

Rituparno Ghosh: The Crowning Memories and Filmmaking Techniques of the Androgynous Bengali Filmmaker

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Abstract

The cinematic lullabies of the late Rituparno Ghosh still murmur through the alley of Tollywood, cajoling the heirs of Bengali cinema. The Renaissance activist-cum-queer icon, through his queer trilogy, heralded the post-377 Queer Revolution in Indian Cinema. The subtle art of Ghosh's filmmaking rejuvenated the artistic ligaments of Bengali Cinema, Bengali Queer Cinema, Indian Cinema, Indian Parallel Cinema, and Indian Queer Cinema. His (gender-neutral pronoun) artistic sensibility resembling that of Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, and Aparna Sen initiated the revival of Bengali Cinema. The Bengali director, Rituparno Ghosh ushered the waves of realistic filmmaking, dissecting the fibres and veins of human existence. The androgynous magician enticed the Bengali audience and experimented with filmmaking terminology and techniques. Hence, the film corpus of Rituparno Ghosh demarcates the trajectory phase of Indian filmmaking in the 21st century.

KEYWORDS: Bengali Cinema, Bengali *Bhadralok* Audience, Bengali Queer Cinema, Cinematography, Commercial Cinema, Film Criticism, Filmmaking, Film Techniques, Globalisation, Homosexuality, Indian Cinema, Middle-Class Cinema, Mise-en-scene, Queer Film Criticism, Realism, Regional Queer Cinema, Section 377 IPC, Visual Storytelling

Introduction

Rituparno Ghosh/ Shourneel (1963-2013), the prolific Bengali filmmaker and cinematic clairvoyant with his social awareness films, trumpeted the birth of New Indian Cinema, Indian Queer Cinema, Regional Cinema, Regional Queer Cinema, and Bengali Queer Cinema. The quintessential films of Ghosh are *Hirer Angti* (1992), *Unishe April* (1995), *Dahan* (1997), *Bariwali* (1999), *Asukh* (1999), *Utsab* (2000), *Titli* (2002), *Shubho Muharat* (2003), *Choker Bali* (2003), *Raincoat* (2003), *Antarmahal* (2005), *Dosar* (2006), *The Last Lear* (2007), *Khela* (2007), *Sob Charitro Kalponik* (2008), *Abhohoman* (2010), *Noukadubi* (2011), *Sunglass*, *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010), *Memories in March* (2011), *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012), *Satyanweshi* (2013), *Jeeban Smriti* (2012). Zie hosted two shows, *Ebong Rituparno* (ETV Bangla) and *Ghosh & Co.* (Star Jalsha). Zie also became part of television serials like *Bahanno Episode* (1996, Doordarshan); *Sahib, Biwi air Ghulam* (2004, Sahara One); *Gaaner Oparey* (2010, Star Jalsa). Ghosh was honoured with multiple esteemed national and international awards. Ghosh essayed diverse roles in acting, directing, scriptwriting, production designing, and creative direction.

Rituparno Ghosh as the self-assigned harbinger of cinematic social activism, welcomed the dreams of New India and memories of Old Bengal. His queer trilogy (*Arekti Premer Golpo*, *Memories in March*, and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*) prophesied the rainbow-hued dawn of decriminalising homosexuality (Section 377 IPC) by the Supreme Court of India on 6 September 2018. The reel-real artistic metamorphosis of Ghosh reflects the transformation of pre-377 Anti-Queer India to post-377 New Queer India. This article voluntarily addresses Rituparno Ghosh with gender-neutral pronouns like zie/ hir/ himself instead of he/ his/ himself as a respectful gesture towards Ghosh's gender fluidity.

1) Rituparno Ghosh: The Artisan of Filmmaking

Rituparno Ghosh, with his twenty years of cinematic career, demonstrates the fine arts of filmmaking in a transitional era of technological advancements and dynamic cultural cobwebs. Ghosh's filmmaking style resonates with nuances of originality, authenticity, creativity, professionalism, innovativeness, experimentalism, self-reflection, an eye for detail, intellectual curiosity, and fluidity. The fabrics of realism, new realism, interrogative realism, surrealism, metafiction, social activism, philosophical existentialism, traditional humanism, and transnational urbanism mark his films. "Rituparno Ghosh was entirely a self-taught filmmaker. He never attended a film school nor apprenticed with the filmmaker. His work in advertising industry, where he quickly acquired a reputation for writing with that man, served as a training ground for his filmmaking" (Ghosh 160).

Ghosh utilised techniques like metafiction narratives, theatrical elements, props symbolism, documentary apparatus/ docudrama, nostalgia, repetitive imagery and psychological characterisation. He used implicit imageries, adaptive intertextuality, indigenous cultures, vernacular folk music, nature-urban locations, mythological iconography and metaphors. He employed literary and religious symbols like the Radha- Krishna metaphor and Tagorean elements. He skilfully delivered qualitative creativity at a low-cost budget by cutting down production expenditures. His one-room films like *Raincoat* and filmmaking location-based films like *The Last Lear*, *Khela*, *Asukh* and others illustrate this technique. Ghosh's filmmaking style easily adopted transitional technological innovations like CD, DVD, TV, DISH TV, Blu-ray, private channels, and Multiplex theatres. Ghosh partnered with national and Bengali/ regional corporate production houses like Reliance, Planman Motion, Ramoji Films, Shree Venkatesh Films and Applause Entertainment. The privatisation of cinema benefited his creative project budgeting and wider audience market at global levels.

2) Bewitcher of Bengali *Bhadralok* Audience

The demise of Bengali film veterans, and the rise of new urban middle-class nuclear families, accelerated the decline of Bengali cinema and the rise of commercial cinema. This phase transformed when Rituparno Ghosh treaded into the deserted lanes of Tollywood and captured the psyche of the Bengali middle-class/ *Bhadralok* audience. People flocked to the theatres to watch Ghosh's realistic films that are rooted in Bengali culture, middle-class sensibility, emotional nostalgia and cultural identification. Films like *Titli*, *Abohoman*, *Choker Bali*, *Raincoat*, *Dahan*, *Dosar* and others illustrate how middle-class Bengali audiences identified with the realistic representation of their own social, political, and economic tribulations. His parallel and commercial films initiated ripples of silenced intellectual debates. The audience found the heir of Satyajit Ray and Aparna Sen in Ghosh.

3) Magician of Storytelling

The films of Rituparno Ghosh are self-contained scriptwriting workshops for amateur scriptwriters and film students. Ghosh possesses a gifted way of storytelling with poignant scriptwriting, dialogue delivery, humane characterisation and idiosyncratic body gestures. Ghosh's magic of storytelling and creative imagination are byproducts of his mother's stories that charmed his childhood. The metafiction and docudrama storytelling style of Rituparno Ghosh is marked with frequent flashbacks, past-present illusions, and opaque dream reality. His storytelling combines innovative editing, creative cinematography, art design, vernacular music, camera angles, settings, lighting, framing, and postproduction works.

Ghosh's films nag audiences to brood over the colonial nostalgia of Bengal, nationalism, colonial modernity, partition trauma and postmodern challenges. His thematic trigonometry always circumscribed the boundaries of post-colonialism, feminism and queerness. Some of his thematic contents are childhood, festivals, funerals, marriage, family reunions, traditional homes, mythology, Bengali aesthetics, taboo subjects, homosexuality, detective expeditions, existential crisis, spiritual journeys and parent-child relationships.

4) Crusader of Women, LGBTQIA+ Community & Abuse Survivors

Rituparno Ghosh, as the humane puppet master, dramatises the theatricality of human relationships and existential dilemmas. Ghosh's films are not just stories but the lived-in experiences

of marginalised communities castigated by societal repressions. Ghosh's urban middle-class audience-centric films mostly captured the dining table verbal conflicts of families that culminate with humanistic bonding in hospital rooms. Ghosh enjoys culturally bombing the audience impulsively with hushed taboos like rape, marital rape, AIDS, widowhood, adultery, queerness, menstruation, and mental health crisis. Hir works are social resistance against the hegemonic cultural discrimination of the heteronormative masculine patriarchy. Ghosh portrayed the female psyche and traumas of hir female protagonists with a delicate sensitivity that reflects hir own umbilical identification with the women. *Choker Bali*, *Unishe April*, *Titli*, *Shubho Muharat*, *Antarmahal*, *Noukadubi*, *Bariwali*, and *Dahan* are feminist films. Ghosh's queer trilogy, in terms of Section 377 IPC, acts as the manifesto of Indian Queer Cinema, Regional Queer Cinema and Bengali Queer Cinema. "The impact he left on Calcutta's LGBTQ community. Rituparno Ghosh had already come out in the open about his sexual preferences around 2008/ 2009. Though he almost had an absence in many of his films, his foraying into acting in *Arekti Premer Golpo* (*Just Another Love Story*), *Memories in March* and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* blurs the line between filmmaker, filmmaking and actor to such a great extent that it becomes difficult to separate and identify the one from the other" (Mandal 249).

5) Conqueror of Globe

The foresightedness of Rituparno Ghosh in making global and national standardised films led to hir triumph as a regional director, blurring linguistic-cultural barriers. Hir films employ the inclusive strategies of vernacular dialects, multilingualism, English subtitling and multilingual dubbing. "Though he largely worked in Bengali, his native language, with stories and themes rooted in Bengali culture, his films have broken geographical and linguistic barriers by reaching national and international film festivals....He transcended the barriers of regional cinema firstly by bringing into actors and actresses from national cinema to see star in Bengali film" (Chatterjee 25, 27). Along with Bengali audiences, hir films received wide exposure among non-Bengali regional audiences, Western audiences, Bangladeshi audiences, Indian audiences and Indian diaspora audiences. Such landmark films include *Choker Bali*, *Antarmahal*, *Bariwali*, *Shob Charitro Kalponik*, *Satyanweshi*, and others. "His films carry in them easily identifiable markers of a cultural milieu, in which Ghosh as an artist while displaying an intense awareness of international cinema, art and literature" (Dasgupta et al. 10). Multilingual Indianness of hir pan-Indian films forged nationwide identification among the audience. It also aided the smooth adaptability into new media of visual consumption like OTT platforms. Even after the demise of Ghosh, hir queer trilogy's global filmmaking strategy elevates the relevance of issues regarding LGBTQIA+ communities in terms of the post-377 era.

Conclusion

Rituparno Ghosh, being an avant-garde filmmaker, through hir dexterous craft of filmmaking, single-handedly rescued Bengali Cinema from capsizing in the tumultuous waves of commercial masala cinema. Hir social awareness films redefined the portfolio of Indian Cinema and Indian Queer Cinema in the global-national-regional market. Even after a decade, the contribution of the late Rituparno Ghosh is still visibly acknowledged both in India and abroad. Hir acclaimed films are now eternally preserved in OTT platforms as creative byproducts of the brand, Rituparno Ghosh. Ghosh, through hir queer trilogy, aroused queer humanitarian politics and revived the visible consciousness of the Indian LGBTQIA+ Revolution. Henceforth, Rituparno Ghosh, the visionary Bengali filmmaker, heralded the advent of innovative liberalisation of filmmaking in Tollywood and Indian Cinema, only to bequeath the audiences with a plethora of crowning socio-cultural nostalgia.

They say that in valour she is a man, and a woman in tenderness. -Rabindranath Tagore, Chitra: A Play in One Act, Arjuna, Scene VII

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