

## Critiquing Rituparna Ghosh: Gender sensitivity and identity in films

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### Abstract

Film maker, versifier and an author, Rituparna Ghosh was Bengali and Indian cinema's agent provocateur and one of the most modern directors, having received both national and international acclaims for his films. He is credited for changing the Cinematic ideology, perception and impact especially for the Bengali middle class 'bhadralok' and moved into narrative film making with the critically acclaimed *Hirer Angti* in 1992 and *Unishey April* in 1995. Apart from projecting Bengali culture and tradition, his concepts moved around the convolutions of relationships, the niceties of feelings and the often silent hardships that are involved in everyday family life in India. His work projects the changing perceptions of the 'Gender Identity' by dominant sensitized middle class with narratives of sexual desires, thereby demystifying existing philosophies of heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy.

**Keywords:** films, gender identity and bhadralok

### Introduction

Ghosh came into scene when Bengali Cinema was wheezing for breath, having been heave down over nearly two decades. His stories were gasping for fresh breath full of creativity and new perspective. The paper is written to study the women projection and characters that has always famed the female sexuality and freedom and scuttled against the main principles of creating a stereotypical image of characters in Bollywood. He raucously confronted the accepted dynamics of supremacy equations between male and female, among males, between parents and their kids, between heterosexual and queer group. The gender fluidity portrayed by his characters came across as rather radical in a country where gender identity remains as misguided hypocritical and heliocentric concept.

Ghosh's films are no doubt an agent provocateur in both Kolkata and Indian cinema. He was a significant storyteller with a sensitive understanding of the touching tangles that relate with relationships. At his best, Ghosh's writing is delicate but expressive. His characters speak for themselves without saying a word, using their body language and tinges; communicating as we tend to do in real life. Films like *Dosar*, *Shubha Mahurat* and *Abohaman* showcased Ghosh's utmost talent and won awards and critical extol worldwide.

In films like *Unishey April*, *Dahan* (Crossfire, 1998) *Asukh* (Malaise, 1999) *Utsab* (Festival, 2000) or invoked wistfulness for feudal magnificence in his period pieces, such as *Antarmahal* (Views of an Inner Chamber, 2005) and *Chokher Bali* (The Passion Play, 2003) Ghosh mostly restrained himself to the setting of the bourgeois living room. As Sayandeb Chowdhury writes in his paper in this collection, 'The Endangered City in Rituparno Ghosh's Early Cinema of Confinement': Ghosh managed to start a new dialogue with the urban middle class, a segment that was itself consistently on the increase throughout the first decade of liberalization...Ghosh's greatest joy was to throw a group of middle and upper middle-class characters into a tightly-

controlled domestic eco-system in which they were tested, tensions would mount, passions would play their turn and the possibilities of melodrama were to be fully realized<sup>[1]</sup>.

### Ghosh and Portrayal of Gender Identity in his Movies

*Arekti Premer Golpo* was his first film after the decriminalization of 377. It is about the Delhi based transgender and clearly portrays filmmaker Abhiroop Sen's liking toward his partner Basu Kumar, a choreographer. The main character, Chapal Rani, is a woman trapped in a man's body and has been jammed in a time twist where he is left with only two options: either behave like a man and be a part of this duplicitous society or have to give up everything for the sake of embracing the inner woman in himself. The film describes the different sexual orientations and identities across two generations. The bond between the mother and sisters of transgender community is also projected in the film. The movie clearly shows that our society is vindictive, intolerant and a conformist. So much femininity has been brought by the male characters in the role that not even a female actor would have been acted so well right from washing clothes to cooking, making tea, dancing the movie has got a big picture to bring out the real woman in him.

His film, *Chitrangada* is about acceptance of a person's identity. The film is not just about sexuality or one's own identity but about a story of a choreographer. Ghosh being a gay had a complete understanding of the role and has done justice to his role as Rudra, the protagonist. Rudra's final decision to go for sex reassignment surgery to become a woman so that they can adopt a baby. The impasse of a wish to change from a man to a woman, the altruism of being able to go under the knife for the sake of love and then face denial only to be able to reach out to the same person again – the

<sup>1</sup> DATTA, S., BAKSHI, K. and DASGUPTA, R.K., 2015. The world of Rituparno Ghosh: texts, contexts and transgressions. *South Asian History and Culture*, 6 (2), pp. 223-237.

projection of all these roles were a tough job for any actor.

Arekti Premer Golpo brought to screen a yesteryear female impersonator of Bengali folk theatre, Chapal Rani, while Chitragada, based on Tagore's dance-drama (1892), deployed the space of theatre in intriguing ways. Both these films are part English and part Bengali, and the sexual identity politics in each is clearly influenced by the libretto of global LGBTQ political and cultural movements; but, the indigenous appeal of both the films lies in their masterful deployment of local cultural forms, which have been extremely gender-fluid. In fact, Ghosh is known to have turned to theatre towards the end of his life, planning several productions, one of which, *Kaaler Sandhya/The Twilight of an Age* was planned to be staged in September 2013<sup>[2]</sup>.

*Unishe April*, which indebted deeply to Ingmar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata* (1978), uses the scuffle between a mother and daughter to unbolt a can of worms, inflicting mayhem inside *bhadralok* living rooms. But after the pretense of filial combat and the dreadful costs of the creative life, there is a chilling critique of the notion of motherhood: successful women may not be forgiven for crossing, even, and especially, by one of their own. Aditi's complete interpellation in patriarchal discourses prevents her from fathoming her mother's struggle to survive as an individual, with an identity of her own. Aditi is eventually confronted by Sarojini on the fateful night she attempts suicide after being rejected by her boyfriend. An emotionally charged exchange between mother and daughter brings about a catharsis reconciling the two estranged individuals.

The depressed, meditative landlady in Ghosh's eponymous movie *Bariwali*, played by Kirron Kher, may echo as a later-day avatar of some of the central characters performed by Majumdar and Shankar. The comeback of women-centric stories in Ghosh's work, therefore, counterfeits a connection with the present existing practice of characters and concerns.

Ghosh portrays a debauched feudal world, its slow burlesque and the grimy state of its inner chambers colonized by women, childbearing machines for continuing the bloodline in his film *Antarmahal* which belonged to the second phase of his career. The film unties an inroad into these hidden chambers to disclose the ferocity towards women in our society which they have to face if they fail to bear male offspring. Spinning around an impotent zamindar's ceaseless accomplishments to bring forth a son, the rightful heir to his throne, the film totally takes the audience to the highest emotional pitch. The aggression of sexual intercourse with no emotions involved in it becomes almost flagrant from the very outset. Rituparno Ghosh in *Antarmahal* revealed the sexual abuse of women in the incarceration at Zamindar's house during British Raj. Rupa Ganguli and Soha Ali Khan played the role of spouses of a rich Zamindar who exploited them physically to get a boy from them. The physical and mental torture that the women have to experience in the patriarchal society are exposed through the receptive representation by the chief female characters in this film. How the blissful universe of a recently married bride suddenly turns into a miserable one after she undergoes embarrassment of being ill treated by roadside eve teasers is the focus of the plot in the film *Dahan*

which is based on a real-life incident in the city of Kolkata. Rituparna Sengupta along with Indrani Halder won the Best Actress National Award for their alluring performance in the movie. Indrani plays an intelligent school teacher who dares to get the culprits behind and becomes a witness in the court, but her voice for justice is concealed by the immoral communal and executive system. His films often portrayed intimate scenes more enthusiastically than what the norm is in Tollywood, at the risk of chopping off into a broader gamut of audiences.

If *Utsab* (2000) is a distinctive family drama unfolding more-than-usual theatrical flavor on the Bengali calendar, the *Durga Puja*, *Titli* (2002) is a deviation of the *Lolita* syndrome—more devout than corporeal—with a stylish meta-cinematic mesh of courses woven into it. In *Shubho Mahurat* (2003) drawing-room drama meets thriller, while *Chokher Bali* (2003), based on Rabindranath Tagore's distinctive novel of the same name, distinguish female ambitions of a married woman and widow—the former with its social sanction, if not restricted, to accomplish itself, and the latter with its strict prohibition on any form of satisfaction. Much of his movies are inspired from Tagore. Both Tagore and Ghosh presented working women, their problems and situations which they face. Ghosh has created a visual presentation of Tagore's works like *Noukadubi*, *Chokherbali* and *Chitragada* and has created a standard in portraying a whole new lot of women characters which talk a lot about the spirit of empowered women. Ghosh used Tagore's dance and drama as a catalyst to play a choreographer besieged with his gender identity in *Chitragada*.

Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* (2003), based on Rabindranath Tagore's novel of the same name projected a widowed protagonist Binodini, in her unapologetic enunciation of carnal desires, questions the age-old postulations about female sexuality, which had been internalized by women. Pryingly, as Ghosh himself began to experience, and live out, the full measure of his so-called androgyny, a part of his individuality also began to sublimate the carnality of desire. He used his cinematic skills in portraying middle class existence, inspiring the whole generation of film makers and film goers to make real cinema and remain resolute in life and art. His movies are known for showing reality in movies and the sensitivities that a movie is able to attain without being too invasive and unequivocal.

Ghosh's films made a mark in launching an acrid critique of hetero-patriarchy, often portraying the real life behind apparently so called happy marriages, romanticism in relationships and family equations. He problematized philosophies of compulsory heterosexuality and monogamy. His films time and again questioned the woman for lack of action within the hetero-patriarchal society and the country at large. His female leading characters struggle hard to throw off the blanket of patriarchal despotism, often discarding the seeming security of the home and romantic relationships. For instance, Ramita in *Dahan* and Binodini in *Chokher Bali* walk out on their respective spouses and suitors to discover a life beyond the restrictive limitations of the home. In his telefilm, *20 Malaltibala Lane* (2006), the protagonist, Soma Chakraborty having been turned down by several suitors and neglected by parents and relatives for failing to amaze

<sup>2</sup> Ghosh, Rituparno was supposed to be Krishna, and me Arjun, 4.

potential matches, walks out from her home one day in search of her own identity.

### Conclusion

The Bengali filmmaker has influenced a majority of the sexual minority community through his films, writings, talk-shows and heroic sartorial statements. Ghosh's films made a mark in starting a pungent critique of heteropatriarchy, often illuminating the reality behind apparently happy marriages, romantic relationships and familial equations. He emphasized on the notions of compulsory heterosexuality and monogamy. Middle-class Bengal, simultaneously conservative and well-schooled, a deadly combination, is obsessed about appearances and maintaining the status quo. But Rituparno seduced them with a particularly well-chosen Rabindrasangeet in a film, with the intimacy of his chamber pieces with unforgettable women, and *then* hit them with the sexual politics – not just homosexual but also heterosexual like the marital rape in *Dahan*<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Roy Sandip, Firstpost, May 31, 2013.