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# Ray's 'Pratidwandi'

## an interpretation *The Adversary*

(Of all the films made by Satyajit Ray, 'Pratidwandi' is considered to be his "best". An analysis of the film, in depth, has been made by the author to provide a better appreciation of the film.)

By T. G. Vaidyanathan

TO ASK whether 'Pratidwandi' marks a fresh departure for Satyajit Ray is to question whether it continues to depict the themes of his earlier works. And, to be sure, some of his earlier themes do appear in 'Pratidwandi' with newer shifts of emphasis and a slightly different focus. For instance, there is the theme of childhood innocence (the 'Apu' trilogy), treated here with a dimension new in Ray, for childhood is for the first time presented beyond the sentimental haze of adult nostalgia and melancholy shadows already darken the foreground in these deceptively placid scenes. Then there is the theme of woman's emancipation (sounded first in 'Charulata' and treated more systematically in 'Mahanagar') taken here much further in the character of Siddharta's younger sister, to the point indeed of assuming alarming proportions in the story.

The problems, too, of a middle-class family in Calcutta are treated with depth and subtlety and Ray's customary ability to focus the issues in a few telling scenes of probing intensity comes to the fore. And yet 'Pratidwandi' goes a good way beyond most of the earlier films (including even the rather complex 'Nayak') and broadens its canvas to take in new elements in the fast-changing milieu of Calcutta. The short telling scene with the hippies and the even shorter scene at the night club are inconceivable earlier. (It occurs soon after the first interview and Siddharta is in a rather dejected mood which changes to one of mounting irritation as the hippies make some simplistic remarks about India). Also, for the first time, Ray's own attitude to his medium is sober and unself-conscious. There are, for instance, two sequences in a cinema hall—the first, a news documentary dealing with budget proposals interrupted by a bomb explosion in the theatre, the second, an old college friend taking Siddharta to a

film society showing a Swedish film "with no cuts". This, too, turns out to be something of a documentary (a Masters and Johnson type of investigation) and while Siddharta is only faintly interested, his friend is openly bored.

### Ray's Attitude

In 'Apu Sansar', Ray showed film clips from an old-style mythological movie and in 'Nayak', even a scene was shown in the process of being filmed but the whole thing was, once again, in the degenerate theatrical



Diritman Chatterjee in 'Pratidwandi'.  
(Photo: Nemai Ghosh)

tradition. Ray's own attitude was a curious blend of nostalgia and condescension but in 'Pratidwandi' these attitudes are held in abeyance and there is a notable absence of self-consciousness. Nostalgia is allowed to seep through only twice: both times on the sound-track when old movie songs are used, but otherwise Ray is very sparing in his evocation of emotion. Unusually for him, he even

uses the negative to keep down the emotional temperature of scenes: notably in the opening sequence of the film dealing with the death of Siddharta's father and again in a few crucial frames during the scene between the prostitute and Siddharta.

The formal treatment, too, is something of a fresh departure. Basically the technique of recall was used with telling effect in 'Nayak', as were the dreams that sometimes turned into nightmares. In 'Pratidwandi', the line that divides recall from fantasy, from nightmare, is a continually dwindling one. There are those recalls of childhood already referred to but on closer inspection it looks as if Ray is doing a bit of amateur psycho-analysis on the side in these scenes. Early experiences and predilections are used as stern determinants, grim foreclosures of future possibilities. There is an early episode which shows Siddharta, about 6 or 7, reading under a tree when he is called to witness the cutting of a chicken's neck. He flinches on seeing the dismembered chick; Tunu, his brother, doesn't and an equation is suggested through the placement of the recall (it is during an argument about politics with his brother) between his introversion and over-sensitivity and his brother's subsequent conversion to Naxalism. More generally, the other scenes of recall in the film (especially the ones involving his sister) invariably serve to reinforce the hold of the past on the present with the result that present actions appear as a continuation of past actions.

### "Success Fantasies"

In a somewhat different category of recall are the throwbacks to his more recent medical studies. There is that delightful early scene of the Zebra crossing when the sight of a sexually attractive girl causes him to remember a physiology lecture on the lymphatics of the female breast! And during that



beautifully contrived final interview the long line of waiting candidates appear as so many skeletons in a scene of extraordinary power and wit. In a significant middle category are the rather romantic personal fantasies of himself as Che Guevara as he looks into a hand mirror or of himself as a well-dressed young man in the scene (before the first interview) where he waits for the tailor to mend his pants. Sharply opposed to these "success fantasies" are the ones of a gnawing personal inadequacy and helplessness.

Notable here is the fantasied shooting of his sister's boss when he goes to visit him, on what must be by any standards, an extraordinary mission for a young man of twenty-five. Even the brief fantasy of Siddharta waiting at a way-side place missing a crowded bus (this while he is being offered a job as a medical representative and told that it would involve a bit of getting about) belongs here as symptomatic of his bafflement in the face of a recalcitrant reality.

And, finally, there are the outright dreams and nightmares. After the nightmare of being guillotined he wakes up in a sweat and outside is heard the melancholy barking of dogs. Cats, too, are fighting in a back alley and Ray captures the eerie nocturnal mood of this scene with barometric accuracy. Soon after this Siddharta has another dream which deserves very special consideration as it is the visual and tonal fulcrum of the film; in it are present all the complex, interweaving elements of Siddharta's biography. No other sequence of images is so commanding and compelling as this one and here, if anywhere, seems to lie the key to Siddharta's personality.

### The Key Dream

In this dream we see the three men who interviewed Siddharta for the job at the Botanical Survey of India—in negative, which is used four times in all in the picture. Then an overhead view of plains (possibly meant to be Vietnam since bombing is heard, also for him Vietnam is associated with the interview) as seen from a moving plane; a shot of a beach and, in the foreground, a fetus, followed by a shot of a women's legs in swimming trunks and fetus again. Siddharta's sister now appears as the woman in the bathing suit and in the background we see a crowd collected

in front of an Ambassador car hitting someone (this is clearly an echo of the incident in the film witnessed by Siddharta where a Mercedes is involved similarly). Next we cut to a line of soldiers aiming their guns at a proudly defiant, nay, smiling Tunu, then soldiers in negative who shoot. As Tunu falls, Siddharta's sister, in nurse's uniform, runs towards the fallen man and then abruptly the face of the sister changes to that of his girl, Keya.

Since I regard this a key dream I shall attempt to comment on Siddharta's character by analysing its implications. Even if the crux of the dream is the shooting of Tunu, one notes that this in itself does not jolt Siddharta out of his sleep. It is the appearance of (a) his sister in a nurse's uniform and (b) the transformation of his sister into his girl that proves too much for Siddharta to bear. His relations with his sister are a little strange and over-charged and, certainly, his attitude to her possible affair with her boss is wildly exaggerated in one so otherwise sophisticated. He calls the man (Sanyal) a "scoundrel" although only earlier when Mrs. Sanyal had called to complain to Siddharta's mother about her daughter's behaviour he had dismissed her as a "neurotic".

In spite of this he continues to harbour the worst suspicions about his sister. His cross-examination of her when she returns home late verges on the sado-masochistic as if he secretly wants his worst suspicions to be true. To mollify his suspicions and to generally pacify him, she talks to him frankly about her plans to be a model and takes him to the terrace to show him some of the steps she has been learning at a dancing school. But even this he turns, in his possessiveness, into a fantasy of her dancing in the arms of a stranger. There is indeed a strong suspicion of incest about his attitude; perhaps this explains his odd behaviour when his friend, Adinath, takes him to visit a nurse who is a part-time prostitute. One notes that physically the nurse resembles his sister—interestingly his sister too is shown as letting down her hair the first time we see her and the suggested resemblance is reinforced by Siddharta's belief that his sister is immoral—a belief that surfaces in the dream when his sister appears in a nurse's uniform. We can probably understand now why he

runs away from the encounter with the prostitute: It is not his inexperience so much as his having come face to face with the forbidden desire.

### Sexual Problem?

One notes again that he cannot bear to look at the attractive nurse—he bolts even before the proceedings have properly started. "Ready—Steady—Go"—the words of the children's game heard as a refrain throughout the sequence serve as an ironic commentary on his failure and subtly draw attention to the working of Siddharta's mind, with its inbuilt suggestion of regression to childhood. Certainly Siddharta has sexual problems of an unusual kind. The fact that in the dream the face of his sister changes to that of his girl, Keya, merely compounds the difficulties, and generalises it, without suggesting a precise location for them.

If the film had been consistent this sexual problem could have been linked up with his general failure and, in particular, his failure to land a job. And, indeed, there are quite a few episodes in the film that point in this direction. Surely the scene where Siddharta abruptly leaves Mr. Sanyal's house in a mood of anger and irritation without properly taking leave; his schizophrenic division of sympathies in the street accident involving the Mercedes-Benz; his awkwardness and embarrassment in the scene with Keya's father and aunt—all these are indices of the deeper personality problems he faces. But Ray curiously strengthens (or weakens?) his hand by suggesting an entirely different explanation. In this new scheme of explanation it is not incestuous sex but the unfeeling bureaucracy that is the whipping boy. This is probably why he places the two interviews strategically at either end of the film narrative to act almost as framing devices. For instance the whole point of the first interview seems to be to hold up to ridicule the intellectual barrenness of the interviewing Board, their total unfitness to appraise the calibre of the younger generation.

### Generation Gap

When asked by one of the members: "Who was the Prime Minister of England at the time of independence?", Siddharta drily queries: "Whose independence?" He is asked inane questions like: "What is your aim in life?"



The climax of this interview is reached when he is asked by the South Indian Chairman of the Board about the most important event of the decade. For Siddharta, as indeed for a whole generation of the under 30's it is the war in Vietnam. Offered the moon-landing as an alternative, Siddharta replies that it was predictable on the basis of the advances made in space technology. Upon which he is asked, quizzically, by the same luminary, whether he is a communist, and Siddharta observes that one doesn't have to be a communist to be moved by what is happening in Vietnam. It is the yawning generation gap that sociologists speak about.

Siddharta of course does not get the job but we get the message. The bureaucracy has a lot of musty ideas about politics and a few moral hang-ups ("What is your aim in life?") rendering it either ridiculous or out of date. The second interview which occurs at the end of the film reinforces the effect of the first interview. Here the point singled out for special treatment is the inhuman callousness of the bureaucracy. Ray achieves a width of social comment in these beautifully contrived sequences and some of his cameos are memorable. Acutely observed, for instance, is the young man, immaculately dressed in a suit, whose Anglicisation stands in marked contrast with the rest of the motely crowd some of whom are anxious if the questions will be in English. With unerring instinct Ray focuses in particular on the squeak of the young man's shoes and makes it the ground note of not only Siddharta's ruminations but indeed of the whole farcical proceedings: it serves as a radical metaphor of class. The squeak is a sinister reminder of what we have already heard before: Mr. Sanyal's approach to the living room, where Siddharta is waiting for him, is prefaced by the same squeak of his shoes. This young man, too, Ray seems to be saying, will turn into a Sanyal soon. He, too, will take his pretty secretary out after office hours to show her his new house in the country.

### Indictment Complete

It is of the utmost significance that when one of the candidates faints, our proto-Sanyal is absolutely impervious to what has happened: he continues his methodical peregrinations

with a clockwork regularity well worthy of his class! Switching his line of attack, Ray now turns the spotlight on the bloody-mindedness of the ruling bureaucracy. When Siddharta rushes in to report the fainting and generally complain of the lack of facilities for the candidates, another member of the power elite observes sagely that the young man has obviously a poor constitution for the job! The indictment of the system is now complete. And when Siddharta charges into the room like one possessed and hurls abuse—and chairs—at the whole bloody lot, we feel the essential rightness of his actions (when I saw the film in Calcutta the approval by the audience of Siddharta's actions at this point was unmistakable). This is the real climax of the film in so far as such a film permits of one. But alas! the fierce logic of the indictment is contradicted by the whole tenor of the film. If sisters turn immoral, brothers revolutionary, uncles nuisances, foreigners imperceptive and trusted close friends either rifle the contents of Red Cross collection boxes or seek amusement in inane foreign films or in brothels then.... then the bureaucracy alone cannot be made the scapegoat of Siddharta's troubles. Impaled on the horns of this dilemma of his own making, Ray offers us the metaphor of the singing bird in the closing minutes of his film.

The singing bird is first introduced as a *motif* during a heated exchange with his sister about her goings-on. When Siddharta angrily calls the man a scoundrel his sister exclaims: "Dadal" and at once we cut to a childhood scene when Siddharta is seen sitting at the edge of a small lake and his sister calls his attention to a song-bird. The song bird figures again in one of Siddharta's conversations with his brother Tunu to whom he says at one point: "I doubt whether you will remember the bird", evidently intending it as an oblique comment on his rejection of spiritual values in pursuit of a life of political action. Again in the Chinese restaurant to which his friend, Adinath, has taken him, Siddharta asks if he could get the song bird and they actually go to an aviary to try and get one. But in the surrounding babel of noises, Siddharta cannot find his bird and there is a note of quiet desperation as he does not even attempt to whistle the bird's

tune when asked by his friend to do so. And then, dramatically, at the end of the film the song of the bird is heard again outside Siddharta's hotel room in Balurghat to which he has been sent as a medical representative. He is about to light a cigarette when he suddenly hears the bird, which has proved elusive all his life, and as he goes to the adjoining terrace the muffled sounds of a funeral procession reach his ears. The song bird is no longer heard and there is a freeze of Siddharta and his unlit cigarette.

### Film's Second Climax

This is the film's second climax, if you like. Ray is using the song-bird as Antonioni uses the mime group at the end of 'Blow-Up'. But Antonioni had after all prepared us for their reappearance in the very opening shot of the film in which they first appear. But Ray plants the song-bird in the middle of the film in some arbitrarily motivated sequences after he has unfolded a good deal of the plot and brings it back for an encore well after the final curtain. But the burden of the bird's song (the words of the chant from the procession—"Ram Nam Satya Hai"—are obviously intended as a gloss on the song) is not in any way relevant to the problems of this modern Siddharta. Ray can draw corny parallels between his hero and the Enlightened One (and the film is unsparing with these, starting with the death at the beginning) but they serve only to emphasise the distance we have travelled since those palmy days. Problems like mass unemployment are recent and endemic to a post-industrial society and will not allow reduction to the terms of ancient and mythical frameworks. If awakening then was to Truth and the Eight-fold Path, now it is to politics and the ethics of commitment. Where the Buddha sat meditating under the Bodhi tree this modern Siddharta flees the world—to become a medical representative! The freeze in 'Pratidwandi' re-enacts Siddharta's familiar bewilderment when faced by conflicting choices but disguises this by the pretty metaphor of a forgotten song. It is after all a lame conclusion to give us after all the early promises of the film. The failure of the film to give Siddharta's failure a coherent form is failure plain and simple and no ornithological sleight of hand could give it a weightier and denser meaning.