Literary Studies
Volume 39, March 2026
[Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Indexed in NepJOL]
Print ISSN: 2091-1484
DOI: https://doi.org10.3126/litstud.v39i1.91753

Literary Association of Nepal (LAN)
Dillibazar, Kathmandu, Nepal
URL: www.literarynepal.org.np

Reforming the Apu Trilogy: Reading, Watching, and again Reading Sarbajaya

Mousumi Hazra

Abstract

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's The Apu Trilogy is one of the canonical references to look back at 1950s rural Bengal, its lives portrayed through the characters fated to tragic destinies and the journey of Apu (the protagonist) through struggles, despair, and misfortune. The novels received worldwide recognition and added several dimensions to it with the cinematic adaptation of Satyajit Ray. The journey from page to screen has been variously experimented with in the hands of Ray. This study aims to reflect on the journey of the trilogy, specifically, the character of Sarbajaya, which is continued in the poem "Me, Sarbajaya" (2021) by Indian poet and translator Zinia Mitra. This paper looks at the transfigurative journey of the character Sarbajaya, who, in the poem, writes a letter to her son Apu, lamenting her last words and her lack of emotional company in her decaying days. "The poem was a direct inspiration of the film, not of the novel," as Mitra has put it. However, apart from an 'unfaithful' adaptation, the poem speaks what is not spoken in the film and the voice that has not been heard yet. I aim to question how poetry, one of the forms of literature, makes the visual character of Sarbajaya 'read' again, with a voice where she speaks of her needs and expectations, and essentially how modernity, which was a thriving zeal for Apu's aspiration, treated Sarbajaya, the Sarbajaya of the poem. In that sense, is it a 'poetic' adaptation, looking back at the source text, therefore, the film, which in turn is adapted from the novel?

Keywords: Sarbajaya, screen, transfiguration, words, modernity.

Introduction

"I believe that for different forms of art there are corresponding series of poetic thoughts, such that a thought can never be expressed in terms of a form that does not correspond to it" (Lotman 33). The term 'adaptation' in the pen of George

Bluestone has always been interpreted as "easy to recognize how a poor film 'destroys' a superior novel. What has not been sufficiently recognized is that such destruction is inevitable…the filmist becomes not a translator for an established author, but a new author in his own right" (Bluestone 62). Talking about adaptation invites a few determinants like specificity, fidelity, and originality that seem to occupy the discussion regarding the text and its adapted frame. This act of transforming shifts the paradigm of reception through a different re-reading of the text, and not always a pleasant one. But prior to this act of transition, a relationship between the text and its adapted frame requires the possible readers who consider the text to be exposed to multiple interpretations and hence, 'destroyable'. Thus, any content framed by a particular form implies a breakage within its existing form, to find another place in the hands of its readers, to play with its other potential referents.

The adapter, always a reader, destabilises the authorial vision of the text through a subjective, imaginative rendition. It is always discussed that literature enables a reading space to visualise a narrative, the pages allow for a room of an imagined world, which can be subjectively specific. However, the mere conceptualization of adapting a text from page to screen, from the practice of reading to the practice of watching, delimits the potential of adaptation as merely a transformation between forms. In reality, the discourse of adaptation boils down to multiple and plural ways of decentring the authors and the texts, in the hands of the readers who read, watch, and re-read the text. Apart from the extensive study done on adapting films from literature, this study is centred around a literature that is adapted from a visual text. In that, it indicates a reversal from screen to page, going back to a journey of articulating the non-spoken, the silent implications of cinema, through language.

In this study, I aim to trace the character of Sarbajaya from Ray's The Apu Trilogy in a threefold manner, where it is primarily visioned through a novel, envisioned through a film, and re-visioned through a poem. The director of The Apu Trilogy, Satyajit Ray, draws and at the same time drops from the novel in numerous and symbolic ways, owing to the cinematic form of narration. The poem "Me, Sarbajaya" (2021), by Indian Poet, author, and translator Zinia Mitra, is a testament of how the visual form nourishes other faculties of representation, which can complement the theme with the inherently stylistic and figurative features. This study primarily selects its two points of reference where the character of Sarbajaya is screened, therefore the second film from the trilogy, Aparajito (1956), and where Sarbajaya is written (maybe, writes), consequently the poem, "Me,

Sarbajaya". This approach attempts to explain the domains of imaging and imaginary, the faculties that the adapted form, poetry, offers in terms of (re) presenting Sarbajaya, imbued with a poetic journey with herself.

Anna Kornbluh, in her book titled The Order of Things: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space, postulates that the study of literary form "is at root the analysis of how language furnishes the order of forms a medium for composing sustained repetitions, delimited contours, performative conjurings, and synthetic abstractions" (5). Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, in his novel Aparajito (1932), which is a sequel to Pather Panchali (1929), captures Apu growing up as an adult, who had lost his father Harihar and sister Durga, after being displaced and dispossessed. Apu moves with his mother, Sarbajaya, from place to place in search of a settlement. After Benares, it is in the village, Mansapota, that Apu and Sarbajaya 'settle' to aspire for a better life. Both Bandyopadhyay and Ray, in their text, portray the rural life of Mansapota extensively, where Sarbajaya seems to have deciphered a way of living life, and Apu earns a living as a priest, following his father's profession to sustain themselves.

Throughout the novel, Sarbajaya is depicted as a self-sacrificing woman who, despite being stifled by poverty, never compromises her ethics with immorality. This depiction is minutely contrasted with the aspiring dreams of Apu, who wants to perceive the art of living with a curious and wondering mind. This aspiration, suggestive of its time, was imbued with the narratives of modernity, giving birth to negotiations with morally conflicting and ethical dilemmas. Satyajit Ray took the camera to intensify this dilemma through the characters of Apu and Sarbajaya, who have different interpretations of the world. Although with several images of the train, the globe, and the books, Apu is portrayed as the aspiring and determined protagonist in the film, representing modernity. Towards the end, Ray delineates a picture of Sarbajaya that stands more than a figuration of motherhood and sacrifice. Ray leaves Sarbajaya with an urge to live a content life with Apu, but due to her decaying health condition, she cannot sustain the hope of Apu's homecoming.

Sarbajaya wanted to write a letter to Apu describing her deathbed days, but she never ended up writing the letter. Towards the end of the film, we are informed of Sarbajaya's demise through Apu's face when he comes home to see her mother. This conversation that the film communicates through an absolute absence of speech is conveyed to the viewers by Ray's camera. One of the viewers of this linguistically absent conversation is Zinia Mitra. In her poem "Me, Sarbajaya", published in 2021, Mitra writes this absence from the perspective of Sarbajaya.

The poem, in the form of a letter which Sarbajaya never wrote to Apu, articulates Sarbajaya's lamenting state of mind and her urge to live more if accompanied by her son. Along with it, the poem draws on a rich description of nature and its intricacies into the relationships that the human and non-human share. Along with wording the depiction adapted from the visual narration of the film, the poem runs a nuanced feminist undertone that voices the persona of Sarbajaya, away from being a mere respondent to Apu's modernity.

As the opening quotation of this study implies, any form is bound to affect the content through its stylistic and communicative essence, which corresponds to the tone, rhythm, and subject of the text. Just as Ray transformed the meaningful language into meaningful absence of language, borrowing the cinematic tropes of adaptation, Mitra also transforms the absence of conversation and the sight of vast, never-ending horizontal sky into a meaningful interwoven poetic form:

Apu, this is the letter I never wrote to you
Carrying a world of huff inside me. (lines 1-2)

This adaptation from the screen to the poem refers to the character of Sarbajaya, who comes up with a voice for her emotional needs. The poem is imbued with a deep poetic voice that transfigures Sarbajaya into someone who speaks for herself. The letter she could not write to Apu has witnessed all of her unutterable words, how she suffered, how, at times, she wanted Apu by her side. The clouded desire of Sarbajaya came alive on the page through the poem. There are imageries in the poem that look back at the visuals of nature of the film, the village roads with a faded silhouette of Apu coming to Sarbajaya, and residues that adolescent Apu left at the corners of the village; all these are reflections that Mitra penned through her poem. There are widespread studies about the Apu trilogy, resonating with the genre of Bildungsroman; therefore, Apu's coming of age, but this literary adaptation of the cinema, through its thematic and formal deviation, leaves a new way to perceive transformations, transition, and transfiguration of the character, Sarbajaya.

The Imagist poet, Richard Aldington, says, "We do not insist upon free verse as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as for a principle of liberty" (qtd. in Levine 4). Hence, the assertion stands for the meaningful existence of any form or genre to hold a text with its entirety of meaning, rather than just creating an alignment with words. The form enables a discourse of "affordances" where the specific structures and aspects contaminate the content:

Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation, and memorization. Networks afford connection and circulation, and the narratives afford the connection of events over

time. The sonnets, brief and condensed, best affords a single idea or experience, a moment's monument, while the triple-decker novels afford elaborate processes of character development in multiplot social contexts…A panoptic arrangement of space, whatever it takes shape, will always afford a certain kind of disciplinary power; a hierarchy will always afford inequality. (Levine 6)

Hence, the question at the core of this study is what does poetry 'afford'? How does the form of a poem affect the narrative or moment? In the context of this study, poetry, unlike the novel or film, is a compact journey of words that continuously spills out of its structures to refer to a transcendent and imaginary formation of thoughts. As John Stuart Mill suggests, "All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy…poetry is the natural fruit of solitude and meditation; eloquence, of intercourse with the world" (Mill 4). Thereafter, poetry is made up of its stylistic and figurative contours to convey subjective thoughts in a rhythmic and rhetorical pattern. In this present discussion of adaptation from a visual narrative to a poem, "Me, Sarbajaya" offers many poetic elements that Mitra creatively engineers to provide a meaningful addition to the Apu trilogy.

In a personal interview with Mitra, she said, the poetic drive behind re-capturing and re-writing Sarbajaya lies in the word Abhimaan (she uses the word "huff" for it). In Ray's Aparajito, Sarbajaya is depicted as a woman of integrity and resilience. We witness her not reaching anybody in need, or showing her life in any victimized way. However, one cannot totally admire Sarbajaya because she also possesses a few unpleasant characteristics (Such as when she behaves inhumanely with Indira Thakuroon). Towards the end, Sarbajaya is depicted as a static persona, holding herself only through the self-reflections of the sacrifices she made and the lifelong poverty she faced. The Bengali word abhimaan refers to a state of mind that amalgamates love, anger, and disappointment; a space of incapable articulation. The silent and intense depiction of her face with a close camera shot suggests such deeply rooted emotions and silence, "burdened with words":

I did not write to you
My silence was heavy with too many words. (Mitra, lines 46-47)

Figure 1: Sarbajaya and her heavy silence

The above still from the film showcases an intense portrayal of abhimaan, suggesting a state between an urge to articulate and not articulating at all. In the poem, this abhimaan is articulated in the form of a letter that Sarbajaya wanted to write to Apu, but could not. In Aparajito specifically, and primarily, in the Apu Trilogy, the unvanquished is referred to as Apu, where the character of Sarbajaya only serves as scaffolding in Apu's journey. In the dominant narrative of modernity, man and knowledge, Sarbajaya signifies the rural landscape and human relationships enmeshed with life's journey. Against this background of rural portrayal of life, modernity is emphasised in the film as its exact contradiction. Apu's departure for Kolkata echoes his departure from the pastoral landscape of Mansapota, Apu's childhood, and the whistle of the train. In the later part of the film, Sarbajaya's existence lies only in the Tulsi Mancha, the pond where Apu used to dip, the path through which Apu used to come home and leave. These visual scenarios are delineated through words in the poem, to reinvoke Sarbajaya relying on the giant tree during her deteriorating health condition:

Waiting in silence with the entire ecosystem
the movements of earthworms and water- snakes
in my blood. Then, your shadow began to move away
from my courtyard and I spread out
my eyes throughout the long days along the curved
dun mud road until
the world turned an empty twilight. Your absence
the big black bending trees in illusion. (Mitra, lines 36-43)


Figures 2 & 3: Apu's departure from Mansapota and from Sarbajaya

The Apu Trilogy can never be disassociated from the symbols it offers. Most prevalent and widely discussed is the symbol of the train. Train, in the course of the trilogy, signifies movement, technology, development, and human capability. Specifically, in Aparajito, Apu's viewing of the train through the broken door conveys an aspirational urge of Apu towards knowledge, learning, and towards a better life. Hence, the metaphor of the train associates the viewers with the narrative's vision, the vision of Apu. But, in the concerned poem, Sarbajaya looks sceptically at the moving train as it continually destabilizes the atemporality of settlement, conceptualizing her entire life shaped by continuous displacement. Sarbajaya's scream cinematically merged with the whistle of the train when her husband Harihar died. With Apu's growing aspiration, the train detaches Apu from Sarbajaya, and Apu's detachment from her mother becomes synonymous with his detachment from nature as well. In the poem, Sarbajaya expresses her anguish towards the train as it has caused all the tragic misfortune in her life. She says:

That bloomed purple in the grey pond
the mud road, the slant of our doorway,
hear the banana leaves sliced by the wind
the rail crush our dreams. (Mitra, lines 6-9)

The tone of the poem captures Sarbajaya as a woman with only one 'ambition' in life, which is to be with her son, Apu. We see the protective nature of Sarbajaya for her son when she yells at Apu for taking a bath for too long in the pond

and searches for him when he is not around. Several actions throughout the film suggest that Sarbajaya's life is intricately woven with Apu's. Sarbajaya is seen tilted against the door when Apu leaves, looking at the path until Apu disappears, but here Apu's departure is not an emotional one. Instead, Apu rushed to catch the train without looking back at his mother. Sarbajaya's existence without Apu seems to be breaking apart as Mitra writes, "circles breaking around you like my protective love" (lines 12-13). This weakening of Sarbajaya's love, hold, and dependency comes at the expense of Apu's modern urge to free himself from any kind of confinement or captivity. As the poet says in an interview:

The poem is Sarbajaya's lamentation because I wanted to speak out the unspoken words of Sarbajaya, words unheard by Apu. There is both a 'speaking for' and 'representation' here not because there is a lack of representation, as we have discussed. It is Sarbajaya…a mother's love and her sighs remain unrepresented because of her abhimaan. (Mitra 6)

In an interview with the poet Marjorie Perloff, published in the book Poetics in a New Key, Perloff describes the essential nature of poetry as a form that plays or experiments with the very formation of language. He says, "If nothing is done with language, no matter how lofty or apropos the theme, it is not poetry" (Perloff 175). Having conceded the perspective that the poem is an experiential journey of Sarbajaya's deep-rooted lamentation, conveyed through a defamiliarized or over-familiarized version of language. The poem, through its subjective unravelling of words, not only curves out a remarkable space for Sarbajaya as a persona who speaks for herself in the face of adversity, but also, through the form of the poem, takes the discussion of the Apu Trilogy through a different perspective – the perspective of modernity.

In the film, Apu always travels with the globe in his hand; his journey throughout has always been outward. In the scene, when his school headmaster gave Apu several books, they incorporated several books on knowledge about the world, such as the North Pole, Espinos, Africa, scientific discovery, and so on. The headmaster says, "If you do not read certain books, your mind will not be liberated" (Aparajito, 00:50:45-00:51:02). Such liberation of the mind through knowledge paves the way for Apu towards modernity. Marshall Berman, in his book All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity upholds the ideology of equating masculinity with modernity and femininity with tradition: "The modern individual is assumed to be an autonomous male free of familial and communal ties" (Berman 56). Hence, modernity requires untying oneself from tradition, from domesticity, and one's emotional roots. In the film, Apu is a representative of such

a modern figure, but Sarbajaya, who aspires for a simple, happy life with Apu amidst the natural landscape of Mansapota, symbolises a regression in the lens of modernity.

The ignorance of her desires and her needs, by modernity and by Apu as a modern emblem, marks Sarbajaya as a peripheral figure amidst the rapid civilisation of human life. In "Me, Sarbajaya", Mitra questions the modernity that excludes certain aspects of human beings as feminine and apolitical. The dominant alignment that modernity sets renders desires and emotional needs as inferior in the dreams of modern development. When in the poem, Sarbajaya speaks for herself, her desires, needs, and expectations, Mitra prioritizes the private, timeless emotions of Sarbajaya that recognize her with subjectivity. It is also deciphered in the film for a moment, when she says to Apu rhetorically, "You are going to Kolkata, what about me? Am I no one?" (translated from, ami ki baaner jawle bheshe esechhi?). This urge is embodied in the poetic form when Sarbajaya utters:

It took you to college, to Kolkata
away from me. I did want you
to study further, secretly nurturing
pride in your achievement like a red
hibiscus. I squeezed my heart
to let you go. (Mitra, lines 29-34)

Figures 4 & 5: Sarbajaya, with the entire nature waits for Apu

Rita Felski, in her book, The Gender of Modernity (1995), questions what it is to be modern, to be driven by the rationale of progress and reason. Felski asserts that women occupy a space of "atemporal authenticity", away from the fragmentation and alienation of modern life (16). That feminine values of intimacy and desire remain always outside the logic of modernity, which is "predicated on the absence

of the Other and the erasure of feminine agency and desire" (Felski 17). This poem, through its subjective and meditative form, gives voice to such articulations that are 'othered' in the accelerating development of modernity, offering another window through which to perceive historical time. Beyond the categorization of Sarbajaya as a self-sacrificing mother, Sarbajaya embodies a modern urge to be taken care of and accepted with her inherent values.

Whereas, on the one hand, Ray laid bare the conflict and distance between Apu and Sarbajaya with nuanced cinematic features, Mitra, on the other hand, emphasizes Sarbajaya's inclinations towards a happy, content life with Apu. Modernity, for Sarbajaya, does not lie in the city life, urbanisation, or in knowledge, but in the lap of nature where Apu grew up, in the muddy road, in the pond, the trees, and in her "protective love" for Apu (Mitra, line 13). As Mitra beautifully sums up Sarbajaya's modernity and recognizes it with as much importance as Apu's globe:

I have kept our house immaculate
in my mind's attic
the tulsi mancha, the kitchen
the clock you made –you and me
lived a brief happy life here, perhaps your green nostalgia
will sometimes bring you to me. (lines 51-56)

Figures 6: Apu and the train

However, the vertical space of a poem and the horizontal space of film communicate differently with readers, translating not only the form, but also letting the form contaminate the content in a specific way. In the book The Pictorial Third: An Essay into Intermedial Criticism (2018), the author Lilliane Louvel says "Poetry is a speaking painting…it is endowed with a positive quality, that of speech" (Louvel 5). In the context of the discussed poem, Sarbajaya articulates the letter she could not write to Apu; she speaks of her emotional needs, of wanting to be loved, apart from the sacrifices she made in her entire life. "Me, Sarbajaya" not only becomes a poem of Sarbajaya's life, but also intrudes on the extensively discussed and dominant theme of the Apu Trilogy. When coming to the poem as an adaptation of the film Aparajito, Mitra certainly does not adhere to the fidelity or originality of the former text. The poem deviates from the film in many ways, resisting any suitable simulation of the source text. In that, just as Satyajit Ray filmed Aparajito from the original novel, making it a different artistic entity by several exclusions and inclusions, Mitra, through "Me, Sarbajaya," makes the poem identifiable as a different journey of Sarbajaya, translating Sarbajaya's abhimaan into a modern urge, drawing recognition to the readers and viewers of the Apu Trilogy:

Fidelity to its source text—whether it is conceived as success in re-creating specific textual details or the effect of the whole—is a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation's value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense…The only remake that would have maintained perfect fidelity to the original text would have been a re-release of that text. (Leitch 162)

Works Cited

Aparajito. Directed by Satyajit Ray, Epic Films, 1956.

Berman, Marshall. All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity. Verso, 1983.

Bluestone, George. Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema. California University Press, 1966.

Bora, Armand. "The Process of Adapting a Literary Work: A Multifaceted Methodological Approach." POLIS, vol. 23, no. 2, 2024, pp. 111-24.

Felski, Rita. The Gender of Modernity. Harvard University Press, 1995.

Kornbluh, Anna. The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space. The University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Leitch, T. M. "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory." Criticism,

vol. 45, no. 2, 2003, pp. 149-71, https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.2004.0001.
Levine, Caroline. Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network. Princeton University Press, 2015.
Lotman, Y. The Structure of Artistic Text. Translated by R. Vroon, University of Michigan Press, 1977.
Louvel, Liliane. The Pictorial Third: An Essay into Intermedial Criticism. Translated by Angeliki Tseti, Routledge, 2018.
Mill, John Stuart. "What Is Poetry?". University of Toronto Quarterly, vol. 29, no. 6, July 1960, pp. 420-39, https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.29.4.420.
Mitra, Zinia. "Me, Sarbajaya." Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, no. 83, Nov. 2021, pp. 233-34, https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2021.83.18.
---. Personal interview. 20 May 2024.
Perloff, Marjorie. Poetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays. The University of Chicago Press, 2013.