

# Sex Positivity of Satyajit Ray's Women: Their Cinematic Journey Towards the Ancient Indian Heritage

Media Watch

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DOI: 10.1177/09760911221112181

journals.sagepub.com/home/mdw

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## Abstract

The article shows how Satyajit Ray's women resist the sexism that comes from colonialism and reach back into a more sex-positive Indian heritage, particularly Chakras and Tantric philosophy of life. This is particularly important in correcting the way imperialist ideology misrepresented gender relations in India to justify British rule and how the misrepresentation has continued in the name of nationalist movements in post-independent India. The article focuses on a selection of Ray's films. It stresses the themes (and their deviation from their original sources) used by Ray to make his point obvious and, at the same time, not very shocking to the traditional Bengali audience of his time. This article also focuses on how the sex positivity of ancient India is manipulated by the colonial hangover and the confusing nationalist ideas that have developed of late into limiting the sexual and social rights of women and how Ray's cinema resists it in a delicate yet bold manner by visualising the markedly conflicts in both of his female and male characters by awakening their sexuality to the ancient Hindu vision of life.

## Keywords

Satyajit Ray's film, ancient Indian philosophies, gender politics, women sexuality, colonialism, sex positivity

## Introduction

Satyajit Ray is often discussed as a Bengali filmmaker, but I find this designation inadequate and misleading because he strives to do his work internationally. Moreover, Ray seems deceptively easy to place in his homeland of West Bengal,

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where most of his films are set and where he lived. Yet in some ways he is a real cosmopolitan, and he strongly resists being understood as a Bengali filmmaker. And as I shall explore in this article, Ray's cinema is profoundly influenced by the sex positivity of the ancient Hinduism and feminist movements worldwide, including the sexual revolution (the 1960s–1970s) in America, and his cinema is in its resistance to the influences of his time and place that they are most energetic and perhaps most interesting.

Changes in concepts of gender and sexuality were crucial to Ray's development as an artist because he entered fully into the zeitgeist of his youth in which movements toward greater sexual freedom coincided and often clashed with feminist movements across the world. While sexual freedom offers many benefits to women, conflicts with more comprehensive aims of women's liberation arise because of myths generated about women's sexuality by men. And breaking the myths about female sexuality has become foundational to feminist theories. Such myths as the ideas that women have weaker sex drives than men, feel sexual arousal only in response to male desire, are naturally monogamous, experience stronger orgasms from vaginal intercourse than from clitoral stimulation, lose interest in sex when they become too old to be found attractive by most men, and value affection more than sexual pleasure all provide support for the patriarchal social systems and sexist mores that create gender oppression. And these myths create an unevenness in general sexual liberation that has become so severe that for many women, a sexual revolution's only result is that women feel pressured to have sex they do not want and men feel free to exploit women for their pleasure and offer them little physical satisfaction of their own. As Virginia Woolf suggests in *A Room of One's Own*, the barring of women from the academic library that she begins her book discussing metaphorically represents the exclusion of women's voices from the story of female subjectivity and ensured for centuries that men's self-serving stories about women, including all the myths about sexuality named above and many more, would derail any artistic, as well as social, movements toward greater sexual honesty and freedom.

How can we contextualise and historicise sexism in India? Martinez defines 'sexism' as 'oppression based on sex just as racism oppression based on race. Sexism includes both social structures and attitudes of male superiority that are rooted in those structures' (Martinez, 1972, p. 51). So 'sexism' is holding the belief that women are inferior to men and/or is supporting (often by participating to one's advantage) systems that oppress women precisely (that systems unlike racism or classism that oppress women as a group). If one accepts that a woman may not want to exercise the same sort of sexual freedom as a man has without questioning what in her society might have caused this attitude, then one is thinking in a sexist way. While discussing Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, Bartky warns that '[t]o overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed' as she observes that sexism is 'endemic throughout Western political theory' (Bartky, 1988, p. 343). In India, most women are raised to know their sexual feelings mean nothing as they will be married off to a stranger who they do not know or love and who does not love them, and he

will use them any way he chooses to use them. They are taught not to seek sexual pleasure in any way. So they do not feel entitled to sexual pleasure. A woman who has never known intense sexual pleasure with a man whom she is romantically in love with and passionately desires and who reciprocates those feelings will not prioritise the pleasure she has never had. To expect men and women to feel, think and act the same way when society treats them very differently is sexist.

Furthermore, sexism in India has some direct connection with British colonialism. Martinez convincingly argues that '[s]exism is a useful tool to the coloniser; the men are oppressed, but they can beat and mistreat women, who thus serve as targets for a frustration that might otherwise become revolutionary' and concludes '[t]he truth is that we need to reexamine and redefine our culture' (Martinez, 1972, p. 52). In ancient Indian literature (not only in Hindu religious literature but also in Muslim literature) and sculpture (e.g., Konark and Khajuraho temples), we find many examples to support this thesis. *Rekhti* poetry in Urdu, as Vanita explains in her book, *Gender, Sex and the City*, shows a unique understanding of female pleasure, and surprisingly all the poetry that has survived is by men (Vanita, 2012). Also, erotic treatises descended from the *Kamasutra*, such as the *Anangaranga*, which she analyses in one of her book chapters (Vanita, 2005, pp. 191–216), have beautiful descriptions of female orgasmic pleasure (Vanita, 2005, pp. 211–212). Vanita (2005, p. 15) argues in another chapter:

One way in which the British justified their presence and domination in South Asia was by attacking Indian social and political structure as iniquitous. The attack was primarily focused on Brahmans and princes, both Hindu and Muslim: hence, *Manusmriti*, which the Jones school of British administrators had magnified as symbolic of India's greatness, was declared a Brahmanical code and critiqued by the Macaulay school of administrators as symbolic of the backwardness of Indian society.

Because of this gross misrepresentation of ancient Indian heritage, the change towards ignorance came under British rule, especially among educated men. The situation deteriorated through the twentieth century as Indian-language education moved to formal institutions and modelled on Victorian English education.

Because Ray saw honesty about sex and advocacy of greater sexual freedom as part of his creative production, he had to contend with this conflict. I will focus on a few of his films to show in the length of an article how Ray draws on ancient Indian sex positivity in his women characters and how he invests in freeing women from constricting social positions and touches on many aspects of understanding the (re)construction of gender in India. *The Adversary* (*Pratidwandi*, 1970) and *Days and Nights in the Forest* (*Aranyer Din Ratri*; Ray, 1970) investigate the ways the institution of marriage is established as a normal state for women by majoritarian culture, for example. And just like his 1960 films *Devi*, *The Big City* (*Mahanagar*; Ray, 1963), *The Adversary* and *The Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire*; Ray, 1984) also challenge the 'goddess role' traditionally given to women in the Indian society and in the Indian context this role has extremely complex religious and political ramifications. It is linked to the nationalist framework, which I shall discuss later in the article. And both in

the *Devi* and the *Home and the World*, Ray deviates from the original stories to make his sex radical stand clearer in the Indian context. In Ray's films, Bimala returns to her marriage for her renewed sexual passion for her husband and Daya, instead of committing suicide runs into the sunlight, keeping the possibility of a dehumanised woman getting back life of her own alive. It may indeed be interesting to note that the on-screen 'kisses' in *The Home and the World* or, showing a woman (who is not a professional prostitute) smoking and undressing in front of two men in the *Adversary*, or a Bengali housewife wearing a see-through blouse and roaming the streets of Calcutta as a salesgirl in the *Big City* during the 1960s–80s in a Bengali/Indian context could be seen 'as provocative' as uses of words like 'cunt' in a British/European one. I shall discuss these films as representative works of Ray that challenge conventional and patriarchal social and artistic norms. And in this way, the *Adversary* is significant not only for portraying the nondomestic expression of sexualities and the 'radical representation of sex,' but as, according to Cooper, in *Adversary*, we can see the 'most innovative cinematic expression' (Cooper, 2000, p. 13). Cooper writes, 'Ray deliberately jettisons his classical style in *Adversary*', and instead, we can see his modernist attitude here because of his 'fragmented style of film making,' 'switch to negative and dream sequences,' 'the abrupt flashbacks and the playful flash-forwards,' film's central protagonist, Siddhartha's 'hesitant and inarticulate character', and his 'conflicts and doubts' (Cooper, 2000, p. 13). This style is aptly used to undermine Victorian sexual morality prevailing in post-colonial India (and being renewed in the form of nationalist movements). It makes his latent sex radicalism subcutaneously effective. My friend and postdoctoral mentor, Carol Siegel defines the 'sex radical cinema' in her book (2015) as 'one whose approach belongs to the minoritarian, ... a film that presents sexuality in a manner that disturbs the liberal concept of a norm, that introduces ideas about sexuality and its impact on society that disrupts majoritarian views of how sex fits into human lives' (Siegel, 2015, p. 26). All of these representative films including the *Adversary* can be considered 'sex radical' in the traditional Indian context and, at the same time, I will argue, are spiritually connected with the ancient and sex-positive Indian heritage.

By getting influenced by the changes in gender norms and art worldwide, Ray shows some Avant-gardism in his films, delicately and spiritually connected with various strands of ancient Hinduism. And Ray probably discovers some connection between ancient Indian philosophies and the feminist movements of his times. His women characters result from the clash between the ancient Indian sex positivity and Victorian sexual morality injected into India by colonialism. Looking at how gender and sexual ideologies developed where he lived and worked is necessary to fully understand how and why he entered the conversations and debates over sexuality that surged in his times. Because Ray grew up and lived in an area dominated by Hinduism, as is most of India, that will be our focus here. This is also particularly important in correcting how imperialist ideology misrepresented gender relations in India to justify British rule and how the misrepresentation has continued. For this reason, let me begin with a genealogy of sexual attitudes in England in the first half when India was under British rule and in India in the second half of the twentieth century when Ray made his films.

## **Genealogy of Ideas: Locating Roy as an Auteur**

### *Victorian Sexual Morality*

All concepts of sexual and romantic relations in the West developed in relation to Christianity. Christianity deemed all physical pleasure, and sexuality in particular, as a distraction from spiritual life. Because Christianity preaches that we have immortal souls but no physical life after the body's death, only eternal suffering with no hope of escape or eternal bliss with God, one lives to achieve heaven. Ideally that means devoting oneself to prayer and good deeds to help others (children, the weak, the sick). Those who cannot forgo sex are urged to marry and have sex only to produce children who will be raised as Christians. The married couples are expected to work as partners to live the most blameless spiritual life possible as an influence on others, especially their children. But producing children is not in itself meritorious. It is simply a way of making some amends for the sin of having sex. While procreation is valued because it potentially brings more Christians into the world, it is also always considered a sin to have sex. Sex cannot be virtuous, only excused if meant to produce a child, but because the child was conceived through sin, it is always also sinful.

Mothers are women who have sinned sexually and are not to be respected any more than other sinners. Because fathers are, under patriarchy, the ones who guide and discipline sons after babyhood, they are far more respected. A mother who babies her son is considered bad because she undermines his masculinity. The only mother truly venerated in Christianity is the Virgin Mary. This is because all sex is seen as sinful, and since she gave birth to God/God's son without ever having sex, she is the only truly pure mother.

Whereas India has female gods and figures who are lovers of a god and venerated because of it, the West has no female deities. The Catholics worship Mary because she is virginal and pure. Many female saints in Catholicism and Protestantism are venerated because they died rather than have sex. God cannot have any sexual contact with humans or anyone, so this is why Mary had to conceive Jesus through a miracle that did not involve sex. Christianity demands its followers an 'imitation of Christ' whereby they must act as they believe he would, to the extent that they can. Christian theology sees the incarnation of Jesus as a miracle through which God had a son who is also miraculously part of God. He came to Earth as a human so that He could experience human life and thus have compassion for us. He died after torture in a horrible sacrifice so that no other person would ever have to die but instead would live eternally with God in heaven if only they believed in Him and tried to live as He did, entirely devoted to helping others who were less powerful because they were merely human.

However, the development of chivalry and courtly love ritual among the highest social classes in the medieval period meant that men were called upon to imitate the self-sacrificial behaviour of Jesus toward women. They were to treat women to whom they were attracted as holy, putting the woman's needs and feelings before their own. This is the Western version of the perfect romantic relationship: the man sacrifices himself out of love for the woman. He has all the

power (due to the patriarchy and his greater size and strength), but he gives it up to act as a servant to the woman he loves so that her pleasure is his pleasure. This is the ideal. By the end of the nineteenth century, both men and women rebelled against this ideal, and women's denigration as inferior returned. Mothers were hated and scorned the most.

For this reason, Western Christian cultures were very patriarchal and sex-negative. The Victorian period was when ideas about gender shifted hugely in the West. In earlier periods, it was assumed that women were more animalistic and carnal than men because they were assumed to be less intelligent and less cerebral. They were seen as having less self-control. This is why women were kept from having much independence, as it was assumed that if they had the freedom to do as they liked, they would be very promiscuous and upset the patriarchal lines of descent. But the Victorians believed women were (ideally) more virtuous than men and had more sexual self-control along with personalities more loving and generous. Thus men must try very hard to protect themselves from all unpleasantness. By the end of this period, people were rebelling against these ideas. And then came the significant (re)discovery by medical professionals that women could experience sexual pleasure without penetration, that orgasm was easiest for most women to achieve through clitoral manipulation without anything going into the vagina at all (Moore, 2018; Peplau, 1976). Women also entered the workforce at higher income levels. This shook up patriarchy and called into question the sex roles of the past. Because now it seemed women could live without male protectors or lovers—no further need to defer to them or obey them.

### *Ancient Indian Philosophies*

Ancient Hindu philosophies of sex were essentially different from Western religious philosophy based on Christianity. Sex positivity and paying importance to female sexual pleasure were present in the prevailing Hindu religious philosophies. Juliet Richters (2016), a distinguished scholar in sexuality studies, quotes Vatsyayana, the ancient Indian saint, and argues:

More sexually liberal cultures assume that women take at least as much pleasure in sex as men and regard orgasms for men and women as a 'natural' part of sexual interactions. We should not think that this is only a result of contemporary scientific knowledge and post-feminist liberalism in developed countries. In the *Kama Sutra*, a Sanskrit treatise on love-making that dates from about the fourth century CE, the author does not refer to orgasm by a distinct name, but it is clear from the discussion that he regards women and men as deriving pleasure and satisfaction from sex. (p. 98)

She shows how Vatsyayana distinguishes female sexual pleasure from male's and shows ways to give utmost pleasure to women depending on their sexual mood. Apart from the sex guide (*Kamasutra*) written by the ancient Hindu saint, Vatsyayana, some Hindu temple sculptures show men having sex with multiple

women and in different postures, including oral and anal sex. We can see both reciprocation and participation on the part of the women as they seem very happy. Anyone can assume that without having sexual pleasure and orgasm, women could not be so participative and offer such tremendous sexual pleasures to men. As Doris Lessing, in her introduction to the book *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (2006), praises Lawrence for knowing about G-spot and describing accurately vaginal orgasm, Vanita also shows (2005) that in Urdu *Rekhti* poetry and *Anangaranga* as well, there are detailed descriptions of the clitoris ('*Manmathachhatra*'), G-spot ('*Purnachandra*'), manual stimulation of the clitoris (rubbing clitoris with fingers), penetration with dildos and vaginal as well as clitoral orgasm. They have a clear understanding of clitoral stimulation that 'causes fluid to flow continuously' and hence of the necessity of foreplay for women ('the woman melts') and female orgasm ('Gender, Language and Genre' and 'Many Colors of Love' 2005).

Along with that, Indian Hindu culture tries to promote *shraddha* (there is no single English synonym for the word, but the Sanskrit word means a mixture of *respect* and *obedience* that too originates from inner loyalty and praise for the person) as an integral part of romantic as well as sexual relationships. Mutual *Shraddha* is seen as the essence of the man–woman relationship. But gradually, with the rise of patriarchy, probably after the long colonialism, *Shraddha* was expected more from women for their men than from men for their women. And women were taught not to desire their pleasure but only to be given to the man's pleasure. In *Vaishnava* (a branch of Hinduism worshipping Lord Krishna and Radha, whose stories are based on *Bhagavata Purana*), there are three pure types of feelings possible between two persons: *Sasha* (friendship), *Dasha* (servitude, as a servant to their master) and *Batsolo* (parental affection, basically as the affection of the mother towards her son). Another valued kind of feeling (the fourth) possible between two persons is *Modhur* (which literary means 'honeyed'). When *Modhur*'s feeling is present between two lovers, it is seen as the best feeling possible between two persons because it contains all three other feelings. *Modhur* is the combination of friendship, servitude and motherly affection, which create the highest form of love.

Indian religious philosophy treats mothers with the utmost respect. Because having sex with her husband and giving birth to a child is not treated as sinful. On the contrary, many Hindu mythologies show that women gave birth to children due to having sex with their lovers (Kunti in *Mahabharata*) before marriage. Society did not utterly denounce the mothers. This inherent respect for the mothers has its roots in Hinduism's natural acceptance of sex both for procreation and recreation. In Hindu mythology, Lord Mahadeva is shown being breastfed by his wife Parvati to soothe his throat after he drank all the world's poisons to save humankind and so feels tremendous pain in his throat as it turns blue and gets burnt with poison. This is a typical example of motherly affection shown to one's lover or husband. The concept of being a mother is divinely respected in India, where there are many motherly goddesses, and the goddess Durga, whose worshipping (now on UNESCO's Cultural Heritage list) is usually between late September and the middle of October, is considered the most incredible and longest festival in West Bengal. Durga has four children (two

male and two female), and her children are also worshipped with her; even the male demon she killed is also honoured with her but not her husband, Shiva. In India, people usually call women 'mothers' to show respect. Most Indian women seem to be very glad to be addressed as 'mother' by men, not simply because it is a compliment but because it means she is sexually safe from that man, as having sex with one's mother is probably the greatest taboo in India and ethically considered most hideous too. Sexual violence against a mother figure is appalling because the very term 'mother' stands for extreme sacrifice for her children. Most Indian mothers do sacrifice a lot for their children. No Indian literature or cinema celebrates or even makes excuses for a mother giving up her children or neglecting her children to attain pleasure from anything other than them. Ray tries to show a little bit of this in the film *Pikoo* (Ray, 1980), where a mother tries to trick her son into going to the garden and spending a long time there so that she can have sex comfortably with her illicit lover. But the woman suddenly cries bitterly seeing her innocent son in the garden from the upstairs room window when she is going to shut it before having sex with the man. She never enjoys sex with him on that day. She is portrayed as a negative character, a 'bad' woman who seems to be responsible for the death of her ailing father-in-law, which is depicted as amounting to murder. So, though Ray seems sympathetic to the plight of the women in a culture where they are treated generally as less than men or as having worth only to what they can do for men, and gives importance to women's sexual desire that they express and try to fulfil through encounter out of wedlock in some of his films, he does not go against the Indian mother image venerated by the dominant culture of his place for centuries.

Many Indian women give up their educations and careers to give more time to their children. In her article 'Transformation in Ideas and Ideals, 1900–1947', Bharati Ray explains it too with real examples. Some even neglect their health and beauty rituals to serve their children, as if they think that they do not require anything else apart from the well-being of their children. And though the ideal feeling between lovers is culturally promoted as *Modhur*, and it contains the feeling of *Batsolo* (motherly feeling) and *Dasha* (servitude), after the colonialism, women are gradually expected to be more subservient in romantic and sexual relationships. *Modhur*, among its combination of three types of feelings, has only one word for equal rights (*Sasha*-friendship) but two words for direct (*Dasha*) and indirect (*Batsolo*) subjugation. So with the rise of patriarchy, it is expected that a woman whose love is true will sacrifice like a mother for her lover without thinking of herself and will be an obedient servant to him. That this self-sacrificial behaviour is only expected of women and not of men is not promulgated in *Vaishnava* literature which describes with the highest aesthetic beauty and psychologically enthralling ways the affair of Krishna and Radha, who are culturally considered the most ideal lovers in India. Many literary texts (poems mainly) in *Vaishnava* literature describe their adulterous but supremely fascinating relation. Lord Vishnu (one of the supreme gods in the Hindu trinity, the other two are Brahma and Maheshwar or Shiva) has eight principal wives (*mahisi*) and around sixteen hundred junior wives (*gopi* or *gopini*). But still, he comes back to earth as Krishna, a human avatar and has an affair with Radha, a married woman.



Radha is senior to him and already married to his maternal uncle but without sexual satisfaction with her husband. So by having an affair with Radha, Krishna breaks three social taboos: having sex with someone else's wife who is extremely unhappy with her husband, having sex with one's relative (considered a type of incest, even when there is no blood relation) and having sex with an older woman (to some extent a social taboo, as it is always expected that a man should desire only women younger than him). Indian society is hugely accepting of these stories, and both Krishna and Radha are worshipped as gods and goddesses. Radha's love for Krishna is considered ideal and the purest form of the love of a woman for her lover because it is selfless, as he never promises to marry her, and she has to suffer social calumny and much disruption and turmoil in her own family and neighbourhood because of her adulterous relation with Krishna. The story shows that departing from traditions is not a *sin*. Instead, it is unethical and immoral to follow the practices where women are not considered equal to men, and their sexual pleasure is treated as unimportant.

Apart from having many powerful goddesses religiously worshipped by Hindus, Tantra, a branch of Hinduism is unique in the world as the central God is female, and both men and women worship that supreme female God. A male worshipper and practitioner of Tantra always take his female partner as the guru who will show him the way to emancipation in her female body by having intercourse with him. He treats her with the utmost respect. Chakras are central to the philosophy of the Tantric yogis, who use sexuality to achieve the highest point of spirituality. According to those yogis, sex is potent energy, and one cannot suppress or destroy energy. If one tries to do that (to repress it), it will destroy the person.

On the contrary, one can transform it into spiritual energy. And the woman is the guru, or the guide in this endeavour to transform it. If one never experiences sex in this way, one cannot be transformed from a sex partner to a true lover, and the lover cannot unite with the eternal *Chaitanya* (consciousness) as professed in *Kena Upanishad*. According to that theology, one can feel the power of God in oneself, not through the renunciation of the body but through celebration of it. Therefore, the yogis try to overcome the limitations of our earthly existence not by rejecting body or sexuality but through indulgence in it. Sadhguru explains that yogis see all bodies as containing masculine and feminine energies which need to be brought into balance for one to be 'effective in the world.' But a higher consciousness is attained when our energies enter into Sushumna. 'Sushumna is attribute-less; it has no quality of its own. It is like space. If there is space, you can create anything you want (Sadhguru, 2013).'

Only when you move beyond masculine and feminine, you can 'dare to explore all dimensions of life' (Sadhguru, 2013). Richters also confirms the sex positivity of this ancient religious school in India and the importance it pays to women's sexual pleasure: 'Some strands of Tantrism (a group of Indian mystic sects dating from the sixth century CE or earlier) include ritual sex in which the man is similarly required to avoid ejaculating while the woman is encouraged to have orgasms' (Richters, 2016, p. 102). Gerald Doherty's work on the influence of Lawrence's understanding of the chakras on *Lady Chatterley's Lover* suggests

how the knowledge gained through his travels of cultural visions of sexuality and gender differed from those he knew in Britain filtered through Indian philosophy. They structured the ways Lawrence's insights about what sex could be and do increasingly informed his writing. Doherty convincingly argues that 'the psychology of the chakras, both in its traditional Yogic version and Lawrence's idiosyncratic interpretation,' as elaborated in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, is key to the sexual/spiritual journey of Mellors and Connie (Doherty, 1980, p. 80). Unlike the yogis, Lawrence believed that the energies must be directed downwards, to the genitals, in order to restore the balance disrupted by Western civilisations' overvaluation of the mind (Doherty, 1980, p. 81). However, he agrees with the yogis in striving for balance and connection to the cosmos, 'retracing ancient modes of connection,' traversing the archaic path of the chakras back to 'the great Source' ... (Doherty, 1980, pp. 91–92).

The concepts of sexuality and romantic love in Hinduism, particularly women's sexuality as it is expressed and experienced by Indian women, may seem quite contradictory. A traditional Indian woman is expected to be more eager to provide sexual pleasure to her partner than to receive it. This creates the impression that her pleasure and orgasm are not her concern at all. So the condition of a woman who can only find happiness in giving sexual pleasure to men and does not expect pleasure in return is very deceiving. Because either she enjoys it personally and has orgasm eventually and lies about her altruistic intentions during sex due to her cultural inhibitions, or she is ignorant of the very existence of female orgasm and hence never expects it and pretends to be happy by thinking that her body attracts a man of her choice and that the man is getting pleasure out of her body. Few Indian women say directly that they want sexual pleasure, and if they experience orgasm, they may be too inhibited to admit it.

## Ray's Women

While Satyajit Ray was always admired for his empathetic portrayal of women in his films, I shall show that Satyajit Ray's films represent male–female relations consistent with the sex positivity of ancient Indian Hindu philosophies. And that way of seeing does align in some respects with a major goal of feminism, namely to free sexuality from patriarchal role-playing and subordination of women through body shaming and instead to allow women and men to free themselves into higher spiritual consciousness through uninhibited bodily presence. It seems worth considering to think here about how different this is from the Victorian sexual ideology, which maintained that adherence to rigid gender roles not only constituted appropriate behaviour but was indicative of mental health and that women were either dangerous whores with whom contact would destroy a man's body and soul or desexualised domestic angels whose spirituality would help men escape the dangers of lust.

Ray's task was not so easy, particularly when he made those films where he tries to treat man-woman relations fairly, freely, frankly and fearlessly. Probably

after hundreds of years of colonialism, women in India are no longer considered equal to men, and their sexual pleasure is treated as unimportant; instead of learning to please women and taking pride in that, men are socialised to believe that women's pleasure is only what D. H. Lawrence decries as 'sex in the head,' an emotion that comes only from pleasing men. And it all originates from a culture that deviated from ancient Hindu myths and philosophies. As Goyal quotes Leena Abraham in her article and argues that

[i]n India, the main hurdle to talk about sex and sexuality is the notion that sexuality is corrupting the minds of the people, that it is a western concept and against our culture, despite a long and rich history of sexuality in writing, sculpture, and storytelling. Even knowing about sexuality, knowing one's body in its entirety, and acquiring more information about sexual relationships may lead to shame.... It is also somehow considered a man's terrain, as far as knowledge, practice or curiosity is concerned. (Goyal, 2017, p. 143)

But a notable feature of Ray's films is their focus on women's choices, which can be seen as a reflection of Ray's involvement in the Brahmo Samaj movement, which, as Saumitra Chakravarty (2011) explains,

was at the forefront of the social reform movements of the time. It was more egalitarian in worship than the Hindu religious order, allowed free mixing of the sexes in the prayer meetings, called for female education, widow re-marriage and the advancement of the age of marriage for girls.

Chakravarty provides a starting point for understanding Ray's treatment of gender with her perceptive analysis of Ray's differences from Tagore, in the film for which Ray is best known in the West, *The Home and the World*, which was adapted from Tagore's novel. Robinson writes, 'unlike most Bengali homes, Ray has no image of Rabindranath Tagore, who has influenced him and his father and grandfather more than anyone else. "Such a cliché!" he told me when I once mentioned it' (Robinson, 1989, p. 5). To be out of the charm of Tagore and not having an attitude of Tagore worshipping for a Bengali artist are something very significant. We understand this better when we see the subtle but surprising deviations of Ray's film, *The Home and the World*, from Tagore's novel and Tagore's essential spirits. In the 1964 film *Charulata* (Ray, 1964), which also depicts changes in the status of Indian women during the Bengal Renaissance at the turn of the nineteenth century, Ray depicts the emptiness of the life of Charu, a young married woman who gives vent to her sexual hunger in a passionate relationship with her husband's younger brother. The situation, as Vanita explains in the chapter 'Gender Language and Genre' is very common in *riti* and *rekhti* poetry, where we see 'a young wife attracting not only her husband but also his younger brother' (Vanita, 2005).

Both films focus on the changes in the status of Indian women during the 'Bengal Renaissance' at the turn of the nineteenth century. Chakravarty observes that both create 'portraits of lonely, sensitive, dissatisfied women locked away in ornate affluence in enormous Victorian mansions' and also notes that they are

especially poised to experience dissatisfaction due to their childlessness; which places them 'outside patriarchal stereotyping.' All of them come to our attention through their restless lives held static in stately country homes. This is certainly the situation of Bimala, the ill-fated protagonist of *The Home and the World*, who rebels against her husband Nikhil and the world of the convention he represents through an affair with his friend Sandip. In depicting Bimala's error, Ray is also reminiscent of women's attraction to the goddess role as Chakravarti says, 'Beguiled by Sandip, she believes herself to be an emblem of feminine *Sakti*/Power, which was part of the cult of the Mother Goddess introduced in the nineteenth century by the Hindu Revivalist movement,' and as such she takes on the nickname Queen Bee, 'an overtly sexual term indicating a woman's desire for multiple sexual gratifications.' Her support of the revolutionary movement Sandip leads (in a hypocritical manner) results in Nikhil's death in the riots Sandip causes. Both narratives depict Bimala realising directly before this tragedy that she has done wrong and returning to her marriage. But Ray, unlike Tagore, does not show the woman reconciling with her husband through submission to a traditional subordinate role. Instead, they reconcile through their sexual attraction to each other, dramatised by a passionate kiss. But passion does not protect the woman from the sexism of societal mores, as it seems to do in Tagore's novel, where, as Cooper argues, she attains 'a cathartic purification in her widowhood' through enforced chastity (Cooper, 2000, p. 96). Ray ends the film with an image of Bimala with the shorn head and white weeds worn by Hindu widows forced to retreat from pleasures of life, 'a victim of a history [and patriarchal tradition] that finally forces her to occupy a position neither at home nor in the world of her time' (Cooper, 2000, p. 96).

A related theme is taken up, also tragically, in Ray's film *Devi* (1960). The film beautifully portrays the dehumanisation of a woman through being worshipped as a goddess. It depicts a young childless wife, Doya, in nineteenth-century rural Bengal who lives with her husband's family while he is away at school. Due to his dream, her father-in-law, Kalikinkar, believes she is an avatar of the goddess Kali and must be worshipped. As the villagers also adopt this belief, she comes to believe it as well, which leads to her despair when she fails to save the life of her ailing nephew, whom she loves. The film focuses on the tension between the traditional father and his educated son, Umapasrad, who sees the father's belief as nonsensical. Ray clarifies that the deeper conflict is between the sublimation of the erotic into chaste spirituality and the truer spirituality of sexuality. Umapasrad tries to remind his wife that she is just a young woman and that they have been enjoying conjugal life for the last three years, but she is confused. She also realises that she should flee from the imposition of divinity, and in her body, she feels the call for normal sexual life (the secret meeting between husband and wife at night clearly shows that), but she is in a dilemma. Her body is with the husband, and her mind is with the tradition, blind faith, loyalty towards the father-in-law and the desire to fit into society. Her body and sexuality show her the right path to choose, but the system wins. Fear wins. Tradition wins. She goes back to being worshipped again, although her new position as a goddess makes her formerly loving nephew

uncomfortable with her and ends their easy pleasure in each other. Common joys of life come to us naturally, but our mind's complications that form an artificial system prevent them. The child's death completes the cycle of killing nature by nurture, destroying common natural beliefs and joys by artificial rules and diseased thoughts. Umapasrad accuses his father of killing the little boy without proper treatment because of his blind faith. Kalikinkar seems ruined physically and psychologically as well, and unable to accept the truth that he is mistaken in his beliefs. And 'unable to reckon with her lack of agency as either goddess or woman, Doya goes mad.'

Ganguly argues that the film is misunderstood as a critique of religion, as it is far more complex than that. She demonstrates that 'the film is as much about the fate of women as it is about the impasse in which belief finds itself, caught between the extremes of religious obsession and secular zeal, myth, and enlightenment.' She remarks that the film 'highlights the separation of the supernatural and the natural in secular thought' as tragic, particularly for women. Through the cross-cutting from 'the deep-focus tightly framed shots of a disoriented Doya seated in her temple to long shots of the utterly denuded countryside', we are shown that the domination of nature and the reduction of woman to a disembodied ideal are intrinsically related. Ultimately the film grapples with the need to return to and reinvent myth, not only for the good of humanity generally but to liberate women from a literary killing system. Perhaps this is one reason Ray ends his film, not as in the short story by Provatkumar Mukhopadhyay, with Doya hanging herself, but with her desperately running out into the sunlight. *Devi*, as we know, faced censorship problems in India until Nehru interceded and the film's export ban was lifted. Although, as Robinson writes, '[u]pon its release in India, *Devi* ran into a lot of trouble' as 'Devi was widely seen as an attack on Hinduism' (Robinson, 1989, p. 126), and about Indian censorship, he surprisingly notes that 'independent India retained all the rigidity of colonial India' (Robinson, 1989, p. 65).

Indian nationalist movement led by male Indian leaders during the British regime promoted the mother image of the country, and in doing so, they needed a social culture to be widely promoted where women are glorified as mothers, and deep respect for them is cultivated in the society. It helps the nationalist movement, on the one hand, by more participation of women in freedom fighting as they are respected as mothers by the male activists ensuring their sexual safety and people's intense trend to deify the mothers could be easily channelised into their love for their motherland and subsequent hatred towards the British rulers who 'rape' their motherland socially and economically. Datta, in her book on Ashapura Devi, mentions that feminism during pre-independent days emerged not as a separate category against men in the society but 'as an anti-colonial struggle when women (mostly of the middle class) fought for national independence alongside men' (Datta, 2015, p. 3). But that nationalist movement, led mainly by male leaders, did not allow the emergence of true female space apart from their motherly roles and thereby strengthened prevalent patriarchy in the colonised society. Basu mentions,

Gandhi was certainly no radical thinker of women's liberation; he was against women's gainful employment and preferred to be a moral other than an economic force in society ... since Gandhian organisations of ideology retained the conventional notions of feminine qualities, it has often been argued that women's participation in the freedom movement was an extension of their traditional role. (Basu, 1976, p. 7)

So over emphasised importance of motherhood on Indian women is empowering them socially and the Indian women, otherwise subjugated in all social roles, naturally get so fascinated about this social empowerment over men that they sacrifice the sexual pleasure (and the pleasure aspect of sex) to qualify for that role has not become a big deal. They somehow accept it. As also in Ray's *Devi*, we see the young woman finally refuse to flee with her husband and come back to the goddess role after much confusion. It only confirms the trend among Indian women that they love their social empowerment (only possible in mother/goddess role) so much that they willingly give up sexual pleasure. Bharati Ray argues that the position of a child bride in her family 'improved somewhat when she became the mother of a son, and assumed importance only when she became the *ginni* ["head of the domestic side of the household"], usually at an advanced age' (Ray, 1991, p. 5). And '[t]his is why nothing like the western feminist theory of motherhood as the principal source of women's bondage was (has been) developed in Bengal' (Ray, 1991, p. 19) as '[m]any a conventional notion was allowed to exist within the framework of new value system; religiosity and self-sacrifice remained intrinsic parts of the 'female' concept, extolled in literature by female authors like Anupama Devi and Nirupama Devi' (Ray, 1991, p. 20). So she shows why Indian women do not enjoy sexual pleasure fully and how the sexuality of women is not paid any importance in the patriarchal socio-economical structure of the Indian society, which I argue has its roots in overpowering colonialism down the centuries. The way colonialism must have impacted gender relations in India is that instead of experiencing the 'age of revolutions', which resulted in the beginnings of women's liberation as the result of the valorisation of individuality, autonomy and personal freedom, Indians were kept at the mercy of dictators, their colonial masters.

In *The Adversary* (1970), based on a Sunil Gangopadhyay's novel with the same name, Lotika, a professional nurse, the role played by Sefali, comes out of her bedroom and starts undressing in front of two men, smokes a cigarette wearing just a bra and asks one of the men to help her open the back hooks of her bra so she can take a shower. To highlight the sexual atmosphere of the room, by contrast, Ray adds a religious song in Hindi coming from outside and being heard mildly in the room and is intensified a bit, mainly when the nurse breaks the social taboos and does things that will shock men as women are not expected to do those things in Bengali as well as Indian culture, for example undressing in front of two men, smoking a cigarette and that too with men, asking men to light it, asking help to open the hook of her bra in her bathroom and above all showing positive intension to have sex (being sex-positive directly). The Hindi religious song is included as a diegetic sound in that scene, probably to remind the audience

of the sex positivity of the ancient Hindus as described in Hindu epics and myths. She is not a regular prostitute, is evident in the film, and has a full-time job as a nurse. In Ray's film, the protagonist struggles with the apparent antagonism between physical urges and the modern idealisation of individual agency. And here, too, nursing is a central metaphor. When he and his companions enter her room, the bold young woman is still in her nursing uniform. This again probably stimulates some subconscious thoughts in Siddhartha about nurses seeing life in all its hidden nakedness. Since Siddhartha himself is a dropout of medical college, he is well aware of the prosaic approaches of the medical profession towards life and human bodies. His fearful hesitation and natural shyness of a sexually starved virgin young Bengali man are confirmed when she starts undressing in front of two men and lets her long hair hang loosely (another conventional sex symbol in Indian cinema). That she is never hesitant and shy about showing her body is too bold an expression on her part for Siddhartha (as well as for Ray), and it increases his hesitation and uneasiness. Then she asks for a cigarette from them. A woman smoking in front of men is indicative of loose morals in India. The way she asks for a cigarette, and requests Siddhartha to light it while bending towards him (while she is half undressed and her breasts are so prominent in her bra), and blows in his face, probably to attract him sexually, are too much for Siddhartha (though they are very pleasing to his friend, Adinath) and were probably too much for the Bengali audience. Robinson writes '[a]s he reluctantly lights her cigarette, the image goes into negative, accompanied by some pulsating chords on an organ' (Robinson, 1989, p. 213). The image going negative can be compared to the beginning of the movie when the dead body of Siddhartha's father is bought out of their house for the funeral procession. The death of his father ruins the family financially and causes Siddhartha to have to give up medical college. So the shock and subsequent tragedy of Siddhartha's father's death is visually equated with the shock he gets by seeing a bold nurse asserting her sexuality. Since he is not emotionally prepared to have this nurse sexually, it is more of a shock than a balm to his suppressed sexuality. And it crosses its limit when the nurse invites Adinath to her bathroom to unfasten her bra and help her undress. Adinath goes to her, and Siddhartha can 'see' her leer at Adinath and can easily guess the reason for her leer. Her provocative smile in the bathroom galvanises Siddhartha into going out of the room as he cannot endure the sexual atmosphere of the room any longer.

The nursing association in Calcutta protested against Ray's portrayal of the nurse, who is shown experimenting with sexuality and even secretly accepting money from men in return for sexual favours (Robinson, 1989, p. 212). The organisation members' objection to the portrayal shows how common the view of nurses as immoral was, as they felt that Indian audiences could not see the nurse as an individual but instead would take her as representative of the nursing community. That Ray apologised to the nursing association for that portrayal only confirms his theme as essentially sex-positive. As Robinson also mentions that '[u]nfulfilled sexual desire is a constant theme of *The Adversary*' (Robinson, 1989, p. 212), and Ray shows it brilliantly as Siddhartha

waiting to cross the main road he spots well-built, sexy girl coming the other way between the traffic. Suddenly we were inside his head in a flashback: a lecturer is explaining the anatomy of the female breast to a lecture hall crowded with male and female medical students. (Robinson, 1989, p. 211)

In the film *Days and Nights in the Forest* (1970), Hari, a man from the city, invites Duli, a local Santali woman, into the deep forest where they can have sex. After their mutually pleasurable intercourse, Hari tries to pay her so she will come to him again. Much to his surprise, Hari discovers Duli already has all of his money because he unconsciously drops his purse on the ground during their intercourse. She could have taken all his money. But she gives him back his purse only to clarify that Hari, as a representative of urban civilisation, thinks of sex as a commodity to be purchased from women. In contrast, as a representative of India's ancient civilisation, she values real passion and does not allow money to encroach on it. Her return of the purse demonstrates her view that having sex for financial gain negates its power to transform us. Ray suggests that a natural connection with a woman outside of financial transactions can lead a man to a different consciousness, which is the elementary religion of our being.

The film, *The Big City* (1963) depicts a woman's struggle, Arati's, to become financially independent. First, she needs to fight the conventions of traditional Bengali society, her family, her husband and finally, her colleagues. Ray shows us the cultural chains she needs to break to stand on her own feet, and the movie celebrates the emergence of the type of new woman being called for by Indian feminists of the time. In Ray's film, Arati accepts the job of a door-to-door saleswoman to be financially supportive of her family, although her employment violates a social taboo.

Further, Arati being a homemaker creates a revolution in her family and society by taking a job as a saleswoman and wearing a see-through blouse out in the street. The exposure of her breasts is an act of liberation from bodily repression and shame. Previously we see Arati's cleavage and part of her breast when she is in bed with her husband, making the revolutionary decision that she will go out to work for the family. This partial nudity strongly symbolises the dramatic, taboo-breaking, change taking place in Arati's mind because, like the use of words forbidden by censors in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the inclusion of such images is revolutionary in Indian cinema, pushing to the very boundary of what the national censors would allow.

## Conclusion

Cooper includes in his study of Ray's films a section entitled 'In Praise of Satyajit Ray's Feminist Stance', in which he asserts that '[i]n the final analysis, it is fit to say that Satyajit Ray rescues his women by making them live in a state of authenticity, or what the existentialists called "good faith",' (Cooper, 2000, p. 133). Ray clearly states about his women in the *Cineaste Interviews* that reflect his 'own attitudes' and 'personal experience of women':



Although they are physically not as strong as men, nature gave women qualities which compensate for that fact. They are more honest, more direct, and by and large, they are stronger characters. I'm not talking about every woman, but the type of woman which fascinates me. The woman I like to put in my films is better able to cope with the situation than men. (Georgakas & Rubenstein, 1983, p. 383)

## Ray's Limitation

With that conviction and courage, Ray portrays his women to be sex-positive and, in that way, comes closer to the sex positivity of ancient Hinduism and Tantra. He probably believes that through sexual satisfaction for both sexes, the world can be saved from class conflict, consumer capitalism, and such horrors as environmental destruction. At the same time, indeed, Ray's films are not directly concerned with women's physical or sexual responses. Of course, in Ray's works, women fall in love and have sexual experiences, but orgasm, so central to Western Feminism, is not directly death with. That Ray did not dare to go too far in shocking his society is rooted in his genre: cinema. In his book, Ray himself writes about an Indian, specifically a Bengali film director,

[i]f his film did not bring back its cost, his backers would lose faith in him. And when one backer loses faith in a director, other backers tend to follow suit, resulting in no time the director finds himself branded as a bad risk.... *Avant-gardism* is a luxury which we cannot yet afford in our country. (Ray, 1976, p. 58)

A Bengali filmmaker has to mainly depend on a comparatively small market to get back the cost of the film since Bengali films generally have no larger market in the other states of India or abroad. Thus such films cannot be too far in advance of their times in depicting controversial subjects, particularly sexual ones and especially ones related to female sexuality, given the negative focus on female sexuality in almost all cultures and societies. But a film in Bengali can rebel delicately, showing small changes that society does not yet approve of. And Ray does this in many of his films. As Paganopoulos writes, 'Amartya Sen ... argued that Ray's sense of humanitarianism culturally challenges pre-conceived ideas of a European humanitarianism, which took the form of a "progressive" modernity'. He also argues that '[n]owadays, watching Ray's films, as set on the margins in between his Bengali identity, European education, and Indian culture reveal channels of communication between presumably "opposite" cultures, whilst questioning the Orientalist deduction between "East" and "West"' (Paganopoulos, 2020, p. 389). Ray takes as a subject the situation of women who are educated but unworldly, stuck in their large country homes with no life outside their minds. And he pushes the boundaries of what his society allows by depicting the expression of their sexuality as a way to get out of this essential frustration.

Victorian ideology contributed to the sexual and societal suppression of women in colonial and post-colonial India. And it is more important now because the new thing now added to that century's old hangover is the rise of religious

fundamentalism and the effort among politicians who support it to move India backward in terms of culture and education. Vanita argues in the conclusive chapter of her book that the 'British view of precolonial princes, poets, and their worlds as decadent became enshrined in the modern Indian nationalist imagination' (Vanita, 2012, p. 256). The political motive is to make the general public more intolerant of artworks supporting sexual freedom, particularly for women, and even our great past and heritage.

As a reminiscent of the Bengal Renaissance, Ray has resisted this fundamental aggression through his films, his superbly contemporary mind and his feminist stance, which is in perfect tune with the ancient Indian philosophies in their deepest spiritual sense. This article celebrates the spirit India cherished for centuries and recognised as of great value by Satyajit Ray, the most celebrated film-maker of India, and must serve as a small attempt to resist the recent political aggression and spread of false religious propaganda not only to degrade India's ancient and progressive philosophies in general but to minimise the space for personal freedom and all sorts of creative thoughts that necessarily need to be defiant.

So the article examines the ways women and gender roles are represented in a few of Ray's films, among others and aims at reconsidering Ray's women characters from an oblique angle of sex positivity that was part of ancient Indian philosophies, which rightly allows some forms of equality for women and how patriarchy and sexism rise slowly in colonial India and the contexts from which they spring from. Ray's women affirm the conflicts between the Victorian sexual morality and ancient Indian sex positivity, and we can see that his women are moving closer to a Hindu vision of life in which the point is not to become personally powerful but instead to bring things into balance by allowing/enjoying equity in sex and man-woman relationship. I seek to show in this article that the sex positivity of ancient India is rightly translated into Ray's films, which are ontologically Indian, adapted in Ray's ways, and it can resist to an extent the sexist societal mores in post-colonial India and recent religious fundamentalism as well, that supports a sexist system in which women are subordinated to the patriarchal society. What Ray did not live to see, but what his cinema anticipated was the continuation of these debates into the present day, as social changes brought contentions over the idea of women's equality to the forefront of Indian civilisation. The situation is changing as the conditions for women and men's attitudes are changing. Greater economic freedom for women, which in India so far affects only educated women in professional roles, and greater access to venues in which their voices are heard, from politics to the arts, are bringing women's desires into the open and creating opportunities for discussion of gender equity in sex, as in other areas of life.

### **Acknowledgement**

I thank my friend and postdoctoral mentor, Carol Siegel, for editing this article and helping shape my ideas.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The research is part of the author's Fulbright Postdoctoral Project (2018–2019) funded by USIEF (United States-India Educational Foundation).

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