

From Screen to Word: Modernity and Mitra's *Me, Sarbajaya*

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Abstract

This research article focuses on a piece of literature that has travelled all the way from a novel to its cinematic adaptation and again travelled back to literature. Satyajit Ray's phenomenal film *Aparajito* (1956), adapted from Bandyopadhyay's novel of the same name, has been one of the greatest adaptations of its time. This paper deals with Zinia Mitra's poem "Me, Sarbajaya," published in 2021 where I investigate the transfiguration of the character, Sarbajaya. In the poem, I intend to analyse how Mitra's Sarbajaya becomes a metaphor for modernity of the Other. There have been numerous research works done on cinematic adaptation, but this research is interested in how the reverse journey from screen to page has been crucial in adding a different dimension to the Apu Trilogy.

Keywords: Screen, gender, words, modernity, Sarbajaya.

Cinematic adaptation has been one of the significant manifestations of the multidimensionality, transculturation, and atemporality that literature holds. In Bengali, watching a 'boi' is the most popular and colloquially used synonym for watching a movie or cinema. Though unconsciously used most of the time now, the word 'boi' never fails to look back at the very form cinema had taken its core from, i.e., books. From Satyajit Ray to Vijay Anand to Kurosawa, they all had witnessed and experimented with the transformative journey of words from page to screen, from the imaginative to its visuals. This paper tries to trace this transfiguration of that very art from a cinema to a literary piece, as opposed to the existing and dominant concept of adaptation, investigating how this cinematic language is transcribed into words and what it loses and gains in the process. To analyse this literary adaptation of a cinema, this study is interested to analyse the poem "Me, Sarbajaya," published in 2021 by Zinia Mitra, and how this particular poem, adapted from Satyajit Ray's 1956 film *Aparajito* contributes or adds a new dimension to the famine of the Apu Trilogy or specifically to the character of Sarbajaya.

Bibhutibhushan Bandhopadhyay's *Aparajito* (1931), the second novel in the Apu Trilogy, was filmed by Satyajit Ray as *Aparajito* in 1956. Like most of his works, Ray's camera has never failed to uphold numerous insights into the existing literary works. Ray in *Aparajito* re-emphasizes the inherent co-existence between nature and human life and

problematizes the relation between a mother and son as the film gradually unravels through the characters of Apu and Sarbajaya. Ray has been nuanced about the conflict between Sarbajaya's character, who throughout her life served as an emblem of motherhood, and Apu, who aspired for a different life while growing up. But gradually, these two characters stem from each other as they develop different perceptions of life. When Apu had left home for getting admission in a college in Kolkata, Sarbajaya was left only with memories; memories of her beloved daughter, Durga, and her husband. The nature and its landscape became the only resort for Sarbajaya and served as a replica of the life she had spent together with her family in Nischindipur. Her unending longing for Apu and the expectation that one day Apu would come back and they would be settled, was disrupted by a sudden change in Sarbajaya's health. And towards the end of the film, we witness that Sarbajaya's urge to be with Apu never gets fulfilled and upon returning home, Apu could no longer see her mother who had already been passed away. The audience remains a witness to the conflict, as Ray never aspired for reconciliation or any indubitable truisms, and towards the end, it looks like a wide landscape bare of life. The character of Sarbajaya, throughout the film, remains stagnant and expectant and is sharply placed in contrast with the ambitious life of Apu. By excluding and incorporating numerous insights, Ray's *Aparajito* re-emphasized the intense complexity of the relationship between a widowed mother, Sarbajaya, and her highly aspirational son, Apu. The letter that Sarbajaya wanted to write to Apu appealing him to come back home to meet his physically ill mother, is the only cue that the poem in discussion, is left with. Further, this apparently moral binary never gets resolved throughout the film and we get to hear the silence (prevailed in the film) in the poem with the words slept with Sarbajaya.

Looking into the poem by Zinia Mitra, titled "Me, Sarbajaya" (2021), and its projection of the character Sarbajaya, it is of no conjecture that the poem transfigures Sarbajaya into someone who speaks for herself and has been given a voice. The letter she could not write to Apu, has witnessed all of her unutterable words, how she suffered, how, at times, she wanted Apu by her side, and how she experienced her death gradually. This clouded desire of Sarbajaya came alive on the page, replicating the sacrifices she had made throughout her life and during the absence of Apu. While the whole trilogy resonates with the Bildungsroman genre, Apu's coming of age, the character of Sarbajaya through the poem, leaves a new way to perceive modernity in the literary adaptation of the cinema.

Mitra's poem, in this research, is evaluated and analysed in the same context that *Aparajito* built its story upon, i.e., in the context of the post-independent Nehruvian vision of modern India. The metaphors in the film from the very beginning, the railway, the books given to Apu by his teacher in school, and the globe all indicate an urge for a life full of exploration, discovery, and thirst for novelty. The steady drive for modernity at various stages of life is even more significantly pronounced in the cinematic adaptations, mainly through the character of Apu. From this lens, Apu's life becomes a bildungsroman where we witness his journey from Nischindipur to Mansapota to the modern city, Calcutta. This is where Mitra's poem "Me, Sarbajaya" looks at Sarbajaya and her silence. Sarbajaya, to whom modernity had not reached, finds herself in the existence of nature, with the tradition of culture. If Apu signifies Modernity in Ray, then Mitra's Sarbajaya reads modernity as an allegory. Besides the trilogy's grand foci on Apu's struggle for existence in a 'modern' city like Calcutta, Mitra's poem turns to Sarbajaya, who was caught between her pride for her son and her decaying body, where the sole energy is to reverberate what is being unspoken in the film:

"Apu, this is the letter I never wrote to you

carrying a world of huff inside me" (Mitra, lines 1-2)

The poem takes the lens away from Apu's growing life and strengthens Sarbajaya's character by giving words to her silence. Mitra posits these contrasting worldviews side by side where readers remain pondered before the dominant theme of the film, i.e., modernity. The rails, one of the most essential metaphors of modernity that come repetitively in the trilogy, appeared to be the reason that "crushed" (Mitra, 9) the dreams of Sarbajaya. The "protective love" (Mitra, 13) of Sarbajaya seems to be a burden for Apu, which is why Apu felt immensely happy and free upon Sarbajaya's demise. As Mitra says in a personal interview:

“Trains may symbolize progression, but Apu’s family reveals the contrary. The train motif common to all three films points to the frightening reality that technology, that is the inevitable result of modernism, waits for none...the falsity of the dream of progression is amply demonstrated.” (4)

This poem marked a significant insight from the life of Apu and Sarbajaya, a conflict that is not resolved in the binary of modernity (represented through Calcutta), and the rural landscape where modernity has not 'reached'. The place where Sarbajaya lived with the entire ecosystem, "lived a happy life" (Mitra, 55), where the "green nostalgia" (Mitra, 55) could bring Apu back to her. The character of Sarbajaya becomes an emblem through which we see a Modern urge to be taken care of between love and sacrifice.

The discussion around the poem *Me, Sarbajaya* leads the audience to perceive the character of Sarbajaya differently, apart from her motherhood and familial concern. Sarbajaya, in the poem is given a voice, a voice of decision, a voice of expectation, a voice that talks about her gradually decaying body. Her writings to Apu follow a mother's anxiety and urge to be taken care of by her children. If, in the film, Apu represents modernity and modern thinking at the center of progress and development, Sarbajaya is more into the green nostalgia of life where she "lived" (55) a happy life. The conflict in the film that Ray emphasized, which was primarily densed with the widowed mother and Apu's freedom, is being followed in the poem where Sarbajaya does not see modernity in city life, in knowledge or education, but in her "protective love" (13) for Apu within their small family. She recurrently returns to the rural landscape where Apu grew up with the pond, the muddy road, the trees and tries eagerly to bring Apu back to her life.

The poem carries a sense and tone of lamentation. Sarbajaya speaks of her death in the poem, which carries less of a regret for not seeing her son before her death but more of a regret for her son, who, before seeing her mother for the last time, lost her on his way home. As a palimpsest of Ray's *Aparajito*, the poem sheds light on how a mother speaks out against a 'modern' world by emphasizing her needs, wishes, and expectations. By incorporating Sarbajaya's perspective through the poem, Ray's *The Apu Trilogy*—which, at that time, was essentially a hub of contemporary India that Nehru had dreamed of—becomes an allegory that offers us yet another window into modernity. If *Aparajito* by Satyajit Ray is a symbol of modernity, then Mitra questions that modernity in the poem from a feminine perspective—that is, the modernity that is not based on the elimination of feminine agency and desire or the absence of the Other, as it has always been. This is something that finds a resonance in Marshall Berman's book *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982): “The modern individual is assumed to be an autonomous male free of familial and communal ties” (56). Berman goes through a critique of equating of masculinity with modernity and femininity with tradition. Thus, if one's concerns, desires cannot be aligned with the dominant conception of Modernity, can they be simply (dis)placed outside of it? Here in lies the significance of asking the question through the poem: is Sarbajaya represents

modernity as much as Apu does? Is she a modern figure? Is it not to acknowledge that Sarbajaya comes up with a self-consciousness unparalleled in the depiction of Sarbajaya in Ray or in Bibhutibhushan? These are the questions that the poem "Me, Sarbajaya" gave birth to, where natural and timeless emotions hold sway with a recognition of the profoundly historical nature of private feelings. Referring to the multidimensional and contradictory nature of modernity and feminism in her book *The Gender of Modernity* (1995), Rita Felski states:

"Woman embodied a sphere of atemporal authenticity seemingly untouched by the alienation and fragmentation of modern life...that feminine values of intimacy and authenticity remain outside the dehumanizing and alienating logic of modernity...The history of the modern is thus not yet over; in a very real sense, it has yet to be written." (18)

Coming back to the language of art and its transculturality across various forms and mediums, it leaves various things behind in the pursuit of new things, it moulds itself in a new way to meet how far it can go. In that process, on the one hand it lingers onto the work it derives its inspiration from, on the other hand, it adapts itself in a new language to become a complete piece of art. As a result, when Satyajit Ray's *Aparajito* becomes a complete piece of art of its own through its cinematic language, through its exclusion and inclusion from the previous work, Mitra's Sarbajaya leaves many things behind and takes many things further to become a complete piece of art in itself. Thus, the expression of the 'abhimaan' or huff in Sarbajaya moves the 'POV' (cinematic term for 'Points of View' shot) of the Apu Trilogy, where the character is not "past, over, and concluded" with its creator, but "it continues, albeit in different forms." (cited in Mitra). And it continues with the poem "Me, Sarbajaya."

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