

PORTRAYAL OF QUEER IN RITUPARNO GHOSH'S 'QUEER TRILOGY': STRENGTHENING THE QUEER COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Rituparno Ghosh has been one of the most prominent figures of Indian parallel cinema and the most celebrated queer icons of India. After Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and Ritwick Ghatak, Ghosh was the one who brought the Bengali audience and cinema lovers back to theatres as he kept enriching Indian cinema with his back-to-back masterpieces, that not only amazed Indian audience but also bagged immense acclaims, awards and praise from international viewers as well. The three films in which Ghosh acted- '*Arekti Premer Golpo*' or Just Another Love Story (directed by Kaushik Ganguly), '*Memories in March*' (directed by Sanjoy Nag), and '*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*' (directed by Rituparno Ghosh)- include active and impactful queer performances, are strong enough to strengthen the queer communities, which for so long have been marginalized. In an India, where the very concept of LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and '+' for related communities) is still looked down upon, Rituparno Ghosh- both his presence and performance in his apparent 'Queer trilogy' have extensively helped to carry forward the journey of people belonging to different sexual orientations and genders and have also provided greater courage to the people belonging to this community to 'come out' and continue with their journey of love and exploration of self-identities. By analyzing the three films- '*Arekti Premer Golpo*' (Just Another Love Story), '*Memories in March*' and '*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*', this research analysis will try to explore how the portrayal of queer and Rituparno Ghosh's performance in the three films could strengthen and influence the LGBTQ+ movement and the queer community.

Keywords

Rituparno Ghosh, Queer, Gender, LGBTQ+, Cinema, Queer community

Introduction

The Oxford Dictionary defines 'Queer' as "*describing or relating to a sexual identity or gender identity that is different from traditional ideas about sex and gender*". Since the queer theory got formulated in the 1990s, queer studies have become quite an important discipline in gender studies (Whittington, 2012). Eve Sedgwick defines queer as- "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning

when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically” (Whittington, 2012). According to Judith Butler, queer may be described as "a contestation of the terms of sexual legitimacy” (Whittington, 2012).

It was in 1992, that movements were started to decriminalize Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Article 377 says that “carnal intercourse is against the order of nature” and that non-binary sexuality is a punishable offence and anyone found guilty should be imprisoned for life (Two Years Since Article 377 Annulment, LGBTQ Community Still Battling Prejudice, 2020). It was finally on 6th September 2018, that Article 377 of the IPC was officially decriminalized by the Supreme Court of India.

‘Queer’ has been, for quite a long, a much-debated topic in India. The Indian, and thus the Bengali society have often ridiculed the idea of queer existence. For instance, when there were widespread petitions and claims for decriminalizing Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) to legalize homosexuality, Indian ministers claimed homosexuality to be ‘unnatural’ (Correspondent, 2013). But there are avid references and portrayals of non-binary narratives and alternate sexualities in Indian heritage and culture. From ‘Shikhandi’ in the Mahabharata, portrayed as a trans-person, to ‘Brihannala’, the third Pandav Arjun, who dressed like a woman and taught dance to Uttara, the daughter of king Virata- queer performance has been depicted as a natural phenomenon in ancient India (Rajendran, 2014). ‘Agni’, on the other hand, the God of fire, and the consort of the Moon God, and ‘Chitrangada’, depicted by Tagore in the dance drama of the same name is a warrior princess, brought up by her father as a man bear pieces of evidence of queer in India since its cultural and mythological inception (Anonymous, 2016). The temple sculptures of Khajuraho, for instance, explicitly portray women in erotic positions (Pattanaik, 2009). There are other references of queerness in Hindu mythology as well, for instance, the Hindu deity Vishnu is known to have taken the form of a beautiful woman named ‘Mohini’ to trick the demons so that the Gods can get to drink the Amrita (the pure potion that made Gods immortal) and the Hindu God Shiva, is often pictured as an androgynous or trans deity with half of a male body and the other half of the body as a female, portraying the body of Parvati (Ghosh, 2018). Still, the idea and existence of queerness in India were ostracized and condemned for a long time, and the Bengali society was no exception. We have witnessed that both men and women in the Vedic ages and in ancient India used to wear ornaments and heavy jewellery. But when in present day, men are seen wearing ornaments, they are invariably labelled as ‘trans people’ which comes with an inherently negative connotation.

In such a situation, Rituparno Ghosh came out as the queer star of India and certainly in Bengal (Acharjee, 2020). He used cinema as a medium through which he tried to break all sorts of gender stereotypes and expressed how normal and smooth it can be to be the person one ‘wishes to be’. Rituparno Ghosh started his filmmaking career with the film ‘*Hirer Angti*’ (1992) after quitting his job at the advertisement company ‘Response India’ (Dasgupta & Bakshi, 2018). Ghosh started making his films at a time when there was a lack of “serious” content in Bengali cinema, matching those standards as set by the master filmmakers like

Ray and Ghatak, as they had passed away and Bengali theatres were flooded with commercial, melodramatic films that did not interest the cultural sects of the Bengali 'Bhadralok' society (Acharjee, 2020). The films by Rituparno Ghosh painted the silver screen with powerful and unique stories- stories of women and womanhood, and the everyday lives of women, stories about cinema itself, combined with the sophisticated 'Bhadralok' aesthetics that greatly impacted the Bengali viewers of all social strata. Most of the films consisted of stories that addressed the lives of women and echoed the nuances of human relationships that usually go unheard. His storytelling was so uniquely original, that each of his audience could relate to them. From 'Unishe April', to 'Dahan', 'Dosar' to 'Bariwali', 'Chokher Bali' to 'Antarmahal', all the characters were highly impactful on the Bengali urban middle-class in Kolkata- in shaping their thoughts and even their wardrobes (Acharjee, 2020).

Gradually, Ghosh started 'coming out' and his aura and charisma impacted queer people, allowing them to renounce all sorts of embarrassments related to their sexualities and gender preferences. For instance, he appeared in talks shows like 'Ebong Rituparno' and 'Ghosh and Company' in unique aesthetic wardrobes- featuring a combination of deeply kohled eyes and kurtas that not only glorified his transition, but also welcomed other trans people to accept who they are, and present themselves in public however they wish to do so, as he correctly and firmly said in 'Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish', "Just be, what you wish to be. It's your wish" and "you can choose your gender".

Literature Review

Before exploring how queer has been portrayed in cinema and what is cinematic about queer, it is quite essential to clearly distinguish and understand the concepts of sex, gender, sexual preference, and sexual orientation. To distinguish between 'sex' and 'gender', in many feminist theories, 'sex' has been equated with a woman's physiological characteristics (Butler, 1988). It is known that in 1991, the term 'Queer theory' was first coined by Teresa de Lauretis, that for the first time provided homonormative ideas (Dasgupta, 2020). Maurice Merleau Ponty in 'The Phenomenology of Perception' describes sex as "a historical idea" and it has a vivid analysis of "the body in its sexual being". Thus, 'sex' is the biological aspect that distinguishes the 'female' and the 'male' as physiological entities.

On the other hand, 'gender' is the 'cultural interpretation' and the 'signification' of the biological 'facticity' (Butler, 1988). When sex is the biological representation, gender is the 'social construct' that is used to identify a human being as a 'woman' or 'man'. When it comes to defining sexual orientation, Stearns (1995) has beautifully stated that "a sexual orientation is generally defined as a sexual attraction to one or both genders that is relatively consistent over time and situation".

While arguing queer performativity, Whittle in 'The Transgender Debate: The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identity' states that when people belonging to LGBTQ+ communities, mostly those who seek transition, "undergoes gender reassignment surgery without changing

their sexual orientation—transsexual people are just as likely to be straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual in their new gender role as any people are.... There is no relationship to sexuality.” For quite a long time, mostly in India, issues related to an individual’s sexual orientation, sexual preference, and gender identity have been much discussed. Parker (2009) in ‘Sexuality, culture and society: shifting paradigms in sexuality research’ states that the ‘sexology’, gender and sexual studies have been introduced in several disciplines and curricular courses such as psychiatry, biology, medicine, and many cultural studies, but it is yet to study how vividly the discussions and studies related to sexual orientation and sexual identities- that include transformations, same-sex romantic relationships, and other discourses related to non-binary genders and their identities have been incorporated in Film studies or how clearly have non-binary gender roles have been included in Indian cinema, particularly Bengali cinema. This paper will explore, through descriptive analysis and comparative studies among the three films- ‘*Arekti Premer Golpo*’ (Just Another Love Story), ‘*Memories in March*’ and ‘*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*’ how the portrayal of the queer in Bengali films has helped to revolutionize the LGBTQ+ movement, how these films were impactful to strengthen the queer community and whether Ghosh and his performance could help other Bengali filmmakers to bring queer depictions and related narratives on screen.

Objective

This paper intends to find out to which extent queer portrayal in the films- ‘*Arekti Premer Golpo*’, ‘*Memories in March*’, and ‘*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*’, through the performance of Rituparno Ghosh could strengthen LGBTQ+ movement and the queer community and what impact Ghosh’s performance in the film has on Bengali cinema from a queer perspective.

Research Methodology

The paper will undergo descriptive analysis of three films- ‘*Arekti Premer Golpo*’, ‘*Memories in March*’, and ‘*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*’ to study how portrayal of queer in Bengali cinema and Rituparno Ghosh’s performance in the three films could strengthen and influence the LGBTQ+ movement and the queer community.

Analysis

Arekti Premer Golpo (Just Another Love Story):

‘*Arekti Premer Golpo*’ or ‘Just Another Love Story’ is a film directed by Kaushik Ganguly that was released in 2010, and is the first film that introduces actor Rituparno Ghosh on screen - as he played both the roles of the youth of the renowned *Jatra* performer Chapal Bhaduri, aka ‘Chapal Rani’, who is mostly known for playing female roles in Bengali *Jatra* (an art form, mostly related to theatre performance that originated in the 15th Century, Bengal: Britannica) and a documentary filmmaker named Abhiroop Sen who is on a journey from femininity to androgynity. The film is about the journey of two queer figures, the

former by compulsion and the later by choice (Ghosh, Rituparno Ebong, 2019). Apart from these two important characters, the film also presents a very crucial figure through Basu (played by Indraneil Sengupta), a bisexual man, who is in a continuous tension between the two relationships with his wife 'Rani' (played by Churni Ganguly) and Abhiroop. The film narrates the journey of Chapal and Abhiroop as they are on a quest to discover their own identities and their individualities.

Memories in March

'*Memories in March*' is a 2011 film directed by Sanjoy Nag, acted by Rituparno Ghosh, Deepti Naval in the lead roles and supported by Raima Sen. It is a story of a grief-stricken mother Arti (played by Deepti Naval) who is coming down to Calcutta at the news of the passing away of her son, Siddhartha (voiced by Dhruv Mookherji) in a car accident. As she explores the world and life of her dead son as a copywriter in an advertisement agency, she finds out that her son was in love with the creative director of the same ad company, Ornob Mitra (played by Rituparno Ghosh), about which he could not tell to his mother, however he tried to do so. The film beautifully explores how the grief and memories related to the same person first detaches, and later unites the lover and the mother in a relationship that will forever try to keep the love alive for the same person.

Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish

'*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*' is a 2012 film written and directed by Rituparno Ghosh. This film is based on Chitrangada, a character from the Indian epic the Mahabharata, and the dance-drama 'Chitrangada' written by Rabindranath Tagore. '*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*', is perhaps one of the most important films made and performed by Rituparno Ghosh, and probably the best film ever made on the queer performance in the history of Indian parallel cinema. The film centers around the story of Rudra, a dancer and choreographer (played by Rituparno Ghosh), and an androgynous figure who develops a homoerotic relationship with Partho (played by Jishu Sengupta), a percussionist, heroin-addict, and a bisexual person. The story is about Rudra's wish to change his gender to become a woman through a gender-reassignment surgery, but in the end, he is on a quest to explore his gender identity, to experience the eternal transition, just like Tagore's Chitrangada, who first seeks the blessings of Madan (Cupid) to use beauty as a weapon to woo Arjuna, the third Pandav and at the end finds out a more refined self-identity.

Comparative Study

In order to compare depictions of queer in the three films where Ghosh performed, propagating homonormativity, it would be quite evident that '*Arekti Premer Golpo*' and '*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*' contain familiar elements, whereas '*Memories in March*' brings along a much toned-down queer portrayal. Though the films in which Rituparno Ghosh performed invariably brought queer connotations, a comparative

analysis of his films will help to derive a clearer perspective of queer depiction in Bengali cinema.

In *'Arekti Premer Golpo'*, when Abhiroop's documentary production proceeds, it is as if he can almost relate himself and his life with that of Chapal's, as the veteran actor narrates experiences from his love life. Thus, the film shows a non-binary relationship between Basudev Kumar Ray and Abhiroop, with Rani being Basu's wife- a triangle that almost parallels Chapal Bhaduri's relationship with Kumar Babu, who was married to Gopa (Sajna P, 2014). In fact, when Abhiroop develops a deep friendship and solace in Uday, it is almost parallel, when Chapal meets Tushar. This makes it clear that Chapal in his youth and Abhiroop- both are vulnerable, tormented and humiliated figures in a society that ridicules a person for choosing his or her gender.

'Arekti Premer Golpo' lucidly shows how the culture of androgyny was quite present in this country, Chaitanya being its cultural epitome, carrying within him a harmony of the dual natures of Radha and Krishna, who are worshipped as the most significant figures of love. Ghosh, through his powerful dialogues and performance in the film was trying to break the patriarchal stereotypes in the society that for so long was propagating heteronormativity, for instance in the scene where Abhiroop was arguing with a journalist saying "Suppose I was making a film on... say Amitabh Bachchan. Would it (sexual preference) still be relevant?" and critically posing the question to the audiences: "What makes you such an authority on what's normal and what's not?". *'Arekti Premer Golpo'* is a film about getting 'established' in the society, irrespective of gender identities and sexual preferences of an individual, because it is Ghosh, who sparks the question "What is more important- the way we live our lives, or the way want to?".

'Memories in March' is quite a different film, compared to *'Arekti Premer Golpo'* and *'Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish'*, as in this film, the portrayal of queer and the performance of an alternate gender is much toned down. The film presents a story of a bereaved mother, Arti who comes to Kolkata on the death of her only son, Siddharth, and finds out that his son was gay and was having a homoerotic relationship with his colleague Ornob Mitra, the creative director in the advertisement company. *'Memories in March'* is a story that explores the different layers of human relationships, where sometimes grief and death separate two people, leaving them in states of utter devastation, while memories of a shared relationship tend to 'unite' them together.

'Memories in March' does not highlight any queer performance, rather it is an attempt to normalize the acceptance of homonormativity. It is the presence of Rituparno Ghosh, but not any of his deliberate performances that connote the image of queer in the film. From the very beginning, it was Arti, Sid's mother who was engulfed by the grief of her son's death and almost the whole story of Ornob and Sahana occurs with Arti, Sid being the common person. Though Arti, being a conservative woman, finds it difficult to accept that her son was gay, but the more important emotion to her is that her son is no more, a grief that she can never ever "come into terms with". *'Memories in March'* also brings a very important

conversation about being queer. As many might think queerness is a psychiatric or a pathological condition, just as Arti does, which is prominent when she says- “*Maybe if I’d taken him to a psychiatrist or a counselor*”, just for ‘normalizing’ her gay son into heteronormativity. But in the end, it is all about the deceased one’s memories and his belongings that were left with both Ornob and Sahana.

From the beginning of the film, there is no such reference to ‘queer’, as it is found in ‘*Arekti Premer Golpo*’ that begins with Chapal Bhaduri playing the role of Goddess Sitala and pleading for ‘establishment’ in the society, through a very meaningful and connotative speech, “*...the established gain men’s respect. But one who has no status in society, be she ever so worthy, will always be ignored.*”- which almost reverberates the imploring of Chapal, Abhiroop, and probably anyone belonging to a sexual minority to get ‘established’ in the society, or like in ‘*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*’, that begins with the statutory warning of cigarette smoking narrated by Ghosh himself, a voice that connotes the presence of a non-binary sexuality in the film. The following title card also shows, “*Tagore’s Chitrangada is an Amazon warrior on a quest to discover her gender identity.*” But, ‘*Memories in March*’ begins with Sahana receiving the news of Siddharth’s accident over the phone after returning late from the office party.

While doing a comparative study of the films where Ghosh had performed, a discussion becomes inevitable between the parallel picture of the transition that Chapal and Abhiroop go through in ‘*Arekti Premer Golpo*’, along with their love lives, were reverberated in ‘*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*’ where Rudra is in an ‘ongoing’ transition much like Tagore’s Chitrangada- both looking for their self-identities in the light of a new dawn.

‘Chitrangada’ is originally a character of the Mahabharata, the Hindu epic, who was the daughter of King Chitrabahana, the princess of Manipur (present day Odisha). According to the Mahabharata, king Chitrabahana’s ancestors were blessed with an omen that their dynasty will have only male heirs. But Chitrangada was born a princess, so she was brought up by her father as a warrior, she learnt the tactics of warfare, just ‘like a man’. As Chitrangada meets Arjun, she recognizes herself as a ‘woman’, and feels for the very first time her sexual urge to be a woman, to become feminine and perform her femininity. So, she prays to ‘Basanta’ or Spring (the Lord of all Seasons) and ‘Madan’ (Cupid) to embellish her with the umpteenth beauty of femininity, so that she could win the heart of the third Pandav. As her wish was granted for one year, she could charm Arjuna, but a time came when he kept looking for Chitrangada, the manly princess. As the wish came to an end, Chitrangada identifies herself as ‘Rajendra Nandini’ (The Regal Woman).

Ghosh interpreted Tagore’s Chitrangada through the story of a dancer-choreographer Rudra, who is staging Tagore’s Chitrangada for the poet’s 150th birth anniversary and in the process, meets Partho, who shall be playing percussion for the event. Rudra, being an effeminate person falls in love with Partho, whom he thinks to be ‘marginalized’ for his addiction to heroin and drug. Rudra decides to become a woman through a gender-reassignment surgery, and after he does so, Partho begins to search for the old effeminate

Rudra. Rudra finally chooses his gender and renounces the implants of the surgery. In the break of a new dawn, ze might have found a more refined self- identity of hirsself, as ze seems to know “no transition is ever complete, it is an ongoing process”.

Rituparno’s Performance: Impact on Indian Cinema and Queer Portrayal

‘Queer’ is quite a controversial and a delicate topic to deal with, when it comes to the context of Indian Cinema, particularly Bengali Cinema. In the 90s and even in the early 21st century, the Rainbow, or the ‘pride’ as queer is often called, did not get a serious space in Bollywood cinema, and certainly not in Bengali cinema. Even the films of Ray, Sen and Ghatak, which are often called ‘Indian parallel cinema’ did not include the portrayal of the queer, mostly due to the homophobia and the heteronormativity of contemporary Indian and Bengali society. Just not denying the depiction of queer in films, some Bollywood films like ‘*Kal Ho Na Ho*’ bear references to the prevalent homophobia. Most films of the time used queer as a ‘comic element’, some instances are the ‘*Mumma I want Gopal*’ scene from ‘*Golmaal 2*’, the blatant transphobia in ‘*Houseful 4*’ and the song ‘*Khol De Dil Ki Khidki*’ in ‘*Humshakals*’ (Bhatia, 2021). But, in the present day, we find films that have provided space where queer can be taken into serious consideration. Indian cinema has now started embracing films like ‘*Mango Soufflé*’ by Mahesh Dattani, ‘*Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga*’ by Shelly Chopra Dhar, ‘*My Son is Gay*’ by Lokesh Kumar, ‘*Badhaai Do*’ by Harshavardhan Kulkarni, ‘*Cobalt Blue*’ by Sachin Kundalkar, and so on.

Queer representation and queer performance gradually started finding importance both in Bengali alternate and mainstream media after Rituparno Ghosh became impactfully vocal about his gender fluidity, by boldly including queer characters in the lead roles of films like ‘*Arekti Premer Golpo*’, ‘*Memories in March*’ and ‘*Chitragada: The Crowning Wish*’. Ghosh has immensely influenced the Bengali society to talk freely about any form of sexual identity and gender fluidity.

In Bengali cinema, films like ‘*Achena Bondhutto*’ by Hrishikesh Mondal, ‘*Samo*’ by Chandrayee Ghosh, ‘*Family Album*’ by Mainak Bhaumik, Kaushik Ganguly’s ‘*Nagarkirtan*’, and so on include significant depictions of the LGBTQ (Upadhyaya, 2022). Even Bengali soap operas included subtle portrayals of queer, ‘*Firki*’, that premiered on Zee Bangla and Zee 5 is one such example, that centred around the story of a trans-woman who adopted a girl as a single mother.

Conclusion

We may be hopeful about the future depictions of queer in Indian cinema, and therefore in Bengali cinema as well. As Ghosh had initiated the process of liberation of the queer, it is now through the present-day filmmakers that Indian cinema might start witnessing films where there will be a paradigm shift of queer portrayal in cinema- from the comic character to the serious and concrete one. When Bengali audience will continue to watch serious queer contents on screen and involve into meaningful discussions about queerness, there is quite some hope that the profuse stigma surrounding queer will gradually keep

fading away and people might start accepting queer or any non-binary gender or sexuality, if not embracing it too soon.

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