

The Feminine Mystique: Representation of Duli in *Aranyer Din Ratri*

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Maroona Murmu, Associate Professor at the Department of History of Jadavpur University, and a proud representative of the Adivasi community in academia, once, in an article, had written about a curious question that surfaced in the mind of one of her esteemed colleagues. The colleague had expressed amusement over the fact that Professor Murmu didn't exactly "look" like a Santhal. When she asked her colleague for further elucidation, the latter painted the picture of the "quintessential" Santhal woman, which uncannily resembled the figure of the Santhal girl Duli, played by the legendary actress Simi Garewal, in Satyajit Ray's film *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1970). In the eyes of the esteemed colleague, who supposedly had a sophisticated urban background (with a refined taste for the internationally acclaimed films of the auteur), the projected figure of the mysterious aboriginal girl of the film became the universal epitome of the Santhal women.

Aranyer Din Ratri, which narrates the saga of four friends' bohemian sojourn in the vernal forests of Palamau in Bihar, is widely regarded as a masterpiece by eminent film critics and film aficionados, and it happens to be one of the first Indian films to utilize the technique of the carnivalesque. Ashim, Sanjoy, Hari, and Shekhar, after being frustrated with the hectic city life, embark on an adventurous journey, which echoes the early bohemian days spent by the writer Sunil Gangopadhyay, who is the author of the eponymous novel, on which the film is based. The four friends bump into the voluptuous tribal girl Duli in a rustic liquor shop, and Hari (played by Samit Bhanja), the rogue member of the group, instantly feels attracted to her, as she approaches them for an extra drink. The inebriated Duli, from the very beginning, seems to have been devoid of inhibition, as she unhesitatingly asks for *adha-pauwa* (half-quarter) drink from the gentlemen. Ray portrays Duli as a dark-skinned girl with a sharp, pointy nose; her neck and ears are adorned with tribal jewelry, and a flower

is pinned to her hair rolled into a bun. She is persuasive and adamant, her inebriated eyes and intoxicating voice trigger lustful fantasies in the minds of men. It is interesting to note, that Simi Garewal is a highly sophisticated, English-educated woman, with no apparent connection with the tribal community, and her metamorphosis into a tribal woman is astounding, as she herself recalls, “For a week, Manikda (as Ray was affectionately called) wouldn’t let me shoot. He took me to the ‘bati-khana’ (the liquor shop) where the Adivasis would gather at night to drink-and let me just observe. I saw women like Duli, my character, and it made all so easy” (“When Simi Garewal worked with Satyajit Ray”). Despite the actress’ impeccable performance, Professor Murmu observes, “Ray, a filmmaker who had otherwise acquired a worldwide reputation for his meticulous attention to details, did not hesitate to transform a fair skinned Simi Garewal, with her pointed nose and large eyes into a Santhal woman with a dab of soot on her body. The Santhals continue to bear the literary or cinematic burden of such cultural stereotypes” (Murmu). In spite of her fantastic acting, Garewal’s sophisticated persona sometimes erupted through the fissures of her character. She talked about observing the tribal women, but do all tribal women look like Duli? Or is it an image created by the urban mind, which stares at the aboriginal people from a distance, and interprets them in exotic terms? An urban gaze often ignores the diverse patterns present within a specific community, and it invites generalization, “Case studies of specific race/ethnicities and religions reveal much more cultural variation in their stereotype content, supporting their being responses to particular cultural contexts, apparent accidents of history. To change stereotypes requires understanding their commonalities and differences, their origins and patterns across cultures” (Fiske). Ray has ignored these differences and gravitated towards the traditional depiction of the tribal women, which reeks of exoticism. The urban populace has almost always thought of the Santhals as the “Other,” and erroneously tried to place them in their fabricated theoretical paradigm. Adorning a fair-skinned Garewal with a dab of soot and tribal jewellery seems to be a travesty of truth, as she emerges as a poor imitation of the tribal women, and this is analogous, though in an inverted manner, to the story of the crow with peacock feathers, who tried to hobnob with other peacocks. Stereotypes are also observable in Ray’s *Jalsaghar* (1958), albeit in a different manner; the larger-than-life character of the *zamindar*

Biswambhar Roy (played by Chhabi Biswas) stands vertically opposite to the images of the real-life landowners of Bengal in many cases.

Interestingly, in 2017, around twenty tribal women from all over India participated in a beauty pageant titled the “Adivasi Moolvasi Janjatiya Miss India,” organized in Jamshedpur, by the All India Santhali Film Association. “The event portrayed tribal people beyond stereotypes, busting myths of their involvement in acts of witch-hunting and others. The AISFA ensured that tribal women got depicted as new-age, educated and empowered members of society” (Das). However, the legacy of Ray seems to have been carried forward by the new age directors of Bengali television soaps. These soaps occasionally celebrate nuptial unions between a city lad and a tribal girl (the exaggerated depictions of these unions do not have a modicum of reality), where, again, the Ray standard of stereotyping tribal women is followed.

Moreover, Duli becomes a victim of the “male gaze.” Laura Mulvey, in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” gives an exposition of the concept called “Scopophilia”, or the love of looking, which has been the dominant trope in the film-making and film-viewing processes around the globe. Audiences act as the voyeurs, who secretly peep into the private lives of the characters in a film, and derive pleasure by objectifying them, especially the women. This act of voyeuristic pleasure has been made possible because of the presence of an invisible fourth wall, i.e.-the projection screen, which separates the auditorium from the fictional realm of the actors. This gaze is essentially masculine and heterosexual, as it desubjectivizes the female characters, and converts them into objects of desire. This “Peeping Tom” attitude has been notoriously celebrated by Hollywood, which considers films as mere commodities in a capitalist network. Ray, who was an ardent fan of Hollywood movies (in his Academy Award speech, he expressed his gratitude to the American movies, which had created indelible impressions on his artistic mind), might have been influenced by this “male gaze” project, and that admiration has manifested itself in a seductive manner in *Aranyer Din Ratri*. When Duli bends down and combs the bungalow room with her broom, her accentuated curves, her exposed back, more than bringing forth the local colours, create sexual tension in the mind of Hari, and likewise in the minds of the audiences. Roland Barthes’ observation on the darkness of the movie theatre, expounded in

his essay “Leaving the Movie Theatre,” seems to be crucial in this context, “Not only is the dark the very substance of reverie (in the pre-hypnoid meaning of the term); it is also the “color” of a diffused eroticism...the movie house (ordinary model) is a site of availability (even more than cruising), the inoccupation of bodies, which best defines modern eroticism—not that of advertising or strip-tease, but that of the big city” (Barthes 346). Audiences, while watching the film in the darkened auditorium, project their sexual desire on the screen, and try to construct a sexually charged image of Duli, by synthesizing various sensuous fragments of her actions; she nonetheless remains an obscure object of desire, who at least tries to satisfy their voyeuristic drive.

But what role does Duli play in this film? Doesn’t she play the role of a submissive woman who is willing to perform an act of prostitution to fulfill her desire of visiting Calcutta? Her position might remind the readers of the condition of Ophelia in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, where she is made to perform the phallic function, where she becomes a mere object of desire and an agent of reproduction in the eyes of Hamlet. This act of reification, from a female subject to a sexual object also takes place in *Aranyer Din Ratri*, where Duli dawns as a desirable woman in the eyes of the romantically and sexually frustrated Hari, and she becomes the human conduit to vent out his repressed sexual passions, which he might have been harboring for his estranged girlfriend (played by Aparna Sen). The marginalized position of Duli, as an illiterate tribal woman, makes her vulnerable to the onslaught of the “civilized” world represented by Hari. Though the sexual intercourse between Hari and Duli takes place by mutual consent, it can’t be ignored, that Hari gains an upper hand in this union, as he colonizes her mind by planting dreams about Calcutta, the city of dream-fulfillment. Duli, a widow, naively gets carried away by Hari’s words, and dreams about an urban escapade, away from her mundane rustic life, while Hari treats her like a sex toy with a limited shelf-life. An article published in *The Hindu* by a special correspondent gives a picture of the sexual predicaments of the tribal women in India, “Tribal people continue to wallow in misery and are easy prey to sexual exploitation by lecherous men who approach them with false promises of a happy married life. This is revealed in studies conducted by the Kerala State Women’s Commission. The studies, covering the Commission’s four years of activities from 2007, published recently as souvenir,

reveal that social and economic problems among tribal women are compounded by the presence of a large number of unwed mothers in their midst...As much as 50 per cent of tribal women are subjected to sexual exploitation; and 53 per cent of unwed mothers are in 20 to 25 age group." Though the consequences of that sexual encounter are situated outside the textual space of the film, it can be said with certainty, that Duli could easily have become a member of this decrepit and hapless group of women. However, equal participation was there from her side as well, which cannot be entirely dismissed in the name of feminine naivety. This paradoxical stance makes her position extremely dubious.

Lakha, who dawns as the arch-nemesis of Hari, stands at the crossroads of vengeance, sexual jealousy, and racial anxiety. He bludgeons Hari to an incapacitated state, which could be the manifestation of his repressed anger towards Hari, since the latter had allegedly branded him a thief. Or it is the expression of anxiety, on seeing the modesty of a tribal girl being violated by a licentious urban man? In the novel, a group of Santhals ambushes Rabi (Hari's literary alter-ego), after discovering his sexual liaison with Duli, and inundates him with vitriolic comments, "You bastard...you think Santhal girls are free?" (Gangopadhyay 96). In the film, however, the group has crystallized its presence in the figure of Lakha, who emerges as the protector of tribal modesty. But on the other hand, could it also have been the expression of his sexual jealousy, where Hari is his opponent? Lakha inadvertently upholds the honour of the tribal community by assaulting Hari, against Duli's sexual adventure, which might have remained as a stain on the face of the community. He, therefore, helps in the restoration of the status quo after it has been jeopardized by Duli's misadventure.

Duli, the tribal girl, acts as a foil to the city-bred characters like Aparna and Jaya (played by Sharmila Tagore and Kaberi Bose respectively). Especially Jaya, whose insides are teeming with unfulfilled sexual temptations after the unprecedented demise of her husband, tries to seduce Sanjoy in the emptiness of her room. Both Jaya and Duli are widows, and they try to titillate the sexual reservoirs of Sanjoy and Hari. Does Ray want to portray the inexorable nature of the feminine desire, which stands as an "excess" and threatens to transgress the patriarchal parameters? Hamlet, after perceiving the formidable sexual drive of his mother Gertrude had uttered in horror, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" Perhaps Ray

wishes to underline this inexorable desire, which effaces the boundaries that separate a tribal and an urban woman, and equalizes their positions; geographically, they have divergent positions, but they are ironically united in sexual terms. Nayan Jyoti Das, in his essay, "Santali Women: Under the Shadow of Long Silence" writes about the primacy of the males in the Santhali ecosystem, "A Santal girl is the property of her father until her marriage and as such he is to provide safeguard to her modesty and is solely responsible for her conduct. If an unmarried girl commits an offence, her father is fined or temporarily outcasted 'for his property has gone astray'. Similarly, when a girl is married she becomes the property of her husband and he has to take care of her" (209).

No reference to Duli's father is available in the film, however, the death of her husband due to snakebite has been mentioned. She is, therefore, a liberated woman, who is not haunted by the patriarchal Symbolic Other, and she can now freely assert her desire. She becomes a New Woman of the Santhal community, who is liberated from inhibitions, who wishes to adopt modern (or urban?) sensibilities. But can we really ignore the presence of the formidable social protocols, which always try to neutralize the female desire? Duli, therefore, remains a problematic figure, who is at the same time a foil, a submissive figure, a rebel, a victim of cultural stereotype, and a licentious character. It is not possible to describe her in simple terms, as she is a giant paradox, who eludes descriptions.

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