“People Said I Created Pornography”:
Sexuality, The Gaze and Rituparno Ghosh

Somdatta Mandal

I: INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning of his career, when he made Unishe April (1995), acclaimed Bengali filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh made films revolving around women, so much so that he has often been labeled as “the woman’s director of Bangla (Bengali) cinema.” His explanation for his oeuvre was also simple – he just felt that he understood the inner feelings of women, their passion, agony and suffering. So all his films up to Titli (2001) dealt with women-centric situations, either talking about the new woman, the lonely one, the rebel one or the persecuted one. Ever since he adapted Tagore’s Chokher Bali (A Passion Play, 2003) and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s short story “Protima” as Antarmahal (The Inner Chamber, 2005), Rituparno has been mired in controversy for making films with too much, and often unnecessary, focus on sexuality and what film critics like Laura Mulvey call “visual pleasure” or “the gaze.” In Rituparno’s case the situation is further complicated by three factors: a) his own preference for alternative sexuality; b) his constant harping on the statement “I feel I understand the inner feelings of women, their passion, agony and suffering” (Mandal 18); and c) his own declaration about the androgynous nature of human characters – “I believe in the art of androgyny which includes the male and female opinion.”

Discussing Chokher Bali and Antarmahal in details, my paper focuses upon some of these issues and tries to analyze why the director feels that he understands the psyche of women better and hence can offer a more objective approach. It is also interesting to see how moving backwards in time, setting these two films in the nineteenth century, Rituparno became bolder in depicting relationships and sexual escapades of characters than he did in films set in contemporary times. Also the gender-sensitized director seems to have become more keen on cashing in on the global culture market’s penchant for ‘authentic’ India (read Bengal), which

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can be constructed by invoking the past as it exists in the popular imaginary. Thus we have ample bare-bodied women in the zenana, young widows and matured first wives whose menstruating situations -- described by the director in graphic details in both the films under discussion -- pointing out to the viewers the latent sexual potentiality of suppressed womanhood.

II: SEXUALITY

Talking of sexuality, let us first take the example of Chokher Bali, a film subtitled a “passion play.” Though the phrase encapsulates the complex web of desire into which the novel’s two male and two female protagonists are inextricably caught, the person singled out for exclusive attention is Binodini. Ghosh transforms Rabindranath Tagore’s avowedly psychological novel of triangular love into a period piece with his own version of the nation and its women. The deprivations, both sexual and material, that mark the life of an unusually gifted, educated, strong-willed and passionate young widow who willfully transgressed the code of conduct proper for her, provides the director with the convenient apparatus to showcase the apparently deglamourised sex appeal of Bollywood’s diva Aishwarya Rai cast in the role of Binodini. Anticipating opposition towards his film and creating a rationale for his departure from the original, Ghosh begins the film with a quote from Tagore in which the latter expresses regret about the ending of the novel: “Ever since Chokher Bali was published, I have always regretted the ending. I ought to be censured for it”(translation mine). After a great tumult of adulterous passion between the widowed Binodini and Mahendra that precipitates a crisis threatening the latter’s marriage, the novel concludes with a reconciliation of the married couple at the bedside of Rajlakshmi, Mahendra’s dying mother. Binodini forgives both the men and goes off to Benaras and leads an ascetic life. Ghosh is unwilling to accept this analysis. “Suddenly she becomes very clinical and antiseptic, devoid of all passion, because that is the right thing for a widow to do,” says Ghosh in an interview with AsiaSource.

Tagore started this serialized novel with the forbidden passion of a widow, more because of reasons of titillation; he had to draw people to read his novel because he was editing the magazine! It got a bit out of hand midway, and all the holy
Brahmins, their hair went up in holy smoke [laughs] and they almost started lambasting Tagore, so he himself not being a Hindu decided not to fiddle too much with Hindu sentiments and restored her to the conformist, Hindu domesticity that society demanded at that time.

So in Ghosh’s Barthesian reworking of the novel, there is no neat closure of the intense claustrophobic web of desires and jealousies set up between the protagonists. Instead, the ending is made much more complex, enigmatic and open in which the audience learns of Binodini’s decision, through her letter written to Ashalata, to search for her ‘desh’ instead of simply of going away to Kashi to live as a good Hindu widow. This ‘desh’ is not ‘country’ nor should be translated or read as country, says Ghosh. It should be read as a space, a space or domain for an independent woman that Binodini was. In another interview given to film critic Shoma A. Chatterjee in 2003, Rituparno commented on what inspired him to make a film on Chokher Bali:

It was the delicate interplay of relationships that touched me. The story offered a vast matrix of relationships, which I, as director, could play around with in a myriad different ways. Chokher Bali struck me as a very original text to begin with. It deals with unfaithfulness in the man-woman relationship within the institution of marriage. Maybe, if you pick on this lack of faith, you may find that one common link between Chokher Bali and Bariwali. The ‘period’ flavour I could invest the film with was another attraction. Tagore’s original story did not have any time reference. The characters seem to be hanging in a limbo. The film offered me the chance of preparing the ‘period’ for the film. In Shatranj Ke Khilari Ray created the historical context for the film turning the ‘period’ into a ‘character.’ He did the same for Ghare Baire and Charulata. I have done the same in this film (Chatterjee 223-24).

So far so good. But throughout the movie, Ghosh who has highlighted his research into making the film an authentic ‘period’ piece particularly in terms of setting, apparel and jewellery, has taken recourse to several incongruities regarding social norms of behaviour and codes of conduct that guided heterosexual interactions. Instances of physical intimacy of the married
couple in their private chambers have been overdone no doubt, but in public (especially in the picnic scene where Ashalata and Mahendra lie huddled together) or Behari’s entry into the puja room with a stranger asking for Binodini’s signature for campaign are held up as signs of such a-historical approach. What is interesting to note is that the film’s violation of historical and textual fidelity is closely linked to issues of sexuality. Critics point out that Binodini and Mahendra’s dalliance in the thakurghar (puja room) is historically inaccurate apart from being blasphemous. Mahendra comes with the jewel box and touches her in an endearing way and apart from asking him to take her to the River Ganges, Binodini states that she does not want to take ‘the middle path.’ She wants Mahendra to accept their relationship in public, which obviously he cannot do. Mahendra calls him his ‘pran bhomra’ (literally and metaphorically meaning the wasp that carries his life and soul) and when he kisses Binodini, she states, “My husband died of TB” and laughs at the shirking attitude of Mahendra, the would-be doctor. Other critics also note that although the novel does not allude to a consummation of the illicit relation between Mahendra and Binodini, the film flamboyantly displays the love bites on Binodini’s exposed neck and has several scenes of love-making, the most notable of which takes place inside a horse-drawn carriage where the passion of the lovers is offset by the sounds and sights of the rallies protesting against British domination. What is disturbing is that Ghosh, in attempting to visually translate the passion that informs the novel but remains unstated, resorts to hackneyed codes of representation of sexual passion a la twentieth century Hollywood. Later when Binodini sheds all her inhibitions, comes decked in gold ornaments and succumbs to Behari by asking him to marry her, she says, “You don’t have to love me…Take me.” Though her proposal is rejected, she tries all the sexual mores possible to attract Behari’s attention and wants to do away with the three female attributes she has, namely as a young woman, as a western-educated memsahib and as a widow.

The urge to display overt sexuality gains even greater momentum in Ghosh’s next film. Set in the late nineteenth century, 1878 to be exact, Antarmahal (Visions of the Inner Chamber) is a definite period piece bringing into focus the patriarchal zamindari system of rural Bengal with landlords keeping their wives hidden in the zenana. It is a brilliant depiction of the oppression women suffered at the hands of their ‘masters’ -- the zamindars, husbands and priests. Bhubaneswar Chowdhury is a wealthy and tyrannical zamindar who has two obsessions:
the first is his desperate attempt for an heir which even his new young second wife Jashomati seems unable to deliver; and competing with his regional rivals to produce the most magnificent effigy for the annual Durga puja ceremony. This year he concocts a master plan – why not change the face of the goddess for the most powerful woman on earth – Queen Victoria. This would fetch him the enviable title of ‘Roy Bahadur.’ Meantime his two wives Mahamaya and Jashomati try to look out for one another especially as Bhubaneswar begins to sexually assault his younger wife each night. He even brings a Brahmin priest to chant holy shlokas pleading to the gods of procreation (10th episode from Kalidasa’s Raghuvansha) while the intercourse goes on so that the brave exploits of mythological heroes would expedite the conception of a male heir. Traumatized and lonely, Jashomati is dangerously drawn to the young sculptor Braj Bushan who has been employed to create the new effigy of Durga. Despite the purdah system, Ghosh manages to create several situations in the film where the young Jashomati comes physically very close to Braj Bhushan. The contrast between love and sex, male oppression and tender ministration is brought into the frames with teasing sensitivity. By the time the zamindar realizes that the face of the Goddess Durga has been modeled on his young wife and marches with his gun to shoot her, the woman has already committed suicide. The British painter who serves as the objective narrator of the story concludes the film with the following statement. “She died of an incurable malady. No one knows what happened to the young sculptor.”

As a self-proclaimed expert in portraying relationships, in this film also Ghosh excels in developing the subtle nuances between characters, especially the interplay and interdependence of the two oppressed women, who are ironically juxtaposed against patriarchal adoration for supernatural heroines. But Antarmahal created quite a furore for his blatant presentation of sex. Though some critics accused him of presenting pornography, Rituparno was quite nonchalant about the whole affair. In an interview given to Indrani Roy Mitra for rediff.com (November 22, 2005) he stated that he failed to understand why Indians couldn’t accept sexuality as a part of life. He felt sad the accusation of creating pornography came from a country that adores the architectural excellence of Khajuraho and takes pride in the Kama Sutra. He said:

“...A film is but a mirror of life and so in Antarmahal. It spoke of the life and times as they were in the 19th century Bengal. The period witnessed the sexual exploitation and my job was to recreate it. Pornography is something that makes...”
use of sex and sexuality to generate physical excitement. It’s a pity that people are equating *Antarmahal* with cheap exhibitionism. The intimate scenes were not meant to entertain. They were meant to stir the audience’s minds. The zamindar makes is a point to have sex with his wife every night so she can bear him a child. Their sexual interaction is a dry, mechanical process bereft of love and emotion. The wife is used and abused every night by her mindless husband. Through the oft-repeated ‘intimate’ scenes, my intent was not to focus on the sex but on the way the woman in question was exploited by her husband. People in our country are used to sexual overtones in literature, but not in films. I wish they would get rid of such inhibitions.

This kind of self-declared mission of exposing patriarchal oppression therefore is supposed to lift the film from the accusations it has been facing since its release. Dubbed as ‘Rituparno’s porno,’ questions were raised whether the director could not have shown some of the intimate scenes a little less exposed and more suggestively as did Satyajit Ray from whom he borrowed many tropes, ideas, scenes in both *Chokher Bali* and *Antarmahal*. For instance, Jashomati, acted by Soha Ali Khan resembles the child-bride in Satyajit Ray’s *Devi* (*The Goddess*, 1960) portrayed by her mother Sharmila Tagore, but with a difference. Ray was too much of a puritan to project sex in anything but silhouette and could never imagine of going into the graphic scenes of sexual subjugation. Justifying the bold scenes Rituparno further states:

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

He even mentioned that in keeping with the fidelity of the story he wanted to depict the younger wife run out nude in the open courtyard but could not do so fearing the censor scissors.

III: THE GAZE
Film critics and feminists have discussed the meaning and possibilities of the ‘gaze’ over and over again. Before delving into analyzing how Rituparno uses the ‘gaze’ as a trope in both his movies, I would like to discuss a little about the theoretical issues related to the prevalence of the male gaze across cultures, something that bell hooks describes as Hollywood’s patriarchal cinematic practice of “explicitly representing woman as object of a phallocentric gaze.” The concept of the ‘gaze’ as distinct from that of the ‘look’ requires attention here and we can term ‘look to connote a process, a relation, while using the word ‘gaze’ for a one-way subjective vision. The “gaze” came into film theory, as most people know, through Laura Mulvey’s influential 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In that essay, Mulvey alternated between using ‘gaze’ and ‘look’ for the phenomena she was describing. In the section titled “Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look,” Mulvey almost immediately replaces ‘look’ with ‘gaze’ when she says that “The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 11). She proceeds to show how “an active-passive heterosexual division of labour has …controlled narrative structure,” and to discuss differences between scopophilic and narcissistic pleasure in looking. Although in one section Mulvey talks about “the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film,” and notes that “Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like,” when she summarizes her points at the end she returns to the word ‘look.’ She distinguishes three cinematic ‘looks’: that of the camera in the pro-filmic event; that of the spectators in the cinema; and a third look that denies the first two and subordinates them to it, namely, that of the characters towards one another “within the screen illusion”(17). Mulvey does not appear to see any difference between the “look” and the “gaze.” As a one-way subjective vision the ‘gaze’ is distinguished from ‘look’ as a strategy for opening up space for process in looking, and E. Ann Kaplan emphasizes that the difference between the two words is significant and should be considered seriously.

It is true that “gaze” reduces the ‘woman/man’ to a mere ‘body.’ In the highly and historically patriarchal Bengali society, looking connotes curiosity about the Other, a wanting to know (which can of course be oppressive but does not have to be), while the gaze involves extreme anxiety – an attempt in a sense not to know, to deny. Rituparno Ghosh amply uses all the three types of gazes in the films under discussion. In Chokher Bali he uses the sartorial codes of early 19th century Bengali women, which did not include any upper body garment to
allow the camera to rest on the exposed shoulder and back of Ashalata and Binodini. As Chakrabarti and Ganguly rightly point out, perhaps the most memorable excess of this fetish is displayed in the scene in which the modern (read western) educated Binodini teaches Ashalata how to wear a blouse/jacket (257). It appears that Ghosh cannot resist quoting Satyajit Ray of *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World, 1984)* where he uses a long sequence of Bimala trying on her new jackets. For Satyajit Ray, the woman’s jacket becomes a metonym for the emerging *bhadramohila* (the new bourgeois gentlewoman) in the context of western modernity. However for Ghosh this is an opportunity to titillate the audience with Aishwarya Rai’s flawless and well-toned and exercised shoulders and waist. She does not fit the description of Tagore’s Binodini as a woman with smouldering sexuality who has “joined eyebrows, sharp glance, flawless features and a voluptuous youthfulness” however she might try to trail the end of her white sari on the floor with her waist-length hair seldom tied. Her box-office glamour prevents the audience to think of her as a woman with earthy sexuality and unfulfilled passion.

But apart from the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film looking upon the woman’s body as subject/object, in Rituparno’s films the situation is often reversed too. Rituparno’s feminist focus entails an interest in subjectivity, interiority, and relatedness – all of them approached through psychoanalysis. The body and looking are the most primitive aspects of humans. On the literal level there is unavoidably a structural “subject/object” look, which may be experienced as mutual, as a process, a relation. Reminiscent of the protagonist in Ray’s film *Charulata (The Lonely Wife, 1964)*, in *Chokher Bali*, when Binodini looks at distant objects through the opera glasses her vision pans the ghats of Benaras but focuses primarily on the muscular bodybuilding activities of the wrestlers. In the scene where they go for a picnic, Behari volunteers to get down into the pond to pick up some lotus flowers. Through Binodini’s vision, the camera focuses on the bare-bodied, well-toned muscular figure of Behari something which according to some critics seems like “a stereotypical, MTV endorsed western gaze, which commodifies the male body”(Chakravarti & Ganguly 256). At the same time they argue that interestingly, this post-modern gaze obliterates the subtle but powerful suggestion of homo-social bonding between Behari and Mahendra that informs the novel.
In *Antarmahal* the elder wife Mahamaya, shocked to see the bare body of the scantily clad young artisan, gets a screen fixed on the verandah because she does not want the younger wife Jashomati to show her bare armpits to the young man below while feeding the birds. Yet we cannot forget her own look of erotic longing as the Bihari sculptor shivers in his sleep in the outer courtyard. Abhisheki Bachchan’s bare body, long legs, and rustic way of wearing the dhoti add to this trope. She also has a screen erected in the bedroom between the mantra-chanting Brahmin and the copulating couple. This screen also acts as a safeguard for enticing the man with her own body. Using the age-old trope of female seduction, Mahamaya tries to distract the man’s attention but inevitably leads herself to become a commodity for sexual enjoyment when the Brahmins convince her husband to ask her to satisfy five men of their kind. That she agrees to satisfy those Brahmins so that she can ultimately bear a child of her own (the system of *niyog* being a common device even mentioned in our ancient Indian epics) and that she becomes hysterical on the fateful night because she starts menstruating is deviating into other issues of the film. But coming back to the subject of female gaze, there are several scenes in the film where she looks out of the window rather voyeuristically at the young sculptor bathing in the pond, as is the more overt one when she sees the bare body and legs of the man for the first time and throws down a dhoti to cover himself up. Rituparno can be thus applauded in bringing into focus the idea of female desire through the female gaze, a subject hardly projected in commercial films. On the other hand, he has also been criticized for exploiting the sexual fantasies of the young sculptor, whose effort in building the bosoms and thighs of the goddess is deliberately juxtaposed with scenes where he caresses his own young wife’s bare body. Facing severe criticism from the sculptor community for such blasphemous and suggestive scenes, such attempts to titillate the viewer’s sexual desires could easily be done away with. Though taking liberties with the original plot of the story, Ghosh’s good intention of portraying the various tales of oppression, of aged husbands raping wives half their age, of society making fun of wives unable to bear children, of priests taking advantage of helpless housewives and so on is quite successful. He also does well by lending a subtle treatment to the romance that evolves between the young sculptor and the beautiful second wife of the zamindar, as if to juxtapose as well as accentuate the uncouth lovemaking that takes place between her and her husband.
To conclude we can say that Rituparno is hopeful that with time his film will attain the same status a few years down the line as did Aparna Sen’s *Paroma* made way back in 1985 wherein the protagonist, a 40-year-old homemaker fell in love with a man almost half his age and caused a lot of hullabaloo among middle-class Bengali cinegoers then, but is now applauded by feminists and ordinary viewers alike as a landmark film depicting the emergence of the ‘new woman.’

**References:**

*Antarmahal* (*The Inner Chamber*, 2005).
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Cinematography: Abhik Mukherjee
Music: Debajyoti Mishra.


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