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Real to Reel: The "Third Gender" Narratives and Queer Identity in Rituparno Ghosh's Bengali Films

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**Real to Reel: The “Third Gender” Narratives and Queer Identity in
Rituparno Ghosh’s Bengali Films**

A Thesis by

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Chapman University

Orange, CA

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Film and Media Studies

May 2024

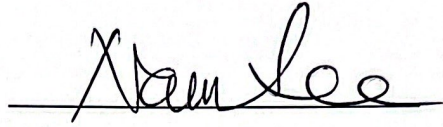
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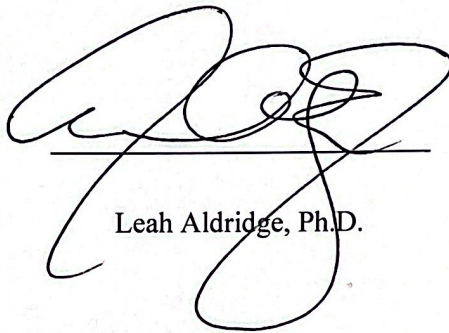
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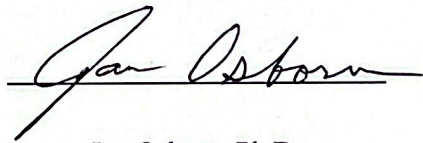
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Nam Lee, Ph.D., Chair

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Leah Aldridge, Ph.D.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jan Osborn", written over a horizontal line.

Jan Osborn, Ph.D.

April 2024

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Rituparno Ghosh’s Bengali Films

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ABSTRACT

Real to Reel: The “Third Gender” Narratives and Queer Identity in Rituparno Ghosh’s Bengali
Films

by Manjima Tarafdar

This thesis critically explores the third gender space that Rituparno Ghosh created in his later films, where he either featured and/or directed the films. The Bengali filmmaker, Rituparno Ghosh was one of the very few filmmakers in India who consciously and vocally spoke for the sexual minorities and represented them in his films. Focusing on the films, *Arekti Premer Golpo*, *Memories in March* and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, the thesis looks at the films that negotiated through the in-betweenness of gender identity, not solely lying within the binary of gender. Through this representation of the third gender space, the thesis also looks at how Ghosh used gender identity in association with the cultural and historical presence that the third gender has had in India. Focusing on how Ghosh created a public space for third gender narratives, third gender gained a space to be discussed, which later also became an autobiographical exploration of Ghosh’s own association of third gender representation. It illuminates how his work represented the transgender identity and community that were previously erased from Indian history and helped to create a politically safe space for the transgender community to express themselves. His films revived and recontextualized the portrayal of the “third gender” in Indian cinema, juxtaposing the traditional cultural depictions with contemporary struggles of the transgender community. His films also served as a catalyst for social and legal advancements towards the recognition and acceptance of transgender identities in India.

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Introduction

“বনমালী তুমি পরজনমে হইয়ো রাধা...তুমি বুঝিবে তখন... নারীরও বেদন.” (“Bonomali tumi, poro jonome hoyo Radha... Tumi bujibe jokhon nari ro bedon.” (Krishna, in your next birth, come as Radha... Then you will know the pain of a woman).¹ When Indian filmmaker Sangeeta Dutta used the Bengali folk song in her documentary about the Bengali filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh, its lyrics, which predate the film, resonated with the lived experience of Ghosh’s transgender identity. Nothing in this lifetime could perhaps capture Ghosh more accurately than this Baul song, a genre of music that speaks of the soul of a person. It resonates deeply with Ghosh’s identity, as director Kaushik Ganguly on many occasions has uttered, “in him resided a woman.”² Rituparno Ghosh (1963-2013) was a cultural icon in Bengal, considered one of the great filmmakers of Bengal, and mentioned alongside the likes of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen. Ghosh never ventured commercially into Bollywood, but was celebrated as a Bengali filmmaker, portraying stories of Bengali middle-class, the ‘bhodrolok,’ initially focused on narratives centered around women.

As his career progressed, the conviction with which he understood his characters evolved. This led to a slow transition into films in which his characters began to embody his own experiences and identity, whether it be Rituparna Sengupta in *Dahan* (1997) or Debashree Rai in *Asukh* (1999). This gradual shift marked a change in his narrative focus from women to transgender characters. From the outset, Ghosh was intent on telling previously untold stories. In doing so he weaved his own experiences into the narratives. As actress Aparna Sen remarks, “His films are personal.”³ Ghosh’s films as well as his interviews reveal that he consistently

¹ Dutta, Sangeeta, dir. 2023. *Bird of Dusk*. SVF. Translation is mine.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

emphasized the position of the marginalized in contemporary Bengali society. His body of work illuminates how various communities, integral to the Indian cultural history were ignored, were never provided a significant social position to voice their perspectives. They were seen as second-class citizens, ignored and excluded from mainstream culture.

The depiction of the minorities and the marginalized, be it women or transgender characters, as protagonists was almost non-existent, not just in Bengali films but in Indian films as a whole. The audience preferred stories about heroic men saving women; therefore, it was difficult to find women's narratives or transgender characters in cinema. Transgender characters, if any, could only be the villains or a comic relief. They never had any pivotal role in the plot. They were not considered human; instead, they were dehumanized, stripped of any emotion or empathy. They were typically dressed in bright shades of pink and neon exaggerating their characteristics to be comical and to be laughed at.⁴

Ghosh initially started his career in advertising and then slowly ventured into Tollywood (Bengali film industry) as a director. Working with some of the most popular actors, such as Aparna Sen or Prosenjit Chatterjee, helped build his name in the industry. Much later in his career, he debuted on-screen as an actor, starting with *Arekti Premer Golpo (Just Another Love Story)* in 2010. As his films achieved box-office success and contributed to revitalizing the Bengali film industry, Ghosh became a household name in Bengal. However, as speculations about his personal life started to surface, Ghosh gradually spoke out about LGBTQ+ rights as human rights and advocate for transgender rights through his filmmaking as a screenwriter, actor, and director. Even though Ghosh never explicitly discussed his own sexuality and identity, he always talked about the conditions of the transgender community in Bengal. Much like his

⁴ Kaur, Pushpinder. 2017. "Gender, Sexuality and (Be) longing: The Representation of Queer (LGBT) in Hindi Cinema." *Amity Journal of Media & Communication Studies* 7 (1): 22-30.

previous work, which was culturally specific to Bengal, his later work on the transgender community was, although contemporary, traditionally and culturally rooted in the social milieu of Bengal.

Ghosh understood the nerve of Bengal and targeted his films towards the Bengali middle class, his primary audience. Arghyakamal Mitra, a close friend and editor of Ghosh, recounts his words, “My primary audience is in Bengal. Only after catering to them, I can cater to India, then it’s fine. Or to the international market. But I am not going to cater to the international market first.”⁵ It is clear that Ghosh never wanted to shift from his focus on making Bengali films, and this may have limited his reach within the non-Bengali Indian audience. Yet it was this very specificity that established his cultural significance, as his work deeply reflected the nuances of Bengali culture. Ghosh’s vision transformed the landscape of Bengali cinema and Indian cinema at large. He brought to significance “gendered identity,” redefined the position of women within the Bengali community, and created revolutionary tales of the “third gender,” a term used in India to acknowledge gender identities beyond the traditional male and female binary. These stories also reflected elements of his personal identity.⁶

The notion of a “third gender” is critical for understanding the celebrated and popular reception of Ghosh’s queer and transgender films in India. The term indicates India’s historical recognition of transgender and LGBTQ+ identities in ancient literature and art. Contemporary animosity and the exclusion of their narratives can be traced back to the criminalization of homosexuality during the British colonial era. Ironically, this prenotation is a legacy of colonization, as Indian culture has acknowledged a “third gender” since ancient times, be it in its

⁵ Dutta, Sangeeta, dir. 2023. *Bird of Dusk*. SVF. Translation is mine.

⁶ Bhatkar, Omkar. 2015. “Deconstructing Desires: A Critique of Heteronormativity in Rituparno Ghosh's Films.” *Amity Journal of Media & Communications Studies* 5 (1-2): 97-106.

mythological figures, religious, historical, or ancient texts. It was the British who brought subjugation and ruling, along with the binary of gender. In 1861, the British enacted Section 377 in the Indian Penal Code, criminalizing and penalizing “carnal intercourse against the order of nature.”⁷ Although Section 377 was eventually removed from the Indian Penal Code in 2018, Rituparno Ghosh could not witness this historic judgement. After suffering from major health issues including severe diabetes, he had passed away in 2013 after a heart attack. He was known to be going through gender-reassignment surgery and had undergone abdominoplasty and breast augmentation surgeries which reduced his weight drastically. He was also on hormone therapy, and his doctor suggested that this triggered pancreatitis. He passed away before the transition was finalized.

Even though Ghosh did not live to see this historic win, his films had played a significant part in the removal of Section 377. Since India’s defeat to the British Empire on June 23, 1757, in the Battle of Plassey, British culture has been integrated with Indian culture.⁸ Thus, for over two centuries, homosexuality and transgender identities were seen as peculiar and the LGBTQ+ community was not accepted even after India achieved independence from Britain. Thus, Ghosh’s films were a direct challenge to this mainstream culture surrounding the LGBTQ+ identity as they embraced and revived the ancient notion of the “third gender” as legitimate.

Despite his pivotal role in validating LGBTQ+ identities through cinema and activism, Ghosh’s work has been understudied, especially within the scope of queer history and identity. Previous scholarly attention has been predominantly on women’s narratives in his films. In the current political climate, where the right-wing government tends towards cisnormativity, the

⁷ Gupta, Alok. 2006. “Section 377 and the Dignity of Indian Homosexuals.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 41 (46): 4816.

⁸ Rahman, Aziz, Mohsin Ali, and Saad Kahn. 2018. “The British Art of Colonialism in India: Subjugation and Division.” *Peace and Conflict Studies* 25 (1): 1-26.

situation for the LGBTQ+ community in India remains volatile and precarious. Given this condition, understanding Ghosh's association and engagement with the LGBTQ+ community is imperative, as it provides valuable insights into the evolution of queer discourse in India.

This thesis aims to provide an in-depth examination of Rituparno Ghosh's oeuvre, focusing on the previously overlooked representation of transgender identity and sexuality. This thesis focuses on how Ghosh created a public space for third gender narratives in his films. Through Ghosh's portrayal, third gender gained a space to be discussed, which later also became an autobiographical exploration of Ghosh's own association of third gender representation. It illuminates how his work represented the transgender identity and community that were previously erased from Indian history and helped to create a politically safe space for the transgender community to express themselves. His films revived and recontextualized the portrayal of the "third gender" in Indian cinema, juxtaposing the traditional cultural depictions with contemporary struggles of the transgender community. His films also served as a catalyst for social and legal advancements towards the recognition and acceptance of transgender identities in India.

This thesis begins by anchoring Ghosh's filmmaking in traditional Indian culture and art, exploring the historical and mythological depiction of LGBTQ+ narratives, particularly the concept of the "third gender" in ancient Indian literature. It underscores the significance of these depictions in forming a backdrop against which Ghosh's understanding of the "third gender" identities unfolds. Ghosh's exploration of his own transgender identity as manifested through his performance and self-representation, particularly in *Arekti Premer Golpo* helped in creating the space for third gender narratives. It also offers an analysis of *Memories in March* highlighting Ghosh's dual contribution as both the screenwriter and actor, where he portrays nuanced

relationships entwined with queerness. The examination culminates with Ghosh's interpretation of a Bengali classic tale by Rabindranath Tagore in *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, through a queer lens, thereby highlighting how his engagement with queer culture played a crucial role in building a strong political consciousness within queer community, and politicizing the queer body that had been removed from the hegemonic patriarchal Indian tradition.

Queering the Past: Ghosh and Third Gender Narratives in Indian Culture

Rituparno Ghosh made his directorial debut with *Hirer Angti (Diamond Ring)* in 1992. Throughout his career, he gained huge international critical acclaim as a director, actor, and writer. His films consistently portrayed strong female characters, a theme further centralized in his second film *Unishe April* (1994) and beyond. Ghosh's influence contributed to transforming the portrayal of women in Indian cinema and their status in Bengali society. His films mostly centered on women from middle-class or upper-middle-class families, placing them at the heart of a patriarchal society and contrasting their representation with the conventional, religious portrayals found in earlier Indian cinema. As Indian scholars Sangeeta Datta, Kaustav Bakshi, and Rohit K. Dasgupta in *Rituparno Ghosh: Cinema, gender and art* noted, most of Ghosh's early films dealt with female characters and their stories within Bengali society, a subject often ignored in Indian cinema.

By disrupting the mainstream Bengali film industry, Ghosh's films caused a ripple effect, helping the emergence of a new age of directors in the 2010s. This shift within the Bengali film industry also influenced other major film industries in India. Ghosh's ability to attract the audience and make them listen, observe, and address the issue is what brought changes to mainstream cinema. Ghosh made his audience adapt to films that did not fit into the

trope of the mainstream “masala movie.”⁹ With his personal motives and advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community, he continued to make films that sparked controversy as his films began to prominently feature queer and transgender stories in the 2010s.

Ghosh’s own gender identity and the use of personal pronouns has been a subject of scholarly and critical debate. The majority of sources employ he/his/him pronouns, although some have suggested that he was a trans woman and/or genderqueer.¹⁰ A definitive pronoun preference from Rituparno Ghosh is not documented, compounded by a gap in translation from Bengali—a language without gender-specific pronouns—to English. This thesis adopts the conventional use of he/him/his pronouns as utilized by a majority of Indian scholars. To fully understand Rituparno Ghosh’s work, it is important to understand the society in which Ghosh was born, which had its struggles with orthodox conservative patriarchy. Ghosh was always ambiguous about his sexuality and gender identity, especially given the condition of the Indian film industry. Ghosh often wore dresses and makeup, and it is implied, as previously mentioned, that he was in the process of transitioning before his death. However, there is no substantial proof, especially as almost all articles and fellow artists refer to Ghosh with male pronouns.¹¹

India’s historical texts, mythologies, and religious literature provide rich evidence of a recognized “third gender”; however, this cultural acknowledgement has been obscured over time due to colonial imposition and the subsequent legal systems under the British rule as previously explained. When India gained independence in 1947, the new government took into account the

⁹ Masala movie is a kind of genre, which has a variety entertainment, and it includes a combination of extravagant sets, songs, dance, good winning over the evil, a huge spectacle and is usually a larger-than-life experience with huge budget. Turksma, Riet. 1999. “Masala Movies: Filmmaking in India.” *Lola Press* 11, no. 60 (October).

¹⁰ Datta, Sangeeta, Kaustav Bakshi, and Rohit K. Dasgupta, eds. 2017. *Rituparno Ghosh: Cinema, Gender and Art*. Routledge.

¹¹ A need for privacy is understandable, but there is a fine line between individual rights to privacy and historical erasure. As with erasure, the accounts of queer history within Indian history depletes.

various laws and regulations of multiple countries in its new constitution. However, it failed to recognize its unique cultural position towards non-binary identities, as it maintained the constitution and codes of the British Empire intact. Whether intentionally or not, it did not acknowledge its marginalized communities. Much like the problem of the caste divide and the inability to recognize the LGBTQ+ community, it had forgotten the presence of a third gender within their cultural roots. For example, Hindu mythology holds transgender individuals in equal status to other genders. The concept of “Tritiya prakriti” or “napumsaka” also termed the “third kind” is mentioned in Hindu mythology, folklore, epic, and early Vedic and Puranic literature.

The dichotomous view of gender is mostly seen as a western construct, which through colonization had spread across the globe. It was only much later, that the notion of transgender came into view, which tried to accept gender identity outside the binary. But even in this usage, the binary image of a trans man or a trans woman is seen. The use of the terminology, third gender is very culturally specific to India. The third gender is viewed as a gender of its own, where a person does not fall within the assigned binary of male or female, but rather the in-betweenness. A person can be born as the third gender or later identify as the third gender and in India is mostly referred as “Tritiya prakriti.” Even though evidence of its existence is culturally rooted to ancient India, given its relative newness to the society, it is somewhat new to mainstream culture. Therefore, the term transgender or third gender are used synonymously and alternatively in India. Vedic literature is not the only place in which transgender figures are mentioned and sustained. We can find characters who belong to the trans community even in Indian Epics. Lord Rama, in *Ramayana*, was banished from Ayodhya, his kingdom. When his followers went with him to the forest, he asked all men and women to return to the kingdom. It was only the hijras, better known as the transgenders, who remained with him. In the Tamil

version of the *Mahabharata*, Aravan, the son of Arjuna and Ulupi, is known as the one who started the lineage of transgenders; therefore, the hijras or the transgenders are also known as Aravanis. He is mentioned in early text as Peruntevanar's *Parata Venpa*, a 9th-century Tamil version of the *Mahabharata*. In the tale, Aravana married Mohini (Lord Krishna's female avatar) and later a tradition was formed where all transgenders would marry Aravana and re-enact his death and become his widows. In Koovagam, Tamil Nadu, there is an 18-day festival every year, where the village trans-women dress up as his wives and then mourn Aravan's death. Arjuna also transformed into a woman (Brihannala) in *Mahabharata* after he was cursed by Urvashi and lost his masculinity. Even Chitrangada in *Mahabharata* was a trans woman.

In another Hindu mythology, the transformation of female to male is depicted. Ila was the daughter of Vivasvata Manu and Shraddha, but they wished for a male child. After Ila was born, they continuously prayed to God, and Ila was transformed into a man—Sudyumma. Sudyumma was cursed and then became a female, but Shiva altered the curse and let Sudyumma be a male every alternate month. During his female phase, Ila married Budha and gave birth to the Lunar dynasty. Several Hindu deities, however, are recorded in religious texts as having either participated in homosexual acts, varied their gender, served as protectors of transgender individuals, or represented India's third sex, the 'kliba.'

The story of Shikhandini also tells the tale of a hero who was born a woman but raised as a man and eventually swapped their gender with another man's, thereby becoming a man in body and spirit. There is also the deity Samba, son of Krishna, who stands as the patron of eunuchs, transgenders, and homoeroticism.¹² Another example of a transgender character in Hindu

¹² Tarafdar, Arundhati. 2015. "Reviewing Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish: An Exploration of the Issues of Adaptation and Gender-Crisis in Rituparno Ghosh's Film." *Labyrinth: An International Journal of Postmodern Studies* 6, no. 4 (October): 79-90.

mythology is Ardhanarishvara whose name combines three words, “ardha” (half), “nari” (woman), and “ishwara” (lord). It is believed that Ardhanarishvara is a God, whose half is a female, formed from one part of Shiva and the other part of Shakti Goddess or Parvati. Such forms can also be found in the androgynous Lakshmi-Narayan (goddess Lakshmi and Vishnu).

The traces of alternative sexualities in Indian society dates to the days of Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*, written in the third century in Sanskrit.¹³ It shows the rich prominent “third gender” presence in history. Yet the objection to *Kamasutra*, due to it being reduced to a text merely about sexual position during the colonial period, reinforced the heteronormative stance of the Indian society, making anything other than normative wrong.¹⁴ It is not just *Kamasutra* that has been misinterpreted during the colonial period, a lot of history and customs were also destroyed because of the lack of awareness and ignorance to the Indian tradition and culture, making it difficult for non-Western cultures to accept queerness.

Despite India’s rich history acknowledging the existence of non-binary gender identities, the recognition and rights of the queer community have been marred by inconsistency. Despite the abolishment of Section 377 in 2018, protests are being carried on even today. The partial amendments made to LGBTQ+ rights since 2009 are still a major problem, even though the LGBTQ+ community has become more prevalent in recent years. Child adoption by trans individuals is not legal as the adoption process is governed by the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956, which permits only cisgender men and women, or single individuals, to adopt children within the country. As of 2023, the rights to civil partnerships, marriage, or

¹³ Doniger, Wendy. 2003. “The 'Kamasutra': It Isn't All About Sex.” *The Kenyon Review* 25 (1): 26-27.

¹⁴ Puri, Jyoti. 2002. “Concerning Kamasutras: Challenging Narratives of History and Sexuality.” *Signs* 27, no. 3 (Spring): 603-639.

even to be in a sexual relationship with a person of the same gender remain unavailable. This is due to the fact that while such laws were partially accepted, they were subsequently denied.

The pre-condition of conservativeness in sexuality and gender binary brought by the British Rule has created massive ripples in Indian culture, where now the current right-wing government's efforts to reverse LGBTQ+ rights have had a negative impact on the fight for their human rights.¹⁵ In India, this system of marginalization, sanctioned by social authorities, is institutionalized, and non-heteronormative orientations remain a punishable offense. The issue of LGBTQ+ rights first came into public view when Section 377 was contested in 2001.¹⁶ In this context, Ghosh publicly spoke of human rights for the LGBTQ+ minorities in 2009 when the Delhi High Court spoke in favor of Section 377 instead of nullifying it from the Indian constitution.

In India, some films, such as Madhur Bhandarkar's *Page 3* (2005) showed a twisted sort of gay relationship that further traumatized the viewers instead of creating a needed awareness regarding the community. Therefore, for a community with almost no representation in films, Ghosh's films become particularly significant. By depicting transgender characters within the framework of social norms, experiencing the same emotions and relationships as others, his films made it easier for viewers to accept the characters. Aligned with Stuart Hall's cultural codes, Ghosh's work resist singular meanings, rather the meanings are derived in relation to the viewers cultural influence and available cultural codes. As gender binaries are categorized through the dichotomy based on physical difference and performance from what one is taught, something

¹⁵ Express News Service. 2023. "Same-sex marriage: BJP opposed, MP Sushil Modi said, "will play havoc with personal laws."" *The Indian Express*, October 17, 2023.

¹⁶ Urs, Priya. 2013. "Making Comparative Constitutional Law Work: 'Naz Foundation' and the Constitution of India." *Verfassung Und Recht in Übersee/ Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* 46 (1): 95-101.

that is not taught does not seem to fit within the cultural codes. Ghosh changes this limitation by showcasing that transgender individuals have always had a place within Indian culture.¹⁷

Rituparno Ghosh's support for the LGBTQ+ community initially came as a shock to the Bengali community, as nobody in Bengal had publicly spoken for them. Even though Ghosh knew that his affinity and alliance with the LGBTQ+ community would corner him in the society, he continued to actively speak for them. His support brought forward new-age transgender activism within Bengal, eventually changing the Indian law in 2018. Ghosh worked closely with the LGBTQ+ community, speaking for them, becoming a prominent celebrity figure who spoke about the condition of homosexuality in Bengal. His films also influenced various political motives in India, promoting the rights of women and the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community within a society navigating the path towards modernity while still holding onto its traditional values. Rather, in an orthodox fashion, the LGBTQ+ portrayal in Ghosh's narratives has been famously referred to as the "gay trilogy" (as the three films, were released in succession). The three films—*Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010), *Memories in March* (2010), and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012) —were historic, especially as they boldly critiqued and challenged the dominant hegemony and showcased a world in which LGBTQ+ were a visible part of society. In this trilogy, the "third gender" is brought up in dialogues, demonstrating Ghosh's conscious effort to affirm the historical and cultural legitimacy of non-binary identities within the Indian society.

¹⁷ Hall, Stuart. 2004. "Encoding/Decoding." In *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, and Andrew Lowe, 51-61. Taylor & Francis.

Translating the Transgender Self in *Arekti Premer Golpo* and *Memories in March*

The year 2010 marked a milestone in the history of Bengali cinema with the release of two significant queer films, *Arekti Premer Golpo* and *Memories in March*. These films came at a pivotal moment for transgender and LGBTQ+ rights after portions of Section 377 were struck down as unconstitutional in 2009 (even though this decision was overturned by the Supreme Court of India in 2013). Conceived from Rituparno Ghosh's lived experiences, these films were untold stories that he wanted to write and leave for future generations, to possibly change the legal rights for the LGBTQ+ community.

The film's director—Koushik Ganguly—met with Rituparno Ghosh with his script of *Arekti Premer Golpo*, calling upon Ghosh to take a role: “Only if you will do the part, I will do the film.”¹⁸ Ghosh said yes making it the first film on queerness and transgender identity after the partial decriminalization of Section 377. The film explores transgender relationships through the filmmaker character Abhiroop Sen (Rituparno Ghosh) and his bisexual lover Basu (Indraneil Sengupta) and the past relationships of Chapal Bhaduri, a real-life stage veteran. The film is about Abhiroop making a documentary film on Bhaduri, a female impersonator, who only portrayed female roles in 1960s Bengal and was popularly known as Chapal Rani.

The film follows Abhiroop Sen, a Delhi-based transgender film who visit Kolkata with his cinematographer and lover Basu to make a documentary film on veteran actor (jatra actor) Chapal Bhaduri. During Bhaduri's heyday, he was popularly known as Chapal Rani, for his female impersonations on stage, which we later see as the extension of his identity. During the shoot, Abhiroop faces difficulty because of his and Bhaduri's transgender identity but through

¹⁸ Dutta, Sangeeta, dir. 2023. *Bird of Dusk*. SVF. Translation is mine.

this struggle he forms a close bond with Bhaduri, helping in the acceptance of their true third self. In the film, Ghosh is the actor and plays dual role, one is of Abhiroop, who consciously owns his third identity and the other of young Chapal Bhaduri/Chapal Rani, who has to hide his identity to survive. This duality serves to show how third gender is viewed and represented, through the lack of awareness it helps in consciously distinguishing gender binary and the cultural presence of third gender in Bengali culture.

The film starts with a glimpse of Bhaduri, dressed in female attire, as Chapal Rani, intentionally showing the conscious play of gender. In the film, Chapal Rani becomes symbolic as it was this name which Bhaduri used when he was in his female avatar or with his lovers. It is interesting how the film starts by telling its audience how Bhaduri, in the present time, had to live in forced seclusion in North Kolkata and the only intruders in his life were some interviewers or filmmakers who had taken a keen interest in exploring his “unusual life.” This un-usuality, as the film suggests, is about the pressing agenda of forced gender binary, and how gender and sexuality cannot fit within the binary. Through slow revelation by showing small events, the film makes the audience uncomfortable, yet questions the accustomization that they had been led to believe, that gender is within the binary construct. Consciously, the film lets the audience make the choice to decipher if the same-sex relationships shown in the film are unusual or not. *Arekti Premer Golpo*, as Ganguly had stated, is as much about Bhaduri as it is about Ghosh. Ganguly had said, “Without Ritu’da the film would not have been made.”¹⁹ And it turned to be true, as producer Tapan Biswas only made the film because Ghosh insisted.²⁰ And with this, Ghosh’s autobiographical journey of depicting the third gender began.

¹⁹ Ibid. Translation is mine. Rituparno Ghosh was lovingly called Ritu’da and even though the word “da” is short for “dada” or elder brother, it was a loving nickname that was used by his friends and colleagues.

²⁰ Ibid.

Ghosh has two roles in the film, one of a young director from Delhi who wants to make a film about the veteran actor, and the other playing the character of Bhaduri (younger Chapal Bhaduri/Chapal Rani) in flashbacks. Shot in documentary style, the film begins to blur the line between real and reel as it proceeds, making it difficult to distinguish what is fictitious and what is not. When we first see Ghosh in the film, his character Abhiroop is instantly established. Basu is lying on the bed, shirtless, as he picks up a phone call, and answers. The caller on the other end wants to talk to the director, Abhiroop Sen. Basu scrambles out of the bed, and knocks at the bathroom door of the hotel, calling Abhiroop lovingly, “Babes.” The camera shifts from Basu and pans to Ghosh and the audience gets their first glimpse of Ghosh as an actor. He is the transgender director in the film, Abhiroop Sen, applying kajal (black eyeliner) while he has a towel wrapped on his head. Abhiroop and Basu are clearly a couple.

There is a parallel between Abhiroop’s life in the 21st century and that of Bhaduri’s in the 1960s. Both were considered different, not fitting within society’s structure of masculinity. However, Bhaduri could not wear kajal, as he knew he would be mocked. Instead, he wore clothes that were designed for men (mostly kurta pyjama), which he points out to Abhiroop, “You are wearing Kajal,” to which Abhiroop replies, “I wear it every day. Don’t you?”²¹ The silence in the scene is enough to imply that Bhaduri cannot wear kajal, for he cannot face the backlash that he had faced earlier. The scene cuts to Abhiroop and Basu in their hotel room, sitting on their bed, wrapped in each other’s arms. They being lovers, the intimacy is rather natural. Abhiroop unconsciously places his hands on Basu’s thighs and asks, “Basu, why can’t Chapal’da wear kajal in the film? Poor thing! Must have craved this all his life. Let him wear it.” Basu, a little flabbergasted, asks if it would affect the continuity of the film. Abhiroop replies,

²¹ Ganguly, Kaushik, dir. 2010. *Arekti Premer Golpo* [Just Another Love Story]. Translation is mine.

“How does it matter, Basu? What is more important, tell me? The way we actually live our lives or the way we want to?” It could be inferred that Abhiroop, even though he lived his life the way he wanted to, still had to live in a society that did not accept him. He wanted more.

The way Ghosh plays Abhiroop in the film almost makes it impossible to distinguish him from his character. Much like Abhiroop, Ghosh would wear makeup with dramatic kajal as well as more feminine clothes in real life. He was known as the flamboyant dresser, different than others. His cross-dressing made him the center of public discussion while, at the same time, making him someone who was laughed at. During the shoot, most of the crew, apart from those who were close to him, would address Abhiroop as ‘madam’ or other female designations. They would, rather iconically, call him ‘Abhi’da.’²²

Throughout the film, we see Abhiroop being drawn toward Bhaduri, getting emotionally attached to him. It almost feels that he, too, is an extension of Bhaduri and his closeted self. When Sandipan (Bobby Chakraborty), the journalist comes to interview Abhiroop regarding the documentary, he asks if the film concerns only Bhaduri’s personal life or his career. Even though Abhiroop tries to ignore Sandipan’s questions concerning Bhaduri’s sexual orientation and preference, Sandipan continuously pesters him. Irritated, Abhiroop asks if this question would still be relevant had it been a film on Amitabh Bachchan, the Bollywood superstar. Sandipan dismisses the question and says that it would obviously not be relevant as Bachchan’s sexuality is “normal”; he is heteronormative. The conversation turns hostile as Abhiroop challenges Sandipan about who has given him the authority to judge what is normal and what is not. The interview ends with Abhiroop saying that he is making a film about an art form where male actors would impersonate female roles. Sandipan being irritated with this rude ordeal of things

²² It is iconic especially as Rituparno Ghosh faced a similar situation, where many assumed his gender and even though he preferred being called Ritu’da, only those who were close to him did.

not going his way, calls Abhiroop a ‘faggot’ as Abhiroop walks away angrily and shouts, ‘Pack up.’ The scene shows how Bhaduri, because of his gender identity, is treated as a peculiar character, as residing at the outskirts. Even Abhiroop’s identity is reduced to a slur when he questions this twisted idea of normalcy, further elaborating how society reacts to identity and sexuality when it does not fall within their assumed binary norm.

Ghosh, who had been called many a name, was used to this ridicule. In most of his interviews when he was asked about his gender and sexuality, he would say that gender and sexuality did not affect his art form and therefore was not a relevant question. On many occasions, Ghosh talked about gender neutrality and how gender cannot be defined within the binary.²³ Much like Abhiroop, he would not follow the dress code for one’s assigned gender. He would never wear a saree as his audience might have expected, neither would he wear a dhoti-kurta. As he had stated, he would go for something in-between, neither a man nor a woman but, as the Indian scriptures suggested, the third gender. This consciousness of not falling within the binary was reflected in both his personal life as well as his work life. In doing so, he brought forward the notion of third gender, trying to familiarize transgender identity.

When Ghosh appears as the younger version of Chapal Rani in *Arekti Premer Golpo*, there is no part of him that resembles Chapal Bhaduri, Abhiroop or Rituparno Ghosh. He is androgynous, the male actor impersonating the female body. Bhaduri does not want his lovers to be called by their real names in the documentary. In the flashbacks, which are shot in sepia tone, we see Chapal Rani (Ghosh dressed as a woman) in full face makeup, wearing a heavily embroidered silk saree, with nail paint and heavy gold jewelry, hair in a bun with flowers decoration. Chapal Rani is drinking from a tall glass, fanning her face with a paper fan. She is in

²³ Bakshi, Kaustav. 2013. “Interview of Rituparno Ghosh by Kaustav Bakshi-“I know my city can neither handle me nor ignore me.”” *Silhouette: A Discourse on Cinema* 10 (3).

her dressing room on set, sitting in front of the mirror. Chapal Rani through the mirror, sees her lover Kumar (Indraneil Sengupta) entering. It is here that the duality of the role begins. Kumar is Basu, just dressed differently to fit in the 1960s. In the present, we see Abhiroop is the 'other woman' in the relationship, as Basu is married and his wife, Rani (Churni Ganguly) is almost unaware of this relationship, similar to that of Chapal Rani and Kumar. Ghosh in an interview had stated that he had specifically played the character in a more feminine manner for the audience to accept it, as it was an "effeminate man as the 'other woman'".²⁴

In the film when a newspaper article regarding Bhaduri and this ongoing documentary comes out, the neighbors of Bhaduri cannot accept the open call out of Bhaduri as a gay man. They want the shoot to be closed. Abhiroop is advised to be dressed differently, but he says he will not hide himself because others think it is not normal. On set, the neighbors create chaos, they say how difficult it would be for Bhaduri to show his face in society, now that speculations about his sexuality are out in the open. Even though it was known by everyone, this outright statement is what makes the situation problematic. One of the neighbors exclaims "It is already difficult for us to manage the two sexes. So, kindly don't bring a Third Sex into this!" In a mainstream commercial film, it was one of the very first instances that the third sex is openly discussed, already creating it a controversial topic, therefore, to show how the society shuns them and ignores it is what makes the characters so realistic and approachable. Amidst this chaos, it is decided that the shooting can no longer take place and the crew starts looking for a different location. Bhaduri even now is searching for the friendly face of Abhiroop but he cannot come to his rescue, as his presence would create more problems.

²⁴ Ibid.

In this process, Uday (Jisshu Sengupta) comes to the rescue and provides his house as the shooting location. He is fascinated with Abhiroop, he keeps on clicking pictures of Abhiroop. In their first meeting, Abhiroop says how much he would like to shoot in the Gourango Temple behind Uday's house, he states, "I am a non-believer, but I feel Chaitanya is the epitome of the cultural androgyny of this country. Radha and Krishna are almost symbiotic in him. He stood against all kinds of discrimination. 500 years ago, and it all happened so organically." This establishes the insinuation of the presence of the third gender in Indian culture. Intentionally, the film takes place within the days leading to Durga Puja, which in the Bengali culture marks the end of the patriarchal calendar and the start of the matriarchal calendar in Bengal, the location also changes from Kolkata to Hetampur on the day of 'Mahalaya', one of the most auspicious days in the maternal calendar. This suggests how the film, too, relies in the in-betweenness, not falling either on the patriarchal side or the matriarchal side. It is within these small instances of the film that establishes the transgender notion of the film, the in-betweenness, not belonging to the binary of either men or women.

When Uday tells Abhiroop that he needs to stop dressing so elaborately to prove a point and just be himself, Abhiroop understands him; he immediately gets a haircut and goes bald. With him growing closer to Uday, Basu and Abhiroop go apart, especially as Rani (Basu's wife played by Churni Ganguly) comes to Hetampur. The film shows the problems that Bhaduri had to face, he had lost his work and home, as women started working in the Bengali Theatre. He was not accepted and even Kumar had moved on and abandoned Chapal Rani, especially as Chapal Rani lost the glamorous lifestyle and looks. Chapal Rani, now dressed in staggered clothes, do not have any means to live in the city. Chapal Rani moves to Tarapith and there Tushar (Jisshu Sengupta) gives Chapal Rani a place to stay.

At the very end of the film, Abhiroop asks Bhaduri, “Do you really think of yourself as a woman?” Bhaduri replies, “If I thought of myself as a man, then all problems in my life would have been solved. Don’t you?” Abhiroop says, “No, I don’t consider myself a woman.” Bhaduri says, “Really? You don’t think so? You don’t think that God was sculpting you to be a woman and then made a mistake and made you a man instead?” Abhiroop smiles solemnly and says, “No, I don’t think that. I think men are different, women are different, and we are different.” Their conversation dismisses the debate of the binary and the existence of the third gender, the very third gender that is always omitted.

In *Human Rights of the Third Gender in India: Beyond the Binary*, transgender activist and author Lopamudra Sengupta discusses how, despite a constitutional establishment of the Third Gender in India, they still struggle to be accepted by the society. Even Chapal Bhaduri's performance of Shitala, the pox-goddess, which shows him covered in make-up, saree, and jewelry, with his soft-spoken voice hinting at the goddess, brings forward the gloriousness that female impersonators on the stage held. The performance cannot adhere to the restrictions of ‘drag’ as it does not parody hegemonic gender constructions to denaturalize or destabilize them, as most drag queens are expected to. What is challenging is the way the gaze is changed, as his performance changes the constructs of ‘masculinity’ and shows how femininity completely takes over an actor’s body during their performance. In regard to this aspect, Ghosh had stated how much this duality through gender performance is needed to be portrayed in the film, as it would define Bhaduri and yet distinguish him from Abhiroop.²⁵ It distinguishes the understanding of gender clearly, focusing how the third-gender cannot be identified with the binary, showcasing

²⁵ Ibid.

how it is a different gender altogether prominently describing how it needs to be understood and acknowledged.

Before the release of *Arekti Premer Golpo*, Ghosh and Ganguly stated, on multiple occasions, that Abhiroop and Rituparno were not the same person, that Ghosh was only an actor in the film. However, later he was given credit for direction as well as screenplay. In many interviews, especially after the film's release, the duo stressed how much Ghosh brought to the character his own lived experiences. Abhiroop was almost a younger version of Rituparno, making the mistakes he had made in real life. Later Ganguly narrates, "In one scene Ritu Da was sitting dressed as Chapal Rani and the lover had come to meet her. It took him four hours to do the makeup. When he came to the set, he looked completely a different person; Rituparno Ghosh was unrecognizable. As he was taking off his makeup, the mascara and eyeliner had smeared his face. With a shaved head. As I entered the room, He said, 'Close the door.' As he told me that I knew there was a problem, once the door was closed, he started crying profusely. What he told me then was very private, but it stood for, 'The woman has now left me. She has gone for good. She is never going to return.'"²⁶ Ganguly clearly shows how Ghosh, too, struggled with his own identity. Being a biological-man, it must have been difficult for him to come to terms with his identity, especially as it was so much in speculations and talked about publicly. Acknowledging it publicly in the film, helped in showing his transgender activism clearly. Much like the transgender community, Ghosh and Ganguly in the film show how Abhiroop and Bhaduri had to face the dichotomy of gender. The trauma that comes with identity remains the same in a society that petrifies its members, and that is what the dual roles of the characters in their past and present suggest.

²⁶ Dutta, Sangeeta, dir. 2023. *Bird of Dusk*. SVF. Translation is mine.

In the film, Abhiroop, in contrast to Bhaduri, is far more open about his sexuality. He dresses the way he wants to without adhering to social norms (much like Ghosh did in his life) and is not bothered even if someone comments against it. He uses make-up to look more feminine, almost to the extent that it overtly exaggerates the way he looks. Through his costume and makeup, Abhiroop challenges the patriarchal social system that defines men and women as binary opposites and marginalizes those who fall in-between. Concerned about the marginalization and victimization of those who do not comply with heteronormative expectations, Abhiroop regards them as the "third sex," an amalgamation of the characteristics of the two genders and androgynous by nature. His existence is paradoxical to the heteronormative paradigm.

Uday, who later became part of Abhiroop's team, comments on his hairstyle: "I don't like your hairstyle. It seems you are too desperate to prove a point." And rightly so, as Abhiroop does want to create a point, a point of his identity, where he too falls amongst the "third gender" no matter what others suggest him to be. The mere existence of the third gender is frowned upon in society as it defies social norms, and that is what Ghosh with his association with the film and the character, tried to change. With Ghosh's association, *Arekti Premer Golpo* became one of the most important transgender narratives in Tollywood.

The successful glamour of *Arekti Premer Golpo* overshadowed the nuance of a transgender narrative in *Memories in March*. The film shows a mother coming to terms with her son's death in a car accident. In the process, she comes to know that her son was gay and in love with his transgender boss. As the director Sanjoy Nag suggests, the film is as much of Ghosh's as it is his, especially as Ghosh was the film's screenwriter. The film was conceptualized during the shooting of *Arekti Premer Golpo* as Ghosh wanted to talk more about the closeted gay,

someone who is not as flamboyant as Abhiroop or Chapal Rani. The tone of the film is more subtle and is as much about acceptance as it is about mourning: a mother mourning her son's death, and a lover mourning the loss of his lover. Finally, the film depicts the mother accepting her son's sexual identity and relationship.

When Ghosh was asked about the crux of the film, he answered, "The subject is 'who does memory belong to?'"²⁷ The film is about memories, the mother has her own memories of her son and assumes them to be the only truth. As she comes from Delhi to Kolkata after her son Siddhartha's demise, she meets his friends. They fill in the gaps of her memories of her son's with their own. She realizes that her memories are not the only authentic ones. She sees her son's sexual identity and slowly understands and accepts him. The film also explores the idea of reception and reaction, how the revelation of an LGBTQ+ identity or a same-sex relationship affects the families or close ones, and how that reaction affects the individual.

Memories in March shows the process of society's reaction which not many films can capture. It treats the relationship as natural without juxtaposing it as something other than the normal. Ghosh as Ornob Mitra, is so different from his flamboyant self as he takes on the role of a mournful lover. The first time we see him, he is wearing jeans and a black t-shirt, wearing black sunglasses in the crematorium. He talks casually with Siddhartha's mother, Arati Mishra (Deepti Naval). When Arati comes to know the truth, she is initially hesitant. But slowly they start forming a bond, through the grief of losing a loved one. Siddhartha, the loved one, whom they lost in a road accident. Siddhartha is never shown on screen, only his voice is heard. As Ghosh portrays Ornob, the scenes are shot more intimately and in a private space, dim-lit, making the story seem hidden from the outsiders' view. It almost feels that the audience is

²⁷ Sengupta, Reshmi. 2011. "Who's memory is it?: Actor Rituparno Ghosh and Director Sanjoy Nag on the Mechanics of *Memories in March*." *The Telegraph Online*, March 23, 2011.

intruding on the private space of Siddhartha, Ornab, and Arati. It suggests a kind of question about why there is so much curiosity in a same-sex relationship, and so much criticism, if it does not concern others. Arati already subverts the notion of an ideal mother image as she is a single mother estranged from her husband, a well-educated working woman. The feminine attributes of Ornab almost hint at him identifying with the third gender. It becomes evident with the use of the Maithili song during Ornab's visit to the accident site, projecting Ornab as a woman, as the connotation of the “many shifts in one” is clearly stated. The references to Krishna and Vrindavan in the song immediately draw a parallel between Ornab and Radha.²⁸ Radha becomes the archetypal image of the beloved often invoked in Indian mythology and Bhakti songs.²⁹ Similarly, Arati understands the relationship shared between them. It is not a disease; Ornab is not a disease; in fact, he is the one who had helped her son to accept himself just as he is.

Film critic Taran Adarsh explains how beautifully the difference in gender and sexual orientation has been vividly described in the film: "A film like *Memories in March* treads on a hitherto unknown path, and I genuinely feel that such stories need to be told. [The act of] coming out of the closet ... would encourage more people to open up and accept their sexuality with pride."³⁰ Ghosh's stardom and performance not only helped authenticate the performance but also helped in creating a conversation about the atrocities that the third gender had to face. The ideological implication of Ghosh's on-and off-screen gender performance is substantial. His representation of characters, especially representing the transgender community, blurs any distinction between the life of reel and real life. In his films and his real life, Ghosh would cross-

²⁸ Krishna and Radha in Hindu mythology is the God and Goddess of love. They are worshipped as a prayer. Vrindavan is believed to be the place where Krishna hailed from and had spent time with his beloved, Radha.

²⁹ Bhakti songs in Hindu religion are songs used to show devotion to God. Bhakti songs on Krishna and Radha also speaks about their love and is often used to symbolize love and devotion for one's partner.

³⁰ Adarsh, Taran. 2011. "Memories in March Review 3/5." *Bollywood Hungama*, April 1, 2011.

dress and embrace the androgynous, creating a distinct understanding that you cannot dissociate the “other” from the “self.” Ghosh had stated regarding the discourse of the politics of identity, “Our understanding of sexuality is sadly limited by the binary heterosexuality/homosexuality. I believe our identities are subject to the body, which is a boundary... I believe in transcending that boundary.... the body is in a state of transition, perennially ... [and] so is my identity.”³¹

Understanding the fluidity of gender, helps in accepting the third gender and their presence in India.

Written by Ghosh, the subversion is intended, especially as he always had done it in his career. The film subverts the notion of conventionality, already creating a story different from what commercial films provide to the mainstream audience. In one of the scenes of the film, Ornab says to Arati that he hated the fish tank in Siddhartha’s house, as he hated the idea of being caged, of being put in boxes. Liberation and freedom are what one needs, as everyone needs to be what they are, already suggesting that he or even Siddhartha cannot be defined through what society perceives them to be, they are more than their sexual identity. As the film’s screenwriter, Ghosh’s interviews regarding the LGBTQ+ community and transgender identity became more open and voiced. *Memories in March* almost becomes a reaction to *Arekti Premer Golpo* as it becomes a tale that speaks about how the narration of a transgender tale comes with its prejudices of being rejected and how a conservative society approaches a same-sex or non-heteronormative relationship.

Transcribing the Queer Body in *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012)

Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish (2012) follows the story of the dance drama choreographer Rudra (Rituparno Ghosh) in his process of transitioning to female and finding his

³¹ Bakshi, Kaustav. 2013. “I can’t have a relationship because people get overwhelmed by my stardom.” *Hindustan Times*, June 9, 2013.

own sexual self and sexual identity. Ghosh is the writer, director and actor of the film. In the film, he consciously chooses to bring forward his autobiographical narrative, distinguishing clearly western concept of transgenderism and limitation of gender binary with the cultural presence of third gender in India and its mythology and religion. The film pushes into view the questions of desire and sexuality, especially as it draws into focus the body of a male dancer considering sex reassignment surgery. In Indian culture, especially in classical and folk dance, male dancers are not rare, but as dancing is seen as a feminine activity, they are still considered more feminine. Ghosh not only challenges the stereotyping and shaming of men who dance but also problematizes it even further by celebrating the fluidity of the body and sexuality. He disassociates the biological gender from sexuality by emphasizing the mutability of the body.

The film starts with Rudra in a hospital bed as he talks with his counselor Shubho (Anjan Dutt). Rudra narrates the introduction of his dance drama: “It had to be an heir that was all the father knew. To carry on the name and the family pride. And so the training began. But the child to be a girl or a boy? Did anyone ask or even want to know? Children have dreams beyond their parents’ expectations, and they wish on stars and fallen eyelashes. Sometimes wishes come true. Unexpectedly to crown a life and turn everything inside out.” Shubho is rather astonished at this introduction and asks if the audience would even be able to relate to *Chitrangada*.³² He even suggests that it was also autobiographical. Rudra explains that because Shubho knows about his sexual identity, he thinks it is autobiographical. The opening scene poses the question whether this film in itself is autobiographical or not. Would someone who does not know about Rituparno Ghosh still assume the film was autobiographical? The uncanny resemblance to Ghosh’s life and Rudra says otherwise; they are too similar, the way Rudra dresses and behaves is almost identical

³²*Chitrangada*, the dance drama by Rabindranath Tagore is extremely popular in Bengal, therefore, its context is almost known to the theatre audience.

to Ghosh, even the bonds shown in the film are almost identical to Ghosh's own. Despite its autobiographical elements, the film is loosely based on the one-act-verse drama of the same title written by the renowned Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. Rituparno Ghosh (much like Rudra in the dance drama) had written, directed, and also acted in it as the transgender protagonist. As Rudra suggests, "Chitrangada is the story of a wish. That you can choose your gender."

Even though the film is based on Tagore's dance drama, the story of Chitrangada goes way back in Indian cultural history. Tagore adapted it from the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*. In the "Adi Parva" of the *Mahabharata*, it is said that Arjuna met Princess Chitrangada during his expedition to Manipur. Her father Provanjan, the king of Manipur had previously learned from Lord Shiva that only sons in his family would be blessed. Instead, a daughter is born debunking the divine decree. Since the king did not have other descendants, he decided to rear her as a boy: she learns archery and practices the art of war. Later, she falls in love with Arjuna, and the king grants permission to marry, provided Arjuna's son becomes king and heads the Manipur dynasty.

In Tagore's *Chitrangada*, it is explicitly mentioned that Chitrangada is a trans woman who was assigned male at birth but later transitioned into a woman. His adaptation was the story of a search for gender identity. Ghosh, highly influenced by this drama, also wanted to make a stage play, but it was never realized due to his untimely death. Tagore had talked about the "gender trouble" of the brief point of Chitrangada's metamorphosis from man to woman.³³ The internal conflict of her meeting Arjuna for the first time is apparent, as her masculine traits slowly fade, and passion and love awaken. But amidst it all, she is still in grief as she cannot understand the love she feels for a man, as it is wrong. Despite all her efforts and the notion of

³³ Ghosh, Sheenjini. 2020. "A Queer Journey: Mahabharata to Ghosh's Chitrangada." *International Journal of English, Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)* 5, no. 1 (January-February): 170-175.

her being a fierce warrior, the feminine attributes overpower her struggle. She finally reveals her true self to him, and only after he accepts her can she accept herself and her identity.

In Ghosh's *Chitrangada*, we see Rudra in a hospital bed for sex reassignment surgery; as the camera draws close, we see the bedframe and the bedside rod partitions his face. From the first scene, we understand the film's intention: a biological man is split into two halves in a search for who he is supposed to be, and he finally understands who he is not. There is an imposition of identity in this film; he is not an engineer like his father wants him to be, and he is not the man that society views him to be. He is just himself, sometimes not even enough for himself. Rudra, in the film is vulnerable; he wants the love of his father, he even tells him that he has given up on trying to mend this relationship, as he knows his father will not accept him. Rituparno Ghosh plays the choreographer Rudra Chatterjee, who is starting to prepare to stage Tagore's play as a dance drama on his 150th birthday. During the staging, he meets the percussionist Partho (Jisshu Sengupta). Initially, they cannot tolerate one another, but slowly, they fall in love.

The film almost parallels Ghosh's life. Even the portrayal of Rudra's parents is an extension of Ghosh's own, as Dasgupta notes. In an interview, Ghosh stated, "*Chitrangada* carries a silent dedication to them, my ma and baba (parents)."³⁴ This approachability of Rudra does not alienate the audience from a marginalized character, for most Indian films that are focused on marginalized characters and narratives, there is a certain lack of ability that bars the audience from empathizing and internalizing the turmoil of the characters. However, Ghosh portrays the community as they are, as normal human beings but facing difficulty at being understood. Centered on Rudra staging the play and his drug addict boyfriend, Partho, the film

³⁴ ABP Ananda. 2012. *Rituparno Ghosh's Chitrangada- the story of a dancer*. ABP Ananda.

focuses on this outcast romance, bringing into view how society is still hesitant to accept the marginalized. Ghosh's adamancy helped other directors to make films about the LGBTQ+ community and also talk about their existence in a socio-religious conservative society in such films as *Nagarkirtan* (2017) and *Samantaraal* (2017) or voicing in favor of the community and making Indian Pride march a celebratory occasion. Ghosh takes his audience on a journey and subverts the binary, exploring the questions of transitioning individuals as well as oneself, questioning age-old notions about transgender, as well as reflecting on the multi-tiered tensions that surround identity.

In *Chitrangada*, this tension is unraveled as we see Rudra talk with his counselor Subho on multiple occasions. The conversations with Subho bring forward Rudra's inhibition about desire, his confusion, and despair regarding his image of self and society, how he views himself, and how this viewing changes when others see him. Rudra is alone, and he seeks companionship; his acceptance of rejection brings him turmoil, and it changes as we move further into the film. His father as well as his partner cannot accept him, and this leaves a mark on him. What comes as a shock to Rudra and us is that even Shubho is a figment of his own imagination. It leaves Rudra with one option, a sort of narcissism, a relationship that helps him; he cannot love anything more than himself, other than him sharing some loving and comforting moments with his mother. A bond that was much cherished even in Ghosh's real life.

Rudra's fear of being rejected for his identity is clear. Shubho and Rudra's conversations almost seem like Ghosh answering questions about himself. It is as if he is asking how an audience that celebrated him in the likes of Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen could reject him just because he changed the way he looked. His love for cross-dressing and figuring himself out may change their views on him and may result in rejecting his queer genre as a whole.

Ghosh makes a strong statement throughout the film: a performance not coded by gendered performance. The radicalism of *Chitrangada*, therefore, had a significant impact not only on the queer movement but also on the performance arts as a gender-fluid sphere. The films *Arekti Premer Golpo* and *Chitrangada* complement each other in this regard: both turn to the performance arts and locate within them sexualities and sexual behaviors, inaugurating an avenue for queer sexualities in the populist art forms. The film's interpretation also provides ground for rereading popular tales, as through his interpretations of Tagore, we can find a much greater potential for queer stories, and they help in looking at the Indian mythical past in a newer way.

Ghosh's selection of *Chitrangada* is conscious; he ties the mythic with reality, creating (as one understands) his best work. In the film, Rudra's father has always seen his son's effeminacy as a disease, and he could not accept a sexual orientation different from what hegemony had taught him. He repeatedly tells Rudra, "You could have just directed the play. Why act in it?" It almost makes it seem that Rudra, playing a transgender character, made him ashamed in society. It is no coincidence that both the father and the son are poles apart, especially regarding their understanding of gender. The father does not accept his son's profession as a dancer. He wants his son to be an engineer (much like Ghosh, in reality, was an engineer and had studied at Jadavpur University—to fulfill his parents' wish). His son's sexuality prevents him from attending any of his plays. He represents society, saying that his son would become central to mockery for his behavior. Even though the mother is more accepting, she still has her prejudice. Rudra's mother cannot accept his decision to undergo reassignment surgery. "I gave birth to this body," she reminds him, "which is yours... I have a right to know whatever goes on in this body. I have a right to know if it is changing, transforming."

Even though they later accept his wish, the process is not smooth; they blame themselves for all that is wrong in Rudra's life, but ultimately, they provide him the freedom to choose his gender. Even actress Aparna Sen, who had almost been like Ghosh's family said after watching the film, "I knew my uncle and aunt very well. They have come alive through your movie. Those sections are so very appealing!"³⁵ Indicating how the stories intertwine. Sen later also shared how Ghosh, in his early life, had a tremendous desire to become a woman but later resigned himself to his physical fate. She said, "The sex of his body may be male, but his gender mindset was decidedly female."³⁶ But what is heartbreaking is Rudra's desire to change gender, much like Chitrangada in the myth, because of love for another person. Unlike Chitrangada, Rudra wants to adopt a child, as Partho loves children. Still, per the guidelines of the Central Adoption Resource Authority in Chapter 4, Section 1, "Same-sex couples are not eligible to adopt." Partho laughs at this cordial as he thinks Rudra is not thinking straight. He cannot believe that Rudra would ever be indeed able to accept him, a bisexual man. When Partho rejects him, Rudra gives in to embracing his former self, as he alone cannot have a child, and the man he loves is no longer with him. After much consideration, Rudra finally accepts that gender is a matter of choice and moves away from what gender and sexual orientation state through social norms. The "crowning wish" becomes Rudra's choice to choose himself irrespective of everything that society initiates him to be. He states, "Most of us are unhappy with what nature gives us. Or guys wouldn't want a macho six-pack to become a man, and girls wouldn't wax and primp to become a woman!" This understanding echoes Judith Butler's thesis on gender.

Much like Butler, Rudra believes in gender as a choice. Still, as Butler recognizes, it is not at all possible for gender to necessarily precede any choice of "gender style" itself, which is

³⁵ Dutta, Sangeeta, dir. 2023. *Bird of Dusk*. SVF. Translation in mine.

³⁶ Ibid.

always and already limited from the beginning. Butler explains, “[t]o choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that organizes them a new. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew one's cultural history in one's terms. This is not a prescriptive task we must endeavor to do, but one in which we have been endeavoring all along.”³⁷ Rudra’s initiation was forced upon him by the outside, limiting him. Instead, he chose to critique his limitations and acknowledge that he indeed was a representation through the third gender, for his transgender self could not fit within the definition of binary. His rejection of the surgery finally demonstrates that he had accepted himself: he chose his gender, the third gender, he could dress as he wanted, he could be as he was, finally, and did not need to be limited by the norms of societal expectation.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Rituparno Ghosh

The amalgamation of Ghosh and his films helps us understand how gender issues created a stir within Indian society. The three films analyzed in this thesis, often called the gay trilogy, were a celebration of Ghosh and his identity. They not only defined Ghosh but depicted the controversies that he and other transgender people had to overcome. As Ghosh had previously stated, his films were his activism.³⁸ Ghosh was determined to challenge social taboos and open up a public space for dialogue about the third gender. Because of Ghosh, other transgender filmmakers and artists found a position in the industry, as Sangeeta Dutta in her film, *Bird of Dusk* (2018), shows the transgender actor, Ranjan Bose and different actors portraying Ghosh in different Bengali theatre performances. It also shows another person, holding Ghosh’s picture in the middle of the Pride Rally in Kolkata, with the title, ‘LGBTQ+ ICON.’

³⁷ Butler, Judith. 1986. “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex.” *Yale French Studies* 72:35-49.

³⁸ Bakshi, Kaustav. 2013. “I can’t have a relationship because people get overwhelmed by my stardom.” *Hindustan Times*, June 9, 2013.

During the filming of *Arekti Premer Golpo*, the rumors of Ghosh's imminent sex reassignment were controversial and much debated. When asked, Ghosh replied, "It is assumed that feminine gay men desire to be women. It is an inability to see beyond the binaries of male-female hetero-homo. So, they feel that all feminine gay men must have a desire to become a woman, and since Rituparno Ghosh has the money, he must have undergone the surgery. I am a strong supporter of sex reassignment surgery, but everything I support does not necessarily apply to me."³⁹ His carefully constructed facade of sexual ambiguity before the media and his embrace of gender fluidity proved controversial issues for Tollygunge in the wake of *Arekti Premer Golpo*. His public appearances while crossdressing only further stoked discussions of his sexual ambiguity. His iconic status overpowered any representations on the stage, even as they challenged conservative social attitudes. Ghosh was aware that he would lose a section of his audience who did not feel comfortable with the honest exhibition of his sexuality in real or reel life.

Ghosh continued to assert gender fluidity. Because his body of work most often dealt with issues facing middle-class Bengali 'bhodrolok', the predominant source of his audience and fan base, it is only likely that his non-heteronormative storylines and celebrity status positively changed middle-class ideology. With Ghosh's death, the LGBTQ+ community in Kolkata mourned. Ghosh's films depicted the urban complexities with a continuous exploration of gender parallel to his exploration of his sexuality. The closet becomes symbolic of the hetero-patriarchal social structure from where the queer community must emerge in their own right into a more liberating space. The patriarchal society is similar to the proverbial fictional closet where their voices are silenced, their narratives of suffering are omitted and erased, and their sexual desires

³⁹ ABP Ananda. 2012. *Rituparno Ghosh's Chitrangada- the story of a dancer*. ABP Ananda.

are suppressed. In his autobiographical book *First Person*, Ghosh openly talks about his personal experiences as a queer personality, the challenges in a male-dominated film industry, and the existing narrative in films from a male lens. He says, "My point is, why shouldn't I celebrate my sexuality?"⁴⁰ He further says in an interview, "There is much more to such relationships. Same-sex relationships, too, are extremely soulful, emotional and have the same pathos that any heterosexual relationship has."⁴¹ Ghosh showcases this emotion in his films, not adhering to stereotyping gender or same-sex relationships.

India's rich history depicts transgender themes and characters in its sacred texts, epics, myths, and literature. From Shikhandi and Chitrangada in the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata* to the acknowledgment of a third gender in *Kamasutra*. This existence and iteration acknowledge the acceptance of non-binary identities. Even the Hijra community, a long-established transgender community in India, has been the earliest known non-binary community legally in the Indian constitution. Ghosh's influence affected in the increase of queer films in the Indian film industry, with stories such as *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Aligarh* (2015), *Iratta Jeevitham* (2017), *Nagarkirtan* (2017), *Geeli Pucchi* (2021), and *Badhaai Do* (2022) that gained huge success both commercially and critically, pushing forward LGBTQ+ stories.

As film scholar Moinak Biswas argues, Ghosh progressed into a 'post-economic liberalization' that transitioned in his films: "Chitrangada moved into a domain where the circle is drawn around 'I,' which has some disruptive potential."⁴² This potential for disruption further

⁴⁰ Ghosh, Rituparno. 2013. *ফার্স্ট পার্সন: প্রথম ও দ্বিতীয় খণ্ড একত্রে*. Dey's Publisher.

⁴¹ Hazra, Saonli. 2018. "A Tribute to Rituparno Ghosh, the Filmmaker who Humanised Same-Sex Relationships." *The Wire*, December 10, 2018.

⁴² Thakur, Tanul. 2023. "In Today's Queer Stories, Rituparno Ghosh Seems To Be Present Even Through His Absence." *Outlook*, August 30, 2023.

created a rupture in the narration of the stories.⁴³ Film scholar Daisy Hasan adds, “Given that the roots of the story lay in the Hindu epics, the film can also be read as an attempt to critique the Hindu Right’s appropriation of mythological texts.”⁴⁴ This can be seen in the strict regulations and terrible treatment towards the transgender community, especially in the pro-right-wing states in India. Whereas the left-wing states try to make the regulations more lenient for the LGBTQ+ community, such as Kerala in 2015. The South Indian state, Kerala, had announced a transgender policy that helped in protecting the human and basic rights of the trans community that had finally drawn a clear line at stopping their discrimination and exploitation.

Ghosh’s ability to acknowledge and tackle criticism and portray flawed characters helped in showing his flexibility as a director and actor who had relationships with humor, performance, and alienation. It would have been equally enlightening to see if Ghosh would have furthered his horizon with new stories and inclusion, but this is perhaps a void of never-ending questions as he passed away just a year after the release of *Chitrangada*. Even in this omission and absence, Ghosh was found as the new wave of activism rose in India; with *Pride* becoming a constitutional demand, the contours of LGBTQ+ rights changed and perpetuated new rights and laws. The battle of the community continues; as even though homosexuality has been decriminalized, its acceptance is still barred, as in 2023, the Supreme Court ruled against the legalization of same-sex marriage.

There are very few directors and actors who publicly support LGBTQ+ activism, let alone show it in their art, but the ferocity that Ghosh showed so naturally was perhaps the very

⁴³ Bag, Shamik, and Nandini Ramnath. 2013. “Rituparno Ghosh, a filmmaker who pushed the envelope, dies at 49.” *Mint*, May 31, 2013.

⁴⁴ Hasan, Daisy. 2015. “‘Kissed on one Cheek and Slapped on the Other’ Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada* as an allegory of oppositional readings.” Edited by Sangeeta Datta. In *Rituparno Ghosh: Cinema, Gender and Art*, edited by Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K. Dasgupta. Routledge.

last in Indian films. His oeuvre is a legacy that affected him both personally and in his career. Ghosh was influenced by Bengali art, culture, aesthetics, and history, so much so that it was evident in his films, making him a prominent cultural queer icon. Ghosh exhibited a selfhood that was not restricted by shame. He countered the shaming with flamboyance and an excess of self-dramatization. He experimented with his fashion choice and physical appearance a great deal, resorting to non-binary, gender-neutral clothes in his later years. Ghosh's gain as an auteur cannot be denied, especially as it delved with stardom and the cultural significance that he and his narratives held, and it favored more than it does for the queer subculture of Bengal.

Even though he never directly addressed the several gender reassignment surgeries he went through during the last few years of his life, the changes in his physical appearance were clear. Still, he consistently offered valuable commentaries on gender sensitization. Ghosh had influenced a majority of the sexual minority community through his films, a mark in starting a pungent critique of heteropatriarchy, often illuminating the reality behind apparently happy marriages, romantic relationships, and familial equations. He emphasized the notions of compulsory heterosexuality and monogamy.

Rituparno Ghosh, in an interview, discussed: "Our society is in a process of evolution and there are many questions coming from it. One has to confront those questions gracefully."⁴⁵ Ghosh truly understood the dynamics of storytelling and how stories that subverted the norms needed to be told. He understood his transgressions and unconventionalities, and his experiments with his identity and self became an escape from the formulaic style that was exponentially used in films. Ghosh came to terms with his identity and sexuality over the last few years of his life, and this acceptance was reflected in his films. The films gained commercial and critical acclaim

⁴⁵ Bag, Shamik, and Nandini Ramnath. 2013. "Rituparno Ghosh, a filmmaker who pushed the envelope, dies at 49." *Mint*, May 31, 2013.

in Bengal and across India. From winning 12 national awards, he was also influential stylistically in filmmakers such as Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, Kaushik Ganguly, Srijit Mukherji, and Kamalleshwar Mukherjee. Ghosh's films and activism provided a surge in narratives that depicted and explored transgender identities and experiences in contemporary Indian films. The films that were discussed showed their crucial role in reflecting the social fabric of a nation and highlighting the struggles and triumphs of marginalized communities. In recent years, transgender movements in India have gained momentum, challenged societal norms, and advocated for inclusivity and acceptance.

Along with Ghosh's activism, transgender movements have shattered barriers and given voice to a community that has long been marginalized and misunderstood. Understanding the politics of identity in India is difficult as it is filled with multiple cultures, and the films have only helped in their inclusivity and their positioning within the socio-cultural milieu. When the films *Arekti Premer Golpo*, *Memories of March*, and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* were released, it was a crucial phase as the legal navigation with queerness was still trying to be figured out. Bringing forward queer stories during such volatile times made it extremely difficult for the films to be screened and not targeted. As writer and director, Onir, in an interview, had stated regarding Ghosh, "I miss his presence in Indian cinema because there was a queer gaze to his work."⁴⁶ It can be understood the only the appearance of the third gender did not matter but it was the ownership of it, which all the characters that Ghosh played and portrayed did, and hence why his transgender characters are so vastly celebrated. His authentic and heartbreaking exploration of the queer community helped in challenging the existing gender norms. Rituparno Ghosh was not just a Bengali filmmaker; he was an icon of Indian Queer community.

⁴⁶ Telegraph India. 2023. "Onir: 'I miss Rituparno Ghosh's presence in Indian cinema because there was a queer gaze to his work.'" *The Telegraph Online*, February 3, 2023.

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