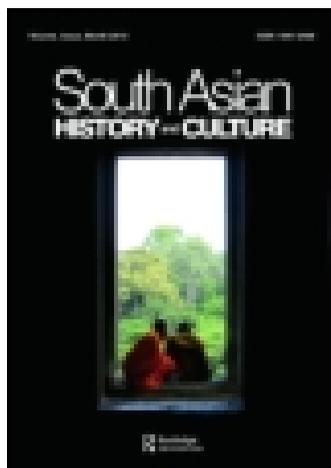


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The world of Rituparno Ghosh: texts, contexts and transgressions

Sangeeta Datta^a, Kaustav Bakshi^b & Rohit K. Dasgupta^c

^a School of Arts, Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK

^b Department of English, Sanskrit College, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

^c Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, Winchester, Hampshire, UK

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The world of Rituparno Ghosh: texts, contexts and transgressions

Sangeeta Datta^{a*}, Kaustav Bakshi^b and Rohit K. Dasgupta^c

^aSchool of Arts, Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK; ^bDepartment of English, Sanskrit College, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal, India; ^cWinchester School of Art, University of Southampton, Winchester, Hampshire, UK

In this article we introduce the queer Bengali auteur Rituparno Ghosh (1961–2013), who had a significant role in reviving the Bengali film industry that was going through a dark phase for a little more than a decade. As an iconic feminist film-maker and queer cultural figure, Ghosh has been an influential icon within Bengal and more widely in India and the diasporas. In seeking to examine his vast oeuvre of work we focus on its various elements. First, we examine Ghosh's feminist position, and how he shocked his middle-class audience through his transgressive discourses. Second, we investigate the influence and inspiration he received from figures such as Satyajit Ray and Rabindranath Tagore. We argue that Tagore's sensibility and philosophy imbued all his films. In doing this he was also uncritically referencing the other great Bengali film-maker Satyajit Ray. Third, an examination of Ghosh is incomplete without referencing his uninhibited performance of queerness both in his films and in the public domain. Over here we look at his final queer film trilogy but also the impact he left on Calcutta's LGBT community. Finally, this article ends by focusing on Ghosh's legacy on other Bengali film-makers.

Keywords: Rituparno Ghosh; queer; auteur; Bengali cinema; Rabindranath Tagore; Satyajit Ray

The game-changer

Rituparno Ghosh (1961–2013) was a film-maker, lyricist and writer who emerged on the cultural scene of Bengal as a copywriter of a Kolkata-based advertising firm in the 1980s. He made a mark for himself in the world of commercials, winning several awards for Response, the agency he worked for. After directing two documentaries for Doordarshan (National television), he graduated into filmmaking with *Hirer Angti* (Diamond Ring, 1992), which was critically acclaimed but failed to get a commercial release. For his second film, Ghosh collaborated with Aparna Sen and Renu Roy to form Spandan Films, which produced *Unishey April* (19 April 1995). The film won the National Award for the Best Film, and when it hit the screens in the summer of 1995 it remarkably changed the experience of cinema for the middle-class Bengali *bhadrolok*.¹

Ghosh arrived at a time when Bengali cinema was going through a particularly difficult phase. Satyajit Ray had passed away in 1992, leaving behind him a vacuum which seemed difficult to fill. Although Goutam Ghose, Aparna Sen and Buddhadeb Dasgupta tried to carry forward the legacy of 'intellectual' cinema represented by Ray and Mrinal Sen, they made films far in-between having little bearing on the commercial market. Tollygunge, where the main studios are located, had been taken over by

*Corresponding author. Email: sangeetadatta@me.com

film-makers who were mostly remaking Tamil or Hindi films. They worked within severe budget constraints, and the financial and intellectual impoverishment was glaringly visible on screen. The Bengali middle-class audience, unable to relate to the films, which lacked originality, turned away from the theatres to the small screen. Bengali television consciously promoted classics of 1950s, 1960s and 1970s fuelling nostalgia for a lost ‘golden era’.

This low phase lasted for more than a decade, after the sudden demise of Bengali matinee idol Uttam Kumar in 1980. Rituparno Ghosh arrived in the early 1990s, in the milieu of a severely struggling industry. With a persuasive style of storytelling as his forte, Ghosh thoughtfully merged the distinct categories of art-house and commercial cinema, reviving the middle-of-the-road genre. With several years of experience in a top-notch advertising firm, Ghosh was adept at pinpointing the pulse of his target audience. Quite effortlessly, he tapped the sensibilities of the educated urban audience by reviving through his films, not only Ray’s intellectualism and art of storytelling, but also the simplicity and candour of commercial Bengali cinema represented by the likes of Ajay Kar, Tapan Sinha, Tarun Majumdar, as well as the Bombay-based Bengali film-makers Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Basu Chatterjee. Ghosh continued to replicate the success of *Unishey April* and within a few years himself became a matinee idol of sorts.

Ghosh mostly confined himself to the milieu of the bourgeois living room (in his films such as *Unishey April*, *Dahan* (Crossfire, 1998) *Asukh* (Malaise, 1999) *Utsab* (Festival, 2000)) or invoked nostalgia for feudal opulence in his period pieces, such as *Antarmahal* (Views of an Inner Chamber, 2005) and *Chokher Bali* (The Passion Play, 2003). As Sayandeb Chowdhury writes in his paper in this collection, ‘The endangered city in Rituparno Ghosh’s early cinema of confinement’:

Ghosh managed to start a *new* dialogue with the urban middle class, a segment that was itself consistently on the increase throughout the first decade of liberalization ... Ghosh’s greatest joy was to throw a group of middle and upper middle-class characters into a tightly-controlled domestic eco-system in which they were tested, tensions would mount, passions would play their turn and the possibilities of melodrama were to be fully realised.

In most of his films, Ghosh worked within a strictly realistic mode. However, with *Sob Charitro Kalpanik* (Afterword/All Characters Are Imaginary, 2009) he began experimenting with his style, when he shifted to surrealism. In *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012), he experimented even further pushing the boundaries of form and style. While Ghosh was criticized for unabashedly conforming to bourgeois values and celebrating a ‘good life’, he was also widely applauded for bringing out in the open subjects barely discussed in middle-class society. His narratives explored transgressive social codes, marital rape, same-sex desires and moral hypocrisies of the new middle class. Of course, Ghosh had a precedent in Aparna Sen whose films had repeatedly addressed such mature issues as pre-marital sex, adultery, divorce and remarriage. Ghosh heralded a new era of Bengali Cinema, making films in quick succession which were commercially successful and critically awarded. His films self-consciously addressed a generation of educated upper-/middle-class Indians savouring the fruits of economic liberalization, generating a sizeable number of Rituparno Ghosh loyalists. Very soon a host of young film-makers, experimenting with novel subjects, followed in his footsteps.

In his 20-year career as a film-maker, Rituparno Ghosh directed 20 feature films, 3 telefilms, 1 television serial and wrote the script for another. For several years (1997–2004), he edited *Anandolok*, a popular Bengali film magazine, and later, a cultural

supplement to the Bengali daily *Pratidin*, entitled *Robbar* (2006–2013). As a talk show host, he ran two extremely popular shows, *Ebong Rituparno* and later, *Ghosh & Company*. He made a foray into acting with Kaushik Ganguly's *Arekti Premer Golpo* (Just Another Love Story, 2010). Following the success of the film, he played protagonist in two other films, *Memories in March* in 2011 (directed by Sanjay Nag) and *Chitrangada*, which he himself directed. Ghosh enjoyed a remarkably rare stardom, barely achieved by any other Bengali film-maker except Satyajit Ray. Rooting his argument in Christine Geraghty's theory of stardom, Sumit Dey, in his essay in this collection, thus observes, 'Through his multiple role playing and different discourses around them, Ghosh quite unequivocally embodies all three aspects of stardom as explained by Geraghty: a celebrity, a professional and performer'.

Ghosh's popularity was not confined to India; he got international recognition quite early in his career. To a great extent, Ghosh's international reputation was built with the enthusiasm of the Bengali diaspora. After winning two national awards for *Unishey April* and *Dahan*,² Ghosh was invited to North America by cultural organizations in Los Angeles, New Jersey and Houston where his films were screened and discussed. Tapan Biswas, the producer of *Utsab*, arranged a world premiere in North America even before its release in India in 2000. Bengali cinema appeared to have a world market to tap into.

In 2001, Sangeeta Datta invited Ghosh to a four-city tour of the United Kingdom with a special focus at ICA in London. His introduction to the London audience was followed by a regular participation at the London Film Festival – the first international film festival to screen his films. *Bariwali* (The Lady of the House, 1999) was screened to much critical acclaim in Berlin and won the NETPAC Award at Pusan in 2000. Both *Chokher Bali* and *Antarmahal* were nominated for the Golden Leopard Award at the Locarno International Film Festival in 2003 and 2005, respectively. In 2006, *Dosar* (Companion, 2006) had a special screening at the Cannes Film Festival following which he earned high praise from veterans like Mani Rathnam and Javed Akhtar. In 2010, *Abohoman* (The Eternal, 2010) was nominated for the Best Film at the Deauville Asian Film Festival. Although Ghosh won national awards almost every year, ironically international awards eluded him. He was a serious discussant of cinema and his post-screening conversations were always well attended. By this time he had also started to grow in profile as a film magazine editor, TV host and stage artist.

Chokher Bali marked a new beginning of international interest in his films. The next few films travelled widely to various national and international festivals. Another spate of interest was built with the last films in which Ghosh stepped in as actor, essaying queer characters. *Arekti Premer Golpo* opened to much critical interest in Berlin. At the London Indian Film Festival, Ghosh spoke about alternate sexual identities and breaking new ground in Indian cinema. At the Hay Literary Festival in Spain in 2011, a vivacious cross-dressed Ghosh engaged in a sparkling on-stage conversation. By this time Ghosh was travelling widely from New York to Sydney to Singapore, sharing his thoughts on gendered identity and the artistic process. His on-stage conversations and master classes have grown in archival value since.

Ghosh's untimely death brought an abrupt end to a hugely prolific career. Ghosh's departure saw Kolkata in mourning and a dramatic intervention of the State in his funeral rites. From the arrival of the Chief Minister to his home, the procession to Nandan (Kolkata's film culture hub where hundreds queued up in torrential rain) and the final gun salute at Shiriti crematorium (a first-time tribute to any cultural icon in Bengal) was telecast live on several television channels. Since then, the city had continued to offer sustained tributes to Ghosh testifying his prevailing cultural influence. A memorial tribute

season was hosted by the Satyajit Ray Institute in August 2013. The 19th Kolkata International Film Festival, 2013, which programmed a special strand of Ghosh's films, opened with the unreleased *Sunglass/Taak Jhaank* (production date 2005). A popular Durga Puja pandal in south Kolkata displayed his film stills and memorabilia. A large section of his books and wardrobe was donated to the Satyajit Ray Film Institute for use in student research and productions. A compilation of his editorial column entitled *First Person* was published by Dey's Publishing House during the Kolkata International Book Fair, 2014. Exhibitions of photographs, paintings and sculptures by young artists continue to remember Ghosh. Film schools at Jawaharlal Nehru University (2013) and Ambedkar University (2014), New Delhi, organized exclusive festivals to showcase his major films, along with panel discussions and paper presentations. The Montage Movie Club, Manjeri, Kerala, paid homage to Ghosh in a 2-day-long film festival, *Ritu Parivarthan*, immediately after his demise in 2013. Recently, on the occasion of his 53rd birthday, Weavers' Studio, Centre for the Arts, Kolkata, organized a 10-day-long exhibition of his belongings, rare photographs, film stills, in addition to film shows and panel discussions with eminent personalities from the industry and film scholars. Several months after his demise, Ghosh's absence is much too conspicuous and overwhelming; there seems to be no replacement for such a prolific talent.

Intertextuality, freedom and agency

Ghosh's films made a mark in launching an acrid critique of hetero-patriarchy, often revealing the reality behind apparently happy marriages, romantic relationships and familial equations. He problematized notions of compulsory heterosexuality and monogamy. His films time and again question a woman's lack of agency within the hetero-patriarchal family and the nation-state at large. His female protagonists struggle hard to throw off the mantle of patriarchal repression, often abandoning the seeming security of the home and romantic relationships. For instance, Ramita (Rituparna Sengupta) in *Dahan* and Binodini (Aishwarya Rai) in *Chokher Bali* walk out on their respective husband and suitor to discover a life beyond the restrictive boundaries of the home. In his telefilm, *20 Malaltibala Lane* (2006), the protagonist (Soma Chakraborty), having been rejected by several suitors and maltreated by parents and relatives for failing to impress prospective matches, leaves the home one fine morning in search of an identity of her own.

In *Unishey April*, it takes years for Aditi (Debashree Roy) to come to terms with Sarojini, (Aparna Sen) her mother, and reconcile herself with the truth that a mother who does not live up to the conventional expectations of motherhood is not necessarily evil. Completely under the influence of an immensely egoistic father, Aditi develops a strong revulsion towards her mother, who has relentlessly pursued her career as a dancer and prioritized it over her responsibility as a mother and a wife. Eighteen years after her father's demise, Aditi is still unable to forgive her mother and blames her for being selfish and career-minded. Aditi's complete interpellation in patriarchal discourses prevents her from fathoming her mother's struggle to survive as an individual, with an identity of her own. Aditi is eventually confronted by Sarojini on the fateful night she attempts suicide after being rejected by her boyfriend. An emotionally charged exchange between mother and daughter brings about a catharsis reconciling the two estranged individuals.

In *Antarmahal*, an important film belonging to the second phase of his career, Ghosh unravels a decadent feudal world, its leisurely extravaganza and the sordid state of its inner chambers, inhabited by women, childbearing machines for perpetuating the

bloodline. *Antarmahal* makes an inroad into these hidden chambers to reveal the brutality women suffer if they fail to bear male offspring. Revolving around an impotent zamindar's incessant endeavours to bring forth a son, the rightful heir to his throne, the film completely dismantles the romance generally associated with sex to reveal the crudity of the act. The violence of sexual intercourse with no emotions involved in it becomes almost palpable from the very outset. The two women protagonists' sexual desire for other men that attributes some agency to both, despite their incarcerated lives under the constant gaze of a repressive patriarch, also appears unsettling to many; for, women are usually imagined as sexual objects with no desire of their own. On the one hand, Boro Bou's (Rupa Ganguly) daring act of sexually titillating the hypocrite Brahmin pundit is punished by the community of high-born priests. On the other hand, Yashomati or Notun Bou's (Soha Ali Khan) final act of suicide underscores the impossibility of successfully sustaining a desire that disrupts normative codes. The low-caste potter Brij Bhushan (Abhishek Bachchan) falls in love with her, compelling Notun Bou to take her own life. For, even being desired by a man, other than the husband, is blemish on the woman's character.

In film after film, Ghosh attributes to his female protagonists an agency or reflects on the lack of it and makes them question their subordinate status. He vociferously challenges accepted dynamics of power equations between men and women, between parents and children, between straight and queer people. In *Shubho Muharat* (The First Day of the Shoot, 2003), a film belonging to the 'whodunit' genre, Ghosh very subtly interweaves into the thriller narrative, the pursuit of freedom in women. A murder mystery, which appears bewildering to all, is solved by a widowed homemaker, who by her sheer astuteness pieces together the evidences and unravels the puzzle. In the process, she rediscovers herself. She admits to the murderer in an emotionally charged moment that she is immensely grateful to her. Had she not been drawn into this murder mystery, she would not have realized that she had an unusual gift of solving riddles that even the police could not untangle. Rangapishi (Rakhi Gulzar), as she is fondly addressed by her niece, thereby finds meaning beyond the mundane monotony of her everyday domestic chores. The film ends with the murderer and the 'detective' emotionally connecting with each other, as Madhuja Mukherjee argues in her paper (in this collection) 'En-gendering the detective: Of love, longing and feminine follies', infuses an overtly 'masculine' genre of the detective fiction with a rare emotionality (that supersedes the rationalism of the 'male' sleuth's final revelation of how he arrived at the conclusion) and transforms it completely. In this particular instance, Ghosh's feminist position manifests itself, not only in his theme and characterization, but also in his reconstruction of a western hyper-masculine genre, by locating the action in familiar domestic spaces of the middle-class home and making a sleuth out of an ageing widowed homemaker who barely steps out of the house. Ghosh's story, inspired by Agatha Christie's *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, acknowledges Miss Marple to be the inspiration behind the conception of his Rangapishi. Ten years later, Ghosh brought Rangapishi back on screen with his last telefilm, *Tahar Naamti Ranjana* (Ranjana Is Her Name, 2013), which was the first of the series of short detective films he had planned for the Bengali entertainment channel Star Jalsa with Rangapishi as the protagonist.

Ghosh deals with the idea of freedom and agency in all his films. Vicimization and exploitation especially through parochial conservatism and patriarchy is not always physical, he reminds us. In an emotionally charged scene in *Unishey April*, Aditi asks her mother, 'Baba ki korto tomay' (What did my dad do to you?), to which she answers,

‘Kichhu korto na! Tumi ki mone koro mar dhor korlei kharap hoy?’ (Nothing! Do you think physical abuse is the only form of abuse?). This unseen violence meted out to women has often been brought up by Ghosh, for instance, in *Bariwali* where Banalata (Kirron Kher) and Sudeshna (Rupa Ganguly) are emotionally exploited by Dipankar (Chiranjit Chakraborty). In a way Ghosh directly engages with Sumit Sarkar’s thesis of the neglected *bhadramahila* whose liberation and agency needed to be controlled, manipulated and exploited to maintain a societal status quo.

Another abiding interest Ghosh betrays is his unwavering fascination with stars and stardom, the film industry and the very art of filmmaking. In *Unishey April* and *Chitrangada*, his protagonists are two immensely successful dancers; in *Bariwali*, *Abohoman* and *Khela* (Game, 2008), his male protagonists are all film-makers; *Asukh*, *Shubho Muharat*, *Abohoman*, *Bariwali* and his telefilm *Abhinay* (Performance, 2002) revolve around female stars, their misgivings, depression, insecurities and struggle to find place in a male-dominated industry. *The Last Lear* (2007), on the other hand, deals with a yesteryear Shakespearean actor (Amitabh Bachchan) who is currently lost to public memory. In these films, Ghosh delves deep into issues of popularity, the loneliness of being at the top, anxieties about waning stardom and the film industry’s inherent ruthlessness.

Ghosh took a deeper plunge into discourses surrounding art, creativity, fame and the crossing of gender and class boundaries in *Sob Charitro Kalponik*, one of his most complex films. His protagonists are a couple, both poets. Indraneel (Prosenjit Chatterjee) is a successful poet, but is often reprimanded by his wife for being blissfully unmindful of the material needs of a family. Radhika (Bipasha Basu), the wife, is the breadwinner, who has never seriously pursued her poetry seriously enough. Apparently another story of a mismatched couple undergoing the drudgery of everydayness, *Sob Charitro* becomes increasingly intriguing as it philosophizes on art, inspiration, intertextuality, plagiarism and the honesty one needs to have towards one’s art. Srimati Mukherjee, in her paper, ‘Borrowing, becoming, and the question of the self in *Sob Charitro Kalponik*’, in this volume, writes how the film

breaks down lines of class distinctions between the economically privileged and the destitute homeless; boundaries between the normative and the mad; and more implicitly, gender divisions as well, through the medium of poetry and of course film. In its early and middle sequences, the film dramatizes possibilities of the breaking up of the poetic ‘I,’ crossovers, and inhabiting an other via the character of Indraneel. Yet, as *Sob Charitro* moves through its middle sections and queer desire and transsexuality are represented, Ghosh also destabilizes certainties in his audience by having us question whether the perspective is Indraneel’s or Radhika’s. This blurring of distinctions between the two perspectives is accentuated by the juxtaposition of their two poems at the end of the film, Ghosh coming full circle to the concept of poetic borrowing and poetic license.

Ideas of art, freedom, textures of interpersonal relationships, the politics of the home, identity and sexuality continued to inform Ghosh’s films throughout his career. While being strongly rooted in a local Bengali culture, his films were also remarkably global in execution and appeal. These films carry in them easily identifiable markers of a cultural milieu in which Ghosh had matured as an artist, while displaying an intense awareness of international cinema, art and literature.

Influence and inspiration

Once crossing the crowds of Trafalgar Square in 2002, watching children frolicking in the fountains, Ghosh responded to a Tagore song playing in the car exclaiming, 'I can now begin to see the expansive span of these words, *Anandadhara bohichey bhuboney* (The stream of happiness runs through life)'. If there was one singular lifelong influence on Rituparno Ghosh, it was Rabindranath Tagore. Brought up in a middle-class Bengali home, an avid reader with a photographic memory, Ghosh was intimately familiar with Tagore's oeuvre: his poetry, novels, essays and songs. Fascinated with the history of the Bengal Renaissance, he was intrigued by the Tagore family in Joransanko. The inside stories and relationships in one of the most well-known families in Bengal, the magnetic narratives of the Tagore women had him enthralled. His plans to make a film on Thakurbari eventually remained unexecuted.

One of Ghosh's earliest scripts that he tried pitching was an adaptation of Tagore's novel *Chokher Bali*. His script departed from the original ending of the novel, which Tagore himself had expressed dissatisfaction with. Ghosh had discussed the lead role with various actors before the film was finally produced by Venkatesh Films in 2003 with Aishwarya Rai as Binodini. *Chokher Bali* marked a significant transition point for Ghosh with its ambitious canvas, enhanced production scale and the involvement of Bombay film stars.

Critiqued by the local industry and sections of the home audience for such a glossy production, Ghosh was primarily interested in depicting the marginalization and ambiguity of the sexualized widow. As with many of his earlier films, Ghosh explored the role of the outsider and the duplicity of arranged marriage. With this production he also revelled in the potential of an opulent period setting. Armed with a talented production team, the period research was done in great detail. Both Rituparno and his brother Indranil had inherited their visual aesthetics from their artist mother and film-maker father. Indranil, the set designer, researched North Calcutta houses to design a magnificent set in Technician Studio in Kolkata. Period costumes and accessories were painstakingly researched and designed. Props were ordered from London. Every detail was added with loving care which finally contributed to a rich and textured visual, making *Chokher Bali* a reference for film-makers over the last decade.

The primary source of cinematic reference was the other artist that Ghosh had great admiration for – Satyajit Ray. The inspirations for period interiors were those classic Tagore adaptations by Ray, namely, *Charulata* (The Lonely Wife, 1964), *Devi* (The Goddess, 1960) and *Teen Kanya* (Three Daughters, 1961). Ghosh not only modelled his storytelling technique on Ray's template but followed his diligent research and eye for detail. By this time he was also recognized as the true inheritor of Ray's legacy.

In 2010, Bombay film-maker Subhash Ghai commissioned Ghosh to make a bilingual version of Tagore's novel *Noukadubi/Kashmakash* (Boat Wreck, 2012). He agreed with the producer that this plot-driven, Dickensian tale of mistaken identity would hold appeal for the masses, although he was not particularly fond of the novel. The project again offered the challenge of a period film, which Ghosh's creative team would delight in handling. Shot between Kolkata and Benaras, the film captures the period in intricate detail and characters in fleshed out performances. Unfortunately Ghosh fell out with his producer as he was not given editorial control over the film.

Ghosh offered his own tribute to Tagore in his 150th birth year in his interpretation of the well-known dance-drama *Chitrangada*, originally a tale from the *Mahabharata*. Tagore had dealt with the concept of identity within the framework of masculine and

feminine constructs. Ghosh reworked this myth to extend more fluid possibilities of gender and alternate sexual identity. His theatrical interpretation of Chitrangada's transformation revitalized the stage presentation of this opera. As gay choreographer Rudra, Ghosh inserted himself into that performance/transformation space, thus allowing the film to be defined as autobiographical. Ghosh reinstated the concept of androgyny which had always been a part of his past as Datta writes in 'Several Roles Converging': 'This is the challenge the film offers - to confront and empathise with a third identity. In fact it asks us to tap into this hidden part of our psyche and our cultural history'.³ Daisy Hasan (this collection), in her essay on *Chitrangada*, explores how Ghosh remakes Tagore's vision of Indian identity by infusing it with elements of political, cultural and sexual liberalism. She argues that in charting his response to Tagore's original play, Ghosh is dramatizing the need for oppressed groups to create subcultures capable of decoding cultural texts along subversive or oppositional lines. Ghosh has time and again showed Tagore in a new light, through his own reinterpretations, references to the poet's works, in his writings and incorporation of his songs in almost all his films, and adaptation of his texts.

Ghosh was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture to make a film on Rabindranath Tagore to mark his 150th birth anniversary. Although this was a staggering honour, the offer also had its challenges. Ghosh had to make a documentary and conceive how it was going to be different from Ray's much celebrated biography *Rabindranath* (1964). Turning away from the institutionalized public figure, Ghosh took up Tagore's early autobiography *Jeeban Smriti*. These impressionist memories give a sense of the elusive poet and lonely artist lurking behind the canonized Rabindranath. This loving and subjective search for the artist by Rituparno becomes part of the narrative shaping and moulding fresh insights into the human personality of Tagore. As Sangeeta Datta writes in her paper,⁴ the director's preoccupation with the artistic process and a tortured artistic psyche can be marked from *Abohoman* through the later phase to culminate in *Jeeban Smriti* (Selective Memories, 2013).

Deeply influenced by the *Vaishnav Padabali*, Tagore's early songs of *Bhanusingher Padabali* had explored the subjective voice of Radha. At the age of 16, Tagore was also expressing his most feminine side. In his love songs, Tagore continued to explore female subjectivity or androgynous voice, many of which worked on the trope of the Radha figure stepping out in search of her lover. Ghosh assumes the *abhisarika* persona – embodying desire – and the Tagore song *Gahana kusuma kunjaj majhey* (In the dense, flowering bower, a soft, sweet flute plays/Forget fear and shame, come friend and step out in the woods) becomes a leitmotif in his films *Abohoman* and *Jeeban Smriti*. In the former, this marks the transposition of the young actress into a star, and in the latter, Ghosh himself is Radha, setting the film-maker and his subject in a quasi-erotic relationship.

Tagore's Vaishnav lyrics and other songs evoke passion and desire in key sequences in *Chokher Bali* too. The imaginative use of Rabindrasangeet to forge subversive ties as in *Utsab* or in *Dosar* offered a fresh context for Tagore songs which have otherwise been middle-class staple fare for a very long time. And the final subversion comes in that wonderful dramatized reading of Tagore's short story *Streer Patra* (The Wife's Letter) for a radio production in which Rituparno reads the female part of Mrinal in his voice.

In his films, Ghosh often used oblique references to his sources of inspiration and influence. Having grown up on Ray's films, his influences are obvious: references to the architectural design of *Charulata* in *Chokher Bali*; especially, the binoculars he gives to Binodini immediately reminds an alert viewer of the lonely wife in Ray's film. *Devi* is as

an unmistakable inter-text in the oppressive feudal narrative of *Antarmahal; Shakha Proshakha* (Branches of a Tree, 1990) quite clearly offers the template for the complex family drama of *Utsab*; *Jeeban Smriti* holds close the docu-drama treatment of Ray's *Rabindranath*; and *Abohoman* with its unambiguous reference to Ray's own life remains one of Ghosh's best films.

Ghosh's *Rabindrik* or Tagorean sensibility went beyond the use of specific texts; it was a way of validating Tagore's philosophy in contemporary times that shaped the vastly popular television series *Gaaner Oporey* (Beyond the Songs, 2011–2012) which he wrote for Star Jalsha, or, sparked the cheeky song in *Abohoman* written in response to that fablesque Rabindrasangeet *Krishnakali ami tarei boli*. During *Jeeban Smriti*, Ghosh engaged in rigorous archival research and was inspired to make a film on the Tagore household in Jorasanko. This project remained unmade although a limited edition of collaborator Shibaji Bandopadhyay's script (entitled *Ekti Barir Golpo* or *Story of a House*) was published. Another lifelong ambition which he shared with Satyajit Ray was to make a film on the *Mahabharata*. He researched the epic seriously with Nrisinghaprasad Bhaduri, but this project always remained a dream. Towards the end, as performance artist, he was making boundaries fluid and starting to inhabit mythical texts in *Chitrangada*. He had also started rehearsing for a play on Krishna with director Kaushik Sen. As Datta argues, Ghosh traverses the *Mahabharata*, Tagore and Ray in his later films, pursuing the artistic consciousness and its painful contradictions:

Ghosh leaves us with fleeting moments, compressed, layered, elegiac sequences which need not be shaped into narrative cohesion or closure. This abstraction makes *Abohoman* a significant transition point for Ghosh who then veers towards the creative process and the artistic predicament. The contradictions of this process are of immense beauty, pain and solitude, as we see in the interpretation of *Chitrangada* and *Jeeban Smriti*.⁵

Performing queerness

A critical investigation into Ghosh's work would be found wanting without reference to his sexuality and his uninhibited 'performance' of the same in public. As mentioned earlier, Ghosh's films were remarkably informed by the social, cultural and economic changes wrought by the economic liberalization in the lives of the Bengali middle class. Ghosh was at once a product and producer of the schizophrenic consumerist culture effectuated by the open market. Ghosh's iconoclastic move, that is his decision to 'come out' officially and thereafter, associating himself with films on queer subjects,⁶ was also, by default, conditioned by neo-liberal discourses of a late capitalist society. His films, in which he acted and/or directed, were over-determined by the neo-liberal sexual identity politics. That does not, however, eliminate the radicalism involved in making films on same-sex desires, for this is one topic which had never found expression in Bengali Cinema until Ghosh took the bold step. Ghosh's queer films arrived at a significant moment in the cultural history of the LGBT movement in India. *Arekti Premer Golpo*, for instance, went on floors and was released subsequent to the reading down of Section 377 of the IPC in a momentous verdict given by the Delhi High Court in July 2009. Kaustav Bakshi and Parjanya Sen, in their article 'India's queer expressions on screen: The aftermath of the reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code', while discussing how such a verdict transformed the cultural perspective on same-sex desires, write:

The Delhi High Court Judgment extensively cites instances of contemporary psychiatric opinion on homosexuality thereby attempting to render the 'homosexual' subject as a 'normalized' subject... The attempt to thus normalize and recuperate the 'homosexual' subject is, however, accompanied by a simultaneous impetus of intervention, in the form of the HIV/AIDS interventionist framework. By appelling individuals as 'gay community' or 'gay' or 'homosexuals' the Judgment sanctions a new 'class' of normalized citizen-subjects, which is granted legal immunity. At the same time, by claiming them as 'vulnerable', the state makes the 'life' of a 'community' its targeted area of intervention.⁷

Ghosh's queer films began appearing in this particular moment, when 'homosexual' men and women rejoiced the state recognition, yet, stood on the precarious edges of being marked out as 'different' and therefore in need of disciplining.

Ghosh made a positive contribution to this changing perspective and knowledge of the 'homosexual' by intervening *sanitized* spaces of the middle-class home with narratives of parallel sexualities, thereby debunking prevailing notions of compulsory heteronormativity. *Arekti Premer Golpo*, *Memories in March* (2011) and *Chitrangada* indeed worked towards arousing awareness of same-sex desires among the uninitiated middle-class audience. By inserting narratives of same-sex desires and the emotional struggles of being *different* into already existing fables of normative middle-class lives, Ghosh, was successful in engendering a change in the perspective from which love and desire had been comprehended so far. Interestingly, however, despite his radicalism, he was not unconditionally embraced by the LGBT community of Kolkata; they have been scathingly critical of his films on the grounds that they elided over local histories and cultures of remarkably non-conforming and rebellious queer subcultures and located queer desires within the snugness of affluent homes, cordoned off from grass-root politics. Aniruddha Dutta addresses this critique in his article included in this collection, arguing how Ghosh's queer films 'establish a double distancing from lower class/caste narratives of gender variance, and construct a script of gender choice and fluidity premised on bourgeois trajectories of modernization'.

But Ghosh had indeed taken an enormous risk in deciding to go public about his sexuality and making films on same-sex desires, as he told Kaustav Bakshi in an interview:

I have indeed estranged a section of my audience... the middleclass audience, we were talking about... I am aware of the loss. A lot of them are wary of my cross-dressing in public! In fact, the respect I used to command has been seriously affected by my decision to proclaim my sexuality.⁸

Yet, he could no longer be pretentious about his sexuality and deliberately took up this cultural activism. In retrospect, most of Ghosh's earlier films seem to betray unambiguous signs of queerness. In a career spanning 20 years, Ghosh indeed took a long time to 'come out' officially in public through his films, talk-show (*Ghosh & Company*) and writings. But, as Richard Allen convincingly theorizes in his article in this collection, the torment of being in the closet was much too conspicuous in his other non-queer films such as *Raincoat* (2004) and *Noukadubi*: both these films, he argues,

invoke the metaphor of the 'closet' to characterize the mortifying ways in which desire is confined and denied within arranged marriages. By doing so they evoke, albeit in a manner that is itself closeted or disguised, an analogy between the closet created by compulsory heterosexuality for those who are incipiently homosexual, and the rejection of love based on desire created by conditions of what I shall call compulsory arrangement.

Other films too, namely *Asukh*, *Bariwali*, *Titli* (The First Monsoon Day, 2002) and *Chokher Bali*, carry recognizable signature of a queer film-maker. In *Asukh*, the protagonist's (Debashree Roy) mostly half-lit and over-furnished room, quarantined from the world outside, literally and metaphorically becomes a closet in all its claustrophobia and gloom. In *Titli*, a teenage girl's (Konkona Sen Sharma) fascination with an ageing hero of Bombay Cinema ends in utter disillusionment when suggestions of incest become overt, as the girl discovers that her hero was actually her mother's boyfriend in her college days. The film, told mostly from the perspective of this teenage girl, reveals the director's identification with the girl's self-anagnorisis that her desire to marry the star would never be fulfilled. In *Chokher Bali*, on the other hand, Ghosh effectively deploys the male body as spectacle, notably subverting the conventional male gaze of the camera. Kaustav Bakshi, evoking Laura Mulvey, observes in his article '*Chokher Bali*: Unleashing Forbidden Passions':

There are several shots in which the camera almost lovingly films the male body; in scenes of physical intimacy involving Mahendra and Ashalata or Binodini, it is Mahendra's body that is exposed rather than those of the female characters. The gaze of the spectator and that of the camera are fused in all these shots thereby transforming the male body as spectacle. In this sense, the film makes an attempt 'to reverse the relation between the female body and sexuality which is established and reestablished by the classical cinema's localization of the woman's spectacle'.⁹

In *Bariwali* Ghosh's queerness articulates itself more explicitly through the representation of Prasanna, the old servant of the house. Ghosh provokes a sense of discomfort with Prasanna (Surya Chattopadhyay) from the very beginning. Banalata's loosening of her saree and baring her blouse in the presence of Prasanna unsettles the viewers. It becomes difficult to reconcile this particular act of Banalata with that of her parochial conservatism which keeps her confined within the precincts of the house and does not even allow her to visit the ground floor of the mansion and meet strangers without a genuine cause. The sense of discomfort heightens when Prasanna appears in Banalata's dream, dressed in a saree and participating in *stree achar* (wedding rituals performed only by women). However, Prasanna does not merely accept his emasculation and infantilization, he resists in his own way – which is the essential function of his discomforting presence, and a deliberate insertion by the director. Apart from that, in Banalata's confinement in the decaying mansion, her detachment from life, her repressed sexual desires and her eventual abandonment by the man she falls in love with, Ghosh's anguish of being in the closet becomes indeed apparent.

Prasanna is one of the first queer characters we encounter in modern Bengali cinema and the first visibly queer character created by Ghosh. In his later films especially through his queer trilogy (*Arekti Premer Golpo*, *Memories in March* and *Chitrangada*), Ghosh made a positive contribution to the changing social perspective and knowledge of the 'queer'. *Bariwali* and Prasanna's character in particular can be traced as the genesis of Ghosh's lifelong interest in narrating and critiquing the neo-liberal sexual identity discourse.

Before and after the release of *Arekti Premer Golpo*, Ghosh began appearing in feminine clothes and loud makeup in public. He raised a controversy in 2009 by publicly affronting a stand-up comic of Bengali television. Proclaiming himself the spokesperson of a community of men who had to live through public humiliation for being 'effeminate' day-in and day-out, Ghosh entered into a no-holds-barred critique of the stand-up comic in *Ghosh & Company*:

When you are mimicking me, are you mimicking Rituparno Ghosh, the person or are you mimicking a generic effeminate man? ...What message are you putting across? Have you ever thought that when you mimic me, you actually end up humiliating all effeminate men in Kolkata? ... You should be sensitive to the fact that you are hurting the sentiments of a sexual minority. I am objecting to your act not because I am inconvenienced myself; rather I am objecting to it on the behalf of all those for whom I maybe a representative.¹⁰

In his editorial column in *Robbar*, Ghosh gradually became extremely eloquent about his sexuality, relationships and loneliness. On many occasions, he laughed at how people gossiped about his possible affairs and shared such incidents in his editorial column. He once wrote:

As Gobindo [his driver] and I chattered with the vendor for parsley, an interesting comment reached my ears. Two young girls, nicely decked up! One of them, indicating us, was telling the other – ‘Baba! He has seduced this guy, now! Only he is capable of such things...’ I understood they were speculating that Gobindo was my current boyfriend. Gobindo had heard the comment too, I noticed. I thought he would be embarrassed. But no! He was totally unperturbed. At least temporarily, he continued to perform the role of a gay boyfriend of a celebrity without demur. And we, like a couple, wrapped up our morning shopping and got into the car.¹¹

At other times, profoundly melancholic and lonely, he seemed to bleed through his pen. Recalling an incident with one of his erstwhile lovers, he wrote:

brings contentment. Although we know, we do not want to accept that the promise implicit in these words is much too fragile.¹²

Notably, in *Robbar*, a self-consciously queer novel, *Holdey Golaap* (The Yellow Rose) by Swapnomoy Chakraborty started to be serialized under Ghosh’s editorial endorsement. Interestingly, the novel delineates the realities of those queer people who have never been represented in Ghosh’s films. An intricate mosaic of several queer narratives, the novel draws heavily upon anthropology, history, psychology, contemporary theories of gender and sexuality and other juridico-medical discourses to establish same-sex desire as *natural*. Unlike Ghosh’s films, the novel addresses the grim realities of lower class *kothis* and *hijras*, both urban and non-urban. The novel, which ended on 14 July 2013, roughly 6 weeks after Ghosh’s demise, eventually turns out to be a bildungsroman of a *kothi*, albeit with a subverted ending. *Holdey Golaap*, which relentlessly ruptures bourgeoisie values and morality, to date, remains one of the most potent queer novels in Bangla. Perhaps, what Ghosh could not do in his films was to a certain degree compensated by this novel, written under his editorial supervision.

Ghosh’s radicalism in its myriad forms indeed brought queerness out of the closet to dwell in the middle-class living room. But, conversely, he ended up generating a particular queer stereotype. In Kolkata, especially among the Bengali middle class, Rituparno Ghosh and ‘gayness’ have become unequivocally synonymous to many, whereby the indeterminate range of sexualities indicated by the term ‘queer’ has been eliminated from the popular imagination. In fact, ‘Rituparno Ghosh’ has become a brand epithet of abuse for men who cross-dress and/or are ‘effeminate’. An LGBT activist of Kolkata writes:

I want to ask whether that name [Rituparno Ghosh] apart from becoming a cultural icon of the feminine man is also standing-in for something else for the Bengalis. Is this name (which among many other things is also a brand of sorts for gendered performativity), unwittingly,

carving out a comfort zone for middle/upper class Bengalis? Is this name nothing but a sanitized version of such offensive terms as 'ladies', *boudi*, *sakhi* (and more recently and increasingly 'homo')...by which the Bengali *bhadrolok* has always abused his effeminate classmate mauling the latter's self-confidence...?¹³

While this is indeed unfortunate, it is also undeniable that Ghosh has indeed been instrumental in propagating the myth that all men who are 'effeminate' are 'gay' and all 'gay' men cross-dress, or vice-versa.¹⁴ Yet, what remains immutable and unsurpassed till date is Ghosh's extraordinary boldness to live life on his own terms, to make an alternative way of being, at least visible, if not completely acceptable, and dispel, if not too successfully, the rock-solid mantle of impiety that hung over it.

Legacy

When Ghosh began his career with *Hirer Angti* followed in quick succession with *Unishey April*, it was not hard to imagine that his audience was not the rural or suburban viewer. Rural Bengal and the suburban belts had been a staple viewer base for the popular Bengali cinema made through the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast, Ghosh's films were invoking the urban audience of Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, as too that of Tarun Majumdar, Hiren Nag, Tapan Sinha and Ajay Kar, directors who ruled the Tollygunje film studios in the golden era of the 1960s and 1970s.

There are more than a handful of news reports that have commended Ghosh's role in bringing back the erstwhile middle-class audiences to Bengali cinema in the 1990s and thereafter. Ghosh had also been a mentor to many young film-makers in the city. A younger generation of directors such as Srijit Mukherjee, Mainak Bhaumik and Kaushik Ganguly, all of whom shared a good personal rapport with Ghosh, have acknowledged how he was inspirational for them.

In fact throughout his career from depicting marital rape in *Dahan* to incestuous relationships in *Utsab*, Ghosh had always been several steps ahead of his contemporaries. Writing about this trajectory of *Utsab*, Srimati Mukherjee contends that Ghosh has 'made film after film, often to tell us something very simple: that those who are close to us... no matter how different from the majority because of inclination or circumstance, need not censure but words of love... it is up to us to do what we will with this message'.¹⁵ Echoing Mukherjee's thoughts Shakuntala Sinha, a homemaker – and interviewee for this project – who professed to be a Rituparno fan, noted:

I love watching Rituparno's films. I don't think anybody understands the psyche of women as well as he did. It's not just women actually, it is the entire human psyche over which he has a deep knowledge. My favourite films are *Utsab* and *Dahan*. I identified with them very closely. Things like incestuous relationships are taboo and not spoken about in joint families but incidents like those happen all the time. I was very very surprised when *Utsab* boldly portrayed that on screen.¹⁶

On the other hand, on the subject of his portrayal of queer lives (most overtly through himself as in *Arekti Premer Golpo*, *Memories in March* and *Chitrangada*), another interviewee, a queer identified interior designer, argued:

I will remember Rituparno's queer themed films just for a few brilliant moments and those moments had got nothing to do with queer sensitivity/approach. His being a celebrity and 'out', definitely helped the queer scene in a big way. He was someone the Bengali middle

class could not ignore, which brought the topic in whichever form, positive or negative, into the middle class domain. Also after watching *Arekti Premer Golpo*, middle class Bengalis started feeling 'sympathetic' towards gays, although, sadly enough, to most of them, 'a gay' came to mean a man who dressed like a woman or Rituparno Ghosh himself.¹⁷

Such views show how Ghosh's cinema as well as his own persona allowed for a social interaction whereby taboos and subjects that were largely left unspoken (rape, female agency, queerness, incest) were suddenly brought into the middle-class domain for discussion and dissection. His audience also remember him for his innovative use of Tagore, his writings or his talk shows which were informal *adda* sessions with eminent people from the culture industry. Rita Sengupta (63), a homemaker from a small town near Kolkata, tells us:

I liked Rituparno because his films and writings, for instance his column in *Robbar*, were easily comprehensible. He could be profound without being preachy. I enjoyed his talk shows also. I loved him in *Ebong Rituparno*...he was so candid and colloquial.¹⁸

The 'star' persona of Ghosh indeed extended well beyond his films. As already noted, his role as culture producer extended from films into television, music and print journalism. Accordingly, Sumit Dey (this collection), in his essay 'Just like a film star: The style of being Rituparno Ghosh', has considered how Ghosh often had a dual response from his audience. While his films were lauded as being in line with Satyajit Ray's legacy, he was, at the same time, censured for his non-normative sexual and gendered persona.

Notes

1. We are using the term *bhadrolok* following Sumit Sarkar's explication of the term. See, Sarkar, *A Critique of Colonial India*.
2. For a detailed study of *Dahan*, see Mukherjee, "Feminism in a Calcutta Context."
3. Datta, "Several Roles Converging."
4. Datta, "Life, Death and an Elsewhere."
5. Datta, "Life, Death and an Elsewhere," n.p.
6. For a discussion on Indian films made on queer subjects, see Ghosh, "The Wonderful World of Queer Cinephilia"; Bakshi and Sen, "India's Queer Expressions on Screen," 174–5; and Dudrah, *Bollywood Travels*.
7. Bakshi and Sen, "India's Queer Expressions on Screen," 174.
8. Bakshi, "My City Can Neither Handle Me Nor Ignore Me," 11.
9. Bakshi, "*Chokher Bali*: Unleashing Forbidden Passions," 6–7.
10. This quotation is transcribed (and translated into English from Bengali) from the talk show *Ghosh & Company* hosted by Rituparno Ghosh for a Bengali entertainment channel Star Jalsa.
11. Ghosh, "First Person," October 31, 2010a, 4.
12. Ghosh, "First Person," April 24, 2011, 4.
13. Hazra, "Amra Rituparnora," 5.
14. See Dasgupta, "Launda Dancers," 442; and Dasgupta and Moti Gokulsing, *Masculinity and Its Challenges in India*.
15. Mukherjee, "The Impossibility of Incestuous Love," 408.
16. Interview with Shakuntala Sinha, Kolkata, October 9, 2013.
17. Interview with Sanjay, Kolkata, September 15, 2013.
18. Interview with Rita Sengupta, Kolkata, December 14, 2013.

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