Why did Durga, Sarbajaya, and Aparna have to die?

Rubaiyat Hossain ponders the disquieting dispensability of the female characters in the Apu Trilogy

THE coming of modernity in South Asia is marked by the intellectual and material invasion of colonial political economy. As India and Pakistan emerged as modern nation states in 1947 one question was constantly being asked by South Asian intellectuals, and it was the question regarding the uniqueness of South Asian modernity in relation to the Western model.

Satyajit Ray, making his first film in 1955, was to make a serious statement as a long-standing member of the Bengali intelligentsia on the type of "modernity" that was to be ushered in by the Indian nation state, especially in the context of rural Bengal.

I would argue that the Apu Trilogy, made between 1955 and 1959, is Ray's first coherent narrative of the trajectory from tradition to modernity, from rural to urban, from darkness to light, from unreason to reason.

One curious feature of this journey towards modernity is the constantly surviving male figure (Apu) versus the failed and dead figures of the females (Indir Thakuran, Durga, Sarbajaya, and, finally, Aparna).

Critically understanding the woman's position within the nationalistic narrative can open up a unique view to interrogate the colonial past, and offer a clearer sense of the nationalistic politics. Lata Mani and Gayatri Spivak have noted the disappearance of the female figure from the patriarchal nationalistic narrative into a textual space where she is forever caught between "tradition" and "modernity," "patriarchy" and "imperialism," "subject-constitution" and "object-formation."

As women literally become the discourse between "tradition" and "modernity" in colonial Bengal, it is important to examine various nationalistic narratives and observe how they handle the figure of the woman, and where she is placed in the discourse. I would like to trace Satyajit Ray's placement of the female figure in his narrative of "modernity" by primarily looking at *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aporajito* (1956), and *Apur Sangsar* (1959).

Satyajit Ray's cinematic representation of Apu peering through a torn blanket to carrying his son on his shoulder is the trajectory of Ray's modern

