

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

APARAJITO (THE UNVANQUISHED) 1956

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

Aparajito is the second part of the Apu trilogy, based on the novels by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay. The first part (*Pather Panchali*) concludes with Apu (aged about six or seven) and his parents leaving their village in Bengal. This second part traces the story of Apu's growth from a school boy to young man at college in Calcutta (with two different actors playing him in those two stages of life). Since his father dies early on, the core of the story is the heart-rending relationship between Apu and his mother. As with *Pather Panchali*, there is pathos with two key deaths, but there is also hope for Apu's future. The movie is structured in three sections, moving from the city to the village and back to the city, and each one represents a crucial stage in the development of Apu as a young man.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Within India, *Aparajito* did not achieve the same success as the first section of the trilogy (*Pather Panchali*). One reason for this was that Ray deliberately darkened the mood, and deviated from the source-novel, by showing the complexity of the mother-son relationship, which is arguably the cornerstone of Indian society. Instead of being filled with pure devotion to one's mother, Apu is indirectly, though not intentionally, responsible for her death. Over time, however, Indian audiences have come to agree with international critics, that this is another Ray masterpiece. Although not as poetic as *Pather Panchali*, it has an edge as it charts the progress of its hero, like a classic coming-of-age novel. Over the decades, the film has also become more popular because of its depiction of the rural versus urban tension that still runs deep in Indian society. Literally millions of young men have made the same journey as Apu and will continue to make it. The details change, but the dynamic does not.

STORY

Hope in the city The film opens with one of Ray's favourite images, a moving train. But rather than crossing the open countryside (as in *Pather Panchali*), this train is crossing a bridge that leads us in the bustling city of Benares. Apu and his parents have relocated from the village to this famous city of religion and of death (cremation by the river bank), which sets the tone for this long film. The father, Hari, now earns a modest income as a priest, performing cremations on the steps leading down to the Ganges where corpses are burnt. He even makes friends with other priests, who come to his little house for a cup of tea. Apu, now ten years old, has no school nearby and spends his time on the streets, playing with other boys. Aside from Sarbojaya fending off a lecherous neighbour, the family appear to be happy and have put the tragedy of their village life behind them. Until disaster strikes again. Hari gets ill, takes medicine but collapses and dies the next day. Sarbojaya tries to make some money working as a maid, but the work is hard and the income meagre.

Return to the village In a scene that reverses the opening sequence, mother and son look out the window of a train that goes across the bridge in the opposite direction, taking them away from Benares and back to a village. It is not the village that they left, but the village of Sarbojaya's uncle, who offers them a house. She has to put her pride to one side and work as a servant in other people's houses to earn money to feed herself and Apu. In another reversion to the past, Apu begins to train as a priest, following in his father's footsteps. He, however, is unhappy and longs to go to school like other boys his age. His mother is reluctant to let him go because she knows that this will eventually lead to his leaving her. Reluctantly, she agrees and he goes to a local school that turns out to be run by a conscientious headmaster and offers a British-influenced education. Apu is clever and

disciplined and, aged 17, he receives a scholarship to study at a college in Calcutta, just as his mother had feared. Now, she has an even bigger decision to make: to let her son follow his dream or stifle his future so that he can take care of her. She is in failing health and has no one else in the village to comfort her. However, after her son's pleading, she again consents and he leaves for Calcutta.

Calcutta Apu begins his new life in Calcutta, free of the village and its obligations that have hindered him since birth. He finds an apartment and discovers the wonders of electric lights. Apu buckles down to his studies, focusing on modern science, and also works in a print shop in order to pay his rent. He is excited but has his own difficulties. One day he falls asleep in class, having not slept because of his job at the print shop, and is expelled.

Mother's pain Intercut with scenes of his joy and discoveries are shots of his mother's despair and loneliness in the village. Her son's eagerly awaited letter never comes, and her interactions with others in the village only serve to underscore the fact she is all alone. Eventually, Apu does visit his mother, but his stays with her grow steadily shorter. She knows that he is pulling away from her and that she cannot, and should not, stop him. For his part, Apu is not unaware of his mother's plight, but, he, too, feels unable to halt the forward progress of his life.

Too late This tension comes to a dramatic end when Sarbojaya falls ill and wants to write to Apu to ask him to come and look after her. She wants him to come, but, at the same time, she does not want to interrupt his studies. She prevaricates and doesn't write. Apu then receives a letter from one of her neighbours, informing him of his mother's condition. He drops everything and hurries to the village, only to find that she has died. Apu's uncle, his mother's uncle, urges Apu to take up the job of local priest, like his (dead) father. Apu, once again, turns his back on the village and returns to the city.

THEMES

Change A movie that opens with a moving train and concludes with a young man leaving the village for the city is all about change. Whereas *Pather Panchali* is static—life in the village doesn't change much and neither do the characters—*Aparajito* is in perpetual motion. There are three major shifts of setting, multiple journeys by train back and forth from the village to the city, the deaths of a father and a mother, plus the fact that two different actors play Apu. All roads lead to Calcutta, at that time the most sophisticated and modern city in the subcontinent. Apu studies the fast-moving discipline of science, he works in a print shop that produces the latest news and he has the joy of discovering the light bulb.

Tradition Change is dramatic when it occurs in juxtaposition to tradition, as it does in this film. The family might seem to have escaped the static life of the village, but their shift to Benares only takes them into another site of Hindu tradition. Again, in the opening sequence, the shot of the moving train is followed by scenes of everyday life in this holiest of holy Hindu cities. People feed pigeons, boats glide leisurely by on the river and rituals are performed on the ghats, the stone steps that lead down to the Ganges. Men purify themselves by bathing, women worship goddesses and priests burn the bodies of the dead. (This sequence, curiously, imitates a similar sequence in Jean Renoir's film *The River*, shot in Bengal five years earlier and on which Ray served as assistant director.) Apu's father, Hari, then comes into view, as one of the priests, chanting and praying on the river's edge. Next, we see the family home, a small apartment near the river, where Sarbojaya cooks and cleans. Whenever a man (who is not a relative) enters, she must retire to the kitchen. Whenever she goes outside, she covers her head. Not much has changed, except the setting.

Sacrificial love These somewhat conceptual themes, however, are overpowered by the theme of sacrificial love as personified by Sarbojaya. When her husband, Hari, dies, she has no one but Apu. They move back to a village, where her uncle lives, where she lives for Apu and through him. The second half the film depicts the agony of a parent who knows that she must allow her child to leave her and yet feels that she will not survive his leaving. Many critics have praised the performance by the actress (Karuna Bannerjee) playing the role of Sarbojaya. She does not say much, but her facial expressions communicate the full spectrum of emotions from love and longing, to sadness and defeat. It is not easy for Apu, either, but he has another life, a future in Calcutta, to live for. She has no one, only the son who she loves but cannot hold. She is powerless to stop the very thing that will kill her, and she watches in mute acceptance as her son leaves her.

Endurance A final theme in this film is announced in the title: endurance and determination. Although Apu is a young man with a positive outlook on life, he has suffered a great deal. He has seen a series of deaths in his family: first his aunt, then his sister, his father and finally his mother. He feels some guilt when he finds her dead because he realises he has neglected her. In the final scene, he has a sort of breakdown and might never have recovered. But he summons up the mental strength to realise that his ties to the village have now been severed and he is free to pursue his future. His newly-discovered maturity, the realisation that he is an adult, is then displayed when his great-uncle tries to persuade him to become a village priest. Apu politely but firmly rejects this advice and walks down a winding road, away from the village and toward the city. Apu is unvanquished.

CHARACTERS

Sarbojaya Sarbojaya is married to Harihar and is Apu's mother. Sarbojaya is one of the few constants in this film of fluctuation. As in the first part of the trilogy, she is the voice of pragmatism, in contrast to the fantasies of her husband. When her husband becomes ill, he thinks that a medicinal tonic will cure him, but she is sceptical. And when he does die, she struggles to maintain her equilibrium. She puts on a brave face for Apu, but the moment he disappears from the screen, the mask falls and reveals a terrified woman. Again, Ray uses a contrast with Apu to dramatise her character. In one moving sequence, when Apu tells her that he will return to city and we hear the scream of train in the distance, we also see her crestfallen face. His exhilaration of returning to the city only serves to emphasise her despair at his departure.

Pragmatic The ever-practical Sarbojaya has to make the big decision for the family. She urged her husband to leave the village (in *Pather Panchali*) and move to Benares. Now, in *Aparajito*, she makes another difficult decision, in which economic need is weighed against moral conscience. Following her husband's death, and with no other source of income, she has been working as a cook for other people. But her employer has shown an unwanted interest in her as a sexual object, and she has received a letter from her uncle who offers her a home in a village. She could remain in Benares, where she can make some money or she can move back to a village, where she will have to rely on others but where life might be better for her and Apu (who is running around in the streets and becoming a sort of unpaid servant for her employer). She makes her decision as she walks down the stairs of a house, with each tentative step registering another stage in her thinking process. At the bottom, the camera comes up close and we see a fixed face. She has decided that they will go back to the countryside to a healthier life.

Self-sacrificing Although she is pragmatic and decisive, Sarbojaya is a traditional Hindu wife. More than passive and demure, she is also self-sacrificing. The best example of this quality comes in the form of another crucial decision, this time toward the end of the film. She is alone in the village, and Apu is studying in Calcutta. He has visited her several times, but only for a day or two, and she is not only desperately lonely but also ill. Whether it is mental or physical, or a combination of both, we don't know, but she is sinking fast. She wants to write to Apu and ask him to visit her, to cheer her up, but she does not want to interrupt his studies. It is the universal dilemma of a parent having to sacrifice oneself or one's child's future. In the end, she does not write to her son, and therefore dies without him at her side.

Apu Apu is their son. The wide-eyed little boy of *Pather Panchali* has grown into a sensitive young man. He is still full of wonder and something of a dreamer (like his father), but he is a bit moodier and more reflective. He has ambition but he is also observant. He has vague ideas rather than sharply-defined goals. He is also lanky, gawky, awkward and a little comical, especially when we see him parading around the streets of Calcutta in his uncomfortable western shoes. Still, he smiles all the time, radiating a warmth out into the world. He is emotionally torn, wanting to help his mother but inevitably attracted by the new world of Calcutta. He is a loving son, but his heart is now in the big city.

Self-absorbed One side of Apu is his youthful self-absorption. The lure of the city is simply too strong for a young man to ignore, even if it means causing distress to a mother whom he loves. This aspect of his character is depicted in a moving scene, in which Apu has come back to the village to see his ailing mother. They are in a small house, where she is cooking, with her back to him. He is lying down, not far away. She begins to tell him about her loneliness and despair and asks if he will care for her in old age. As she talks and prepare food, the camera shows us what she cannot see: Apu has fallen asleep.

Loving The other side of Apu—his sensitive, loving nature—is shown in several scenes. Perhaps the most moving, however, is one of the episodes when Apu comes back to visit his mother in the village. Only one day after he arrives, and she is happy, he realises that he wants to return. His mother is sad, but Apu appears indifferent to her. He packs up and leaves for the train station, not noticing his mother’s grief. He buys his ticket and waits for the train, but we can see that he is not happy. The train arrives, but in the next shot we see Apu coming back to his mother. Sarbojaya is surprised, hugs him and asks what happened. Apu says only, ‘I missed the train.’

Harihar Harihar (or Hari) is Apu’s father.

Headmaster The headmaster is Apu’s teacher and supporter in the village school.

Bhabataran Bhabataran is Sarbojaya’s uncle, who invites them to live in the village of Mansapota.



(Apu arrives in Calcutta)



(Apu discovers the electric light)



(Sarbojaya tries to save her dying husband)