

**DEFINING THE 'RITUPARNOESQUE'
RITUPARNO GHOSH AND AUTEURISM, SEXUALITY AND
STARDOM**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
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SUMIT DEY



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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation titled “**Defining the 'Rituparnoesque': Rituparno Ghosh and Auteurism, Sexuality and Stardom**” submitted by me at School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy in Cinema Studies**, is an original work and has not been submitted by me so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university or institution.

Sumit Dey

Certificate

This is to certify that the dissertation titled “**Defining the 'Rituparnoesque': Rituparno Ghosh and Auteurism, Sexuality and Stardom**” submitted by **Sumit Dey** at School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy in Cinema Studies**, is his work, and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university or institution. We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Dr Ira Bhaskar
Supervisor

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27th July, 2012

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Introduction

ABSTRACT

This M.PHIL dissertation critically reckons with the Bengali film-maker Rituparno Ghosh as an auteur in contemporary Bengali cinema and as a star and a charismatic icon in the culture industry by looking at his oeuvre and his own performance and commentary in different communication media. The project also locates this eccentric, eclectic director who has been catering to the middle class, erudite, suave audience in Bengal and beyond, in the tradition of the ‘New Film Makers’ like Aparna Sen, Goutam Ghosh, Buddhadev Dasgupta et al (Raha, 1991), while pointing to the unique characteristics of his films in terms of stylistics and narrative patterns that give him a distinct place among his contemporaries. The project further examines and problematizes the varying positions from which his cinema has been read and placed in the generalized discourses of “Post Liberalization Bengali Parallel Cinema” (Bhattacharya, 2009); feminist scholarship and journalistic criticism. How the director critiques heteronormative love, couple formation, the institution of marriage and addresses sexuality in general occupies a section of this project. Another research question that has animated this project is the idea of performance in general and gender as performative in particular. The project critically engages with issues of gender fluidity, androgyny and queer identity keeping in mind the case of Rituparno Ghosh as a star-performer.

My endeavor in this dissertation has been to critically examine the status of Rituparno Ghosh as an auteur by situating his films in the tradition of new Bengali cinema while simultaneously highlighting the articulate and subtle differences between them at the thematic and stylistic levels. At the same time, I have tried to critically qualify the notion of auteurism in the romantic and structuralist senses by looking at the question of stardom that is the director-as-star, which, in its turn, is enmeshed with industrial practices, media discourses, fan cultures and reception contexts. Linked with this concept of stardom is performance. The word 'performance' functions almost as a double-edged sword while talking about a director-turned actor/performer like Rituparno Ghosh. This is so because, for him, direction, acting, reacting – are all propelled by his desire to perform.¹ His performance also encompasses androgyny, gender fluidity and fashion. On my part the attempt has been to see these traits in the light of contemporary theories of performance and of gender-as-performative. Questioning normativity, marriage and the addressal of sexuality are the two key concerns which keep on re-appearing in Ghosh's films. I have tried to investigate this issue and explore how Ghosh critiques the inhibitions regarding sexuality in the suave, *bhadralok*, middle class Bengali public sphere, through his films like, *Chokher Bali*, *Anta Mahan* and *Abohoman* among others. Again, at the same time, Ghosh's performative queerness per se can also be seen as a critique of normative sexuality in a different way. How these attempts help him to challenge the given 'Repressive Hypothesis'² (Foucault, 1980: 17-49) has also come under the purview of this project. Instead of creating a uniform

¹ Author's interview with the director

² By this I mean the disavowal of the dark zone of sexuality. There is a hypothesis in the *bhadra* domain that sexuality apparently remain unspoken due to a cultural repression.

meta-narrative by knitting these threads, I have rather tried to make complex patterns by using similar motifs differently throughout the dissertation.

Discourses around Bengali Cinema and Rituparno Ghosh

Bengali cinema started receiving scholarly attention in the last two decades. The first attempt at revisiting the history of Bengali cinema, keeping in mind the contemporary, in a somewhat linear and teleological fashion was done by Kiranmoy Raha (1991). Ajoy Kumar Bose in a Bengali essay addressed the contemporary as well as the past of Bengali cinema (1998). Rajat Ray has given a broad overview of the tradition and postulations of 'good Bengali Cinema' (2000), while Sharmistha Gooptu's book is an attempt at producing a counter narrative of the conventional history of Bengali cinema (2010). She, however, does not speak of the contemporary moment at any length. As far as the director-as-an-auteur studies are concerned, quite a considerable volume of work has been done on the famous Ray-Ghatak-Sen trio. Among the recent directors, Buddhadev Dasgupta and Aparna Sen have had attention at some length in the form of monographs by Pradip Biswas (1994), John W Hood (1998), an anthology by Ajoy Dey (1994) and a book by journalist Shoma A Chatterjee (2002). Goutam Ghosh, on the other hand, enjoys critical attention in the accounts of John W. Hood (2000) and Yves Thoraval as one of the makers of art cinema, (2000). In most of these works, the common key concern has been a biography based auteur study with textual analysis of the films.

In the work of Ajoy K Bose, Kironmoy Raha and Yves Thoraval, Rituparno Ghosh enjoys a passing mention as one of the torch bearers of 'New Bengali Cinema'.

Alison Macdonald has attempted to present a critical and anthropological reading of Ghosh's films spending much ink on the 'real' and the 'imagined' women in his films (2009). She locates these characters in the broader context of feminism in the Indian academia and the roles and position of women in Indian society. Somdatta Mandal, on the other hand, describes Ghosh essentially as a 'woman's director of Bangla cinema' (2002). In her essay, Mandal focuses on the female protagonists' role in the narrative economy of his films by unproblematically drawing a simplistic conclusion that since Ghosh 'understand[s] women' (18) better, his films emphasize women and their inner self. However, she focuses only on Ghosh's early films. Nandana Bose and Srimati Mukherjee have studied Rituparno Ghosh's 1997 film *Dahan* from two similar perspectives. While Bose analyzes the film closely in terms of sexual politics, Mukherjee reads it in the light of the new waves of feminism in Calcutta (Bose, 1999; Mukherjee, 2003). There have been multiple studies of the film *Chokher Bali*. While Pinak Shankar Bhattacharya read the film in comparison with the novel (2003), Paromita Chakravarty and Swati Ganguly read the film as an exemplar of 'Post-colonial negotiation with the Nation'. Again Kaustav Bakshi tried to engage with the question of the 'Female Gaze' in his reading of the film.(2011) Somdatta Mandal too saw the film along with *Antarmahal* through a similar lens. (2010)Spandan Bhattacharya, in a recent essay, has spoken of the absent presence of an extra-diegetic voice or a dubbed voice dominating the central protagonists in most of Ghosh's films in general, and a recent film of Ghosh namely, *Sab Charitra Kalponik* (2009) in particular, leading to new meanings. He takes on Michel Chion's concept of 'acousmatic sound' to elaborate the argument (Bhattacharya, 2011). The third chapter in Bhattacharya's unpublished M.Phil thesis posits Rituparno Ghosh within 'the star director discourse' that goes beyond film texts and takes into cognizance other extra

filmic elements and the idea of ‘continuation’ and ‘difference’ in a *bhadralok* film director. This is part of a larger project that looks at the category of ‘post liberalization’ Bengali ‘Parallel Cinema’ by exploring ‘the politics of past-ness’, ‘*bhadralok*’ nostalgia and difference (2011).

Auteurism and Rituparno Ghosh:

‘Auteur theory’ and the major definitive discourses surrounding it began with the contributors and critics associated with the French Film Journal *Cahiers du Cinema* and soon after with American cinephile and scholar, Andrew Sarris whose concern was to identify the auteur in a film maker thereby analyzing a director’s oeuvre with a focus on reading the mise-en-scene of the films for the signature of the auteur. Thus the auteur critics tried to point to the embedded, uniquely distinguishable personality of the director from the body of works produced by a given director (Sarris, 1981). Peter Wollen on the other hand held that film making is a collective process and it’s not a wise decision to look for the director’s personality as embedded in a series of film texts. One should try and appreciate the director not as a meaning maker, but as a puller of several strings pertaining to a network of meaning which is produced by a larger system rather than by an individual director (Wollen, 1981). After having summed up these positions Edward Buscombe intervenes saying that cinema as an institution is rooted in society, so one should be cognizant of cinema’s effects on society and society’s impact on cinema and a film’s effect on other films vis-à-vis ideology, economics and industrial logic. He says, before venturing into auteur studies one should keep in mind the finer codes originating in and outside of a film (Buscombe, 1981).

So before considering Rituparno Ghosh as an auteur it is important to locate him in a larger matrix. Ghosh started his film making career in the early 1990s. Prior to his emergence Buddhadev Dasgupta, Goutam Ghosh, Aparna Sen et al were considered to be the torch bearers of 'New Bengali Cinema' (Bose, 1998). According to Kironmoy Raha, Ajoy K. Bose and Yves Thoraval, these new directors came into being with the New Wave movement and contributed to the somewhat stagnated 'art' quotient of Bengali cinema by constantly harking back to the aesthetics of the holy trinity of Bengali cinema: Ray, Sen and Ghatak (Raha, 1991; Bose, 1998; Thoraval, 2000). Spandan Bhattacharya has focused on the film makers of the parallel cinema of the 1990s whose narratives invested in reviving the 'lost glory' and 'good taste' of an earlier art cinema tradition, and were marked by the quality of 'pastness' both in terms of form and content, and were oriented to cater to the erudite intelligentsia and the middleclass gentle-folk in general. Ghosh, in Bhattacharya's opinion, fits into this group of directors while maintaining his distinct characteristics even as his cinema exemplifies the very nature of the 'post liberalization Bengali 'Parallel' Cinema' (2011). A similar claim had been earlier made by Tapas Ganguly in his 1997 article where he had considered Rituparno Ghosh as one of the 'inheritors' of the Dasgupta-Sen-Ghosh legacy (61). By critically engaging with these positions, I would like to see the ways that further distinguish Ghosh from his contemporary colleagues. Film journalist Shantanu Chakraborty observes that Rituparno Ghosh as a film director is a product of the high moment of televisuality.³ According to him the emphasis on interiority in Ghosh's films is a result of his awareness of the taste of his audience who are quite attached to televisual aesthetics. This, of course, should not be the only yardstick of differentiation.

³ Author's interview with Shantanu Chakraborty. June 19, Kolkata 2011

Again to go by the industrial logic, the emergence of big corporate production companies like Shree Venkatesh Films and their recent interest in ‘art house’ cinema and encounter with directors like Ghosh marks a major change in Ghosh’s own career as a film maker as well as in the power dynamics of the industry. For example with Ghosh’s film *Chokher Bali*, Shree Venkatesh Films started producing ‘parallel’ Bengali films besides their staple popular films. They chose to produce Ghosh’s film because he was already a well known, national award winning director who earned fame both at home and abroad and had the ability to rope in Bollywood super stars like Aishwariya Rai. After more than a decade of film making, Rituparno Ghosh is now considered the ‘most powerful director’ of Tollywood (Nag, 2008: 8).

Stardom and Rituparno

Apart from his films, Ghosh’s presence as a charismatic personality and as a celebrity cultural commentator has further added to his star status. Besides film making he has worked as an editor of the Bengali film bi-weekly *Anandalok* and he now edits the Sunday supplement of a Bengali daily *Robbar*. His editorial columns have earned repute from the aficionados of Bengali literature. He has also hosted two celebrity chat shows. A particular kind of interior décor, Ghose’s way of performing as an interviewer, his style statement, all gave rise to certain public discourses at around that time. He also walked on the ramp in 2009 for the fall-winter collection of designer Abhishek Dutta. He has been subject to mimicry by stand up comedians on Bengali television leading to further controversies. This eclectic director recently ventured into producing and conceiving a TV-serial ‘*Gaaner Opare*’ [On the Other

Side of the Song] which was an alternative attempt at narrativizing Tagorean aesthetics and his music.

This celebrity status and stardom can be read as a sign of 'charisma'. Richard Dyer, in his book *Stars*, draws on Weber's theory of 'charisma'. Stars represent a unique opportunity to study changing notions of the "self." A 'star' discourse emerged as commentary extended to the off-screen life of film performers. Dyer argues that in many cases, stars' off-screen personalities were at least as important as their on-screen personas in shaping our perceptions of their meanings. Off-screen personalities must also be understood as constructed personalities, just as we understand the characters stars play in films to be constructed (Dyer, 1998).

My attempt at seeing Ghosh as a star takes off from the argument of Spandan Bhattacharya. Bhattacharya has attempted to look at the 'star' figure of Ghosh which goes beyond his films and touches upon his public presence as a cognitive sign (2011). I'm more interested in looking at the star phenomena in an inclusive manner. Here I have sought to see and complicate the auteurism of Ghosh around which revolves the discourses of the star persona. In the dissertation, I try to define what can be called the 'Rituparnoesque' that imbues and suffuses his film texts as well as his other ventures. Here I have found Christine Geraghty's concept of 'star-as-celebrity' (2000) very useful. According to her, the star as celebrity has the vantage point of remaining prominent in public memory as an icon even if his/her star status diminishes. But in the case of Ghosh, at the moment, both these identities play very important roles and they have equal status.

Ghosh and Gender

Now Ghosh has forayed into acting as well. His performance in the role of the noted male-actress [female impersonator] of yester years Chapal Bhaduri has enjoyed critical attention. This project dwells on some issues relating to homosexuality, performativity, androgyny and the crises of masculinity. Rituparno Ghosh's public appearance in an androgynous look, attire and his promotion of a 'Third Gender,' challenges hetero-normative, hegemonic masculinity. This has to do with queer self fashioning and presentation. In Richard Dyer's words "surviving as queer needs mastering appearance" albeit consciously (2004: 64). It's interesting to look at how Ghosh's star-director status and queer self fashioning complement each other, when it comes to his performance.

The goal of this dissertation has been to define the idea of 'Rituparnoesque'. I have coined this term to combine the manifold aspects of authorship, sexuality as signature style and the style of being Rituparno through the performance of gender both onscreen and off-screen. I have demonstrated how authorship discourses and star discourses collaborate to produce the overall persona and style of Rituparno Ghosh. While speaking of authorship I have often used phrases like 'Rituparno Ghosh shows...' By this I mean the 'auteur' Rituparno Ghosh not necessarily the person Rituparno. The 'name' of the director comes only to perform the function of the auteur. I have taken this idea from Janet Staiger who argues that the author functions through a 'repetitive citation of a performative statement of authoring choice.' (2003:51) For her, it is this 'authoring choice that produces the author'. (51) Therefore my understanding of the 'Rituparnoesque' goes beyond taking into consideration the 'intention' of the 'person' Rituparno Ghosh as director. To pinpoint

the readable auteuristic codes, often phrases like ‘the film shows...’ have been used in this dissertation.

Methods of Reading

Though the death-knell of structuralist auteurism was heard forty years ago, it’s not wise to discard the notion of an auteur all together. The newer trends in auteur studies demonstrate how the auteur is now understood as a nodal figure amidst an intricate matrix. I have attempted to engage with some of the new ideas on auteurism in this work.

I have borrowed the idea of ‘multiple perspectives’ while talking about a director, from a volume of critical essays on Almodovar edited by Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudak: *All about Almodovar: A Passion for Cinema* (2009). This volume aims to elucidate Almodovar’s work from a range of perspectives that mirror, amid breaks and refractions, the stylistic and thematic diversity of his films. In many ways, the provocative paradoxes and eclectic procedures of Almodovar’s career justify such a collective, heterogeneous approach. Mark Allison’s *A Spanish Labyrinth: The Films of Pedro Almodovar* gives me useful insights for studying an eccentric director by contextualizing him in his own culture, fandom and reception (2001). This book is weighted more heavily to the *how* rather than the *what* of the films. These have helped me to develop some of my key arguments.

The narrative analysis strategies used by Richard Allen in his book *Hitchcock’s Romantic Irony* have been extremely relevant for my work. His focus on narrative and stylistic form and an orientation towards understanding the connection

between aesthetics, gender identities and sexuality is particularly relevant for the dissertation and has the potential of giving me new tools for reading film-texts. Moreover, Allen's take on "Sexuality and Style" in Hitchcock's films has been particularly methodologically useful for the second chapter. In this chapter in his book, Allen describes how the issue of sexuality has been dealt with in Hitchcock's films through visual style and theme (2007).

For the third chapter I have taken recourse to Richard Dyer's arguments about the star figure and its charisma (1998). Secondly I will use Christine Geraghty's concepts of the Star as performer, celebrity and professional (2000) while discussing Rituparno Ghosh as a star. Judith Butler's theory of gender as performative rather than as fixed has helped me to navigate through this section in a major way (1999). I have drawn on Ruth Holliday's postulations on queer fashion in which fashion speaks for identity (2001), and R W Connell's categorization of masculinities where he speaks of hegemonic, marginalized and complicit masculinities and their historical interrelations.⁴

Finally I have, at times, depended on the methodology that Rituparno Ghosh himself follows while writing and speaking of his own films. I have also included interviews of the director himself and actors, distributors, producers, art directors, cinematographers, music directors et al and have tracked the public and media discourses about Rituparno as well – both published and broadcast material - in order to construct the stardom of Ghosh's persona.

⁴ R.W Connell defines *Hegemonic Masculinity* as "... [T]he configuration of gender practice which ...guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (1995:77). For him gender 'as a social pattern' (81) needs to be seen in a historical context. Connell opines that "Hegemonic Masculinity" is supplemented by subordination, complicity and marginalization leading to 'violence and crises tendencies' (83). In my use of Connell's argument the main focus is on the constructedness and fallibility of this hegemony. How Ghosh's films and his own performance help in puncturing the notion of hegemony related to masculinity will be my key concern here.

Chapterization

Chapter One: A Cinematic Tradition and The Individual Talent of Rituparno

Ghosh

My endeavor in this chapter has been to contextualize the cinema of Rituparno Ghosh within a cinematic tradition and as a flow of the cultural capital while pointing to his unique style. In this chapter I have described how Ghosh imbibes the cinematic tradition of Satyajit Ray by referring time and again to his film frames and compositions. I have also described the music of Rabindranath Tagore as a strong narrative tool of Ghosh. Then again I have demonstrated how Ghosh developed his own cinematic style by underlining the middleclass interior spaces charged with a sense of everydayness, interiority of the characters through the use of letters as voice over, explicating the emotion quotient in films especially about filial relationships. I have tried to critique and explain his preoccupation with his female protagonists while showing how he also deals with the crises of masculinity in a few of his films. A section on the crises of the middleclass joint family has been devoted to highlight his concern with the deep rooted anxieties of the middle class by analyzing the common themes of two films. In order to take into account these issues in this chapter I have discussed a series of films and analyzed their mise-en-scene. I have used these descriptions and analyses to foreground the typical auteur signature of Rituparno Ghosh-which I have called the 'Rituparnoesque.'

Chapter Two: Sexuality as Signature Style

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate that it is Ghosh's approach towards sexuality in his films that makes him different from both Ray whose cinema inspired him to make films and Tagore who has remained his cultural mentor. I have tried to argue that by highlighting sexualities, Ghosh's films also critique the general goal of restoring the heterosexual 'couple' by the different traditions of cinema in India. His films show the possibilities of the existence of other kinds of 'couples' that does not conform to societal norms. In this chapter I have analyzed seven films of Ghosh's to demonstrate how he deals with the issue of sexuality in myriad forms: in *Utsab* –sexuality takes the form of incest – the dark secret that threatens to undo the family. *Chokher Bali* foregrounds the destructive power of sexuality, while *Antarmahal* reveals the decadence of the feudal world that is marked by degenerate sexual practices in the garb of ritualistic religion. In *Dosar* it is an extramarital sexual relationship that threatens and almost destroys the conjugal world of Kaushik and Kaberi. Also in a peculiar way, the sexuality of the other relationship works towards the recovery of the sexual charge in the marital relationship. *Sab Charitra Kalponik* is also about a discovery. The wife of a poet discovers the fantasy woman of her husband. Paradoxically this discovery makes him more desirable and destroys Radhika's ability to follow through on her attraction towards Shekhar. In *Abohoman* once again the power of sexuality of the muse of a director destroys his marital world. Ironically history threatens a repetition as the director's son too falls in love with the same lady. *Chitrangada* foregrounds the issues of homosexuality in terms of alternative couple formation, its crises leading to further gender ambiguities, the aestheticization of gay love and its marginal location vis-à-vis normative family. A

discussion of *Chitrangada* thematically and stylistically here leads to a discussion of my point of the performance of gender in the third chapter where I talk about the iconic figure of Rituparno, his performance of gender and his own stardom.

Chapter Three: The Style of Being Rituparno Ghosh: Gender, Performativity and Stardom

In this chapter I have looked at Rituparno as a performer including discussions of his acting, fashion and style and public appearances. His public appearance in a Sunday chat show *Ebong Rituparno* that ran consistently for two years was critically appreciated among the Bengali, middleclass *bhadralok* after initial criticisms and exclamations of surprise.⁵ Apart from the content of the programme, the entire ambience, set design, décor, Rituparno's appearance in his flamboyant, designer kurtas, casual, 'caught unaware' kind of conversations added to the popularity of the programme (Bhattacharya, 2011). In the sequel to this programme "Ghosh and Company," aired on Star Jalsha, almost after seven years, Rituparno reappeared in his much talked about androgynous look. His occasional guest appearances in other chat shows, reality shows and public functions foreground his star/celebrity status besides his repute as a director. For him performance is about presenting oneself before the world. It includes political stands, statements, dressing up, make up, fashion etc. The discussion of fashion has been an important orientation for me to talk about Rituparno Ghosh's performance.

⁵ Author's interview with the director. He mentioned that he was a little skeptical about the program. He had apprehensions that his mannerisms and attire will be criticized. But later the content of the programme had its edge over all other things.

There has been continuous speculation about the ambiguity of Rituparno Ghosh's sartorial statements and his leaning towards femininity. His cross dressing has raised several eyebrows as well. But Rituparno says he 'celebrate[s] an in-between-ness of gender' (Sengupta, 2010: 2). Fashion forms a major part of gender discourses as it has a 'queer' quality to itself and the ability to break conventions, set patterns.

I have used my discussion of Ghosh's sartorial style as an entry point for a discussion of his performance in films. Rituparno has acted in Kaushik Ganguly's *Arekti Premer Galpo* and Sanjoy Nag's *Memories in March*. The abiding themes of these films are homosexuality, gender trouble and ambiguous androgyny. In his most recent film, *Chitrangada* which is based on Rabindra Nath Tagore's dance-opera about the Arjun-Chitrangada legend from the *Mahabharata*, Rituparno portrays the role of a choreographer who goes through intense emotional turmoil to come to terms with his gender fluidity. . The film constantly crisscrosses between the narrative of the dance-opera and the life of this choreographer, Rudra Chatterjee.⁶ In the chapter I have discussed his performance in all three films with a clear focus on how his acting and his characters go on to supplement his off screen persona as well. In this chapter I have also attempted to take forward my major concern as to how the various other roles of Ghosh distinct from his identity as director contribute to his stardom and how that stardom qualifies his auteur status.

There are several approaches to do an auteur study. The most common approach is to give a holistic picture of the cinema and the style of the auteur. I don't claim to have given a complete picture of the work of Rituparno Ghosh. I have tried

⁶ Author's interview with the director

to pull a few strings together to embark upon how certain elements in the cinema of Rituparno Ghosh can be studied in the light of the contemporary theories of 'Auteur Studies'. I have also tried to open up possibilities for thinking about how a dialogue between the theories of authorship and that of stardom can be made possible by putting forward the case of the 'Rituparnoesque'. Hence my idea of the 'Rituparnoesque' does not seek to give a closure to the issues I have discussed in this dissertation. Rather the disparate discourses that I have tried to bring together remain like an ensemble cast in the films of Rituparno Ghosh: with each actor with his /her distinct presence.

CHAPTER I

A Cinematic Tradition and the Individual Talent of Rituparno Ghosh

Introduction

The early 1990s is remarkable in the history of Bengali cinema as it saw the demise of Satyajit Ray. With Ray's death in 1992 a tradition of realist, 'art' cinema practiced by him received a major setback. It was in the same year that Rituparno Ghosh, fresh from the world of advertisement made his first film *Heerer Angti* under the aegis of the Children's Film Society of India. The film was at its post production stage when Ray passed away. The film was never commercially released. In the mean time the New Wave moment in Bengali cinema had meandered into a new post-liberalization phase as veterans like Mrinal Sen (whose cinematic idiom kept changing in terms of thematic concerns and moods), Goutam Ghosh, Buddhadev Dasgupta and Aparna Sen kept on making films on an off. While Sen was experimenting with his form by searching the 'inner enemy' (Sen, 2011) amidst old relics and modern urban interiors (for example *Antareen*, 1993), Goutam Ghose and Buddhadev Dasgupta were concerned with the lives of others vis-à-vis the panoramic vastness of nature (for example Goutam Ghose's *Padma Nadir Majhi*, 1992 and Buddhadev Dasgupta's *Charachar*, 1993). Aparna Sen too was situating her films about women against the backdrop of history and larger political changes in the world (for example *Yuganta*, 1995). These directors earned their repute both at home and abroad. The national award and other international awards at different festivals came to recognize their cinematic idiom charged with their own views about politics their

and sense of history. While ‘artistic’ Bengali cinema was being praised beyond Bengal, at home within the industry it was sharply split between two extreme categories - ‘popular’ and ‘parallel’. It was at the same time that satellite television made a powerful entry into the Bengali cultural sphere drawing film audiences from the theatres back to their homes.

Amidst these developments Rituparno Ghosh emerged with his second film *Unishe April* (1996), a film about filial relationships set within the confines of a house and made with a very constricted and rationed budget. Since the film won the National Critics Award, middle class audiences started paying attention to this new director. Reviews of this film praised the film-maker for his ‘maturity as an artist with rationality and sensibility’ (Palit 2002) and for explicating recognizable signs of his ‘knowledge of the cinematic’ (ibid). By the time he went on to make his third film *Dahan* (1997) Ghosh was identified as a true inheritor of the cinematic tradition exemplified by Satyajit Ray in terms of characterization, cinematic space, mise-en-scene and the tradition of realist narration (Ganguly, 1997). Rituparno Ghosh himself admits that he was inspired by Satyajit Ray when he thought of becoming a film maker and he also considers Rabindranath Tagore as his cultural mentor. Both these figures, according to Ghosh helped him develop a strong penchant for aestheticism (Gupta, 2008). Thus in a way, the cinema of Rituparno Ghosh can be seen as an epitome of a certain ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986) flowing from a given tradition. According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital in its embodied form is not instantaneously given like a gift; rather it’s acquired from a tradition over a considerable period of time (1986: 241-58). In the same logic, Rituparno Ghosh has

been able to inherit the ‘cultural capital’ of Tagore and Ray, which his own art demonstrates making him acceptable to the suave, *bhadra* middleclass audience.

But what are the traits of his cinema that made him dear to this class of audience? The Press and academic discourses have pointed out certain virtues in the cinema of Rituparno Ghosh. Veteran film and theater critic Shamik Bandyopadhyay notes that Rituparno Ghosh’s cinematic talent lies in his art of delineating the life style of the middle rung of society in a true, realistic way(1999). He further explains that Ghosh’s way of depicting middleclass life is restricted to familial relationships which gives the class an opportunity to look at their most intimate relationships, their intrinsic complexities and hesitations while the larger political and historical responsibilities and struggles are set aside. He merits Rituparno Ghosh’s films as films about various relationships of the middleclass world with conflicts and resolutions lying within the scope of the narrative (Bandyopadhyay, 1999). Ratnottama Sengupta sees the virtue of Ghosh’s films in their ability to bring to the fore the emotional undercurrents and complex patterns in relationships.¹ Again Shoma. A. Chatterjee feels that the films (especially the early ones) of Ghosh depict middleclass interior spaces, charged with the everydayness of the protagonists’ lives and their relationships.² Professor Somdatta Mandal describes him as the ‘woman’s filmmaker of Bangla Cinema’ (2002). She notes how Rituparno Ghosh delves deep into the inner psyche of his female characters and etches their mindscape in the films in a sensible way. According to her, Rituparno Ghosh does not try to portray women’s condition in a given society; he is rather interested in showing the psychologized nature of such characters (Mandal, 2002: 32). So it can be said that Ghosh seems to

¹ Author’s interview with the journalist, November 1, Kolkata, 2011

² Author’s interview with the journalist October 29, Kolkata, 2011

exteriorize the interiority of his (female) protagonists. Rituparno Ghosh describes his own films as follows:

Rituparno Ghosh makes films for adults. The protagonists are mostly immersed in serious thoughts. They fight with each other exchanging poignant words. They cry either openly or privately. They either suffer or make others suffer. There are no smiling faces, no fun...Sun rays just pour in either through windows or through sun blinds. There is no open space or sky from horizon to horizon, no open milieu. Though *Titli* had a journey across a hilly road but most of it was in the confines of a car (Music Album, *Khela*, 2008).

From this description certain things become clear 1) that most of his films are set in interior spaces and 2) most of them are about two or more people in a relationship frantically negotiating and reconfiguring their spaces within the ambit of a home or elsewhere. 3) The third major aspect of his films is that most of these characters belong to the urban middleclass as the director feels that as a representative, understanding this class and its familiar spaces is his forte and he has firsthand experience of knowing this class of people, their emotions and their reactions to any given situation.

From the above discussion it can be said that Rituparno Ghosh's cinema needs to be seen in the context of a cinematic and cultural tradition. Borrowing the idea of T. S Eliot it can be said that the individual talent of Ghosh has to be understood in the context of a past tradition (1982), and his talent should not be seen as something completely distinct or arising out of the blue. By harkening back to the cinematic sensibilities of Ray and the cultural sensibilities of Tagore, Rituparno Ghosh seems to have developed his own style. He seems to have 'procure[d] the consciousness of the past' (Eliot, 1982) and 'continue[d] to develop this consciousness throughout his career' (ibid). Keeping these issues in mind, this first chapter aims at discussing how Ghosh has imbibed the cinematic influence of Ray in his own frames and banked on Tagore's music to carry forward his narratives. The chapter further takes on board the

claims about emotional relationships, middle class spaces tinged with everydayness, middleclass conflicts and resolutions, the emphasis on female protagonists, and the exteriorized interiority of the protagonists as the recurring features in the cinema of Ghosh. In order to analyze these features the chapter will analyze the mise-en-scene and sequences of films like *Unishe April*, *Dahan*, *Asukh*, *Bariwali*. Some other films will also be used as suitable examples in some of the sections. The analyses of these films are done to foreground the signature of Ghosh as an auteur, and to demonstrate that particularity in his work which I am arguing is central to and one dimension of the 'Rituparnoesque' that can be identified wholistically as the style of Rituparno Ghosh.

The Cinematic References of Satyajit Ray in Rituparno Ghosh's Films

Rituparno Ghosh's allegiance to the cinematic tradition of Satyajit Ray gets revealed from a close reading of his shot compositions and thematic concerns. He is of the opinion that the influence of Ray is so strong in his cinematic imagination and his unconscious that he does not have to refer to Ray's cinema deliberately. But such references come up rather spontaneously. In this section I will seek to demonstrate with examples how he refers to the cinematic tradition of Ray by quoting him in different films.

The opening sequence of *Utsab* shows Joy, an important protagonist in the film documenting the Durga Puja festival in his maternal uncles' ancestral house. As he narrates the events captured in his camera, we see a child in conversation with the idol maker who is giving finishing touches to the Durga idol at the grand prayer hall.

The kid asks him about the mythical background of the festival. The idol maker tells him legends and myths about the idol. This sequence clearly refers to the opening sequence of Ray's *Joy Baba Felunath* (1978) in which a child converses with the idol maker in a similar manner (figure 2). Quite self consciously the director makes Joy comment on the sequence. In fact, Joy mentions at this point that the image can possibly invoke the memory of *Joy Baba Felunath*. This can be taken as Ghosh's way of 'Procur[ing] the consciousness of the past' (Eliot, 1982). Thematically the film invokes the memory of Ray's *Shakha Proshakha* (1990) as well as both films concentrate on the crises of the joint family. I will come back to *Utsab* later in a different context. But the main issue is that the film constantly refers to the model of *Shakha Proshakha*. This becomes evident from the image of the joint family discussing issues at the dining table (figure 4). This image recurs in Ray's film. In a similar way Ghosh also uses the image in *Utsab*. Thus he connects with Ray's cinematic aesthetics.

Thematically Ghosh's film *Antarmahal* is similar to Ray's *Debi* (1960). Both films focus on women in the feudal world as subjects of sexual subjugation and oppression in the name of religion. The opening sequence of *Antarmahal* shows the celebration of Durga puja quite like in *Debi* (figure 1). In Ray's film, the opening titles are projected onto the face of the idol in different stages of completion then the camera backtracks to show the grandeur of the celebration in the palatial house of a zaminadar as if to paradoxically foretell the key theme of the narrative: what becomes of women in the feudal world; they are seemingly worshipped as goddesses on the one hand, and on the other, they are subjected to patriarchal oppression in the guise of religion. This motif has been used by Ghosh in *Antarmahal*. He also showcases the

celebration of Durga Puja in the palatial house of a zamindar where the narrative unfolds, at the beginning of the film. He also uses similar kinds of camera movements and close ups of the idol as in *Debi*. He uses the images to foretell the paradox of the feudal world, or the schizophrenic behavior of the class in its perspective on women that is split between the sacred and the profane domains. Clearly the model for *Antarmahal* is *Debi*. Also the casting of Soha Ali Khan as Yashomati, the younger wife of the zamindar brings back the memory of Sharmila Tagore, Soha's mother as Dayamoyi in *Debi*. I will describe this issue elaborately in my second chapter in a different context. In *Debi* there is a recurrence of the image of a captive bird as an analogy for the situation of the women in the feudal family. This motif has also been used by Ghosh in *Antarmahal* (figure 6).

The most vivid references to Ray can be found in Ghosh's *Noukadubi*. Two sequences particularly refer to Ray in a very conspicuous way. First, when Ramesh accompanies the bride Kamala on the riverbank covered with dense *Kash* flowers one can easily reckon that visually it refers to a sequence in Ray's *Debi* in which Dayamoyi attempts to flee with her husband. Their movement through the *Kash* forest on the riverbank is the reference point for the sequence in *Noukadubi* (figure 5). In Ray's film the couple walks past an abandoned structure of a Durga idol. Similarly in *Noukadubi*, Ramesh discovers Kamala beside an abandoned Durga idol. The sequence in which Kamala is taken to the rented house of Ramesh reminds one of a similar sequence in *Apur Sansar* by Ray. As in Ray's film *Noukadubi* shows the couple going upstairs, entering the room in a similar way. Kamala's reaction on entering the room, moving around in it, standing near the window - all constantly refer to Aparna doing the same thing in *Apur Sansar* (figure 3).

Procuring the Consciousness of the Past: When Rituparno Refers to Ray



Figure 1 Satyajit Ray's *Debi* and Rituparno Ghosh's *Antarmahal*: opening scenes



Figure 2 Ray's *Joybaba Felunath* and Ghosh's *Utsab*: the idol maker and a kid



Figure 3 *Apur Sansar* and *Noukadubi*: The bride enters the new house with the bride groom



Figure 4 *Shakha-Proshakha* and *Utsav* : The joint family at the dining table

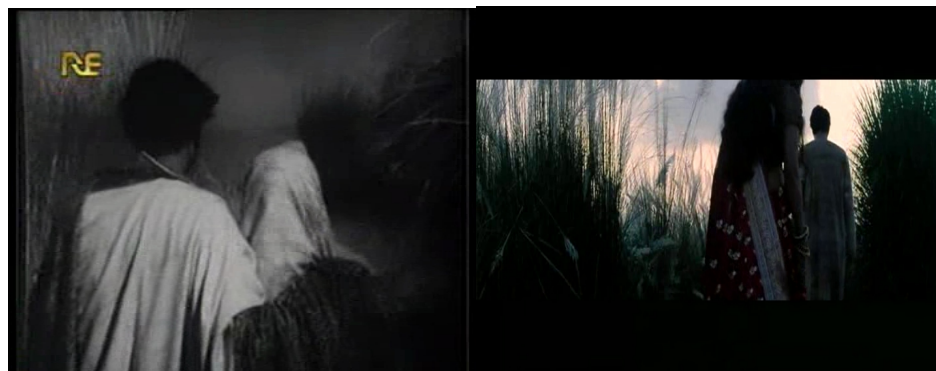


Figure 5 *Debi* and *Noukadubi*: Man and wife at the river bank

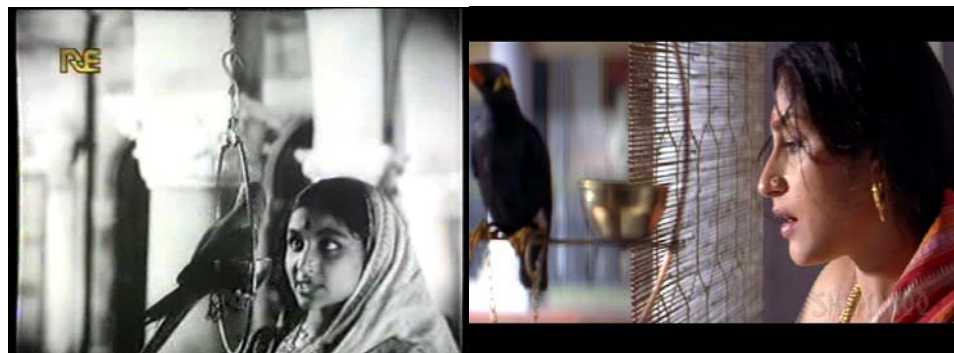


Figure 6 *Debi* and *Antarmahal*: A woman in the feudal world and the captive bird

The analysis above tries to demonstrate as to why to some extent, Rituparno can be considered an heir to Satyajit Ray. Apart from these obvious references there are other subtle references in other films in terms of space designing and mise-en-

scene. For instance, one can appreciate a brief sequence in *Dahan* as Ghosh's tribute to Ray. In the sequence, the camera foregrounds Shrabana's father lying on bed with a book in front. The room is half lit with one table lamp and a bed lamp. In the background Shrabana's mother does up her hair. On the soundtrack, one hears a Tagore song *jete jete ekla pothe nibhechhe more bati jhor utheche ore...ebar jhor ke pelem sathi* (my light got extinguished in the storm. Now I have the storm as companion)³ probably playing on a transistor. The couple talks about the future of their children, ways to manage finances, their daughter's marriage, property issues etc. The lighting, the posture in which the father lies, the very mise-en-scene and the topics of discussion can possibly be seen to evoke the memory of a similar couple space, and the mise-en-scene of the middleclass and its family issues in Ray's *Mahanagar* (1963). Besides it might trigger the memory of a sequence in one of Ray's films In Ray's 1977 film *Jana Aranya* there is a sequence in which the father of the central character broods over his son's future in the time of ethical denuement, sitting in a candle lit balcony as a Tagore song plays on the radio. The song *Chhaya ghonaichhe boney boney* (Shadows deepen in the woods) stylistically bespeaks the gloomy situation in the narrative. Interestingly, the actor Pradeep Mukherjee who plays Shrabana's father in *Dahan* was the son in *Jana Aranya*. The sequence in *Dahan* thus simultaneously refers to two films of Ray, albeit indirectly. This can be seen as an example of an auteur's cinematic way of conversing with another auteur. This section has merely attempted to introduce how the influence of Ray can be taken as a ground for approaching Ghosh's individual cinematic style. In the following section I will

³ The song is premonitory as it foretells the predicament of Shrabana, the daughter of the couple who indeed chooses walk alone in the end of the narrative

demonstrate how Ghosh translates the cultural sensibilities of Tagore into cinematic language by using his songs as a means to contextualize the narrative.

Translating Tagore Songs into the Cinematic

Rituparno Ghosh asserted in a Bengali TV reality show in 2010 that Tagore songs and especially their lyrics have always had an impact on his scripts. The tune of several Tagore songs have been used as theme music in many of Ghosh's films including, *Asukh*, *Chokher Bali* etc. Besides he loves to call himself a Tagorean i.e. one who subscribes to Tagore's aesthetic worldview. A protagonist in his film singing a Tagore song is not difficult to find. *Asukh*, *Bariwali*, *Utsab*, *Titli*, *Subho Mahurat*, *Dosor*, and *Khela* -all these films have a protagonist singing a Tagore song that has a prime role to play in the narrative of the film. *Asukh* and *Titli* also incorporate a few poems by Tagore as well. *Chokher Bali* being an adaptation of a novel by Tagore has in it more Tagore songs compared to the other films. But rather than giving many examples what I intend to do in this section is a brief analysis of the theme music of *Noukadubi*, a screen adaptation of another Tagore novel, in order to convey an idea about how Tagore songs normally function in his films. Ghosh has used two Tagore songs among others to describe the narrative of the film. Other songs in the film appear in different situations. The song in the opening sequence is '*Khelaghar bandhhte legechhi amar moner bhitore, kotorat tai to jegechhi*'⁴. The song expressing the inner hesitation of a person standing on the cross roads of home and the world speaks of building a false castle in the air and keeping it open for a playmate to enter

⁴ It may be loosely translated as "I have been building a play house deep in my mind and have spent several sleepless nights doing this." Translation mine

and occupy the throne inside. Outside, a stranger invites him/her to play with him/her but he/she cannot go as he/she is busy playing with the new playmate. This works as a commentary on the narrative itself in which two men (Ramesh and Nalinaksha) and two women (Hem Nalini and Kamala) either make futile attempts to build a false castle with the wrong play mate, or live under the wrong impression that the person they are proposing or living with is the right playmate. Like the song, the narrative also shows these four characters engaged in a game of misunderstanding and lack of knowledge. As for instance, Kamala does not know that she is actually not married to Ramesh. Ramesh, on the other hand, realizes that it was not Kamala whom he married. He actually married a village girl named Sushila who died in the boat-wreck. Hemnalini accidentally meets a man named Nalinaksha Chatterjee in Benaras. She becomes fond of his company and the person. She subsequently proposes to marry him. When they are all set for the wedding Hemnalini finds Ramesh coincidentally. Kamala finally learns the truth that her real husband is not Ramesh but Nalinaksha. They also meet in a dramatic way. Thus the song tells the tale of their misconceived notion of home. The other song is *Tori amar hothat dube jay* i.e. 'my boat capsizes all of a sudden'. This metaphorical song is about accidents and calamities in life that bring about sea changes. The theme of the song has a similarity with the narrative and the title of the film. The song ends with the hope that someday or the other, the boat will find its true destination in a valley of flowers i.e. the song nurtures the hope of a happy ending, just as it almost foretells the happy ending of the film narrative too. Thus, here in the film, the lyrics of the two songs act like the voice of the Greek Chorus.

The use of Tagore's songs in *Chokher Bali* can also be remembered in this context. One can see the remarkable use of Tagore's songs in Ghosh's attempt at contextualizing the central theme of the film by bringing in two Tagore songs sutured together at the end of the film as the credit titles roll. (Ganguly and Chakraborty, 2007: 245)⁵ While the first song speaks of the enchantment of human desire and its falliability, the second one is a verbal description of 'Mother Bengal/Nation' which came out during the turbulent times of the anti-Bengal Partition movement and coincided with the artistic concretization of the nationalist iconography of 'Bharat Mata'.⁶ These songs give us an entry point to access the image of Binodini Like the content of the songs, Binodini too travels from the horizon of passionate desires to the horizon of self realization quite like the nation itself. The use of these songs can be seen as Ghosh's way of infusing Tagorean sensibilities in his films especially since he is adapting and reinterpreting a Tagore novel as his film. In the next section I will point out how the director uses the 'letter' as a means of explicating the inner psyche of his characters. The letter as a tool of establishing the complexities of a character is a common theme in Tagore's stories, novels and poems (for example the story *Streer Patra* or 'The Letter of a Wife' and the poem *Sadharan Meye* or 'The Ordinary Girl').

⁵ The two songs are: *Era sukher lagi chahe prem, prem mile na, sudhu sukh chole jay emoni mayar chhalona, era bhule jay, kare chhere kare chay, tai kende kate nishi, tai dohe pran* meaning 'they yearn for love in their penchant to be happy; but love remains elusive evermore. So does happiness the deceiving elf that she is. Is it happiness or is it love? They do not know which is it they desire. And, the nights dissolve in the deluge of their tears that pour forth from their burning soul.'(translated by Kaustav Bakshi) The second one is *Aji Bangla desher hridoy hotey kakhon apni.tumi ei aparup rupey bahir holey janani, ogo ma tomay dekhe dekhe ankhil na p here, tomar duar aji khule gechhe sonar mandirey*. It means 'suddenly you appeared from the heart of Bengal today. In your beauteous form o mother, seeing your godly self even the golden temple gates await your presence' (Translated by Abhija Ghosh). The first song appeared in Tagore's dance drama *Mayar Khela* (The Enchantment of Love, 1886). The second song was written by him during the anti-Bengal Partition movement of 1905.

⁶ Bharatmata was a famous painting by Abanindranath Tagore.

The Letter Says It All: Exploring the Interiority of Characters

A common motif used in quite a number of Rituparno Ghosh's films is a letter being read as a monologue or voice over of one of the protagonists. He uses this motif remaining true to the literary tradition of Tagore. The voice over not only bridges different spaces, but also in a way comments on the complementary moving images of these spaces. The spoken words of the letter that acquire a life of their own sound like oracles of redemption leading to a temporary narrative resolution. The letter motif foregrounds the interiority of the female protagonists in most cases. Examples of this recurrent motif are traceable in *Dahan*, *Shubho Mahurat*, *Chokher Bali* and *Rain Coat*.

In *Dahan*, Romita Chowdhury often writes letters to her sister who lives in Canada sharing her experience of her conjugal life in a joint family. In her last letter as in within the narrative expressing her wish to go there alone after her disillusionment with her marriage, husband and in-laws. She begins the letter by iterating that 9, Golf Club Road 'used to be' her in-laws' house that has been sheltering her since her marriage. She recalls an incident that she discerned from her balcony. She saw a rain soaked dog's hesitation and lack of courage to cross the road and find a better shelter. She compares this incident with the general mentality of the Bengali urban middleclass towards maintaining a peaceful status quo. She writes how she was led to believe by her father that her in laws' house is her home. Romita narrates how she loved the inmates of the house, obeyed their orders, how she did not meet the press after an attempted rape, lied to the court by not recognizing the culprits. But all she has earned for her obedient though compelled responses is inexplicable loneliness which she could not share even with her husband who slept

like a log at night while Romita spent sleepless nights in the balcony, swallowing sleeping pills for sound slumber. She articulates her views on marriage which seems to her to be a room of 12 feet by 14 feet called security more than love or concern. She is not sure whether her marriage will be sustained in the long run or not. Romita feels everyone including herself, her parents, husband, her sister-in-law, even the men at the metro station who molested her are very lonely. So realisation dawns upon her that it's high time to gather courage to stay alone and enjoy a sense of independence. . She concludes the letter by asserting her feeling that she wants to join her sister in Canada where she has applied for a few jobs.

During this voice over, the camera travels across mainly four spaces. It takes the spectator into the interiors of Romita's in-laws' house, then it swiftly moves in to the house of the girl who is ready to get married with one of the metro station men. Soon it gets back to the balcony adjacent to Romita's room and the shot followed by the sun bathed, claustrophobic constellation of houses in the middle class locality where Romita's in-laws' house is situated. Finally the voice over narration ends as one sees Shrabana, Romita's savior walking out of the old age home alone where her grand mother resides . Moments ago she had told her grandmother that even having agreed to marry her own chosen man Tunir, she would love to walk alone at times. Thus the letter read out by Romita almost becomes a commentary on marriage, and the situation of a married woman in the urban middleclass milieu of Calcutta.

In *Shubho Mahurat*, Padmini Chowdhury, the actress who comes from the USA to take revenge on her co-actress Kakoli leaves a letter for Ranga Pishi who solves the mystery. The sequence has been built up in the following manner. Padmini's husband enters her room to find Padmini lying on her bed, apparently fast

asleep. He gets startled by the unusualness of the situation and moves closer to her with a worried face and sees Padmini's hand touching a framed photograph of her son, who had died early, on the bed side table. He lifts her hand from there and it falls suggesting that she is dead, and that she has committed suicide. A perplexed Sambit discovers a letter addressed to Mallika, the journalist who also played a major role in solving the case, in an envelope on the same table. The camera leaves Sambit's face as the letter begins in the form of a voice over by Padmini. The letter, as has been mentioned, was written for Ranga Pishi whose name Padmini never asked even during her final encounter with her a couple of days ago in the afternoon. She writes that by committing suicide she has created the last press headline of her life. She says that she has left a cheque for bearing the expenses of the treatment of a terminally ill daughter of her final prey, the hairdresser Kalpana, who blackmailed Padmini by letting her know that she had seen her tactfully mixing poison in the glass of cold drink meant for Kakoli. What Padmini emphasises is her accolades for Ranga Pishi's new found talent as a sleuth. Knowing well that Ranga Pishi is a great admirer of her as an actress, Padmini calls the letter an elongated autograph to a fan.

In the mean time the film starts unfolding different spaces that include the post office from where the letter is dispatched, the post box on the street corner, the mail van which moves past school kids on the street uttering their secret wishes at the sight of the van, the morning street and the buildings shown from a top angle shot. Finally the camera follows the letter to its ultimate destination which is the threshold of Ranga Pishi's house. Cats scratch over the letter perhaps marking the end of the invisible yet nasty catfight that has taken place between Padmini and her victims for a couple of weeks. The letter ends with a two-shot of Ranga Pishi and her niece,

Mallika, standing face to face by the side of the window. The journey of the letter thus sums up the network of the pursuits of feminine desires, the disastrous fallout of desperate pain and anger and the discovery of hidden talents.

Binodini's first and last ever letter to her dear *Soi*⁷ Ashalata also evokes the same kind of imagery. Behari who has been Binodini's object of desire finally proposes to marry her, and arrives with the paraphernalia of marriage at the door of Binodini's boat house oared on the ghats of the Ganges at Benaras. As he knocks at the door, no reply comes from within. He pushes the door and it opens. There is no trace of Binodini in the room flooded with early morning light. All he finds are two letters on the table with her opera glasses lying on them. Behari sees the letters. The one written to him says "I'm fleeing as I'm afraid the ceremonial toast would be inadequate. The other letter is for Asha. I shall be ever grateful if you gave it to her."⁸ We see Behari's speechless face full of wonder and sadness in a close up shot. Then begins the disembodied voice of Binodini reading out the letter. A cut takes us to Ashalata reentering her husband's home after a long, self imposed exile in Benaras. Binodini recalls in her letter how she built a castle of dreams with Asha on the second floor of the house on Darji Para Street and how Asha used to ask her about *desh*⁹. Binodini feels that both she and Asha built a small *desh* (nation) of their own in that space where apparent differences in their outlooks and personalities were supplemented by their desire to make a family, a nest. This led to a competition in which both of them ended up desiring the same man and their paradise was lost in conflict. Then she tells her how her experience of Benaras broadened her mind and

⁷ A colloquial term used in Bengali for addressing a female friend. It comes from the Sanskrit word *Sakhi*.

⁸ My translation from the soundtrack of *Chokher Bali*.

⁹ In Bengali *Desh* refers to both state and home village. Here Binodini uses the term interchangeably.

views. For her, Benaras was an eye opener as she saw the real nation beyond the banal superstitions and rituals of the Kolkata house. She saw the real people and their plight. Binodini advises Asha not to raise her child only within the confines of the Darji Para street residence. She now tells her how much she actually loved her despite bad blood and how they befriended each other promising they will remain friends forever. In the wake of Lord Curzon's proposition of partitioning Bengal, Binodini is afraid that she and Asha will be living in two different nations where memories of their togetherness will be the only bridge between them. Her letter gets over on this note.

All this while we see a pregnant Ashalata almost rediscovering her space in her husband's abode with the daily chores of the household in progress oblivious of the tension within and without. She moves from one room to another, recalls her conjugal love as she smells the perfume bottle gifted to her by Mohendro, her husband,; she opens the cupboard and takes out the small jewelry box where she had once found Binodini's love letters to her (Asha's) husband that brought about a calamity in the happy nest. Now she casually looks at them, puts them back and keeps the box inside. She enters her mother-in-law's empty room where she had died a few days back. Then we see her in the closed balcony with little Basanta, who was hitherto living in Behari's custody. This suggests that Behari is leaving him under the new guardianship of Asha and Mohendro. They watch a political procession in protest against the proposed partition of Bengal. This is followed by a scene of Asha taking her first step towards literacy under her little tutor Basanta. Finally the sequence ends in the bedroom of Asha. She is lying on her bed with Binodini's letter in her hand, while Behari is seated on a chair facing Asha. The letter thus acts as a commentary on

Asha's dream nation which is her home. This also brings redemption to Binodini who is lost, and Asha's grudge against her turns into a sigh of sadness.

The last sequence in *Raincoat* has a letter from Neerja to her ex boyfriend. Manoj being curious opens the packet which his friend's wife has found in the pocket of the raincoat lent to him by her. He finds two gold bangles and a necklace wrapped with a letter by his Neeru who he had gone to visit on the same day. Neerja writes that she has come to know that Manoj came to Calcutta to borrow money from his friends as he needed it badly to start a business thereby trying his luck for a little financial security for himself and his mother. She complains that Manoj did not tell her the truth. She has got to know about it from the letter addressed to his now well-off college friends that was lying in the pocket of the raincoat. Neeru insists that Manoj should not hesitate in taking the jewelry as a small gesture of help from her. She reminds him that if she were his wife (which she never could be) he would have all the rights over her jewelery. The letter is contrasted with the image of furniture being carried by two men on the wet street dimly lit by the street lamp. It reaches the door of her rented house which Neeru describes to Manoj as a well off set up to conceal her abject poverty and a very unhappy conjugal life. The letter and the images in a way comment on the fleeting nature, makeshiftness and constructedness of a home and the desired dream home which Neeru and Manoj could not build.

The letter theme returns in *Noukadubi*. In the film two central female protagonists Kamala and Hemnalini write letters. A letter is written by Kamala who has lived with Ramesh like his wife being under the wrong impression that Ramesh is her husband. Kamala writes this letter to him and leaves after having discovered the truth by chance. Hemnalini writes an explanatory letter to Nalinaksha whom she

proposed to marry as a gesture of gratefulness. When Hemnalini meets Ramesh again by accident and learns the truth about his marriage, she changes her mind, decides to marry him and withdraws her proposal of marrying Nalinaksha. Both the letters are again in the form of voice overs and they are read out as the camera moves to different places. The film does not show them writing these letters. The letters bridge spaces and people.

The letters in voice over form become a cinematic tool for Rituparno Ghosh to bring to the fore the inner self of his characters, mostly women. In *Asukh*, Ghosh uses Tagore's poem recited in Rohini's inner voice to reveal her psyche. Linked with this motif of interiority is the theme of interior spaces and intimate relationships in Ghosh's films. The next section will discuss these themes as discernible in the cinema of Rituparno Ghosh.

Interior Spaces and Intimate Relationships as Motif

A commonly discernible aspect in the films of Rituparno Ghosh is the use of interior spaces as major sites of narrative development and resolution. Actions in his films take place mostly at home or more specifically inside rooms in the spaces of daily existence marked with a sense of everydayness. Such spaces are specifically urban, middleclass spaces. The untying of complex knots in filial relationships and relationships between strangers takes place in these spaces. The use of interior space as a site for various developments in intimate relationships runs like a common thread through most of Ghosh's films. Complex familial and non-familial relationships are an important feature in the films of Rituparno Ghosh. This feature is recognizable in

the entire oeuvre of the director. But his early films very prominently showcase complex relationships between relatives and strangers as evident in *Unishe April*, *Asukh* and *Shubho Mahurat*, . There are of course other relationships in other films by Ghosh. But I have chosen these three examples to demonstrate how relationships in the everyday living space work in his films. Such relationships have a strong emotional quality in them, and the portrayal of the flow of emotion between the characters works as a signature style of Ghosh's. While expounding the relationship between emotion and subjectivity in the case of melodrama, Ira Bhaskar argues that it is perhaps possible to look at the individual subjectivity of characters in films through the prism of emotion as a theoretical category, because she believes 'emotion is key to subjectivity'. (2012: 163) She draws on multiple theoretical approaches towards emotion, the most important one being that of Harding and Pribram. They are of the opinion that "...[emotions] might operate in the reproduction of subjectivity, culture and power relations." (2002 : 418) Borrowing this line of argument I would like to show that in the films of Rituparno Ghosh emotional relationships reconfigure the power relations between characters by reproducing their subjectivity within middleclass culture. I will analyze a few sequences from the three films I have referred to in order to elaborate my point.

The final encounter between the star dancer Sarojini, and her daughter Aditi takes place at home leading to the narrative resolution. From the beginning of the film a strained relationship between the mother and the daughter has been depicted. While Sarojini is portrayed as a star, Aditi is shown as an ordinary woman desperately trying to uphold her individuality and self reliance in order to posit herself against the star-power of Sarojini. The film builds up to this final moment when a repressed

emotional history of two hysterical women unfolds building up their affective subjectivities. The narrative causality informs us that Aditi has sent the domestic help away after her mother left for Madras to meet her guru for having won a coveted award. It is sheer coincidence that Aditi has had a break up with her boy friend on the death anniversary of her father, and her mother has won a prestigious award on the same day. She has decided to commit suicide due to her breakup in the absence of her mother. But the intention of the narrative brings the mother back. The symbolic absence of other characters brings the two protagonists closer perhaps to emphasize their individuality. Amidst torrential rain outside and darkness inside the house, Sarojini and Aditi start excavating their unpleasant past as allegations and counter allegations continue between them. Aditi discloses bitter memories of her childhood while Sarojini was building her career that threatened her conjugal life. Aditi describes this as the reason behind her strained relationship with Sarojini. On her part, Sarojini through her emotional eruption exposes her sad memories of a marriage going wrong. She narrates how she continuously tried to strike a balance in life, torn between home and career. She admits that her husband's disapproval of her success and career took her far from the man. She further explains that her husband's mediocrity barred him from accepting her success and fame. She says it was he who was possessive about Aditi and that is why she could not intervene into Aditi's life in her growing up years. Finally, the hysterical outburst on both sides comes to an end with Aditi and Sarojini coming closer to each other like long lost friends. The unfolding of their respective emotional history brings out the repressed subjectivities of Aditi and Sarojini. The conversation between them takes place in the kitchen, the store room, the dining space, in Aditi's room and later in Sarojini's room. The spaces are important as they become site for memory and their personal histories. Sarojini

and Aditi start getting to know each other anew when they begin the conversation in the kitchen. With the discovery of Sarojini's lost perfume bottle they start to perform their past. Sarojini and Aditi's acts of entering into each other's rooms can be read as their entry into each other's lives which was h stalled for years. Thus the known spaces become sites of conflicts with the solution lying therein. The conversation also refers to the general middle class culture in which very often inequalities between the statuses of spouses cause a broken family resulting in a traumatic childhood for kids. It also shows how becoming a star in the middleclass world causes complexities in the familial relationship as one is hard put to choose between the private sphere of home and the public sphere of the world of fame. The emotional outburst resulting in the birth of Sarojini and Aditi's revamped subjectivities also reconfigures their power relations as one sees the vulnerable aspects of both characters. Sarojini's star power suddenly diminishes as her new affective subjectivity is born during the course of the conversation. This new subjectivity reduces her into an ordinary mother, and her relationship with Aditi turns into an ordinary mother-daughter relationship.

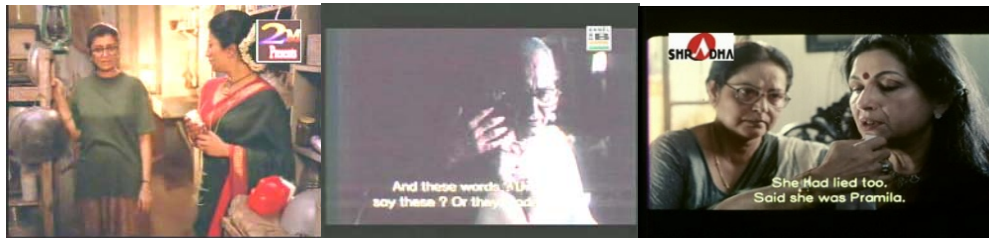


Figure 7 Emotional relationships and middleclass spaces in the films of Rituaparno Ghosh: *Unishe April*, *Asukh* and *Shubho Mahurat*

In the final sequence in *Asukh* a shot reveals Rohini dressing up in front of the mirror in her room devoid of sunrays. In the following mid-long shot her father Sudhamoy appears at the door with the day's newspaper. He enters the room asking whether she has read her own interview in it. Rohini answers in the positive.

Sudhamoy expresses his sheer astonishment that she never let him know about the crisis in her relationship with Aniruddha, her boy friend, and her anxieties about whether or not her mother is suffering from AIDS. While he is composed in the background with Rohini in the foreground, Sudhamoy tells her that he has come to know this after reading the press interview. He confirms that the medical test reports reveal that her mother is suffering from urinary track infection resulting in high fever. Rohini gets surprised at her own false, out of proportion contention about her mother's malaise and her own obnoxious imagination that it's her promiscuous father who has transmitted the disease. Sudhamoy is equally surprised and begins to understand the reason behind Rohini's cold, peevish behavior towards him. He insists that Rohini should have confided everything to him. The camera follows Rohini in a pan shot as she gets up. She requests him not to speak of these issues to her sick mother. Then she defends herself by saying that whatever she has said to the press is a mere publicity stunt and public memory is too shortlived to remember this. But Sudhamoy admonishes her for tainting her boyfriend's image in the press publicly by taking advantage of her popularity as a star . He reaches out to her. Rohini cannot control her tears and breaks down in her father's arms. A contrasting warm light illuminates the protagonists at this point. The father consoles her and asks why she has written about disloyalties and unfaithfulness. She keeps on apologizing. The father apologizes to his daughter, caresses her affectionately and puts eyedrops in her eyes with utmost paternal love, and thus the filial anxiety comes to an end.

The event in this sequence takes place in Rohini's room which has a chiaroscuro light scheme. The semi dark space of the room can be taken as a metaphor for Rohini's psychological complexities or the general anxieties of

middleclass people. Natural light hardly comes into the room suggesting the darkness and persistent doubts that overpower Rohini in the narrative. When her father enters the room opening the door and keeping it ajar, for the first time one sees morning light coming in. The arrival of the father here is significant as he comes from light and Rohini belongs to darkness. This is repeated again in the last shot. This appears to be paradoxical because it is Rohini who is the actress, a subject of different lights in cinema while her father represents that ordinary middleclass that goes to watch films in dark theatre halls. This preexisting power relation is worth noting here as it gets altered or reconfigured. This sequence is followed by a mid close up shot of Rohini still sobbing after the confession. The light goes off as she cries out for her father. A couple of still images of Rohini, her mother, Rohini's boy friend (applying eye drops in her eyes) and the father appear while in the background the mother tells the father to bring light to Rohini's room which is very dark so much that Rohini can't see anything. Rohini's face gets literally lightened as his father strides with light. This again shows Rohini in darkness and her father with light. A recurring action in the film is Rohini's father applying eye drops in her eyes which can be read as Sudhamoy's gesture of opening his daughter's eyes so that she can see clearly. Thematically these sequences appear to be a cinematic rendition of a Tagore poem *Hariye Jawa* (Being Lost) in which a little daughter while going to play with her friends cries that she is lost as her father asks her why she is crying. She feels she is lost because the wind blew off her lamp. Here in the film, Rohini's emotional outburst gives her the new subjectivity of that little daughter as in the poem. The camera constantly focuses on a portrait of Rabindranath Tagore on the wall. This image of Tagore's obviates speculation about the reference to some extent. By virtue of becoming like the little daughter her power relation changes with her father and she

becomes an ordinary daughter. Rohini's out of proportion assumptions about her lover and her mother's disease points to her location within middleclass culture in which diseases like AIDs and infidelity in love life are not accepted easily. They are rather often seen as signs of moral degradation. Thus the sequence reveals the reproduction of a new subject, culture and new power relations.

In *Shubho Mahurat*, the actor Padmini Chowdhury comes to meet journalist Mallika suspecting that she has understood that Padmini is the murderer of Kakoli and the hairdresser, and she encounters her unknown fan, Mallika's aunt (Ranga Pishi) who has actually solved the case. Ranga Pishi makes her confess the truth. Padmini tells her that she came to take revenge on Kakoli by killing her because she had played a pivotal role in causing damage to her baby during her pregnancy by spreading a contagious disease . Padmini killed the hairdresser because she was a witness to this murderous act of hers and had blackmailed her for money. After confessing to her crime, she breaks down as Ranga Pishi tells her how sad she was when her pet kittens had died after consuming poison meant for rats. Ranga Pishi tells Padmini that even she had wanted to take revenge on the people who spread the poison. But she had consoled herself with the thought that the kittens were lost for ever. Therefore taking revenge would just be a meaningless act of retribution. She iterates her faith in mercy perhaps to suggest that if vengeance remains in everyone's mind, a vicious circle of retributive justice will go on and many mothers will lose their offspring and many children will lose their mothers. Thus realisation dawns upon Padmini. Here similar experiences become the common point of reference.

The event takes place in the drawing room of Ranga Pishi. Ranga Pishi, as I have mentioned in a previous section, is an ordinary house wife with a penchant for

seeking the truth by adding and connecting things up. She has clear eyes and sharp ears and nose for identifying any irregularities. She is also an ardent cinephile. She is so closely attached to the space she belongs to and is well connected to the everyday world due to her common sense that it seems that her omniscience comes from a command over everyday middleclass experiences. She almost becomes an extension of the space she belongs to. Thus the drawing room of Ranga Pishi with a profusion of day light reflects the clearness of her senses and that is why this space becomes the perfect investigative zone. The emotional interaction between Padmini and her in this zone brings them to the same plane of motherhood giving birth to a shared subjectivity. The power relation between them also changes as now Ranga Pishi has the authority stemming out of her knowledge of the crime and Padmini turns both into a vulnerable, confessing criminal and an object of Ranga Pishi's piercing gaze. Ranga Pishi's conversation with Padmini gives her three concurrent subjectivities of a fan, of a detective and that of a woman with strong motherly instincts. Padmini's coming to her house also approximates the middle class desire to see the film star beyond the screen by intruding into his/her personal domain. In this case Ranga Pishi suddenly assumes the position of a film journalist as well, quite like her niece Mallika. Thus the sequence can be considered as an instance of emotion reproducing subjectivity, culture and reconfigured power relation which has been charted out as the subject of scrutiny in the present section. Noticeably these moments of intimate, emotional relationships revolve around female protagonists. Female protagonists occupy the center stage in most of his films except a few exceptions. Therefore this emphasis on female protagonists can be identified as one of the common features in the cinema of Ghosh. In the following section I will take up this feature in the cinema of Ghosh.

Emphasis on Female Protagonists as a Recurring Feature

A noticeable attribute of the oeuvre of Rituparno Ghosh is the pre-eminence of female protagonists. From *Unishe April* till *Chokher Bali* and *Antarmahal* his prime pre-occupation was studying the inner and outer world of women in a given society. His characters range from a middleclass housewife who falls prey to molestation to a widow in the early twentieth century coming to terms with her identity. This pre-occupation was so strong that there have been criticisms that his attention to the male figures is biased and he has not been able to etch male characters properly. This is a disputable proposition. I will explain the reason later. But even keeping aside such criticism in a positive vein, it can be said that Ghosh's films do explicate the internal psyche and the external universe surrounding women. This theme has been explored in *Unishe April* in a mother-daughter relationship, in *Asukh* it becomes the exteriorization of an actress's complex psyche; *Titli* again essays the sweet and sour relationship between a mother and daughter regarding the same man; *Chokher Bali* shows the journey of a nineteenth century widow towards self realization treading the path of dangerous desire; *Antarmahal* narrates the claustrophobic tale of the feudal world and the imprisoned women within. The most women-centered film of his is perhaps *Subho Mahurat* in which the killer, the detective and the victims are all women and the motive behind the murder too is very feminine-vengeance erupting out of failed motherhood. Motherhood is the driving force of this film. The film opens with a quote which says that the film is 'for those Miss Marples who always knew that their sons were skipping school by inventing false excuses or those who knew everything when their daughters returned from their in-laws' with red eyes, but did not utter a thing.' This theme of motherhood comes up time and again. Kalpana, the

hairdresser who is killed by Padmini blackmails her for money to bear the expenses of her daughter's treatment. Ranga Pishi's affinity to her pet cat and niece comes out of her motherly instinct. Padmini comes to take revenge on her colleague Kakoli because she developed a contagious disease which resulted in Padmini's giving birth of a spastic child who did not live long. The camera man's wife Promeela has been shown as a pregnant woman. Thus the film is full of feminine affect which culminates into maturity in the last but one sequence of Padmini's critical encounter with Ranga Pishi that I have discussed in the previous section.

Dahan deals with femininity from a different perspective. The film is about the pros and cons of marriage. The film foregrounds several discourses about marriage. The central protagonist Romita falls prey to the patriarchal ploy of middleclass society. She is molested at the metro station by a group of young men and is saved by a school teacher, Shrabana. While she is muted by her in-law's family resulting in her telling a lie when it came to identifying the culprits, Shrabana is humiliated in the court by the lawyers who questioned her own chastity. Both Romita and Shrabana experience the futile and oppressive nature of the institution of marriage and are disillusioned. Romita's sister-in-law and Shrabana's grandmother represent conformism towards the institution of marriage. While Romita's sister-in-law does not believe in any temporary freedom of a woman as one day or the other that freedom will be taken away from her, Shrabana's grandmother believes in gradual submission to the lover thereby overcoming the stifling nature of the institution. Both these protagonists however do not uphold the institution either. They seem to have a desire to be free but they don't want that as ultimately it will be a futile desire. A third character who gets disillusioned about marriage is the girl friend of one of the men

who was charged with the molestation. *Dahan* does not portray Shrabana as a revolutionary character; rather it focuses on her vulnerability and her desire to provide justice for Romita. At the end of the film, both Romita and Shrabana decide to walk alone at least temporarily.

After the court room incident the film restricts itself to depict the vulnerable face of a very sick Shrabana. In a close-up shot, it studies her facial expression while inter cutting with it the court room sequence and the humiliating questions of the defendant who proves through his jugglery of words that Shrabana does not hold a moral character as she roams around alone at night in the city. The voice of the defendant represents for a moment the general notion of male dominated middleclass society in the early nineties that women who stay outside home after a certain point probably do not have morality emblazoned on their character. The situation faintly echoes the moral dilemma of the middleclass depicted in Mrinal Sen's *Ek Din Pratidin* (1978) in which the elder daughter's very late return home creates a humongous hue and cry among the neighbours who suspect the morality of the character. Rituparno Ghosh wrote in his editorial column in *Anandalok* that the last shot sequence of *Dahan* was the molestation sequence. He wrote that the re-enacting of a real incident shocked him as he was split between his socially conscious and sensitive self and his director self. The socially conscious and sensitive self was preventing him from taking the shot while re-enacting a situation when a vulnerable woman is being molested without any protest, albeit in a staged manner. The director self was pressing him to take the shot for the sake of the film. He was stunned to see the event in front of his eyes and realized that the character Romita should have been completely numb and mute after such extreme humiliation (1997). After the process

of humiliation comes full circle in the court room, the film does not show Romita anymore. Only her voice hovers around her house. The film does not take away Romita's voice but hides her face as she was forced to tell a lie in court and was molested by her husband as well. Her husband too questions her morality within the confines of a middleclass household. Therefore it is her voice that dissents even after the body disappears.

Bariwali explores the futile desires of a spinster Banalata who remains the sole inheritor of a huge feudal property even amidst the denuded status of the class. She somehow copes with the burden of an ancestral house with the help of only two domestic help. Being on the verge of losing that property to the land settlement department, she takes the lucrative offer given by a director in search of an old mansion for the shooting of his film *Chokher Bali*. She grows fond of the director's charming personality and starts surreptitiously desiring him. Even after realizing the situation, the director pleadingly keeps on putting various demands to her. The demands include that she has to do a small role in the film. She however becomes a subject of derision even before the lead actress who realizes that the lady loves the man with whom she once had an affair. On the one hand, Banalata starts considering herself as the director's muse with an edge over his ex-girlfriend the actress; on the other hand she voyeuristically witnesses the wild, sexually vivacious romance of her servant girl, Maloti with her boy friend Naran. However the unreciprocated and unrequited love of Banalata for the director gets a jolt when the director sends her a formal letter paying her a cheque as the rent for the house. The letter also mentions that the scene in which she acted had to be deleted from the film as artistic discretion.

The film has a feminine affect in terms of space designing and mise-en –scene. The camera roams around in different spaces of the relics of the house as Banalata performs her daily chores. The house becomes a connecting object between Banalata’s past and present. It also becomes her dream space as she desires her newfound man, the object of her fantasy, Dipankar the film director. In her dreams, her dilapidated body turns in to the beautiful form of a bride. The dream sequences reveal her past trauma as the person to whom she was betrothed died of snake bite causing her marriage to be cancelled. The protagonist in her bridal attire in dreams becomes almost like Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. In the sequence in which Banalata prepares for the role in the film within the film, she is shown in warm light by the side of a mirror. She dresses up like a newlywed woman. The director’s entry into the space paradoxically makes it her space of desire. Again in the sequence when the shooting of the film takes place with Banalata as a married woman, the director tells her to look at him to fix her look for the shot. A close up shot shows her looking up almost like the way a bride looks at her bride groom during the wedding ceremony. This also paradoxically refers to her futile desire. The marriage song from a mythical text as background score underlines the situation poignantly. The mythical text bespeaks the marriage rituals of a mythical character Behula whose bride groom would die of snake bite. Thus the film depicts the multilayered desires of Banalata.

These films by Rituparno Ghosh should not , however, be considered as feminist films as the category itself is problematic as it runs the risk of marginalizing them. As Pam Cook notes:

The existence of the women's picture both recognizes the importance of women and marginalizes them. By constructing these different spaces of women, it performs a vital function in society's ordering of sexual difference. (1983:17)

Dahan and *Bariwali* tend to fall into this trap by relegating the women to the places restricted for them by the middleclass and patriarchal authority. In *Subho Mahurat*, however, Mallika one of the main protagonists poses a question as to whether it is possible to love two men simultaneously. Hers remains like a mild rebellious voice. In *Dahan* Romita's and Shrabana's decisions to walk alone for a while also become such mild questioning or protesting voices. This can be described by borrowing Srimati Basu's expression of describing Bengali women's magazine *Sananda*. She says :

...[T]he economic exigencies and cultural expectations that govern the production of *Sananda* do make it inherently suspect as a feminist space, but its accessibility and normative tone of social consensus also indicates possibilities for creating ideological unease.(2002:126)

In a similar logic, these films by Rituparno Ghosh too have a sense of a feminist space but they often tend to create ideological unease in terms of the textual politics of locating the protagonists and their cultural reception. Further, Rituparno challenges this label of 'woman's director' by focusing on male characters intensely in his later films like *Raincoat* and *The Last Lear*. These films portray the central male protagonists' vulnerability through the thematic archetypal portrayal of the love lorn *birahini* figure and William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. From the middleclass universe of women I will move into the joint family structure as seen in the films of Rituparno Ghosh in the penultimate section to identify it as an important theme in Ghosh's cinema.

Crises in the Joint Family and Middleclass Anxiety as Theme

In this section I will discuss how Ghosh's cinema demonstrates the anxiety of the middleclass by taking a closer look at the joint family structure in two films: *Hirer Angti* and *Utsab*. There is a similarity in the thematic structures of these films. Both films have the underlying theme of joint family structures getting unnerved with the sudden reappearance of a stranger or a kinsman evoking bitter memories of the past. Such incidents happen at a crucial moment when all the family members unite for an occasion. The crisis that happens due to the arrival of such characters, however, gets resolved in the end. There is a sense of time in which the past does not remain the forgotten, nostalgic past but becomes a part of the present. The arrival of such characters almost haunts the narrative like a specter. The stranger or the kinsman does not come with an expectation but with a motive of rightful intrusion. The situation can perhaps be summed up with Jacques Derrida's notion of the 'Arrivant' (1994:65). Derrida observes that the figure of the 'arrivant' is ambivalent in the sense that he is unexpected yet his presence looms large across the spectrum of the present. He appears like a ghost. He does not appear from out of the blue. He is there unseen. His appearance or arrival is just ceremonial. As Derrida writes:

Awaiting without horizon of the wait, awaiting what one does not expect yet or any longer, hospitality without reserve, welcoming salutation accorded in advance to the absolute surprise of the *arrivant* from whom or from which one will not ask anything in return and who or which will not be asked to commit to the domestic contracts of any welcoming power (family, state, nation, territory, native soil or blood, language, culture in general, even humanity), *just* opening which renounces any right to property, any right in general, messianic opening to what is coming, that is, to the event that cannot be awaited *as such*, or recognized in advance therefore, to the event as the foreigner itself, to her or to him for whom one must leave an empty place, always, in memory of the hope—and this is the very place of spectrality (ibid).

The characters I'm talking about almost behave in a similar manner.

In *Hirer Angti*, Ratanlal Bannerjee owns an old palatial house in a suburb of Bengal and celebrates Durga Puja every year. The ceremony in the narrative of the

film is about to take place. This is the 30th year. The film begins with Ratanlal standing on the steps of the worship hall at the courtyard with a worried face just before the new moon night heralding the arrival of the mother goddess. The idol making is in progress. The children of the family are excited as the occasion is knocking at the door. But Ratanlal seems worried and unhappy. As his man Friday asks him about the reason of his worry, Ratanlal reveals an old secret, which his man Friday too is aware of. He says he is afraid that the puja is not going to take place this time. Ramdulal's grandson will come to claim his right over his grandfather's property and money. Ramdulal was a notorious dacoit who had left a cache of his booty with Ratanlal who used to be a mere priest in a village temple. He left his baby grandson before dying. He said within thirty years from the date his grandson would come to claim his property rightfully, the failure of which would amount to Ratanlal's permanent right over the cache. He also said that on every new moon before the pujas two men of his gang will come to enquire about the arrival of his grandson. Then years passed by and Ratanlal made money, built his palatial house, raised his children with half of the cache he got. In the mean time he constantly awaited Ramdulal's grandson who did not come. He expresses his anxiety to his man Friday that if he comes, the grandeur, lavish life style, the house, and the ceremonies all will come to an end. The very next day, a stranger, Gandharva Kumar, arrives much to the anxiety of Ratanlal and introduces himself as the grandson of Ramdulal. Then Ratanlal discloses the secret to his sons who start discussing the issue seriously and get upset at the thought of leaving the ancestral house and living the rest of their lives elsewhere. The children become sad too. Thus Gandharva Kumar works as a bridge between the forgotten past and the present. His presence shakes the family from its foundation. Finally however Gandharva Kumar turns out to be fraud. The family gets to know that

he was hired by the two gang members of Ramdulal. They hired him in order to possess the cache. One was already killed by the other dacoit who did not want to share the booty with his partner. Finally he also gets arrested and the family celebrates the puja as usual. Gandharva Kumar leaves for Bombay to try his luck at acting.

In *Utsab*, it is Sisir, a kinsman of the old matriarch Bhagabati, whose arrival brings to the fore a series of uncalled for tensions. The pitfalls of the family, the fragility of kinship bonds, ties and the distribution of property –all come to the surface at once by the uncanny reappearance of Sisir with whom the family shares a bitter memory. The narrative reveals that Sisir had an incestuous love affair with his first cousin, Bhagabati's elder daughter, and therefore he was expelled from the family. He was not financially very well off at that time. Then, as the narrative suggests, he made a fortune in real estate and now he has become an established promoter. He comes with a proposal of buying the old house of Bhagabati situated in a suburban area and of building a big apartment complex in its place. He offers a good sum for the house to be distributed between the two sons, daughters and their mother equally. The uncanny reappearance of Sisir intensifies the unseen crises in the lives of the members of the family. The family is on the verge of a collapse as secret tensions among the members suddenly come to haunt them. The elder daughter with whom Sisir had an affair fears a conjugal tiff with her husband over the issue of the return of the man she loved. She is so hysterically afraid that she sees a shadow of her own affair in the intimacy of her son and her niece. I will return to this point in detail in the next chapter. The younger daughter of the family and her husband are having a marital crisis as well, so much so that she might have to have a separation and come back to her mother. The selling off of the house depends on her decision whether to sustain

the marriage or not. The second son of Bhagabati is going through a financial crisis, as his company is on the verge of a shut down. He had a role in the expulsion of Sisir. Now he wants to forget that and borrow some money from Sisir. The mother leaves the decision of selling the house to her children who are equally hesitant about the deal. Finally, however, the younger daughter makes it up with her husband and decides to stay with the old mother along with her husband. Thus the selling off of the house gets postponed, perhaps forever, while Sisir's strained relationship with the family gets over and the familial tie gets reinvigorated.

It is interesting to note that the arrival of both the characters in the two films during the festival serves the purpose of conducting an acid test of the inner fears and insecurities of the middle class universe¹⁰ with a feudal past and the frailties of its family structure. But Ghosh's take on the middleclass world has been criticized by many critics. For example, film society activist Rita Datta points out that Rituparno Ghosh has only a partial view about the crises of the middleclass. According to her, he focuses only on the internal crises of the class. He does not attempt to relate these crises to the world of larger history and politics (2010). However, it can be said that Ghosh's pre-occupation with the middleclass and their anxieties perhaps tends to underscore the fact that even the personal can be taken as a manifestation of political sensibilities.

¹⁰ Actually the class I am referencing here is the middle class. It is not the urban middleclass – rather it is the old feudal class that is in a state of disintegration – and can be identified as middle class in terms of their economic profile now.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate how Rituparno Ghosh's cinema exemplifies allegiance to the cinematic and cultural tradition of Satyajit Ray and Rabindranath Tagore while at the same time developing its own particularity. In this connection, I have discussed the key features of Ghosh's cinema in terms of its engagement with the interiority of characters, interior spaces as the site for reconfiguring emotional relationships and clearly etched out female protagonists. I have also taken into account the issue of middleclass anxieties as discernible in two films of Ghosh's with a focus on the joint family and its immanent crises. These features taken together foreground the overall concerns and style of Rituparno Ghosh and establish him as an auteur. I call this overall style the 'Rituparnoesque'. Perhaps it is this style of Rituparno's that makes him the most desirable director for the *bhadra* Bengali middleclass. But the distinct style of Ghosh's that distinguishes him from Ray and Tagore's cine-cultural tradition comes from his approach towards sexuality in cinema. This approach critiques the constructed suaveness of the middleclass in matters relating to the complexities of sexuality. I will demonstrate how sexuality becomes the signature style of Ghosh's cinema in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 2

Sexuality as Signature Style

Introduction

Rituparno Ghosh's cinematic idiom is heavily influenced by the film style of Satyajit Ray, to whom he owes a lot in the way in which he deals with realism, storytelling and characterization. And it is for this reason that Ghosh has time and again been hailed as the suitable successor of Ray. At the same time, Ghosh is also culturally conditioned by the sensibilities of Rabindranath Tagore thanks to his constructive engagement with Tagore's literature. Certain elements like songs and the interiority of the characters in his films are in tune with Tagore's literary tropes. By locating his creative, individual talent in the cinematic tradition of Ray, and on the cultural avenue treaded by Tagore, Ghosh has earned the kudos of the Bengali, middleclass, *bhadralok* audience who seem to discern a positive flow of 'cultural capital' in his oeuvre from the haloed canonical creations of Tagore and Ray. While it is certainly true that Ghosh can be placed in the "tradition" of Tagore and Ray, one persistent component of his oeuvre that makes him different from either Ray or Tagore is his approach to sexuality in cinema. While Tagore's and Ray's responses to sexuality were characterized by a puritan economy of expression meant to suggest its presence and identity indirectly, Ghosh's way of dealing with it is more direct, vivid and explicit. Tagore and Ray present sexuality minimalistically, but Ghosh's cinematic aesthetic almost blatantly underscores sexualities in myriad forms.

Sexuality can be identified as a recurring motif in Ghosh's films. Sexuality is not manifested in his oeuvre in a homogeneous way, and there are several ways in which sexuality and its power are articulated in the films of Ghosh. If in one film, sexuality takes the form of incest-desire, powerful enough to undo the family, then in another, it becomes the destructive desire of a woman capable of making a family fall apart. In other films, a representation of decadent and exploitative sexual drives question the degenerate sexual practices of the feudal world, and critique the sanctity of marriage plagued by an extramarital affair. The power of sexuality especially in the extra-marital relationship is strong enough to jeopardize the couple space in Ghosh's films. At the same time, and strangely so, the sexual charge and energy of the illegitimate relationship can also become instrumental in bringing together the married couple in a state of emotional status-quo, so much that even a dead husband becomes desirable to a woman in one of his films. The questions of homosexuality, gender ambiguity and discourses around them have also come into prime focus in one of his recent films. It is thus clear that sexuality animates the film narratives of Ghosh that do not deal with sexuality in a romantic way. Rather, sexuality is foregrounded in a very discomfoting manner in his films that bring to the fore the general anxieties and uneasiness that the middleclass world has with issues relating to sexuality. Furthermore, the films of Ghosh throw light in the dark zones of middleclass sexualities masked by *bhadralok* sensibilities. Thus, sexuality, in the films of Ghosh oozes out of the frictions of the moral world of Bengali middleclass culture that tends to put on the garb of suaveness by not openly addressing sexuality.

In this chapter, I will try to demonstrate how Ghosh cinematically explicates the *bhadralok* anxiety regarding sexuality. Apart from examining the narratives of a

few films of Ghosh which deal with the multiple discourses of sexuality, I will focus on the various cinematic tropes which the films use, to substantiate my argument. Heteronormative couple formation has been at the heart of most cinematic narratives in almost all the cinemas of the world which have been understood to be driven by this sole motivation (Biswas, 2000 : 133). While Hollywood makes it possible for the couple to move from the familial towards the conjugal, in Indian popular cinema this migration remains incomplete because the gaze that produces Indian cinema does not allow a smooth transition from feudalist conventionalism to bourgeois modernity caught in the discourses of postcoloniality. But still in the 1950s, Bengali cinema facilitated a pull towards this desire by allowing a distinct space for the onscreen couple exemplified by Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen (ibid). Shiladitya Sen has considered the films centering this onscreen couple as representing the deceptive sexuality of the middleclass that reasserts the power of patriarchy (2009 : 268-274). It is to be noted that at the end of most films about couple formation, marriage is the only way of acknowledging the sustenance of this idea. Madhava Prasad observes that 'middleclass' cinema as a distinct trend in Bombay cinema especially in the 1970s can be seen as a site for producing the nuclear couple conditioned by familial networks (1998: 163). According to him the sole concern of these films was to maintain the sanctity of the (heterosexual) middleclass 'endogamous unit'. Rituparno Ghosh's films don't have a direct lineage to either of these traditions but since his cinema is located within the unique idiosyncrasies of Indian cinema one cannot possibly avoid the temptation to contrast his cinema with other pre-existing traditions especially in matters related to sexuality. I have already mentioned how sexuality in manifold forms occupies center stage in Ghosh's films. But it is interesting to note that while exploring different sexual practices his films continuously open up

possibilities for different kinds of couple formations generally not approved by society. By underscoring sexuality in the form of incest, extramarital affairs, homosexuality etc, the films of Ghosh persistently shatter the notion of heteronormative, legitimate endogamy and are quite unlike the preceding traditions. The portrayal of sexuality in his films creates a pretext for destabilizing this 'normalization' of the endogamous couple. Thus Ghosh's films re-map both couples and their spaces. His films do not subvert the normativity of the couple but problematize it by bringing in other variables of coupling. In this case the main thrust is on sexuality. The different variables of coupling become a vehicle to convey the power of sexuality. In this chapter my attempt will be to demonstrate how certain films of Ghosh exemplify such discursive practices associated with sexuality and how they underline sexual subjects. In order to do so, I will analyze sequences from his films that bear testimony to the problematic as described above. My attempt will be to demonstrate how Rituparno Ghosh's films use sexuality to examine and critique the Bengali joint family, the sanctified couple space, widowhood, and feudal decadence with a close liaison with religion and heteronormativity.

Incest: The dark family secret - *Utsab*

I will begin my analysis with *Utsab* (2000). The film tells the tale of a middleclass joint family on the verge of losing its ancestral home. Each member of the family has his or her own problem. But the buried problem that becomes pivotal in flaring up of the present crisis is the dark secret of the family: incest. The elder daughter of the family Parul had had an incestuous love affair with her first cousin. Her cousin was thrown out of the family for this. After several years that cousin, Sisir,

has become an established promoter. He has returned after years and presents a proposal to the family to buy their property. Now this becomes discomfoting. The members of the family who had despised Sisir for several years suddenly become positively disposed to him and set aside the unpleasant past associated with him. They decide to turn to him for financial help, with the first step being to sell their house to him. Sisir, by his very presence verily shatters Parul's marital stability. Now the welcoming gesture of her relatives towards Sisir places her at the cross roads of confusion, fear and hysteria. She is so overwhelmed by her memory of her incestuous relationship in the past that she sees seeds of a similar relationship sprouting between her son Joy, and her niece Shampa. She almost discerns history repeating itself.

The film foregrounds the dark zone of *bhadralok* anxieties. The general views that people have about Indian joint families in general, are conditioned by moral values and tradition. This traditionalism becomes even more evident when the entire family gathers together during a festival. *Utsab*, meaning festival, is set in the context of Durga Puja. The Durga idol, in its traditional form signifies the ideal joint family as the key idol is surrounded by other idols under the same 'Chalchitra' or the backdrop. The film shows a similar idol being worshipped at the worship hall. Incidentally, the central figure who still carries on the tradition of celebrating the festival is the old mother whose name happens to be Bhagabati, a synonym of 'Durga'. She is surrounded by her two daughters and two sons. But the film problematizes the notion of the happy joint family by focusing constantly on the imminent crisis that plagues the apparent unity and structure of the family. The film clearly distinguishes the sacred from the profane, with the profane being subject to dishonor caused by the overpowering nature of sexuality. Incest which is considered a shameful affair not to

be brought out in the public in Bengali '*bhadralok*' culture is used as the sole motif in the film probably to point to the fragile constitution of morality associated with middle-class joint families.

The meta-narratives about Bengali joint families always highlight the enlightened part of the construct for the public imagination. In the Foucaultian sense, only the 'deployment of (holy) alliance'¹ (1980:106) and legitimate relationships are foregrounded while talking about the joint family upholding traditional values. For instance Rabindra Nath Tagore's autobiography *Jiban smriti* (1961) and Satyajit Ray's *Jakhan Chhoto Chhilam* (1982) represent the glorious nature of their respective grand joint families and relatives. Their accounts leave aside the dark secrets and scars of those illustrious families, which have been dug out later by historians and novelists. Satyajit Ray's later accounts, however, tell us how he fell in love with his first cousin Bijoya, who went on to become his wife. He does not tell us what kind of reactions and pandemonium it created in his maternal uncles' family where he was raised after his father had died. Later Bijoya Ray's autobiographical account (2005) of her life with Ray gave us a glimpse of this incestuous love affair.² Perhaps 'Bhadralok' morality bars the middle class from acknowledging something like incest which is culturally taboo. This becomes evident if one remembers the controversy that Taslima Nasrin's autobiographical account (2002) created when Nasrin spoke nonchalantly of the childhood trauma created by an incestuous affair. Thus incest and the grand Bengali joint family have their own secret history as it were. Almost on a similar note, the film seeks to destabilize the rosy picture of the great Bengali joint

¹ Michel Foucault describes 'deployment of alliance' as a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions.' (1980: 106)

² My intention here is not to judge the legitimacy of incestuous relationships. I have brought up this issue just to show how complex joint families are as opposed to the generalized notion about their haloed existence.

family by uncovering the subversive sexuality which is not approved of or is disavowed culturally. The film shows that the joint family is equally complex and problematic despite the garb of moral uprightness and being part of a glorious tradition.

In *Utsab*, the incest theme has been played out in two ways. On the one hand, we see Parul's encounter with her family members regarding the issue with the camera observing her facial expressions, body language and hysteria in close up or mid-close-up shots. On the other hand, Shampa and Joy's playful camaraderie, Shampa's fondness of her cousin as a possible repetition of her aunt's past is established through the mutual exchange of looks of the two characters and the secluded nature of their encounter in low light and semi darkness. Parul's anxiety regarding her past affair with Sisir is articulated through her bodily gestures, facial expressions and hysterical behavior. There are four sequences in which she gradually reveals to her family members what kind of trauma she faced regarding this past scar resulting in an unhappy married life. She complains that despite her sincere attempts to disavow the incestuous affair, her husband and family members have time and again reminded her about it to fulfill their respective wishes. What is worse is that even after her son's coming of age this issue is being foregrounded as a real one. Her attitude to the present crisis of the family is very indifferent. She is not worried about whether the house should remain or not. She just wants to be rid of the angst caused by her incestuous past. She also alleges that her brothers purposefully locked her inside when Sisir was being expelled from the house years ago. Now she is again purposefully being used as a prop to welcome him back for their ulterior motives. She refuses to be a subject to be acted upon by her family that conveniently disowned

Sisir in the past, and now wishes to bring him back. When she breaks down before her family, she mentions that it's Sisir's financial condition that matters to them. Her family has adjusted their attitude towards Sisir according to his financial status. She complains that due to the ulterior motives of her brothers she has been bearing the burden of an affair for so long and her husband too has been insinuating her persistent relationship with Sisir. Parul's encounter with her family takes place in broad daylight in the dining space, hallway and the balcony. Her encounter almost becomes a spectacle, with her brothers, sister, sisters-in-law, mother and son closely scrutinizing her behavior with the eruption of an unpleasant past. Here her relatives become her audience as she performs her monologues. She performs memory and history. Her hysterical behavior makes Sisir's absent presence to be felt more conspicuously. Her public presence and conversations exteriorize incest thereby bringing to the fore the complexities of middleclass Bengali families and the vested interests of the representatives of that class in conveniently veiling and unveiling dark secrets related to sexuality.



Figure 8 stills from *Utsab*

This public exteriorization of incest is contrasted to the private encounters of Joy and Shampa. Though the film does not depict them sharing an incestuous relationship in any obvious manner, it foregrounds a sexual tension between them by using certain subtle tropes in terms of dialogue, camera movement etc. There is a recurring motif in the film: Joy observing Shampa through his camera lens. Often Shampa acknowledges his gaze by reciprocating with eyes. Her facial expression is

ambiguous in the sense that it is difficult to describe what kind of pleasure she derives from her equation with Joy. But there is a kind of an excess in that equation. Their relationship gets sexualized especially as Parul's account of her own situation acts like a commentary on Joy and Shampa's relationship as well. Parul's sudden invasion into their domain and her dissatisfaction with their proximity make Shampa and Joy aware of the sexual charge beneath their apparent sibling affection. Joy and Shampa's encounters generally take place in abandoned staircases, junk rooms, and dark chambers. The lighting patterns of these scenes with their sharp contrast of light and darkness suggests perhaps the chiaroscuro of affection and subtle sexuality that lies at the heart of sibling relationships in big families. Furthermore the spaces where they meet are considered in the cinematic and literary imagination, places of secret encounters between couples not sanctioned by the societal gaze. Interestingly, Shampa and Joy during their meetings talk about the incest that Parul had experienced. While Joy remembers his childhood affected by his parents' fight over the issue, Shampa compares her situation with that of Parul. She also reminds Joy about her anxiety regarding a childhood event of going to a planetarium where Joy had touched her in an undesirable way. She seems to have imbibed her aunt's fear that the history of incest is going to be repeated. Joy and Shampa are also aware about Joy's father's pet phrase of describing Sisir as 'brother to beau'. On that note Shampa tells Joy to rhyme his name with something. Joy comes up with 'bhoy' which in Bengali means fear. Shampa rhymes his name with 'pronoy' which means love. Their respective ways of rhyming underline the very ambiguous nature of their relationship. Again, she is not happy about the fact that Joy is going abroad. She cherishes the dream that Joy would come to save her if she had an unhappy married life. Thus the chemistry between Joy and Shampa is extremely complex and therefore the spaces

they appear within and the lighting scheme of those spaces speak volumes about their complex relationship.

The parallel tracks of the Parul-Sisir and Shampa-Joy relationships meet at a singular point towards the end of the film. Shampa gives Joy a clean chit as Joy makes a clear statement that he views Shampa as his friend more than anything else. The camera shows in a mid close up shot, Shampa singing a song, resting her head against Joy's body. The song continues as the camera goes on to capture Parul at the worship hall. She lights a lamp as Sisir enters the space and frame. Sisir and Parul don't get into any emotional conversation. Sisir casually talks to her about her son and compliments her for the French toast and tea that she had made for him in the morning. Sisir admits that he has come just to say hello to her. Parul also casually acknowledges his presence silently. Their encounter in the semi darkened space caught in long-shot suggests the distance that has grown between them over the years. It also highlights the stage of sublimation that the volatile incestuous relationship has reached over the years, and signifies how their relationship has grown. The song in the background bridges the generations and the worlds of Sisir-Parul and Joy-Shampa. The old pillars of the house and Parul's elder sister-in-law remain the silent voyeuristic spectators of Parul's encounter with Sisir. For the first time, Parul looks happy at this moment as she is not perturbed much by Sisir's presence. This time she does not seem worried about the closeness of her son with her niece. The film does not attempt to give any closure to these relationships nor does it judge them. It rather focuses on how incest becomes a pretext for conducting a litmus taste on middleclass anxieties over sexuality not sanctified by marriage.

The destructive power of sexuality: *Chokher Bali*

Chokher Bali (2003) based on Tagore's eponymous novel explores another dimension of the destructive power of sexuality. It not only focuses on an extramarital affair, but also on a widow's claim to pleasure, forbidden in accordance with the unstated rules of mainstream patriarchal society. Ghosh contextualizes the narrative in a given historical context when the nation in the making was experiencing the *swadeshi* turn in the early years of the twentieth century (Chakravarti and Ganguly, 2007:242-259). It will be wrong to assume that Ghosh has merely adapted the Tagore novel in his film. Rather, he has reinterpreted the narrative.

The narrative revolves around Mahendra, Behari, Binodini and Ashalata. The opening images of the film show that Mahendra's mother attempted to facilitate a marriage between her son and her friend's daughter Binodini. She believed that Binodini would be her ideal daughter-in-law thanks to her English education and penchant for neat home making. But Mahendra refused to marry her. Mahendra's close friend Behari too did not find her suitable for himself. So Binodini was married off to another man who dies soon after and Binodini becomes a widow. In the mean time Mahendra's aunt Annapurna decides to make a match of her niece Ashalata with Behari. But Mahendra finds her attractive and marries her. Rajlaxmi does not approve of this marriage. She goes to her village and fetches Binodini to her house as if to take revenge. Binodini becomes a friend of Asha's. She, however, cannot hide her jealousy. Gradually Binodini grows fond of Behari. But she is desired by Mahendra. She cannot stop Mahendra. As this extramarital affair comes to Asha's knowledge, she leaves for Benaras. Rajlaxmi expels Binodini. Binodini reaches Behari and proposes to him. Behari refuses her proposal. She then decides to commit suicide but

cannot do so. Mahendra comes and takes her to Benaras. On the ghats of Benaras she experiences the true condition of women either as widow or as a tawaif. She understands the low status of women in a patriarchal society and goes on to find her true identity and that of the nation. Her search for identity becomes so profound that she sends Mahendra back to his wife and refuses Behari's proposal of marriage.

In the novel Binodini is portrayed as a rebellious young widow asserting her desire as a woman. Radha Chakraborty describes the character as an embodiment of Tagore's concerns about women, and their location and identity in patriarchal society (2011:8-14). Tagore described the novel as a psychological one. Chakraborty highlights the subterranean conflict between the modernization drive that enlightened social reformers took up for the betterment of women and a widowed woman's zeal to attain her rightful life of pleasure and fulfill her desire (ibid). Tagore's novel ends with Binodini seeking an apology from Mahendra and Behari for her sexual desire for them. Tagore was not happy with the ending. He regretted the predicament of Binodini in the novel. He wanted to be censured for not having done justice to Binodini. Ghosh uses this as his entry point to approach the novel. Pinak Shankar Bhattacharya points out that Binodini in the novel differs from the one in the film. In the novel she is apologetic about asserting her sexuality. But in the film she does not repent having expressed her sexual desire. When Rajlaxmi admonishes her, pointing to her sexuality as the destructive greed of a woman capable of undoing the family, she protests saying that her sexual desire is similar to tasting a forbidden food or drink (Bhattacharya 2003). She does not consider her desire for men she loves as a grave mistake or a great sin. Rather, she defends it by comparing it with any other instinctive urge of a woman that cannot be curbed by the imposed identity of

widowhood. Rituparno Ghosh sees Binodini's widowhood as a mere pretext which Tagore uses just to bring the protagonist amidst Mahendra, Behari and Ashalata (Ghosh 2003). Both the novel and the film explore the destructive nature of Binodini's desire and sexuality. While the novel neutralizes her power by making her apologetic about it, the film takes her to the path of self-realization which overpowers her desire. The film also portrays the destructive nature of Binodini's sexuality which threatens to undo a family and also demolish her own self esteem.

Binodini's sexuality has been underscored in the film in three ways: a) by portraying her as a playful woman with agency³ b) by showing her performing certain acts of self adoration and c) by portraying her intimacy with her lovers as opposed to Ashalata's conjugality. In the initial moments in the film there is a sequence in which Behari reads out to Mahendra, Rajlaxmi and Annapurna a section from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Krishnakanter Will*. That section of the novel describes the rebellious widow, Rohini, her idiosyncrasies and sexuality. While Rajlaxmi agrees with the punitive treatment of the character for having violated social norms, Mahendra criticizes the author's intentions. Rajlaxmi however considers the description of the character as the author's act of playing to the gallery to please his implied readers. Seeing her son's sympathy towards widows she brings up the issue of Binodini. Thus the sequence has been used to foretell the direction of the film and gives scope to the audience to visualize Binodini beforehand via the example of the predicament of a young widowed woman in another classic Bengali novel.

³ In Bengali Binodini refers to a playful woman and Sri Krishna's eternal muse Radha. Rituparno Ghosh reminds us that in the cultural history of Bengal Binodini refers to Nati Binodini the powerful stage actress who too went on to live life in her own terms by overcoming social norms. The term Binodini, according to Ghosh, is perennially associated with forbiddenness.(2003)

When Binodini does make an entry into Rajlaxmi's house, the camera very often captures her in a particular way, for example, by using mid close up shots of Binodini standing in front of a Renaissance painting of a nude female figure in Ashalata and Mahendra's room. Her face is highlighted with a high contrast key light keeping the rest of the room semi dark. The lighting scheme bolsters the poignancy of the character. The projection of Binodini in this manner hints at her playfulness, her commanding sexual power and her threatening presence within the conjugal space of Asha and Mahendra. This image occurs time and again in the first half of the film. Thus the film cinematically and aesthetically expresses the multiple shades in the character of Binodini using the mise-en-scene to complement the narrative and establish Binodini as a powerful woman in terms of her sexuality.



Figure 9 images from *Chokher Bali*

Binodini's piercing gaze towards Mahendro and Behari also establishes the power of her sexuality and her subjectivity. Her gaze alters the dynamics of the patriarchal male gaze and turns the two men into objects of her gaze. Even the camera, at times, takes her point of view in observing her objects of desire (Bakshi, 2011). On the one hand, the camera establishes her sexuality by contextualizing her within the mise-en-scene, on the other it takes her perspective demonstrating the power of her gaze. Thus Binodini becomes a sexual subject and object simultaneously.

There are two sequences in the film in which Binodini attempts to beautify herself going against the restrictions imposed on widows by society. In the first sequence, she wears a red jacket to demonstrate to Ashalata how the jacket is worn. Cinematically, the sequence is built with a relay of gazes. As Ashalata insists that Binodini teach her the art of wearing the jacket, Binodini tells her to shut the door. A shot shows Asha shutting the door of her bedroom. In the next shot we see that Annapurna looks up curiously from the balcony in front of the room stopping her work. Then Ashalata gorges on the sight of Binodini's bareback as she wears the jacket. Having worn the jacket she turns back to Asha and stares at her with blushing eyes as Asha still looks on. The sequence highlights the homoeroticism that the two characters share. The sequence reminds the audience that Binodini is a rebel and she wants to assert her sexuality and desire by performing forbidden acts in closed spaces. The claustrophobic nature of her sexuality is also underlined by this sequence. The cinematographer of the film later revealed that a theatrical lighting scheme has been used in that sequence in order to show the eerie nature of Binodini's desire (Moitra, 2003:6-9).

In another sequence, Ashalata decks Binodini up with ornaments that are again something that is forbidden for a widow. When Ashalata advises her to wear the ornaments stealthily, Binodini protests saying 'ornaments are not men' so there is no harm in wearing them. After wearing ornaments she dances playfully in front of Asha while singing a Tagore song in which Radha's female companions insist with her that she look at the beauty of Krishna. This camaraderie gets interrupted by the sudden arrival of Behari and Mahendra. This sequence plays a pivotal role in the film

as Binodini becomes Mahendra's object of desire after this event and Binodini's desire for Behari also deepens after he spontaneously praises her bejeweled form.

Binodini's relationship with Mahendro has been portrayed differently from Mahendra's conjugal intimacy with Ashalata. Firstly, Binodini and Mahendra meet in claustrophobic spaces like the prayer room, the carriage. It remains a secret affair quite like Binodini's love letters to Mahendro which lie in her jewelry box. Thus her love has been metaphorically represented as a secret treasure by showing her love letters locked with the ornaments. Secondly, unlike Asha, Binodini does not behave like a passive object in front of Mahendro. She is very articulate about her desires and wishes. There is a tension between the narrative and the cinematic tropes in producing the image of Binodini. The narrative pull tries to keep her within the closet curbing her sexuality, but the camera captures her in close up and mid close up shots closely observing her powerful physicality. The camera constantly highlights her sexuality especially with a focus on her face. Thus Binodini's destructive sexuality emerges out of this tension between the narrative and the cinematic tropes.

The sequence in which Binodini decorates herself with ornaments and goes to meet Behari portrays her as an *abhisarika* or the woman who goes to meet her lover secretly overcoming all odds. Binodini's desire assumes an archetypal quality in this sequence. When she presents herself before Behari in her bejeweled look she seeks to conquer him by her youthful sex appeal. However, she becomes equally vulnerable too before the indifferent gaze of Behari. High contrast lighting, the closed door situation and the sound of fire crackers in the background hint at her desperate desire and the potentially self-destructive nature of her sexuality. She imposes herself on Behari desperately when Behari refuses to marry her, or love her.

Thus Binodini's sexuality reaches its nadir in this sequence as Binodini loses her self-esteem and insists that Behari keep her as his maid. Later in a letter, Binodini asserts her identity as a woman of flesh and blood beyond all other socially imposed identities. But her sexuality becomes detrimental to her own existence as well as to the conjugal life of Mahendro and Asha and the friendship of Mahendro and Behari. Finally, her self-realization helps her to overcome her destructive desire and that makes the revamping of the family possible.

Degraded sexualities: The decadence of the feudal world : *Antarmahal*

There was a flood of vituperation that descended upon Rituparno from audiences and critics alike when he made *Antarmahal* (2005). The film was dubbed as 'Rituparno's Porno' and he was charged with promoting pornography on celluloid (Mandal 2010: 70). Ghosh's response was that it is a pity that people in India still cannot accept sexuality as part of life (ibid). He stated clearly that his intention was not to focus on the sexual intimacy between a man and a woman. Rather he wanted to show how women were exploited by patriarchy in the 19th century. He distinguished between pornography and the film stating that while pornography uses sex to titillate physical excitement, the film uses sex to show the sad predicament of a woman in feudal patriarchy. In fact the film contains a pathological and gory account of the decadence of feudal society with a representation of exploitative sex and sexuality masked by ritualistic religion. Rituparno Ghosh feels that *Antarmahal* was shocking for his audience because he deviated from his usual subject, the middleclass, in this film. He observes:

The crux of the matter is that people have become so used to seeing middle class ethos and life patterns in my films, that they just cannot accept *Antarmahal* which is a conscious deviation from the known path. They are more irked as the film appears to be laden with sexual overtones. Why can't they understand that it is meant for adults, for whom sex is an indispensable part of life? (Mandal , 2010: 74)

It is clear that the cause of middle-class discomfort with the film comes from its blatant showcasing of the carnal nature of sexuality which the middleclass audience constantly disavows. The film is significant in that it is a clear example of sexuality as the driving force of Rituparno Ghosh's cinema in this period even as the concern impacts the stylistics of his films. Sexuality has been dealt with in three ways in the film-through the portrayal of sexual violence on women in the name of religion, by privileging the female gaze over the male object, and thirdly by showing the young sculptor's desire for the younger lady of the house getting channelized into his creation of the goddess's idol. The film opens with a sequence in which the *zamindar* (landlord) Bhuvaneshwar Chaudhury is copulating with his wife in a very torturous, pathological and gross manner. The shot is taken in a poorly lit chamber to suggest how cruel the dark nights could be for a woman imprisoned within the no-escape world of feudalism and patriarchy. Bhuvaneshwar is so consumed by the desire for a male heir that he does not hesitate making love to his wife even in the presence of a priest in his bedroom who is reading out scriptures to make sure that the child to-be-born becomes as great as mythical heroes. In the name of religion, tradition, and the perpetuation of the family line, Yashomati, the younger wife gets raped by her husband before the piercing male gaze of the priest. The sequence has a claustrophobic quality with the violent and pathologized act of sex used only as a means of procreation, bereft of pleasure. The following sequence shows Yashomati in long shot running and screaming hysterically in the courtyard attempting to escape from her trauma and insult. She bumps into the young sculptor who has come to make

the Durga idol. She stares at him for a while and then slaps him in a gesture to vent out her anger against the piercing male gaze as it were. Finally she is caught by the maidservants and dragged into the inner chamber. She resembles a vulnerable animal that is to be sacrificed in a ritual. When she is dragged across the courtyard, she is taken past an altar made for sacrifice with a wooden structure to lock the head of the animal. The mise-en-scene here thus signifies how she has fallen prey to the sinister design of patriarchy. The sequence also highlights the dubious nature of the feudal world. On the one hand, the land lord wants to acquire a British title. Hence he has ordered the young sculptor to create the Goddess' idol in the form of the most powerful woman on earth - Queen Victoria. On the other hand, he subjugates and diminishes his wife into a mere procreating machine whose modesty is not protected from the gaze of other men.

The land-lord's desire can be contrasted with his elder wife, Mahamaya's desire. She is bold enough to show her bare body to the priest to titillate him. Her act becomes subversive as she wishes to take revenge against her husband's ploy to prove her infertile. This of course comes with a price, as priests of the village want to sexually exploit her in the name of decadent rituals conveniently modified to fulfill their own desires. When Bhuvaneshwar has a hallucination about the priests' plan, he sees Mahamaya as a sacrificial object. The sequence of the hallucination has been shot on an epic scale with an eerie background score of monastery music and chants. She steps down from a palanquin amidst the sacrificial rituals. Being intoxicated and garlanded like a sacrificial creature, she topples over a vessel full of milk causing it to spill over. The visual signifier is full of sexual undercurrents masked by religious ritualism.

Another noticeable feature of the film is the privileging of the female gaze (Mandal, 2010: 72). There are several images of Braj Bhusan , the well built sculptor being watched by Mahamaya and Yashomati. They voyeuristically gaze at him when he sleeps uncovered, or while he is bathing in the pond. Both women derive a secret pleasure from gazing at him or in his physical presence. Yashomati even sees him in his dreams. Mahayamaya insists that Yashomati fulfill her desire for the young sculptor by consummating her love with him, even as she discloses her own attempt at making futile advances on him. Yashomati's secret encounter with Braj Bhushan on the pretext of ousting a cat from her room metaphorically represents her desire for the man. Even during this silent encounter the female gaze overpowers the male gaze. The female gaze of desire here is pitted against the perverse gaze of the priests.



Figure 10 scenes from *Antarmahal*

Braj Bhushan's silent desire for the young wife of the land lord has been displaced into his act of building the Durga idol's torso. He also remembers the uncovered torso of his wife. In his imagination, Yashomati and his wife become the same woman. The dark worship hall where he makes the idol connects religion with sexuality. Unlike the priests, Braj Bhushan glorifies the woman he desires. He uplifts her to a divine status by developing the idol in her beautiful form.

The film invokes the memory of Satyajit Ray's *Debi* (1960) which also explores the nexus between religion, patriarchy and sexuality. Soha Ali Khan, who plays Yashomati, invariably brings back the memory of the image of Sharmila

Tagore, her mother, as Dayamoyi in *Debi*. But as Professor Somdatta Mandal observes, Ray perhaps had some puritan reservation against depicting sexuality in its gruesome form. (2010: 67-76) Thus in *Debi*, Ray economizes sexuality by restricting it to the patriarchal gaze. He attempts to sublimate it in the hysterical persona of Dayamoyi's father-in-law. Ray depends entirely on the mise-en-scene and makes it speak volumes. Ghosh on the contrary, portrays sexuality in *Antarmahal* both through mise-en-scene and the ghastly, pathological representation of sex. Thus, the film is truly an example of the distinctness of Ghosh's approach towards sexuality in cinema. The film makes it evident that his style is completely different from that of Ray's in dealing with sexuality despite a few formal similarities even as the subjects of the two films may have elements that are common.

Marriage and the power of disruptive sexuality: *Dosar*

Dosar (2006) deals with an extramarital affair, another dimension of sexuality. The film according to Rituparno Ghosh is not a film 'on' marital infidelity but a film 'about' it. (Sengupta 2006) He wanted to explore what happens when a husband's extra marital affair comes to the knowledge of his wife after the other woman dies in an accident. He wanted to make it in black and white to portray infidelity from multiple perspectives, in various shades of black and white. The basic story line is: Kaberi gets to learn about her husband Kaushik's affair with his colleague Mita Roy after Kaushik's car meets with an accident killing Mita and gravely injuring Kaushik. Kaberi is at her wit's end as to what to do with her husband. On the one hand she would like to separate from Kaushik; on the other hand she cannot help caring for her husband and tending to his bruises. She is caught in a strange dilemma. Finally she is

able to love her husband who in his turn returns to his wife physically and emotionally.



Figure 11 scenes from *Dosar*

This storyline is punctuated by another extra-marital affair between Kaberi's friends, Brinda and Bobby. Furthermore, the hotel room where Kaushik stayed with Mita is occupied by a new couple after they leave. The film does not state clearly whether they are man and wife. So there too lies a possibility of another extra marital affair. The film does not moralize or judge infidelity; it tries to look at the power of sexuality in each of these relationships. In one sequence Kaberi is shown opening the message box of her husband's mobile phone which the police had kept in their custody after the accident. She finds a poem written by Mita. The poem talks about kisses, passion and the blurring of the line between lust and love. The soundtrack enveloped at this point by the Scottish bag-pipe tune becomes very poignant, as Kaberi's facial expression caught in a close up shot remains very ambiguous. The poetry continues as this shot fades in to the next one in which Brinda and Bobby discuss the future of their relationship. Thus the poem bridges three couples: Kaberi-Kaushik, Mita-Kaushik and Brinda-Bobby. While Kaberi is bewildered by the discovery of her husband's extramarital affair, Brinda is sick with her unhappy marriage. Bobby cannot control his desire for Brinda while Mita's husband gets wild. To get away - from his pain he brings home a prostitute as if to take revenge on his unfaithful wife who is anyway dead. But still he cannot be happy as the angst born out of the situation

keeps on engulfing him. If Kaberi's narrative represents one dimension of the impact of infidelity, then Brinda and Bobby's story and that of the couple in the hotel room show the flip side of it. The film captures the reactions of different characters experiencing the brunt of infidelity. It foregrounds the power of sexuality that charges the couple space with different kinds of desires not entirely contained within the space of conjugality. At the end of the film, the same poem which was written by Mita for Kaushik is recited by Kaberi. The poem brings Kaberi and Mita to the same point-with their desires merging and directed towards the same man.

Death, fantasy and sexual desire: *Sab Charitra Kalponik*

In *Sab Charitra Kalponik* (2009) sexuality takes a slight detour. The film is about a wife's rediscovery of her husband after his death. Her desire for the husband increases when he dies. Radhika, who was born and brought up in Jamshedpur, comes to Kolkata after getting married to the poet Indraneel Mitra. Since she never grew up in Bengal and was educated in an English medium school, Radhika is not very well versed in Bengali language, literature and culture. Therefore she does not identify with her husband's world at all. She does not like her husband's unbridled lifestyle. She cannot accept the fact that Indraneel does not earn because he is a creative man. She can't tolerate his very presence at times. She grows fond of her colleague Shekhar. But things change after Indraneel's sudden death. Radhika gets to know that Indraneel had a fantasy woman Kajari, about whom he wrote many poems. She wonders who this Kajari could be. She starts hallucinating that Indraneel is still there in her life. She keeps on pondering over, loving and fighting with her husband.

Her desire towards Indraneel becomes so intense that she cannot follow through her attraction towards Shekhar.

The film plays with psychological time and cinematic time. It goes back and forth to portray Radhika's relationship with her husband. From the very beginning of her marriage, Radhika had not approved of Indraneel's lifestyle and therefore had not liked his physical proximity. Whenever he had tried to get intimate with her she had pushed him away. A recurring image in the film is Radhika verbally attacking him either for not earning, or for his irresponsibility. In several sequences she literally pushes him aside when he attempts to get intimate with her. Most of these sequences -privilege Radhika over Indraneel as the camera keenly observes Radhika, keeping her in the foreground while Indraneel, relegated to the background is shown mostly in soft focus. This poetics of privilege changes its course after Indraneel dies. As Radhika starts hallucinating about Indraneel after his death, the cinematography and lighting scheme change. For instance when Radhika talks to Shekhar in her balcony she enjoys light, while Shekhar stands in darkness. In the next shot an unreal, theatrical light falls on Shekhar. Strangely Radhika and the audience discover that it is Indraneel. Sequences in which Radhika has hallucinations about Indraneel's presence, have this strange unreal light and these dream spaces are accompanied by an eerie sound of water dripping from the tap. She also sees a human image of her husband's fantasy woman Kajari who dresses up like her. She often imagines Kajari as her husband's feminine alter ego. For instance, there is this long sequence at the beginning in which the camera focuses on a photograph of Indraneel's. Then it pans gradually to come to Radhika, seated on a chair and contemplating her husband. In the background a poem is being recited. The poem hails the unfathomable in the

form of a river Alokanda. This becomes a commentary on Radhika's inability to fathom her husband. She rises from the chair, switches off the light and opens the door. She reaches a dream space where known and unknown people have gathered in a forest. She calls her husband by his name and those faces stare at her. She sees Kajari beckoning her. A white frame follows this sequence. The dream continues. Radhika enters her flat dressed up like a bride, with Shekhar trailing behind as the bridegroom. This sequence has a theatrical lighting scheme and sonorous drum beats as background music. She sees Indraneel lying on the floor dead. She asks someone who shaved his beard? Usually she had an issue with Indraneel's unshaven, unbridled look. What had struck her when she had found him dead in reality was his clean shaven face. The beard here metaphorically signifies Indraneel's wild desire for Radhika. When he was alive Radhika always detested his wildness. After his death this becomes an issue of worry for Radhika. She has hallucinations that Indraneel is still lying by her side. The same sound of water dripping from a tap continues as she tells Indraneel, 'I was very afraid to have seen you clean shaven'. Indraneel's overwhelming presence in Radhika's life especially after his death is confirmed by showcasing the larger than life image of Indraneel in the house. The image gives Shekhar a clear message that he is not welcome in Radhika's life any longer.



Figure 12 scenes from *Sab Charitra Kalponik*

Radhika also has hallucinatory perceptions of Kajari. She reaches Indraneel through Kajari as it were. In one sequence Kajari is shown performing household chores with Radhika. Radhika caresses herself and imagines it is Kajari who is fondling her body. This intimate moment between Radhika and the imaginary woman Kajari has been shown in extreme close up shots. It has been done possibly to underscore the emotional and sexual intensity of Radhika's desire towards her husband who is no more. One hears in the back ground a poem by Indraneel, in his voice:

We shall not able to sleep tonight.

Let's go to the terrace.

Where is the terrace but?

We have another couple living upstairs

On top of that another couple reigns

Its dawn and we are still climbing stairs

Touch a star of your choice and tell it:

You want all the sorrows inflicted by your previous husband to scatter now as fire flies⁴

The poem, the identical saris that Kajari and Radhika wear and also the visual similarities between the actresses playing Radhika and Kajari⁵ either point to the fact that Kajari is Radhika's imagination of her own exteriorized self or it suggests that Kajari is the feminine subjectivity of her husband. This becomes more ambiguous when we see Kajari read out a poem to her in Bengali about a wife's confusion about her husband's identity. Radhika discovers that Indraneel's last Bengali poem was a translation of a poem Radhika had written in English. It is difficult to decide whose voice it is- Indraneel's, Kajari's or Radhika's. But the desire of the deceased husband

⁴ Translation mine

⁵ Bipasha Basu and Paoli Dam

and that of the hallucinating wife meet through the medium of the fantasy woman via this piece of writing:

*What if one night one crosses the boundary, comes to my home
Lurks in the shadows in my husband's form and wants to be fed,
Wants to bathe, wants to sleep in my bed.
His body familiar, breath unknown,
Wild eyed with passion in my husband's form.
What if confused I grab him by the hair from off my breast,
Who are you I say in great distress,
Lest I forget being locked in love with this other,
That he is lost, in the cold and crowded streets or crouching under a wayside stall,
My most intimate man unknowingly betrayed.⁶*

Radhika's life with Indraneel comes full circle as she rediscovers her husband after his death and starts her life anew with him, this time in his absent presence. Poignantly then, sexuality has a posthumous appeal as Radhika finds her desired 'intimate' man in Indraneel who comes to life through his writing, her own imagination of him and the fantasy woman Kajari's hallucinatory presence.

Sexuality, creative inspiration, fantasy: *Abohoman*

The media grapevine buzzed with speculations that Rituparno Ghosh had made a film on Satyajit Ray's affair with actress Madhabi Mukherjee when *Abohoman* (2010) was released. (Biswas 2010) What the director's intentions were is of course a debatable issue, but the moot point is that it's a film about the relationship of a director with his favorite actress who is wild, unsophisticated, adamant yet adorable. Director Aniket Chatterjee contemplates casting a budding theater actress

⁶ From the subtitle track of the film

Shikha in the role of Nati Binodini in his film. Her unsophisticated nature and roughness initially prevents him from casting her for the role. But his wife Deepti, who was the first choice for the role ten years ago, convinces him to cast Shikha in the role. Deepti grooms Shikha. Shikha's spontaneous acting and gestures start attracting Aniket. He develops a Pygmalion love affair with her. His family turns into a broken nest. Gradually with the passage of time the family reaches a temporary status-quo. After Aniket's death, his son Apratim who wrote a critical piece about his father's extra marital affair falls in love with Shikha. The narrative of the film is layered as there is a film within the film supplementing the tale of Aniket and Shikha. It is the story of Nati Binodini in the film which Aniket directs. The film within the film mirrors the predicament of Shikha. Nati Binodini's relationship with Girish Chandra Ghosh is constantly compared in the film to the relationship between Aniket and Shikha. These two stories run parallel. The title of the film *Abohoman-* means the eternal. The narrative of the film shows two kinds of eternity-generational and historical in matters of love and sexuality. The love affair is eternal because the director's son also falls in love with Shikha. It is eternal also because it foregrounds the artist and his muse theme in the Binodini-Girish Chandra Ghosh story and the Aniket-Shikha story. The history of world cinema has seen a number of such couples like Jean-Luc Godard-Anna Karina, Ingmar Bergman- Liv Ullman, Raj Kapoor-Nargis, and Guru Dutt-Waheeda Rehman etc. Thus the film engages with the eternity of the director-actress romance as seen in film history.

The power of Shikha's sexuality comes from her adamant wildness. This not only threatens the family of the director but it also paves the way for history to repeat

itself as Aniket's son falls in love with the same actress years later. Three sequences in the film demonstrate this theme clearly.



Figure 13 Scenes from *Abohoman*

An over the shoulder shot shows Aniket rewinding and pausing a film strip that reveals Shika's spontaneous winking of eyes during a dance performance. This shot is followed by a series of close-up shots of Aniket admiring the image with a smile of pleasure on his face. In the background, young Apratim's song about the mascara lined eyes of famous *nayikas* of Bengali literature and cinema can be heard. The song comments on Aniket's love for Shikha. As Apratim sings, Aniket stands at the door of his room. Apratim mimics Shikha's gestures and Aniket feels embarrassed. The yellowish warm lighting, mingled with the romantic tune of the song hints at the blossoming of romance between the director and his muse. The cinematic space is occupied by Aniket, Apratim and Shikha's image. Aniket's wife Deepti is not present in the scene. Therefore it does not remain a familial space. It becomes a space of two heterosexual men admiring the beauty of an actress. The sequence also forebodes Apratim's attraction for Shikha. Thus Shikha's image becomes a sexualized one.

This sequence is followed by the film within film in which Shikha dressed as Nati Binodini serves a drunken Girish Ghosh. The sequence has a sepia tint to point to the event's pastness. There is a chiaroscuro effect in the lighting scheme. The sequence catches in long shot an actor in the role of Girish Ghosh lying on a couch in the balcony and reciting a poem in his drunken stupor. Binodini insists that he sleep

but he asks her 'what am I to you'. Finally he goes to bed still asking the same question. Reciting a dialogue from a play Binodini replies: '*ei bondi- amar praneshwar*'⁷ that is 'This captive man is my love'. Throughout this sequence she remains on the other side of the sun blind. She also remains on the other side of the window. This suggests that she cannot become part of the familial space. She is the other woman who is seen as a sexualized subject.

Towards the end of the film, Apratim is shown in conversation with Shikha. Quite like his father, he comes to visit and talk to her. They meet at the abandoned stepping-stone of the staircase leading up to the terrace. The sequence comprises close ups of Apratim and Shikha's faces. At times, Shikha's face is shown in the foreground while Apratim stands in the background. They are also shown together, standing face to face against a back drop of cage like nets covering the railings of the space. Shikha talks about how she was treated. She mentions the stories Aniket used to make her read. The stories were interestingly about fallen women getting redeemed with the arrival of messiah like gentlemen as their suitors or lovers. Apratim admits his attraction and love for her and expresses his desire to cast her in his film. The mise-en-scene and the conversation signify Shikha's outcast status. Though she does not emerge as a sexualized object here, but one can notice a subtle sexual tension between the two characters in terms of the exchange of their looks. Thus the film presents the power of sexuality of the muse who contributes to the creative life of the artist. The film seeks to project this powerful image of the muse who is always an outsider as an eternal phenomenon.

⁷ Italics mine

Alternative sexualities, gender ambiguity – *Chitrangada*

Chitrangada (2012) is more about gender than about sexuality. However, the film portrays the crises in and around homosexual love. The basic story line is: Rudra, a dancer decides to undergo gender reassignment surgery to be able to adopt a child with his boy friend Partho. In the process of becoming a woman his self-revelation happens and he discovers his true self and chooses his gender.

The film aestheticizes the physicality of Rudra's relationship with Partho by using Tagore's dance drama *Chitrangada* which Rudra's dance troupe is performing. Their lovemaking has been turned into a choreographed dance movement, and its theatricality invests their love affair with a certain mythic resonance. The Tagore text helps to build up the film's narrative. The film also posits this same sex couple as opposed to the heterosexual one that is Rudra's parents. Rudra and Partho's lovemaking takes place mostly in darkness or half lit spaces. When Partho expresses his wish to adopt a child with Rudra, Rudra reminds him about the law that two men in India cannot adopt a child. Enraged Partho embraces and kisses him stating 'we will do without a child'. The room is semi dark with a focus on the two protagonists like in a play. Rudra then proposes the idea of changing his sex. The camera shows them kissing, embracing and displaying affection thereby forming a new couple space with a lighting scheme that in its turn comments on the tumultuous zone of homosexuality in Bengali, middleclass society. This kind of portrayal is very new in Bengali cinema. The sequence ends with the entry of Rudra's mother and her switching on the light. Her facial expression is of a slight disapproval if not of disgust. She is going to attend a wedding ceremony with her husband. Here the wedding

ceremony is paradoxical because this is something that Rudra and Partho as a couple will never enjoy.



Figure 14 scenes from *Chitrangada*

The film, however, does not portray Rudra and Partho's relationship as a major problem in Rudra's family as he belongs to the upper middleclass echelons of society. The next sequence shows Partho and Rudra standing side by side in the balcony and planning a life together after the gender reassignment surgery. Rudra insists that Partho suffer him when he undergoes the operation. Partho, though not very happy about it discusses their life as couple. What is striking about the sequence is the use of Shehnai in the background score. Despite being a non-diegetic sound at this point, it serves as a commentary on the homosexual desire for marriage and family, which often falls a few notches short of being materialized. Both these sequences highlight the larger issue of the marginalization of same-sex lovers and the dark zones they are forced into, at the fringes of hetero-normative society. They also bring out some of the common complexities in same-sex love especially between two men. Their closeness in the dark room as opposed to the respectable position of Rudra's parents in broad light creates a stark contrast between heterosexual marriage and homosexual desire for marriage that hardly materializes. The aforesaid sequences represent the aspect of social deprivation and the truncated nature of homosexual desire that is often unfulfilled.

Repeatedly the film shows Rudra dining with his parents while raising serious issues pertaining to his life. Rudra and his parents are composed mostly in shot-counter-shot. This projects Rudra like an interviewee to an anthropologist, speaking of the marginalized lives of queer people. In one of these sequences, Rudra discloses his wish to undergo a gender reassignment surgery. The conversations foreground the repercussions on Rudra's parents regarding their social position due to Rudra. His mother alleges that Rudra will never understand his parents' feelings for their children. This dialogue refers to the general anxiety of the middleclass that queer people are indifferent and irresponsible towards their families and family ties. Rudra's mother also points out the contingent nature of homosexual 'conjugalities'. Rudra counters this argument saying that it is better to have a companion at one stage of his life rather than remaining single forever. This expresses the anxiety of queer people regarding loneliness, infidelity, and betrayal in their short-lived relationships. It also calls attention to the fact there is no abiding law in India that enables gay or queer people to form a marital union. Therefore, by default, personal ethics becomes the primary binding factor that can make possible the coming and staying together of queer people under the same roof for a longer period.

The film articulates an insider's view of homosexual love in a semi autobiographical mode. This is evident from the dialogues of Rudra and other characters. These dialogues echo Rituparno's own views and statements about homosexuality, same sex love and the middleclass views of a queer person ventilated in his interviews and editorial columns. Since Rituparno Ghosh has enacted the role of Rudra apart from directing the film, the character acquires a realistic dimension. The role of Rudra is supplementary to the image of Rituparno. The film continuously

holds a dialogue with the extra-filmic persona of Rituparno as well. Thus the film can be used as an entry point to survey the persona and performance of Rituparno Ghosh. The film will reappear in the third chapter in the context of his performance and acting.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate how sexuality becomes a major thematic concern of Rituparno Ghosh's oeuvre and impacts his stylistic forms as well. His approach to sexuality in films makes him distinct from his recognized master Satyajit Ray, or his cultural mentor Rabindranath Tagore. I have tried to illustrate the multiple dimensions that sexuality (incest, extramarital affairs, feudal decadence and sexuality; homosexuality etc) has in the cinema of Ghosh by analyzing sequences from seven films. A serious concern with sexuality as Ghosh's signature style creates another dimension of the 'Rituparnoesque' that I have been discussing in this dissertation. In the next chapter, I will try to identify Rituparno Ghosh as a star going a step ahead of recognizing him as an auteur.

CHAPTER 3

The Style of Being Rituparno Ghosh: Performativity, Gender, and Stardom

Introduction

Rituparno Ghosh seems to have an ambiguous position in popular media discourses and the Bengali *bhadralok* public sphere. On the one hand, he is celebrated as an award winning film maker and a legitimate torch bearer of the glorious tradition of Bengali ‘art’ cinema exemplified by Satyajit Ray et al; on the other hand, he is censured for his non-normative modishness with transgressive impulses, non hegemonic masculinity and alternative sexual preferences and identity. It appears from the popular media and public discourses that the *bhadralok* middleclass sensibilities that Rituparno Ghosh’s cinema aspires to articulate has a contrapuntal relationship with his unconventional sartorial statements, sexuality, and the process of becoming and presenting himself as queer. If one half of the persona of Rituparno comprises his image as a successful director pursuing ‘good taste’, the other half is formed by a discomfoting image of a non-normative queer person epitomizing what is theoretically called ‘Gender Trouble’ (Butler 1990, 2000).

For Rituparno Ghosh, however, the different roles that he plays in the different walks of life do not conflict with each other. . He loves to call himself a performer. For him performance is all about presenting oneself before the world. It includes direction, acting, fashion, commenting on culture, reacting to a given situation and so on. He has indeed played several other roles that are not essentially tied to the

director's seat behind the camera. He has reviewed films in newspapers; he became the editor of a leading Bengali film magazine *Anandalok* and later began to work as the editor of the Sunday supplement (namely *Robbar*) of a Bengali newspaper *Sambad Pratidin*. He engineered certain discernible changes in the content and look of these magazines. He invaded the drawing rooms of Bengali middleclass households via his television chat shows *Ebong Rituparno* [meaning And Rituparno] and later *Ghosh and Company* in which he would indulge in a semi informal *adda* (chitchat) with the who's who of different fields like film, culture and the entertainment industries with his inimitable intellectual panache, idiosyncrasies and sartorial extravaganza. His claim to fame also happened with other preoccupations like elocution, appearing in TV reality shows as a special guest, participating in heated political discussions on news channels, walking the ramp for a well-known designer and hosting coveted cultural programs etc. Recently he forayed into acting as well. Three films, two made by other directors and one by him have seen him performing respectively the roles of a female impersonator of yesteryears, a transvestite documentary film maker, a gay advertisement professional and a dance choreographer coming to terms with his gender identity. Thus his status as an auteur is time and again reconfigured by his role as a performer and celebrity.

As a celebrity, Ghosh has acquired stardom and enjoys the position of a star in the sense that Christine Geraghty understands the term. Through his multiple role playing and different discourses around them, Ghosh embodies the three aspects of stardom as explained by Geraghty that is as a celebrity, a professional and performer (2000:183-195). The celebrity, professional and performer avatars of Ghosh's persona have a 'performative' aspect to them. Judith Butler has theorized 'performativity'

(1990, 2000) in the context of essentially enacted gender roles; according to her, gender identities are constructed by reiterating social norms attached to these roles, and these roles are not fixed identities but they are time again performed to sustain socially sanctified normativity. Hence there is a sense of becoming in the various socially constructed gender identities. This concept of performativity becomes an important tool for understanding the persona of Rituparno Ghosh as he consciously and nonchalantly performs, but also redefines his gender both on screen and off screen. This chapter will review the texts and contexts that contribute to the style of being Rituparno Ghosh, the star performer, performing the other half of the ‘Rituparnoesque’ which comes from the other roles that he performs going beyond the director’s chair.

This chapter has four major concerns. The first section of this chapter focuses on the image of Rituparno Ghosh in the popular media. It will pay attention to the overall persona of Rituparno constructed through his media presence. The second section will focus on the issue of his androgyny and fashion. The third section will discuss his performance as actor in *Arekti Premer Galpo* to be followed by *Memories in March* and *Chitrangada*. This section will briefly mention the issue of homosexuality in the context of the films. The fourth and final section will connect the different identities, roles and faces of Rituparno Ghosh to identify him as a star in tune with Spanadan Bhattacharya’s line of argument that he is a ‘star director’ or a ‘director with a difference’ within the domain of Bengali ‘Parallel’ cinema (Bhattacharya, 2011: 131-137). I will also demonstrate how the star figure of Rituparno Ghosh qualifies his status as an auteur in this section.

The Emergence of a Different Media Icon

Rituparno Ghosh's media presence has been characterized by three overlapping phases. First, he came to the limelight in press discourses thanks to his ardent loyalty to the tradition of Bengali 'parallel cinema' exemplified particularly by Satyajit Ray. Secondly, when he became the editor of leading popular Bengali film magazine *Anandalok*, readers got a glimpse of the director's creative and thoughtful mind. This period saw him writing about cinema and stardom among other things. He later expanded his horizon of thought and expression through his cultural commentary in the editorial columns of *Robbar* (the Sunday supplement of *Sambad Pratidin*, a leading Bengali daily). Thirdly the moment that made him a household name in the Bengali middleclass universe was the Bengali satellite television boom. In the year 2000, he appeared on *ETV Bangla* as the host of a popular Sunday chat show named *Ebong Rituparno* [And Rituparno]. The program redefined the notion of masculinity on television and its content reconfigured televisual experience in the age of satellite T.V. Ghosh was reincarnated again in this new role after seven years when he hosted *Ghosh and Company* on *Star Jalsha*. This time Ghosh would possess a more commanding voice and a more nonchalantly self confident image thanks to his upward mobility within the Bengali culture industry. This powerful image of Ghosh remains persistent to date in various other television programmes that invite him as a guest. The media constantly casts the spot light on him to underscore his directorial and personal idiosyncrasies including his choice of subjects and actors for his films, his sartorial extravagance and gender reaffirmation.

Rituparno Ghosh has been enjoying media attention since his second film *Unishe April* earned critical fame and success. He has been celebrated as a suitable

heir of the glorious realist-modernist tradition of ‘parallel’ Bengali cinema exemplified especially by Satyajit Ray. For instance a review of Ghosh’s third film *Dahan* praised him saying:

The promise that Rituparno Ghosh created about himself with *Unishe April* has not only been fulfilled by *Dahan* but his position as the probable future of Bengali cinema and as a director of the highest order have also been secured by it.¹ (Palit, 1998: 4)

Such praise and patronage continued as Ghosh went on to make critically acclaimed films one after the other. Most of the press discourses highlighted his aesthetic sensibility and ability that was seen to be in the tradition of ‘good’ cinema. Before and after the release of each of his films the media published interviews with him and highlighted his choice of the subject matter of a film, the art of execution and the choice of actors etc. The major acknowledgment from the media perhaps came with the label that he is ‘the most powerful director of Tollywood’ with the ability to rope in Bollywood superstars like Aishwarya Rai and Amitabh Bachchan to work within the structure of Tollywood (Nag, 2008: 1).

While one section of the media has engaged with his art and work, the other has observed the person, Rituparno, his sartorial style, his idiosyncrasies and speculated about his sexuality. As Tithi Sarkar writes:

Rituparno Ghosh’s life is one unending celebration. National awards have come to be associated with every film of Ghosh’s... [His] sartorial statements raised eyebrows and there has been plenty of speculation about his sexuality. (2011: 82)

Most such news or feature articles talk in some detail about how Ghosh wears ‘ikkat dyed odhnis’ to add to his sartorial finesse (Basu, 2001: 56), comment on his mellifluous voice and his ‘fashion glitterati’ like persona (Shah, 2005). The press also reports and publishes articles on his androgyny, look, danglers, kohl lined eyes

¹ Translation mine

(Sengupta, 2010) and sexuality (S. Sarkar, 2011), especially in the context of his acting and public appearances. He has indeed emerged as a distinct personality. Film blogger Kaustav Bakshi has described him as a ‘sensitive’ person with an unconventional media presence. In his words:

...my enthusiasm for *Unishe April* was triggered off by an interview of Rituparno Ghosh that was aired on HMV-FM. Listening to Ghosh, I discovered I had never heard a man speak so sensitively or even for that matter so informally in a public space. Ghosh’s mild voice, his effeminate accents, punctuated remarkably the thoughts he shared. I found myself meeting a very different man. He was not like the other filmmakers. I had heard Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen before, and was awed by their wisdom. But I never struck a chord with them. Rituparno’s emotionally charged talk (not verging on the sentimental, mind you) almost seduced me into admiring him (2008).

Such alternative sensibilities in Ghosh are also evident from his editorial columns written for *Anandalok* and *Robbar*. They bring out the culturally sensitive mind of a person who always foregrounds the softer coordinates of life through his presence. His editorials are real treats for the Bengali literati. His editorials for *Anandalok* highlighted his cinephilia and penchant for the star studded tinsel town. Occasionally they turned out to be sneak previews of his films at different stages of their making. He was instrumental in changing the very look of the magazine-so much so that the advertisement for the magazine would add a catch line ‘Flip through and see it’s changed’. His editorial column ‘First person’ in *Robbar* bespeaks his association with cinema, society and culture in general. He writes about different people, personalities, cinema, film festivals, places, incidents, and literature; he shares personal anecdotes about his childhood, youth; and critically comments on burning media and sociopolitical issues. In fact his first editorial for *Robbar* that came out in 2006, at a time when West Bengal was experiencing a deep political crisis with the issue of land acquisition in Singur, articulated his voice of dissatisfaction and protest. But his voice of dissent was very suave, soft yet argumentative, wise and very strong.

He mentioned somewhat consciously that ‘tenderness is the easily reckonable trait of the personality of Rituparno Ghosh. Readers probably have a hesitation in seeing such a tender person as the argumentative editor of *Robbar*’² (2006: 4-5). He then went on to saying that his soft, mellifluous voice (literally and figuratively) has nothing to do with his argumentative and critical mind. Thus he emerged as an ‘alternative’ voice in the Bengali cultural spectrum dominated to a great extent by media discourses.

Rituparno Ghosh’s visible entry into the Bengali public sphere happened with his appearance as the host of a television chat show called *Ebong Rituparno* [And Rituparno]. This programme came up at a time when West Bengal had just started to experience the satellite television boom. The first episode of the programme was telecast in April 2000 on the newly born Bengali satellite channel ETV Bangla that aspires to match ‘the distinctiveness of rich Bangla culture with qualitative programming that echoes viewers sensibilities’ (Etv Bangla official Website n.d.). In keeping with the tune of the channel the programme was conceived as a conversational show that would have the fervor of the Bengali *adda*. The show would see Ghosh holding casual conversation with his guests, mainly crème-de-la-crème from different fields like film, and the entertainment and culture industries. The list of guests would include actors like Soumitra Chatterjee, Aparna Sen, Madhabi Mukherjee, Supriya Debi, directors like Mrinal Sen, Goutam Ghosh, Anjan Dutta, musicians like Debojyoti Mishra, Rezwana Chowdhury, novelists like Sunil Gangopadhyay, Suchitra Bhattacharya, poets like Joy Goswami et al. The choice of his guests reflected Ghosh’s knack for locating himself within the haloed circle of Bengali culture full of icons catering to the intellect and emotions of the lettered,

² Translation mine

Bengali middleclass in pursuit of good taste. The setting would further correspond to the choice of guests. The set replicated the well-decorated drawing room of an upper middleclass Bengali family with an uncanny resemblance to some of the interior spaces of his films. The set that was conceived by Ghosh himself consisted of different kinds of show pieces, table tops, photo frames, wall hangings, paintings, sun blinds, a portrait of Tagore's, lamp shades, trees, a center table surrounded by old style wooden chairs, sofas with comforting cushions and above all bookshelves full of a variety of books ranging from classic literature to cinema.

Amidst all these, Rituparno would emerge in his clean shaven, curly haired, designer kurta clad, bespectacled look. To add to the look he used to wear *odhnis* on his right shoulder- a perfect sartorial embodiment of *bhadralok* suaveness. He would indulge in a very informal conversation with the guests-so much that he would often call them by their nicknames and address them in an informal way too. Dipesh Chakraborty in his thought provoking analysis of Bengali *adda* mentions how in the twentieth century the *adda* became a site for exchanging thoughts by the informed and culturally inclined lettered Bengali middleclass. He showed how *adda* broke the mere gossip oriented confines of pre modern public spheres and metamorphosed into an elite practice of exchanging creative and constructive ideas with drawing rooms of middleclass houses being the major space for such discussions (2000, 2008:184-213). Such homebound, vivacious conversations would vanguard and condition the urban, upper middle class *bhadralok* culture that was at its nascent stage at the beginning of the twentieth century (ibid). Interestingly at the dawn of the new millennium this model of *adda* was being replicated televisually through this program, which was very different, and culture specific as compared to other contemporary, popular

interview based programmes on satellite TV like *Rendezvous with Simi Garewal* or *Coffee with Karan* in terms of ambience, presentation and format. Thus, on the one hand, the programme highlighted the aesthetic sensibilities of a true Bengali gentleman—well read and articulate enough to exchange views with equally talented and celebrated personalities belonging to different fields of culture, but on the other hand, it by default focused on the person's style, mellifluous voice and mannerisms that conformed to the press descriptions about him. Rituparno himself was very hesitant about doing the programme in the very first place. He was afraid that there would be an unnecessary hue and cry among the viewers about his 'effeminacy' and 'fashion'.³ But according to him the programme became successful because of its rich content.

In *Ebong Rituparno's* sequel *Ghosh and Company*, aired on Star Jalsha, Rituparno reappeared as a host almost after eight years. This time several changes had taken place. The title montage of the programme showed that Ghosh was preparing himself for the show. He would then go to receive the guest at the door. During the conversation the guest would be served tea by a domestic help. This time he appeared in his much talked about androgynous look with bald head, eyes done up with kohl, ear rings, jewellery, long dresses with frills, designer cloaks, Patiala pajamas, turban, colourful dupattas etc. He started appearing (and appears) in other T.V shows and cultural programmes flaunting this look. He sees this reappearance as the return of a confident Rituparno, sure about his image in the media. Ghosh thus challenges the normative notion of the masculine stereotype on television. As compared to actors in T.V serials, or male news readers his self defined sartorial style and softness have an

³ Author's interview with the director, Kolkata, May the 18th, 2011

element of uniqueness. His screen appearance destabilizes the television viewer's preconceived notion of masculine prototypes. This discomforting figure of Ghosh has led to the production of several discourses - both friendly and adverse - especially in the media and virtual public sphere which I will discuss later in a different context.

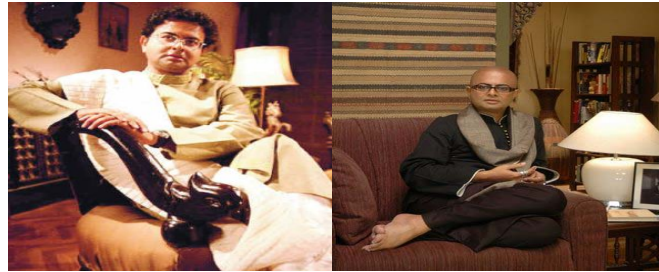


Figure 15 Rituparno Ghosh in *Ebong Rituparno* (2000) and *Ghosh and Company* (2008)

When the Wardrobe Speaks Volumes

The discomforting figure of Rituparno Ghosh that came in the media with *Ghosh and Company* gave rise to speculations that he was gradually becoming a woman. Such speculations became even stronger when he ventured into acting. This point will be addressed later in details. In the present section I will discuss how Rituparno Ghosh's sartorial statements are linked with his performed androgyny. Rituparno Ghosh does not identify himself essentially as a woman, contrary to the commonsensical views about him. He rather sees himself as an androgynous man. He considers androgyny as a privilege for any artist. In this case too he draws inspiration from his cultural mentor, Rabindranath Tagore. He mentions that Tagore's androgyny was thematically played out in his novel *Ghare Baire* in which he sketched the character of Nikhilesh in the shape of a *birahini* who awaits her lover. Nikhilesh waits for his wife to come back from the path of infidelity. This, according to Ghosh has a

subversive charge as Tagore tried to create the traits of a feminine sensibility in a male character (Sarkar, 2011: 83). He points out that even certain songs of Tagore have an ambiguous androgynous voice underneath. Since ‘pronouns and verbs in the Bengali language are not gender sensitive...the mysterious and mystical ambiguity of androgyny is a treasure...’ comments Ghosh (Sarkar, 2011: 83). His own practiced androgyny, he believes, comes via this kind of influence. Hence it can be said that he has inherited the notion of androgyny from the Bengali literary and cultural traditions. Even otherwise, androgyny is not very unfamiliar in Bengali culture as at least two of the adored Bengali icons Sri Chaitanya and Sri Ramakrishna are considered androgynous.

Thus, in the same way as his cinema is considered a continuation of a tradition, Ghosh’s androgyny too can be seen in the light of tradition. Rituparno Ghosh’s attire has never been strictly masculine. His sartorial style has evolved over the years. His fashion has, however, become conspicuous in recent years with a gradual queer shift in his wardrobe. He was described as a ‘creative person with a little unbridled look’ (Sen 1995) after he had won the National Award for his film *Unishe April*. Press photographs would often carry images of him wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Now the images show him flaunting his grand garments highlighted by jewelry, kohl and make up. Ghosh’s own explanation is that he does not want to abide by normative codes of dressing. Therefore what he wears is unisex in the sense that his fashion does not come from nowhere. It has precedence. He believes:

The concept of unisex has been monopolized by women. Women can wear men’s clothes. The problem arises when men wear women’s clothes. Whatever I wear has always been worn by men. Wearing things like earrings and necklaces has always been a part of our sartorial history and tradition. These were tagged as feminine frills during colonial rule (Sengupta 2010).

He takes the accessories he wears as a sign and celebration of his gender fluidity or in-between-ness. He chooses to identify himself as belonging to the 'Third Sex' (ibid). He says in one of his editorial columns in *Robbar*, he hardly needs an excuse for makeup and dressing up, 'aamaar ichchhe tukui jothestho' [my wish is enough] (2010:8). Interestingly, noted socialite designer Sharbari Dutta, who has been designing clothes for men for quite some time now and has designed for people like Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Kapil Dev, and M.F Hussain, also has a similar kind of approach towards changing mind sets when it comes to dressing men. According to her, Indian men were very inhibited when it came to dressing up. Due to the British influence and our colonial hangover, , we always considered grey, pale blue or navy blue as masculine colours that make for smart outfits (Roychowdhury, 2011: 4). She says,

I wanted to prove that there's no clash between masculinity and bright colours. Our Indian tradition in menswear is of bright colours and *nakshas*. So why have we ignored it completely? A three-piece suit is not the only fashion statement for an Indian man. He can also make a statement in traditional Indian clothes (Roychowdhury 2011).

Dutta is now busy popularizing even sari as unisex attire. So basically in a way both Ghosh and Dutta are trying to say that fashion does not need to restrict itself to the socially sanctioned and culturally codified gender binaries. During my fieldwork I came across one article which was published on the corresponding page to the one that carried a review of Ghosh's *Dahan*. The article was about how designer cotton jackets, dhotis etc were gradually becoming part of genderless and unisex fashion at that time (Dey ,1998). This was almost as if the magazine layout predicted the parallel journey of fashion experiments that Ghosh would be involved with besides catering to the intellect and emotions of the educated Bengali middleclass.



Figure 16 Rituparno Ghosh's androgynous look

Fashion forms a major part of gender discourses as it has a 'queer' quality to itself and an ability to break conventions, set patterns. For instance Richard Dyer points out: 'Feminization of male attire [does] not mean wearing women's clothes but a readiness to wear bright or pastel colours, to put extra flounce or decoration to an outfit, to do things, in short, that only women were supposed to do' (2002:63). Rituparno himself says that he will never wear something that is culturally very feminine like a sari unless he needs to wear it for the requirement of a particular character that he is portraying (RoyChowdhury , 2011). This brings us to the question of defining what masculine fashion is after all. Recent scholarship on masculinity studies emphasizes rethinking the masculine and feminine as constructed categories. R. W Connell, for instance, argues that masculinity and femininity are fluid, culturally constructed categories. Connell writes:

To define masculinity as what men empirically are, is to rule out the usage in which we call some women 'masculine', some men 'feminine', or some actions or attitudes 'masculine' and 'feminine' regardless of who displays them...the terms masculine and feminine point beyond categorical sex difference to the way men differ among themselves. (1995, 2005 : 69)

This argument can be extended to fashion. Fashion like sex and gender is a cultural construction. Culturally, certain dresses are strictly associated with women and certain dresses with men. When someone breaks that rule it immediately becomes problematic. Theoretically such a deviation should not necessarily put the person

concerned into the category of the other gender as the new theories propagate that ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ are broader categories, so much that they incorporate both norms and deviation. By this logic, deviant sartorial practices cannot always be called a case of gender bending. To apply this argument in the case of Rituparno Ghosh, his fashion statements can be seen as having the power of expanding the purview of the male wardrobe. His clothes do not necessarily make him a cross dresser.⁴ Even if Ghosh’s attire is discerned as located on the borderline of cross-dressing or transvestism they cause a ‘category crisis’ (Garber 1992:16). Transvestism generally problematizes, exposes and challenges the very notion of ‘original’ and stable identities. It also ‘...calls[s] attention to cultural, social or aesthetic dissonances’ (Garber, 1992: 16). In the same manner, Ghosh’s wardrobe can be seen to demonstrate a failure of ‘definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits border crossing, from one (apparently distinct) category to the other’(Ibid). Fashion bloggers have considered Ghosh as one of India’s uniquely fashionable ‘men’. Fashion connoisseur Parmesh Shahni writes:

There is a new wave of androgynous dressing coming out of urban India, and I like it very much. In each case, it is a very unique form of individual expression... I’ve silently admired the award-winning film director Rituparno Ghosh’s several stunning public appearances in the past year. In February, at the Berlin premiere of the film *Aareki Premier Golpo* (Just Another Love Story), in which he makes his acting debut, Rituparno made heads turn with his turban, choker, salwar-kameez, lipstick and eyeliner. Was he dressing in character (he plays two roles in the film, one of a gay director and another of a jatra performer) – or was he just reinventing himself in the public eye? Why does it matter? He was (is!) fabulous, full stop (2010).

⁴ For instance, I have in my mind the image of Ajman Khan (who is generally remembered as one of the stereotypical villain characters of Bombay cinema) as the dandy ruler of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah in Ray’s *Satranj ki Khiladi*, flaunting chowbandhis, chowrah pajamas, designer cloaks, jewellery, danglers and kohl-lined eyes or for that matter the ethnic costume of a male Kathak danseuse like Pandit Birju Maharaj. Such sartorial practices are familiar as androgynous, and are not necessarily identified as exclusively female attire. Of course one could accuse me of conflating attires related to performance and everyday life. But if the person concerned is Rituparno Ghosh, who considers himself to be a constant performer then such accusations probably do not hold water.

Thus the androgyny of Ghosh underlines queer visibility in media and the public sphere. As Ruth Holliday argues, 'having been invisible (or pathologized) for so long in writing, the media, law and culture more generally' now queer identities have been 'increasingly visible through a number of mechanisms' (2001:215). She believes:

The politics of visibility as well as the many everyday cues and codes of dress, gesture or conduct are often used to communicate identity to others of the same or different groups. For example, the development of queer styles such as butch and camp (to name but two) have become signifiers of sexuality and are mapped onto the surface of bodies, not least through clothes. (ibid)

Rituparno Ghosh's androgyny and fashion thus contribute to the general queer visibility in the media. It is interesting to see how he carries forward this image from the small screen to celluloid and how they differ or resemble. He acted in Kaushik Ganguly's *Arekti Premer Galpo* to be followed by Sanjoy Nag's *Memories in March* and his own *Chitrangada*. Homosexuality is the common thread in the three films. Each film shows different nuances of homosexual love and its complexities. The subjects of gender and identity also play an important role in these films. In the following section I will focus on Rituparno Ghosh's performance in *Arekti Premer Galpo*, *Memories in March* and *Chitrangada*.

Examining the Performance of Rituparno Ghosh as Actor

Acting for Rituparno Ghosh is an extension of his work as director. He generally demonstrates the nuances of a character by enacting it for his actor. He expresses his indebtedness to his actors who taught him acting through their strengths, weaknesses and above all through their dependence on the director (Sarkar 2011). He considers acting to be 'activism through art' (Ghosh 2011).

He forayed into acting after having directed seventeen films. He debuted as an actor in Kaushik Ganguly's *Arekti Premer Galpo*, which is a reworking of Ganguly's telefilm *Ushnotar Jannya*. The film *Arekti Premer Galpo* showcases the parallel travails of a transvestite film maker Abhiroop, his love affair with his cinematographer boyfriend Basu and a veteran female impersonator of yesteryears Chapal Bhaduri.⁵

The release of the film saw an 'unprecedented hoopla' as Kaustav Bakshi notes correctly (2011). The CEO of Nandan, Nilanjan Chatterjee refused to exhibit the film due to its subject matter: homosexuality which was new to Bengali cinema at that time. This debate got even more intensified as Rituparno Ghosh and Nilanjan Chatterjee had a verbal war on a news channel. Secondly, fueling the persistent speculation about the ambiguity - of Ghosh's sexuality, a series of articles (including Ghosh's own) flooded the media as to how he prepared for performance by undergoing a thorough cosmetic regime (2011). The third pressing question was whether Abhiroop's character allowed a sneak preview into Ghosh's personal life. Rituparno Ghosh held that 'I don't need any masquerade to portray my own life'. He chose to perform the roles as he was confident enough about his performance skills and inhibition free attitude towards acting (RoyChowdhury, 2011). Kaushik Ganguly, the director felt that he was his spontaneous choice as his personality and gestures would expressively embody the character extremely well (Sengupta 2010). Apart from acting in the film he was the creative director of the film, that is, he was responsible for designing the aesthetic quotient of the film.

⁵ Female impersonation that is men performing women's role in folk theatres and popular theatres like Jatra has a long history in Bengal. In recent past it was a common practice till the mid seventies. Several actors like Chapal Rani, Satadal Rani, and Putul Rani et al earned fame via their critically acclaimed performances as impersonators.

The film maker Abhiroop and his boyfriend Basu come to Calcutta to shoot a documentary on the colorful , onstage and off stage life of Chapal Bhaduri , the well-known female impersonator of Bengali popular theatre. Apart from portraying Abhiroop and Chapal’s marginalized and ostracized positions in society due to their queerness, the film also brings out the issue of homosexuality and non-static sexualities. What is interesting is that the director uses the same set of actors to portray the worlds of Abhiroop and Chapal.



Figure 17 Rituparno Ghosh in *Arekti Premer Galpo*

The two characters are distinguishably different from each other. While Chapal Bhaduri belongs to the group of not so coveted performing artists of the lower middle class, subject to absolute penury, Abhiroop comes from a neo-urban elite upper rung of society. Chapal is unlettered and bereft of urban sophistication mostly associated with the urban, English-speaking population. Having enacted female roles for years, Chapal identifies himself as a woman. He is not aware of his homosexuality and considers his relationship with his long-term male companion as a ‘normative’ man-woman one. Again there is an aspect of ‘becoming’ and performativity in his feminine self as he dresses up to be a woman on stage. His identity is therefore doubly performative. Judith Butler proposes that gender does not need a body to manifest itself as gender is a construct (Butler 1990, 2000,xiv). By that logic Chapal Bhaduri’s

gender is also constructed, doubly so. On the one hand he is performing his gender on stage, and while physically being a man, he feels like a woman. Thus the character of Chapal creates a problem of definition. How does one define him then-as a gay person, performative transvestite or a queer man who identifies himself with a woman.

Abhiroop is different from Chapal. He is informed, sure of his sexuality, that is, he loves to be androgynous. This is almost his political statement. He refuses to be called 'madam' despite his flamboyant, androgynous attire, kohl lined eyes, ear rings. He does not identify with a woman, yet refuses to dress up 'like a man.' His androgyny becomes even poignant when Abhiroop shaves his head. Chapal, on the other hand loves his long hair and feminine gait. Again Abhiroop has an authoritative power that comes from his personality and self confidence. Chapal's power comes from his performance. Otherwise he is a fatalistic person, docile to his companion. He forces androgyny on himself under given circumstances. The film, through its camera work foregrounds the bodily gestures and attire of Roop and Chapal to foreground their sartorial politics and sexuality.

Abhiroop's character is important here because he plays the role of a director that is closer to Rituparno Ghosh by profession. His sartorial statement and performative androgyny is also somewhat closer to that of Ghosh. The way the film raises its voice against the marginalization of homosexuality and androgyny can be read as Rituparno Ghosh's own voice. Despite Ghosh's persistent claims that the film has nothing to do with his personal life, by default it ends up carrying forward the offscreen personality of Ghosh. The character supplements the real persona of Rituparno Ghosh. The protagonist Abhiroop makes Rituparno become a proponent of

queer identity and culture. In a sequence Abhiroop encounters a journalist who asks him whether he is making a film on the sexuality of Chapal Bhaduri. He counters him by telling him that he is not very keen on addressing sexuality because he is not making an ad-film on 'viagra' and there is nothing very obvious about Chapal's sexuality as he and his performance both are as natural and normal as that of Amitabh Bachhan. This puts forward his own view that sexual minorities in the country should not imbibe this politics of marginalization.⁶ Rituparno Ghosh's performance thus assumes a political proportion in the film. The film, however, tends to conflate androgyny with homosexuality, and that threatens to stereotype the queer identity. I shall come to this point in detail in my conclusion.

Rituparno Ghosh reappeared as a gay character in Sanjoy Nag's *Memories in March* that released soon after *Arekti Premer Galpo*. The film has been scripted by Ghosh. In this film he plays the role of Arnab, an advertisement professional. The narrative of the film is about a mother's coming to terms with her son's sexuality after his death. Arti Mishra comes to Calcutta after learning that her son died in an accident. She is constantly supported by her son Siddharth's colleagues Arnab and Sahana. Sahana later reveals that Arnab is Siddharth's boyfriend. She takes time to come to terms with the fact that her son was gay and after initial repulsion towards Arnab is able to accept him as a friend if not anything else. She is able to connect with her son who is no more through Arnab. Arnab, on the other hand, takes Arti into confidence and shares his memories of Arnab with her.

⁶ Author's telephonic conversation with Kaustav Bakshi regarding his interview of the director

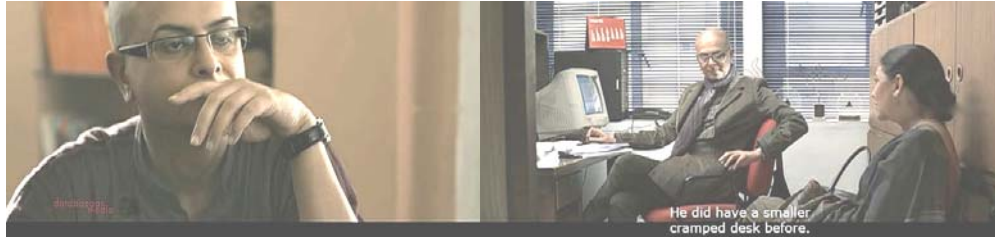


Figure 18 Rituparno Ghosh and Deepti Naval in *Memories in March*

Like in *Arekti Premer Galpo* Rituparno Ghosh as Arnab occupies the centre of attention in this film. The camera captures him mostly in close up and mid close up observing his gestures and persona. In terms of attire, the character Arnab is quite close to the general androgynous look of Rituparno. Unlike his characters in *Arekti Premer Galpo* he did not have to dress up differently in the film being Arnab. He portrays the vulnerability and marginalization of a queer man through his performance. The camera while observing him closely in close-up and mid close up shots plays the role of an anthropologist keen on documenting a representative voice of the queer community. It seems that the film has a pedagogic tone as it aims at familiarising the audience with queer love and identity. The film takes the death of Siddharth as a pretext to examine his mother's priority between Siddharth's tragic death and his hitherto unspoken gay identity. Rituparno's character Arnab is important here because through his acting Rituparno Ghosh produces the absent character of Siddharth. He also takes the chair of a queer counsellor and propagator of the queer cause. In one sequence composed in mid-closeup and shot in shot-counter-shot mode he points out to Arti that their being gay is no psychological problem. Instead he surmonizes her to undergo counselling. His role in this sequence can be taken thematically as an extension of the sequence with the journalist in the preceding film. Rituparno Ghosh is however, aware that he is becoming the face of 'queer cinema of Bengal,' preaching about different nuances of homosexual identity and

relationships by default. He thinks this is not desirable as this repetition might result in a pedagogic monotony (Ghosh, 2011). He also feels that repetition of almost similar themes in *Arekti Premer Galpo* and *Memories in March* ran the risk of harping on the same string within a short time span. But he was happy at the impact that these films were able to create in the public psyche. He therefore consider his roles as Arnab in *Memories in March* and as Abhiroop in *Arekti Premer Galpo* important as they embody a statement about queer life through their actions.

Chitrangada is about gender, identity and performance. The film is about a clash of wishes-society's wish to see a person in his normative gender and a person's wish to choose his gender. Tagore's dance drama *Chitrangada* here works as a metaphor. Rabindranath Tagore reconfigured the notions of gender and identity in this path breaking dance drama. Manipur's king raised his daughter Chitrangada like a boy as he wanted her to become his suitable heir. Chitrangada meets Arjuna and gets besotted with him. She desires to become a woman and turns to the god of love, Madana, whose boons promise to make her a woman for a year. Arjuna enamored by her beauty falls in love with her. Meanwhile Chitrangada becomes tired of her newfound 'femininity' and Arjuna hearing about the Amazon warrior that the princess was desires to see her in that form. Finally Chitrangada reckons her true identity and gender. She returns the boons to Madana before time. Arjun accepts her the way she is.

Ghosh adapts the story to a contemporary context. The film showcases a male dancer, Rudra's journey towards self identification and his crowning wish to choose his gender. Rudra's father wanted him to be like any other 'normal' man recognized by society. He does not like him to dance as for him dancing is not a very masculine

form of self-expression. Rudra, however, refuses to conform to the norm and wants to be a woman to be able to adopt a child with his boyfriend. He further thinks that his gendered identity and body do not limit the art form, dance, through which he expresses his self. Dance surpasses his body which goes through a process of transformation. His mother feels that he should have been accepted the way he is. He is effeminate by nature. So his mother by that reasoning thinks that he should have been considered 'natural' according to his nature and not by what is believed to be natural and normative by society. He does not feel that he is a woman trapped in a man's body and that therefore he would need to change his phenotype. Rudra's decision to undergo a gender reassignment surgery is a mere necessity directed towards a goal – to enable him to adopt a child. However, in the process of becoming a woman surgically, he comes to terms with his gender and identity. He, quite like Chitrangada, wishes to be what he was before that is an effeminate, vivacious androgynous man with tonnes of creative energy. He also realizes that the body, as a signifier of gender, is subject to medical change and mortality. Therefore gender identity articulated through corporeality is essentially fluid.



Figure 19 Rituparno Ghosh in *Chitrangada*

Body and performance are at the center of the film. The film time and again captures Rudra's body on the verge of a transformation especially in close up shots. The film goes to and fro between the corporeality associated with his art and the

corporeality of his gender identity. The film opens with a close up of Rudra sleeping on a bed at a hospital. The shot centering this body gives one a sense of seeing a new born. This shot recurs several times perhaps to make the body under transformation bearable to the audience. This is a new subject in Bengali cinema. Therefore, probably the director wishes to give the subject, Rudra and his body on the verge of transformation, an intimate proximity to the audience. There are several shots which produce Rudra's bodily presence in an iconic way. He is composed at the center of the frame. He is often depicted as an overwhelming corporeal entity by focusing on his augmented breasts and transformative bodily contours. The dialogues also revolve around the body which is under change. For instance, Rudra reveals his bodily transformation to his boyfriend. The event is equally discomfoting to his boy friend within the frame and to the audience outside the frame. Rudra's mother talks about her rights over his renewed body with synthetically procreated limbs as the biological body was born out of her. Rudra speaks of the contingency of the 'natural' and culturally gender specific body as that is subject to surgical change. Again the transformed body puts into question the legal aspect of defining a body in terms of its assigned gender. He refuses to fit into the legal definition of his reassigned body. Most of these dialogues about the ontological identity of the body are captured either in mid close-up or close-up shots. By almost pathologically foregrounding the transformative body, the film perhaps points to the culturally constructed nature of the gendered body and its vulnerabilities. Thus the body of Rudra enters into the trap of heteronormativity as he being an androgynous, gay man chooses to be a woman to fit into the 'normal' heterosexual model of understanding gender.

Judith Butler poses the question as to whether it is possible to link the materiality of the body with that of the performativity of gender in her *Bodies that Matter: The Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993). Butler attempts to reformulate the idea of the materiality of bodies and investigates how the power of heterosexual hegemony conditions the issues related to corporeal sex and gender. She demonstrates that sex is constructed by the operative hegemony of heterosexuality since the birth of a gendered body. Furthermore this delimits the viability of a possible counter thought regarding a viable sex. Thus a 'normative' regulation produced by heterosexual hegemony diminishes the subversive potential of sex and gender by compelling them to undergo a set of ritualistic practices so that they can be easily appropriated. When non normative identifications challenge the heterosexual intention of producing citational rules to sustain its hegemony, certain beings and bodies are produced which more often than not remain the site of the operation and reconfirmation of hegemonic heterosexuality. Rudra's decision to undergo gender reassignment surgery creates such a situation when he almost succumbs to the heterosexual imperative of confirming its hegemony. Finally, his decision to be as he is can be read as a subversive act as that dismisses the heterosexual model of essential gender binaries (Butler 1993:21-50).

Rudra's corporeality is also expressed through his performance. His dance is composed mostly in long shots, top angle shots and mid close-up shots. His performance in the film is also about self-expression in an autobiographical mode. Anne Cooper Albright sees contemporary dance as writing autobiography in the language of performance. She demonstrates how the body is instrumental in defining the experience of identity. She observes that dance is a means of expressing the self 'I' by the gesticulation of bodily experience (1997: 122). Rudra's bodily

transformation and the resultant crises are often expressed through his dance. This becomes the embodiment of his autobiography, of experiencing his identity and gender as he feels them while he dances from within crossing the limits of his gender and identity. Rudra reconfigures his performative body in relation to objects and spaces and thereby metaphorically he reconstructs his identity and gender. Thus it becomes important to see these performances in the context of Ghosh's androgyny and sexual politics in real life. Reading these images together gives birth to a star text that brings together the cinematic and the extra-cinematic. This star-text also qualifies his authorship.

The Reconfigured Stardom of Rituparno Ghosh

Rituparno Ghosh's performances in the three films open up possibilities to read his authorship in two different ways. Firstly, apart from his performances as characters, he played three crucial roles in the making of these films as I have discussed. He was the creative director of *Arekti Premer Galpo*, scriptwriter of *Memories in March* and the writer and director of *Chitrangada*. These three roles affirm his auteur style in terms of the look, mise-en-scene and the cinematography of these films. For instance the mise-en-scene in *Memories in March* invariably invokes the memory of some of Ghosh's own films. Thematically, the death of a central character acting as a pretext to reconfigure the characters' relationship to the world has resemblances with Ghosh's films like *Dosor*, *Sab Charitra Kalponik* and *Abohoman*. The voice over of the absent Siddharth in the form of his emails also remind us of the recurrent 'letter motif' in his films which I have discussed in chapter one. That way the film becomes a site to identify his apparently invisible auteuristic

imprints. In a similar way, the film within film motif and the presence of a director character in *Arekti Premer Galpo* invokes the memory of one of Ghosh's favorite themes film-with-in film. The back and forth movement of the narrative reminds one of his film *Abohoman*. Secondly, his performance in the three films as actor makes me turn to the tricky question often asked within the discipline of Cinema Studies as to whether the actor can be called an auteur. Richard Dyer proposes that a film text consists of multiple authorial voices one of them being the actor (1979, 98: 5). Quoting Patrick McGilligan, he points out that powerful actors often influence a film text more than the director or the writer. The actor's presence has been considered an important semiotic signifier. A powerful actor's iconic presence can embody certain meanings that affect the film text. When the actor becomes powerful enough to influence a film text he can be seen as an auteur. He further seeks to articulate that when a star actor is considered as auteur, the network of the industry which produces the said star becomes important. Rituparno Ghosh may not be an acting star in the conventional sense of the term, but his status as a powerful director in Tollywood makes him a star. When the actor Rituparno performs in a film he, brings along the star image of the director, Rituparno. He does influence the film texts of other directors in that right. This way he becomes a star-auteur which is qualified by the other dimension of authorship that is the director-auteur.

Ghosh's stardom however does not come only from his powerful image as director, and he also enjoys the position of a star in the sense in which Christine Geraghty understands the term. According to her, film stardom needs to be rethought vis-à-vis other categories of stardom foregrounded by the media. She seeks to see the star as a celebrity, as a professional and as a performer. She observes that while the

stardom of a celebrity stems out of the gossip and press discourses regarding the public appearance, social life, style and the self sustaining prominence of that person, the stardom of a professional comes through his work and presence especially on media like television in which his or her fame is highlighted by the acts he/she performs. Again the performer becomes a star not through his private life so much but through his/her performance in films and other media. Here the performance skills are drawn attention to, demonstrated vividly and highlighted (Geraghty 2000). Through his performances of many roles in both reel and real life, Ghosh embodies the three aspects of stardom as explained by Geraghty.

The stardom of Rituparno Ghosh constantly shifts between his performance as actor and also as director. This also seems very complex if seen through a theoretical prism. It is multilayered in nature. In the words of Spandan Bhattacharya:

The appeal of Ghosh's stardom does not only lie in the simplistic acceptance of the 'difference' (that comes from his alternative media presence, androgyny, performance and the reception of these), but in the plurality of its meaning making (2011: 137).

Thus his stardom as celebrity, professional and performer constitutes the overall style of being Rituparno or the other half of the 'Rituparnoesque' which also comprises his auteurism. And this multicoloured, multilayered and multifaceted stardom impacts the reception of him in the industry and in the public psyche. The popularity that Ghosh enjoys comes from his own auteur-texts and his star-texts. The dialogue between the auteur-text and the star-text makes him a star-director.

Conclusion

In this Chapter, I have tried to demonstrate how Rituparno Ghosh, apart from being a director emerges as an alternative media icon, an androgynous personality with a sartorial extravagance, and as a performer on screen by portraying characters that are nuanced by his off-screen presence. I have also tried to see him as a star in the reconfigured sense of the term, that is as celebrity, professional and performer and how he can be seen as a star-director –an identity that comes out of a dialogue between the auteur-text and the star-text. I have tried to describe how Ghosh’s style of being a director is supplemented by his style of being an icon with all his idiosyncrasies. In the final and concluding section of my dissertation, I will try to engage with the question: how the ‘Rituparnoesque’ can be defined and approached from different other possible perspectives. I will also discuss the two kinds of stereotypes that the director Rituparno and performer Rituparno create. First, the queer stereotype that the image of Rituparno Ghosh as an iconic figure both in films and real life has created in the public imagination, and secondly the stereotype that his films have created through their stylistics, so much so that the films of certain other directors are also being clubbed under the category of ‘Rituparno films’ in certain academic discourses.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have basically three major concerns revolving around the figure of Rituparno Ghosh as an auteur and a star. Firstly I have tried to consider Rituparno Ghosh as an auteur in recent Bengali cinema by analyzing his signature style in films. Secondly I have sought to look at his unique approach towards sexuality in films that makes him distinct from his predecessors. My third concern has been to see how he becomes a star both because of his performance of his directorial identity and also his performances on screen as an actor which are not always connected to his identity as a director. While navigating through these issues I have tried to embark upon a moot point- How the stardom of Rituparno Ghosh qualifies his status as an auteur.

I have engaged with the question of how Rituparno Ghosh emerged as a major auteur in the mid 1990s and has continued to be in media attention for his abilities to carry forward a cultural tradition of 'good' cinema pioneered by Satyajit Ray among others. I have mentioned how Ghosh imbibes the 'cultural capital' of *bhadralok* cinema and culture in his work remaining true to the realist narration tradition of 'art cinema'. The mise-en-scene in his films often refers to the films of Satyajit Ray. He believes that he does not have to do construct his mise-en-scene in the Ray mould consciously; rather Ray's influence is so strong in his cinematic imagination that by default his frames refer to Ray. He developed his cinematic style and language by exemplifying the training of cinema that he got from the canonical works of Ray.

Ghosh's cinema portrays the middleclass Bengali world thanks to his affinity with this class. His close attention to middleclass interior spaces vibrant with familiar everydayness can be identified as one of his signature traits in his films. He etches out narratives of relationship by foregrounding their emotional quotient. This can also be identified as his central cinematic characteristic. Press and academic discourses claim that a unique style of Ghosh's is his focus on women. According to such discourses he portrays the inner and outer worlds of his female protagonists with great detailing. But that does not necessarily make him a women's filmmaker as that amounts to calling him a feminist director. Feminist film as a category itself is a contested terrain. Therefore whether or not he should be called a feminist director is a debatable issue. His later films like *Rain Coat*, *The Last Lear* explore the crises of masculinity in a certain way. This punctures the 'woman's director' label to some extent. He uses the recurrent letter motif to bring out the interiority of the characters. The letter in voice over form comments over other images which form part of the narrative. Another major feature in the cinema of Rituparno Ghosh is the use of the Tagore song to contextualize his narratives especially when he adapts and reinterprets Tagore's novels. For instance, the final credit title sequence in *Chokher Bali* uses two songs which bespeak the context of the narrative as shown in the film. *Noukadubi* too uses Tagore songs to carry forward the film narrative. Hence, one can see that Rituparno Ghosh has been able to develop his own cinematic idiom by carrying forward the legacy of Ray and Tagore as his cultural tutors. He has carved a niche for himself in the Bengali *bhadralok* cultural milieu by dint of his allegiance to a certain tradition. But this position is precarious as he seems to be perched at the edge of the so called *bhadralok* moralities when it comes to dealing with the issue of sexuality in his films.

Rituparno Ghosh's distinct thematic and stylistic concern that makes him different from his predecessors lies in his approach towards sexuality in cinema. Sexuality in his films appears thematically and cinematically. In a series of films he explicates manifold sexualities in the form of incest, extra-marital affairs charged with the destructive power of sexuality, decadent sexual practices of the feudal world channelized through ritualistic religion, and homosexuality and gender ambiguities. In this case often the camera work and the mise-en-scene become important conveyers of his thematic concerns. By foregrounding sexuality he opens up possibilities for alternative couple formation as opposed to Indian cinema's general obsession with sustaining the sanctity of the married couple as an endogamous unit. He also seeks to bring out the middle class's persistent disavowal of subterranean complexities in issues relating to sexuality. Unlike his cultural masters, Tagore and Ray, his depiction of sexuality is not minimalistic. He shows the powerful nature of sexuality somewhat blatantly. This comes through his narrative plots as well as through the mise-en-scene. This use of sexuality as idiom joins hands with his ambiguous androgyny to deepen middleclass anxiety.

Rituparno Ghosh shares a very contrapuntal relationship with his implied, middleclass audience; on one hand he is hailed as a successful flag-bearer of the tradition of 'good' cinema, relentlessly aspiring to match up to suave *bhadralok* taste; on the other hand he is censured for his performative sartoriality, androgyny and sexuality. This contrapuntal relationship comes out of several media discourses devoted to his art and personal idiosyncrasies. Ghosh, through his sartorial statement, mellifluous voice and 'effeminacy' has become an alternative television icon at a time when Bengal is experiencing a satellite T.V channel boom. His editorial columns in

two magazines, distinctively different in nature also bring out his distinguished, soft personality. The alternative personality and his performative androgyny is not only limited to his role as T.V chat-show host or guest in other programmes; but it also goes beyond the small screen onto celluloid as he has forayed into acting. He has played three queer characters in three recent films as I have mentioned before. These characters embody his personal statement on homosexuality and androgyny. Also these characters serve as supplements to his off-screen personality. Of these three films he has directed one and the other two have seen him as creative director and scriptwriter respectively. These roles can be seen as part of his position as an auteur. This auteur status is complex as actors in recent scholarships on authorsip are considered auteurs. Hence Ghosh's auteurism comes from his performances as well. He has established himself as a star by directing award-winning films with famous star figures in Tollywood and Bollywood. This stardom is further qualified by his performances. These performances make him a star in the reconfigured sense of the term that is, a star has three aspects: celebrity status that comes from media discourses and grapevine stories about a star, professional status that comes from the work that a star does and performer status that comes from acting and other off-screen performances. Ghosh seems to embody these aspects of new stardom perfectly. When the star Rituparno Ghosh meets the auteur Rituparno, he becomes a star director.

I have tried to define the 'Rituparnoesque' in three dominant ways: by evaluating his auteur signature style in his films which are located within a certain haloed tradition; by his fore grounding of sexuality in his films as his unique means to delineate his individual talent and departure from the given tradition; and his style of being a performer, a sartorially androgynous celebrity and a star-auteur. The

'Rituparnoesque' therefore refers to the overall style of Rituparno Ghosh as auteur and star. But there are other areas which could be looked at as possible sites of reading the 'Rituparnoesque.' For instance, the Rituparno Ghosh directed telefilms; he has directed and scripted successful T.V serials like *Bahanno Episode* and *Gaaner Opare*. It can be interesting to look at how he adapts himself to the television medium. This is important because he emerged with his cinema when television was gradually replacing the overwhelming presence of cinema in the cultural sphere. Hence a comparative study of his cinema and television serials and telefilms can answer questions about how he has been striking a balance between these two media, and whether he has appropriated televisual aesthetics in his cinema or his cinematic intervention has been able to change the look of his telefilms and serials. Secondly, his documentaries may be taken as another area of finding Ghosh's futuristic thumbprints. How he expresses his creative faculties through this form of cinema can possibly qualify his status as auteur from a different perspective. Thirdly, in continuation of what I have said about Ghosh's use of the Tagore song as a major tool to take forward his narratives, how music in general works in his film can also be studied. Music and background score often become a thematic expansion of the narrative in many of his films. For instance, the marriage song in *Bariwali* comments on the central protagonist's desire and futile existence. In *Shubho Mahurat* the piercing tune of Shehnai and the weather forecast on T.V carries forward the central theme of mysterious murders and the sadness associated with the murderer, the victims and the sleuth. The use of a Tagore song describing the beauty of autumn in *Utsab* turns into a paradoxical comment on the unpleasant unfolding of events within the narrative. His later films *Khela*, *Abohoman* have several songs written by him; he composed songs on the mythical love story of Krishna-Radha in Brajbhasha for

Raincoat and *Memories in March*. It can be interesting to see how the music and songs in his films can be used as methods of reading his films, by approaching the auteur through aural signatures. In this connection, how he uses dubbing as a means to enliven his protagonists or how he voices certain characters in his films by dubbing for them can be used as another entry point to do aural auteur studies.

A significant area of discerning the 'Rituparnoesque' is his choice of actors. He chose to use stars of the mainstream cinema as lead actors in his films starting from *Unishe April*. His cinema has given certain popular, mainstream actors new identities by showcasing their acting talents. Prosenjit Chatterjee, Rituparna Sengupta, Indrani Haldar, Jisshu Sengupta have become common faces in 'parallel' Bengali films of recent times thanks to their exhibition of talent in Ghosh's film. Thus Ghosh's films can be taken as a stage to expose serious talent in actors more popular for their raging career in mainstream Tollywood cinema. Prosenjit Chatterjee's becoming the staple face of 'parallel' Bengali cinema can be taken as a case study in future research to see how the 'Rituparnoesque' impacts on the industry and the actors. It is perhaps the power of the 'Rituparnoesque' that brings big production houses to work with him with big stars outside Bengal.

Rituparno Ghosh's authorial signature can also be seen in his ability to make Bollywood actors and actresses essay roles completely distant from the characters they play in Hindi films. In a way Ghosh opens up possibilities for stars like Aishwarya Rai, Amitabh Bachchan, and Bipasa Basu et al to make an entry in Tollywood and act within the constraints of this industry. A sequence from *Sab Charitra Kalponik* can be seen as a metaphor for this situation. Radhika (Bipasha Basu) goes to attend the condolence meeting of her late poet husband Indraneel

(Prosenjit Chatterjee). She feels completely out of the place there as she cannot identify herself with the world her husband belonged to. But still she tries to connect hard with the people her husband was close to and also with her husband's poems. This can be compared with Bipasha Basu's situation. She comes from Bollywood. She is not that familiar with the Bengali film industry. But it is the intervention of Ghosh that makes it possible for her to work amidst the strengths and weaknesses of the industry quite like Radhika's coming to terms with her husband. Thus further research on these networks which posit him as an auteur in the industrial sense of the term are also possible.

But the style of Rituparno Ghosh also produces certain stereotypes. His cinema creates stereotypes in terms of the look, theme and mise-en-scene that are demonstrated by the films of other contemporary directors who have come to make films much later than Ghosh. The other stereotype is created through his recurring appearance in queer films made in Tollywood. This queer face of Rituparno often seeks to account for other unheard voices within the queer community.

To begin first with the film stereotype, we can turn to Moinak Biswas's recent formulations on *neo-bhadralok* films. According to Biswas lately there has been an upsurge of certain interior based, middleclass relationship oriented, 'parallel' films in Bengali cinema pioneered especially by Rituparno Ghosh(2011: 256). He observes that such films are very far from the real politics of the outer world and are constricted within the limited domain of the 'bedroom and dining spaces' (257). He identifies the basic feature of such films as their persistent emphasis on extra-marital relationships and the crises of the couple. He also feels that the solution of these crises also comes about within the scope of the narrative. He calls these films 'a ritual of the gated

community' (258) by which he means that such films necessarily cater to the desire of the *neo-bhadralok*, urban, upwardly mobile middleclass audience and become mirrors to their lives, as if there is a communication process between these films and their implied audience within a closed – circuit that disavows the politics of the street. One can surely identify Ghosh's *Dosar*, *Sab Charitra Kalponik* and other films that fit into this category of *neo-bhadralok* films. But it is interesting to note that such aesthetic sensibilities are also discernible in the films of recent directors like Aniruddha RoyChowdhury.



Figure 20 Rituparna Sengupta in *Anuranan* and Sharmila Tagore in *Antaheen* by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury

Roy Chowdhury's films despite their unique and distinguishable style and mise-en-scene are closer to the thematics and aestheticism of Ghosh. His films are also located within the world of the urban, upper middle class. Interior spaces in his films also happen to be bed rooms, dining spaces, living rooms. He too casts some of the actors who acted in Ghosh's films like Aparna Sen, Sharmila Tagore, Prosenjit Chatterjee, Rituparna Sengupta, Raima Sen et al. They also revolve around marital crises and relationships. Camera movement, shot composition etc are also quite similar if not the same. It is possible therefore to argue that Rituparno Ghosh's films make films of similar themes happen thereby creating a stereotype.

The other stereotype that is created is via the queer image of Rituparno Ghosh on celluloid. Rituparno Ghosh has portrayed queer characters in *Arekti Premer Galpo*,

Memories in March and *Chitrangada*. But interestingly these films are not being seen as queer films. Rather they are seen as films on homosexuality with the focus being on the characters played by Ghosh. As Kaustav Bakshi correctly observes in his case study of *Arekti Premer Galpo* that the film emphasizes Abhiroop and Chapal played by Ghosh more than bisexual characters like Basu and Chapal's lover or for that matter the sexually ambiguous or non-normative characters played by Jisshu Sengupta(2011). In a similar way Arnob in *Memories in March* and Rudra in *Chitrangada* are the center of attention. These films tend to essentialize the queer protagonists as necessarily effeminate and androgynous stereotypes. This also adds fuel to the public perception about Rituparno Ghosh. He is generally perceived to be a 'womanly' gay person speaking on behalf of the queer community. His homosexuality is not so much the point of attack in the public view, as is his 'effeminacy' and performative sartorial androgyny. His figure has become so overwhelming in the lay man's psyche that his name is used to typify the queer community. To turn to Kaustav Bakshi again, Rituparno Ghosh has almost become a 'brand ambassador' of the queer community. He narrates how the image of Rituparno Ghosh is being time and again used as a template to address effeminate people like him as 'Rituparno' (2011). He observes that though Rituparno Ghosh has paved the way for more queer visibility but his portrayal of effeminate, androgynous characters in films are 'quintessential' and 'erroneous' as it equates 'cross-dressing with homosexuality' (ibid). He argues that recent scholarship in queer studies has been able to bring out the complexities of queer identities. So from a theoretical perspective, Rituparno Ghosh's image tends to conflate homosexuality with effeminacy and androgyny. That Ghosh tries to speak on behalf of men like him is confirmed by the controversy that intensified when he had a faceoff with noted comic

Mir in one of the episodes of Ghosh's chat show *Ghosh and Company*. He censured Mir for mimicking him not because his personal sentiments were hurt but because he indirectly represents a section of the queer community. While Mir justified his aping of Rituparno as showing reverence with mimicry, Ghosh countered him. He said, somebody aping him does not affect him personally but it conveys a wrong message. He explained that mimicking him hurts those 'Sexually marginalized' people who consider Ghosh as their idol. His claim of voicing the perpetually mute section of the queer community who can not articulate their experience is problematic as it tends to efface the difference between his class position and that of other queer people. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's argument that western intellectuals' tendency of speaking on behalf of subaltern subjects especially of other post-colonial cultures threatens to 'doubly efface' the subaltern voice and agency can be applied here. Ghosh's class position and star status enable him to express his queer self in a bold way. When he presents himself as a spokesperson of people like him it becomes a problem as his class position differs from the people he is claiming to be representing. Thus his presence threatens to efface the marginal queer voices.

Both these stereotypes created by the cinema and the bodily presence of Rituparno Ghosh can have consequences that are undesirable in the sense that both stereotypes can make the visible makers of the style of Rituparno Ghosh or the 'Rituparnoesque' invisible after a point. While the cinematic style of Ghosh can be appropriated by other contemporary film makers, his 'queer' iconicity can appropriate other queer subjectivities. Thus the existence of other kinds of 'queer' representation becomes almost unthinkable and the cinema of relationship also takes a monolithic form given the overpowering nature of the 'Rituparnoesque'. This situation can be

described suitably by using Richard Dyer's views on the process of stereotyping. He observes:

The role of stereotypes is to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm and separate what is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit (1993, 2002: 16).

However, even after having noted the dual nature of stereotyping it can be said that it is because of Rituparno Ghosh's successful explication of interior based, relationship oriented films that new directors can think of venturing into making similar kinds of films. This applies to his emblazoned gender performativity as well. It is because of him that some of the closeted queer people can come out by establishing their rights to perform their gender according to choice. These issues can be taken as subjects for future research.

In conclusion, it needs to be noted that it is seemingly very difficult to give a closure to the idea of the 'Rituparnoesque'. Rather it opens up possibilities for new research. Firstly because, Rituparno Ghosh's career as a filmmaker and star is at its peak now. It is difficult to foresee which way it will meander in the future. Secondly, his performative androgyny raises eyebrows today, but later it may be accepted as it is with the change of time and taste. So my definition of the 'Rituparnoesque' remains a temporary one to grasp his cinematic and personal idiosyncrasies.

Filmography

Hirer Angti (The Diamond Ring) (1992)

Unishe April (19 April) (1994)

Dahan (Crossfire) (1997)

Bariwali (The Lady of the House) (1999)

Asukh (Malaise) (1999)

Utsab (The Festival) (2000)

Titli (The First Monsoon Day) (2002)

Shubho Mahurat (2003)

Chokher Bali (A Passion Play) (2003)

Raincoat (2004)

Antarmahal (Views of the Inner Chamber) (2005)

Dosar (The Companion) (2006)

The Last Lear (2007)

Khela (Get Set Go) (2008)

Shob Charitro Kalponik (Afterwards) (2009)

Abahoman (The Eternal) (2010)

Arek ti Premer Galpo (2010)

Nouka Dubi/Kashmakash (The Boat Wreck) (2011)

Memories in March (2011)

Chitrangada (The Crowning Wish) (2012)

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