He explores human relationships with a rare sensitivity. In all his films he handles human frailties with tenderness and understanding, humor and irony. It is this quality that won the young Bengali director Rituporno Ghosh, laurels for all the seven films he’s made till date. In less than a decade, he has acquired a reputation that takes him far beyond his immediate area of creative operation in West Bengal. A simple storyline and superb acting make his movies special. As his films revolve around relationships, they are emotionally gripping and do not need the props of songs and dance. Moreover what gives Rituporno an edge over other directors is that he wins awards and draws crowds. His successful film career has already made him the bridge between good Bengali cinema and crowds – something that eluded other greats like Satyajit Ray, Rittik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen. Born in 1961, Rituporno began his life in advertising and had no formal training in filmmaking but being the son of a documentary filmmaker, he grew up within the ambience of filmmaking. His films offer the Bengali film cognoscenti an enthralling time and prove once again that he is a specialist in ‘human relationships’ and in the ‘female mind’, particularly when in turmoil. Asked why he concentrated so much on relationships, he candidly admitted, “Relationships fascinate me. I was born in a middle class family, so naturally, relationships played a very important part of my life. Even today, relationships are essential to me. So it [exploring relationships] comes easily to me – it is not a concerted, laborious effort on my part.”

Rituporno began his directorial venture in 1992 with *Hirer Angti*, a children’s film that was never publicly released. As the traditional saying goes, “Behind the success of every man there is a woman.” In his case, it was Shabana Azmi. “I used to interact with Shabana Azmi a lot. I wanted to do a film with her, but she couldn’t. However, she heard the script, and she offered finance and assistance from the Children’s Film Society of India, of which she was the chairman” says Rituporno and also adds, “Obviously she saw some potential in me.” But from this point onwards most of his films started revolving around women, so much so that he has often been labelled as “the women’s director of Bangla cinema.” Rituporno’s explanation of course is simple: “It’s just that I feel I understand the inner feelings of women, their passion, agony and suffering.”

*Unishe April* (1995), the first feature film to be released, and actually the film with which Rituporno arrived, portrays the changing intimacies in a mother-daughter relationship. Though dubbed by many cinema pundits as having “nothing new,” this film on a celebrity mother danseuse Sarojini, and doctor daughter Aditi, successfully exploited the middleclass sentiment and basic family problems and became a super hit with its polished presentation. It also showed that the director was “comfortable with female psychology and their intricate relationship.” The linear development of the plot is quite simple. On the 19th of April, Aditi lovingly remembers her father who died on this day when she was only eight years old. Aditi’s love for her father leads her to follow in his footsteps by becoming a physician, while loathing her mother, a professional dancer, who was performing at the time her husband died. On this anniversary, her mother receives word that she is receiving the nation’s highest artistic prize, which ultimately ends Aditi’s engagement to her fiancé when his family discovers that her mother is the acclaimed dancer, Sarojini. Throughout the film there is a
deep undercurrent of tension about Aditi’s prevaricating boyfriend’s commitment to their relationship. Through a series of flashbacks and a storm that rages both outside the family home and between mother and daughter, they both finally face the truth of their relationship. Unishe April makes a concession to the delicate Bengali sensibility and leaves out the explicit sex scenes unlike Aparna Sen’s Paroma but it has one thing in common -- both the films promise new beginnings to women who have been through fire. Though it is really quite irrelevant whether or not Rituporno had seen Ingmar Bergman’s Autumn Sonata before he made this film as some critics feel, [he said that Bergman hasn’t been a conscious influence] but nevertheless the two films can be compared as works of art. Debashree Roy, who plays the daughter’s role in the film feels that Ghosh is “brilliant” in the handling of female emotions.

Rituporno’s next venture, Dahan (Crossfire) (1997) is another award-winning film where the focal point is a well-reported rape attempt. The girl and her family are at the receiving end of society’s disapproval. It portrays the plight of a woman, assaulted by a group of men and who succumbs to the pressures of her husband and in-laws by giving a false statement in court. The story line of this film is once again quite simple. On her way home one evening from teaching school, Jhinuk witnesses an assault on a young woman, Romita, and her husband. Through this fateful and transforming event, the lives of the two women from different social backgrounds intersect. After rushing to assist Romita, Jhinuk convinces the couple to file a complaint with the police. The event becomes headline news and Jhinuk is hailed as a heroine. But these moments of glory are fleeting, and any feelings of goodwill evaporate as the families of the two women bristle at Jhinuk’s unwavering pursuit of justice. Such persistence becomes especially embarrassing for members of Romita’s upper-class family, who must endure endless questions and criticism from friends, relatives and neighbours. Fearful of any deeper involvement or further attention, both families pressure Jhinuk and Romita not to appear as witnesses at the final hearing. Individual liberties and the pursuit of justice collide with middle and upper class sensibilities and lose the battle for survival. As the director, Rituporno unflinchingly challenges society’s willingness to deny the rights of individuals when they threaten the comforts and conventions of the economically privileged. Women in Indian society are among those still enslaved by the restrictions and codes of behaviour born of society’s hypocrisy and complacency – Jhinuk and Romita both have to contend with unspoken codes that coil around them with a silent but oppressive strength. Viewers feel intimidated at the way the two women are asked embarrassing questions and the five men try to get free with the help of corruption and male domination.

It will not be out of place to mention here an interesting controversy that is raging in Kolkata at present regarding Dahan. The film was screened on the third week of November in Kolkata as part of the international fortnight of violence against woman, organized by a NGO, Sanlaap. It was a platform where the ‘reel’ and ‘real’ life were starkly portrayed. On 27th November, the audience at Nandan got an insight into the situation of the couple harassed by four youths at the Tollygunje Metro station in 1992 and the woman who fought for the couple seeking justice. This formed the basis of the film. Present on the occasion were author Suchitra Bhattacharya and Ananya Chatterjee, the journalist who inspired the character Jhinuk in the film. Bhattacharya, who wrote Dahan, said, “My story was a little different from the original film. A lot of my readers asked me why I had portrayed Jhinuk, the sole witness to the assault of the couple, as a loser in the end. Because I wanted women to realize the pain and suffering I wanted readers to act.” Some in the audience said that though women were becoming more independent, it was up to the male members of society to react.
to such injustice and violence. But Ananya Chatterjee lambasted the film. In an act of unusual courage, she had come to the aid of a young couple when they were being roughed up by a bunch of hooligans. But when her story was adapted on celluloid, she found that it was flawed by male stereotyping. From the very beginning she had a problem with the film and felt that it had been majorly unfair to the male characters, especially the victim’s husband. She reported (The Times of India, November 28, 2001):

Though the film says that it is based on a true-life incident, I am surprised at the way the characters are portrayed. The woman’s husband has been portrayed in a negative role whereas in real life both the woman and the man fought against social pressure and always appeared in court seeking justice. In real life, the couple, who were college students, had got married after the incident. The man stood firmly by his girlfriend, and had supported her against immense societal pressure. The couple married in UP and the case is still in court.

Firm in her belief that she will certainly get justice, Ananya said, “They had no right to portray the couple as they have done in the film.” Emphasizing upon her firm belief that the actual cause of the trouble was that one cannot handle unwanted male attention, she also regretted that it had taken her such a long time to react to what happened at the metro station on the evening of June 24, 1992. Stating categorically that she never made any money out of the film, (The Statesman, November 18, 2001) nor was in any way involved in its production process, she put the entire blame on Rituporno Ghosh for misrepresenting the actual story and taking recourse to male stereotypes.

It would have made me greatly happy to see him (the victim’s husband) portrayed as the man he actually was – the first one to protest (not me) at the scene of the incident, who dared to speak up when everyone was looking away, who got beaten up badly because of this, who stood by the girl in the police station, at the identification parade, in the court, at home, amongst friends and relatives. He was a man who chose to marry the woman he loved despite everything – a man who was clearly not a stereotype. When stereotypes take over, real images make way for plastic ones. Real people often fall prey to such situations when they have to live out of these images, often under immense stress. The stereotype takes away the rational thought process and encourages popular views to ride over reality. It would be wrong to assume, however that stereotyping happens only with women. A man can become a victim to the same stereotyping as can a relationship.

This clearly happened in the case of Dahan. I can never understand how a novel or a film can be referred to as based on a real life story when none of the characters concerned were consulted on what really happened, on the day and thereafter. As a result what happens is a stereotyping of characters where both the men are shown as villains, patriarchs who are insensitive to their women. This is clearly the fruit of a vision which has chosen to follow the beaten track and attempt at hitting ‘safe’ targets: men. Just like some men in real life hit at what they consider to be safe and soft targets: women – regardless of age, race, class, caste and colour. If she is a child, she can be molested, if she is a teenager she wants to be molested, if she is single she
is waiting to be molested, and if she is married, she must be unhappy and therefore…..

If this stereotype has to be broken, it has to be attacked from both sides. For it is not some men who need to be broken, it is this easy, shortcut method of stereotyping to justify one’s actions and mind-set that needs to be addressed and broken down. When such stereotyping happens in a group or in a home it is dangerous enough. But when it happens in literature or in a film which leaves lasting impressions on people’s minds it is likely to be catastrophic…..We are not yet ready to accept real men and real women.

The debate about the authenticity of representation of fiction into film is perhaps a century old, beginning right from the days of cinematographic history. Whether we can rely on the director’s choice or deal with an adaptation as an interpretation is also a debatable point. But the kind of charges that Ananya Chatterjee has labelled upon the director of the film Dahan will need several thousands of storms over teacups to resolve the issue. Till date, Rituporno Ghosh, has not replied or reacted to this charge against him.

In his next feature film Asookh (The Malaise)1998, Rituporno shifts slightly from his earlier stance but nevertheless sticks to his explorations of human relationships. “While Unishe April explored the mother-daughter relationship, Asookh is about the father-daughter relationship,” says Ghosh. But the similarity ends there. While in the former film Debasree Roy plays the role of Aditi, the unglamorous daughter of a stunner, in the latter she is Rohini, the filmstar daughter of Sudhamoy, played by veteran actor Soumitra Chatterjee. Rohini, aged thirty-five, a well-known actress, is a foolish woman. Despite her years in the industry, she expects her boyfriend to keep his hands off nubile nymphets. But Annirudha, the intellectual with the generic beard and jhola, seems more committed to better cinema than Rohini. He starts a roaring affair with Rohini’s own protégé, a sizzling starlet highly stocked on estrogen. Only Rohini does the honourable thing: she sinks into gloom. She takes to brooding with a passion. If her world does not collapse, it is because she alienates herself from it. The dark, closed, air-conditioned room where she sits becomes a giant reflection of the interior of her mind. And Rituporno proves once again that he is a specialist in the female mind, particularly when in turmoil.

What is interesting about Rohini in this film is that she is not up against another woman, but she downs herself slowly into the treacherous private world of her own self, of sleeping pills and oblivion. In her claustrophobic room, where the thin light only exaggerates the haggardness of her features, Rohini looks longingly at a handful of sleeping pills before gulping them down all together. Obsessively attached to her lenses and her eye drop, she watches the world through a film, as if naked sunlight will hurt her. Asookh, the disease of alienation, of being cut off from one’s feelings and natural being, spreads like an infection throughout her. But to ask Rituporno why he is obsessed with women as the subject of his films is to get an insight into a director’s relationship with his audience. Like his earlier two films, here he is again found portraying a vulnerable face. But vulnerability with him did not necessarily mean weakness. It meant sensitivity. Women afford him that. “It is not that men cannot be vulnerable or sensitive,” says Rituporno, who himself is often seen in flamboyant kurtas not many of his sex would dare to sport. In fact, he believes that human qualities are androgynous, beyond sex really. “But to the Indian audience, a woman would be more
acceptable as vulnerable than a man. Every medium has its set definitions, including definitions of masculinity and femininity. Every medium has its code,” says the director. He knows his audience matters, so he does not shock them, as long as he has another story to tell. He only challenges their expectations, regarding gender, especially according to the demands of his story.

Some critics feel that delving too deeply in human relationships can have its flipside too. The sense of *déjà vu* and the overpowering sense of pain, grief and anxiety within the four walls can be claustrophobic too. In *Asookh*, Rohini has problems other than her boyfriend. But unlike Aditi, the embittered daughter in *Unishe April*, also ditched by her boyfriend, Rohini has a loving family. Her old parents, touchingly proud of their talented daughter, yet untouched in any way by tinsel glamour; are as attached to each other as to their only daughter. The father (played by veteran actor Soumitro Chatterjee), works late at night with a scrap-book for his own private collection of the pictures of his glamorous daughter. But sometimes such closeness suffocates Rohini. When her mother falls ill, her father becomes obsessed with her. In one scene, while father and daughter are having dinner, he starts talking about his wife’s health. “She didn’t pass stool this morning,” he says. After some time, he mentions her urine trouble. Then he comes back to her constipation. While it is black comedy to the viewer; Rohini gets up, quite disgusted. She seems put off by such intimacy, yet it is the only center of stillness in the whirlpool of her emotions.

Then something terrible happens and a small doubt lurking inside Rohini’s head looms into a huge suspicion. Her mother gets fever and is advised to have her blood tested for HIV. While her parents, ignorant about HIV and allied issues, are at peace with themselves, Rohini is petrified at the prospect of losing her mother. And because her father can be the only source of infection, she is racked with doubt and fear. The last frontiers of her defense against the world go down. Rohini becomes alone – alone perhaps as only a woman can be to whom nothing matters more than her relations. But Rituporno knew how to pick up things and make them whole again. It takes a small medical report to do that. As she sees light, metaphorically and otherwise, with her father trying to light the candle as the lights go off, Rohini suddenly, in a flash, realizes she has been wrong, very wrong. Not only because she had suspected her father, but because she had created a hell of her own making, in her own mind. She is alone, because she has only been looking at herself. And even if a boyfriend strays, love does not cease, nor trust, not even for him. And it’s good to have parents who care too much about each other.

*Asookh* scores in having a rich literary content. “My inspiration for this film was a poem by Tagore,” said Ghosh. The poem *Chhotto amar meye*, (My Little Daughter), is from the *Hariye Jawa* anthology. In the film, Rohini is shown to be an avid fan of Rabindranath Tagore. A portrait of the poet looms large in her bedroom and the walls of the apartment have prints of his paintings. The poet plays an important role in the director’s life as well. For Tagore, Rituporno feels, works on the same bewitching quality that leads the director to his subjects in the first place: vulnerability. Like Rohini feels at the end of the film, Rituporno thinks that one can be strong despite one’s vulnerability. Her awakening is reassuring and different from the way mother and daughter came together in a stormy scene in *Unishe April*, which Rituporno himself feels is “a less mature work. That was a union of passion and happened somewhat despite themselves. But here Rohini makes the journey herself.” Asked about what happens to the boyfriend who wants to come back to Rohini and whether she should have taken her back, Rituporno stated, “I don’t know. I hope she is strong enough not to take
him back.” Like Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, *Asookh*, is the story of a woman breaking the barriers of her own self.

Rituporno’s favourite subject of the changing pattern of human relationships in the context of a now defunct joint family becomes the subject of his next film *Utsab* (The Festival) (2000). Exploring the grey areas of family bonds, and set in a crumbling mansion outside of Kolkata, it is a drama that is similar to the Dutch film *Celebration* that explores the dynamics and secrets of a family that meets each year for four days to participate in a Durga Puja and visit its matriarch, Bhagabati (played by Madhabi Mukherjee who has acted in the Satyajit Ray films *Charulata* and *Mahanagar*). Initially it seems as if the tensions that seep into the siblings’ interactions are based on petty arguments, such as who was given the room with the better view, but on further inspection the friction runs much deeper. Amidst the rituals and hoopla of the puja, we slowly learn that Asit, the younger brother, is on the verge of losing his job while Keya, the youngest daughter, is experiencing serious marital difficulties. She has returned to the house after three long years, with her belligerent, alcoholic husband, Arun, whom no one seems to like. Parul, the eldest daughter, is an emotional mess who is harbouring a deep, dark secret from the family’s past. After one of her moody outbursts, a sister-in-law advises her, “Don’t brood over the past.” From their subtle references and sly innuendoes, we infer that she was involved with a long lost cousin named Sisir, who was subsequently banished from the home. Years later, and now a successful businessman, he wants to buy the place. Meanwhile, her son Joy is filming the whole ordeal while shamelessly flirting with his lovely cousin, Shampa.

As harbinger of ensuing trauma, one of the characters vehemently declares, “Daughters of this house are great at making mistakes.” Unfortunately, their learning curve isn’t very high and they continue to commit the same blunders. Some critics feel that in this film Rituporno deals with such problems rather superficially. There are so many people to cover that their issues get only skimmed over rather than fully explored and it seems that in Rituporno’s fictional world the entire Bengali family becomes dysfunctional. “My films are not about what should be, but what is,” he asserts. Apart from the slow pace of the film, as in his last film, Ghosh infuses an element of self-critique into the plot. By having Joy record the gathering, he adds a discourse on film—to be continued in his next ventures as well.

*Bariwali* (Lady of the House) (2000) which won hearts at the Berlin Film Festival, once again, is an account of human relationships that often goes wrong due to certain miscalculations. In this film, the lonely protagonist Banalata (played by Kiron Kher), is a middle-aged spinster who lives in a bucolic mansion outside Kolkata. Stately, but crumbling and neglected, the mansion serves as an efficient metaphor for Banalata’s own state. At the heart of the film is the problem of an oppressive loneliness and it has been dealt with in different ways on the screen. Here it is set in a personal and social context and produces some inspiring insights. Extremely lonely, Banalata spends her days cloistered in a corner of the mansion with her two perpetually-quarelling servants. She is someone who has lost touch with the world and even detests the idea of television invading her world but cannot prevent her maid from revelling in that glossy world of make-believe. Her loneliness is reminiscent of Ray’s *Charulata*, though Charu does not have to think about financial matters while wallowing in loneliness. Again, though the film does not have the passion or the intense sense of desolation of something like *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, Rituporno makes it an interesting foray into a theme that is rarely tackled in Indian cinema. Being the last of her dynasty, Banolata had given all
hopes for finding a husband after her would-be groom died of a snake bite before her wedding day. Impractical as she is in practical matters, the misplaced deed to her house leads to a sense of financial insecurity which in turn leads to Banalata considering the unthinkable – letting her house for a film shooting. The unit is to shoot Tagore’s Chokher Bali but Banolata is not at all interested in the world of glamour. Her only mission is to raise fund for the house tax which the municipal assessing officer could ask for.

When film director Dipankar first comes to her house the electricity has tripped in Banalata’s upstairs quarters. Dipankar uses a screwdriver to fix the problem and the symbolism is instant – he has brought a spark of light into her dark existence. Once the shooting of the film begins in the mansion, the painfully-shy Banalata slowly comes to idolize the director (even having full knowledge about his flaws). Adept at handling women to suit his purposes, he is extremely well-spoken with her and the moony-eyed, unworldly Banalata just can’t see him for what he is. Ironically he is a director of presumably-sensitive art films. But, in a tight budget, he isn’t above exploiting Banalata for his own ends – getting her to hand over her family heirlooms from paintings to silverware as free props for his shoot. Banalata doesn’t mind as he has now become part of her romantic fantasies manifested only as dreams through her subconscious. Without committing himself in any way, Dipankar smoothly accepts her offer to waive the rent when he runs into financial difficulties and even persuades her into enacting a small scene in the film. In a suhaagan’s saree and demeanour she speaks her lines looking directly into his eyes. The public knowledge of her devotion is not spelt-out, but is implicit. However, for Banalata, there is only one subtle humiliation around the corner. Once the film unit leaves the mansion, there is no communication from Dipankar. She is unable to realize how ruthlessly exploitative the real world can be. She keeps on waiting for a line or two from Dipankar in reply to hers. She reads in a newspaper that the film is ready to be released. On the day she was just getting ready for attending the matinee show of the film, finally a missive does arrive, but it’s only to send a belated cheque and to relate the news that Banalata’s scene has been edited from the film – there is not even that tiny space for Banalata in Dipankar’s film … or his life. As the film inches towards its end, a shattered Banalata is faced with the electricity going off on her floor once again – completing the symbolism that had begun with Dipankar’s entry into her life. But hopefully she is now better equipped to take control of her life. But Rituporno makes his missive clear – it is always expectation that leads to exploitation. But this exploitation that is perpetrated by the members of the film clan is done a bit too subtly. For although one does understand Banalata’s need to be accepted by this and in her life, thereby becoming a victim of her own desires, never once does Dipankar come across as the villain of the piece, if he was ever meant to be that way.

Throughout Bariwali, one is attracted by the nuances in Banalata’s character, tracing her growth in what could be called one of the most tumultuous periods of her life and when she tries to reconstruct her past on the fragmented memories of those few shooting days. Outwardly the film has some similarity with Mrinal Sen’s Khandahar. Rituporno, the master storyteller deftly paints the pangs, pains and loneliness of the spinster and deals with emotions like disappointment, sadness, loneliness and hurt. Though much of the script concentrates naturally on the central character, it also offers cameo performances of other characters who all contribute in some way or other to the total experience. For instance, the juxtaposed portrait of the over-ebullient maid Malati (played by Sudeepta Chakrabarty) and the scenes where she bosses over Banalata carry the charge of reality. Finally, the film is interesting because of its structure of a film within a film. Rituporno’s primary
interest is in people who are observed with their subtle shades mirroring a world in the grip of exploitative and amoral principles partly redeemed by the vestiges of innocence.

Abhinay (Acting) Rituporno Ghosh’s first telefilm made last year (2001), with story, screenplay and dialogue by the multi-faceted director, is as starkly stunning in its insights into human nature as Unishe April, Dahan and Bariwali. And like his earlier films—Asookh, Bariwali, Utsab and Titli — this one too touches on a world he knows best —the world of cinema and the beautiful people who bring it to life on screen. This 70-minute film-within-a –film telefilm was made as one of the specials for Alpha Bangla channel’s anniversary celebrations. Abhinay is a simple story, simply told, and yet stunning in its effect. Completed in just four-and- a-half-days, it was shot in a hotel in Bolpur (rechristened Kusumdanga to perhaps touch on Sujata’s erudite wisdom that leaves her girl Friday, Beethi wide-eyed and won over), it is a film that quite obviously revolves around an actress Sujata (played by Roopa Ganguly) – an abhinetriti with the rest of the cast playing out their parts like pawns on a chessboard. She’s a star, unreal and seemingly unreachable even when she’s conventionally dressed like the simple, suburban housewife next-door and pleading with a “blessed” tree for the life of her ailing child. Perhaps it is because her tears are glycerine-induced and her world appears so far removed from such harsh realities. Naturally, her director is surprised when she points out to him that a mother whose son is dying wouldn’t use so many words and certainly not so many cliches. “How would you know? How would any of us know considering that we have never lived through a similar situation and can only emulate standard, stereotyped responses?” he argues.

Sujata, his striking, sophisticated, well-read heroine, isn’t convinced. And to appease her the director promises to sit in with her after pack-up and re-work the dialogues.

That evening, he has to wait a while for Sujata to finish with her mysterious visitor from Kolkata. A visitor is the object of everyone’s curiosity. The reasons for his closed-door visit with didi is speculated on endlessly by Sujata’s hairdresser, Beethi during her romantic rendezvous with the cameraman who’s trying to seduce her on the dim stairway. It is the director who finally meets up with this “guest” when he is eventually summoned to Sujata’s room. He finds her relaxing in the air-conditioned comfort of her room with a glass of Scotch, coldly dismissive of the bearded stranger who’s still hanging around even after being summarily shown the door. Awkwardly the director sits around waiting for his star’s visitor to leave and is a privy to what should have been a confidential conversation. Sujata’s guest turns out to be her ex-husband Mihir who begs her for Rs 15,000 that can help save the life of a child - her child! The revelation is shocking but what’s even more shattering is Sujata’s reaction. The director can only watch in horror as his heroine, so sensitive to every nuance in the script, remains completely unmoved by her husband’s plea. Without so much of a flicker of emotion, he’s told that he will have to wait till she returns to the big city for the money “since I don’t carry so much cash with me when I’m on location.”

Unwilling to be a mute spectator to the unfolding drama anymore, the director offers to advance a loan. But Sujata stops him and slipping off a gold kangani from her wrist, hands it to Mihir with the offhand suggestion that he can raise the money needed for their daughter’s treatment by selling it. Mihir leaves with what the director knows is only an imitation bracelet and will not fetch him more than Rs.150.00. When he points out the “costly mistake” to her, Sujata drops her head into her hands and sighs, “Oh, I’m sorry I didn’t think! The bangle’s part of my get-up, right? Now there’ll be continuity problems!” Her callous almost inhuman disinterest in her little girl brings forth a torrent of angry accusations from the director who now refuses to change even a line in his script. “You can
say the lines as they are, or you can walk out, I really don’t care!” he spits out angrily. She looks at him, understands his anger and outrage at her behaviour, and tells him quietly that she does care. Or rather did care for the daughter who was born after two years of marriage and time enough to realize that the man she’d married was a wastrel. Ahana who came into her life with the first rays of the sun but couldn’t keep her tied down to the man who had ironically been christened Mihir, meaning the Sun. Realizing that the only way out of the darkness of her marriage was to concentrate on her acting career, Sujata leaves Mihir, and Ahana too with her mother-in-law, helping out when she can with her upbringing with timely donations.

She goes on to confide that she was in Mumbai, shooting a film, when she learnt from one of Mihir’s friends that her daughter who was always a sickly child, was grievously ill. Sneaking into the hospital room, concealed behind a burkha, [a trope that remains unexplained for the audience], Sujata was with Ahana when she died. Watching silently, helplessly as her daughter is wrenched away from her. “She died four years ago, but Mihir has yet to tell me that she’s gone. He continues to come to me using the excuse of her illness to raise some money, little knowing that I know the truth,” Sujata tells her director in a voice that’s drained of all emotion. The director is stunned! “You know and you still give him the money?” he asks her incredulously. “Well, he needs the money and he has his self-respect,” she rationalizes.

However, Abhinay despite being set in the celluloid world, doesn’t offer much by way of glamour or technical wizardry. Rituporno’s forte is the unravelling of dark secrets and he does it with a brevity of emotions and an overloading of mundane everyday details that makes the climax all the more unforgettable. Roopa Ganguly is the perfect choice for Sujata. There’s a veneer of sophistication in Roopa that comes from being associated, however briefly, with Mumbai’s film city. An air of hauteur and arrogance that cloaks every top-ranking star, sparkling of awe and admiration amongst the commoners whose lives she touches, be it the owner of the shanty tea stall whose curds she’s been sampling or the girl Friday who is her constant companion. The male members of the unit are more clear-eyed and carnal in their character analysis, but even they don’t grudge her the only air-conditioned room in the hotel that comes with the privileges of being a star. Even the director who’s closer to her both intellectually and emotionally, keeps his distance and difference. Roopa makes the transition from a touch-me-not star to a human being touched by tragedy with ease. Apart from her, the role of Sujata’s hairdresser, sketchy and still-to-be-developed, it is interesting to see how Rituporno uses her flirtatious smiles and intense eyes to flesh out this cameo. However, her “affair” with the cameraman seems a wee bit contrived and forced into the script perhaps to hint on the transitory web of relationships that begin and end with every film.

Rituporno’s latest production, Titli (Butterfly) has just been completed and released. The credit for the story and script of this film again goes to Ghosh himself. It is a rather unusual story that has Aparna Sen and her daughter Konkona Sen Sharma paired for the first time as mother and daughter in the film as well. The title of the film is after Konkona’s character, named Titli. The last film in the trilogy focusing on mother-daughter relationships, Rituporno tries to live up to his reputation as a “feminine ideologist”. After Asookh, Ghosh once again toys with a film star within the narrative in the film. This time, it is Mithun Chakrabarty playing the struggling young man with dreams of making it big in filmdom. During his struggling days, he was encouraged by a very close female friend (played by Aparna Sen). He makes it big, the friend marries a tea planter and shifts to North Bengal. She has a daughter who, in time, evolves in a great fan of this mega-star. Her adolescent crush for this hero of tinseltown is very convincingly depicted throughout the film. When they meet
by accident in North Bengal during one of the location shoots for one of his films, Titli is shocked to discover that her mother and the actor were once very close. “What transpires between the mother and the daughter after this makes the rest of the film,” stated Rituporno. The ending of the film in which the mother and the daughter come to a sort of understanding when news of the star’s marriage to an upcoming actress reaches the mother (through a personal letter) and the daughter (through the glossy film magazine gossips) to a certain extent reiterates the kind of understanding that the mother and daughter duo had reached in Unishey April. Critics have already charged Rituporno for getting stereotyped.

Rituporno’s next venture is Rabindranath Tagore’s Chokher Bali. In an interview (Filmfare August 2001 issue) he admitted, “Chokher Bali has been my dream project for a very long time. So when I made my director-protagonist in Bariwali make a film on that novel, I was vicariously fulfilling my dream. Today’s Bengali cinema has moved away from literature towards Hindi cinema and South Indian films. But I am finally making Chokher Bali.” Aware of the industry superstition that it is a cursed subject and no one has been able to do it till date, Rituporno’s first tryst with Tagore stars Aishwarya Rai as the rebellious Binodini and Raima Sen as the homely Ashalata, the young widow caught between the Brahminical predominance of the 18th century Bengal and the influence of the West. A woman-centered story no doubt, how this young girl goes about her life and finds her identity forms the crux of the film. Maybe this is what attracted him towards this novel in the first place. Since it is a classic and a period piece, Rituporno says he has to be careful how the time frame of the novel is recreated in the film and that he will leave the job of art direction to his brother. The release of this film is eagerly awaited to see how the director contemporizes issues and treats the relationships that grow out of extramarital involvement—themes that seem quite close to his heart.

Rituporno Ghosh is perhaps the only Bengali director in whom good qualities of two outstanding filmmakers have assembled. His films, like those of Tapan Sinha, are narrative in style and emotional in approach. Moreover he makes films that do not follow the mainstream song-dance-action pattern. At the same time, like Aparna Sen, he excels in exploring inner recesses of the human mind right from his first feature film, Unishe April. His connection with, and influence of Aparna Sen has become too widely known to be called accidental. It is also not accidental that Aparna has starred in many of his films. Every viewer can trace similarities of situations, themes, and characters of Rituporno’s films with Aparna’s directorial ventures like Paroma (The Ultimate Woman) (1984), 36 Chowringhee Lane, Paromitar Ek Din (House of Memories) (2000). For instance the similarities between the lonely Anglo-Indian teacher Miss Stoneham in Aparna Sen’s film and Bonolata, the middle-aged spinster in Ghosh’s film cannot be overlooked as accidental. When asked whether Bariwali was inspired by 36 Chowringhee Lane, Rituporno admitted, “There are some inherent similarities between the two films. The lonely spinster, yes. But then, loneliness runs through all my films.” Actually, the influence of his ‘godmother’ Aparna Sen is evident from his very first film Unishe April. In this film he gets away with making a bold statement which is usually thought as too strong for the middle class milieu. Sarojini, the famous dancer (played by—who else? Aparna Sen) on the threshold of middle age, still very attractive, who is frankly contemptuous of the demands of her family, has chosen her career over it, doesn’t mind having a boyfriend even with an angry grown-up daughter around and doesn’t bother to be a ‘good mother.’ Yet the audience understands her—the same audience that was scandalized by Aparna Sen’s own Paroma, which had shown a middle-class married woman’s search for identity leading her to a sexual relationship outside marriage. As Rituporno himself says” “There would have been no Unishe April without Paroma. I
have consciously avoided the explicit sex scenes following Paroma’s example.” Though Rituporno stated that “Aparna Sen has been an influence as a human being, not as a filmmaker” and that he has “been quite close to her and one reason for that is our affinity to the cinema of Satyajit Ray,” many viewers and film critics have started mentioning Aparna Sen and Rituporno Ghosh in the same breath because they feel that their films are increasingly beginning to look alike. One sees the same faces, hears the same intonations, ponders similar poignancies, explores the same interiors and visits the same emporiums. The films even talk to one another with the same mutual admiration and familiarity as their makers do with each other on prime-time regional television. Moreover, both in their films like to stay within the cosier ambience of the Bengali bhadralok they know. Their films use a form of easy realism that could give to their audience the addictive pleasure of recognizing their familiar selves in the films’ polished surfaces. Rooms, clothes, makeup, speech, food, local references reflect back an everyday world that falls in exactly with the images designed for and distributed to a particular ‘niche market.’ This phrase has been used recently by Rituporno Ghosh, who understands “the sentiments of the urban and educated Bengali who has purchasing power.”

Rituporno’s films are indeed inspired by Satyajit Ray and he has no qualms about being constantly compared to him. “It is a proud thing to follow your father’s footsteps,” he said. Ray is considered one of the world’s best filmmakers of all time and it is difficult for anyone, including Rituporno Ghosh, to break out of such a shadow. Though all of his films are technically superb, what is still missing in him is that subtle touch that differentiates between a good and a great filmmaker. Maybe his post-forty productions will overcome the drawbacks found in some of his films. But when asked from whom he derived inspiration, he candidly admitted the name of the great master again: “Satyajit Ray. It was after seeing his films that I thought of filmmaking myself.” Of course he also mentioned that unlike his mentor he was “quite non-musical” and used music only when it spoke for itself. Asked whether he feared the responsibility of being the neo-Ray who’ll revive the Bengali film industry, Rituporno replied in the negative:

“If my films help the Bengali film industry in any way, I’ll be extremely happy. I’m extremely flattered that I’m being compared with Satyajit Ray. But I feel I’m majorly overrated. I came into Bengali cinema at a time when intelligent urban films were going out of fashion. That’s why I found a place quickly. I can’t compare myself to the masters of the Bengali cinema.”

Though the director admits that he was influenced by Ray, there is one subtle difference in his handling of women. Unlike Rittik Ghatak’s Meghe Dhaka Tara, Mrinal Sen’s Ekdin Pratidin, and Satyajit Ray’s Mahanagar, his films do not deal with the condition of women in Indian society. In other words, there is no concern in Rituporno’s films with the working-woman though career stands in the way of proper understanding of mother and daughter in Unishe April. Taking a step beyond the women protagonists of the earlier films mentioned, whose prime aim was to support their families, Rituporno’s women have no other familial obligations. Actually Bengali films that did focus upon women did not take any interest as Rituporno does in exploring women-women relationships and simply remained confined to women pitted against a strong patriarchal society.

In an interview given to me during the dubbing sessions of the latest film Titli, Rituporno once again stressed on the androgynous nature of human character. Asked whether he thought that a male director was more capable of exploring a female psyche than a female director, he replied, “No, I
don’t. I don’t believe in gender discrimination between artists. I believe in the art of androgyny which includes the male and female opinion.” In fact, he feels that he understands the psyche of women better because he can offer a more objective approach. He specified that there is a difference between a woman’s point of view and a woman character’s point of view. To illustrate the point he mentioned the story of *Ramayana* and how it would be totally different if it would be told from the female protagonist, i.e. Sita’s point of view. There would be several technical questions that would crop up then, he insisted. For instance, why did not Sita conceive any children though she lived for fourteen long years in the forest? But he regretted that such issues are never touched upon and instead a very simplistic narrative structure is opted for. Thus, Rituporno reiterated that the actual problem lies in the fact that we are not used to looking at things from the other’s point of view. Therefore, it is not necessary to be a woman to understand gender related issues. Asked by Kishore Chatterjee (Explocity.com, September 21, 2001) about his views on marriage and whether he had any plans to get bound in a familial bondage, the filmmaker, who is now literally labeled as a “feminist ideologist,” replied in the negative and confessed that he was “yet to experience the need.” When asked whether cohabitation or the concept of living together better than so-called bondage – as marriage is often identified so, Rituporno replied, “Perhaps so. At least, it doesn’t have any binding and it leaves a much-required space between two minds. It enables the two personalities to possess their individual identity.”

A survey of various other interviews that Rituporno has given elsewhere shows that in all of them he admitted to a special affinity for women: “It’s just that I feel that I understand the inner feelings of women, their passion, agony, and suffering” he reiterated in a rediff.com interview. Again, at a recently given interview to Sudeshna Roy of *Hindustan Times* (February 10, 2002), Rituporno admitted that all his films are women oriented:

> It started as if by accident in *Unishe April*. And then this women orientation was carried forward in my next film *Dahan*. I wanted to make films on vulnerability and in Indian cinema, women are almost synonymous with the word. Secondly, a vulnerable woman is more easily accepted by our society. If I have to project a man in a similar light, I would have to give many more reasons for the man’s vulnerability. There was a time when I used to be defensive about this image. But now I am no longer bothered by it.

At the felicitation of the Bimal Roy Memorial Committee for his contribution to Indian cinema, Rituporno even gave us a list of the women he likes and admires. “My all time favorite actresses are always those whom I work with. Besides them I have five more actresses whom I admire.” These actresses are Jaya Bachhan, Sabitri Chatterjee, Tabu, Shabana Azmi and Waheeda Rehman. The latest venture of this prize-winning director is a film called *Shubho Muharrat*, where interestingly enough, the celebrated filmmaker turns to an Agatha Christie mystery and has cast the celebrated actress Rakhee as a Bengali Miss Marple. The other important lead role will be taken by Sharmila Tagore. (The woman-centeredness is therefore neither an accident nor can the director get out of his expertise on female relationships!) Since the film required two middle-aged actresses, one traditionally beautiful and the other with a pan-Indian look, he thought both these actresses “fitted the bill to a T.” When asked by the same interviewer why a director known for his films on human relationships suddenly hit upon a thriller, Rituporno candidly replied:
Who says thrillers are not about relationships? The story I have selected is definitely a thriller, but that is just a take-off point. The film is eventually about relationships, about bonding between two women from different walks of life. I have taken off from an Agatha Christie novel, but that is all. The story is totally Indian in flavour. Quite some time back, I had thought of making a television soap on this story. But that project did not materialize. Now I have written a full script and created a sort of Bengali Miss Marple.

Rituporno once again justified his female-centeredness of the story by stating that the concept of a woman detective has always excited him:

The difference between the male gaze and the female gaze is what stirred me. Men look at crime differently. Their mode of detection is also more theoretical, where the mind and logic get the upper hand. With the woman, her intuition, her innate common sense, her native intelligence and her power of observation, which is at times deemed mere inquisitiveness, is what works wonders and this also seems to be a more interesting way of tackling crime. Besides, male detectives are often given a kind of asexual image, which I don’t find very exciting.

What are Rituporno Ghosh’s dreams? He dreams of making films from the mythological stories of Manasha-Mangal – with Ma Manasha, the snake goddess, with Lakhinder and Behula (once again note the choice of familial relationships!). Though he wants to stick to family drama and to the classical narrative style, he has no penchant for working in other forms. But he would love to do real satire, good comedy, and black humor films too (like Satyajit Ray’s Parash Pathar) he admitted. There is a rumor that the young director has also planned an untitled film with Amitabh Bachhan based on a story by the noted Bengali novelist, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay and it will deal with a man in his mid-life crisis. Till this 2004 targeted film is released, it would not be over-emphasizing to conclude by stating that the raison d’etre for Rituporno Ghosh’s films remains, “I understand women.”

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Raincoat – his venture into Hindi films. Is it to capture a wider audience?

Andarmahal –

Dosar –