself to a subgenre of a regional-language cinema of India as exemplified by the work of Satyajit Ray, a Bengali filmmaker inspired by Italian neo-realist cinema to make a significant body of parallel films for the intellectual elite about the teeming middle classes, mainly of the city of Calcutta (incidentally colonial India's first capital city and yet known, if arguably, as the country's cultural and intellectual nerve-centre) through most of the second half of the 20th-century. Brian McFarlane, in the 2006 issue of *Meanjin*, quotes Paul Arthur's succinct pronouncement that “movies and the modern city were made for each other,” and goes on to say that

the megapolitan swell of twentieth-century cities coincided with the emergence of the movies, which, more than any other art form, were peculiarly equipped to register their complexities, the thrill of their sheer magnitude and diversity, and the potential for human lives to achieve dominance in them—or fear or anomie. (McFarlane 246)

Ray's oeuvre may be said to exemplify this understanding of cinema, the city and modernity in the postcolonial Indian context. Calcutta may easily be considered the one constant, recurrent protagonist of his most important cinema; even in *Pather Panchali* (*The Song of the Road*, 1955), often said to be his best work and set in rural Bengal, Calcutta works as an absent aspirational

marker of modernity. But it is in Ray's films of the city through the 1960s-1970s that a riveting montage of Calcutta caught between its post/colonial past and its post/modernist present is mounted. As Supriya Chaudhuri has commented regarding Ray's Calcutta films, "These are driven, haunted films; films recording the spectrality of the modern city, a place of memories, desires, ghosts. This quality, a quality of being intensely present, located in the material world, and for that reason, being an aspect of its unreality, its relegation of existence to non-existence, distinguishes all the films" (Chaudhuri 254). There can be very little doubt that the city is a tangible, fraught presence in Ray's cinema, and it is largely through his reading of its troubled, emergent urbanism that he grapples with an understanding of his times.

However, Chaudhuri's recognition of Ray's cinema as "humanist" is important for our engagement with his work, particularly if one chooses to recognize that the press of bodies that flow over the Howrah Bridge and through Calcutta's dirty, congested streets are not merely disembodied, dystopic visions of an urbanity gone awry but representative of a political commentary on the social and historical realities of the times. As Chaudhuri states quite rightly,

Looking back at the historical situation within which these stories, these films, were produced, it would be wrong to underestimate, in the interests of a shallow morality or a shallower theoretical sophistication, the desperation of their protagonists. Unemployment, hunger, madness, degradation, urban terror... Ray represents the threatened, fearful, self-betraying bourgeois [who] sees not an alternative as such... but individually unacceptable modes of surrender. [And] because he places us, and his own gaze, within the field that is criticized, he will not permit us the satisfaction due to the satirist, the privilege of exemption. (272)

Ray's particular strength, in fact, has been the ability to tell affective stories through a deliberately minimalist black and white camera, and through heaps of broken, or focused, images of bodies and their disparate parts—speaking mouths, contorted faces, hands lighting cigarettes and raising endless cups of tea, tired legs trampling through crowded pavements—yet draw the viewer into the experiences of those bodies. It is an affect that is especially evocative in the delineation of masculinities and femininities in the city, imaged in patterns of what may perhaps be called subtle (or intellectualized) sexualities.

Sexuality is never absent from Ray's city cinema, though rarely overt. There has been a great deal of commentary and analysis of the depiction of women in his films, which range from a sister and friend as prostitutes (*Pratidwandi*, *Jana Aranya*) to a daughter-in-law who is deified as a goddess (*Devi*), but less is usually said about Ray's portrayal of tortured masculinities in sexual contexts. It is possibly true that Ray's male protagonists appear to represent more obviously the horrors of social dystopias associated with economic hardships, but it is

important, I think, that much of that sense of degradation and helplessness that the modern city appears to engender is visualized through feelings of sexual emasculation for men, and correspondingly through experiences of a sexual empowerment for women often born out of desperation, as potentially dangerous as it is heady. Ray's 1963 film *Mahanagar* (*The Big City*) is a gendered representation of the tribulations of an economically and socially challenging big-city life, and I see it as a significant precursor to the three films that make up his Calcutta Trilogy: *Seemabaddha* (Company Limited, 1971), *Pratidwandi* (*The Adversary*, 1972) and *Jana Aranya* (*The Middleman*, 1975).

Mahanagar and *Charulata*, it seems to me, both contain traces of the best of Satyajit Ray's cinematic strength, the ability to be so nuanced in their depictions of sexual/gendered tensions in the developing urban landscape of postcolonial India that it is possible to make a great deal of its symbolist values and miss its fraught realism altogether. I have chosen to look at *Charulata* and *Mahanagar* together because, despite being set apart in time (in pre- and post-independent India, respectively) they constitute a very interesting set of responses to the idea of the 'new woman' (*nabina*, in Bengali) in the social register of the urban educated middle class in the history of post-Renaissance Bengal. They are complementary in their exploration of the spaces available to the urban educated Indian woman to reconfigure her own identity. In *Charulata*, it is the domestic sphere of the home's inner chambers and a progressive/'enlightened' 19th-century marriage that its protagonist negotiates through a transgressive sexual awakening, while *Mahanagar*'s female protagonist enters the public spaces of Calcutta's streets and workplaces to come to terms with the promise of 'independence', and the compromises she must make in order to partake of its pleasures. Not just coincidentally, perhaps, it is the same actress, Madhabi Mukherjee, who plays the female protagonists' roles in the two films.

Satyajit Ray transformed filmmaking in independent India through 29 films spanning four decades, starting with the celebrated *Pather Panchali* (*The Song of the Road*) in 1955. Ray has been hailed as the filmmaker who ushered modernity into Indian cinematic culture. And yet, as well known Ray critic Chidananda Dasgupta has pointed out, "Seldom has a film director's work chronicled the process of social change in a country over a long span of time as Satyajit Ray's. The subjects of his films range over the shifting social scene in India for over one hundred and fifty years." (Dasgupta 3) It may be said that Ray used his 'modernist' cinema to interrogate notions of modernity that he discovered embedded in social, political and cultural patterns of the past hundred years, chronologically determined as archaic/ancient/obsolete/conservative. In doing so, Ray achieved both a re-visioning of what was assumed to be archaic and obsolete in sociological history and a re-questioning of the equation between the contemporary and the modern.

Ray, who died in 1992, was an intensely creative man who, besides his large oeuvre of cinema, wrote short stories, poems, and novels in Bengali, as well as sketched and painted, and from after his landmark 1964 film, *Charulata*, did his own camera work and music for his cinema besides scripting and directing. He has been given many labels—classicist, humanist, the last Bengali Renaissance man—but in the final analysis he appears to defy any such slotting. All Ray's creative work was deeply rooted in his Bengali milieu, and yet it is—as his cinema always testified and now his novels and short stories, translated into English, also bear witness to the world at large outside of Bengal—in many senses truly transcultural in its multiple implications. Ray's cinema was inspired, in fact, not by Indian filmic traditions at all but by European cinema, and his early work particularly by Italian neo-realists such as Renoir and Vittorio de Sica. (In his collection of essays, *Our Films Their Films*, Ray talks about Renoir's visit to Calcutta in 1949 to scout for locations to shoot *The River* when he met and talked to him, and de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief*, which he saw in London in 1950, as profound influences on the making of his first film.)¹⁰

According to Suranjan Ganguly, while Ray's films have been shaped by Ray's cosmopolitan, modernist, twentieth-century perspective, they reveal a value system that has more to do with the nineteenth century... Ray was born in Calcutta in 1921 into a middle-class family of writers, painters and poets. The family had strong links to the Bengali Renaissance, a 19th-century cultural movement based on a synthesis of Western liberal ideas and traditional Eastern values... The high priests of the Renaissance promoted education, science and rationality, widow remarriage, emancipation of women and the reform of religion. Ray thus inherited the world-view of a class deeply committed to the European Enlightenment philosophies of progress, which would shape the liberal-humanist idealism of his work. The city, where the Renaissance was forged, would also be a factor in his evolution. Although no longer the capital of British India at the time of his birth, Calcutta was still the country's most cosmopolitan city as well as its foremost cultural centre, with a vibrant intellectual life. With its urban colonial milieu Ray would encounter a modernity that was a direct result of the East-West fusion. (Ganguly 1-2)

Ray's films addressed the citizens of a newly-independent nation who sought to comprehend, like him, what it might mean to be 'modern' (in the specific sense of being progressive). His films from *Pather Panchali* onwards become an extended study of an emerging nation as filtered through the experiences of men and women who seek to define themselves in relation to the larger forces that are transforming their world. Usually, these forces manifest themselves through fairly basic conflicts between the feudal and the modern, tradition and prog-

ress, the village and the city, the old and the new. Even if Ray offers no easy solutions, we sense how these conflicts are shaping a modern composite identity that for him represents true Indianness... in relation to an India that is in a perpetual state of growth as a dynamic, pluralistic nation (Ganguly 9).

It is possible perhaps to see Ray's oeuvre as divided fairly neatly into the 3 decades during which he produced most of his cinema, starting with *Pather Panchali* in 1955 and ending with the films of the late 1980s, *Ganashatru* (Enemy of the People, 1989), *Shakha Proshakha* (Branches of a Tree, 1990) and *Agantuk* (The Stranger, 1991). It has been argued that the films between 1955 and 1964 strongly endorsed Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of nation-building, which Ray greatly admired then. There is certainly evident in his early cinema an idealism that borders on the romantic as Ray upholds values such as education (*Aparajito*, The Unvanquished, 1956), the family as a social unit (*Pather Panchali*), and the emancipation of women (*Mahanagar*, 1963; *Charulata*, 1964) while he critiques feudalism (*Jalsaghar*, The Music Room, 1958) and orthodoxy (*Devi*, The Goddess, 1960), which stand in the way of an apparently progressive modernity (Ganguly 6). It is this body of work that has been described as "an enlightened liberal's perception of the history of modern India" (Bandyopadhyay v), in which Ray envisions the modern as emerging from a dynamic relationship with history where there are no violent ruptures but only lessons from the past and present.

In the early 1970s, however, the tone of Ray's cinema changed, perhaps as the Nehruvian dream vision was exposed as inadequate in the context of India's postcolonial realities. Beginning with *Aranyer Din Ratri* (Days and Nights in the Forest, 1970) and through the Calcutta Trilogy (*Pratidwandi*, *Seemabaddha* and *Jana Aranya*, 1971-1975) Ray began to address the problems of urban India in a repeated trope of the emasculation of the Indian male and the difficult transformations of female roles in a transitional society. These are perhaps the most profoundly cynical of his films, in which the city, formerly hailed as the signifier of an exuberant modernity, fails to deliver its promise. A radical alternative to the erstwhile promise of the city is in fact offered in *Aranyer Din Ratri*, in which a holiday in a remote forest area acts as a rejuvenating space for a group of young urbanites who have in various ways lost their perspectives on life. But of course it can only be a temporary reprieve from the reality of their existences, and at the end of the film, when the urban-dwellers head back to the city, there is both a sense of renewal of energy and a strange foreboding in the return. This state of contradiction that permeates the mood of the friends as they head back home to the city and to their 'real lives', as it were, is conveyed clearly through the affect of the film; however, there is no glorification of the forest sojourn as anything more than a respite from daily routines, and while the city holds many disappointments and challenges, for Ray the solution does not appear to lie in escaping it altogether.

In his last decade of work, Ray continued to trace the moral and spiritual decline of a complex society struggling to come to terms with changes and disappointments. He focused on instances of compromise and betrayal in daily life, as if to indicate an India changed—and changing—beyond recognition. While they contain odd glimmers of hope and redemption, his last three films appear to present, as a final testament, a profound disillusionment with the way in which post-independence India had shaped itself.

Charulata is considered an exemplary film in Ray's oeuvre not merely for its historical significance—its examination (under a magnified gaze, as signified by the repeated use of a pair of opera-glasses throughout the film) of the legacy of the Bengal Renaissance in the late 19th century through the clash of imported ideas of European Enlightenment with conservative, Hindu notions of home and family and gender roles—but also for its exquisite cinematic crafting. The film is premised on the notion of the gaze, of a looking that verges on the voyeuristic, though a sense of trespass is only always suggested and/or imagined, never actualized by a camera that roams and lingers on faces and feelings. Suranjan Ganguly has called it a film of “the woman's eye” (Ganguly 55) in which *Charulata* is given the privilege of gazing—upon the world around her, and upon the young man who storms into her placid household and unleashes a fury of passion in her that leaves her breathless and broken at his departure. As she is empowered by a pair of opera glasses that she trains on all whom she gazes upon, it does appear that at one level at least it is her gaze that controls the action of the film. However, Ray's *Charulata* in its immaculate camera work also points toward other (conflicting, interrogating, deflating) gazes that ultimately do not allow the woman's eye to remain uncompromisingly dominant in the battle of wills that looking signifies. The particular challenge to *Charulata*'s look is twofold: first, in the way in which the camera watches her as she goes about her business of gazing closely at the world around her and at the object of her desire (because Ray's filmography makes it imperative that the spectator remain aware of the camera's palpable presence); and second, in the way that *Charulata*'s gaze remains largely unreciprocated by both the men in her life—her husband and her “thakurpo,”¹¹ the young cousin-in-law with whom she falls in love. For if looking/gazing is an empowerment, not looking (back) in reciprocity may perhaps be seen as an ultimate voiding of the possibility of power.

Charulata, a filming of Rabindranath Tagore's short story “*Nashta Nir*” (“The Broken Nest”), is set in 1879 at the time of the Bengal Renaissance. Western education had been introduced into India by British legislation in 1835, and English education, endorsed by the educated liberals amongst Indians, had given rise to the *bhadralok* class, a bourgeois elite who forged an uneasy alliance between Western liberalism and traditional ‘Eastern’ thought. This yoking of disparate cultures had resulted in the Bengal Renaissance in the

19th century, whose leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy took up the challenge to reform a backward society on the model of the European Enlightenment. The emancipation of women constituted a large part of this reform movement, through which widow burning (sati) was abolished, women were offered education up to the college level, and widows were allowed to remarry.

The pursuit of 'enlightened' social reforms also resulted in the endorsement of English dress and manners, and a class of educated 'westernized' Bengalis took on the garb and food habits of the British while remaining Bengali at heart. Charulata's husband Bhupati, immaculately suited and bearded, celebrates the victory of the liberals in Britain's elections but fails to register any problem with the fact that his wife, who he knows is full of intellectual potential, is bored to near death in her daily "antar mahal"¹² life and ripe for transgression, perhaps simply because she craves excitement and freedom from an existence which appears to be of no worth to anyone. Despite the high humanist Enlightenment ideals that Bhupati proudly proclaims and endorses, he ironically proves unable to extend the same ideals to his own domestic life and reform it accordingly.

In the film, Bhupati is a western-educated, politically-aware and 'enlightened' 19th-century Bengali bhadralok who idealistically tries to run an English-language newspaper from his affluent home, and as a result of this ambitious venture has no time for his beautiful, young, bored wife Charulata. When Bhupati's young cousin Amal comes to visit, arriving literally in the midst of a rising storm, he blows fresh energy and life into Charu's universe. A literature student, he pens romantic prose and sings rousing around the house. Bhupati, well intentioned as ever, entrusts Amal with the task of providing literary succour and encouragement for the bright Charu. The mood of the time that they subsequently spend together is accentuated repeatedly in a motif of leisurely sunlit days spent under a shady tree in the garden, where Charu lounges indolently on a swing, singing and chatting and watching Amal as he lies prone on a rug on the grass, writing. Charu's use of the opera glasses to scrutinize him clearly signifies her increasing interest in him, although ironically the closeness of her gaze does not ultimately determine its clarity—despite the fact that Charu is an intelligent and personable woman with a mind of her own. Charu in her impetuous infatuation is unable to see Amal for what he is: a selfish, immature, and egoistical young man who enjoys her attention but has no intention of jeopardizing any aspect of his life by reciprocating her emotions, though he lacks the courage to convey this sentiment to her directly.

The film is meticulously crafted and deeply self-reflexive, using the camera to mimic the significations of theme that centre upon vision and illusion, knowledge, learning, writing, creating, all processes that enhance the essential search for self-knowledge. That the knowledge gained may finally not be wholly positive is the very essence of the message. Ray in his spectacular camera work deliberately appears to put his craft on display, emphasizing cinematic

techniques and drawing attention to the ways in which art and artifice fuse in the modernist consciousness. Even as the spectator is immersed in the unfolding of the plot, Ray makes her conscious of her role as spectator, as well as of the dynamics of the camera and how the latter can manipulate and control the erotics of the gaze. As Charu gazes through her opera glasses, either in unentangled interest in a passer-by on the street or in the growing entanglement she weaves around Amal and herself, the camera caresses her female form and we are conscious of ourselves watching her—almost voyeuristically—as she watches specific objects of her desire and non-desire. In Ray’s technique, instead of drawing us into this close scrutiny in the Mulveyesque sense of identifying with a male (admiring) gaze, the camera work constantly makes the viewer conscious of its art and artifice, the crafting of the film, and its fictionality. As Ganguly points out, Ray appears to underscore this by inscribing “Nashta Nir” in large script on the final frame of the film (58); by doing this he pays visible homage to Tagore’s story as well as reminds the spectator that a fictional story has inspired this cinematic representation. Given that cinema is notorious for making the unreal somehow appear real due to the medium’s realistic effects, this reminder is clearly a gesture by the filmmaker to distance the narrative from its contents.

Charulata has been read as a celebration of female agency, as an assertion of the efficacy of a woman’s desires and the need to express them even when such expressions endanger the genteel society’s status quo. It is certainly true that Charu in the film attempts to empower herself in diverse ways, the two most obvious instances being her pursuit of Amal as an object of desire and her bold foray into creative writing, instigated by her intention to ‘show’ Amal what she is capable of. That her attempts at self-empowerment meet with little sustained success, however, indicates that there can be no ultimate celebration of a gained agency. All that is gained at the end of the film is knowledge, both of the self and the domestic world, by both Charulata and Bhupati—a knowledge that threatens to permanently rupture the fragile web of contentment that binds them without offering any solution for the disruption. The film can be read more usefully as Tagore’s, as well as Ray’s, critique of the Bengal Renaissance, which produced men like Bhupati who professed belief in radical politics but proved oblivious to ways in which they were short-sighted about enlightened change in their immediate spheres of experience, the domestic one in particular. Bhupati was kind in attempting to find ways of keeping his young wife busy, for example, by suggesting that his young cousin Amal discuss literature with her, but nevertheless demonstrated a complete lack of serious engagement with the issues underlying Charu’s apathy and boredom, which were the result of a network of constraints upon women in affluent homes like theirs despite the educated, apparently progressive men who headed them. The film therefore critiques the celebrated ideological movement that

apparently brought the 'modern' into Bengali consciousness, as a movement and a modernity that was inherently flawed.

What Charu's story celebrates instead—and Ray does absolute justice to this idea in his film technique—is the private female space, autonomously opposed to the public, male-centric spaces that women are forced to negotiate in all the worlds they inhabit, whether inside or outside the bedroom or the "antar mahal." The long sequences that lovingly delineate Charu's ennui, and the multiple ways in which she seeks to alleviate her condition, constitute Ray's defiant assertion that what is supposed to be of no interest to anyone can indeed be beautiful as well as meaningful. However, when she does find something worthwhile to do – fall in love with a vibrant, romantic young man, and more importantly, write well enough to be published in a prestigious journal—her radical acts bring her not pleasure but pain. So the private space that she sought to shake out of somnolence cannot even bring her a sense of satisfaction in the ultimate analysis; yet there is no doubt that Charu grows through the knowledge that her painful experience of truly 'living' brings her. Her future as we leave her at the end of the film is uncertain at best and possibly psychologically turbulent, but the film makes the radical statement that such a future is preferable to the endless ennui that enveloped her before Amal struck her world like the proverbial tornado.

What further redeems Charu's awakening—if only to pain rather than pleasure—is the fact that it comes without a sense of guilt about its transgressive nature. Both men in the film, who manage to finally invalidate Charu's bid to break out of mould by side-stepping her gaze, are yet beset by different kinds of guilt: Bhupati for being unable to give her enough attention to keep her occupied, and Amal for embodying a second threat of betrayal in a household recently devastated by Charu's brother's embezzlement of the newspaper's funds. Charu, although taken by surprise at her own passionate awakening in response to Amal's carelessly affectionate camaraderie, is unswerving as she stares its destructive allure in the face; even her grief when it finally surfaces appears proud in its passion and full-throatedness. Bhupati's shock when he discovers her in its throes is indicative of both horror at its implications for their relationship as well as awe at the glimpse of an aspect of Charu's personality that he had never encountered before.

There has been much critical comment on the fact that *Charulata* represents metaphorically that violent encounter in colonial India between tradition and modernity, between the 19th and 20th centuries, between the 'prachina' (traditional woman) and the 'nabina' (new/modern woman), and that the ambiguous conclusion—in which Bhupati and Charu's hands reach out tentatively toward each other but freeze before they can touch—marks the difficulties with which such transitions are effected. It is obvious that there is no real possibility of the valorization of transgressive action when it steps out



Charulata (Madhabi Mukherjee) in Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (The Lonely Housewife, 1964)

of the private space, as Charu's futile bid to assert her desires proves; however, there is yet a validation of the space that is intensely private in its transgressive moments, and a valorization of that sense of privacy in its intense joys and unhappinesses. In fact, it is this, if anything, that the film celebrates through its intricate camera work—not Charu's awakening itself, but the right to her awakening, despite the demarcated space within which it operates.

My reading of the film's churning of modernities, urbanities and sexualities is focused primarily on Ray's employment of the pair of opera glasses in Charu's hands. Two critical sequences in the film are constructed around the opera-glasses: the first, to signal Charu's desperate boredom within the confines of the inner chambers of the house, when she runs from window to window on an enervated afternoon to watch the intermittent activity on the deserted sun-burnt streets of the city through the lowered shutters, and uses the glasses to magnify (and bring closer) those images for/to herself; and the second, when she gazes with barely-concealed (if at first barely-recognized) sexual desire at the young Amal in the idyllic garden scene later in the film. It is not merely coincidental that the two worlds she gazes upon longingly through the opera glasses—the streets of the city which she cannot step onto in keeping with her world's social decorum, and the man in a garden of fantasy/idyll whom she suddenly, and violently, desires—are equally unavailable to her. If the opera glasses in her hand signify modernity, providing the means and the power to look closely at, as well

as to draw that which she desires towards herself in a gesture of defiant agency, the very function of the glasses voids any lasting or real effect, since the magnification as well as the contra-distancing is at best merely an illusion. The significations of the opera glasses, therefore, are complex, implying both immediate empowerment and an ultimate invalidation of Charu's agency. However, a paralleling of desire is effected between the streets of Calcutta and the young man sprawled charmingly on the grass through the image of Charu's opera glasses, which link the two scenes, and converge on an understanding of her yearnings.

Mahanagar chronicles the story of a middle-class joint family in Calcutta in the second half of the 20th century, which has fallen on hard times as the sole male breadwinner, Subrata, is unable to make ends meet. His aged parents, his unmarried young and sprightly sister, his beautiful but unsophisticated wife Arati, and small son yet remain happy and united, until Subrata and Arati decide on a desperate measure to surmount their financial problems, and Arati applies for and procures a job as a saleswoman in a sewing machine company. Arati's foray into the world of sales and salaries under the tender gaze of her proud husband slowly changes tenor as she gains confidence and begins to assert her new knowledge of the city's life beyond her household walls. According to Chidananda Dasgupta, "It is in *Mahanagar* that, for the first time, we come across a woman who awakens to the possibility of determining the course of her own life. Typically enough, the awakening touch comes from the husband, for men have traditionally liberated, just as they have enslaved, women. But traditionally too, they have retracted when they have seen the consequences of their action" (Dasgupta 78). Significantly, Arati is neither defiant nor destructive in her quiet bid to redraw the boundaries of her hitherto sheltered existence, and is in fact visibly troubled when her husband begins to withdraw his support of her new enterprise; and it is only in the subtlest of changes in lifestyle, attitudes, dress and speech that both the promise and the problem of suspected female overreaching lies.

Priya Jaikumar, in a study of cinema at the end of empire in India, suggests that cinematic modernism, like cinematic realism, may be understood as a response to historical modernity. Specifically, modernism may be characterized as a range of aesthetic symptoms manifesting both the euphoria of change and "an anxiety of contamination" produced by the decolonization, democratization, commercialization, and massification of culture, society, and politics" (Jaikumar 198). Arati's emergence as a salaried, newly-madeover working woman dislocates her prior position as a traditional Indian wife, mother, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law, a disjuncture recognized as symbolically representative of the disorienting effects of the new and disruptive urbanism of 1960s India. However, as Darius Cooper has suggested in his reading of Arati's make-over in *Mahana-gar*, what is more interesting is the fact that despite Arati's conscious bid to take over a masculine role as joint-breadwinner in the household, which she achieves



Arati (Madhabi Mukherjee) in
Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar*
(The Big City, 1963).

by being successful at her job and insisting upon a recognition of her newfound economic stature at home, she is increasingly feminized and sexualized in the course of her transformation. Surprisingly, Cooper finds the visual emphasis on her eroticization in the film through provocatively translucent clothing “puzzling,” saying that “Ray overarticulates Arati’s liberated presence... Not only would her family at home not allow such a brazen sartorial display, but even her own Bengali boss would be scandalized” (Cooper 106), although he does later concede that in that transient moment on the street when Arati revels in her sexualized freedom, she can aspire to a “supreme moment of erotic meaning” (Cooper 106) for herself alone, unshackled by the patriarchal expectations that she negotiates everyday at home and at work.

I would, in fact, read those sequences of the film that explore and emphasize Arati’s growing feminization/sexualization—in her awareness of her physical body and its increasing attractiveness while negotiating public spaces in the city of Calcutta—as a series of significant semiotic engagements with notional female liberation in contexts of urbanity, modernity, and sexuality in post-independence India. That Arati achieves this awareness with the help of a circle of female friends at the workplace, and through the particular empathy she shares with a young Anglo-Indian¹³ colleague, Edith, also gestures toward the possible/promising space of same-sex friendships for urban women outside of the domestic sphere, a space almost never explored with any seriousness in Indian cinema of the time. I suggest that this is a space that ‘modernity’, with all its gaps and doubts, allows for ‘the woman question’ at the (dis)juncture of decolonization. The long sequence in *Mahanagar* in which Arati is first taught by Edith to recognize, in the office washroom mirror, the positive physical transformation that can be wrought by the application of lipstick, and succes-

sive scenes in which the lipstick functions as a signifier—of freedom intricately wooed and won through a deliberate eroticization of Arati's appearance—constitute a cinematic narrative all the more powerful for being embedded in the understated register of quiet female camaraderie.

It may once have been easy to read into lipstick a phallic signification, except that such facile denominations of power are now obsolete. It is far more useful to see the lipstick as a marker within a continuum of Arati's gradual awakening to the pleasure of remaking her sexual self, which is analogous with her slow but deliberate transformation of the way in which she wears the sari: still the traditional Indian woman's dress, but now draped and accoutered so differently that a docile housewife morphs into an alluring woman about the city, a transfiguration that Cooper finds "puzzling" because it would be unacceptable in the world she was rooted in. That Arati is caught in a conflict that positions her newly sexed self in opposition to her prior pliant personality is, of course, clear. This confrontation is reflected in the film's juxtaposition of the city's public spaces (which she traverses confidently as a working woman) with the demarcated boundaries of her family home (in which she functions as wife, mother, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law—but not as an autonomous woman with an income, friends, and desires of her own). Ray's cinematic vision appears to employ this juxtaposition to image the nature of Arati's conflict as she grapples with the onslaught of modernity in the form of her own incipient sexuality. The moment is quite possibly as "puzzling" to her as it is insidiously liberatory.

It is in this "puzzling" but potentially liberatory moment that I would locate the predicament of urban sexualities in postcolonial India, reading it through cinematic texts that may usefully complicate our understanding of modernities in/of Indian culture. Even as we are caught in the glare of a postmodern, globalized turn in India, the real and imagined stories of Indian cities are yet poised upon peculiar ambivalences that are so delicately nuanced by an elusive modernity that they are liable to be overlooked. The film text is peculiarly equipped to insert itself into the fissures created between the local and the global (city), as it were, and to enact visually and aurally for its spectators the conflicts of the postcolonial nation state. In fact, in interrogating ideologies of modernism through inchoate female sexualities, Ray's postcolonial film text often appropriates for itself the very space of liminality that it explores, and becomes its signifier.

Notes

1. I use this term in keeping with the general understanding of postcoloniality as (a) a historical period beginning with the onset of colonial rule and extending indefinitely 'past the post' of independence, and (b) a signifier of an identity that bears together the marks of colonization, de-colonization and the constitution of an independent 'postcolonial condition'.

2. Bhabha emphasizes reading “the hybrid moment of political change” through representations that contest the “terms and territories” of extant ideologies, an idea that has been central to the reception of postcolonial texts. See Bhabha 18–28.
3. The re-naming of many Indian cities in the late 20th century (along with new names for streets/roads/squares in cities, towns and villages all over the country), ostensibly to re-claim a pre-colonial identity, can also be read as a post/modernist project that challenges history’s impositions.
4. Gyan Prakash discusses the ambivalent position that the city has occupied in the Indian nationalist imagination, saying that it is only in recent years that an ‘urban turn’ has been effected in academic study across social science disciplines. See Prakash, 2–3.
5. See Chatterjee.
6. See for example Wilson.
7. For a critical engagement with the notion of the ‘embodiment’ of spaces, see Bourdieu.
8. For a nuanced discussion of what public culture signifies in post/modern contexts, see Appadurai.
9. A site is a space that is churned by the meeting of historical and global processes. See Soja.
10. See Ray 9.
11. A Bengali kinship term for a husband’s younger brother or male cousin.
12. Literally “inner chambers.” In traditional Indian households, housewives were confined to these living quarters and could not freely approach the outer rooms of the house in which outsiders/guests were received.
13. The identity of a young Anglo-Indian woman in Calcutta in the 1960s symbolizes a lifestyle that stands in complete contrast to the world that Arati occupies. In the national imaginary, and in Bengal in particular, Anglo-Indians constituted a strongly ‘Westernized’ community whose women could conduct lives unrestrained by ‘traditional’ Indian proscriptions.

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