Visual Imagery Of Film Posters: Satyajit Ray's Introspection Beyond The Screen

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Abstract:

Culture has always been a guesstimated concept backed by hierarchy. This hierarchy was initiated by drawing a prominent line between 'High' art and 'low' culture or mass culture. This protuberant notion emanated from a generalised perimeter of thought guarding the framework of so called genuine cultural practices which are majorly meant to heighten and imprint intellectual, insightful, and aesthetic thoughts and taste in the audience's mind. Mediums which did not fit into such standards were for a significant period deprived of the 'high' art status. This seems quite contrary to the arena of culture as it not only stands for the procedure of developing one's taste but also includes aspects of literary works, artworks, lyrical compositions, architectures all that a society can produce. With the emergence of Modernism, Culture unleashed from the ambits of social status and class. Gradually, the understanding of Culture has managed to surpass the confinements of customs, beliefs, traditions, social expectations and become purely illustrious locution free from the shackles of morality, intellect, or aesthetic or aesthetic preferences; linked to conventional cultural practices.Such impulsive nature of culture often reflects in the autonomous functioning of societies or communities, particularly the non-western ones. This can be perceived by visual imageries or works of art related to culture, especially imageries related to advertisement and graphic design. Such mediums of visual communication have always been an effective mode in undergoing persuasion, especially the term 'Graphic Design' which primarily stands for different genres of designs for printing has always been the most prominent examples of audio-visual communication. Gradual advancements in technology led to the emergence of an array of new possibilities which worked in favour of the most crucial tools of visual communication, one of which is Poster. Though considered a product of 'low' culture, since it's guessed emergence, Posters have proven to be an amalgamation of imagery and words attributed to socio-political and cultural contexts. Due to the commercial and transient nature, it serves as a ground of experimentation for artists. Though dependent on other art mediums like painting, sculpture, photographs etc. its parasitic temperament has continued to evolve within confinements. More precisely, Film Posters have inherited the freedom of experimentation the most. The Western countries though got access to experiment on Film Posters earlier, the Indian Film Posters had a different narrative. Due to possession of two prominent streams of Cinema – Mass and Art, the film posters from the very beginning have supported strict distinctions while forming the stylisations of these two genres. While the Hindi film posters were mostly characterised by bright colours and bohemian essence and often actors appearing against hues of colour, this was not the case with Bengali Film Posters. Bengal during the 1940s and 1950s had a host of talented young designers working in British advertising agencies. The changing market demands of an independent nation amalgamated with the designer's own quest for showing a distinctive regional style reflective in the works of Annada Munshi,

Makhan Dutta Gupta, Oroon Coomar Ganguly and especially Satyajit Ray. A visionary auteur like Ray, who not only directed films but also designed publicity materials for them is what shaped the visual culture of modern Bengali Aesthetics. The derivative nature of Cinema when presented in a compact static format of Film Poster is what proposes a designer turned director's legacy. This paper aims to undergo a visual analysis of Ray's Film Posters and understand Ray's interpretation of visual culture through them, subjected to varied range of themes and genres

Keywords: Imagery, Film Poster, visual culture, Title design, Cinema, Typography, Bengal

Introduction:

Cinema has always been one of the most influential media in lives of people due to its audio-visual mode. This art of narration encapsulated with inputs of script, screenplay, actors, music, and many other factors aims to mirror contemporary social life, trends, cultural influences within which it works. In other words, this art of story telling is derivative of its surroundings. From being a Taboo to becoming an integral part of social life, Cinema has seen many changes along with the ever-changing socio-political scenarios, cultural influences, and technological advancements. This aspect applies to the Posters of Films as well. The primary purpose of Film Posters is to promote an upcoming release by providing information such as – Title, slogans, name of director, name of actors, name of Producer or Production House and an appealing visual. The mention of visual here is meant to address the co-existence of images and words which are composed in such a manner that it grabs audience's attention and evokes interest among them by suggesting essence of the Film and also providing a hint about the concern of the Film in a vague manner. Thus, Film Posters are meant to evoke a lasting appeal of the film in the 'Viewer's' mind. Besides providing information, these posters also serve as a catalyst for emotions. This interesting attribute produces a challenge of catering to the target audiences and convey a message to them.

Also, Film Posters are meant to strike a balance between an innovative and individualistic visual concept and some preconceived elements of a genre. This confines experimentation and results in providing an identical look to the Film posters of same genre, even if designed by different artists. One such example is the case of Bollywood Posters of 1970s. These Film Posters are majorly characterised by montages with images of actors from still photographs pasted into a collage with a hand painted background, reproduced in a bulk. Bengali Film Posters though, had a similar approach, still managed to produce distinguished composition styles and typographies within same genres. Preoccupied with the responsibility of visualising cinematic experience in a static form, Film Posters contribute in documenting trends of visual culture and their metamorphosis as well. However, they are meant to conjure up the narration and mood of the film in a single static composition.

Print productions and Graphic Design although introduced much earlier, the implementation of technology and augmentations of visual culture made a significant impact on this concern. Colonial Art education in India had already introduced the likes of 'industrial,' 'decorative' art terms but the 20th century introduced 'commercial art' as a more structured sobriquet of these terms. In this context, establishment of the Indian Institute of Art in Industry in the year 1947, played a role of a lodestar and in the successive decades, Kolkata (then Calcutta) became India's most burgeoning hub of advertisement aided by ventures like J. Walter Thompson, D.J. Keyner and many more such agencies. Thus, the home of many commercial talents metamorphosed into their workspace soon. Famous commercial artists like Annada Munshi, O.C. Ganguly, Raghunath Goswami, Satyajit Ray and many more began their journey with these firms, producing illustrations, book covers, labels, and many more such advertisement works. However, to understand the nuances of Ray's vision as a commercial artist, we must observe his trajectory as a student first.

Ray: The student

Coming from a family of legends like Upendra Kishore Ray Chowdhury and Sukumar Ray, Satyajit had interest in art and cultural consciousness since childhood, but his enrolment in Kala Bhavana in 1940, added to widen his perspective. Under the orchestrations of Nandalal Bose and Benode Behari Mukherjee, the visual understanding of Ray got lyricism. Though art education in Kala Bhavana was and still is aloof from commercialised visual understanding, but there are instances of trivial commercial attempts by practitioners there. One such remarkable example is the series of Haripura Congress Posters by Nandalal Bose created in 1938 (figure.1). Commissioned by Mahatma Gandhi for Congress sessions in Haripura, these posters were handmade by using Tempera Technique on handmade papers. These posters primarily depict village life, had little to no resemblance with the existing and prevalent conventions of Posters. The earth like colour schemes,

devoid of Typography compositions with one or two figurative depictions in the foreground and a common linear temple arc design still managed to amalgamate and impart a commercial look to these works. Even in case of Sahaj Path illustrations (figure.2), the Illustrations were purely designed without the knowledge of commercialisation but genuine understanding of how to cater to the viewer's needs. Nandalal's disciple Benode Behari Mukherjee show similar traits when his calligraphic practice (figure. 3) is taken into consideration. His confident sweeping strokes convey structure to the fact that, he much like Nandalal Bose was much unaware of what commercialisation meant but through his subconscious or conscious approach, he too succeeded in visualising typographic quality. Apart from these, another important occurrence in Ray's journey was the booming practices of Printmaking techniques in Kala Bhavana. Workshops conducted by foreign practitioners in the early 1920s, such as Madame Andre Karpeles and Mexican artist connoisseur Fryman strengthened the foundation of Printmaking practices in the premises of Kala Bhavana. The traces of such practices show up in Ray's competence in varied range of Printmaking techniques- woodcut, lithography, photo engraving, scraper board, silkscreen. While working as a graphic designer for various publishing houses in Kolkata (Calcutta) he did many works for novels, books, magazine covers, etc. These may have assisted in understanding modern and economic advertisement's visual requirements.

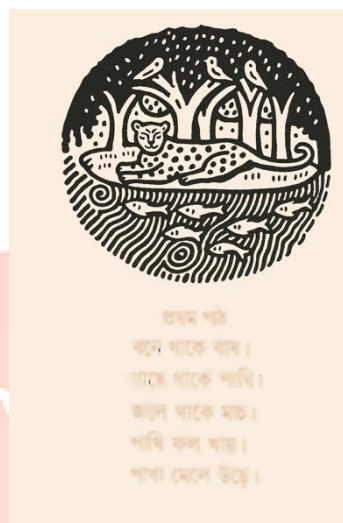Figure. 1: Haripura Congress Poster.
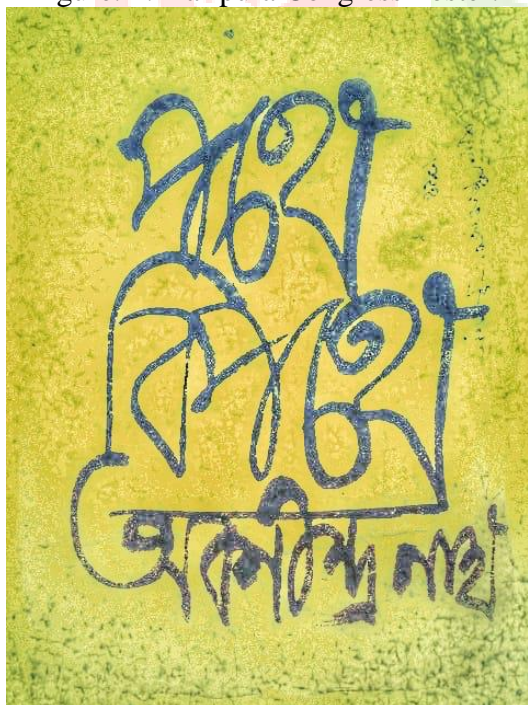

Figure. 2: Sahaj Path Illustration

Figure. 3: Calligraphy of Benode Behari Mukherjee

The Directorial Perspective:

The alliance between a Film director and his film is largely decided by his understanding of the script and style of narration. The visualisation of screenplay and director's rendering of the artistic aspects eventually led to completion of the desired vision. The 20th century understand of visual culture is encompassed by imageries other than conventional works of art, mostly cinema and advertising. Hence, Cinema as an emerging and evolving medium then had much potential in shaping or standing for the visual culture of a particular community, race, etc. In general, Cinema has always been balkanised into two genres- Parallel Cinema and Commercial Cinema. While Parallel Cinema or Art Cinema is polarised to be a director's cinema, Commercial cinema is considered a narration of fantasy away from Realism. But Bengali Films especially during the 1950s-1970s even in the 80s witnessed two genres of cinematic vision- first, the purely commercial genre practiced by eminent directors who often amalgamated fantasy and realism and second, pure artistic genre derivative of well-known novels, short stories, brutal reality, etc. These decades witnessed an array of legendary film directors like Tapan Sinha, Mrinal Sen, Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak. In a quest of exploring varied range of themes- drama, romance, musicals, satire, documentaries, children's films, etc., Ray's narrations often targeted the middle class population. His interpretation of Humanism encircled Tagore's literary works to Tribal entity, science to morality and social culpability to human ethics. A visual analysis of his film posters from 1950s-1960s will present a retrospective on modern as well as postmodern Bengali aesthetics and visual culture.

Statement of Research Problem:

Hand painted Film posters or those generated through varied Printmaking techniques may have lost relevance today, but their contribution in shaping the 'Bengali Aesthetics' is immeasurable. They were not mere amalgamation of images or pieces of information, in fact, they carry reminiscences of varied experiences and trends within themselves, evoking timeless charm. Though Colonial India had already introduced likes of industrial art or decorative arts, it was in the first years of 20th century that the term Commercial Art came to be known within the radius of Art groups, clubs, and expressed itself in the form of Advertisement. In the successive years, Kolkata (Calcutta) began experiencing a flooded entry of advertisement agencies causing the upliftment of many talented artists, one of whom was Satyajit Ray. A commercial artist turned director, Ray finally got to live his long-awaited passion of Film making with Pather Panchali but, the self designed film poster also managed to capture a bit of director's vision. While Satyajit Ray the film director enjoys an enormous fame, Satyajit Ray the artist when compared is still overlooked. Although his journey and accomplishments are well documented and much talked about, all of it is often confined to the Children's magazine 'Sandesh'. His contribution in shaping the modern Bengali Aesthetics is vague till date, especially in case of Film Posters. In this paper, the statement of Research problem is to study, see and interpret Ray's vision in including trivial but impactful elements of modern Bengali visual culture in his film posters, while visualising the narrative of his films in a compact, static form.

Literature Review:

A wide range of sources has been employed in constructing this piece of writing. When was Modernism (2000), authored by Geeta Kapur and published by Tullika, New Delhi investigates the notion of modernism in the Indian Art scene. The Post Colonial aspects are taken into consideration to understand the political and cultural upheavals. Besides exploring the works of artists like those of the Progressive Artist's Group, this book also studies the characterisation of Satyajit Ray's Apu. Art and Visual Culture in India (2009), edited by Gayatri Sinha published by Marg Publications puts forth the massive upheavals saw in Indian Art and Visual Culture from Colonial India to the post global era. Through discussion over a diverse range of media-photography, advertisement, painting, performance art and cinema, Sinha examines art within technology and socio-political circumferences. In other words, this book interprets visual culture beyond 'high' art. An Introduction to Visual Culture (1999), authored by Nicholas Mirzoeff and published by Routledge, London traces the emergence of visual cultural studies into academics and scrutinises how visual culture is consumed in the post-modern world. Mirzoeff focuses on the social regulation of how vision is perceived. Exploring Visual Culture: Definitions, Concepts, Contexts (2005) authored by Matthew Rampley and published by Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh implies an interdisciplinary approach to examine conceptualisation of advertisement to films and focuses on how visual imagery is operated within broader cultural and social frameworks. Rampley proposes a theoretical foundation in visual cultural studies and provides an inclusive approach by questioning the hierarchy of visual forms. Posters: A Global History (2014), authored by

Elizabeth E. Guffey and published by Reaktion Books, London offers a thorough analysis of the history of evolution of Poster design through a transnational politically aware approach. Guffey emphasises on the functionalities of posters and their perceptions across divergent historical and cultural contexts. Guffey also conveys on the mechanism of visual communication in the global scenario. Through the proposal of a multinational framework, Guffey also provides the visual narratives of posters specially related to Cinema. Bengali Cinema: An other nation (2010) authored by Sarmistha Gooptu and published by Routledge India, Delhi focuses on how Bengali Cinema carved a distinct cultural identity within a Pan-Indian zone. Gooptu proclaims on how Bengali Cinema especially during the 1950s-1970s presented itself as a gentry cultural vigour and challenges the homogenised interpretations of Indian Cinema and puts forth the role of Cinema in assembling the cultural identity and visuality of Bengal. This book proposes possibilities on how Bengali cinema culturally defined itself and this understanding can be taken forward to analyse the functionality of poster Art. Rang Tulir Satyajit (2014), authored by Debasis Deb and published by Ananda Publishers offers a detailed and infrequent study of graphic design in Indian Cinema, rather Bengali Cinema and discusses Satyajit's contribution in shaping the modern visual identity of Bengali culture. Deb focuses on a broader history of Bengali visual culture by employing it in comparative analysis with the contemporary Film Posters of Bollywood.

Methodology:

For the current area of study, a Case Study with semiotic approach is chosen. From the treasure trove of Ray's self designed posters, this study will majorly discuss Ray's film posters designed between 1950-1960. While undergoing visual analysis of these film posters, a close cultural conjunction will be an area of discussion. As already discussed, Culture can be seen in the most trivial and unexpected matter, Film Posters too, though looked down upon, have always offered close cultural connections gradually bridging the gap between 'high' art and 'low' culture. Considering Ray's vision on both his films and film posters into consideration, the case studies aim at exploring the use of visual elements such as typography, forms, etc. along with their connection with Bengal's visual culture. As one of the rare Indian film directors who explored various genres, Ray's posters can be understood clearly with the aid of ethnical approach as it will help to analyse the gradual change observed in making Film Posters. Hence, the mythology employed here in qualitative in nature.

Case Study:
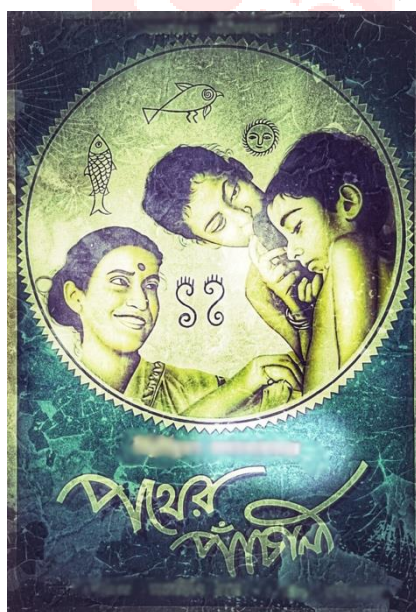
Film: **Pather Panchali (1955)**

Figure. 4: Film Poster of Pather Panchali

Adapted from the 1929 Bengali novel of the same name written by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, this film marked the directorial debut of Satyajit Ray in 1955. This film subtly hints at Colonial India; while primarily focusing on village life hence, visuals of village appear predominantly in the film itself. The film Poster (figure. 4) is designed with a flat green background which stands for the environmental structure of a Bengali village. In the enclosure of a circle decorated with basic triangular motifs, appears the protagonist Apu with his older sister and their mother. The simple motifs of fishes, sun, and Goddess Laxmi' feet appear

in the white backdrop. Despite the presence of such vibrant flat green background, the monochromatic portraits managed to shine. The title design or Typography of the Film's name confirms the simplicity of Ray's chosen niche. However, this poster displays visual culture of Bengali village life through the trivial motifs shown against the white backdrop and the prevalent green background affirms their importance. The word 'design' has subjective connotations. By employing such a simple colour scheme, motifs against naturalistic portraits, Ray succeeded in visualising a modern yet traditional visual culture in a static form.

Film: **Devi (1960)**

Figure. 5: Film Poster of Devi

This film deals with jeopardy caused by superstitions and religious extremism. This film poster (figure. 5) presents a visual where the face of Devi, which is centre staged at the top of the poster shows bicoloured face of the protagonist. The title 'Devi' written in Bengali script shows a unique feature; the decoration of the alphabets presented with the illustrative motif resembling "Chala" of Gods and Goddess. The bright red colour of the title and the bindi on the forehead of the protagonist also hint at the plot of the film. Each interpretation of design is meant to offer certain aspects of meaning which team up together to convey totality in the audience's understanding. Through close inspection, the dilemma of the protagonist present in the poster as a portrait cutout can be felt in a subtle temperament. The blank expression on her face also concludes to this assumption. The sharp contrast in the overall earthy tone and the bright red typography and bindi add to the drama quotient of the poster.

Film: **Charulata (1963)**

Figure. 6: Film Poster of Charulata

Though Ray's take on social commentary related to women began with an undertone in Devi, it was Charulata which made his interpretation dominant. Questioning woman's position in society, Charulata was

Ray's second adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's literary works, this time the novel – Nastanir (The Broken Nest). The film just like the novel brings up the topic of infidelity, tussle between moral and immoral and questions conventional societal standard through which a women's character is measured. The film poster (figure. 6) resembles book cover design. The film poster shows an illustrative female face from side profile with the title designed in maroon exhibits resemblance with Alphona, thus owning a stereotypical feminine essence. The unfinished essence of the female face conveys depths of Charulata's character.

Film: **Mahanagar (1963)**

Figure. 7: Film Poster of Mahanagar

Urbanisation has been elemental to the way societies have assembled themselves in the Indian mainland. Urban centriole as a dominating hub of socio-economic and political culture as well as intellectual diaspora has attracted even people and communities from remote regions. Often perceived as symbol of advancement, the ambits in the form of city walls are a hegemonic influence on what we usually perceive as a city. Millions of people, move to a city every year driven by a utopian dream. These attributes make urbanisation an important subject for film making, specially after the observation of demographic transformation in cities like Delhi, Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai). After the first decade of Independence, the democratic urge demanded demanded nation building which became the driving force of progress in these conurbations. Soon, these cities with their growing population became a visual of failed expectations, brawl and suppression. Hence, expression of art in the Post Independence era became largely inclined towards the working class and middle class, in these cities, especially Kolkata (Calcutta). Mahanagar, adapted from Narendranath Mitra's Abataranika is set in such an undertone but questions the status of a working woman. Much like the already mentioned film posters, this Film poster (figure. 7) presents a portrait of the protagonist. The blue hued flat background with the protagonist's indifference is confined by the typography which resembles the urban structure. The striking red lipstick adds sparkle to the otherwise calm and monochromatic visual. The lipstick also symbolises an adaptation of the urban lifestyle.

Film: **Nayak: The Hero (1966)**

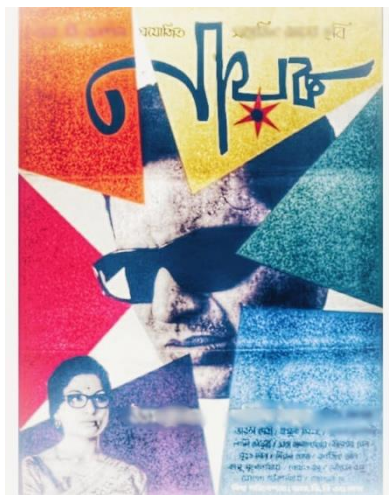
Figure. 8: Film Poster of Nayak: The Hero.   Figure. 9: Film Poster of Nayak: The Hero

Figure. 10: Film Poster of Nayak: The Hero

Admiration of oneself has always been accompanied by insecurities and mistakes. It is often encountered by reevaluation of one's actions. Nayak: The Hero, I feel narrates introspection of s character eventually revealing it's layers. The film posters of this film (figure.8,9 and 10) reveals the same in a subtle manner. The posters possess the same typography of the Title but the visuals obviously varied. The first mentioned poster (figure. 8) has a flat blue background with the portrait cut out of the protagonist in focus. The riveting quality which distinguishes this poster from other posters is the order in which the title is placed. The title is placed on the presumable notion of a sunglass representing the impassive outer shell of the protagonist. The second poster (figure. 9) utilises the same cutout but placed it underneath the colourful triangles which eventually form. Star altogether against the face of the protagonist. The last-mentioned poster (figure. 10) presents a striking rose-pink silhouette of a man wearing sunglass representing the protagonist with supporting cast at the back in the form of portrait cutouts. All the three posters show the appearance of the journalist played by 'Sharmila Tagore' in varied sizes, providing a subtle hint at the importance of the character after the protagonist. The Typography of Title Design interestingly showcase the utilisation of a star, which suggests the glamorous liege of a Hero. The whole typography staged in an autographic manner also visualises the culture of movie star autographs and its demand which is relevant till today.

Result and Analysis:

The Visual imagery of Ray's Film Posters between 1950s-60s show traces of compositional structure implied by initiators of Bengal Renaissance Art, specially Abanindranath Tagore's Omar Khaiyyam series or Nandalal Bose's prints for Sahaj Path. Both of these body of works used a specific colour pallets, simple motifs and vast negative space. Clearly drawing inspiration from the aesthetics of Kalighat Pata paintings, Ray's Film posters often include simple motifs related to Bengali daily life, such as Fish, Devi Laxmi's feet as seen in the Film Poster of Pather Panchali. The vast negative space and often single figured or single portrait based design of his Film Posters evoked by Abanindranath's or Nandalal's understanding which themselves are evoked by Japanese aesthetics clearly indicates the presence of cross-cultural elements in Ray's understanding of aesthetics. His choice of muted colour scheme often reminds of his days in Santiniketan and how his masters Nandalal Bose and Benode Behari Mukherjee themselves were inclined towards the predominant colour palette of vegetation there. His expertise as a graphic designer expresses itself the most in his hand drawn typographies. The titles of Film when put against the otherwise visual design of his posters, do not merely convey the required information but also embraces the energy of the suggested title and its symbolism. For example, the title of Mahanagar, visualises a structural quality of cityscape in a minimalistic way. In case of the Typography used in Charulata too, the wildling plummets symbolise the feminine in Charulata's character. Portrait cutout against flat colour base- a common occurrence in most of Ray's film posters rather than being just a visual element actually establishes an emotional connect with the audience and increases introspection among them. Ray manages to showcase the trajectory of commercialism Bengali image making from Patachitra, Battala Prints to 20th century Graphic Design. The Film Posters convince themselves as works of art often establishing a psychological and emblematic understanding among the audiences. A close study of Ray's Film Posters not only reveal Bengal's choice of visual aesthetics but also show how a regional visual practice can be presented in a modernised and universal demeanour.

Conclusion:

This study has surveyed Satyajit Ray's art of Film Poster making as a plat of an automated apprehension, arguing that his decisions on design employment function as visual inferences to the thematic choices of his films. Ray's Posters do not appear as mere aesthetic art objects but they serve as visual illustrations evoking reminiscences of culture, particularly visual culture. Through semiological analysis, it has been demonstrated how continual use of iconography- for example, the use of 'star' in the typography of Nayak's title design, Ray engages the utter tensity of modernity, resonance and identity. Propped at the convergence of visual cultural studies and the introspection of a visual storyteller, this inspection shows that Ray's works as graphic designer is an augmentation of his directorial autonomy and a contribution to India's trajectory of developing Film Poster heritage. By treating these designs as pivotal documents we divulge their function in ciphering socio-historical environs. Also, Ray's concoction of indigenous and modern minimalism foresees modish discussions involving encyclopaedic versus localised archetype.

Further research may traverse comparative analysis across Bengali Film Posters, carrying the vision of different directors and cross-cultural findings on the interpretation and visualisation of Bengali Film Posters abroad. Eventually, recognising Ray's Film Posters as a fundamental part of his cinematic corpus augments our understanding of how directors surmount the ambits between imagery, ideology, and narration within the inclusive area of visual culture.

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