



**Book Review --- In Search of Voice and Identity: Women of Satyajit Ray's Family**

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**Name of the book: In Search of Voice and Identity: Women of Satyajit Ray's Family**

**Author:** Tumpa Mukherjee

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**Reviewer details:**

*In Search of Voice and Identity: Women of Satyajit Ray's Family* is a well-researched book in the field of Gender Studies. The author traces the life and achievements of the key women folks in Satyajit Ray's family across generations. In the Foreword written by Prasad Ranjan Ray, a living member of the Ray family and former Additional Chief Secretary, Government of West Bengal, mention has been made how Tumpa Mukherjee gathered information from occasional writings and references left by the members of the illustrious Ray family and how painstakingly she had conducted the interviews with the living family members and how she has observed, interpreted personal and historical documents through introspection.

The book has a Foreword, a Preface, Acknowledgements, a Glossary where Bengali terms have been explained in English, a note on the Abbreviations used and a Family Tree of the Rays before the Content page. A twenty-page introduction is followed by the accounts of the women's lives which are again categorised under Daughters-in-law, Daughters and Granddaughters. A look at the Content Page gives us the drift and the role which the author wants to ascribe to each of the women in the Ray family. Thus, Bidhumukhi Debi gets her identity as the matriarch, Suprabha Ray is termed as the unvanquished, Bijaya Ray is acknowledged as the pillar behind Satyajit Ray and Lalita Ray gets the identity as the supportive wife. After chronicling the lives of the selected women the author in her conclusion situates the Ray family women in the context of Brahma women in the late 19th century and the early 20th century. The book also has two appendices- i) list of song albums by Suprabha Ray and Bijaya Ray and ii) Family Photographs of the Ray family. A two-page Index makes the book user friendly.



The Cover Page illustrated by Syed. Abdul Halim utilises a collage of some well known shots of Satyajit Ray and uses five photographs of the better known womenfolks in Satyajit Ray's family, Suprabha Ray, Sukhalata Rao, Leela Majumdar, Malati and Nalini Das.

The Introduction to the book serves as a backdrop and provides a candid picture of the Bengali society in the late 19th century and the early 20th Century with its traditional and conservative social practices. The patriarchal dominance, the life in the *antahpur*, the joint family structure, the role of the women shouldering the domestic workload, the purdah system, the women being subjected to strict household norms have all been mentioned by the author to portray the condition of women in the- then Bengal and also to situate the 'Her-Story,' that she would be narrating through the lives of the women in the family of Satyajit Ray, the women who have embraced the emancipatory endeavours of Raja Rammohan Roy and become a member of the Brahmo Samaj. The role of the British missionaries and the social reform movement of the Brahmo Samaj have been traced by the author to give the readers a perspective of the socio-cultural ethos of Bengal. She traces the birth of the new woman as the harbinger of social change even when they maintained the traditional stereotyped feminine role of being the mother, wife and daughter. By recovering the stories and silent voices of the women in the Ray family the author has probed into the change taking place over time.

The methodology adopted in this book is rooted in qualitative, interpretive and feminist research traditions, consciously making an effort to move away from positivist linear historical methods. The author being a Sociologist and trained in positivism, explicitly debunks its limitations and employs methodological triangulation. She recognises the fact that no single method can adequately capture the lived realities of women. The study treats qualitative research as a bricolage, where the researcher acts as a bricoleur, combining various tools such as archival research, memoir analysis, oral narratives, visual representation and introspection. Since most women in the study are no longer alive, the author relies on autobiographies, biographies, photographs, family memoirs, letters, etc. to reconstruct the silenced subjectivities. The book draws upon ethnomethodology, phenomenology, hermeneutics, feminism, deconstruction and autoethnography to interpret life trajectories not chronologically but through fragments, discontinuities and critical life events. By synthesising individual memory with collective and cultural history, the methodology creates a balance between women's invisible labour and emotional worlds, while maintaining ethical sensitivity and reflexive awareness between the researcher and the subject.

The Ray family is remembered for its towering male figures like Upendrakishore Raychowdhuri, Sukumar Ray and Satyajit Ray. The women in the family were seldom given public visibility and historiographical attention happens to be marginal. The author claims to offer a tribute to the unseen, unheard and the marginalized voices of women of a section of the Ray family who embraced Brahmo religion in this book.

The account with which the author begins her discourse is Bidhumukhi Debi, wife of Upendrakishore Raychowdhury. Coming from a progressive Brahmo family she was educated. However, she did not seek a career. She was a homemaker and her life reflects the Brahmo ideal of the educated, morally upright supportive wife. She was a matriarch, an epitome of feminine virtues. A rare strength of character was also exhibited by Suprabha Roy, wife of Sukumar Roy and mother of Satyajit Ray. Sukumar Ray's untimely death gave Suprabha Ray an opportunity to exert herself. This is the quest for an autonomous voice which the male



hegemonic society normally does not allow. Pusalata Ray, the wife of Subinay Ray on the other hand fell a prey to economic dependency and patriarchal norms. Women like Bidkumukhi Deki, Suprabha Ray, Bijaya Ray and Lalita Ray sustained the intellectual, moral and cultural environment by being supportive to their male partners. The dignified, educated and socially engaged bhadramahila within a reformist household portrayed an image of a refined cultural modernity.

The story of the daughters especially the lesser known ones are filtered from memoirs and depicts the life and times of women in conservative families. The Ray family women can be located within Brahmo gender reform which emphasised female education and respectable existence. They were gradually becoming literate, musically trained and culturally conversant. Sukhalata Rao, the daughter of Upendrakeshore, for example, had established her identity as a painter, a writer and a translator and had won several awards as a social activist and author of children's literature. Punyalata Chakraborty, another daughter of Upendrakishore led the life of a homemaker and also wrote in Sandesh. In her writings we get valuable insights about the growth and development of education, of the modern family, early professions and also about nationalism. Malati Ghoshal, the Rabindra sangeet exponent, Madhurilata Mahalanobis, Labanyalata Ray, all nieces of Upendrakeshore balanced between family duties and work life. Madhurilata was a teacher and Labanyalata contributed to Sandesh. Pramadaranjan's daughters Suleka Ray, Lila Ray and Latika Ray were public figures- Suleka retired as Principal of Gokhale. College and Lila Majumdar gained appreciation as a writer of children's literature along with other genres. Latika Nag was also a teacher and she became the Headmistress of Shri Shikshayatan School. The daughters of the Ray family thus were slowly and marginally moving to the public sphere. In the portrayal of the granddaughters of Upendrakeshore, Kalyani Karlekar and Nalini Das we notice how education and resilience can shape a woman to challenge the societal norms and create a voice of their own to mould the masses.

In her concluding analysis the author remarks that the Brahmo women of the Ray family were all spirited women, independent minded and self confident. Even when they faced hardships in life, they faced challenges and rebuilt their lives. They had created their own niches without denigrating the traditional role of women as wives or daughters. Some could create a voice loud enough to be heard by others while some had faded into oblivion. The author pays a tribute to the oblivious voices and implores us to accept and recognise their contribution in a patriarchal society.

The book stands out not only as a family history but also as a feminist social history, offering an insight into gender, domesticity, education and creativity in colonial Bengal. Some women of Ray's family were active participants in the cultural production, even when they were denied public recognition for their work. They were readers, writers, educators, caregivers and moral anchors, whose steady intellectual influence often flowed invisibly into the works of men they supported. A contrast with the Tagore family of Jorasanko shows that Swarnakumari Devi, Kadambini Ganguly and Sarala Devi Chaudhurani were more familiar with the public intellectual life and accessed political spaces. They extensively edited journals, participated in movements and articulated their thoughts in tandem with nationalist ideologies. Ray's household on the other hand was progressive but culturally inward-looking. The lives of the women and their intellectual spirit



largely remained confined within the domestic and private. The women were also firmly apolitical, embodying their culture with the feminist detached from mass politics.

A key limitation of *The Women of Satyajit Ray's Family* lies in its uneven analytical focus, particularly the disproportionate attention given to daughters-in-law in comparison to daughters within the Ray household. While daughters-in-law are examined in considerable depth – as cultural mediators, caregivers, and emotional anchors navigating an unfamiliar and hierarchical family space – the daughters of the family remain relatively under-analysed. This imbalance is significant because daughters occupied a distinct and complex positionality: they were simultaneously insiders by birth and outsiders through marriage, yet their transitions, negotiations of identity, and losses of natal belonging receive limited sustained engagement. The methodological reliance on available memoirs and narratives, many of which were authored by daughters-in-law, partly explains this skew; however, the book does not sufficiently interrogate how archival availability itself produces gendered silences. This gap subtly reproduces the very invisibility the book seeks to challenge, suggesting the need for a more reflexive critique of source hierarchies and a deeper exploration of daughters as historical subjects in their own right within elite Bengali families.

This book however, *'In Search of Voice and Identity: Women of Satyajit Ray's Family'* remains crucial in creating a space which foregrounds women's silences, sacrifices and constrained agency during male dominated cultural histories. For scholars interested in gender studies, family studies and looking at the Bengali cultural milieu, this book is not only valuable but necessary.