

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

DEVI (THE GODDESS) 1960

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

Set in the 1860s in rural Bengal, this film focuses on a wealthy family headed by Kalikinkar Roy. Kalikinkar, an aging and pious Hindu, is a widow with two married sons. The younger of them, Umadas (Uma), is married to Dayamoyee (Daya), who is thought by Kalikinkar to be an incarnation of the goddess (*devi*). When Daya appears to cure sick children, she becomes the centre of a large cult. Her husband (Uma) opposes this as superstition and argues with both his father and his wife, who has now begun to believe in her own divine status. When Uma's nephew dies in Daya's arms from lack of medical attention, she is shattered and loses her mental stability.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Devi is Ray's most controversial film. In presenting a story that exposes the dangers of Hindu belief, even suggesting that it leads to the unnecessary death of a young boy, Ray knew that he would receive negative reactions. In fact, the short story upon which the film is based was originally conceived by Rabindranath Tagore, who feared that his own rationalist views would create too much controversy and therefore asked a friend, of more impeccable Hindu credentials, to write it. When Ray wrote the script for the film, he, too, was cautious and set the story in the safety of the past (1860s). It was a good choice because this was also a time when the public debate about religion and science was prominent in Bengal and elsewhere in colonial India. Ray's film is especially daring because, while goddess worship is strong all over India, it is a defining element of Bengali culture. Durga Puja, the annual festival devoted to the goddess/Devi, is as important to Bengalis as Easter is to Christians.

STORY

Marital bliss In the opening sequence, Uma, Daya and their little nephew enjoy an ecstatic night celebrating an annual festival called Durga Puja (Durga is a form of the goddess popular in Bengal). Later scenes show the vast estate over which Uma's father, Kalikinkar, rules. We witness Daya and Uma in bed, in close physical contact. Although Hindu society and film etiquette (at the time) inhibited any overt show of physical love between Daya and Uma, their affection for each other is never in doubt. Daya is very kind to her aging father-in-law and rubs his aching feet in the evening. She is so loving and sweet that everyone adores her, especially little Khoka, the nephew, who always wants her (and not his real mother) to tell him a bedtime story. Here is a happy family. A minor niggle arises when Uma is about to leave the home to take up university study in Calcutta. 'How will I cope without you?' Daya asks, and Uma comforts her by telling her to look after Khoka. In future, he says, there will be other little Khokas about, a comment that draws a chaste blush from Daya.

Devotee of the goddess After her husband leaves, Daya pays even more attention to her father-in-law. Kalikinkar is a worshipper of Durga, the goddess, and has a separate shrine devoted to her in the house. Every day he spends time praying to her, offering her food and asking for her blessings. When speaking to Daya, he refers to her as 'mother' (which is another term for the goddess) and to himself as 'son,' which emphasises his dependency upon her. Daya is also shown to be devoted to her nephew, son of her brother-in-law, Taradas, and his wife.

A dangerous dream One evening, as Daya is rubbing Kalikinkar's sore legs, he tells her how lucky he is to have a 'mother' who appears when he calls her name. That night, in his dreams, the image of the goddess merges with that of Daya. The third eye of the goddess, a symbol of mystical knowledge, is superimposed on the *bindi*, or dot worn on Daya's forehead. When he wakes up,

Kalikinkar is convinced that his daughter-in-law is a human manifestation of Devi and instructs his other son, Taraprasad, to bow down at her feet in obeisance. Taraprasad is bewildered, and Daya (only sixteen or seventeen years old) is terrified, but the old man insists and they acquiesce.

The cult Then Daya/Devi is isolated in a separate room for worship, not only by the family but by servants and their families and others on the large estate. Daya submits to this treatment, silently and demurely, which only increases the public perception of her divinity. On one occasion, she is overcome by the incense offered to her by her father-in-law and faints, which Kalikinkar interprets as a sign that she has gone into a trance.

Reason fights back Harasundari, Taraprasad's wife, is horrified by this idolatry and writes a letter asking Uma to return from Calcutta. Meanwhile, more and more people come to ask Devi for blessings. Uma returns and gets involved in a shouting match with his father, a classic argument of Hindu faith healing versus modern medicine. Their argument is interrupted by even louder shouting outside Devi's shrine. She has cured a sick and dying child.

Aborted escape Uma now takes things in hand and sets in motion an escape plan for him and his wife. But when they reach the river, which will take them away, Daya sees the abandoned image of Durga (left over from the festival shown in the opening sequence). She shrinks back and confesses to Uma that she fears she may actually be the goddess or at least is possessed by her. She also fears that going away might bring harm to the family. Uma, not wishing to disturb her further, agrees to return to the house.

Triumph of faith Daya is now even more isolated and shrinks back further into her protective shell. Even little Khoka no longer comes to see her, and the only being with whom she seems to communicate is a parrot. Uma goes to Calcutta to seek advice from a 'modern' professor, who advises him to fight for rationalism over fanaticism. When Khoka becomes ill, his mother calls a doctor, but Kalikinkar dismisses the doctor's medicine and orders her to take her son to Devi for a cure. The mother hesitates—she has never believed that Daya is a goddess—but her son is in a bad condition. What if she really does have supernatural powers? She gives in, takes her son to Daya and puts him in her arms to spend the night.

Death and madness Uma returns the next morning, ready to fight the rationalist cause but finds the household in mourning. Khoka has died. Kalikinkar says that 'the goddess has taken him', but others wonder why Devi would do such a terrible thing. Uma flies into a rage, screaming abuse at his father and his self-indulgent dreams. He rushes to Daya, to take her away from this destructive cult, but he sees that she is not herself. In fact, she has gone mad. In the final, spectral shot, she runs away, through a field of flowers and disappears.

THEMES

Danger of belief The obvious theme that dominates this dark drama is the dangers of extreme religious belief. It can be argued that the father-in-law's obsessive belief in the goddess led to the death of his grandson and contributed to the insanity of his daughter-in-law. It is significant that his conviction that Dayamoyee is an incarnation of the goddess is based on a dream. And when that dream is backed up by the feudal authority of a wealthy landlord, who insists that Daya be actually worshipped as devi, we see how social power can shape religious behaviour. The dangers of irrational religion was rallying cry for a Hindu reform movement (Brahmo Samaj) that was popular in the mid- nineteenth-century Bengal, when the film is set. It is worth stating that Ray's own family had historical ties to the Brahmo movement, which sought a more 'enlightened' or westernised form of Hinduism, shunned ritual and image worship and opted for a religion of philosophical reflection. As far as we know, Ray himself was agnostic about most religious beliefs, but from this film it is clear that he was sceptical, at the very least, about the concept of incarnation.

Religion and society At the same time that the film depicts the dangers of religion, it also presents a relationship between religious belief and social reality that is more complex. For one thing, although the father-in-law is a pious Hindu, he is not some half-mad fanatic. In fact, the film shows us how his belief is itself nurtured by social customs since Daya is a dutiful daughter-in-law and looks after the old man with loving care. By acting as a woman who is compassionate and powerful (in that he is weak and she can affect his well-being), she is, in his eyes, a goddess. If religion moulds society, social roles also underpin religious beliefs in a self-perpetuating cycle of expectation and fulfilment. Indeed, the story presented in the film is thought to be based on a real-life event of a woman believed

to be an incarnation of the goddess. While this may be controversial, if taken to the extremes as shown in the film, the belief that a gods and goddesses appears in human form is widespread in Hinduism, especially in local cults and shrines. It is extremely common for ordinary men and women to become 'possessed' by a deity and enact his or her story.

CHARACTERS

Daya Dayamoyee (Daya) is married to Umaprasad. Daya is a young, innocent girl, perhaps sixteen or seventeen, who begins the film as a devoted wife and devoted daughter-in-law. She is happy and takes particular joy in playing mother to a young nephew, Khoka. She and her husband may not have consummated their marriage yet, but she looks forward to having children. She is unprepared for the attention she receives when her father-in-law declares her to be the goddess. Her natural shyness becomes acute, she withdraws further and further into herself, until, when she is accused of causing Khoka to die, she loses her mind completely. It can be argued that her submissive nature left her without a sufficiently strong self-image to fend off the pressures of becoming a 'goddess.'

Submissive Daya is passive throughout the film, except perhaps in relation to Khoka, with whom she forms a special bond. An especially tender moment that illustrates her submissiveness occurs on the evening before Kalikinkar has his fateful dream. It is late, the house is lit by lamps and we watch Daya slide gracefully down a corridor carrying medicine to her father-in-law. She gives the medicine to him and demurely draws the edge of her sari across her face, as a sign of respect. Then she offers him a glass of water. Finally, she kneels down and begins to rub his aching legs. This is what inspired the old man to imagine that she is a goddess.

Mentally unstable The whole arc of this tragic story takes the young Daya from happiness to insanity. There are several stages in her descent into madness, but the most memorable is surely the final scene. Khoka has died in her arms, and some people accuse her of witchcraft. Her husband has argued with his father and come to save her. But when he enters her room, he sees her kneeling on the floor and hanging on to the edge of a bed. She says, 'I have to go away.' 'Where?' he asks. 'I don't know, but I have to go. Or else...they'll kill me,' she says. Speaking in slow, deliberate phrases, as if to exert control, she asks her husband to fasten a necklace on her. Then her words become gibberish and her eyes dance wildly. This is the culmination of the entire film, the moment when the young mind of a sweet girl has been crushed by the weight of divinity, when she suffers guilt from the death of her nephew and fears for her life as a witch.

Kalikinkar Kalikinkar is the widowed head of a feudal family in 19th-century Bengal. Kalikinkar is a dreamer, not only at night but also during the day. Widowed, aging and without a purpose in life, he sinks deeper and deeper into his fantasies and religious faith. There is no doubt that his faith is sincere, but it appears to take over his mind and control his actions. In this respect, he forms a pair with Daya, who also loses control of her mind. The worshipper and the worshipped, the father-in-law and the daughter-in-law, are both portrayed as victims of extreme religious faith.

Dreamer Kalikinkar fantasises throughout the film, most tragically when he imagines that Daya is the goddess. But an equally significant moment occurs much earlier, long before the dream, when she is rubbing his sore legs. He tells her that, five years ago, he 'couldn't find peace in this world' and wanted to go on a pilgrimage to a famous Devi temple. But now, he says, that is no longer necessary because she (Daya) has come into the house. She is his 'mother', who will look after him. In this scene it is already clear that he imagines her as a divine presence in his life.

Defenceless Toward the end of the film, we see that Kalikinkar is a helpless old man. He has lost his wife, he quarrels with his son Uma and he can only approach his beloved daughter-in-law from the distance of a devotee. A moving scene that dramatises his defenceless position occurs at the end. After Khoka, the young boy, has died and Uma has returned from Calcutta, he sits on the floor, slouched down against the wall of a corridor. Uma speaks harsh words to his father, accusing him of being responsible for Khoka's death, and the old man can only writhe in emotional pain and say things such as: 'I offered my grandson to the goddess.' Uma hits back harder, and Kalikinkar says, 'Don't. Don't say such harsh things.' He then struggles to his feet, tries to embrace his son but falls to the floor. He, like Daya, has been crushed by the turn of events.

Umaprasad Umaprasad (Uma) is Kalikinkar's younger son. Umaprasad (Uma) is one of Satyajit Ray's most virtuous heroes. Unlike many of his other lead male characters, Uma remains a constant source of support to his wife. As a modern rationalist, he is also admirable in his decision to

challenge his father's 'superstitious' ideas, which, in his eyes, have driven his wife mad. He is not an angry, young man, or a natural rebel, but he is left with no choice when Daya is kept in a virtual prison of her divinity.

Considerate Uma's constancy is established in an early scene. He and his wife are obviously in love, but now Uma proposes to go to Calcutta to study at the university and his young wife is troubled. 'What shall I do without you?' she asks, as they lie on the bed. He hands her a bundle of envelopes, already addressed to himself in Calcutta. 'Write me a letter. One every day,' he says. 'But what if there is nothing to say?' she persists. 'You can fulfil yourself by looking after little Khoka,' he says, adding with a wink, 'and soon there'll be more little children.' Daya blushes at this not-so-subtle hint at their coming sexual relationship, but she is reassured. Uma has her best interests at heart, always.

Rationalist Another side of Uma's character is his belief in modern science and modernity in general. At first, although he believes that his father has gone mad (to believe that Daya is the goddess), he is reluctant to challenge his father's authoritative statements about religion. His own belief in rational thinking is then revealed in a dramatic scene toward the end of the film. He boldly accuses his father of having killed Khoka by not summoning a doctor. 'Your superstition is the cause [of his death]', he screams at his wilting father. Uma is the personification of modern India and his father the symbol of traditional religious faith. The rationalist appears to win the argument, but tradition has driven his wife mad.

Taraprasad Taraprasad is Kalikinkar's older son.

Harasundari Harasundari is Taraprasad's wife and Dayamoyee's sister-in-law.

Khoka Khoka is the son of Harasundari and Taraprasad.



(Daya, first worshipped as the goddess)



(a peasant brings his sick son to be cured by Devi)



(Daya/Devi communicates only with a parrot)



(spectral image of the deranged Daya)