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NEGOTIATING MODERNITY: WOMEN'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN SATYAJIT RAY'S MAHANAGAR

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Abstract

Satyajit Ray's Mahanagar (The Big City, 1963) remains a pivotal work in Indian cinema for its nuanced exploration of women's social freedom during a period of profound socio-cultural transition. Set in 1960s Calcutta, the film narrates the story of Arati, a middle-class housewife who enters the workforce, thereby unsettling entrenched patriarchal structures and gender norms. This essay critiques Mahanagar as both a reflection of and a challenge to the dominant ideologies of its time, situating it within the historical context of postcolonial modernity and the contested entry of women into public labour. Drawing on feminist theories, particularly Judith Butler's concept of performativity and Nivedita Menon's insights into everyday subversion, the analysis foregrounds Arati's transformation from a reluctant worker to an ethical agent who resigns in solidarity with her Anglo-Indian colleague. Through close readings of key scenes—including the lipstick moment, Subrata's humiliation, and the climactic walk into the city—the essay argues that Ray employs cinematic realism to highlight the ethical and political implications of women's agency. Yet the film's humanism is not without limits: it privileges middle-class anxieties, neglects structural exploitation, and ultimately reaffirms the marital framework as the basis of female empowerment. The study concludes that Mahanagar embodies both the radical promise and the cautious conservatism of its time. As a cinematic text, it offers an invaluable lens for understanding how Indian modernity reconfigured gender relations, while leaving unresolved the question of whether women's emancipation could transcend the boundaries of class, respectability, and patriarchy.

Keywords: Satyajit Ray, Mahanagar, Women's Freedom, Patriarchy, Feminist Film Theory, Indian Cinema, Modernity.

Introduction

Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* (The Big City, 1963) stands as one of the most significant explorations of women's emancipation in Indian cinema. Set in Calcutta during the early 1960s, the film presents

the story of Arati, a middle-class housewife who takes a job as a saleswoman in response to her family's financial anxieties. Her decision destabilises entrenched hierarchies within her household, forcing both men and women to renegotiate gendered expectations of labour, autonomy, and respectability. While *Mahanagar* dramatises the emancipatory possibilities of female agency, it also reveals the fragility of these freedoms within a patriarchal order structured around class privilege and familial obligations. This essay offers a sustained critique of *Mahanagar* as a cinematic meditation on gender and social transformation in post-independence India. Drawing on feminist theorists such as Judith Butler, Nivedita Menon, and Laura Mulvey, it argues that *Mahanagar* both reflects and challenges the gender ideologies of its time. Arati's journey from reluctant housewife to confident ethical agent dramatises the possibilities of women's social freedom in 1960s India, even as Ray's humanist lens remains bounded by class and patriarchal constraints (Butler 45; Menon 98; Mulvey 14). I examine how Ray's realist style conveys the complexities of women's social freedom in 1960s India. Ray's film thus remains a critical text for feminist film analysis. It challenges viewers to confront the precariousness of women's agency, reminding us that the struggle for emancipation is never complete but always unfolding in the everyday negotiations of gender and power. The 1960s in India marked a moment of transition. The Nehruvian vision of modernisation, urban growth, and expanding education created new opportunities for women, particularly in metropolitan middle-class families. Yet, deep-rooted patriarchal structures continued to confine them to domestic spaces, with cultural anxieties linking women's public visibility to moral decline and Western influence (Chakrabarty 77).

Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* (The Big City, 1963), adapted from Narendranath Mitra's short story *Abataranika*, dramatises this tension by chronicling the journey of Arati, a middle-class housewife who steps into the public sphere as a working woman. The analysis situates the film within its socio-historical moment, examines its representation of patriarchy, explores its cinematic form, and assesses both its emancipatory vision and its blind spots. In examining *Mahanagar*, it becomes clear that Ray offers a subtle but radical exploration of women's empowerment, understood not only as economic independence but also as moral agency and the reconfiguration of gender relationships. This essay argues that *Mahanagar* disrupts the

patriarchal domestic order, foregrounds women's ethical agency, and envisions marriage as a partnership rather than a hierarchy.

Reading the film through feminist theory (Butler, Gender Trouble 45; Butler, Undoing Gender 91; Mulvey 14) and South Asian gender studies (Chatterjee 130; Chakrabarty 77), Butler's theory of performativity, Chatterjee's insights on the gendered nation, and Mulvey's critique of the male gaze, we can see *Mahanagar* as a film that locates empowerment not in isolation but in interdependence. The final image of Arati and Subrata hand in hand epitomises this reconfiguration: a vision of modern Indian marriage grounded in dignity, solidarity, and hope. Recent scholarship enriches this reading. Begum interprets symbols such as lipstick and the bra as contested markers of feminine agency (Begum 52), while Basu situates Arati's journey within the "double burden" of women's paid and unpaid labour (Basu 117). The Sen's study underscores the political resonance of Arati's solidarity (Sen 2009), and contemporary feminist commentaries affirm the film's enduring relevance (Smith 60-75; Rao 22-35).

Historical and Social Context: 1960s India and Gender Relations

Post-independence India was marked by both optimism and contradiction. The 1960s in India marked a period of transition characterised by urban expansion, rising middle-class aspirations, and debates over modernity. Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of modernity emphasised industrialisation, urban growth, and women's education, yet patriarchal traditions persisted strongly (Chakravarti 579). For middle-class families in Bengal, women's entry into the workforce was seen as disruptive to ideals of domestic respectability (Sangari and Vaid 12). Calcutta, where *Mahanagar* is set, was at the epicentre of these transformations. As Partha Chatterjee observes, Indian nationalism had constructed a "new woman" who embodied spiritual purity while remaining confined to the domestic sphere (Chatterjee 130). By the 1960s, however, economic pressures and urban life made it increasingly necessary for women to participate in wage labour. This movement challenged the patriarchal separation of the private and public spheres.

Mahanagar captures this transitional moment. Arati begins working not out of feminist conviction but from necessity, when her husband's income proves insufficient. This reflects what Sangari and Vaid describe as "compulsory modernity," in which economic pressures force women into new roles that challenge patriarchal expectations (Sangari and Vaid

15). In showing Arati's transformation from reluctant breadwinner to confident agent, Ray situates the domestic sphere within larger debates on modernisation, gender, and respectability. Arati's decision to seek employment represents more than financial necessity: it embodies the anxieties and contradictions of a society negotiating modernity. The middle-class household in *Mahanagar* reflects what Uma Chakravarti terms "Brahmanical patriarchy," where women are both subordinated and valorised as custodians of family honour (Chakravarti 42). Arati's entry into the workforce disrupts this ideology, producing both resistance and transformation within her family. As Menon notes, the postcolonial period saw "contested negotiations of women's autonomy within the middle-class household," making female agency a deeply political question (Menon 47).

Women's roles during this period were deeply contested. While nationalist discourse had often celebrated the figure of the "new woman" as a symbol of progress, actual opportunities for women were limited by patriarchy, class, and cultural expectations. Partha Chatterjee famously argued that Indian nationalism divided the world into two spheres: the material/outer domain of the world (associated with men, work, politics, and science) and the spiritual/inner domain of the home (associated with women, purity, and tradition) (Chatterjee 132). Postcolonial India inherited this dichotomy, reinforcing the notion that women's place was primarily domestic, even as modernisation demanded their participation in the labour force (Chatterjee 132). In Bengal, this tension was particularly acute. On one hand, the *bhadralok* (urban middle-class) prided itself on liberal values, education, and engagement with global modernity. On the other hand, it clung to conservative notions of gender respectability, often stigmatising women who worked outside the home as symbols of economic failure or cultural decline (Sangari and Vaid 12). Against this backdrop, *Mahanagar* dramatises the contradictions of a middle-class family forced to reconcile ideals of tradition with the imperatives of survival.

Ray himself was acutely aware of these tensions. Unlike his rural-centred Apu Trilogy, *Mahanagar* turns its lens on the urban family under stress, exploring how economic precarity and cultural conservatism collide with the pressures of modern life (Seton 243). Arati's decision to work is not framed as a political act but as an economic necessity, which gradually transforms into a journey of self-

realisation and ethical agency. This mirrors broader historical realities: women in 1960s India often entered the workforce reluctantly, propelled by family crises rather than feminist consciousness, but their participation nonetheless destabilised patriarchal norms (Menon 47). From a social science perspective, then, *Mahanagar* can be read as both document and critique: a document of the socio-economic pressures shaping urban middle-class households, and a critique of the gender ideologies that sought to confine women to the private sphere despite these realities (Chakravarti 582).

Economic Context of Bengal in the Early 1960s and Its Reflection in Mahanagar

The period in which *Mahanagar i*s set—post-independence Bengal of the early 1960s—was marked by significant economic and social transitions. India was navigating a planned economy under its Second Five-Year Plan (1956–1961), with emphasis on industrialisation and public sector development (Chaudhuri 112–14). Bengal, historically an industrial and commercial hub, faced the dual pressures of rapid urbanisation and the decline of traditional industries such as jute, textiles, and shipping, which had been the backbone of its economy during the colonial period (Bandyopadhyay 327–29). The middle-class milieu depicted in *Mahanagar* reflects these economic pressures. Arati's family belongs to the urban middle class, where income from government jobs or small commercial enterprises often dictates the family's social standing and security. Arati's decision to enter the workforce is a response to financial necessity and a marker of changing social norms. Her husband, Subrata, works in a secure but modest position, and the family's economic stability is precarious—a reflection of the limited opportunities and inflationary pressures of the time (Chakravarti 582).

Ray's portrayal of the urban marketplace, offices, and department stores in Kolkata subtly communicates the nascent consumer culture emerging in post-independence Bengal. The department store where Arati works, selling Western-style products and catering to urban middle-class women, symbolises both economic modernity and the entry of women into the labour market, challenging traditional gender roles (Sharma 148–50). The film also highlights the economic marginalisation of women before such employment, emphasising how their labour was undervalued despite its necessity for the household's financial survival (Menon 47).

Moreover, the interactions between different social classes—clerks, managers, and shop assistants—illustrate the hierarchical nature of employment and wages. Ray subtly critiques the gendered dimensions of economic participation: women like Arati must negotiate both societal expectations and financial imperatives, illustrating how economic conditions intersect with evolving gender norms ("FIPRESCI-India"). In essence, *Mahanagar* does more than narrate a domestic story; it captures the tension of a transitional urban economy in Bengal, highlighting the pressures on middle-class families and the broader implications of economic modernisation for women's agency. Arati's employment symbolises both financial necessity and social change, reflecting the intersection of economic and gender dynamics in early 1960s Bengal (Chaudhuri 118; Sharma 155).

Patriarchy, Male Anxiety, and Family Dynamics

One of the most compelling dimensions of *Mahanagar* is its exploration of how Arati's empowerment generates male anxiety within a patriarchal family system. Ray does not demonise his male characters, but he reveals how deeply ingrained gender hierarchies are destabilised when women step into public roles. The most obvious site of tension is Subrata, Arati's husband. Initially supportive of her decision to work, his encouragement soon gives way to unease when her success begins to overshadow his own insecure position as a bank employee. His sense of masculinity—tied to the role of breadwinner—is threatened by Arati's earnings and growing confidence. When he loses his job, the reversal is stark: the family becomes dependent on Arati, a scenario that both unsettles and emasculates him. Subrata's discomfort exemplifies what R. W. Connell calls the crisis of hegemonic masculinity, where men's traditional authority erodes in the face of changing gender dynamics (Connell 76–81). When Subrata borrows money from Arati, his discomfort illustrates the inversion of patriarchal roles. The domestic tension dramatises how women's financial independence destabilised the ideological division between breadwinning men and dependent women (Menon 48).

The domestic sphere in *Mahanagar* mirrors broader patriarchal structures. Arati's father-in-law, a retired schoolteacher, embodies orthodox morality, condemning women's employment as degradation. His disapproval reflects Brahmanical patriarchal ideology, which historically confined women's respectability to the home (Chakravarti 582). His stance reflects the generational conservatism of a society

in transition, where the elderly often policed women's conduct to safeguard cultural values. His character embodies what Partha Chatterjee described as the "inner domain" of nationalist patriarchy: the belief that women must preserve spiritual and cultural purity by remaining within the home (Chatterjee 130–34). The mother-in-law, however, provides a subtler counterpoint. While not actively supportive, she acknowledges the household's dependence on Arati's income and softens her resistance over time. This ambivalence reflects the complicated position of older women, who both enforced patriarchy and, as beneficiaries of younger women's labour, occasionally recognised its contradictions.

What gives *Mahanagar* its distinctive strength is the way Ray transforms household tensions into a reflection of broader social change. The home, often imagined as a sanctuary of stability, is instead depicted as a space of negotiation, where gender roles are questioned and reshaped in everyday interactions. Arati's use of lipstick becomes a flashpoint for family conflict, embodying both the promise of modern self-expression and the stigma of impropriety, illustrating how even minor gestures can destabilise entrenched hierarchies (Butler 191). At the same time, Ray resists casting men as simple oppressors. Subrata's anxieties are portrayed with compassion, underscoring how patriarchal systems restrict men as much as they confine women (Nandy 45). The film's closing image—husband and wife stepping into an uncertain future together—suggests the emergence of a new kind of relationship, one built on mutuality rather than dominance (Menon 48).

Arati's growing confidence destabilises the household. Her father-in-law perceives her work as a violation of traditional gender roles. At the same time, Subrata, initially supportive, grows insecure when he loses his job and becomes financially dependent on her. This dynamic reflects what D. Basu calls the "double burden": while women assume both paid and unpaid labour, men struggle to accommodate shifting power dynamics within the family (Basu 214). Arati's empowerment coincides with the erosion of Subrata's authority. In one scene, he must borrow money from his wife's salary, a humiliation that destabilises his patriarchal position. Subrata's discomfort reflects what Ashis Nandy describes as the "crisis of masculinity" in postcolonial India, where men's authority was challenged by new social and economic realities (Nandy 7–8). Subrata, Arati's husband, initially supports her work but quickly reveals ambivalence. When he loses his job, his dependence on Arati's income destabilises his masculine identity. The

scene where he reluctantly borrows money from her captures this tension. His humiliation is not economic alone but existential—his role as patriarchal provider is undermined. Nivedita Menon describes such moments as revealing the "fragility of masculinity under conditions of social change" (Menon 48).

Arati's transformation produces palpable male anxiety. Subrata fears displacement, particularly when he loses his bank job. Yet, Ray resists demonising him. Subrata's anxiety intensifies when he loses his job, but Ray resists portraying him as an antagonist. Instead, he embodies the transitional subject of postcolonial modernity (Chakrabarty). This dynamic exemplifies what Dipesh Chakrabarty describes as the "transitional modernity" of postcolonial India: tradition and modernity do not replace each other but coexist in tension (Chakrabarty 50–52). Subrata embodies this tension—anxious but capable of learning. The climactic scene of Arati and Subrata walking hand in hand signifies the resolution: patriarchal hierarchy gives way to partnership. In Laura Mulvey's terms, Ray resists the male gaze that objectifies women; instead, the camera lingers on Arati as subject, while Subrata becomes her companion, not her controller (Mulvey 11).

Women, Work, and Social Freedom in Mahanagar

At its heart, Mahanagar tells the story of Arati's transformation from a traditional housewife into a woman who discovers both financial independence and ethical agency through her entry into paid work. Her journey reflects the broader social and cultural shifts of post-independence India, when women's participation in the workforce—though still limited—began to unsettle long-standing gender norms (Chakravarti 579). Arati initially takes up a job as a saleswoman out of economic necessity, since her husband Subrata's modest bank salary cannot sustain the household. What begins as a strategy for survival, however, evolves into a process of self-realisation, as she acquires new skills, confidence, and the ability to navigate spaces beyond the domestic sphere. Ray underscores this transformation through symbolic gestures: Arati's application of lipstick or her growing proficiency in sales are not mere acts of vanity but signs of her expanding social identity (Butler 191). From a social science perspective, this trajectory resonates with Amartya Sen's "capability approach," which emphasises the freedom to pursue lives one has reason to value (Sen 87). Arati's work broadens her capability set, granting her dignity, autonomy, and moral responsibility.

From a social science perspective, this shift can be linked to Amartya Sen's concept of "capabilities"—the freedom to live the life one values (Sen 87). While initially constrained, Arati's new role enhances her "capability set," enabling her to pursue dignity, choice, and moral responsibility. Importantly, Ray avoids simplistic triumphalism. The empowerment is fragile, contested, and embedded in family tensions. Arati cannot fully assert her independence without destabilising her marriage, but the film insists that true modernity requires such renegotiation. Rather than portraying patriarchy as monolithic, Ray shows it as a fragile system, vulnerable to shifts in economic and emotional dependency. Thus, *Mahanagar* critiques patriarchy not through open rebellion but through the quiet unsettling of gender roles. By foregrounding male anxiety alongside female empowerment, it portrays social change as uneven, fraught, and deeply relational—reflecting the realities of 1960s Indian middle-class life. This complexity aligns with Ray's humanist style, where even antagonistic positions are portrayed with empathy (Seton 243).

Arati's work also highlights the intersection of gender and class. Middle-class women like her were entering modern workplaces in small numbers during the 1960s, often in low-paying, feminised sectors such as sales, teaching, or clerical jobs. As Lipi Begum notes, Ray's film captures the anxieties surrounding women's entry into such spaces: the family fears dishonour, colleagues' subject women to scrutiny, and consumer culture itself positions the working woman as both modern and morally ambiguous (Begum 72–74). In this sense, Arati's story is not simply about liberation but also about the ambivalent cultural construction of women's work.

The film further dramatises the double burden that working women face. Arati continues to shoulder domestic responsibilities, while her in-laws and husband struggle to adjust to the reversal of economic roles. Sociologist Nivedita Menon argues that feminist politics in India must account for such negotiations, where empowerment often occurs within the structures of family rather than in opposition to them (Menon 48). *Mahanagar* embodies this tension: Arati's empowerment is relational, unfolding within the emotional, ethical, and economic networks of her household.

Yet Ray also imbues Arati's arc with a quiet radicalism. Her solidarity with Edith, her Anglo-Indian colleague dismissed due to cultural prejudice, expands her agency from personal survival to

ethical protest. Here, empowerment is reframed as not only about individual gain but also about justice, empathy, and social equality. This is particularly striking because it links women's liberation to broader struggles against discrimination, making Arati's character a vehicle for imagining a more inclusive modernity. In fact, *Mahanagar* portrays women's work in 1960s India as both a necessity and a site of emancipation. Ray's narrative suggests that social freedom is not an abstract ideal, but rather something negotiated through everyday acts—earning, speaking, and protesting—that gradually reconfigure gender relations in the family and society.

Arati's work as a saleswoman symbolises both continuity and rupture. Sewing machines are associated with women's domestic labour, but selling them requires entering public spaces. Her gradual adoption of makeup and lipstick illustrates Judith Butler's argument that gender is "a stylised repetition of acts" performed in relation to social norms (Butler 191). These small acts are radical within the conservative family setting. Her in-laws perceive them as threatening, while her husband oscillates between support and discomfort. This dramatises how women's paid labour destabilised familial and social structures in 1960s India. As Uma Chakravarti notes, patriarchal systems often sought to "re-domesticate" women who strayed beyond traditional boundaries (Chakravarti 582). Arati's work becomes more than a financial necessity—it becomes the site where she negotiates her subjectivity.

Contradictions characterised the decade after independence. On one hand, women entered universities and clerical jobs in greater numbers; on the other, cultural norms continued to valorise the ideal of the devoted housewife. As Partha Chatterjee argues, nationalist discourse divided the "home" as spiritual and feminine from the "world" as material and masculine, producing a cultural expectation that women embody tradition while men engage in modernity (Chatterjee 130–34). *Mahanagar* situates itself within this ideological tension. Arati's decision to work emerges not from ambition but from economic necessity—her husband Subrata's meagre income cannot sustain the extended family. This framing reflects a common reality of the 1960s: women's entry into the workforce was often tolerated only as a response to crisis. Yet Ray uses this premise to reveal how even reluctant participation in the public sphere opens pathways to freedom.

Arati's Entry into Work: From Necessity to Selfhood

Arati's decision to seek employment as a saleswoman is initially driven by economic strain. Subrata's modest bank salary cannot sustain the joint family, especially with his younger sister's education costs. This reflects what Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid term "compulsory modernity," where material conditions rather than ideological commitment push women into public work (Sangari and Vaid 15). Yet once Arati steps outside the home, the film carefully traces her gradual transformation. The act of selling sewing machines, a domestic tool, symbolises the blurred boundary between traditional femininity and modern economic activity. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is useful here: Arati's adoption of makeup, lipstick, and confident speech illustrates how gender is reiterated and reconstituted in new contexts (Butler 191).

The famous scene of Arati applying lipstick before the mirror is emblematic. The camera lingers as she hesitantly experiments with her appearance, shifting from embarrassment to pride. This is not mere vanity but a visual assertion of individuality. In a society where women were expected to remain invisible outside the home, the act of marking her face becomes an assertion of presence. As Sukanta Chaudhuri observes, "Ray's lens allows the ordinary gesture of putting on lipstick to become charged with the weight of modernity and selfhood" (Chaudhuri 134). Arati's employment as a saleswoman selling sewing machines marks a decisive rupture. Initially nervous, she gradually gains confidence, adopting modern markers such as lipstick. In a key scene, Arati applies lipstick for the first time before work, a gesture that unsettles her conservative family. This moment illustrates Butler's notion of gender performativity: Arati reconstitutes her identity through acts of self-presentation that disrupt the domestic script assigned to her (Butler 191). As she gains confidence in her job, she also develops a new sense of individuality that extends beyond the household.

Ethical Agency and Feminist Solidarity

While *Mahanagar* is often discussed in terms of women's economic empowerment, its deeper significance lies in how it links individual freedom to ethical responsibility and solidarity. Arati's transformation is not merely personal; it extends into a moral stance against injustice, revealing Ray's nuanced vision of social freedom. The Arati–Edith

friendship is also symbolically significant. Edith, often portrayed as "Westernised" within Indian films, is not demonised but humanised. As Sukanta Chaudhuri notes, their relationship suggests that "modernity produces solidarities across cultural boundaries rather than erasing them" (Chaudhuri 137). In this sense, Arati's agency is forged not in isolation but through relational bonds with other marginalised women. The turning point comes with the dismissal of Edith, Arati's Anglo-Indian colleague. Edith is penalised not for incompetence but for her identity—her "westernised" manners, English-speaking background, and minority status make her a target of prejudice in a workplace dominated by cultural conservatism. When Arati protests against Edith's unfair dismissal, she takes a decisive ethical stand, resigning from her job in solidarity. This moment shifts the narrative from economic necessity to moral courage, reframing empowerment as not only about survival but also about justice.

From a feminist theoretical lens, this act embodies what Judith Butler describes as performative agency—Arati's resistance is enacted through speech and gesture that redefine her social position (Butler 1990, 191). By walking away from the security of her income, she asserts a form of freedom that is neither reducible to economic gain nor confined by familial duty. It is a radical act of saying "no" to injustice, even at personal cost. This solidarity is significant in two ways. First, it challenges the cultural chauvinism of postcolonial Indian society, which often marginalised minorities like the Anglo-Indian community despite its rhetoric of inclusivity. Arati's refusal to participate in Edith's exclusion represents a broader critique of parochial nationalism. Second, it demonstrates a model of feminist ethics rooted in care, empathy, and relational responsibility. Rather than pursuing empowerment solely for herself, Arati extends her agency outward, aligning with another marginalised woman. The Anglo-Indian colleague's firing foregrounds the precariousness of women in the workplace. Arati's decision to resign highlights her evolution from pragmatic worker to ethical agent. This echoes Ravi Vasudevan's claim that Indian melodrama often uses "domestic crises to frame larger social conflicts" (Vasudevan 211).

Ray's framing of this moment is crucial. The resignation is not dramatised with melodrama or grand speeches; instead, it is rendered with quiet intensity. This restraint underscores Ray's belief in humanist realism, where transformation occurs through everyday choices rather

than heroic gestures. Yet the understated style should not obscure the radicalism of the act. In a patriarchal and hierarchical society, Arati's solidarity is a powerful declaration that women's freedom must be collective, not isolated. Film scholars like Chandak Sengoopta argue that *Mahanagar* exemplifies Ray's belief in the "moral growth of the individual" as the foundation for social progress (Sengoopta 156). In this sense, Arati's protest anticipates later feminist discourses in India that link personal empowerment to larger struggles against inequality (Menon 48). The film thus operates as both social commentary and ethical pedagogy, inviting audiences to imagine empowerment as inseparable from solidarity.

This act exemplifies what Nivedita Menon terms "subversive politics," where resistance emerges not in overt rebellion but in everyday gestures that disrupt authority (Menon 92). Arati's resignation affirms that women's empowerment is not limited to financial autonomy but includes ethical responsibility and solidarity. This scene resonates with Menon's argument that feminism in India often arises through "everyday acts of subversion" rather than grand revolutions (Menon 92). Arati's resignation demonstrates solidarity across class and community lines, positioning her as more than a passive participant in modernity. Yet Ray also frames this choice as risky: by leaving her job, Arati re-enters the uncertainty of unemployment, relying again on her husband. The act affirms her moral independence but simultaneously reinscribes her dependency on the family structure. Here, empowerment is redefined: not the ability to earn but the freedom to act on principle. This aligns with Judith Butler's later work on agency as the capacity to "act otherwise" within constraining norms (Butler 15).

Cinematic Form and Realism

Ray's cinematic style enhances the film's social critique. His use of natural lighting, long takes, and intimate close-ups aligns with André Bazin's theory of realism, which emphasises ambiguity and moral complexity (Bazin 36). The camera lingers on Arati's face as she navigates moments of hesitation and resolve, inviting viewers to identify with her interiority. His neorealist techniques—long takes, natural light, restrained acting—lend authenticity to urban life. Unlike commercial films that sensationalise women's work, Ray embeds it within everyday textures. The sound design is particularly striking. The whir of sewing machines and the noise of Calcutta streets create

an auditory realism that situates Arati's story within the larger cityscape. This emphasises that her struggle is not isolated but part of a broader social transformation. Arati's first application of lipstick is a quiet moment of emancipation. The act unsettles her conservative family but marks her internal shift from dutiful housewife to self-conscious worker. The mirror functions as both a literal reflection and a metaphorical self-recognition, echoing Judith Butler's view of gender as performative inscription (Butler 191).

The climactic scene—Arati and Subrata walking into the bustling city after she resigns—epitomises this realism. The couple's uncertain future is underscored by the anonymity of the urban crowd. The city becomes both a site of danger and possibility, symbolising the precarious freedoms of women in modern India. Laura Mulvey's notion of the "male gaze" is partly useful here: Ray, as a male auteur, frames Arati through his perspective. Yet unlike mainstream cinema that objectifies women, Ray grants Arati subjectivity. The camera dwells on her thoughts and choices rather than fetishising her body. While not feminist in origin, Ray's humanism allows space for feminist readings (Chaudhuri 145).

Limitations and Blind Spots

Despite its progressive vision, Mahanagar has limitations that reflect Ray's positionality and class focus.

Middle-Class Lens

Arati's story is presented as exceptional, though working-class women in India had long been wage earners. Ray universalises the middle-class anxiety about women's work (Sangari and Vaid 23).

Silence on Structural Exploitation

The film highlights ethical dilemmas but glosses over material exploitation—low pay, harassment, lack of security—that defined women's labour (Chaudhuri 142).

Intersectional Silences

Apart from Edith, the film avoids caste and religious dimensions of women's oppression, though these are central in India (Chakravarti 581).

Dependence on Marriage

The ending emphasises reconciliation with Subrata, suggesting women's empowerment remains tethered to marital harmony. As Nivedita Menon observes, Indian cinema often struggled to imagine women outside family frameworks (117).

The Female Gaze in Mahanagar

Satyajit Ray's 1963 film *Mahanagar* (The Big City) offers a nuanced exploration of female subjectivity and empowerment within the social and familial structures of mid-20th-century Kolkata. Central to this exploration is the character of Arati, a middle-class housewife who enters the workforce to support her family. By framing the narrative largely from Arati's perspective, Ray creates a cinematic space in which the female gaze becomes central, allowing audiences to experience her psychological and emotional journey rather than viewing her solely as an object within the narrative (Auto Machination; Shuddhashar). One of the most striking uses of the female gaze in the film occurs in a scene where Arati hesitates over whether to sign her name with a "Z" or a "J." While seemingly trivial, this moment symbolises her struggle for autonomy and self-definition within a patriarchal domestic environment. Subrata, her husband, casually suggests, "Use Z, as in the first letter of 'zoo,'" reflecting the societal tendency to trivialise women's choices (Ghosh 142). Ray, however, frames the scene from Arati's perspective, emphasising her silent deliberation and the weight of personal decision-making. This alignment with her internal experience is emblematic of the female gaze, which prioritises her subjectivity over the male-centric societal lens (Homegrown).

Visual motifs throughout the film further reinforce Arati's evolving selfhood. The act of applying lipstick before leaving the house, for example, functions as a symbol of her growing confidence and reclamation of femininity in the public sphere (Mukherjee 59). Similarly, a brief sequence in which Arati is alone in the bathroom, contemplating her reflection, offers a rare and intimate glimpse of her desires, aspirations, and autonomy free from external judgment (Chatterjee 92). Such moments provide the audience with access to her private world, a core aspect of the female gaze, which seeks to represent women as subjects rather than objects (Feminism in India; FIPRESCI-India).

Ray employs spatial dynamics to foreground Arati's subjectivity. In scenes where she moves through the crowded streets and busy

workplaces of Kolkata, the camera frequently tracks her from within the flow of urban life, aligning the audience with her perspective. This cinematic strategy conveys both her apprehension and her emerging confidence, allowing viewers to experience the city as she does, within the limits imposed by patriarchal society (Chaudhuri 134). Ray's use of natural lighting and long takes further anchors this realism, in line with Bazin's emphasis on cinema's ability to capture ambiguity and the textures of lived experience (Bazin 35). The film's focus on Arati's gaze extends beyond her personal empowerment to interrogate gendered hierarchies within the family. Her decision to work destabilises the authority of her husband, Subrata, whose initial condescension and insecurity give way to dependence as her earnings become essential. By the conclusion, the couple is depicted walking side by side, a symbolic gesture of equality. Yet it is Arati's journey that frames the narrative, underscoring her centrality as subject (Menon 92).

Through narrative alignment, spatial framing, and symbolic gesture, Mahanagar presents Arati not as an object of observation but as an active agent negotiating and reshaping her world. In this sense, Ray resists the conventions of the male gaze (Mulvey 14), offering instead a cinematic vision that anticipates feminist film theory while also situating women's agency within the complex realities of postcolonial Indian society.

Limitations of Ray's Humanism

While *Mahanagar* critiques patriarchal norms, it also exhibits limitations. First, the film's focus on a middle-class household obscures the realities of working-class women, who have long been part of the labour force without the same recognition. As Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid argue, Indian feminism must account for the intersection of class, caste, and gender (Sangari and Vaid 23). Arati's empowerment is framed primarily as a middle-class crisis rather than a structural feminist issue. Second, the film ultimately reaffirms the marital framework as the foundation of Arati's empowerment. Her solidarity with Edith is powerful, yet the narrative resolves with her reconciliation with Subrata. As Chidananda Das Gupta observes, Ray's humanism is cautious: it recognises women's desire for freedom but resists imagining a world where that freedom exists outside patriarchal institutions (Das Gupta 45). *Mahanagar* challenges patriarchal confinement by reimagining gender as a relational, ethical, and negotiated concept. Through Arati's evolution, Ray destabilises

domestic hierarchies, critiques male anxieties, and envisions empowerment through solidarity and partnership. By integrating feminist film theory (Mulvey 14; Butler 25), postcolonial thought (Chatterjee 579; Chakrabarty 200), and recent feminist readings of Ray (Begum 112; Basu 87), we can see the film as a meditation on transitional modernity. Its final image—Arati and Subrata walking hand in hand—epitomises the possibility of a more egalitarian future, one rooted not in escape but in shared dignity and interdependence.

Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* extends beyond the simple narrative of a housewife entering the workforce. It operates as a layered reflection on empowerment, portraying it as a progression from economic necessity to ethical responsibility, from silence to voice, and from rigid hierarchy to partnership. Arati's journey illustrates that empowerment is not a sudden act of defiance but a gradual process of transformation shaped by daily choices and relationships (Chakravarti 582). By the conclusion of the film, Arati has not only moved physically from the confines of her home into the bustling city but has also claimed her own agency. In this transformation, she represents the emergence of the modern Indian woman—financially engaged, socially conscious, and morally self-determined (Sen 87; Menon 92). For these reasons, *Mahanagar* endures as one of cinema's most profound explorations of women's empowerment, both within the Indian context and on the global stage (Seton 243).

Mahanagar is a film of paradoxes: it both celebrates and contains women's freedom, both disrupts and reaffirms middle-class patriarchy. Arati's journey reflects the uncertainties of a society caught between tradition and modernity. Through her, Ray portrays how small gestures—lipstick, solidarity, resignation—carry radical implications for gender and ethics. Its power lies in its realism, subtlety, and humanism. Its limitations remind us of the partiality of all representations, shaped by class, authorship, and historical context. For feminist film studies, Mahanagar remains a crucial text: a cinematic meditation on women's agency that is both progressive and bounded, timeless yet historically specific.

Conclusion

Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* (1963) remains a landmark in Indian cinema not only for its narrative of a woman stepping out of the domestic sphere but also for its nuanced exploration of the shifting gender

relations in 1960s Calcutta. By tracing Arati's journey from hesitant housewife to ethically empowered individual, the film captures a moment when India's urban middle class was renegotiating its values in the face of modernity, economic necessity, and women's growing visibility in public life. The film's enduring strength lies in its humanist subtlety. Ray refrains from overt didacticism, instead weaving social critique into everyday gestures, silences, and interactions. Arati's protest against Edith's dismissal, her negotiations with Subrata, and her tentative embrace of independence all reveal that empowerment is not a single act but a series of ethical choices made within constraint. In this way, Ray anticipates later feminist theories that link personal freedom to collective solidarity and moral responsibility.

At the same time, *Mahanagar r*eflects its historical and social limitations. Its middle-class focus leaves little space for working-class or rural women, whose labour had long shaped Indian society. The absence of caste and religious complexities further narrows its lens. Yet these silences do not erase their significance; rather, they remind us that representations of women's freedom are always partial, situated, and contested. As a cinematic text, Mahanagar exemplifies Ray's mastery of realist form and his ability to elevate intimate domestic drama into a commentary on social transformation. The open-ended conclusion—Arati and Subrata stepping into the crowded city without certainty—symbolises both the fragility and the promise of women's emancipation in mid-twentieth-century India. The city becomes a metaphor for modernity itself: daunting, uncertain, but full of possibility.

For contemporary scholars and audiences, *Mahanagar* continues to offer rich material for thinking about gender, modernity, and cinema's role as social critique. Its legacy can be traced in later Indian films that grapple more directly with women's autonomy and intersectional struggles. Yet Ray's film retains a singular power because of its balance between empathy and critique, realism and symbolism, the personal and the political. In sum, *Mahanagar is* not only a story of one woman's liberation but also a cinematic meditation on the broader question of how societies redefine themselves when women claim visibility, agency, and solidarity. It remains a critical text for understanding both the promises and the contradictions of women's social freedom in 1960s India—and beyond.

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