

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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MAHANAGAR (THE BIG CITY) 1963

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

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OVERVIEW

Although *Mahanagar* (*The Big City*) is not one of Ray's 'famous' films, many critics claim it is his most affecting. Adapted from a Bengal short story by Narendranath Mitra (who helped to write the screenplay), it presents the trials of a middle-class housewife who upsets her husband and his family by going out to get a job in Calcutta. Loyal, demure and withdrawn, Arati (the wife) surprises herself when she finds she likes the role of 'bread-winner.' Her husband, the kind but somewhat befuddled Subrata, finds himself confused and undermined.

This domestic drama, set within the confines of an extended family (the household includes Subrata's parents), is cleverly juxtaposed with the expansive world of the big city. Here, too, are well-drawn characters, especially the vulnerable Anglo-Indian Edith and the charming but not so likable Mr Mukherjee, the boss of Edith and Arati. Having weathered many difficulties, financial and psychological, the wife and husband, who are the core of the film, learn to cooperate as they face an uncertain future in the big city.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Mahanagar is one of the earliest 'feminist' films in India. We feel the joy as the shy Arati begins to enjoy her freedom as a working woman. We cheer her when she stands up for her friend Edith in defiance of the sexist boss. And there is a gentle 'sisterhood' that develops throughout the film between the two female leads, who are so different to each other except for their gender. The film also brilliantly captures the uncertainty that modernity brings to the middle-class Bengali urban family. It is now a generation after Independence in 1947, and the challenge facing the country is less political and more social. How will a modernising India cope? Will old traditions, especially social habits and gender roles, survive in the big city? Is the extended family compatible with a world of working women?

Ray's film addresses these questions head on, and, while he does not offer solutions, he allows us to understand that hope lies in the cooperation between the sexes. Not a revolutionary message, perhaps, but not one that has not dated, either. Not surprisingly, the film earned Ray the prize for Best Director at the Berlin Film Festival in 1964. Since its release, it has steadily gained critical acclaim, with one commentator praising it as 'one of the most rewarding screen experiences of our time.'

STORY

Family set-up The story begins with the family set-up. A tired husband returns from his job as a bank clerk. His wife greets him and tries to comfort him. His old and ailing father (a retired school teacher) needs new glasses to do his beloved crossword puzzles. Money is also needed to pay for private tuition to help the children pass their exams. The husband's mother is ashamed that they are living off their son's modest income, and she scolds her husband for his 'fantasy' that he will one day win the crossword prize and make them rich.

Dangerous idea As husband and wife mull over their financial troubles, he suggests that she take a job. At first, she rejects this idea. She doesn't want to go outside the house. Who will look after his father and the kids? Besides, she says, 'I'm not capable of doing any job.' It is her lack of confidence that is so painfully evident in these series of shots of husband and wife, standing close together, in the cramped house. They move around each other, he smoking, she tidying the room, exchanging short phrases. Then she stops and asks if he really does want her to take a job. 'No,' he says. 'A woman's place is in the home. Besides, you're too beautiful to take a job. You'd be a distraction to colleagues.' But the idea has been planted and takes root in Arati's mind.

Role reversal Slowly, Arati comes to the conclusion that working is the only way to meet the family's needs, and Subrata eventually agrees, especially when he sees an advertisement for a lady salesman with a good beginning salary. The gloom that has settled over the family lifts as the couple begin to plan how to spend their money. Buy that new pair of glasses for granddad, get the tuition for the children, maybe even buy a radio. Arati grows into her new role as the bread-winner, even though she spends less time in her domestic chores. However, her husband, her father-in-law and even her children, are discomforted by the role reversal.

Office realities Arati works for Mr Mukherjee, an affable man who owns a business selling vacuum cleaners. At work, Arati becomes friends with Edith, a young Anglo-Indian woman, who is unshackled by the Hindu tradition of the domestic wife. She even encourages Arati to wear lipstick. Arati shows her capabilities—reliable, organised, mature—and is promoted to team leader. Arati becomes very close to Edith and learns about her home life—an elderly mother in straightened circumstances. Meanwhile, Subrata is humiliated to learn that his father is going around to his old students (some of whom have high-salary jobs) to ask for money. He is also upset when he discovers lipstick in his wife's handbag. Angrily, she throws it out the window.

Moral choices Subrata finally decides that a working wife is not what he wants and tries to convince her to give up the job. Arati is angry—he told her to get a job and now he tells her to leave it—but she reluctantly agrees. The drama intensifies when Subrata goes to work one morning and sees that the bank has folded. Now he has no job and no income. In a panic, he rushes to Arati's office to tell her not to quit. He's too late. She has resigned because Mr Mukherjee suggested that her friend Edith was a 'loose woman', a typical stereotype of Anglo-Indian women. Incensed, Arati boldly confronts her boss and, when he refuses to apologise, gives notice.

Climax There is momentary despair when Subrata and Arati realise that they have no income between them. But they both have hope. 'One of us will get a job in this big city,' she says. 'No,' he replies, 'I believe that both of us will.' Then, in another long close-up shot, they clasp hands and walk out into the streets of the big city.

THEMES

Modernity The black-and-white film opens, as the credits roll, with a close-up of the 'arm' of a street car as it slides along an overhead electric wire. It is an image of mechanised modernity, of movement, transport and unstoppable progress. The next shot, however, shows us a man, sitting inside the moving tram. He is clearly not content. And this is the dramatic contrast at the heart of the film. Humanity is being carried forward, but how will society cope? It is also no coincidence that Arati gets a job as a saleswoman for vacuum cleaners, another machine that typifies middle-class modernity. Similarly, the telephone is used more than once to communicate vital messages between the troubled couple. This is the enduring value of the film, that it presents a married couple confronting a problem: they quarrel, they grow distant, they no longer seem to trust each other, and then, at the end, they learn to face the problem together.

Patriarchy The principal tension created by urban modernity is the emergence of the working woman and the perceived threat to a man's sense of worth. The family in the film are very ordinary. The wife and her mother-in-law work at home; the husband is a bank clerk; his father was a school teacher. In an early scene, the gender expectations are revealed for the next generation. Subrata's sister, Bani, who is clearly a studious girl, is jokingly told it is no use for her to study for exams because 'she'll end up in the kitchen like her mother.' The young son, Pintu, however, is said to need more private tuition. When the gender roles of wife and husband are temporarily reversed, the money is good but the sudden change is too much. This is Satyajit Ray as social realist rather than visionary revolutionary. In the end, however, we see that the relationship between Subrata and Arati has not only survived but achieved a new gender balance. Both of them, the husband says, will look for work.

Anglo-Indians This is one of the few films in India to take up the issue of prejudice against Anglo-Indians. Sometimes called 'Eurasians' or, less kindly, 'half-castes,' Anglo-Indians are a relatively large population in Calcutta, where the British lived for three centuries, married Indian women and fathered children. Shunned by both British and Indian society, these mixed race people developed their own social norms and practices. One of the stereotypes of their women was that they were promiscuous, as sexually free as Europeans but without their sense of propriety. Edith, however, is a hard-working, if fun-loving, young woman who looks after her elderly mother. The prejudice toward her displayed by Mr Mukherjee, her employer, is an example of the deep-rooted misogyny in Indian society.

CHARACTERS

Arati Arati is the wife at the centre of the story. She is married to Subrata and has to play daughter-in-law to his parents, in whose house they live. Arati is the epitome, if somewhat idealised symbol, of the domesticated Hindu wife. At least, this is how she appears at the beginning of the film. She is devoted to her family, playing the role of dutiful daughter-in-law to an irascible father-in-law as well as the role of uncomplaining wife to a kind but not all altogether sympathetic husband. As the story unfolds, however, Arati finds strengths and skills she did not know she possessed. Although her husband had to help her write a job application, she blossoms on the job and becomes a leader in her work group. As a young and attractive woman, even with two children, she also takes pleasure in wearing lipstick. But it is in her relationship with Edith that Arati shows her true colours. She has the courage to confront an older, powerful man in defending Edith, a vulnerable young woman.

Kind Arati's underlying kindness is on display in the opening scenes. As soon as her gloomy husband gets home from the office, she prepares him a cup of tea (which, it turns out, she had to borrow from a neighbour, so dire is their financial situation). Then she comforts her father-in-law, who complains about his aging body, by encouraging him to go out into the park. She shares a joke with Pintu, her son, and she finds time to comb Bani's hair. She is a super mom in 1960s Calcutta.

Courageous Perhaps the defining moment of Arati's character, of the film itself, is the scene when she confronts Mr Mukherjee about his mistreatment of Edith. Although she loves her job, and although it provides the income her family needs, she refuses to work for someone who does not show courtesy to her friend. When he argues with her, saying that he fired Edith so that she (Arati) can take her place and make more money, Arati is unmoved. 'It's unjust and wrong,' she says. 'You shouldn't comment on her character [sexually promiscuous]. Especially when it isn't true.' In this way, Arati demonstrates that our first impression of her—as a compassionate, unselfish person—was accurate. The only change is that her deep sense of humanity is utilised outside as well as inside the house.

Subrata Subrata is a bank clerk, who is Arati's husband. Subrata is also a complex character. He, like his wife, is kind and easy-going, but probably a little too phlegmatic. He is a bank clerk, the icon of Calcutta's middle-class stability but going nowhere. He has a jovial side, playing with his children, as well as a morbid side, when he sinks into depression at the realisation that he is no longer the 'head' of the family. In contrast with his wife, he is a weak character, unable to confront his own deficiencies and relying instead on old patterns and expectations. Throughout the film, he alternates between these two masks—the laughing clown and the morose victim. We are left wondering what he is really, underneath.

Unfulfilled Subrata is not a satisfied man, as we see in the very opening shots of this long film. When we see him riding in a streetcar, coming home from work, and he yawns with boredom and tiredness. Then, walking home, he is harassed by a gang of kids playing the street. At home, he confesses that he has forgotten to buy the special scented tobacco for his mother. He is a failure, full-stop.

Unctuous Subrata's weak character leads him to be ingratiating toward superiors, or anyone from whom he wants a favour. The best example of this obsequious behaviour occurs in a scene when he goes to Mr Mukherjee, hoping that he might help him find a job. Subrata enters the man's office almost like a servant, slightly bent and shuffling. He laughs too easily at the other man's jokes and attempts to stroke his ego by commenting on his company. It is a very disturbing scene, in which a 'good guy' plays the sycophant to such a disagreeable man.

Mr Mukherjee

Character Mr Mukherjee is another well-drawn character, a stereotypical but not a superficial figure. He is the boss, well-dressed, wealthy and in total control of the business. If Subrata, the nervous clerk, smokes cigarettes, Mukherjee the authority figure smokes a pipe. He has a big office, overlooking the big city, and it appears that he is also a 'modern' man. He appreciates Arati's qualities and wants to promote her. He is also, on the surface, a congenial man, but there is a very hard, almost cruel, layer underneath.

Amiable Mukherjee's amiability is demonstrated in a scene late on in the film, when he receives a

visit from an old friend. This friend, who once had a high-paying position in Delhi, is now jobless and has come to seek employment. Although he presents a picture of a down-and-out, Mr Mukherjee does not take advantage of his vulnerability. Instead he treats him as an equal, and they share jokes about the city of Patna, which it turns out is the hometown for both of them. Perhaps, though, this likable side is shown only when Mr Mukherjee is in a commanding position.

Arrogant The other side of Mukherjee's personality is on show when he is visited in his office by Arati. She asks him to apologise for his sexist and unjust treatment of Edith. Speaking in a calm almost submissive voice, she asks him to reinstate her friend. Her challenge to his authority infuriates Mr Mukherjee, who is soon shouting at poor Arati. He dismisses her complaint by saying that she is 'out of place' and that her words 'should come from my side of the desk not yours.'

Edith Edith is a young Anglo-Indian woman who befriends Arati. Edith, the young Anglo-Indian woman working for Mr Mukherjee, stands in complete contrast to Arati. Whereas the Bengali woman is demure, married and withdrawn, the unmarried Edith smokes, swears, wears short dresses and makeup. Arati is high-caste and middle-class, while Edith is low status (as an Anglo-Indian) and comes from a family with little money. It is the genius of Satyajit Ray, however, that this 'bad' girl possesses endearing qualities. She looks after her ailing mother at home just as she befriends the shy Arati at work. In the early 1960s, when the film was shot (and set), we might say she has 'pluck.' Certainly, she is pert and lively, but also kind.

Kind From the moment we first see Edith, she shows concern for others. On her first day at work, Arati is clearly ill at ease and unsure of herself. Edith immediately senses her discomfort and takes her under her wing, guiding her through her first day in the office. It is a touching scene when the 'bad' Edith, who speaks very little Bengali, befriends the 'good' Arati, who knows little English. Across these social, economic and linguistic boundaries, Edith holds out a hand, an act of kindness that is repaid in the end.

Modern Edith, ironically, is also the personification of modernity, especially for the liberated woman in the big city. She dresses how she likes and wears lipstick because she wants to. The effect of this 'female agency' upon the custom-bound Arati is displayed in a wonderful scene at work. Both women are in the ladies' restroom when Arati watches Edith put on her lipstick. Seeing Arati watching her, Edith offers the tube of lipstick to Arati. Arati refuses, but when Edith points out that she already wears a kind of makeup on her forehead (the traditional red dot), Arati relents. In a tender shot, Edith gently applies the lipstick to Arati's lips.

Mr Mukherjee Mr Mukherjee is the owner of a business, selling vacuum cleaners, where both Arati and Edith work.

Priyogopal Priyogopal is Subrata's father. He is a retired schoolteacher, who passes his time by doing crossword puzzles in the hope of winning of big money prize.

Sarojini Sarojini is Subrata's mother.

Pintu Pintu is Subrata's and Arati's son.

Bani Bani is Subrata's young sister.



(Subrata, Bani, Arati and Pintu)



(Arati, in the final scene, when she joins forces with Subrata)



(Subrata, with Arati behind him)



(Mr Mukherjee at his desk)



(Edith)



(Edith applying lipstick to Arati)