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**Dimensions of Narrative Through *Dress*:  
Portrayal of the Marginalized in Satyajit Ray's  
*Sadgati***

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**Abstract**

A general understanding of *dress* categories it as a social, cultural construct, however it adds a unique perspective to its symbolic and semiotic dimension if interpreted in the sphere of film studies. *Sadgati* (1981) filmed by Satyajit Ray for Doordarshan was originally written in Hindi by Premchand in 1931. Reflective of postcolonial society, and bringing in the neo realist film-making influences, Ray has epitomized the

Dalit cause in a hard hitting approach. Analyzing the film through the lens of "dressing up" infers that narrative is lucidly intertwined to clothes and formulates the cinematic construct. The article therefore attempts to look into how Ray takes his narrative and cinematic vision forward with an articulate and communicative use of "dressing up".

**Keywords:** Dress and costume, narrative, identity, film adaptation, Dalit.

## Introduction

*Dress* includes a collection of the modifications of body and/or the supplements to the body, including garments, jewelry, accessories, and modifications like tattooing, piercing, hair do, and make up that can be chosen as a group or also as individuals within the group (Eicher & Higgins 1). While evaluation of a narrative through films, one of the most striking features to be observed is how the identity is constructed in the society, especially through dressing up in nonverbal terms. From a sociological perspective, *dress* communicates a lot in terms of class, and catalyzes the entire process of differentiating the identities of different social class.

This is particularly seen in the sociological *dress* theories, as propounded in the context of conspicuous consumption of clothes and its pecuniary status that clothes are the representation of the social worth, class hierarchy, and by what a wearer is able to afford and choose to wear, aspects of his distinction can also be adjudged (Veblen 77). Further, more, commencing from the root that *dress* is a form for

disseminating messages, it has also originated from the sociological processing and is a mirror of the social class of the wearer (Simmel 4). To embolden these concepts, Pierre Bourdieu posits of how initially the studies established that *dress* was a tool for the dominant class to signify their superiority, giving potency to their positions of power, and reinforcing subjugation upon the lower class (13). In the specialized arena of *dress* and fashion studies, *dress* communicates the plethora of meanings to formulate identity vis-a-vis self, social structure, and values, and it could range from information about age, gender, political affiliations, and religion and to a large extent about the psyche of the person (Eicher & Higgins 2). Humans convey a multitude of information through what they wear, ranging from character, individuality, association with society, connection to variety of situations that a person is part of with an articulate sense of transmitting messages (Damhorst 66).

In the realm of semiotics if dressing up is taken as system of language eliciting meanings, then it is pertinent to study the association of the signifier that is the properties of the clothes and the signified as the concepts or meanings that it generates (Barthes 11). There are three relevant aspects connected to *dress* in context to communication and they are, firstly when we talk about *dress*, it is being referred to as messages, secondly it is understood that messages are emanated from people's *dress* and thirdly it is directed towards a specific group of people to make meaning of what the *dress* has to communicate (Barnard 73). According to Barthes as per Saussure in understanding the overall association, it conveys certain signs which establish meanings

about the wearer as understood in a subjective as well as an objective way rendering dressing up as a system or code which is more aesthetic in nature (Barthes 12). In dimensions of self-realization and appearance, the theory on performativity, Judith Butler is worth consideration too. Through this the idea of gender is pondered, at the level where self, body, and *dress*, interacts and the clothing communicates to the outside world as well as acts back on the body of the wearer (Butler 7). As fashion theoreticians like Fred Davis posit, looking broadly, dressing up is a lens through which one can read, not just what the wearer communicates or wants to denote through his/her act of dressing up but it can also reveal what the wearer also wants to conceal, mask, negotiate with, and down play certain personal aspects (Davis 3).

These theories have abundantly been used to study or read films to critically articulate the role of dressing up in communicating messages. In her book *The Clothed Body*, in the chapter "Black" on understanding the nuances of dressing up, Patrizia Calefato mentions that every item of clothes are substantial signs and are laden with articulate importance and are in a sense metonym to the character which they garb (109). Not only does *dress* communicate, but in many situations *dress* through its visual and as well as textural elements is a more effective tool to communicate than verbal language itself (Kaiser 39). Writing on the clothes and its related importance in creation of identity in India, Emma Tarlo in her book titled *Clothing Matters, Dress and Identity in India*, conjectures that, the twofold process of differentiation and identification is the chief idea in analyzing the progress of clothing customs, denoting that clothes are a way of

categorization of castes, classes, regions, groups etc (318). Thus when articulately used by film makers and their creative team, clothes can become a strong catalyst in abbreviating large texts. The paucity of research and the scarce academic discourse in India, on the pertinent area of *dress* as an important tool in the craft of film making, leads to emergent need to analyze and explore *dress* as an important tool in *mise en scene*<sup>i</sup>. (Barsam 88). *Sadgati* as a case study is chosen as it is one of the finest examples of film which captures the realism from life in its barest form and it being inspired from the Neo Realist style of filmmaking by Ray.

### ***Sadgati* - From Premchand to Satyajit Ray**

Munshi Premchand who wrote this short story *Sadgati*<sup>ii</sup> was part of the Indian Progressive Writer's Association and felt that writers' have a definite role to play in bringing a social change through their writings. This short story presents the story of Dukhi, a low caste tanner who visits Ghasiram, the upper caste *Brahmin*<sup>iii</sup> village priest to formalize the marriage of his daughter, but instead the priest vehemently goes on to exploit Dukhi by ruthlessly making him perform tasks which are physically daunting and below human dignity. Sadly, Dukhi meets his cruel death, and despite his loyal hard work to Ghasiram he reaches his end without being given the last rites and being eaten in the open by scavengers. Ironically through his death, Dukhi attains deliverance, paradoxically attains *moksh*<sup>iv</sup> or salvation, though as per the Hindu laws the last rites of his death was not performed by his tormentor, Ghasiram.

Adaptation through films needs a nuanced understanding of the tenets of filmmaking, its techniques and unique potential in narration and its merits as a visual medium (Leitch 63). Premchand's *Sadgati* was adapted in a triumphant endeavor into a film by the master auteur, Satyajit Ray and was filmed by him in 1981 for *Doordarshan*, a national television broadcaster under the aegis of Government of India. The socialist era of Nehru and continued till the following few decades, socially committed directors like Satyajit Ray have crafted films which reflect the socio cultural, political and religious consequences of the society (Kumar 219). Ray has applied the essence of neo realist cinema by making the movie devoid of any element of overt drama and distractions and pinning it close to factual exactness to the characters, settings, environments, social issues, oppression, and despair, and mostly providing a voice to the underprivileged. The film is rendered with *mise en scene* which has earthy tone with pale colors and rustic textures to etch out the thematic tone of this short story set in the village.

Ray's faithful or reliable adaptation of the Premchand's *Sadgati*, understood from the postcolonial perspective, has brought to it, his own artistic and social agenda by further enhancing the aspect of presenting a factual account of the atrocities hurled on the *Dalits*, by giving to it, a tone which, graphically substantiates the simmering revolt. In her article on Satyajit Ray titled, "His Films, Their Stories", Meenakshi Mukherjee which forms a part of collection of article from the book *Filming Fiction, Tagore, Premchand and Ray*, she has deliberated on the eloquence of Satyajit Ray as a film maker in context to *Sadgati* by stating that Ray has been austere in his

approach in it, amongst all the adaptations that he has done from written to film where he has deliberately structured a realistic tone with not an iota of extra detail, focusing on conciseness and bringing it close to the original length of Premchand's *Sadgati* (7). Ray has kept his impact very focused and real and also used other tools of film making, especially the incisive use of dressing up the characters or in *Sadgati*.

### ***Dress as a Tool for Communicating Narrative in Ray's Sadgati***

*Dress* has been an important aspect of the *mise en scene* and film director's have used it to a their aesthetic advantage to communicate to the audience about the narrative by creating characters and cultural constructs (Wilkinson-Weber 3). More specifically *dress* in films or use of costumes in films is cautiously chosen where every element and aspect of costumes which comes on scene is intentional and is there to sustain the narrative (Andersson 103). The strength of *dress* is that it abbreviates in symbolic ways about the context and the background of the characters and thus disseminates a whole range of information about the character and the story itself, like the demographics, psychographics, profile, background and many other relevant key details which propels the sequence of events in the film. The objective of this research is to examine this approach and analyze *Sadgati's* narrative through the perspective of dressing up where clothes are lucidly intertwined to the narrative and that the dressing up is a key element in the construction of narrative and cinematic identities. Stella Bruzzi in the introduction of her book *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* writes

about, dressing up in cinema by maintaining that clothes are not just essentially there as material but they help create identities and dressing up has an inevitable importance in the film narrative (1).

Use of certain types of material goods is viewed as a signifier of particular kinds of representational or symbolic values, or communicating the values that the wearer holds, and these values are interlinked to the social ranking in context to class, gender and ethnicity (Crane & Bovone 320). As the film opens up with Jhuriya, played by Smita Patil, wife of the village low caste tanner Dukhi, the scene evokes a sense of a village deeply entrenched in caste hierarchy and the accurate representation of the low caste women. As the scene unfolds, Jhuria is returning after getting the reserve of water for her daily use early in the morning and is wearing a plain bright hued *sari*<sup>y</sup>, reflecting the range of colors worn by low caste women depicting her social class, in a way where the hemline of the *sari* ends above the ankle to assure that she is able to carry on with her day laden with physical work with ease without impeding her work.



*Image 1. Jhuriya is dressed articulately in a type of a sari and in a way along with the silver jewelry signifying her social class.*

**Source:** *Sadgati*, 1981

The fact that Jhuriya is busy in morning chores, where she needs to be out of home since morning to make sure that the daily supply of things is in place and has no activity related to rituals and prayers, suggests her position in context to the social class. In contrast to Jhuriya, another important woman character in the film, that is Ghasiram's wife is shown to be inside in the confines of the house and is meticulously dressed in clean, elegant clothing, emphasizing on the class that she belongs to. The comparative portrayal of these two women in *Sadgati* through the *dress* helps establish these constructs of the society laden with class domination and hegemony sanctified by the Hindu laws for the codes for dutiful women.

As discussed in the article by Julia Twigg, titled "Clothing, Identity and the Embodiment of Age", which is part of the book *Aging and Identity: A Postmodern Dialogue*, edited by Jason Powel and Tony Gilbert, it is elicited that as per the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, *dress* is analyzed as an emblem of class distinction, taking further and establishing *dress* as a tool for the elites to maintain their authority, ascertaining subjugation of the inferior class (2). Establishing the contrast through projecting Ghasiram's wife against Jhuria speaks of the role women had to play as per the social hierarchy and norms.



*Image 2. Ghasiram's wife's character of a upper caste Brahmin's wife is established through the dressing up with white sari, signifying purity.*

**Source:** *Sadgati*, 1981

Ray has brilliantly negotiated the narrative to represent the subjugated status of the *Dalits*<sup>vi</sup>, and also the other lower castes in the society soaked with the evils of exploitation. Also the silver jewelry, along with the way Dhania, her daughter is dressed, the backdrop which presumably is outside the density of the village, signifies socially their caste, status, position in society and in a way the scene visually abbreviates the initial verbal tone of Premchand's *Sadgati* and brings into perspective the realistic standpoint.

Taking from the article by Julia Leslie published in the book *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning*, edited by Eicher and Barnes, on her writing on the religious principles of traditional Hinduism for appropriate *dress* for women she has elaborated from the booklet of codes and conducts entitled the *Stridharmapadhati*<sup>vii</sup>, that there are color codes for the upper caste *Brahmin men* (members of the highest Hindu caste, engaged in work as priests or teachers mostly) and for the *Dalit* men, the approved type is dirty and tampered (198). This is seen particularly in the case of Dukhi with soiled, crushed, unclean costumes, and in comparison to this, Ghasiram with his ritualistically and *Brahminically* coded attire, conveys abundant messages about class structure, religiously sanctified.



*Image 3. Dukhi in his tattered dress with the humble and crushed dhoti and short kurta decodes the plight of the Dalits.*

**Source:** *Sadgati*, 1981

Dukhi's predicament is well projected on Om Puri who plays Dukhi replete with crumpled set of knee length *dhoti*, a short shirt style upper garment or a short *kurta*<sup>viii</sup>, and a symbolic small piece of *gamcha*<sup>ix</sup>, drenched with the perspiration of Dukhi and completely crumpled. The *dhoti* which is about four and a half meters in length is a piece of unstitched fabric used as a draped, men's lower garment and in the case of Dukhi it is symbolically styled to give an unkempt impression, to indicate the excess physical work that he is engaged in to be

able to sustain his meager earning. *Gamcha*, put casually on the shoulders by men, is like a friendly aid for Dukhi in this otherwise indifferent world where he uses it as a base to lift heavy goods on his head and later to wipe of the perspiration.



*Fig 4. Ghasiram is seen in the dress code with sandalwood and tilak (red mark) on the forehead, saffron colored attire establishing his high social status.*

**Source:** *Sadgati*, 1981

In contrast to this, the oppressive village priest, sits in the middle of finishing his daily ritual of applying the three horizontal marks of sandalwood paste with the circular red mark after morning bath, to signify his dominant position as

the priest who rests at the highest position, in the social hierarchy, just by the virtue of his birth and who vehemently exploits fellow humans with unabated oppression. Ghasiram is seen resplendent in his characteristic saffron, pristine clean, flawlessly worn *dhoti*, and the long stole, the *janeu*<sup>x</sup> or the sacred thread on his torso, the golden chain with gemstones, a *rudraksha mala*<sup>xi</sup>, clean, sanctified and worthy of being worshiped. The *janeu* which as per the regressive, traditional Hindu laws for dressing up is an indicator of the commencement of the wearer's *Vedic* education. If observed carefully, it is found that the socially ostracized, lower caste men like Dukhi are not wearing the *janeu*, indicating their exclusion from education and keeping ritualized activities in the purview of the upper caste exclusively. These traditionally guarded scriptures leave out women too, from the initiation into *Vedic* education as it is not considered appropriate.

#### Contours and Portrayal of the *Dalits*

Satyajit Ray has put a harsh portrayal of the plight of the *Dalits* through this film. In this context it is pertinent to foreground what Sharankumar Limbale had vociferously posited in the book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations*, that the sufferings of the *Dalits* are seen strongly in the Hindu religion where the shadow, touch and speech are considered to be tainted with genetic contamination thus, considered untouchables and at fault just because they were born such (3). *Dalits* are considered to be such an outcaste that they can be considered to be non *Hindus* so much so that *Dalit* leaders like Ambedkar, as a form of protest called for conversion to

other religions like Buddhism (Manohar 89). The plight has also been outlined in the article by Rajpal Yadav in the edited book by Karan Singh, Amod Rai and Jyoti Yadav in very definite terms stating how the *Dalits* comprise of the helpless untouchables, existing in the margins with degraded lives replete with victimization by the supremacy of the caste and religion (89). The way Ray has faithfully portrayed Premchand's *Sadgati*, through the characters, their costumes, their dwelling, Jhuriya's accessories, it is established through the writings of Limbale that, *Dalits* are prohibited to create property, not authorized to wear gold jewelry, to live outside the village, allowed to use only clay utensils, with prohibition of use of silk, with such instructions replete in Hindu scriptures.

Here, it is important to note that the paraphernalia of codes for wearing *dress* as prescribed by religious texts, makes it impossible for the lower sections to maintain their scheme of clothing to be able to justifiably be equals to the *Brahmins*. The idea of the pure and the polluted has been applied to many such aspects of material culture suppressing the lower caste, denying basic dignity, power, property, and place in society.

As the two main male characters of Dukhi and Ghasiram, share the screen space for the first instance in the film, it is very clear with the way they are dressed, that the latter is on the pedestal in the eye of the former and that the former is in complete acceptance of his subjugation, as he bows down at the entrance of Ghasiram's home, horizontal on the ground happily, symbolically signifying the place of two men. Dukhi

seems to be non rebellious protagonist and rather meek in his response to the caste based humiliation as depicted by Ray (Yengde 11). The costume goes on to enhance the body of the actors, which becomes an important instrument in their hands to sharply connect in an unexaggerated style with the story line, to nuance the subtleties of the text.



*Image 5. Dukhi greeting the priest denoting how the lower caste people undermined their dignity to appease the upper caste.*

**Source:** *Sadgati*, 1981

At a correlated level the actor and the costume come together in this film to give the former more articulated background to bring to forefront the thematic representation with emphasis,

silhouette, color, and the overall tenor. Just as the two are conversing the Ghasiram's son enters the scene in a white *dhoti* and an upper shirt like garment and holding a book, again symbolically denoting that education is for the privileged.

### **Depiction of Class Through *Dress***

Conceivably one of the most important functions of *dress* is to be able to provide identification of the wearer in terms of his/her background, social strata, economic worth, position in the society and occupation. Analyzing the same in *Sadgati*, it is seen that, as Ghasiram's wife enters the storyline at the point when the centrality of the premise is that the priests rule the village socially, is taken forward when she is clad in a pristine white *sari* with the representative red border denoting that the women from this section are at a socially higher position. The color contours in the movie is highlighted through this discriminative white which barely covers up the darkness of her character as she abhors low caste humans but nonetheless it helps to mask her.

Later in the stormy night, when Ghasiram's wife is discussing how to settle the problem of disposing the Dukhi's corpse she is adorned with dark tones of red, depicting her cruel mind. Also, related to aspects of consumption and leisure, in context of Ghasiram and his wife, it is highlighted that *dress* is a signifier of the aspect that the wearer is not in the requirement of earning a livelihood (Veblen 78).

The penultimate sequence of the film is effectively presented, where the village priest Ghasiram is left with no other option

but to do the impure task of disposing off the dead body of Dukhi. Ray has shown the scared Ghasiram, with his *janeu* entangled on his ears, in a desperate bid to maintain his rank and class and to refrain to get dirtied and filthy. Cinematic language, to visually capture the implicit meaning of the story, has been used effectively by Ray, to project the discriminative aspects of the idea of purity and filth that the religious sacrosanct norms subscribe to.

To take this idea of purity forward, Ghasiram is seen very vividly, trying to cleanse himself of the impure act, indicating that he has taken a bath to cleanse himself, and also sprinkling symbolic pure water in the home while reciting religious *mantras*. When exploring the nuances of dressing up, it is also significant to note the representation of the women folk of the tanner community are represented in a way true to their norms and conforming code with silver jewelry and bright earthy tones of *sari*; when they come out to mourn after Dukhi's death in a scene from the film.

### **The Aspect of the Subaltern**

The critical study of *Sadgati* can't be considered accomplished without invoking from the critical studies of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak through her essay titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Through Spivak's essay, one can easily discern the underlying conflicts and prejudices ingrained in *Sadgati*. According to Spivak heterogeneity among experiences of oppression must be recognized. She elaborates that since the subalterns subject position having been constructed out of the colonial discourse, "a pure subaltern"

cannot be traced (66). Spivak argues that any post colonial theory must recognize the heterogeneity of post colonial cultures and complexity of form which is full of differences and contradictions. She warns that the local elites may have, like western academics, no authentic access to the subaltern.

In this context it is observed that both Premchand and Satyajit Ray belonged to the educated and cultural elite of this nation. Their representation of the oppressed class is addressed to the dominant class and seeks to inform them of their injustices and invokes empathy in them. However, it may not have addressed adequately the anger, resentment, and suffocation that the *chamars*<sup>xiii</sup> may have suffered.

## Conclusion

It is seen that in Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati*, there is a clear depiction in the narrative of the plight of the underprivileged catalyzed articulately by the adroit use of dressing up to weave the story forward and visually impact the viewer with the underlined vision of neorealist cinema and taking forward the social concerns.

In this poignant yet hard hitting depiction of the *Dalit* cause in postcolonial context, through the faithful film adaptation of Premchand's *Sadgati*, Satyajit Ray sets a rhythm which is true to his movie making vision. The poetic approach of Ray is an evidence of his master craftsmanship through which the film sets a pace which retains the essence of Premchand's original but he renders to it, his own vision and concern for the underprivileged, on one side and to effectively use the techniques of film making, costumes, makeup, dressing up, to

heighten the audience experience on the other. Satyajit Ray's examination of the perils of the caste system in Indian society through the adaptation of Premchand's *Sadgati*, presents the realistic portrayal of the suppression and dehumanized situation of the community which stands at the lowest ebb of the Hindu society in India. This clearly underlines the ideological nexus of Ray with the Indian socio political condition and his deep scrutiny of the Indian social institutions. Although represented as a genuine cinema *Sadgati* still stands under the intellectual microscope of academia and thinkers for broader dissemination of the issue of the *Dalits* in the colonial and postcolonial context.

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Notes:

- <sup>i</sup> It is the process through which the stage, setting and the environment of the film is formulated including actors, props, costumes, make up etc to create the mood and look of the film.
- <sup>ii</sup> The title of the short story by Munshi Premchand. The word means a good way to exit and in context of Hindu religion it can be interpreted as post death the rightful departure of soul to acquire salvation.
- <sup>iii</sup> A person belonging to higher class, forming part of the hierarchical division called caste and generally belonging to families having high social worth, wealth, power and mostly in occupations related to religion, rituals and priesthood.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Moksha* means freedom in the *Sanskrit* language. In the Hindu religion it is a state of transcendence which is achieved after becoming free from the cycle of birth leading to eternal bliss.
- <sup>v</sup> Generally six meters in length, *sari* is a draped attire for the women predominantly from Indian subcontinent. Prevalent mostly in cotton or silk it is draped over the woman's body over the shoulder or even over the head.
- <sup>vi</sup> Members of the oppressed, untouchable, lowest caste in *Hindu* class structure. *Dalit* the word has its roots in the *Sanskrit* word *Dal* and it denotes to people who are downtrodden, broken. *Dalits* were previously referred to as *Harijans* and signified as depressed classes and the word itself refers to caste rather than class applied to all those menial castes who by birth were stigmatized with utter impurity, contamination linked to their work and occupation.
- <sup>vii</sup> A manual in *Sanskrit* for the religious status and duties for *Hindu* women. The manual was written by *Tryambakayajvan* ( Ad 1665-1750), who was a minister in two of the *Maratha* kings of *Thanjavur* and is renowned as a learned man of religious laws. He is described as the scholar minister and this manual is like a

treatise for women to conform to certain sets of laws governing their daily lives.

- <sup>viii</sup>A upper garment worn primarily by men in South Asia. *Kurta* is loose, does not have a collar and is mostly hip length. It has variations in style depending on the region and the culture.
- <sup>ix</sup> It is a kind of an accessory or a stole and is approximately a meter in length, and is casually put around the shoulder generally by labor class men.
- <sup>x</sup> Is the sacred thread also known as the *yajnopavita*, is as per the Hindu laws the upper caste men wear them on their chest after the *upanayana sanskara* ceremony and is a symbolic reference to be brought close to be accepted by the *Guru* for receiving *vedic* education and the beginning of the formal schooling and thus getting a second birth.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Rudraksh* is basically beads or seeds used in *Hindu* religion as prayer beads and strung together in form of organic *mala* or necklace and having a connoted connection with the Lord *Shiva* and worn by his devotees seeking protection.
- <sup>xii</sup>A low caste tanner community belonging to the untouchable *Dalit* section referred in today's times under the scheduled castes. Their occupation is mainly related to leatherwork or the *charmakara*.

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