

DEFAMILIARIZING THE FAMILIAL: A COSMOPOLITAN READING OF SATYAJIT RAY'S "AGANTUK"

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Abstract: In their introduction to the anthology *Cosmopolitanisms*, Breckenridge et al. describe cosmopolitanism as “ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home” (2000: 587). Cosmopolitanism, in these two dimensions, is enacted in Satyajit Ray’s film *Agantuk* (1991) as well. While the dominant tendency in the film’s reception has been to draw a dichotomy between parochialism and cosmopolitanism – with each proclivity identified with a different branch of the same family tree – this paper shall attempt to problematize this binary. Rather than articulating a tension between the home and the world, this paper proposes that *Agantuk* illustrates two different cosmopolitanisms – a way of “living at home abroad” and a way of “living abroad at home”. While both cosmopolitan approaches diverge significantly, the film makes a strong case that they emanate from a common space of middle-class privilege and access, by contextualizing them against the economic liberalization reforms of 1991 India. Globalization is seen as fostering a banal, consumerist variety of cosmopolitanism – a means for a financially stable middle class to garner cultural capital, and to produce itself as “modern” on a global scale. It is this consumption-oriented cosmopolitanism that bears the brunt of the film’s critical as well as recuperative efforts. Melted and recast, it has the potential to produce a “thicker”, more inclusive form of local, everyday cosmopolitanism – a cosmopolitanism that is equipped to resist the impulse to flatten and commodify alterity, and to open itself to plural, co-existing modes of inhabiting modernity.

Keywords: Satyajit Ray, globalization in India, cosmopolitanism of consumption, middle class, modernity.

In their introduction to the anthology *Cosmopolitanisms*, Breckenridge et al. describe cosmopolitanism as “ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home” (2000: 587). Cosmopolitanism, in these two dimensions, is enacted in Satyajit Ray’s film *Agantuk* (1991) as well. While the dominant tendency in the film’s reception

ISSN 2283-7949
GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION
2021, 1, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2021.1.1
Published online by “Globus et Locus” at <https://glocalismjournal.org>



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Collocations of Satyajit Ray and cosmopolitanism, while true and appropriate enough, do momentarily stumble upon his equally salient position as a postcolonial subject – and artist, and the attendant asymmetries and fissures in his relations with both the home and the world. As a disciple of Tagore, Ray, with his syncretic and inclusive outlook, undeniably carried strains of his teacher’s influence and legacy. At the same time, however, any characterizations of Ray (or for that matter, Tagore) as a “citizen of the world” cannot help but take into account the privilege and the capital (financial as well as cultural) that empowered him to exercise an attitude of cultural openness in a nation recovering from the travails and exclusions of colonialism and imperialism. Ray’s omnivorous absorption of – and appreciation for – the cultural artefacts of the East and the West attests to his upbringing within the uniquely Bengali milieu of the *bhadralok* or the middle class (to which we



will return later in this paper), in an environment of access and social distinction, even in colonized India; more pertinently, it hints at the tensions and disavowals that might underlie a (post)colonial middle class' espousal of a cosmopolitan approach in, to borrow R. Radhakrishnan's evocative phrase, "an uneven world" (2003: v). These tensions, these aporiae, we argue, surface in Ray's work – particularly in the work at issue in this paper, the 1991 film, *Agantuk*.

Agantuk stages a scenario in which the quiet domestic rhythms of the Bose household are disrupted by the return of a long-lost uncle, Manomohan Mitra. The greater part of the film is composed of a series of conversations meant to determine the "real" identity of the uncle. In the course of these dialogues (in which the Boses' friends function as their mouthpieces), we can trace broadly two kinds of cosmopolitan approaches. Mitra, the explorer and anthropologist, evinces a thirst to travel, and to engage with otherness. In his hands, cosmopolitanism becomes a creative and critical resource: receptivity to, and knowledge of, the other leads to the improvement of the self as well as the other. The Bose family, on the other hand, appears to lean towards a consumerist variety of cosmopolitanism: a superficial enjoyment of otherness made possible in a globalized world. In the process of unpacking these two cosmopolitan approaches, this paper shall attempt to show how Mitra brings a critical impetus to bear on the Boses' cosmopolitanism – the encounter with Mitra functions as an education for the Boses.

The viewer's first, albeit partial, glimpse of Mitra is of him in a speeding train: the Rajdhani Express, as he informs his niece Anila in his letter to her. The camera focuses on a worn pair of shoes in the foreground, behind which lies a battered suitcase, and then slides to sock-clad feet, before moving upward to a man concealed by the newspaper before him – effectively establishing him as the stranger of the title, which is revealed in the opening credits immediately succeeding this sequence. This introduction places Mitra in the context of travel, mobility: it grants him a qual-

ity of in-betweenness, a shifting position between places as well as cultures. The discarded shoes (presumably removed for comfort), and the utter absorption in the newspaper, signal that he is habituated to travel, thereby confirming his claims in the letter, and also paving the way for his subsequent accounts of the time spent away from home.

Kendall et al. refer to travel as a “generator of cosmopolitan outlooks – or one of the crucial pathways to cosmopolitanism”, yet the reactionary potential of travel must be acknowledged as well (2009: 101). The encounter with alterity that travel entails can equally lead to a rejection of otherness and a withdrawal into spaces of homogeneity. To activate its cosmopolitan potential, travel requires an inclusive, expanded consciousness; “an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences” (Hannerz 1990: 239). The assumption is that cosmopolitan practices stem from certain cosmopolitan attitudes. Such is the consciousness that Mitra exhibits, and such is the consciousness that informs his travels as well. The image against which he fashions himself is that of the “*kupamanduka*”: a frog that imagines its home, a well, to be the whole world. Mitra views narrow horizons with suspicion, and continually attempts to enlarge them by engaging with difference.

When questioned by Anila about his motives for leaving home, he presents a two-pronged answer: wanderlust, and the urge to explore the question of savagery and civilization. Taken together, these two reasons indicate an openness in the encounter with the other and an ability to suspend judgment and shed predispositions regarding other cultures. The use of the word “wanderlust”, originally a German expression, is highly significant: it reveals that Mitra treats other cultures as creative resources, and values their potential to enrich the self. Moreover, the willingness to interrogate the value of civilization from his own position as a “civilized” man, as a reader of “Shakespeare, Bankim, Michael, Marx, Freud, Rabindranath”, discloses the qualities of “self-doubt and reflexive self-distantiation” which are crucial to the cosmo-

politan disposition (Werbner 2012: 157). This self-reflexive, self-critical dimension of Mitra's cosmopolitanism becomes conspicuous in the dialogues conducted in the Bose household. In addition to commanding deep knowledge of a variety of cultures, he marshals this knowledge to critique, and thereby improve, his own – for example, through his critique of the Bengali practice of *adda*. Implicit in this is the acknowledgement that cultures are fluid rather than static, porous rather than bounded, and that they benefit from transactions with each other.

Despite the wholly favorable view of Mitra that critics such as Andrew Robinson and Gaston Roberge hold, one is tempted to question – as Prithwish Sengupta (the Boses' barrister friend) does – the conditions that enable Mitra's cosmopolitan disposition, his easy mobility. "I left home with my own funds," he replies – funds bestowed on him by a proud grandmother, as a reward for a series of glowing academic performances (01:24:58-01:25:02). Earlier in the film, Anila defends Mitra against her husband's suspicions: "Uncle had many qualities. He never came in second in his life" (00:07:17-00:07:21). The premium that is placed on Mitra's education and learning places him squarely among the *bhadralok*, the traditional middle classes of Bengal, "distinguished by their refined behavior and cultivated taste" (Ganguly-Scrase, Scrase 2006: 47). "A product of English education" in colonial Bengal, the *bhadralok* continued to enjoy their cultural distinction and social prestige (although to a lessened extent) in the postcolonial context as well (Chatterjee 2010: 96).

Located in this environment of social and material privilege, Mitra's cosmopolitanism reflects an elite view of the world. He sees the world as an unbounded space where individual agency may be exercised, and individuality may flourish untrammelled. This echoes in his exhortations to Satyaki as well. "And what is the one thing you promised never to become?" he asks Satyaki as he bids the Boses farewell (01:57:46-01:57:48). The reply is instant and enthusiastic: "*Kupamanduka!*" (01:57:49-01:57:53) From this liberal standpoint, travelling is considered solely the individual's



prerogative, as is the act of engaging with the other. The socio-political structures and the economy of exclusion which circumscribe individual autonomy are not given due credence.

Mitra does admit, however, to one condition that would restrict his autonomy: marriage. Marriage, he tells Mrs Raksit, “would mean a home. The whole point of leaving home was that I didn’t wish to be tied down” (00:48:25-00:48:30). He speaks in a domestic setting, in the company of two married couples, yet makes no attempt to cushion the impact of his words: his disdain for domesticity, for the “stay-at-home” lifestyle, is palpable. The assumption underlying this disdain is that marriage and a home, by curbing mobility, inhibit one’s contact with the abundance of diversity that the world offers. What this assumption does not take into account is that the exposure to difference is also possible through another kind of mobility, which we see in the Boses: imaginative mobility.

The Boses’ synthesis of physical rootedness and imaginative mobility is subtly unfolded in the opening sequence of the film. During a daily morning ritual of tea-drinking and newspaper-reading, a strange letter arrives. While the *mise-en-scène* conveys an impression of stasis, the discussion following the unexpected post ranges freely from Santiniketan to New Delhi: it reveals an ability to transcend the borders of one’s physical location through the imagination. The flows of information and communication lead to a telescoping of spatial distances, thus deepening one’s awareness of a world to which one does not have direct experiential access. Media, too, becomes a site of cultural traffic, thus contributing to the creation of what Arjun Appadurai calls “imagined worlds” (2010: 33). The image seen on television, for example, becomes a synecdoche for an entire culture, in *Agantuk*. When questioned by Mitra about his opinion of New York, Ranjan Raksit replies, “Why, it’s colossal! Judging from what we see in the movies” (00:49:29-00:49:33). Any mention of Brazil immediately reminds him of Pelé, the legendary footballer he has seen on TV. It is evident that imaginative mobility, and the construction of

imagined worlds, are not incompatible with the rootedness of everyday life. They foster a ‘banal cosmopolitanism’ that is “intimately connected with all forms of consumption” (Beck 2006: 41).

This consumption-oriented, quotidian variety of cosmopolitanism finds its provenance in globalization, and the attendant “shift from a producer to a consumer society” (Molz 2011: 34). *Agantuk* is set in 1991 – the year in which liberalization reforms were initiated in India. The opening up of the Indian economy resulted in an influx of consumer goods into the country (van Wessel 2004: 1). Delicate hints of this economic milieu hover in the background of the film, and surface every so often in the material possessions of the Boses, in their consumption practices, in the dialogue. Integration with the global economy, argues Leela Fernandes, led to the rise of a “new middle class” in India: “the ‘newness’ of the middle class involves an ideological-discursive projection rather than a shift in the composition or social basis of India’s middle class” (2000: 90). A newness located on the ideological plane – that is, a newness in the *representation* of the middle class; a newness in the middle class’s fashioning of itself. Liberalization catalyzed a reinvention of middle class identity – “middle class” increasingly became associated with a culture of consumption. With consumption becoming the locus of identity, consumption practices also became a means for the middle class to establish their distance, and distinction, from other classes, as Bourdieu’s work has shown. Hence, the emphasis laid on refinement, on the cultivation of taste, on the acquirement of cultural capital.

In *Agantuk*, we see the first traces of this new middle class’s emergence in the Boses and their friends. With a sensitive gaze, Ray identifies the seam where *bhadralok* culture overlaps with the new middle class identity. A typical *bhadralok* appreciation of high culture feeds into new middle class ideals of cultural sophistication, and the Boses appear to be caught in the moment of transition. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Sudhindra’s attitude to the art collection he possesses. The heir to his father’s collection rather than a true connoisseur himself, he nonetheless

attempts to maintain a veneer of erudition. His true concern, however, is for the monetary rather than aesthetic value of the collection: “My father’s art collection, it’s priceless! In the sitting room alone, there are things worth a million rupees at least” (00:06:45-00:06:53).

In this context, where consumption serves as an index of refinement, cosmopolitan consumption becomes a powerful means of garnering prestige. Cosmopolitan consumption presupposes a certain minimal financial comfort: the wherewithal to access the aesthetic and material products of other cultures. This economic capital is legitimized by cultural capital: the cultural competencies and semiotic skills required to negotiate one’s way through products of different cultures. Cosmopolitanism as a marker of distinction: immediately, one recalls the pride with which Sudhindra tells Anila about his stint learning the German language. “I studied German at Max Mueller Bhavan for a couple of months, before I lost patience and gave it up. I still remember at least fifty or so German words” (00:33:55-00:34:04). The transience and superficiality of Sudhindra’s encounter with German is in direct contrast to Mitra’s cosmopolitanism, which is of an immersive and self-reflexive kind. According to Beck, banal cosmopolitanism results in a “globalization of emotions and empathy” (2006: 42). In the Boses’ case, however, such an engagement with difference does not take place. Cosmopolitan consumption, rather, functions as a medium by which heterogeneity is decontextualized, domesticated, and assimilated.

Yet, cosmopolitan consumption does have a limited potential to stimulate the awareness of a global community and one’s place in it. Through cosmopolitan consumption, contends Steve Derne, the Indian elite “see themselves as middle class on a transnational scale [...] see themselves as situated between the consuming middle classes in the USA and Europe” (2008: 97). Through the adoption of a consumption-oriented lifestyle modeled on that of their western counterparts, the middle class orients itself to the global stage, and seeks inclusion into a global modernity enshrined



ing the principles of secularism, rationality, and progress. The conversation between Prithwish and Mitra becomes instructive in this regard. “What about science?” Prithwish asks Mitra, seeking to know his views on the credibility of science (01:21:40-01:21:44). Prithwish’s own answer to this question – that of “any educated person” – is decidedly in the affirmative. Giving the example of the pictures of Neptune sent by Voyager, he speaks, in tones of unstinting approbation, of the “unprecedented progress of technology” (01:22:03-01:22:06). It is significant that in this identification with a global modernity, there is an implicit association of “western” with “global”. It is accompanied, moreover, by a detachment from indigenous traditions. Let us rewind to the beginning of this conversation. “If you wish to smoke,” says Mitra, “please do not hesitate. I do not believe in this show of respect in front of elders” (01:14:13-01:14:19). The camera then pans to Prithwish and Sudhindra grinning at each other in appreciation. When questioned by Mitra on the subject of Bengali mythology, Sudhindra’s knowledge is found to be conspicuously lacking. Tradition is disavowed in favor of an uncritical subscription to a western modernity.

Such a conception of modernity involves a generalization of a western particular, and a disavowal of the different pattern followed by indigenous history – a disavowal, moreover, of a history of colonialism and a politics of exclusion. Also implicit in the endorsement of a global modernity is a denial of the power disparities structuring that modernity. It is evident that the subscription to such a modernity is characterized by a homogenizing, universalizing impulse. This impulse, as Walter Mignolo’s work shows us, “goes hand in hand with the establishment of exteriority: the invented place outside the [ostensibly universal] frame” (2010: 122). The inclusiveness that this cosmopolitanism promises is paradoxically rooted in a series of exclusions. This exclusiveness is made manifest towards the conclusion of the conversation between Prithwish and Mitra, in their impassioned debate on the subject of savagery and civilization. Here, tribal life becomes the



foil against which Prithwish defines – and grants legitimacy to – “civilization”. Within his monolithic, unilinear model of modernity, tribals are branded as “backward” and “primitive”. Mitra contests this “politics of time” in which “primitives” are relegated to the margins (Sengoopta 2011: 24). He calls for a “cosmopolitan conception of modernity”, in Gerard Delanty’s words, rather than one which considers the western model as the universal norm (2009: 178). By championing the achievements of the ‘savages’, he desires to bring other, alternate modernities into the Boses’ field of vision – to relativize the modernity they inhabit.

Relativize: much of the critical pressure that Mitra exerts on the Boses’ brand of cosmopolitanism derives from his capacity to relativize their ingrained values and practices, to “radically put into question the *doxa* of [their] socio-cultural worldviews” (Kurusawa 2011: 282). Seen in this light, the English title of the film gains a far deeper resonance. The stranger is the liminal figure, located somewhere between the inside and the outside, between the familiar and the other. The encounter with the stranger destabilizes one’s established beliefs, dislocates one from hitherto entrenched positions.

Towards the end of *Agantuk*, a literal dislocation takes place. The Boses travel to Santiniketan in search of Mitra, who has absconded after being censured by Prithwish. There, they find Mitra in a nearby village, Baner Pukur, waiting to watch the Santhal dance, for which they stay as well, at Mitra’s request. Mitra informs them that the Santhals are related to the Kols, who had been the first to rise in rebellion against the British. This is no irrelevant remark: it is a reminder of a history of colonialism, and of the ambivalences of a modernity that is a product of that history. Unable to resist the lure of the music, Anila rushes in to clasp hands with the Santhal women and join them in their dance. Moreover, she is encouraged to do so by Sudhindra himself. The bourgeois woman from Calcutta and the “primitive” Santhal women from a village on the outskirts dancing in harmony – this becomes a deeply significant moment. It marks the first step in the dissolution of the sav-

age/civilized binary and the exclusionary impulse that pervades the Boses' cosmopolitanism. A "thicker" cosmopolitanism is inaugurated, supplanting the depthless, privileged cosmopolitanism of before. The Boses' education is complete. The stranger departs.

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