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# Neorealism, the Bra and the New Indian Woman in Satyajit Ray's *The Big City*

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## **Abstract**

Through the filmic lens of West Bengali director Satyajit Ray's masterpiece *The Big City* (*Mahanagar* 1963), this article focuses on the symbolic meaning of the bra in postcolonial India. It reveals the ways in which the semi-hidden bra in the film functions as a contested site of patriarchal Indian modernity versus Euro-Western modernity and, in the style of neorealist cinema, a utopia of postcolonial and postnational feminine agency. Through textual analysis, the article delves into the influences of Italian neorealist cinema on Ray's aesthetic choices and compares power, dress and femininity across western and non-western contexts. It articulates cultural similarities and differences and how

dream-like cinematic narratives of everyday practices of power dressing provide a window into neoliberal performativity and utopian ambitions for feminine agency during periods of modernization and change.

Keywords: bra, India, film, neorealist, postcolonial

## Introduction

Shortly after Indian independence from British rule in 1947, between 1959 and 1964, non-mainstream, neorealist, west Bengali directors Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak began to address the impact and anxieties of modernity on the Indian family and Indian women. In the black-and-white Bengali movie, *The Big City* (*Mahanagar* 1963) based on a short story by Narendranath Mitra, director Satyajit Ray depicts the relationship between an urban lower-middle-class husband and a wife living in 1960s Calcutta (renamed to Kolkata in 2011) and their conflicting anxieties of modern and traditional values of living in an emerging and developing postcolonial metropolis almost 20 years after Independence. The film begins with a view of the sky and a pylon from a moving tram. The viewer is catapulted into a moving journey in a direction that cannot be seen, thus building up a sense of anxiety and excitement into the urban and postcolonial unknown.

The film sees protagonist Arati Mazumdar (played by actress Madhabi Mukherjee) grapple with leaving the private sphere of her home to go to her first job as a salesgirl during a time when only a few middle-class Indian women left the private sphere of the home and went into the public sphere of the city and the workplace. Arati decides to seek work after her husband Subrata (played actor by Anil Chatterjee) loses his job and struggles to provide for their 5-year-old son, Pintu, Subrata's 15-year-old sister, Bani (played by renowned actress Jaya Bhaduri), Subrata's mother and father—all of whom Arati lives with. Arati begins to enjoy the freedom, money and mobility of going to work. However, the pleasure she gains from working begins to contradict the feelings of her husband, who slowly begins to feel worthless and emasculated by the thought of living on Arati's wages alone. This plot is not explicitly expressed; instead, the impact of the conflicts of modernity upon sexuality, gender and identity making are seen through Arati's display of, and intimate desire and aspiration for, material goods. This is seen in the transformation of Arati's sartorial identity upon entering the big city/workplace, and importantly the spectacle of Arati's white everyday bra under her translucent sari blouse.

This article focuses on the untold story of Arati's bra including visual stills of Arati's bra from the original movie (Ray 1963, see [Figures 1–4](#)). It reveals a subliminal set of meanings to Arati's agency in the home and the city, within a backdrop of postcolonial modernization,

globalization and urbanization that other material items in the film do not reveal.

### **Setting the Scene: a Woman's Place is in the Home?**

Fifteen minutes into the film, a conversation takes place in Bangla between Arati and Subrata regarding whether Arati should or should not work. Arati asks Subrata “do you or don't you want me to work?” to which Subrata replies “no, I don't want you to, [pause] well, if you were a little less attractive, then I would let you go [smiles], a worker like you would reduce the output of the whole office”.

In this scene, Subrata continues to joke with Arati, teasing her that like his father, he is conservative and believes a “woman's place is in the home” and “a housewife should stay in the house and not go roaming around”. It is through this conversation that Ray introduces the colonial discourse of ‘the question of women’ (Chatterjee 1989; Sangari and Vaid 1990). During the British Raj (British colonial rule), the British believed the only hope for moral redemption of Indian society was through its treatment of Indian women; thus, Indian women became the bearers of tradition and nationhood (Banerji 2008, 235; Bhatia 2003; Chatterjee 1989; Tarlo 1996). This led to various women's reform movements being started by both westernized, middle-class and upper-class Hindu/Brahmo Bengali men. Middle-class and upper-class Hindu/Brahmo Bengali men utilized the colonial discourse of civilization and enlightenment (Bannerji 2001; Banerji 2008; Chatterjee 1989; Forbes 1996) to start the Bengali Renaissance, a strong nationalist movement leading up to India's independence in 1947 (Tarlo 1996). Hindu and Brahmo men postulated that women maintain a relationship between the *ghar* (home/inner) and *bahir* (world/outer) using dress as a moral signifier of her social role, her *samaj* (society) and her class (Chatterjee 1989, 624). This included how a woman should cover and uncover her body and what styles and dress were morally and aesthetically suitable for middle-class society (Bannerji 2001; Bhatia 2003; Karlekar 2005). Subsequently, as Brahmo women began to go to schools mostly run by western missionaries who privileged western modernity over Indian modernity; wealthy upper-class Brahmo families too applied progressive western values to Hindu religious thinking, to create a competing model of Indian modernity - leading to what was known as the *bhadro* (respectable) *samaj* (society). This *samaj* rejected various Vedic doctrines such as the caste system, dowry system, idol worship, and encouraged education, rational thinking, enlightenment and the emancipation of women. The *Bhadro Samaj* was an upper-middle-class society/sect consisting of mostly elite Hindu/Brahmo men and Bengali *babus*' (respectable gentlemen). *Babus*' emulated the dress of western ruling classes (Banerji 2008) and encouraged their wives to adopt a ‘new Indian’ identity, including western customs and ways of dressing, and a

certain level of education but only to make them better wives and mothers. *Babus'* believed Indian women's place was ultimately in the home, therefore too much education and modernization would distance Indian women from the domestic realm of tradition and bring them closer to the threat of western cultural values and cultural loss. This blend of upper-class Hinduism, colonial and Brahmo masculinity and its tensions are seen in both Subrata and his father.

Subrata and his father are quintessential Bengali *babus'*, Ray depicts this through Subrata and his father's clothing, as well as character. Both are regularly seen wearing typical *babu* attire, Indian style *dhoti* trousers with a Euro-Western style shirt, tailored suit jacket, umbrella, satchel and shawl. Initially, Subrata supports Arati working to compensate for his poorly paid bank clerk job and to self-validate his degree level education on women's rights. This is depicted in Subrata's frequent use of English proverbs. Subrata's father, on the other hand, a retired university lecturer, refuses to contemplate Arati working. For Subrata's father, there is no question where a woman's role in society should be; according to Subrata's father, a woman's role in society is fixed within the domestic realm. Therefore, he is seen to internalize Arati's choice to work as a sign of personal emasculation and his failure to raise a son who is able to provide. In one scene, Subrata mocks his father's old-fashioned views, he sarcastically jokes with Arati saying that, just like his father, he believes 'a woman's place is in the home' (Ray 1963, see Figures 1), yet Subrata's nervous laughter marks an ambivalence in his core feelings between the old world (like his father) and the new world (Arati), which unravel later in the story as he becomes uneasy with Arati, as an attractive woman, going to work. Through the questioning of her material choices, he questions his own beliefs on whether a woman's place is really in the home.

This initial conversation sets the scene. Depicting Subrata's optimistic yet nervous and Arati's welcoming attitude towards modernity in terms of sharing equal gender roles, as well as their aspiration for a better quality of life through greater economic freedom. Subrata and Arati are both seen to be anxious yet allured by modernity and what a modern India has to offer them as an educated, urban middle-class family. However, through Arati's interaction with material objects and particularly the consistent display of her inherently<sup>1</sup> western bra, a deeper set of gendered meanings of middle-class hopes, dreams and aspirations, as well as transnational style influences are revealed.

### ***Power dressing, the bra and postcoloniality***

Ray frequently introduces Arati's technique for success and her new-found Indian identity through fashion. Thirty-one minutes into the film, Arati is seen unsure about starting her new job as a salesgirl.

Arati discusses her fears with Subrata, she states "I'm afraid of one thing. On the day of the interview, I saw girls working there. My my,

they were so fashionable. They're tip-top, how can I work in tattered slippers?" To which Subrata replies "All right, give me a list of things required to be fashionable. I'll get an advance payment of my wages from the office to buy them for you". In this conversation, Arati associates fashionable clothes with rules of success and emancipation, a form of "power dressing" (Entwistle 2000). We see later what Arati means by fashionable clothes as she waits on the first day of work for the elevator to her office. Arati is transformed from wearing a thick cotton handloom sari with a thick a cotton blouse to a luxurious sheer handloom sari draped loosely across her chest revealing her shoulder and navel and a bra underneath her sheer sari blouse. She is also seen wearing sleeper earrings, a ring and carrying a Euro-Western style handbag. Her reference to "other girls in the office" depicts the ways in patriarchal views of *samaj* and ways of respectable and fashionable views were commonly internalized by middle-class women. During the colonial period, upper-class Bengali male intelligentsia consciously engaged with a Euro-Western ideal of femininity taken from the English *memsahibs*, otherwise known as the *bhadramahila* (*bhadra* meaning respectable and *mahila* meaning woman, also known as the gentlewoman). Like middle-class Hindu men, Brahma men—through their regime of power and knowledge and concurrent discourse of respectability—took part in reshaping how the new woman should manage her body and her sexuality through appropriate ways of dressing (Bannerji 2001; Macmillan 2007; Steele 1985, 2004). This was an essential period of time where upper-middle-class women switched between western and Indian styles (Bannerji 2001; Karlekar 2005; Macmillan 2007). Particular reference was made by *bhadramahilas* on how to manage modest, virtuous and non-sexual sartorial identities (Bannerji 2001, 103). This was a period when the Victoriana styles, such as a high-collared sari blouse with long sleeves, cuffs, collars and jabots, became popular, along with other modest styles such as the petticoat (worn underneath the sari), shoes, stockings and veils (Karlekar 2005). Although we see Arati grapple with class consciousness through codes of respectable dressing throughout the film, the placement of her bra beneath her sheer blouse contradicts the modest, non-sexual and respectable codes of dressing at the time. In the 1960s, bra wearing in India was not visible in public. It was common for middle-class Indian women to display their *choli* (sari blouse) in public but not their bras. Visible displays of bras were perceived to be a sign of foreignness and a sexual taboo. Thus, adverts for bras were mostly confined to the private spaces and back pages (Mazzarella 2003; Thapan 2004) of lifestyle magazines (e.g. *Femina*) aimed at upper-middle-class Indian women who aspired to modern western fashions. Here, the display of Arati's bra signifies an active postcolonial gaze, an ambivalent spectacle where Ray subconsciously moves away from patriarchal Brahma/Hindu codes of dressing for Arati. Instead Ray steers the audience towards a heightened sense of Arati's agency through forbidden desire and material pleasure.

Forty-four minutes into the film the camera follows Arati on her first day at work as a Salesgirl for Mukherjee and Co. Arati is seen selling home knitting machines to upper-middle-class housewives living within the affluent confines of gated homes in the middle of the city.

The camera follows Arati going from door-to-door in her new fashionable work clothes, and it is within this scene that Arati's bra emerges (see Figures 2, Ray 1963). The camera consistently focuses in on her bra beneath her sari blouse. As Arati enters the upper-middle-class home of her first call Mrs. Singha, Arati is seen wearing a transparent blouse through which viewers can see her white bra, a somewhat "daring masquerade" (Cooper 2000,106). This sartorial transformation is "puzzling" since it eroticizes and feminizes Arati's identity despite the conscious bid by Ray to depict Arati in the masculine role of the successful breadwinner. Despite Arati's newfound economic status, she is increasingly feminized through her sartorial transformation of what could be described as "provocative translucent clothing" (Cooper 2000, 106). "Ray over-articulates Arati's liberal presence" since in reality such "brazen sartorial displays" would cause a scandal both for her family and her patriotic Bengali boss Mr. Himangshu (Cooper 2000, 106). Such a narcissistic sartorial spectacle reveals to the spectator the subconscious ways in which Ray depicts forbidden and surreal aspects of Arati's femininity that are concealed from herself and the world within the portrayal of a traditional patriarchal family structure (Cooper 2000, 106). The bra thus replaces dream-like sequences, frequently seen within Italian neorealist cinema at the time (Ruberto and Wilson 2007).

Borrowing from the meanings of similar highly sexualized, eroticized and gendered undergarments, such as the corset and lingerie (Steele 2004; 1985; Fields 2007; Jantzen et al 2006; Begum 2018), here the semi-hidden nature of the bra is symbolic of the contested space within which the boundaries between Arati's individual sexual freedom and societal expectations of fashionability, femininity, tradition and modernity are blurred. Space whereby Arati manages her private and public identity (Steele 2004; 1985; Fields 2007; Jantzen et al 2006) and where practices of domination and resistance subconsciously show through (Amy-Chinn 2006; Foucault 1977, 1978, 1988; Fields 2007; Jantzen et al 2006). The sexualized nature of the bra eroticizes and feminizes Arati's masculine existence, providing outer emotional support to her newly found modern identity. The practical nature of the bra provides her with support and security underneath her blouse, therefore providing physical and inner support, including a sense of desire, professionalism and empowerment within her existing traditional identity.

The bra is thus a technology of the self (Begum 2018; Fields 2007; Foucault 1977, 1978, 1988; Jantzen et al. 2006) a symbolic combination of practices of self-production and care that other items in the film, such as the lipstick and the sunglasses, fail to afford Arati. In a later scene, when Subrata questions Arati's faithfulness to him, she

expresses guilt for taking pleasure in wearing the lipstick gifted by her White-Anglo Indian colleague Edith. Thus, the lipstick seemingly fails to deliver the promise of modernity (depicted through her friendship with Edith, a western woman), that of a sense of individualism and sexual freedom. Arati also becomes uncomfortable wearing the pair of sunglasses gifted to her by Edith. The sunglasses, which initially provide her with a sense of optimism, confidence and independence in the big city, later symbolize Arati's sense of alienation with modern life as she becomes detached from her role as a wife to Subrata and mother to her 5-year-old son, Pintu, when he becomes sick. Through the moving portrayal of feelings of compassion towards guilt associated with Arati's wearing of the lipstick and sunglasses, Ray maps the underlying themes of patriarchal nationalist anxiety, with global modernity associated with cultural alienation, westernization and sexual promiscuity, on to material objects. However, the untold story of the ambivalent bra blurs this anxiety and the binary codes of individual/society, traditional/modern, eastern/western, home/world, sexuality/respectability.

The untold story of the bra evades the pessimistic debate of globalization and modernization as tantamount to western capitalism, thus creating an imaginary dreamy in-between space of ambivalence (Bhabha 1997), where Arati is able to perform her identity as both a mother and working woman, sexual and respectable without the consequences of anxiety and shame. Although the bra is seamlessly situated within the film, in reality, however, this requires unpacking, as it is not clear whether the semi-visibility of the bra and feminized sartorial transformation of Arati's identity upon her entrance into the workplace is reflective of tastes subconsciously influenced by Ray's access to middle-class western and Indian education, including various art forms during his prolonged studies at Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's Fine Arts Academy (Cooper 2000). Is the bra then a subconscious reflection of the middle-class Bengali habitus within which Ray operated?

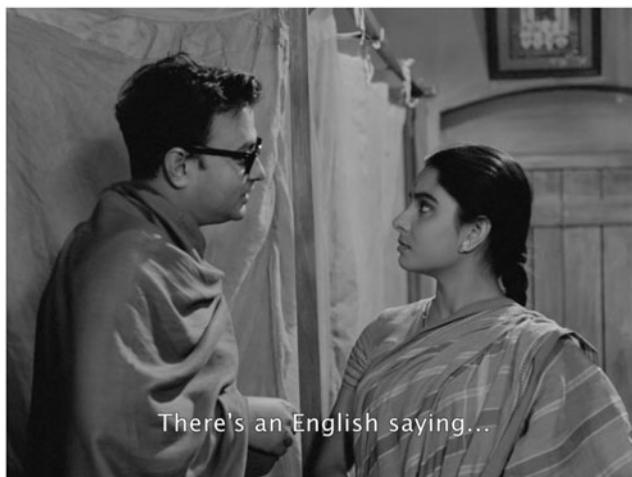
### ***Fashioning middle-class dreams and hopes through neorealist cinema***

Ray, a western-educated middle-class Bengali inspired by Hollywood, French and Italian neorealist cinema, often depicted middle-class tastes in culture and arts within his movies (Cooper 2000). Although Ray is known to create marginal and alternative spaces beyond that of his middle-class *bhadralok* (middle-class gentleman) identity in his films, the sartorial choices and references visually incorporated into his films are forms of symbolic capital that inscribe social order and classification through middle-class taste distinctions (Bourdieu 1984). It was during a work trip to the London headquarters of his Calcutta advertising agency that Ray became heavily influenced by Italian neorealist cinema and the hallmark use of city locations, women's positions and contested local identities (Cooper 2000; Konewko 2016; Ruberto and Wilson 2007).

The influence of western culture on Ray raises questions as to whether Ray subconsciously reproduces orientalist legacies in the film by using western material objects to legitimize Arati's sense of success (Nagrath 2003; Niessen et al 2003; Tarlo 1996), pointing to the doxic habitus of Ray's cinema. Ray's depiction of middle-class aspiration through the placement of luxury sartorial items of that time (sunglasses, lipstick and bra) are taken-for-granted and are distinct from tastes and aspirations from those outside of the middle-class western-educated, Tagore-educated Bengali habitus. Tagore's philosophy runs throughout the film. During the Indian Independence movement, Tagore challenged the essentialist views of Hindu/Brahmo and Gandhian views towards modernity as equating to western capitalism (Hardiman 2003; Trivedi 2007). Tagore was skeptical of globalization, yet cosmopolitan and progressive (Bhushan and Garfield 2014). For Tagore, national growth required transnational integration; he advocated neither total insulation from nor a complete adoption of foreign (western) culture (Begum 2018). These themes run through the film in the way that Ray normalizes the bra underneath a sheer sari blouse for a middle-class respectable working woman like Arati. In the 1960s, representations of the bra in Indian cinema were mostly associated with the vamp/vixen, a "loner which marked the price of her [western] modernity" (Wilkinson-Weber 2005, 142). The vamp, often a foreign dancer and rarely the protagonist, was distinguished by sexualized, semi-clad western/foreign clothing styles such as the visible wearing of bras, swimsuits and underwear. The significance of a visible bra in Indian cinema differed from that of displays of fitted, sleeveless *cholis* (sari blouses), which were fashionable at the time. Although the *cholis* were equally revealing and sexualizing, the garments were perceived as Indian and identifiable with the nation, thus adhering to a romanticized patriarchal vision of Indian modernity, deemed respectable and appropriate for middle-class society. This is opposed to revealing and sexualizing foreign garments like the bra, which were used to signify a threatening vision of modernity linked to westernization, resulting in cultural loss and alienation. It was not until 1967 (4 years after *The Big City* was released) that controversy first broke out in India regarding the wearing of a swimsuit by lead upper-class, Bengali actress Sharmila Tagore (who is distantly related to Rabindranath Tagore and connected to Ray through her first film *Apur Sansar* in 1959 directed by Ray himself) for the Indian film *An Evening in Paris*. Ray's lack of censorship and seamless placement of the bra mapped onto the middle-class, respectable body of Arati 4 years before such controversy, further symbolizes Ray's Tagorian hopes for a cosmopolitan and tension-free vision of postcolonial global modernity. At best the tension between modernization and tradition is dialectical, as we see through the tribulations and self-doubt that Arati undergoes to remain loyal to her Anglo-Indian colleague Edith. The relationship between Edith and Arati forms equal importance to the storyline of her

**Figure 1**

There's an English saying ... a woman's place is in the home (0:15 min). Source: Screenshot, Ray (1963). London: Curzon Artificial Eye. Reproduced by permission of R.D. Bansal Productions©.



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relationship with her husband and her middle-class Bengali boss, Mr. Himangshu.

It is Edith whom she encounters on the stairwell on her first day of work, and we later learn that they share the same birthday. Both are starting their first day at work and are seen walking up to the elevator together (0:33 min). Edith is wearing a 1950s style A-line skirt and western-style blouse with a handbag, similar to the New Look Dior style commonly seen on Hollywood actresses at the time (Bruzzi 2011). Arati is wearing a fashionable Indian sari, holding a Euro-Western clutch bag. Edith initiates the conversation by saying “Hello, I think we had our interviews on the same day, [pause] what silly questions they ask [pause], was that your boyfriend, the one you waved at ... your boyfriend?” To which Arati nods to imply no, then points at her *sindoor* (the red dot-shaped vermilion on her forehead) to signify to Edith that she is married with a husband. To which Edith responds by pointing at her engagement ring and stating in Hindi “*shaadi hoga*” that she will be getting married. This discussion contextualizes the ways in which both Edith and Arati subscribe to and later question middle-class patriarchal ideologies of the validation of female sexuality and social respectability through codes of marital status. The development of Edith and Arati’s friendship is portrayed in several scenes across the film, including when Arati receives an envelope with her first month’s wages. In this scene, Arati is paid in new rupee notes in contrast to the old rupee notes that Edith has received. On learning this, Arati insists on fairly exchanging new rupee notes with Edith’s old ones. In return, Edith gifts Arati a lipstick and a pair of sunglasses to acknowledge her kindness and fairness. Female relationships are reflected through compassionate (Konewko 2016; Mukherjee 2016) acts in neorealist cinema and Ray applies this

**Figure 2**

Arati in 'fashionable' clothes on her first day at work as a salesgirl (0:44 min). Source: Screenshot, Ray (1963). London: Curzon Artificial Eye. Reproduced by permission of R.D. Bansal Productions©.



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style to Edith and Arati's sharing of material pleasures and patriarchal experiences.

One hour and forty-two minutes into the film, Arati visits Edith, who is off work due to sickness, to get a sales document signed. Arati is greeted by Edith's mother, whom she lives with in a one-bedroom apartment block. The apartment is an in-between space compared with Mrs. Singha's gated mansion and Arati and Subrata's traditional abode set in the old colonies. Edith's home is seen as cluttered with fashionable items including magazines, a megaphone and a rail of western dresses (see [Figure 3](#), Ray 1963). This scene resembles the influences of Italian neorealism on Ray's cinematic style and further contextualizes the placement of western fashion in *The Big City*. Associations can be made to the neorealist masterpiece *Rome Open City* (Dir: Rossellini 1945) where the storyline is centered on courageous and rebellious women within the backdrop of a changing city. In particular, the friendship between Laura and Marina, who—like Arati and Edith—negotiate social class, power and agency through the acquisition of material pleasures such as the latest fashions (Konewko 2016). Edith's apartment is aesthetically similar to Marina's, a small space cluttered with the latest beauty items and dresses. Like Rossellini, Ray romanticizes his female characters by imposing traditional roles on them through their desire for frivolous fashions (Konewko 2016, 191; Mukherjee 2016). At the same time, he uses luxury and consumerist themes to threaten the virtuosity of the family and to generate a potent source of ambivalence towards the city (Wilson 1992). However, it is in the final scene, where Arati challenges Mr. Himangshu for unfairly dismissing Edith from work, that we see Italian neorealist styles of compassion and rebellious female sexuality emerge through the dream-like spectacle of Arati's bra.

**Figure 3**

Arati visits Edith's apartment (1:42 min). Source: Screenshot, Ray (1963). London: Curzon Artificial Eye. Reproduced by permission of R.D. Bansal Productions©.



**Figure 4**

Montage: Arati confronts Mr. Himangshu for unfairly dismissing Edith from work (2:05 min). Source: Screenshot, Ray (1963) London: Curzon Artificial Eye. Reproduced by permission of R.D. Bansal Productions©.



In the final scene, Arati is seen in a rage, walking into Mr. Himangshu's office demanding an explanation and an apology for unfairly dismissing Edith from work. To which Mr. Himangshu replies "you are jeopardizing your own position. Would that Anglo-Indian friend have done the same for you?" Throughout this encounter her bra is on display (see [Figure 4](#), Ray 1963), and this is similar to the previous encounter where she boldly requests a pay raise from Mr. Himangshu. Arati is positioned with her back to the camera. In this scene, attention is drawn to the display of Arati's white bra under her sheer sari blouse. It is the bra, in this situation, that is instrumentally displayed to symbolize a seamless dream-like possibility and construction of Arati's brazenness, determination and courage as a career woman, attractive salesgirl, friend, mother and wife. This is contrary to the reality of Arati's

anxious feelings towards resigning from her job, which we see in an earlier scene. Even though Mr. Himangshu is impressed by Arati's work and explicitly favors Arati over Edith for her productivity, and dismisses Edith to replace her with Subrata, Arati's husband (a deal that takes place in an earlier scene between Subrata and Mr. Himangshu, and which Arati is unaware of), this doesn't disguise Mr Himangshu's support for a patriarchal and national version of modernity— where Indian women's preferred identity is as chaste bearers of tradition, through the construct of the new Indian woman, who at the same time as being fashionable and hard-working is also expected to be respectable and chaste (Oza 2001; Thapan 2004). This is further depicted through Mr. Himangshu's comments where he is unable to justify dismissing Edith, repeatedly referring to her as “that Anglo-Indian girl”, as well as reminding Arati that her brazen-ness “Would have been appropriate from this [his] side of the table, not [hers]” and that she is “crossing [her] limits”. It is the brazen display of the bra that reveals Ray's style of engagement with contested borders and boundaries of tradition versus modernity mapped against the feminized Indian body. The material content of Ray's cinematic spaces heightens the duality of competing versions of patriarchal modernities. They are not supportive of Brahma sentiment regarding the shielding of women from western influences and western hyper-sexuality (as symbolized by Mr. Himangshu's sexist attitudes towards Edith). Neither are they supportive of the Bengali intelligentsia, who wished to distinguish Indian modernity from the history of colonization. Ray generates a sense of fantasy, a modern dream for India and Arati, through the placement of the bra. The bra carves out a forbidden and emancipated space for Arati between the home and the world, East and West—a western style, free of the transmission and conjuncture of neoliberal ideologies of competition in the workplace and marketization (Chen 2013, 558).

### ***Neorealist cinema, fashioning a Utopia of female sexuality***

In *The Big City*, Arati's bra is an embodiment of her ambivalence and struggle to find her place between the home (traditional Bengali housewife) and the big city (new working woman in the city). The bra reflects the dichotomous debates in India at the time surrounding western modernity and colonial nationalism. In the realist style of west Bengali cinema, the bra becomes an embodiment of a gendered third space, blurred between the boundaries of colonial/national modernity/tradition, self/society and desire/control. The bra is an instrumental tool of rupture which centers an active gaze that situates modernity, sexuality and erotic pleasure in Arati's life without compromising her role to the ideal archetypes (wife, mother) of nationhood. The bra is an instrumental prop that stands in for a dream sequence, “unmaking the traditionally expected and making or asserting the value of the culturally ‘new’” (Mukherjee 2016, 9).

The film ends with Arati running into Subrata's arms after resigning from her job. Subrata consoles Arati and commends her for being brave and standing up to Mr. Himangshu, stating that he would have been unable to do the same. They both look up at an industrial tower block and Arati states, "not knowing what fate has in store for us, I'm still feeling happy". Similar to the opening scene of the moving tram, which takes the audience into an unknown direction, in the end Arati and Subrata are seen holding hands and walking through the city of Calcutta, yet again towards the industrial, modern and unknown. In this final scene, the bra is not on display, and thus moves the viewer's attention away from Arati's femininity as a rupture, shattering of tradition (Mukherjee 2016), dreamlike, brazen and daring. A scene of realism and realization, thus the absence of the bra emphasizes the symbolic value of the semi-hidden bra, a utopia of seamless equality for women along the lines of East/West home/society, sexuality/respectability, traditional/modern—a failed promise of modernization that nation-states have yet to fulfill, even today. In the end, Arati crafts her own agency, however only through the patriarchal privilege of her husband and through the kaleidoscope of a perfectly dressed body essential for portraying success (Bordo 1993; Entwistle 2000; Gill 2008). The female body continues to be situated along the dichotomy of home/world, East/West, sexual/chaste, colonial/national. This continues to be seen in later films influenced by Ray (Mukherjee 2016) and continues to be represented through western fashion and undergarments, such as lingerie and bras, across mainstream Bollywood films today (Begum 2018). The film however, is considered a feminist film, for its depictions of strong female characters and compassionate male and female characters; a closer look at fashion within the film and brazen dream-like displays of the bra reveal the ways in which tensions are ongoing, and thus agency is temporal, contextual and fluctuating. Although, in some situations, Ray romanticizes his female characters through material western fashion items, thus reinforcing ideal gender roles and reinscribing patriarchal and colonial desires. In other situations, however, we see through the slow sartorial transformation of Arati and the unspoken bra, which is only to be looked at by the audience (and not the male characters in the film), that Arati's forbidden desires, entangled between tensions of tradition and modernity, are rendered active. Through transnational readings of Ray's fashion in the film and through the representations of the ambivalent bra, we are able to understand through rich storytelling that "non-normative female behaviour—particularly sexual—has always constituted a liminal space, a site both of empowerment through transgression and containment through regulation" (Bose 2008, 35). We are also able to situate the director's political and aesthetic views within this, and detect that meanings of dress can change, given contexts, times and social class habitus. Film, like a city, is able to provide a rich archive of contested, changing, magical yet binding, performative and stable (Wilson 1992) meanings of the bra in the urban Indian middle-class

context: “at a fundamental level, movement and change are the touchstones of the everyday ‘performance’ of fashion—the wearing, the gesturing—as well as its life cycle and eventual decay” (Uhlirova 2013, 139).

This article fills several gaps within fashion studies scholarship, it contributes to fashion and film studies outside of the mainstream cinemas of Hollywood and Bollywood. By analyzing the bra, the article extends Indian dress culture scholarship beyond the traditional sari to reveal a deeper set of postcolonial identity constructions. It also extends influential western scholarship on power dressing and intimate wear (corset, bra, lingerie and hosiery), and their links to modernity, sexuality and femininity, to a non-western context. Furthermore, the transnational links to Italian neorealist cinema on Ray’s cinematic aesthetics reveal the ways global film cultures influence fashion in local film cultures, and can tell multi-layered and subliminal stories of our real and imaginary relationships to our identities—past, present and future.

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### **Note**

1. It is the widespread mass manufacturing of the bra in the West and later across the world by western companies and popularization by Hollywood (Fields 2007) that lends the perceived inherently Western connotations of the bra across the world and in India. The bra appeared as an alternative to the uncomfortable corset in the 1900s and was first patented by Mary Phelps Jacobs in New York, 1914, under the name Caresse Crosby, calling her invention “the backless brassiere”. Mary sold her rights to the Warner Brothers Corset Company who went on to sell the most popular brassieres in the next 30 years (Fields 2007). India’s oldest lingerie brand Groversons Paris Beauty (since 1953) began mass manufacturing bras to Indian women who aspired to Western fashions (hence the naming Paris) and were used to getting them imported from the West or tailored (Groversons India 2013). Nowadays, the bra is associated with the rise in Western clothing and Western fashion retailing in India.

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