

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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## COMPANY LIMITED ( SEEMABADDHA ) 1971

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali)

**Contents** (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

### OVERVIEW

*Company Limited* is the second part of Satyajit Ray's so-called Calcutta Trilogy, which also included *The Adversary* (1970) and *The Middleman* (1976). The three films were not made as a series, and the stories are not linked, but they share a focus on a young man trying to make his way in the heartless commercial life of Calcutta. There is a similarity in the storytelling, also, since both *Company Limited* and *The Middleman* are adapted from novellas by the same author (Mani Shankar Mukherjee). The common theme in all the films is the conflict between ethical principles and worldly success, but there is still a key difference in *Company Limited*. Whereas the other two films feature young graduates looking for a job, the protagonist in this one is already employed.

The protagonist is Shyamal, who is a sales manager in a British-owned business that sells fans. Successful and admired by all, he is in line to become one of the directors of the company. Everything goes wrong, however, only because of a tiny flaw in the paint on a large consignment of fans. In order to ensure that the flaw is corrected and no money is lost, Shyamal resorts to deception and falsification. He succeeds in the end, but his happiness is 'limited.'

### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

As with all of Ray's best films, this somewhat overlooked work is successful because it examines issues that are both highly local and yet universal. A business man faced with a moral dilemma, and sliding into a love affair with his wife's sister, is not a uniquely Indian story. But in the Calcutta of the 1960s it was especially relevant for the city, and most of the state of Bengal. In that decade, big, private business was under attack from a centrally-planned economy, and entrepreneurial capitalism was condemned by the leftist parties in power. A senior man in the Shyamal's company quotes from Conrad to offer this advice to him: 'All ambitions are lawful except those which climb upward on the miseries or credulities of mankind.'

The film also exposes the plight of the modern, middle-class urban family. Shyamal and Dolan have only one child, who has been sent to a distant boarding school. When Shyamal's parents arrive from the village, they are shepherded away from their sophisticated friends. The only person who penetrates the nuclear family is Dolan's sister, and her presence results in an intimacy that further threatens to destroy the marriage. All this is in complete contrast to Ray's masterpiece about modern couples adjusting to the demands of city life (*The Big City, Mahanagar*), in which the married couple live with the husband's parents and their two children.

### STORY

*Shyamal's World* The film opens with a voiceover narration by Shyamal, presented as if he is making a pitch to a group of potential investors. 'There are almost a million educated unemployed in Bengal,' he tells us as the camera pans over a city street. 'We don't know how many illiterate ones there are. This is the cause of most social problems. But I am not one of them.' Then we learn about Hindustan Peters, the British firm that makes electrical products like lamps and fans. Shyamal is the sales manager of the fan division. Next, we hear about his childhood, his schooling and his father, who was a teacher. He studied hard, got a job at Peters and worked his way up to his current position. He is married to Dolan, and their son, Raja, goes to a posh school in Darjeeling. They live in a large, modern flat, and he has arranged a separate flat nearby for his father to live in.

*Opportunities* The message is unambiguous: this is a successful, kind and contented man. And things could even get better. The marketing director is suffering from cancer, and Shyamal is up against the manager of the lamp division to take over this more prestigious position. Then we watch as Shyamal attends to his daily routine. He is efficient and confident, but with a touch of arrogance undercutting his charm. We also get an insight into the culture of the company as a whole. The men who run it are smooth and polite, but they are addicted to power and influence. Life at home is much like that in the office. Shyamal smiles to his wife, Dolan, but it is a cool smile. He is business-like, and she is more social and likes to dress up and go to parties. He reads a letter from his son with parental pride.

*Tutul* The placid calm of Shyamal's world is disturbed by the arrival Tutul, his wife's sister. She is unmarried and comes to stay for a few weeks in the married couple's flat. As Dolan and Tutul chat in the sitting room, it is evident that Tutul, while admiring her sister's life, wants more out of life than being a housewife. She is a graduate and has ambitions like Shyamal. She has left her watch at home in Patna, and he lends her one of his watches (a detail that is important later on). Tutul is impressed with his upper-class life-style, going to exclusive clubs and entertaining business friends at the race track. During the scene at the races, we see how the competition of horse racing thrills both Shyamal and Tutul.

*Parents* Shyamal and Dolan hold a cocktail party for his business associates, who talk superciliously about Calcutta's rebellious youth. This upper-class, superficial sophistication is punctured by the appearance of Shyamal's parents, who arrive from a village. Shyamal greets them nervously and ushers them into a back room to avoid any embarrassment in front of his guests.

*Tutul and Shyamal* In the morning, Tutul and Shyamal are the early risers and begin to talk. This renews their friendship, which had been cut off when Shyamal married Dolan seven years ago and left Patna (the town where the sisters were born). Through their conversation, we see that Tutul is interested in the racing-obsessed, whisky-drinking social circles he moves in. Tutul is also impressed with Shyamal, who is successful but only 'plays the game' in order to provide for his family. He doesn't drink too much and remains the thoughtful young man she knew years ago. Shyamal appears a little jealous when he learns that Tutul has a serious boyfriend back in Patna. Although they never express any romantic interest in each other, it is obvious that there is a strong attraction.

*Company crisis* This potential romantic crisis at home is upstaged by a financial crisis at work. In the middle of his efficient day, Shyamal finds the fans in a large shipment are defective. Something is wrong with the paint on 10,000 fans that are due to be sent to Iraq in a few days. Rectifying the defect will take weeks, a delay which would invoke the penalty clause in the contract and the company would lose an enormous amount of money. And, more important, Shyamal would lose face and probably not be promoted to marketing director, as he has been expecting. In a brilliant touch of film-making, Ray keeps the camera on Shyamal's agitated face while in the background we hear the advertising slogan of the company: 'Buy Peter's fan. Cool, cool air. Let the breeze blow and relax completely'

*Solution* Back home, Shyamal confides not in his wife, but in Tutul, who seems to him more intelligent. Tutul says there must be a 'way out', but Shyamal says only an act of god could save him. He says that if there was a problem at the factory, some problem with manufacturing the fans, then he would be absolved of responsibility for the delay. 'Then create a problem,' Tutul says flippantly, 'You can do anything.' Shyamal laughs at this, but the idea sticks in his head and before long he has a plan.

*The plan* Shyamal contacts Mr Talukdar, the personnel manager, and together they come up with a plan to create a disturbance in the factory. If production stops, then they will have a legal (if phoney) reason to delay the shipment of the defective fans. No loss of money or prestige. Both men claim that they have 'clean hands' but that necessity requires them to act in this unethical way. First, however, they must clear the plan with the managing director, and Talukdar also insists that he must be given full credit for the idea.

*Implementation* But how to create a disturbance in the factory sufficient to stop production? This is where Talukdar shows his ruthless streak. His plan is to instigate a strike by goading the unions. There'll be a shutdown. A few bombs will go off and be blamed on the communist-led labour union.

The police will move in and shut down the factory. The matter will go through the courts. 'You can negotiate,' Talukdar advises Shyamal, 'Make a few concessions.'

**Bomb** This is exactly what happens, except that one of the bombs leaves a watchman with life-threatening injuries. Shyamal visits the man in hospital in an affecting scene. The injured man struggles to raise a hand to salute the very man who is responsible for his dire condition.

**Congratulations** The ruse has worked. A resolution to the strike is negotiated and the delay has not cost the company any money and Shyamal retains his prestige. In a happy mood, Shyamal, his wife and Tutul go to a nightclub with belly-dancers. His business rival, the head of the lamps division, congratulates him on the resolution of the strike. And then one of the dancers places a garland around Shyamal's head, sparking clapping from all the guests. In a parallel scene, the next day, Shyamal is promoted to 'associate director' and again receives a round of applause and congratulations.

**Loss** When Shyamal goes home riding high on his success, he meets disappointment. The lift doesn't work and he has to climb seven sets of stairs (a visual metaphor of the corporate ladder?). Inside the flat, Tutul is silent and morose, and he senses her distance from him. Then, in a gesture that marks her break from him, she takes off the watch that he gave her at the beginning of the film and lays it on the table. Shyamal puts his head in his hands. In this wordless final shot, we see that she has rejected his way of life and that he is ashamed of himself.

## THEMES

**Moral frailty** A main theme in this quiet but tragic film is the corruptibility of human nature, the moral frailty of even a decent person, such as Shyamal. Shyamal is ambitious and confident, but he is not ruthless or unusual. Indeed, his fall from grace is made more dramatic by his reputation as a model student, caring father and kind husband. At work, he is polite (if a touch arrogant and sexist) and cheerful. A man responsible for the manufacture of fans does not, on the face of it, appear susceptible to vice. His ethical 'clean bill of health' is underlined by Tutul's memory of him and by her current assessment of him. He has gone to Calcutta and risen in the business world, but he has not fallen into the typical vices that conquer such men: drinking and sexual misbehaviour. But his morality is not robust. It only takes a tiny defect in the fans to destroy the world he has built up for himself and his family. Ray does not suggest that he is a victim. Instead, he is the architect of his own downfall because he cannot or will not see what he is doing. Of course, his blindness is aided by the corporate culture he works in. Shyamal does agonise over his unethical decision, but Talukdar assures him that is simply 'common practice'. 'You've got to play the game,' he says repeatedly. 'What you're doing is not unjust or unusual.' That may be true, but it only reinforces the point that all men (and women) are morally fragile.

**Competition** A second theme is closely related to the first. If human nature is corruptible, the driving force is competition. Men should be ambitious—'Without it, nothing good is achieved,' as the managing director of Peter's Fans says—but when the competitive streak is unchecked, it leads to danger. The inherently sinister nature of competition is dramatised not only in the obvious context of modern business, but also in the parallel world of horse racing. In an early scene, Shyamal takes Tutul to the races, where Ray captures the excitement, almost frenzy, of the crowd. Although the phrase term 'rat race' is never used, Ray makes it clear that competition is the all-consuming energy propelling the story forward. In scene after scene, we hear about 'rivals' and 'promotions.' In a less overt manner, the two sisters are competing for Shyamal's affection. We learn, from Tutul's reminiscences, that they both were attracted to the bright young student Shyamal in Patna. At the halfway point of the romance race, it seems that Dolan has won by marrying the now-successful business man. But wait! Tutul has edged ahead—Shyamal has confided his problems in her, not his wife, and spends more time with her, too. In the final lap, though, the race collapses when Tutul pulls out. The loser is Shyamal.

## CHARACTERS

**Shyamal** Shyamal is the protagonist. Shyamal is a successful business man and nice-looking, too. Happily married, with a son in private boarding school, he looks forward to another big promotion. Naturally, he is confident and optimistic. He has principles, it seems, but they can be ignored if

required. He has no obvious vices, but teeters on the edge of an affair with his sister-in-law. His is in a very precarious situation.

**Confident** From the very beginning, we see that Shyamal is confidence personified. He introduces the film with a narration that is even-toned and yet optimistic at the same time. In the early scenes, he is efficient, personable and smooth in every phase of office work. But there is a special moment that reveals his confidence. He is sitting in the outer office of the managing director, waiting to be called into a meeting. Waiting with him is his rival, head of the lamps division. It seems that they have both 'been sent for', meaning that they might be in line for a commendation. Shyamal greets his competition with what appears to be a genuine smile. The other man offers him a fancy cigarette, which Shyamal turns down, saying sarcastically, 'I'll stick to my humble ones.' A minute later, Shyamal lights a cigarette, inhales and blows a smoke ring into the face of his rival. It is as cool as the fans he manufactures. The next minute, the rival is told he is not needed and can go. Shyamal smiles with extreme confidence.

**Corruptible** Perhaps the revelation of Shyamal's vulnerability should not come as a surprise, but it is sudden. He is told about the problem with the paint on the fans and explains it to Tutul, who accidentally plants the seed of corruption in his mind. The revealing scene comes that same evening, when he goes to see Talukdar, the manager of labour. He explains the problem to him and says, 'There is a way. But it's not in my sphere, more in yours. I mean, I'm not used to taking this kind of action.' Talukdar understands immediately and says, 'Excellent. All along, I have envied you. Your smile, your physique, your sharp personality. But you possess this quality, too. Excellent.' Then Shyamal says that the factory must shut down somehow 'due to unexpected circumstance.' Talukdar nods his head and smiles conspiratorially. Shyamal is disturbed but he does not change his mind. Instead, he reaches for the only justification he can find, saying, 'We had no other way.' The fault, in other words, does not lie with him. But we viewers know that the defect in the fan is a metaphor for his own flaw.

**Tutul** Tutul is Dolan's sister. Tutul, who is the sister of Shyamal's wife, is a deeper character than the male protagonist. She has a college degree, which suggests that she is serious-minded, and she is unmarried, which suggests that she is independent. But in other respects, she is conventional. She is clearly attracted to Shyamal (and has been since they were much younger in their home town), and he is taken by her, but she does not actually flirt with him. Rather, she is something of a moral prude, who finds the cocktail parties and nightclubs frequented by Shyamal and his wife a little distasteful.

**Thoughtful** Unlike her housewife sister, Tutul is a graduate, which suggests that she has an inner life. In the first scene, she spends time looking at the books in her sister's apartment, but her thoughtfulness is more clearly illustrated in a scene at the end of the film. When she visits Shyamal at his office, he shows her the board room, which is something like a shrine to Shyamal. It is large and dark and exclusive. He is proud of it and asks her what she thinks. 'It's ok,' she says noncommittally. 'I'm trying to understand why you like this room so much.' This comment encourages him to explain how the board room reminds him of a race course and its competition. 'Sounds dangerous,' she says and those two words ring a warning bell that he does not hear. This scene reveals Tutul's capacity to understand Shyamal in a way that his wife never could. She is a quiet person, who thinks rather than simply observes.

**Conventional** As an unmarried graduate, Tutul is not the typical docile Indian woman, but neither is she silly or rebellious. In fact, she has an intelligence that makes her suspicious of the fast-living in the metropolis. A good illustration of her conventional character occurs in a late scene in a nightclub. With scantily clad women writhing about in the background and lots of drinking, Shyamal tells Tutul that the dancers make more money than he does. One of the belly-dancers gyrates up to Shyamal and places a garland around his neck. Everyone in the club, including his business rivals, claps as if to celebrate his success. Only Tutul looks concerned, a deep furrow in her brow and her eyes downcast in disapproval. She remains silent through this long scene, apparently upset to realise that Shyamal, her childhood hero, is selling his body in the same way that the dancer does.

**Talukdar** Talukdar is the labour manager at Shyamal's factory. In sharp contrast to Shyamal, Talukdar is short and rather unattractive. He has an obsequious manner, always grinning and rubbing his hands together like a used-car salesman. He is also in another employment category, stuck in his job and unable to climb the corporate ladder.

*Ingratiating* The servile Talukdar did not get where he is without some assets, however; and chief among them is his ingratiating demeanour. He has a way of talking that seeks to please his listener, to flatter, to smooth out any problems and persuade the listener that everything is safe in his hands. This unctuous manner is displayed in a key scene, when he reports back to Shyamal the day after they have made their plans to create unrest in the factory. Shyamal is nervous, but Talukdar sails down the corridor with a winning smile on his sweaty face. Then he sits down and uses his 'don't-you-worry' tone of voice to placate the agitated Shyamal. Everything will go fine, how can it fail? he seems to say with his wide grin and supplicating hands.

*Amoral* The depths of Talukdar's amorality is illustrated in one of the final scenes of this long film. At Shyamal's request, he has created a strike in the factory and arranged for a bomb to be exploded in order to call in the police and have the factory shut. Unfortunately, a watchman is seriously injured by the blast and nearly dies. Shyamal visits the poor man in hospital, but when he returns to the office, Talukdar is not concerned with the man's condition. 'But what if he had died?' the conscience-stricken Shyamal asks. 'How would that affect you?' Talukdar says to reassure him. 'People die every day in Calcutta. If he had died, I would have bought a huge wreath and sent it with your name and condolences.' Ray's film is not political (none of his films are), but he does not flinch from revealing the chilling lack of humanity at the core of big business, as portrayed by Talukdar.

**Dolan** Dolan is Shyamal's wife.



(Shyamal making a deal)



(Shyamal showing the board room to an unimpressed Tutul)



(Talukdar surveys the factory after the bomb explosion)



(The final scene, when Tutul returns Shyamal's watch)



(The two sisters in a happy moment)