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'MIND OVER MATTER': AGE AS A TRANSCENDENTAL PERFORMATIVE IN SATYAJIT RAY'S *AGANTUK*

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When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

- W. B. Yeats ('When You Are Old')

Old age has ever since been portrayed as a debilitous condition of the human mind and body when people lose the vitality of their thought and action and succumb to life whereby they come to lose hold on their societal relationships. The only thought they tend to brood upon consists of the Yeatsian 'soft look' and the 'deep' 'shadows' they once had in their 'eyes'. They are envisaged as being socially impaired and culturally non-performative.

Theoretically speaking, it has almost been forty-seven years that Simone de Beauvoir had published her distinctive work *La Vieillesse* in 1970. The very prefatory page of the book unfolds the fact that she was almost forbidden to write since the condition of senility was conceived as a cultural taboo. The following year had to even see the re-publication of the book under a more perceivably genteel and socially inoffensive title *The Coming of Age*, the work indeed capturing the conventionally castigated condition of being old and, therefore, 'vulnerable, wretched, and isolated, if not abject'. However, it is true that times change, but so far as the cultural perceptions of age are concerned, times perhaps change rather slowly. This persisting and intransigent prejudice against the elderly constituted the initiation of the rise of what we now call 'Age Studies' - an area of thought and praxis first called for by Margaret Morganroth Gullette in her significant works on humanistic and cultural gerontology that include 'Aged by Culture' in 2004 and 'Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America' in 2011, with a view to exploring all the implications of defeatist and dismissive interpretations of ageing. Gullette asks: 'How can we ever have thought we age by nature alone?' (1) Age discourses, in this sense, attempts to consider life as a whole, in spite of the fact that many scholars in the field have sought to avouch the diverse perils and challenges of ageing. Lynne Segal in her *The Coming of Age Studies* affirms:

In any case, understanding the paradoxes of old age means tackling how we always struggle throughout our lives to become, and remain, the person we feel "we are", striving to retain some sense of selfhood and agency, although such efforts encounter different challenges across a lifetime. (2)

The global population is nonetheless getting older and longevity, alongside, over the twentieth century, has increased by around thirty years, thereby creating an entire temporal space for a whole generation. However, the increasing number of old people has done little to shift the 'ubiquitous cultural celebration of youth'. Popular literature and the art industry have sometimes even sought to further themes of generational tensions thereby deploring the ever-increasing army of 'demented very old people' and the threatening 'silver tsunami'. Senility has hence come to be depicted as a condition of existence with people suffering from psychological debilities related to their social and behavioural patterns which are, more

often than not, detrimental to the relationships they share with others. Thus, age has rather stereotypically been presumed to be more culturally perceived since sustaining social relationships depend, to a considerable extent, on such behavioural performances which are normally culturally determined. Any form of 'deviation' from the normative is taken to be 'un-aged-like'.

This discussion brings me closer to what I intend to show in this study through a close examination of Satyajit Ray's magnitudinal cinematic narrative of 'Agantuk', since the work perceivably undertakes to show age as a culturally performative category that can be discursively reactive to inter-generational conflicts and can question its marginalization as a dominant aspect of contemporary modernity. 'Agantuk' can be interpreted as an attempt to subvert the so-called normative notions of the modern condition of man, as an expression of the marked deterioration that was felt in the value system of the middle-class family structure and as a search, therefore, for an alternative authenticity to the notions of the centrality of youth and the vigour, enthusiasm and exuberance, more often than not, associated with youth. Manmohan Mitra, as the 'Agantuk' or the 'Stranger' emerges to be the character chosen to question these 'centrist' tendencies. In his essay, 'Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders', Ashis Nandy worthily characterizes the film's 'distancing strategy':

In 'Agantuk', Ray defies the conventions of his own thought and his self-definition as a chosen carrier of the European Enlightenment in India even more dramatically than he usually does in his more ambitious movies. The defiance comes through a painful process of self-transcendence and self-negation; he has to set up a formidable anti-self in the form of a truant anthropologist who rejects all progressive definitions of civilization and gracefully lives out his faith. (3)

In 1955, Ray's 'truant anthropologist', Manmohan Mitra, defiantly left his family and abandoned the 'centre' of Calcutta. Thirty-five years later, the 'free, untrammelled and truly self-reliant' (4) Manmohan suddenly chooses to visit his niece, Anila Bose, who lives with her husband, Sudhindra, and son Satyaki, in an upper-middle-class city suburb. His letter announcing his impending arrival fails to offer a befitting apology for his long absence from his family or an explanation for his plan to establish, after a considerably long period of silence, some kind of bond with his 'supposed' niece. His letter ushers a convulsive atmosphere of restlessness in the placid 'tea-cup existence' of the Bose family. We find, thereafter, how Manmohan's niece, her husband and their much too 'youthful' friends, almost ruthlessly, come to question not only his age but also his un-aged-like anthropological experiences and their validity. In a bid to achieving a haughty sense of authority over his fallacious and dubious identity - dubious and possibly also fallacious, since he could be either Anila's 'Chhoto Mama' or 'Younger Uncle' or an entirely unreliable impostor - they undertake untiring initiatives to prove that either he is 'radically different', or even 'unscrupulously deviant', and the narrative eventually 'makes them arrive at a transformation of their own inauthentic selves'. (5) Age, as a marginalized entity, thus transcends to give birth to a performative that seeks to displace the centre of the youth-centric ideals and thus brings to the fore the blatant manifestations of 'selfishness, greed and misplaced cunning' (6) of a restless and flustered generation.

What is completely different from the unnecessary alarm, a sense of insecurity and a gradually enhancing suspicion in the minds of the 'youthful adults', however, is the reaction of the ten-year old son of Anila, since he finds the impending arrival of the so-called and so-believed 'fake uncle' very welcome. For the boy, he is a figure of compelling mystery, someone who promises to be exotic and, most importantly, different from his notions of the stereo-typical adult mind. The analogy between the mythological Satyaki as one of Lord Krishna's most faithful disciples and Satyaki as the son of Sudhindra Bose soon was prompted by the question Manmohan asks the boy on first meeting him, whereby the latter chooses to play the role of the mythical character and Manmohan comes to be implicitly paralleled with the 'trickster' god, who, 'like Dionysus, was a god of transgression, and his divinity was all the more numerous and potent because he rejected the rule of reason'. (7) Ray, at this point, shows us a different facet of the innocence of

youth that is free from all inhibitions of suspicion, mistrust, scepticism and reservation and that can unchain itself from all conventional shibboleths of anxieties regarding age. An interesting series of dichotomous dialogues makes this distinction between Satyaki and his elder counterparts all the more pronouncing when Sudhindra goes on refuting almost each and every supposedly unusual traits - unusual for as old a man as Manmohan - for example, possessing a collection of rare coins that he had gathered from his earlier nomadic tours and his fluent command of the German language including his correct pronunciation of the word 'Wanderlust', which he uses to explain to Anila the puzzling nature of his footloose existence. In both these cases, Sudhindra makes it a point to reject Manmohan's authenticity on the ground that the coins that are claimed to be rare could easily have been purchased from Calcutta before coming to his house, and that it would be possible for anyone to acquire the German language if one took classes from the Max Müller centre. As Darius Cooper records in his important work *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity*:

Sudhindra's narrow vision doesn't seem to extend beyond the 'center' of Calcutta. Rare coins and European languages, as far as he is concerned, are to be found and acquired only in urbanized settings. All numismatists and linguists who come from outside the center are to be regarded with suspicion, conclusively labelled as fakes, and then banished. (8)

Another aspect of the transcendental performative that Manmohan seems to depict in the course of actions is his refusal to be a 'kupa-manduk' or, in other words, a frog that lives in a confined well. He also expresses his strong unwillingness regarding the possibility of Satyaki, now almost his disciple, growing up to be a 'kupa-manduk', since the frog never leaves the well and, more dangerously, it is the only reality he knows. He wants Satyaki to liberate himself from the confining conventionalities and experience the wonders that the world has in store for all who are willing to explore. Manmohan also undertakes to tell stories to Satyaki and his friends about various subjects including astronomy and the Incan civilization. When he first meets Satyaki, he teaches him all the one hundred and eight names of Krishna - something that would make him aware of the rich tradition of the Indian mythology which perhaps today's youth has either forgotten or abandoned. Manmohan, again we notice, refuses to be 'aged' in the conventional sense of the term, when he suggests Sudhindra not to touch his feet to only mime the practice of touching a familial elder's feet in respect since the latter should do that only when he would be free of doubt about the former's identity. He offers himself to be judged, not by his age, but by the worthiness of his actions, since he does not want to be shown any obligatory respectful gesture just because he supersedes the others in age, but because his actions are sincere, unpretentious and perhaps are laden with more exuberance than those of any of his younger counterparts. The enthusiastic anthropological ventures of Manmohan also are found to nullify Ranjan Rakhit's attempt to inspect and examine the character of the 'to be or not to be' uncle. The apparent incredibility of the fact that he has lived with tribes all over the world, that he has duly recorded their cultures and civilizational practices in his notebooks, that he has just returned having studied the lives of forty-three Native American tribes and that his writings about them are soon going to be published in America has served to completely baffle and subdue the Rakhit couple and defeat their mission to carry out an un-called for and misplaced inspection. The next to come on a similar mission to expose the 'spurious identity' of the 'mysterious visitor' (9) is Pritwish Sengupta, a highly sophisticated and skilled lawyer who is very clever with words. The dialogue begins with Pritwish questioning about Manmohan's notion of 'dharma' to which the latter responds by saying that the concept does not need any 'institutionalized space or support'. (10) Anila's subsequent song, that she sings on Manmohan's request, serves to uphold a value by which he has lived his life and to answer Pritwish's queries: 'When the "veena" plays dulcet tones in a house / Then grace and beauty awaken / A fresh breeze blows from the outside / Reaching the inner depths of being'. The purity of the mind suggested by the song eventually silences Pritwish. On the question of modern man's progress with technology, hereafter, Manmohan gives an example of the Eskimos'

engineering skills at creating an igloo with two kinds of ice - opaque and transparent - and yet this principle of architectural construction is never recognized by the urbanized who refer to the Eskimo as 'a wild man'. This may be seen to depict modern youth's obsession with technology which often have a stark and adverse influence on their lives which they only belatedly realize. With no logic and inquiries in store, Pritwish reveals his own defeat when he storms out of the Bose household by demanding Manmohan to declare who he is and, if he cannot, he must leave the place forthwith. The latter chooses to leave rather than assert himself unduly, as perhaps any other person of his age would have done. This action, at the same time, helps to bring about his moral victory over his young opponents whom he also, in a sense, mocks by calling himself a 'Nemo' or a 'no-one', an idea that runs counter to the air of self-importance that today's youth often betray in their confrontations particularly with the aged. Even his nature of omnivorousness with food, an aspect of his character that he reveals to Anila when he sits for his first meal, appears to be un-aged-like, since his aged fraternity may be, what is called, more 'cautious' about their gustatory choices due to the multiple perils of age.

The filmmaker takes the final scenes significantly to an outdoor setting in a village in Shantiniketan. This is where the insulted 'Agantuk' has come to after his 'rude expulsion' from the living room of Sudhindra and Anila. The final metaphorical victory of Manmohan perhaps is ushered by his act of bequeathing his entire inheritance, the real reason for which he had come to Calcutta, to the Bose family. The mind transcends matter here at this point and the grossly misconstrued 'Agantuk' carries very little in his pockets to live with the aborigines in Australia. He only has some precious notebooks, in which he documents his tribal experiences, to carry at the end.

Hence, Manmohan perceivably transcends all conventional norms of ageing and struggles to strike back by being, we may say, consciously 'deviant' so much so that he, in the process, is able to subvert the notionalities associated with the biological laws of ageing. He comes to construct a performative that succeeds in bringing about an ameliorative shift in the minds of all his younger counterparts, particularly Sudhindra and Anila as they, driven by their repentance, decide to go in search of their 'now-confirmed' uncle and solicit him to come back to their city home. Ray, here, through a subversive delineation of age, takes this otherwise conceived biological process to transcending levels of an epistemologically and experientially enriching human pursuit. The idea, thus, no longer remains confined to 'an internal phenomenon of the body' characterized by a 'loss of power and agency', redundancy, inactivity, passivity, degeneration and an irretrievable 'aberration', but becomes a narrative of performance that can re-define the limits of the normative and the significance of which lies in the challenge the experience of man at this stage of his life is fraught with - the challenge to disavow all the paradoxes, the vulnerabilities, the perplexities of dependency and the sense of mortality, associated with the very notion of ageing, and to go beyond these constraints by constructing a new reality that would perhaps be more meaningful and, hence, consummately worth-living and worth-experiencing.

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