

Childhood, City, and Colonial Modernity: Re-Reading Satyajit Ray's Childhood Days

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Abstract

This paper revived Satyajit Ray's memoir Childhood Days, as an important literary and cultural document which tells the experience of colonial modernity in early twentieth-century Calcutta through the frame of childhood memory. The idea is to go beyond official and elite-centered histories through analyzing colonial city lived, perceived, and archived from a child's encountering poor's perspective. The paper is organized as a qualitative and interpretative piece of work based on close textual and cultural analysis by reading Ray's recollections with interdisciplinary frameworks from postcolonial studies, urban memory, and childhood studies. It pays attention to sensory details, affect in narrative, and episodes of the mundane, including scenes of the streets, domestic routines, informal learning and early experiences with technology in order to understand the process of absorption, negotiation and resistance to colonial infrastructures and modern technologies within the context of daily life. The conclusions outlined in this research are that childhood memory serves as an epistemological archive of sorts, as an alternative form of knowledge heritage, as a fragmented memory of colonial modernity that is not monolithic or dominant but, instead, inquisitive, playful and sensorial. Ray's memoir brings ordinary urban spaces such as homes, neighbourhoods, markets and places of enjoyment to the forefront, in which colonial and indigenous practices co-exist without fixed hierarchies, thus bringing forms of cultural hybridity and local agency to the fore, which have been neglected in official histories. The conclusion given in the study, Childhood Days, provides a counter-narrative to hegemonic colonial urban histories and that focuses on lived experience, everyday negotiation and continuity of indigenous social practices. These implications lead to larger discussions on the Global South by recalibrating childhood memoir as a valuable reserve to comprehend colonial urban as a space of cultural negotiation, hybridity, and consequently experiential history.

Keywords: Global South, Colonial Modernity, Childhood Memory, Urban Cultural Archive, Lived Experience.

Introduction

Satyajit Ray is renowned across the world for cinema genius in depicting the complexity of the social and moral values of life in India. But his works on the written word, especially his autobiographical

memoir *Childhood Days* (1999) is an important and unexplored source of the cultural fabric of colonial India. The memoir details Ray's early life in early twentieth century Calcutta, a city which was under British rule and undergoing a tremendous transformation. Moving away from the level of personal nostalgia, *Childhood Days*, becomes a silent cultural testament to the experience of colonial modernity from inside, the micro-spaces of daily life.

Colonial modernity in the Global South was not uniform and therefore simply imposed, but rather uneven and experienced and negotiated in the intimate contexts of the home, the street, the school and places of leisure. Traditional historical narratives have frequently focused on grand institutions or colonial administrative blueprints, and on elite points of view, to the point where what it was like to live in cities on a daily, casual, sensory level have always been invisible. This study argues that childhood memory, as expressed in literary autobiography, provides an important corrective to similar stories. The specific character of the child's point of view, based on sensory curiosity, unorganized ties in observation, absence of ideological inflexibility, offers a lot of uncommon epistemic window. It registers social change, not in relations of retrospective awareness or political certitude, but via immediate encounter, play, and affect.

Situating itself in the interdisciplinary research areas of postcolonial studies, urban memory and literary analysis, the current paper reads *Childhood Days*, as an urban text from the Global South. It analyzes how Calcutta not as a planned imperial metropolis appears to Ray, but as a "lived and remembered space", a messy arena of intense and intricate life where colonial infrastructures (like the trams and printing presses) come in contact with, and are subtly transformed by, indigenous social practices and rhythms. The memoir thus figures as a chart of feeling and memory, an alternate archive of knowledge of forms and sensory impressions as well as everyday negotiations that have been shaped out of official records.

The biggest objective of this study report is to perform a critical analysis of Satyajit Ray's *Childhood Days*, as a literary representation of colonial modernity, and how the memoir uses childhood memory as a way to document the hybrid, negotiated and experiential reality of urban life in colonial Calcutta. This research is crucial for a variety of reasons, as it situates the critical approach to Ray's work beyond his cinematic work. It is also part of the process of recovering subaltern and experiential history of the Global South city. It also promotes autobiographical narrative, especially memory of childhood, as a legitimate and potent methodological tool in gaining access to alternate histories of cultural contact and change. By giving priority to the detestable and marginal, this work-striving to make colonial modernity a much more complex and contradictory process lived on the ground wishes to contribute to a better understanding of the colonial modernity.

Methodology

This research takes the qualitative approach of an interpretative methodology based in literary and cultural analysis to analyse *Childhood Days*, by Satyajit Ray as a text which articulates childhood experience, the city and the colonial modernity in the context of the Global South. Instead of using empirical or quantitative approaches, the project uses interdisciplinary frameworks for a close reading of memory, space and everyday life as culturally and historically meaningful constructs.

The main approach utilized is close textual analysis, paying attention to select episodes, descriptive passages and narrative aspects relating to the city of Calcutta, the domestic and neighbourhood spaces, educational environments, leisure activities and encounters with modern technologies. These textual moments are explored in terms of their narrative strategies, sensory imagery and representational patterns in order to discover how colonial modernity is experienced and mediated

through the child's perspective. Particular attention is paid to memoir's use of observation, affect and everyday detail as narrative devices which resist grand historical generalizations.

This close reading is supplemented with a cultural analysis of the context in which the text is situated and that contributes to the historical period in which it was produced. The study bases itself on secondary sources relating to colonial Calcutta, urban modernity, memory studies, and Global South theory to interpret Ray's recollections in the context of broader processes in the history of the world as it later tells without limiting the memoir as a documentary record. Postcolonial and urban memory frameworks are employed heuristically, to develop understanding of indigenous practice and colonial structures as they co-exist and engage in the urban every day.

The research also uses memory as a methodological lens, which child memory should not be understood as a transparent record of the past, but rather as reflective and selective as a way of narrating the past. This approach lets the study explore how memory is able to recreate the city as a lived space, also conditioned by perception, repetition and emotional resonance. By reading memory as an archive to record past events that have otherwise been marginalized to official colonial history, the paper brings to the forefront voices, practices and experiences that are often marginalized in official colonial histories. Overall, this methodological approach offers the possibility to read *Childhood Days*, as an urban text from the Global South and its potential to throw light on the micro-level of everyday life of colonial modernity lived, negotiated, and interpreted at the micro level.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine *Childhood Days*, as a literary representation of colonial modernity by analysing the experience of and memory of early twentieth century Calcutta in the perspective of childhood.
- To analyse the city of Calcutta as it can be lived and archived, as the product of colonial infrastructures and indigenous social practices.
- To consider childhood memory as an alternate epistemological frame, and one that is capable of exposing other forms of knowledge, experience, and cultural negotiation.
- To explore the image of the work practices of everyday urban life - domestic routines, neighbourhood interactions, informal learning, encounters with technology.

Review of the Related Literature

Scholarly interaction with the works of Satyajit Ray have focused mostly on his cinematic legacy, realism, humanism and the use of his visual language and his literary writings, especially his autobiographical writings, have received comparatively little critical attention. Existing studies on Ray's films often focus on his nuanced rendition of everyday life, moral dilemmas as well as social change in colonial as well as postcolonial India, making Ray a key cultural chronicler of the Indian experience. Critics such as Chidananda Das Gupta and Andrew Robinson have focused on Ray's commitment to realism and the fact that his sensitivity to social detail is as much in evidence in *Childhood Days*, albeit a focus of discussion only tangentially in literary scholarship.

Autobiographical writing in the Global South has been widely studied as a cultural documentation and resistance. Scholars working in post-colonial and memory studies, for example, Ashis Nandy and Dipesh Chakrabarti have purposed that the personal narratives from colonized societies are alternative archives that confront Eurocentric historical models. These studies point to the importance of recovering the memory and memory stories as everyday experiences and indigenous practices and histories of feelings that were neither documented nor remembered in the official colonial histories. Ray's *Childhood Days*, fits perfectly into such a tradition by foregrounding the

ordinary life of cities and the childhood perception as valid sources of historical knowledge.

Urban studies scholars have also looked at colonial cities such as Calcutta as the site of hybridity, negotiation, and uneven modernity. The studies of colonial urbanism in general have focused on the fact that modern infrastructures such as transport systems, educational institutions, print culture, and entertainment were not passively assimilated, but locally appropriated and re-signified. Studies by Partha Chatterjee and Swati Chattopadhyay, for example, bring out the ways in which indigenous social practices coexisted and reworked colonial practices of urban planning. Ray's memoir complements these analyses in an important way by providing a ground-level and experiential view of the colonial city as experienced rather than created.

In the study of childhood a number of theorists, like Philippe Aries and more recently cultural critics, have highlighted the social construction of childhood in the sense of historical and cultural contexts. Literary academics have expanded this approach to demonstrate the ways in which the narrative of childhood offers special illumination into social change, just because the narrative comes outside of formal political debate. Ray's childhood gaze is an excellent example of this way of registering colonial modernity - not through ideological judgment, but through curiosity, play, and sense experience.

While these bodies of scholarship are valuable frameworks, there is a critical gap in sustained literary readings of *Childhood Days*, as an urban text in addressing childhood memory, colonial modernity and Global South epistemologies. This paper aims to fill this gap and synthesize the insights from postcolonial studies, urban memory, and childhood studies in a way that will reposition Ray's memoir as an important cultural document of colonial urban life.

Results and Discussion

"In these childhood memoirs I have described some ordinary events and ordinary people... Children do not make a distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary" (Childhood Days, p. 17)

Satyajit Ray's *Childhood Days*, extends beyond the conventional function of memoir as personal recollection and emerges as a textured narrative of colonial modernity as it was lived in everyday urban spaces. Ray explicitly foregrounds the ordinary as the primary registers of childhood memory, noting that "children do not make a distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary". This perspective allows the memoir to expose colonial modernity in early twentieth-century Calcutta not as a coherent or dominant force, but as a fragmented and uneven presence encountered through mundane routines, objects, and experiences. The city thus appears through homes, streets, schools, neighbourhoods, and leisure spaces where colonial and indigenous elements coexist without a fixed hierarchy.

"There were open-topped red double-decker buses... The roads were far less crowded, and the menace of traffic jams almost unheard of" (Childhood Days, p. 18)

"Even now, every time I smell turpentine oil, an image of the block-making department of U Ray & Sons rises before my eyes" (Childhood Days, p. 23)

Urban infrastructure is remembered not as imperial design but as lived experience. Ray's recollection of "open-topped red double-decker buses" and uncrowded roads situates the city within movement, sensation, and affect. Such memories offer access to a non-monumental history of colonial modernity grounded in everyday mobility rather than institutional planning. Similarly, the sensory memory triggered by the smell of turpentine oil, which evokes the block-making department of U Ray & Sons, transforms industrial and print technologies into intimate, domestic experiences. These technologies are absorbed into the child's sensory world, reinforcing the idea of the city as a living archive preserved through personal memory rather than official documentation.

“I cannot recall much about studies and lessons in Gorpar” (Childhood Days, p. 24)

“I could see all kinds of people from my balcony. Hawkers went by in the afternoon, carting their colourful wares” (Childhood Days, p. 31)

Formal institutions such as schooling occupy a marginal place in Ray’s recollections. His admission that he “cannot recall much about studies and lessons in Gorpar” suggests that colonial education did not dominate childhood consciousness. Instead, knowledge emerges through informal, experiential learning embedded in everyday life. Neighbourhood spaces further enrich this urban texture. Observing hawkers from the balcony, Ray records the informal economy and social diversity of the street, presenting the city as a site of movement, colour, and human interaction rather than abstract planning.

“I spent many an afternoon lying in my room, watching this free bioscope” (Childhood Days, p. 32)

“When I stepped into the store I felt as if I had arrived in a land of dreams” (Childhood Days, p. 29).

Modern visual culture enters the child’s world through ordinary domestic spaces. The “free bioscope” formed by light and shadow in a darkened room anticipates cinematic perception without technological spectacle, revealing how modernity is encountered playfully and incidentally. Consumer and leisure spaces similarly appear through affect rather than ideology. The department store becomes “a land of dreams” while early cinema is recalled as a hybrid experience accompanied by live pianists, underscoring the transitional and locally mediated nature of modern entertainment.

“The English cinemas had pianists to provide music throughout a film, instead of words” (Childhood Days, p. 36)

One of the central outcomes of this reading is the identification of childhood as a distinct epistemic position. Childhood registers modernity not through political or ideological awareness, but through sensory perception, curiosity, and lived experience. Technologies such as trams, printing presses, cinema, radio, and toys are not presented as symbols of colonial progress; instead, they are domesticated within local cultural rhythms, acquiring meanings shaped by everyday use rather than imperial intent.

Finally, *Childhood Days*, offers an alternative to hegemonic colonial urban histories that privilege administrative design and architectural grandeur. By foregrounding street vendors, household routines, informal learning, and neighbourhood interactions, Ray’s memoir reveals how colonial modernity was lived, negotiated, and subtly re-worked in everyday life. Childhood memory thus functions as an alternative archive, experiential rather than documentary, through which Calcutta emerges not as a monolithic colonial metropolis but as a hybrid urban space continually redefined by local agency. In this way, *Childhood Days*, contributes to Global South perspectives on colonial modernity by privileging lived experience, cultural hybridity, and everyday negotiation over grand narratives of domination and progress.

The discussion goes further to reveal that Ray’s memoir offers an alternative story to the hegemonic colonial urban histories. Official histories of colonial Calcutta have tended to concentrate attention on such things as administrative design, architectural magnificence and imperial rule. In contrast to this, *Childhood Days*, conceives priority of the ordinary and the marginal - street vendors, household routines, informal practice of learning, neighbourhood interactions and playful experimentation. These everyday encounters suggest how colonial modernity was lived and negotiated, within the frame of everyday life, and subtle forms of adaptation and silent forms of resistance were achieved through continuity of indigenous practices.

Another important result of this study is the appreciation of the memory as another archive. Ray's recollections are experiential knowledge outside the scope of institutional records such as sensory impression, emotional reaction, and habitual practices. Childhood memory thus becomes a way of accessing histories of the city which are experiential rather than documentary. Calcutta emerges not as a colonial metropolis with imperial structures, but as a hybrid urban space with hybridizing urban processes, where there is a constant redefinition by local agency. Overall the results and discussion highlight that *Childhood Days*, contributes to the discourse of the Global South in providing alternative understanding of colonial modernity - one that was not about grand narratives of progress or domination but about lived experience, everyday negotiation and cultural hybridity.

Conclusion

This study has read *Childhood Days*, by Satyajit Ray once again an important literary text that helps to see colonial modernity as lived in early twentieth-century Calcutta through the economics of childhood. Moving beyond its initial manifestation in the form of the personal memoir, the paper has revealed that Ray's recollections were an archive of culture and urbanity that recorded ordinary lives of engagements with colonial infrastructures, indigenous forms of sociality, and emergent modern technologies. By foregrounding childhood memory the study has established the texture of colonial modernity is registered at the micro level of everyday life - through routines of domestic life, their neighbourhood, informal learning and leisure practices - as opposed to official institutions and ideological narratives. The child's gaze offers a distinctive epistemological outlook; an image of the city is an experiential and sensual space which is defined by curiosity, affect and observation. This perspective allows understanding colonial modernity in a more complex way, more uneven, negotiated, and locally reinterpreted rather than monolithic or imposed in a uniform way.

The paper has additionally created awareness of the way *Childhood Days*, offers a counter-narrative to the dominant colonial histories of urban life as they give preference to the ordinary and the marginal. Ray's attention to the everyday urban life shows the subtle form of adaptations, as well as quiet resistance within continuity of indigenous cultural practices. Calcutta comes fully out at that time, not only then, as a colonial metropolis but as a hybrid urban space in constant flux and as much of a victim of indigenous agency as of imperial structures. In situating Ray's memoir with the literary discourse of the Global South, in this study, autobiographical narratives is argued in the context of the value of autobiographical narratives as alternative archives of history and culture. *Childhood Days*, shows how it is within the domain of childhood memory that experiential memory not recorded in official sources can be found and make a contribution to broader interdisciplinary debates in postcolonial studies, urban memory and cultural history. Ultimately, the paper confirms the fact that Ray's memoir is important for providing information of the cultural and experiential facets of colonial modernity which enhance our knowledge of the Global South city as a place of negotiation, hybridity and lived history.

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