

## OPENING CLOSETS AND DIVIDING AUDIENCES: RITUPARNO GHOSH, THE QUEER STAR OF BENGALI CINEMA

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“Rituparno Ghosh came into the world of cinema like a storm, with two remarkable films on the trot. He has disappeared in a similar fashion, like a sudden gust of wind” – Bengali film director Gautam Ghose<sup>1</sup>

We begin this article by invoking Rituparno Ghosh’s death on 30 May 2013, and the subsequent public mourning as a starting point to delve into his life and work<sup>2</sup>. In doing so we engage with Judith Butler’s question ‘What makes for a grievable life?’ (Butler 20). Butler explains that as humans and sexual minorities our lives are marked by a sense of vulnerability and precarity and that for us mourning and grieving is not just about accepting some one’s loss but, more importantly, accepting that something has fundamentally changed and undergone a transformation. Ghosh’s death left an indelible mark on not just Bengali (and more largely Indian) cinema but also a profound sense of loss for the queer community in Kolkata whose own dispossessed lives were given a sense of recognition through Ghosh’s work only to be deprived of it again.

When Ghosh breathed his last, thousands poured out into the streets to pay their last respects. His home in Kolkata was packed with celebrities, friends and politicians. Among the mourners who lined his home as news of his death spread were scores of gender-queer people who had found inspiration in Ghosh’s films, talk shows, and from his life in general. NGOs associated with the queer rights movement gathered at the Nandan and Rabindra Sadan complex, lit candles, prayed together and paid their tribute to Ghosh, whose death was recognised and widely mourned as a loss

of a queer life that had a significant impact on the lives of sexual minorities in Kolkata, India. To them Ghosh was an ally and a friend; for each of them there was a profound sense of loss. Such public mourning was last seen when Ghosh's inspiration and creative mentor Satyajit Ray passed away in 1992. But, in the case of Ghosh, the public mourning acquired a different cultural and political dimension, for it brought out into the open the necessity of recognising queer lives. As Sara Ahmed notes:

[The] the failure to recognise queer loss *as* loss is also a failure to recognise queer relationships as significant bonds, or that queer lives are lives worth living, or that queers are more than failed heterosexuals, heterosexuals who have failed "to be". Given that queer becomes read as a form of "non-life" – with the death implied by being seen as non-reproductive – then queers are perhaps even already dead and cannot die (156).

The paraphernalia surrounding Ghosh's death became a celebration of queer lives as 'worth living'. This recognition was politically significant, with the Chief Minister overseeing the funeral, because the state, under the aegis of the infamous Article 377 of the IPC, still refuses to grant legitimacy to same-sex love and queer identities. Ahmed, reflecting on the public mourning of lost lives post the 9/11 incident, quotes Marita Stukern's protest against the 'hierarchy of the dead' that was constructed, in which queer losses were 'excluded from the public cultures of grief' (Ahmed 157). This absencing of queer losses from the public cultures of grief was severely criticised by the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists' Association, which came up with a list of names of queer people who lost their lives. This list, as Ahmed notes, eventually worked towards incorporating queer loss into the loss of the nation:

...in which the “we” is always a “we too”. The utterance, “we too”, implies both a recognition of a past exclusion (the “too” shows that the “we” must be supplemented), and a claim for inclusion (we are like you in having lost). (Ahmed 158).

It is debatable whether the state mourned Ghosh’s untimely demise as a loss of a queer life; perhaps, the gun salute given to him at the Sirithi Crematorium was more of a recognition of his remarkable contribution to cinema and culture. But, the manner in which the citizens collectively mourned it on the day he passed away underlined how his death marked an irredeemable loss for the LGBT community. In the social media too the predominant rhetoric of grieving was soaked in a deep melancholia for the loss of a strong voice which had time and again upheld the cause of the sexually marginalised, and lived his own life without ever being mendacious about his sexuality. Twitter and Facebook were weighed down by the collective grief by actors such as Amitabh Bachchan to politicians such as Kirron Kher and Smriti Irani. Kher and Irani both represent a right wing political party in India (BJP) who have been vociferous against same-sex rights, but somehow Ghosh meant more than his sexual politics.

#### **PORTRAIT OF A FILMMAKER: LOCATING RITUPARNO GHOSH IN TOLLYWOOD**

Ghosh (b. 1961) was a filmmaker, lyricist and writer who emerged on the cultural scene of Bengal as a copywriter at Response, a Kolkata-based advertising firm in the 1980s. He made a mark for himself in the world of commercials, winning several awards for his company. His foray into cinema with the critically acclaimed *Hirer Angti* (Diamond Ring, 1992), and especially, *Unishey April* (19<sup>th</sup> April, 1995)

changed the landscape of Bengali cinema for the Bengali *bhadrolok* (“gentlefolk”) significantly.

The star system in Bengal cinema has always had the filmmaker at its centre: be the internationally acclaimed Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak or Aparna Sen, or the locally popular and immensely commercially successful Anjan Chowdhury and Swapan Saha. Ghosh arrived at a time when Bengali cinema was going through a dark phase. Ray had passed away in 1992, leaving behind him a vacuum. Although Goutam Ghose, Aparna Sen and Buddhadeb Dasgupta contributed significantly to “intellectual” cinema, they did not have much command over the commercial market. Bengali art house cinema, as it is still called, scarcely found producers, and globally acclaimed directors suffered a major backset. The last three films of Ray, *Ganashatru (Enemy of the People, 1989)*, *Shakha Prashakha (1990)* and *Agantuk (The Stranger, 1991)*, although critically acclaimed, did not have a run at the box-office. It seemed a new kind of cinema was needed, one which would blur the line between parallel and mainstream, an opposition that emerged in the 1950s with Ray’s *Pather Panchali (The Song of the Little Road, 1955)*. To quote Spandan Bhattacharya:

This binary of popular/parallel sustained for more than a decade and this very notion of quality/good taste in the post-1990s Bengali “parallel” cinema successfully worked through cultural frameworks and networks of urban intelligentsia within which its “difference” from mainstream is maintained. But in the last six-seven years with a wide variety of Bengali film texts and their logic of form and apparatus, that very idea of homogeneity and coherence is disturbed. And film texts within the “parallel” category started

opposing some of the features of this category and offering a critique of the middle class values and notion of good taste. (n.pag)

Ghosh pioneered this new trend. In the early 1990s, when Ghosh arrived Bengali commercial cinema was scarcely original; it consisted mostly of remakes of Tamil, Bangladeshi or Hindi films. Made with severe budget constraints, the films were of poor quality, both in terms of technique and content. The educated Bengali *bhadrolok* could not relate to these films, and turned away from the theatres to the small screen. Bengali television channels, conscious of the demand of the viewers, regularly ran classics of an earlier period stimulating a deep nostalgia. Owing to the colossal success of the Indo-Bangladeshi co-production *Beder Meye Jyotsna* (The Snake-charmer's Daughter, Motiur Rahman Panu, 1991), Bengali commercial films began to appear more like crude folk theatre or *jatra* (see Gooptu 1). A whole gamut of such films followed, further alienating the culturally upscale urban folk.

Commercial filmmakers such as Chowdhury and Saha, who contributed significantly to this trend, enjoyed a decade-long stardom by celebrating the moralistic virtues of the poor man, and vilifying the (metropolitan, English-speaking) rich as always already vicious and exploitative. A socialist state, with a huge majority living below the poverty line, in the cities as well as the villages, helped carve out an easy passage to the box-office for such films. The semi-migrant populations of the city, the suburbs and the villages, suffering a culture lag, had Chowdhury, Saha, and others as their heroes; Bhattacharya talking about these filmmakers and their brand of cinema observes: 'Frequently, [...] these narratives critiqued the *bhadrolok*, their hypocritical society, corrupt political leaders and similarly corrupt wealthy men to underscore the heroic struggles of the vigilante figures' (n.pag). Therefore, the *bhadrolok* not only felt alienated by these films for their lack of aesthetics, but also by

his own vilified image within the narratives. Ghosh's films arrived to reinstate the *bhadrolok*'s centrality, his tastes, cultural pursuits and refinement. Subsequently, he soon became a household name in urban sectors.

Although he was criticized for his stylized chamber dramas, which barely looked outside the confines of upper middle class Bengali homes, Ghosh consciously attempted to bring the *bhadrolok* back to the commercial theatres. It might be argued that his films were not as groundbreaking as *Pather Panchali* or *Calcutta 71* (Mrinal Sen 1972), but Ghosh conscientiously brought together several strands of Bengali tradition and culture to appeal to the English-educated middle class. He recreated middle class homes and their immediate realities painstakingly that was reminiscent of Ray, while telling their stories without being too erudite or unintelligible. While both Ray and Aparna Sen clearly seemed to have influenced his films, Ghosh also brought in the simplicity and candor of the mainstream cinema of the golden era. In fact, Ghosh's films engendered a middle-of-the-road genre, reminiscent of older Bengali commercial films as well as those of Bombay-based filmmakers Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Basu Chatterjee, the pioneers of "middle cinema". Ghosh's fascination for the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore also began showing in his films, which used the Nobel Laureate's songs and poems as important narrative devices; later, he adapted Tagore's novels and one of his dance dramas. In other words, Ghosh's films which addressed the *bhadrolok*'s nostalgia for the past, were located in a recognizably "Bengali" cultural milieu, and managed to transcend mere parochialism. In fact, he brought back to Bengali cinema its indigenesness, but without losing sight of an expanding global market. Having established himself as a reliable filmmaker, Ghosh began experimenting with more radical subjects, using his

films as a medium to “come out” and assert his sexuality, much to the disgruntlement of the conservative middle class. As he stated in an interview:

But, my city, I know, can neither handle me nor ignore me... (*smiles*) ... Jokes apart, I have indeed estranged a section of my audience. I am aware of the loss. A lot of them are wary of my cross-dressing in public! In fact, the respect I used to command has been seriously affected by my decision to proclaim my sexuality (1).

Ghosh’s decision to “come out” was indeed radical. The educated middle class, despite its progressiveness, had barely been able to give up on taboos associated with gender and sexuality. Yet Ghosh could no longer pretend to be someone he was not, despite the risk of alienating a section of his audience who had so far held him in high esteem. Ghosh’s stardom was in fact reinforced by this decision, in contradiction to his apprehension that he might end up losing his stronghold.

Ghosh’s arrival in the film industry happened at a critical moment of a paradigm shift: a predominantly socialist state was slowly graduating into late-capitalism, owing largely to the liberalisation of the Indian economy (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 5). It goes without saying that Ghosh’s films were informed by the social, cultural and economic changes wrought by liberalisation in the lives of the *bhadrolok*. His iconoclastic move—his decision to “come out” and associate himself with films on queer subjects—was also conditioned by the neo-liberal discourses of sexual identity politics characteristic of late capitalist society.

The arrival at this later phase of radical cinema happened only after Ghosh had acquired a respectable place in the Bengali’s cultural imagination. The first phase of his career spanned the years when he worked exclusively within the Bengali film industry making films for an imagined Bengali middle class audience (approximately

1992-2001). The second phase began when his films started to receive corporate funding which enabled him to start working with actors from Bombay (roughly between 2002 and 2011). This was an interesting phase as for the first time corporate houses such as Reliance, Planman and Venkatesh started funding Bengali films. It was also during this time that established Bollywood stars became a staple feature in his films, such as Aishwarya Rai (*Chokher Bali*, 2003 and *Raincoat*, 2003), Amitabh Bachchan (*The Last Lear*, 2007), Bipasha Basu (*Shob Choritro Kalponik*, 2008), Manisha Koirala (*Khela*, 2008), Abhishek Bachchan (*Antarmahal*, 2005) and Nandita Das (*Shubho Maharat*, 2003), which led critics to conjecture that Ghosh's move to the Bombay film industry was imminent. Even Amitabh Bachchan's production house came forward to distribute *Antarmahal*, the only regional film it ever backed. *Chokher Bali*, produced by Venkatesh Films, the only corporate production house in Bengal at that time, was the first Bengali film to see a multiplex release. Soon after, the third and last phase of his career began, with a trilogy of queer films (2009-2012). We surmise that Ghosh's star status and a ready constituent of loyal audiences made sure that he could push some of his radical ideas forward and the producers felt it was not unsafe to fund a film especially with Ghosh's name attached to it. Of course as we will discuss further in this article, this was also made possible with his numerous other roles as a cultural commentator, talk show host, columnist and panel discussant that consolidated his status as one of Bengal's foremost cultural icons.

### **THE PHENOMENON BEYOND A FILMMAKER**

As we have already mentioned, Ghosh's stardom was not limited to his status as an auteur director. Ghosh emerged at a time when Kolkata's media industry was undergoing a massive transformation. Several new television channels, an increasing readership of Bengali film magazines and the emergence of corporatized production



houses changed the entire landscape of the culture industry in India. Ghosh's media presence and stardom was catapulted through this advantageous media convergence. Ghosh was already the editor of the leading film magazine *Anandalok*, after which he took on the mantle of a new supplement *Robbar*, which quickly became an iconic Bengali cultural magazine, and in which he authored thought pieces on issues ranging from cinema to sex and politics.

He consolidated his presence in the Bengali cultural imagination in 2000 when he appeared as a host of the popular Bengali evening chat show *Ebong Rituparno* (And Rituparno). In 2007 he started hosting another chat show *Ghosh & Company*. By this time, as Sumit Dey has argued, Ghosh had undergone a complete transformation: he was much more confident, radical and spoke with a commanding voice, conscious of his tremendous power within the Bengali public imaginary (2015:240). It was on *Ghosh & Company* that Ghosh spoke up about queer politics for the first time. Until then, despite his "effeminacy" and the queer aesthetics displayed in his films, he had never publicly spoken about his sexuality or been vocal about queer politics in Kolkata.

Ghosh controversially confronted a stand-up comic on the show in 2009. Proclaiming himself the spokesperson of a community of effeminate men who endured constant public humiliation, Ghosh entered into a no-holds-barred critique of the comic:

When you are mimicking me, are you mimicking Rituparno Ghosh, the person or are you mimicking a generic effeminate man? ...What message are you putting across? Have you ever thought that when you mimic me, you actually end up humiliating all effeminate men in Kolkata? ... You should be sensitive

to the fact that you are hurting the sentiments of a sexual minority. I am objecting to your act not because I am inconvenienced myself; rather I am objecting to it on the behalf of all those for whom I maybe a representative<sup>3</sup>.

Ghosh's radicalism in its myriad forms indeed brought queerness out of the closet to dwell in the *bhadrolok*'s living room. But, conversely, he ended up generating a queer stereotype. In Kolkata, especially among the Bengali middleclass, Ghosh and "gayness" have become unequivocally synonymous, thus overshadowing the indeterminable range of sexualities indicated by the term "queer". In fact, "Rituparno Ghosh" remains an epithet of abuse for men who cross-dress and/or are "effeminate".

One feature of the star text as Rachel Dwyer reminds us is the star's off screen biography, even if it is only for the purposes of 'publicity or for effecting intimacy' (15). Ghosh gave his audiences and fans a glimpse into the intimate spaces of his life, his mind, and his thought processes, in his editorial column in *Robbar*. He often talked about his sexuality, his amusement at people's endless speculations about his sex life, and other personal details of failed relationships without naming his lovers. He also constantly reflected on the melancholia surrounding his every day, his failing health, and apprehensions of leading a life of singlehood forever. In a special issue, entitled "Strange Animals" (1 August 2010), Ghosh projects himself as the queerest of all living creatures, waiting for his father's impending demise and getting used to a lifelong loneliness: 'Father is in the hospital for the past one month. And in this two-storied house at Indrani Park I am alone. Maybe father is preparing me for the rest of my life...a preparation for living a lonely life' (4). While wielding tremendous power as the most sought after filmmaker of the Bengali film industry, Ghosh did not ever hesitate to voice his vulnerabilities, insecurities, and the pangs of being queer and lonely.

Dwyer (18) citing Vijay Mishra has argued that the star text in India operates very differently from Hollywood and is created through the deployment of songs and dialogues in a specific way. This can be traced within the Bengali film lineage where “stars” such as Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen became known for their romantic duets and the characters they performed on screen. At the same time their off-screen lives (Sen’s Greta Garbo-esque private life and Kumar’s more publicly open one) were also heavily scrutinised by the public. Ghosh’s star text, however, was created slightly differently. One may argue that he emerged as a star by making public a ‘precarious’, marginal, dispossessed life, which could have been led hassle-free within the closet. After all as Butler (2004) reminds us public critique and debate only happens through a series of shaming tactics which is what Ghosh had to go through to get a public discourse on queer identities in West Bengal started in the public domain.

Ghosh’s stardom as a queer icon remarkable overshadowed his credits as filmmaker, though one is difficult to filter out from the other. Hankering for a cultural icon, which could give queer lives a meaning, hope and most importantly a celebratory precedent, queer folks in Kolkata in particular, clung on to Ghosh as a messiah of sorts, who could liberate them from a stigmatised life. Memorable dialogues from his films and the poetry he penned are still widely quoted by many of his audiences. Most notably, the song ‘Bahumanarhi saju abhisare pehnu suneel bes’ (Expectant of an amorous union, I dress in blue) from his film *Memories in March* (Sanjoy Nag, 2011) became a popular meme on social media platforms such as Facebook while emerging as an anthem of sorts for the many gender-queer fans Ghosh won over the years. The folk-song, ‘Banamali tumi ar janome hoyeo Radha’ (‘O Gardener Divine! May you be reborn as Radha’), which ran like a motif through *Arekti Premer Golpo* (*Just Another Love Story*, Kaushik Ganguly, 2010), in which

Ghosh made his acting debut, was revived from oblivion as a celebration of androgyny. On his birth and death anniversaries, Facebook walls and pages devoted to him are filled with woeful posts, lamenting his untimely demise, his immense cultural influence on people, and how he changed lives for many gender-queer men and women, who were encouraged to come out, and be themselves.

### **SARTORIAL POLITICS AND STARDOM**

Ghosh's star persona relied heavily on his sartorial choices. Dyer has argued that the 'way stars lived is one element in the "fabulousness" of Hollywood,' and that fashion is one of 'the recurrent features of that life style' (39). In India, as Tarlo has argued, fashion plays an important role, instigating change, questioning national identities and asserting power (8). Ghosh's sartorial statements are linked to his performed androgyny. Ghosh did not identify himself essentially as a woman, contrary to popular views. Rather, he saw himself as an androgynous man, and considered androgyny a privilege for any artist. In this case he drew inspiration from his mentor Tagore: Ghosh pointed out that many of Tagore's works have an ambiguous androgynous voice underneath, and that this was best realised in his songs. Ghosh claimed that since 'pronouns and verbs in the Bengali language are not gender sensitive...the mysterious and mystical ambiguity of androgyny is a treasure....' (Sarkar 82).

It appears that Ghosh inherited the notion of androgyny from such Bengali literary and cultural traditions. In *Arekti Premer Golpo*, the androgynous figure of Sri Chaitanya functions as a constant symbolic reference vis-à-vis the protagonist's gender fluidity. Ghosh's own explanation was that he did not want to abide by

normative codes of dressing. Therefore what he wore was unisex, which he claimed had precedence:

The concept of unisex has been monopolized by women. Women can wear men's clothes. The problem arises when men wear women's clothes. Whatever I wear has always been worn by men. Wearing things like earrings and necklaces has always been a part of our sartorial history and tradition. These were tagged as feminine frills during colonial rule (Sengupta n.pag).

He held that his accessories were a sign and celebration of his gender fluidity or in-between-ness. In one of his editorial columns in *Robbar*, he asserted he hardly needed an excuse for wearing makeup and dressing up: 'Aamaar ichchhe tukui jothestho' ('My wish is enough') (4). While Ghosh's sartorial choices fixated on creating a sense of performance and display we do not believe this is a straightforward example of the 'conspicuous consumption' which Dyer, drawing on Thorstein Veblen, discerns in the lifestyles of stars (42). What Ghosh displays is his social capital in understanding the canons of taste and at the same time aligning his sartorial practices to a queer legacy of androgyny rather than claim it as just his own. Ghosh's fashion was an amalgamation of several local trends of male fashion which has gone out of public memory and is therefore unfamiliar to the current populist understanding of clothing; for, fashion now has clear gender markers in India, where, there was a comparatively more fluid demarcation between male and female attire, before colonial ideas of dressing up began to reinforce a more rigid division between the sexes as regards to clothing (Begum and Dasgupta 137). Therefore, Ghosh did make a strong political statement by the dress-code he uninhibitedly sported, and was never affected by the criticism he encountered. His boldness became more conspicuous in the later years of his life,

when he stunned his audience by appearing in public in danglers, kohl-lined eyes, trimmed eyebrows, lipstick, and loud makeup. This was important as eliciting and gaining support for his choices required his audiences to respond to if not to identify with this. Butler (xix) draws upon the image of the dress to suggest that grief can be grasped through the material of clothing. Ghosh's clothes marked him as different but also enabled new attachments and configurations with fans who were living precarious sexual lives such as him.



(FIGURE 1: Rituparno Ghosh walks the ramp in Kolkata Fashion Week, 2009

(Courtesy Abhishek Dutta)

The androgyny Ghosh projected worked towards augmenting queer visibility in the media and the public sphere (Begum and Dasgupta 139). As Ruth Holliday argues, ‘having been invisible (or pathologized) for so long in writing, the media, law and culture more generally,’ queer identities have more recently become ‘increasingly visible through a number of mechanisms’ (215).

The politics of visibility as well as the many everyday cues and codes of dress, gesture or conduct are often used to communicate identity to others of the same or different groups. For example, the development of queer styles such as butch and camp (to name but two) have become signifiers of sexuality and are mapped onto the surface of bodies, not least through clothes (Holliday 215).

Ghosh’s negotiation with fashion in his films, as an act of creative sublimation, seems to be a direct articulation of his queer subjectivity. At this point we would like to finally turn to his three queer films which are in our opinion central to the appreciation of his unique stardom.

### **SCREEN ROLES**

The final phase of Ghosh’s stardom was marked by his now famous “queer trilogy” *ArektiPremerGolpo*, *Memories in March* and *Chitrangada: A Crowning Wish* (2012). While Ghosh directed only the last one, he was creatively involved with the first two and acted in all three. These films emerged at the time of Ghosh’s own public outing of his sexuality and gender variance within an increasingly volatile queer political movement in Bengal and the rest of India. New discourses of trans and *kothi* identities



were emerging which were distinct from the larger “gay politics” of urban India (Boyce 1201; Dutta 495). Ghosh’s outing led to speculation about whether he had undergone gender reassignment surgery and where in the gender binary he now belonged. Ghosh was against any such binaries and claimed in *The Telegraph* ‘I consider myself privileged because of my gender fluidity, the fact that I am in between. I don’t consider myself a woman and I don’t want to become a woman’ (Sengupta n.pag)

The three films generated much interest among local and international audiences. The fact that Ghosh was associated with and acted in all three opened up different possibilities for interpreting the films. In a certain way, it seems that all three films were Ghosh’s conscious attempt to translate his much speculated upon private life onto the screen. In other words, all three films gathered the dimension of star texts almost literally within the public imagination. Bakshi and Sen have argued that most of Ghosh’s audiences conveniently mixed up Ghosh’s real and reel lives in their appreciation of these films (179). In *Arekti Premer Golpo*, Ghosh as Abhiroop wears loud makeup, female garments, and is often mistaken for a woman; as Ornaab in *Memories in March* Ghosh is a comparatively toned-down, though no less sartorial in choice of clothes; *Chitrangada* has him as a cross-dressing choreographer, Rudra, who contemplates and almost undergoes a gender reassignment surgery in order to be able to adopt a child. But none of these three characters could gain a life of their own; rather, all three have become mere extensions of Ghosh’s real life personality in the popular imagination, for by the time these films appeared Ghosh had already become a queer icon. Audiences were aware of Ghosh’s personal life, owing to his overwhelming presence in the media and his editorials in *Robbar*, and thus could not but conflate Ghosh with these reel characters.



FIGURE 2: Rituparno Ghosh in *Chitrangada* (Courtesy Venkatesh Films)

The connection between Ghosh's personal life and the queer characters he essayed on screen is most conspicuous in *Chitrangada*. Early in the film, Shubho (Anjan Dutt) observes of the new film project he is discussing with Rudra, 'Isn't it becoming much too autobiographical?' to which Rudra replies, 'You think so because you already know my story.' This exchange is loaded with meaning for it subtly merges the character Rudra played by Ghosh and Ghosh the person, who had by then appeared more "womanly" by undergoing cosmetic surgery, hormone therapy and an abdominoplasty. Bakshi and Sen argue:

In Rudra's rejoinder one might read an auto-reflexive irony directed at the audience of *Chitrangada* who has entered the theatre with extra-diegetic knowledge of Ghosh's personal life and is expecting a confessional narrative. At the same time, this comment also legitimizes, as it were, the audience's speculation. Such legitimization is further corroborated by repetitive use of mirrors and reflections within the film that insinuates that Rudra maybe a self-image of Ghosh (207).

Such conflation is certainly facilitated by Ghosh's immense popularity and visibility within the social and cultural sphere. Indisputably autobiographical, *Chitrangada* could only have been made by a director confident of their star status. At the same time, all three films have a significant role in exposing the uninitiated to the world of same-sex love, while making a plea to integrate gender-queer people within the mainstream.

## **LEGACY**

In India and particularly in Bengal, Ghosh continues to thrive two years after his death. There have been more than a dozen retrospectives of his films in various cities in India as well as internationally.<sup>4</sup> Institutes such as Jawaharlal Nehru University and Weavers Studio, Kolkata, have organised film festivals, seminars and panels about his work.

It is striking that Ghosh, who has been hailed as a legacy of Bengal's other famous auteur Satyajit Ray (Dasgupta and Banerjee 49 ; Datta, Bakshi and Dasgupta 228) also stands in direct contravention to the hetero-masculinity associated with the latter. Whilst being credited for bringing the Bengali middle class audience back to the cinema theatres in the 1990s, Ghosh was equally the focus of attacks for effeminacy and the gender-queer body. Ghosh's legacy both in the form of younger filmmakers such as Srijit Mukherjee, Mainak Bhaumik and Kaushik Ganguly's acknowledgement of his work as being an inspiration for them, as well as the debate that his queer work elicited, establishes him as an auteur-star.

What is intriguing is that Ghosh's untimely demise also generated much speculation about what might have caused the death. While many conjectured that his attempt at undergoing gender reassignment surgery at an advanced age was the reason, and

several local newspapers, immediately after his death, ran articles on the dangers of gender reassignment after thirty, many protested against such a proposition, claiming such a post-mortem based on rumours was unethical (Datta, Bakshi and Dasgupta 228). Furthermore, Swapnomoy Chakraborty's *Holdey Golaap* (The Yellow Rose), the first self-conscious queer novel in Bengali, and serialised in *Robbar*, ended, six weeks after Ghosh's death, on a disappointing note: the gender-queer protagonist, who has undergone gender reassignment surgery, realises on her wedding night that it has not worked. It is difficult to conclude whether it was Ghosh's untimely death that inspired such a distressing conclusion, but Ghosh's presence in the cultural and social sphere was so pervasive that it might not be far-fetched to make such a connection. Ghosh's life became a text that was held up as a point of recognition and reference for other queer people in Bengal. Although no moral conclusions were drawn, it seemed that the social media was all too proactive to initiate a discussion on gender reassignment surgery, and the possible risks it might entail. It seemed that had Ghosh not passed away all of a sudden, such discussions would not have been necessary. Perhaps that was the ultimate marker of the stardom Ghosh enjoyed, not just as a filmmaker of rare calibre but also as an icon who had a lasting influence on the lives of the nation's queer citizens.

Returning to Butler, we would surmise that the form of grieving put forward in our piece also comments on Ghosh's rise to fame within a pan-Indian public, rising from his status as a cultural icon to a state icon and finally a national icon. It was after all the aftermath of Ghosh's death and his public mourning that transformed and shaped what Ghosh meant to the queer Bengali public. We would also argue that Ghosh's funeral was used for tangential purposes by various institutes: the state of West Bengal was "claiming" him as a part of their institution, whilst the queer public

sought to recharge the queer political movement and bring together a wider queer visibility (Dasgupta, 268). Butler questions if there is something to be gained from grieving and tarrying with grief (30). Considering the struggle for recognition, she explains that it is an exchange; each partner needs to recognise and realise that the other needs and deserves recognition (43). Through the performative nature of Ghosh's death and funeral both the state apparatus as well as the queer populace were doing exactly that, recognising Ghosh as a state institution but, more importantly, declaring and announcing that Ghosh's queer politics need to be maintained through the recognition and acceptance of the wider queer populace of Bengal.

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<sup>1</sup> BBC News carried a range of media responses to Ghosh's death. Available here: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-22726455>>

<sup>2</sup> We are using he/him throughout this article as this is how Ghosh referred to himself. The authors would like to thank Steven Baker for inspiring the title; and Rituparno Ghosh, friend, ally, icon and inspiration

<sup>3</sup> This can be viewed on *Ghosh and Company*. Episode 10. A clip of this is available on Youtube over here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkKTM2skj9U>> (accessed 27 June 2015)

<sup>4</sup>Rohit K Dasgupta and Tanmayee Banerjee organized a screening of *Bariwali* (The Landlady, 2000) at the University of Westminster, London. Sangeeta Datta organized a screening of *Chitrangada* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. In addition his documentary film *Jeevan Smriti* (Selective Memories, 2012) on Rabindranath Tagore is still travelling to various festivals in Europe and America.