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Research Article



The Uneasiness of the Crown: A Comparative Study of *Nayak* and *Autograph*

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive comparative study of two acclaimed Indian films, *Nayak* (1966) and *Autograph* (2010), to shed light on their cinematic narratives, legacy, cultural contexts, artistic significance and ultimate messages. Satyajit Ray's experimental movie *Nayak* tries to uncover the psychology and mental anguish of a movie star of great fame. Srijit Mukherjee's *Autograph* explores the same theme but with much complex varieties giving us an alternative reality of Ray's picture. Both the film set against the backdrop of the film industry, weave together a tapestry of narratives as they follow the lives respectively of Arun Chatterjee and Arindam Mukhopadhyay reflecting on their past and reconnecting with their roots. Apart from analysis, this paper highlights two of the main themes explored in the film: one is the idea of

fame and success and another is the actor-director relationship. Furthermore, the paper also tries to examine whether *Autograph* can be regarded as a successful tribute to *Nayak* or not. The paper explores the stylistic devices used by Satyajit Ray and Srijit Mukherjee in addition to comparing *Nayak* and *Autograph*. It does this by examining how each director uses character development, narrative structure, and cinematography to portray the complex layers of their protagonists' struggles. The goal of the paper is to explore how the Indian film industry's dynamic actor-director relationship and changing views on success and fame are reflected in the societal and cultural shifts that occurred between the times the films were made.

Keywords: Cinema, Fame, Anguish, Satyajit Ray, Srijit Mukherjee, Movie star psychology, Cinematic narratives, *Nayak* (1966), *Autograph* (2010), Film industry backdrop, Actor-director relationship

Introduction

In *Nayak*, we see the coordination of the two legends- Satyajit Ray, the master director of Indian cinema and Uttam Kumar, the matinee idol, the greatest Bengali superstar. On the other hand, in *Autograph*, we see the combination of Srijit Mukherjee a new-age director, with new methods of direction and storytelling and Prosenjit Chatterjee, the Bumba da of Tollywood, not only a star but also a national award-winning actor. Both the directors have delved very deep into the inner psyche of the lead characters portrayed by Uttam Kumar and Prosenjit and talk about their problems- how they manage their enormous fame and most precisely what is haunting them, in the middle of everything what is missing from their lives. Famous actors playing the role of famous actors: this also is very pursuable for the audience to cast their imagination on the screen. This paper discusses about the in-depth comparative analysis of the films focusing mainly on the theme of success and fame. The paper analyses whether *Autograph* is a genuine tribute or not.

Literature Review

In his book "Satyajit Ray, The Inner Eye", Andrew Robinson discusses that Ray wrote the screenplay of *Nayak* to investigate the psychology of a star and to make a film about a train journey. He concludes that Ray's *Nayak* is not one of his best works, but I will try to establish that this judgment is untenable. This paper aims not only to discuss the aspects of fame but also shows how the best of Ray and Uttam Kumar were combined to produce a classic movie like *Nayak*. I have not come across any scholarly article which deals with the question that *Autograph* is in essence a tribute to Ray's movie. This inspired me to take up this comparative study of two films.

Methodology

The paper adopts a mixed method combining both qualitative and quantitative elements to provide a comprehensive analysis of *Nayak* and *Autograph*. This approach allows for a holistic understanding of the films, incorporating subjective interpretations and objective measurements. Critical analysis with a focus on visual details and film language has been the principal method used in the study.

Approach to the story

Nayak is an evergreen classic for Bengali and Indian cinema lovers. The film was a success both critically and commercially. The movie won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Bengali in 1967 and also became the biggest box office collector of 1966. Mahanayak Uttam Kumar played the role of Arindam Mukhopadhyay a famous face of the film industry. He travels by train after not getting a flight ticket from Kolkata to Delhi to receive a national prize. On the train, he meets Aditi Sengupta, played by Sharmila Tagore, a charming woman who edits a Women's Magazine named 'Adhunika'. She decides to take an interview of the star to popularize her magazine. The story unfolds through the conversations of Aditi

and Arindam giving exposure to the audience what a famous star's personal life is. Structure wise the story is in a way linear, following the unity of time and space in the plot.

Srijit Mukherjee's *Autograph* is about the trio of actor, director and actress respectively played by Prosenjit Chatterjee, Indranil Sengupta and Nandana Sen. The Movie is set in a way as if the audience is obligated to imagine what could have happened if *Nayak* would have been set in 2010 or what might have happened after the ending of *Nayak*. The movie is about a fictional superstar Arun Kumar Chatterjee. Prosenjit Chatterjee who plays the role of the character, like Uttam Kumar is considered as one of the leading actors of Bengali cinema in reality too. One of the main characters of the movie is Subho, who is an aspiring director. Arun accepts Subho's proposal for acting and as well as even producing the film. Now this move Arun is not a kind move at all. He mainly wants to ghost direct Subho's remake of *Nayak*- "Ajker Nayak", and show the world that without an ideal director and producer, his stardom can alone make a film superhit. There is Shri Nandita (Shrin), the live-in partner of Subho who plays the role of the heroine. This film discusses the idea of fame and success and how it ruins one's goal and personal life. The friendly relationship between Arun and Shrin and the love relationship between Shrin and Subho get dismantled by an incident that shows how the craving for success and preservation of one's image can ruin people in general.

Srijit Mukherjee says in his interviews that it was a tribute to *Nayak*. He uses a nonlinear method of storytelling incorporating flashbacks and present-day sequences to weave together the protagonist's past and present. Both of the directors use dream sequences to heighten the emotional bonding between the actor and the audience and reveal the inner turmoil of the hero. Srijit Mukherjee incorporates the film-within-a-film technique to make a parallel between his work and Ray's work. The main story of *Autograph* which revolves around Subho, Shrin, and Arun is an indirect, allegorical and in-depth making of *Nayak* in the twenty-first century and the film "Ajker Nayak" which takes place within *Autograph* is a direct remake of *Nayak*. Indian film scholar Meheli Sen says that Ray's *Nayak* is a response to

Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* (1963) which was about the existential crisis of a director. Here in *Nayak* Ray discovers the crisis of an actor. But Srijit, on the other hand, talks about the existential crisis of three important pillars of a successful cinema- the actor, director, and actress.

Themes

Both films explore themes of celebrity culture, personal introspection, social responsibility, nostalgia, personal growth, and the consequences of fame. The films also present a contrast between cinema vs theatre, morality vs self-fulfilment, superficial vs mundane life, personal vs professional life and of course success vs hollowness of ascent. Social responsibility shows up in both *Autograph* and *Nayak* as a major theme. The films make viewers consider the social impact of celebrities' actions by raising ethical questions about their duties. The conflicting views on morality vs. self-fulfilment weave a complex tale that questions accepted ideas of success. The films offer a moving commentary on the hollowness that frequently follows quick ascent as the characters negotiate the shallow charm of fame. This examination of achievement versus its hollowness serves as a potent reminder of the fleeting nature of adoration. A major theme that weaves through the more general examination of success and the effects of notoriety is personal development. The characters go through life-changing experiences as they struggle with their shortcomings, fears, and social expectations. The films act as mirrors, reflecting the common human experience of pursuing personal growth while adhering to social norms. *Nayak* and *Autograph* provide a thoughtful examination of the human condition in this comparative analysis, stressing the complexities of celebrity and the innate unease that comes with being successful.

Success and fame: blessing or curse?

Mere critical achievement of a film is not enough for anybody who is involved in the making process of the film. The film industry is one of the biggest businesses in the world. The two main aspects that we all notice in a film's success are the lead actor/actress's acting and the director's direction. Now the

question arises what makes an actor famous, his acting and charisma or box office success? Actually both. An actor with extraordinary acting skills cannot survive only relying on his performances, on the other hand, a very famous star with zero performance cannot make a film hit the box-office. Both need to be equally balanced.

In an interview, Srijit Mukherjee claims that the relationship between Shrin and Arun is not romantic. But we see lots of tinges of attraction to each other rather not in a platonic way. In Ray's film, this chemistry is completely eliminated. Ray portrays the characters as two different poles of the earth who can never be together and scenes where we can assume that they like each other are also very less. But in *Autograph*, the late-night dinners, Arun's gaze towards Shrin and Shrin's curiosity about Arun says as if something is cooking up. They both need to talk about the hollowness of their lives. On one hand is the loneliness the star faces and on the other hand the hollowness of Shrin and Subho's relationship. There is a hollowness in Arun Chatterjee's life because he can't lead a simple life, he is always surrounded by superficiality. Suppressing his pains and suffering and internal conflicts, he is always presenting a 'self' to the media, and to his fans which is not real. In *Nayak* Arindam Chatterjee also can be seen presenting this kind of image to the public. His black spectacle is a symbol of his attempt to hide what lies within his soul, which unfortunately he can't show to his fans. Srijit critiques this superficial world in many scenes. Because of Arun's stardom, he cannot even complete the dinner with Aditi in a Dhaba where normal people eat. Ray also shows this hollowness of a famous star. In a scene, when Aditi first tries to take an interview of Arindam, she asks a very deep question which as a phrase Arindam repeats at the end of the movie. She asks him: "In the midst of all, don't you feel there's something missing? some emptiness somewhere" (Nayak 00:26:33-38). Arindam does not answer the question rather he says, "What if I told you, what good would it do? suppose it hurts my box office" (Nayak 00:26:40-50). But at the end, Arindam says to Aditi, "There is something missing. Some emptiness somewhere" (Nayak 01:53:26-30). This shows his realization and acceptance of the fact that money and fame are not everything and excess of them can rob one of one's happiness. Denoting the world of film stars Aditi says, "You live in a different world" (Nayak 01:53:50). Both Aditi and Shrin are not accustomed to live in the world of film stars- the world of extravagance and superficiality.

In *Nayak*, we see a very smooth character transition of Arindam. We can observe his arrogance and overconfidence in him when he is told by his manager that there is no content in his new film. Arindam replies "I am in it. isn't that enough" (Nayak 00:04:14). Apparently, he is sure about his stardom but later it is shown that he is in constant fear of giving flops. He knows that three flop films in a row can pull him down as fast as he climbed up to the top of success. This constant fear of getting dethroned from his position haunts him throughout the train journey. He thinks his personal relations also may contribute to this downfall. For example, when he is asked by his friend Biresh to deliver a short lecture to motivate the labour protest led by Biresh, he refuses saying, "If you want money, I can give you money, any amount. But this is impossible" (Nayak 01:20:15-16). He knows that if he wants to keep his friendship, he will not be able to keep his business. We see how he regrets his change and his current state where he cannot be someone's friend anymore. He is just a star who is too conscious about his films and the money. In that interview, he says to Aditi, "I couldn't do what Biresh asked, it's difficult to say what I was afraid of exactly" (Nayak 01:20:51-59). The audience can decode what his fear was which he talks about multiple times in the film- the fear of failure. He reveals to Aditi "I wish I hadn't changed so much" (Nayak 01:21:17).

In *Autograph* also we see how someone's fame and someone's craving for fame can destroy the humans inside them. Arun's confession is very similar to the confession of Arindam in *Nayak*. When Arun visits Shrin's house after getting drunk, he confesses a lot of things about himself. He says, "I don't care what you are saying, what you say or what people say" (Autograph 01:32:30-36) and the most famous phrase "I am Arun Chatterjee, I am industry, I decide everything" (Autograph 01:32:43-56). He holds the pride as if his candle of success is never going to be extinguished. As if he has complete control over everything. But

in reality, he does not have a bit of control over his life. One bad interview, one leaked footage of him confessing about his personal life can ruin his image and his box office collection. He confesses how he uses his co-actress Anamika and how much she loves him, but in return he just uses her. This shows everybody's dearest and admired Arun Kumar Chatterjee is just like a normal human like us who has follies but whose overarching ambition makes him a villain to himself.

Srijit Mukherjee uses Indranil's character to portray the dilemma of an aspiring film director who wants nothing but perfection in his work and a huge commercial success. First, we see him as very dedicated to his work. In the course of directing the film, he becomes kind of a maniac. After the completion of the film he searches for ways of promoting it and to him the most compelling way is to create a controversy. He leaks the footage to the media where Arun is drunk-confessing about his personal life and Shrin is listening and persuading him to make the situation okay. Even after his girlfriend's disagreement, he decides to follow his own decision which costs him his love relation and even his directorial debut. The producer-cum lead actor of the film Arun decides not to release the movie. Subho cannot taste the success he wants. His vaulting ambition ultimately ruins his work and labour.

Dialogue, Music and Cinematography

Within the field of cinematic storytelling, the narrative and emotional fabric of a film are shaped in large part by dialogue, music, and cinematography. The narrative role that music plays in film explores the deep influence that it has, influencing the cinematic experience both inside and outside of the frame. It always plays a vital role in conveying the themes and messages of a film. The music in *Nayak*, composed by Satyajit Ray himself, is minimalistic yet effective. It complements the film's narrative and emotions without overshadowing the story. We don't find any songs in the movie. *Autograph* features a melodious soundtrack. Deepjyoti Mishra's background score, and Anupam Roy's "Amake amar moto thakte dao" created a buzz in the cinema world which gave birth to a new kind of music and overall a new cinema in Tollywood, which we call Neo-Mainstream. As the song says "Jeta chilona chilona seta na pauay thak, sob pele nosto jibon" sets the tone of how achieving everything can make your life miserable. The songs in the film became popular and added depth to the storytelling, enhancing the emotional impact of the key scenes.

Cinematography has an extensive impact on the viewer's engagement with the story, as demonstrated by the visual choices and their thematic implications. It can convey emotions and ideas beyond what is spoken. Subrata Mitra, the cinematographer of *Nayak* is considered to be the greatest Indian cinematographer. He worked with Ray in the *Apu Trilogy* and also many other Ray films. Though cinematographer Soumik Haldar did a great job in *Autograph* but compared to Subrata Mitra his work seems to be a bit pale and it seems as if the soundtracks and direction compensate for the gap. Many dialogues are similar in both the movies. The dialogue of Arindam- "I'm in it, isn't it enough" (*Nayak* 00:04:14) is also uttered by Arun when his manager is shocked by Arun's decision to do a film under a newcomer's direction. Arun says "Who will be in the media coverage? Me, who will be in the hoarding? Me, who will be on the Friday screen? Me...I'm in it, isn't that enough" (*Autograph* 00:10:31-11:08). The character of Subho is somewhat Srijit Mukherjee himself. In an interview with The Telegraph Online Srijit says, "There is a bit of Subho in me in the initial set-up of the film. He too is a first-time director without a background in the industry and is approaching a superstar with a script that is slightly non-mainstream" (Das "Nayak revisited"). Like Subho, Srijit also approaches Prosenjit Chatterjee with the script and like Arun, Prosenjit's choice of acting in *Autograph* is out the box kind of thing for him.

Dream sequences

Both the directors use dream sequences. *Nayak's* first dream sequence critiques Arindam's obsession with money and *Autograph's* dream sequence which takes place in "Ajker Nayak" critiques the cruelty and professionalism of film actors. Both their theatre Gurus play a pivotal role in the sequences. In the dream, a merry Arindam is seen treading over a heap of notes visually enjoying the taste of money.

Then he hears the sound of a telephone. He finds the receiver in the hand of a skeleton. All of a sudden many skeletons come out of each heap and he slowly gets drowned in the quicksand of money. Shankar da, his theatre Guru, who could have saved him, does not come forward. This dream shows Arindam's inner turmoil and conflict of sinking into the material world of money and fame where his people reject him. There is a shot in the sequence where Shankar da's hand is stretched towards Arindam, as Arindam is sinking in the quicksand of money. This shot is very similar to Michealangelo's painting "Creation of Adam" in which God extends his right arm to give Adam the ignition of life from his finger. Here we can see Arindam as Adam who has no deeper understanding of success in a broader sense and on the other hand Shankar da who knows the dark reality of films and the myth of success. The visual metaphor of money-filled quicksand effectively illustrates Arindam's sense of being trapped while pursuing his goals.

In Srijit Mukherjee's dream sequence, Arun is seen to be in a car. His driver accidentally hits somebody. Arun tells him to move the dead body and drive. Then they crash into a film set and the driver appears to be his theatre Guru, Achinta da, who also could have prevented the accident but he does not do so. Though there is a strong metaphor of cinema vs theatre in each dream sequence Srijit shows how actors are self-centred and only care about their work and image, even somebody's death does not change their mind. The sequences gain depth from the juxtaposition of theatre and cinema, which draws attention to the different morals and values that these two industries share. Srijit expertly captures the actor's unwavering quest for perfection and fame, even at the price of morality. The dream sequence turns into a moving commentary on the competitive nature of the business, where achieving personal success frequently takes precedence over morality.

Prosenjit Chatterjee and Uttam Kumar

Prosenjit's name in the movie is Arun Kumar Chatterjee, which is the real name of Uttam Kumar. Both the actors have played the roles fantastically. Both of them are idols of Bengali cinema. Prosenjit has carried the success of commercial Bengali cinemas on his shoulders for more than 30 years. With back-to-back hits, he has proved his position in the industry. But in *Autograph* Prosenjit lacks the intensity in some scenes and we don't see much of a star-like attitude in him, we can consider him as the nearest one who could play Arun Kumar Chatterjee.

Uttam Kumar is considered to be the greatest Bengali actor ever seen. He even surprised Ray while filming *Nayak*. When he passed away Ray wrote — 'I hardly recall any discussion with Uttam on a serious analytical level on the character he was playing. And yet he constantly surprised and delighted me with unexpected little details of action and behaviour that came from him and not from me, which were always in character and always enhanced a scene. They were so spontaneous that it seemed he produced these out of his sleeve. If there was any cogitation involved, he never spoke about it (Sarkar "From 'flop master general'").

The way Prosenjit is portrayed in *Autograph* poses interesting queries concerning star power and authenticity in films. His purposeful break from a conventional star-like demeanour upends assumptions and gives the story more nuance. On the other hand, Uttam Kumar's *Nayak* partnership with Satyajit Ray illuminates the actor's significant impact on character development. Kumar's unexpected nuances and spontaneous performance highlight the mutually beneficial relationship between the actor and the character.

In the end, the comparison study goes beyond the specific performances to consider the more general dynamics of the director-actor duo. Ray's disclosures regarding Uttam Kumar's impromptu contributions underscore the mutual trust and artistic autonomy between them. A discussion about the changing dynamics between directors and actors and their impact on the finished cinematic work can be started by contrasting this with Prosenjit's portrayal in *Autograph*. The cultural and historical background of Bengali cinema is further enhanced by the actors' respective legacies, which makes this investigation into the subtleties of two cinematic masterpieces engrossing.

Conclusion

When Srijit Mukherjee directed two of the four episodes of the Netflix series *RAY* (2021), in an interview with News18 he stated, “I started with *Autograph* which was a tribute to *Nayak*, which was in itself like a culmination of Uttam Kumar and Satyajit Ray, so a number of people were quite aghast when I made my debut, voodoo dolls were made and all that” (Bandopadhyay “Srijit Mukherji”). While some people enjoyed it as a tribute and film, others criticised it and referred to it as a cheap copy. But in reality, *Autograph* is not a cheap copy. We can call it a tribute and as well an intertextual recreation of *Nayak*. When Srijit as a budding director chose to refer back to *Nayak*, one of the greatest Indian films and use the technique of film-within-a-film technique he entered the danger zone. But he has discharged his job appreciably well. The film is not just a critique of fame and success it is also a critique of brainless commercial cinemas. The film brings a new-age Bengali cinema merging the aesthetic aspects and commercial prospects. Not just a box-office hit, the film also won more than forty awards. The movie ran straight for 120 days in Kolkata theatres. Earlier producers considered the film as neither mainstream nor suited for film festivals. But Srijit created something that mixed- both.

Now what is distinct in the two films as regards their attitude to fame is- is it a blessing or a curse? We cannot just live with *Roti, Kapda, and Makaan* we crave recognition and fame. There’s nothing wrong with it too but the fame a star/actor receives in his career restricts his movement and distances him from common life which eventually becomes monotonous for him. He cannot free himself from that cage of performances fearing backlash which might affect his career graph. Despite all the success and fame, Arindam is so alone. In a scene when Arindam gets drunk, he feels a sudden urge to talk about himself, talk about the truth of the brawl in the bar to someone. Aditi does not want to know the details as she says, “There is no need to tell me, Mr Arindam” (01:43:18). Arindam replies “What do you mean no need?

I feel the need. It’s all piled up in here, there is nobody I can tell it all to” (01:43:19- 43:42). In spite of having everything what a middle-class person dreams about he cannot share his feelings with anybody. This shows how he is trapped in the bars of fame. The audience makes the actors God like entity, his every move is monitored as if there is no privacy in his personal life. In *Nayak*, Arindam utters in anger and disgust that the audience is bloody and whimsical and all should be killed. Though an actor first enjoys his fame and money, deep inside he tries to connect with his roots and a sense of nostalgia haunts him in most cases and it increases as he scales higher tops. We cannot just categorize it as a blessing or curse. It works in both ways. Someone’s overreaching ambition of getting recognition and his inability to cope with the money, recognition or stardom can make him feel like a hollow person inside. On the other hand, success is a kind of basic need for us. We should balance out our lives and our work. This is the message of both the films although it has been presented with other complexities in Srijit’s film. In *Nayak* and *Autograph*, the characters’ quest for personal fulfilment forces them to confront difficult moral choices. This section explores the moral decisions that the characters made and the results that followed. We can better understand the delicate balance between morality and self-fulfilment by examining the internal conflicts that the characters experience. With its ordinary setting, *Autograph* bears a striking resemblance to *Nayak*’s depiction of the cliches that permeate the film industry. The films’ examination of both personal and professional lives intensifies the intricate relationship between people’s happiness and society’s expectations.

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