

S U M I T D E Y



Authoring Space,
Gender and the Past :
A Film Called *Shubho Mahurat*

Rituparno Ghosh's film *Shubho Mahurat* (The First Shoot, 2002), a screen adaptation of the Miss Marple story 'The Mirror Cracked from Side to Side' by Agatha Christie, can be taken as a mise-en-abym of sorts, a crucial object of study in order to understand the persistent characteristic traits of 'parallel' filmic practice, key narrative concerns, in and around the oeuvre of Rituparno Ghosh as an auteur. The film can be recognized as a precursor to the subtle yet discernible departures and shifts that have been taking place in the look of the later films of the director.

While using the term 'auteur' I have in my mind the connotations that have come to be associated with the term in recent literary and film studies scholarship. 'Auteur theory' and the definitive discourses surrounding it began with the critics associated with the French Film Journal *Cahiers du Cinema* and soon after with American cinephile and scholar, Andrew Sarris whose concern was to identify the auteur in a filmmaker analyzing a director's oeuvre. Thus the auteur critics of this tradition tried to point to the embedded, uniquely distinguishable personality of the director in the body of works produced by a given director (Sarris, 1981). Peter Wollen and his contemporaries on the

other hand held that film making is a collective process and it's not a wise decision to look for the director's personality as embedded in a series of film texts. One should try and appreciate the director not as a meaning maker, but as a puller of several strings pertaining to a network of meaning which is produced by a larger system (Wollen, 1981). This group also took 'auteur theory' as a 'reading strategy' (Staiger, 2003 :45).

After having summed up these positions Edward Buscombe intervenes saying that cinema as an institution is rooted in society, so one should be aware of cinema's effects on society and society's impact on cinema and a film's effect on other films vis-à-vis ideology, economics and industrial logic. He says, before venturing into auteur studies one should keep in mind the finer codes originating in and outside of a film (Buscombe, 1981). In a similar vein, John Caughie notes "The activity of the critical spectator...is directed...towards... investigating the way in which the directorial subcode operates in the film, how it interacts with, modifies and is modified by the other codes and subcodes which also operate" (Caughie, 1981). Janet Staiger in her turn articulates the meaning of auteur by phrasing it as 'authorship-as-site-of-discourse-approach.' (2003, 47) She further argues that the author functions through a "repetitive citation of a performative statement of 'authoring choice'. (2003, 51) So, according to her, '...it is this authoring choice' that produces the author. (ibid)

Now before considering Rituparno Ghosh as an auteur it is important to locate him in a larger matrix. Ghosh started his film making career in the early 1990s. Prior to his emergence Buddhadev Dasgupta, Goutam Ghose, Aparna Sen et al were considered to be the torch bearers of the 'New Bengali Cinema' (Bose, 1998). According to Kironmoy Raha, Ajoy K. Bose and Yves Thoraval, these new directors came into being with the New Wave movement and contributed to the somewhat stagnated 'art' quotient of Bengali cinema by constantly harking back to the aesthetics of the holy trinity of Bengali cinema: Ray, Sen and Ghatak (Raha, 1991; Bose, 1998; Thoraval, 2000). Spandan Bhattacharya has focused on the film makers of the parallel cinema of the 1990s whose narratives invested in reviving the 'lost glory' and 'good taste' of an earlier art cinema tradition, and were marked by the quality of 'pastness' both in terms of form and content and were oriented to cater to the erudite intelligentsia and the middleclass folk in general. Ghosh, in Bhattacharya's opinion, fits into this group of directors while maintaining his distinct characteristics, even as his cinema exemplifies the very nature of the 'post liberalization Bengali 'Parallel' Cinema' (2011) A similar claim had been earlier

made by Tapas Ganguly in a 1997 article where he considered Rituparno Ghosh as one of the 'inheritors' of the Dasgupta-Sen-Ghosh legacy (1997). By critically engaging with these positions, I would like to see the ways that further distinguish Ghosh from his contemporary colleagues. Film journalist Shantanu Chakraborty observes that Rituparno Ghosh as a film director is a product of the high moment of televisuality.¹ According to him the emphasis on interiority in Ghosh's films is a result of his awareness of the taste of his audience who are quite attached to televisual aesthetics. This, of course, should not be the only yardstick of differentiation.

Again to go by the industrial logic, the emergence of big corporate production companies like Shree Venkatesh Films and their recent interest in 'art house' cinema and encounter with directors like Rituparno Ghosh mark a major change in Ghosh's own career as a film maker as well as in the power dynamics of the industry. For example with Ghosh's film *Chokher Bali* (A Passion Play, 2003), Shree Venkatesh Films started producing 'parallel' Bengali films besides their staple popular films. They chose to produce Ghosh's film because he was already a well known, national award winning director who earned fame both at home and abroad and had the ability to rope in Bollywood superstars like Aishwariya Rai. After more than a decade of film making Rituparno Ghosh is considered the 'most powerful director' of Tollywood (Nag, 2008: 8)

The narrative of the film *Shubho Mahurat* (2002) goes like this: an NRI Bengali star actress of yesteryears Padmini Chowdhury (Sharmila Tagore) comes to Kolkata apparently to produce a film to be directed by her second husband Sambit Roy (Sumantra Mukherjee). She makes it a point to rope in a close co-actress and friend Kakoli (Kalyani Mandal) for the lead role. Kakoli dies on the first day of the shoot under mysterious circumstances while she was being interviewed by a film journalist Mallika (Nandita Das). Her death is soon followed by the surprising and mysterious death of a female makeup artist. Then a police inspector (Tota Roychowdhury), Mallika and her Rangapisi/aunt (Rakhee Gulzar) investigate the matter to find that Padmini came to take revenge on Kakoli who had inadvertently caused harm to her during her pregnancy resulting in the birth of a spastic child and its early death. Padmini, after having confessed to the crime to Rangapisi who has been a fan of hers, commits suicide.

The film engages itself in representing three different classes of people associated with the film industry. While Padmini and Sambit belong to the well off upper middleclass section of the urban population, Kakoli, Rangapisi,

Mallika, her photographer friend Shubankar (Anindya Chattopadhyay) and Sambit's cinematographer (Rajesh Sharma) come from a middleclass background. The hairdresser comes from a somewhat lower stratum of the society. This question of class has been well substantiated by the pro-filmic interior spaces discernible in the film. Before turning to the issue of interior spaces which become a determining factor pertaining to the gradual shifts and departures in the work of Rituparno Ghosh over two decades it is pertinent to look at the critical responses that his earlier films enjoyed.

Veteran film society activist and drama critic Samik Bandyopadhyay underlines in his review of Rituparno Ghosh's 1998 film *Asukh* (Malaise) that Ghosh's films in general allow the audience to contemplate on their own class position and idiosyncracies by restricting the film narratives only to relationships among different members of the family. According to him the uniqueness of his Ghosh's films lies in his portrayal of the familial relationships.

In fact, man as a social being tends to escape from his familial responsibilities in the pretext of the broader social history or the static position of the tradition that lie beyond the ambit of the family. When Rituparno highlights images of hesitations, conflicts, undulations, crisis, decay in different familial relationships he seeks to signpost the resolution of this crisis within the limits of these relationships too² (Bandopadhyay, 1999 : 3)

Cinephile to the core, film-blogger Kaustav Bakshi rates the film *Unishe April* (April the 19th, 1994) above other films he remembers from his childhood because the film "... did not just tell the story of a temperamental doctor and her mother, but the story we write ourselves everyday through our actions." For him, "What made *Unishe April* a fresh breath of air is Rituparno's attention to details which is the hallmark of all his films." (Bakshi, 2008). Film critic and journalist Shoma A. Chatterjee appreciates in Ghosh's early films the specific interior spaces of the middleclass household mapped, configured and reconfigured by the protagonists through their relationship and associations with objects like a perfume bottle, utensils and other everyday objects.³

It is perhaps possible to theorize on the dwelling places and households of the key protagonists in *Shubho Mahurat*, in the light of the theories of interior spaces and objects thereof. According to Jean Baudrillard the order of placing furniture in a house belonging to a certain class reflects the socio-familial condition of any given period. He says, rooms and other interior spaces are constructed in such a way so that they can maintain a functional relationship with the family and can contribute to the growth of different faculties of an

individual. He further shows how different pieces of furniture make their own presence felt generating a kind of emotional value (Baudrillard, 1996, 2005:13-14). Therefore traditional good taste in choosing an object of home décor, according to Baudrillard, lay in the owner's affinity with them. He laments over the extinction of certain furniture to be replaced by new ones and he presents a critique of the use of artificial lighting to illuminate interior spaces. He argues that earlier light from outside use to settle down on objects at home which would radiate from within as it were. The new interior is artificially lit, which brings certain things in focus and hides some. Thus interior spaces and objects now congeal into a wholesome, sumptuous entity by proliferating information rather than just being a means to mere beautification of the living chambers. (Baudrillard, 1996: 15-20).

For the present occasion I intend to discuss only two interior spaces meant for the two leading ladies of the film, namely Rangapisi and Padmini Chowdhury. There is a foregrounding of a middleclass sensibility in the depiction of the interior spaces of the house of Rangapisi. The house consists of two bedrooms, a kitchen, a hallway-cum-dining-sitting space and a staircase leading to the terrace. When the film introduces the spectator to this house the first thing that attracts notice is the everydayness of a lived space, reverberating with almost a feminine affect : household chores performed by Rangapisi, the utensils used for food, containers on the dining table, a glimpse of the kitchen crockery & cutlery and the living space decorated with different types of wall hangings including a mechanically reproduced MonaLisa-smile framed in glass, a metal face of Ganesha, an old photograph of Rangapisi as a young bride, flower embroidery framed in glass. Junk jewelry, Rajasthani puppets hanging from the mirror stand on the dressing table, the canvas board full of different pin ups, block printed bed-sheets, old switch boards, old table fan, old style glass window pane framed with wood, a refrigerator, a small TV set, an aquarium, a big birdcage, a two tier water filter and a book case on the wall. Rangapisi's tactile intimacy with objects like her betel leaf box, washed clothes, pillows and cushions, utensils, film magazines and her kittens help build up her character and her location among the objects. Such an organization of spaces and objects make her a very familiar figure. Yet it appears that she enjoys some kind of a power and agency thanks to her command over this space, her affinity with the world of objects and her knowledge of the crime and the criminal almost emanates out of this power over the banalities of everyday life. This space is shown several times in the film and it becomes the most important site for narrative resolution. One marked feature that adds to

the construction of this space is the suggestive profusion of daylight pouring in through iron rod windows making it look like a naturally lit space. This kind of lived, daily spaces are common in *Unishe April*, *Dahan* (Crossfire, 1997), *Asukh*, *Bariwali* (The Lady of the House, 2000), *Utsab* (The Festival, 2000) and *Tiuli* (The First Monsoon Day, 2001). In fact this kind of interior design, objects and their relation with the protagonists became a recognizable part of the cinematic style of the early films of Rituparno Ghosh. In a review of *Asukh*, Shoma A Chatterjee mentioned the director's aesthetic investment in restraining the glamour quotient of the look of the film and maintaining the economy of expression through minimal decoration. (1999)

The interior space of the flat that belongs to Padmini Chowdhury may be termed as 'panoramic interior' (Mazumdar, 2007) which is lived yet very detached from the living beings, where the inner and the outer spheres are marked out sharply. Suggestively, this space is mostly lit with artificial light. The whiteness of the walls, glossy bed-sheets, wall paper, lampshades, curtain, mirrors, black and white wall portrait of the star underlined by light, iconic photograph of the city memorial on the wall, table clock, photo-stand, the profusion of white and golden and the material glass all these define the spatially fleeting presence of the NRI star and add to the shopping window aesthetics. This was something unprecedented and unfamiliar to the films of Rituparno Ghosh at the time when the film was released. The commonsensical logic that the space belongs to a star persona will not suffice to explain the very constructed, dreamy look of the interior spaces. Interestingly, this kind of a scenic interior space would later become a common trait in Ghosh's films such as *Sab Charitra Kalponik* (There After, 2009) and in a few other films made by some other directors. This phenomenon has been well articulated by Moinak Biswas. He observes that the approach that is required to grapple with this scenic interior phenomenon could be "the reconfiguration of the language, demand and behavior of the middleclass thanks to the market, media and connectivity: the blurring away of its distinctiveness"⁴ (Biswas, 2011: 256). According to him the recurring signs and codes discernible in such films are "apartments in the high-rises of the city, familiar display of commodities, action restricted to living room-dinner table-bed room. . . ." ⁵ (257). So to sum up, the cinematic construction of such 'enumerated space'(ibid) vis-a-vis the cinema of 'relationship' catering to the neo-Bhadralok audience hints at the shrinking of space and a kind of strange un-belongingness of characters. *Shubho Mahurat* therefore stands at the crucial juncture of two prominent styles of space building, interior aesthetics as part of filmic practice that is validated

through the changes in the context where he is located.

Journalistic and scholarly discourses on Rituparno Ghosh alike have almost unanimously agreed upon his strength in depicting female protagonists more realistically than any other character. (Mandal, 2002; Mukherjee, 2008). One can of course debate as to whether it is necessary to tag him as a woman's filmmaker unproblematically. But as film journalist Shantanu Chakraborty points out, *Shubho Mahurat* is unique because it's a crime film where the victims, the murderer and the sleuth all are women and the motive is very feminine too⁶. Sleuths or criminalists have always been presumed to be men in western and Bengali literary traditions and cinematic imagination. There are exceptions like Miss Marple. But mainly detective stories and films have been considered a masculine genre in general which is now being questioned raising the issue of a crisis of masculinity. (Gates, 2006) The character of Rangapisi is important as she is not a professional criminalist. She is a homemaker and a cinema lover, a fan of Padmini Chowdhury. The activity of detection of the crime stems from her curiosity to learn more about her favorite star Padmini. So the act of detection can be called fan activity. She however admits to Padmini that it's one of her hobbies to combine information gathered through different sources and reach a conclusion toward the truth besides performing her daily household chores. The film thus problematizes the detective film genre itself. Rituparno Ghosh says:

I wanted to make a whole detective series with Ranga Pishima (Rakhee's character in *Shubho Mahurat*)! It's very difficult to make a non-judgemental crime story, which is what I tried to do with *Shubho Mahurat*. Grey characters, no police intervention, nothing: the detective knows who's committed the crime, but she does nothing. I deliberately had women as both criminal and detective, because they're inherently more tolerant. In an ordinary detective story, it is the hunter and the hunted – there's no relationship between them except of wit. (Gupta, 2008)

The film was released in December 2002. In the following year *Bombaier Bombete* (The Pirates of Bombay, Sandip Ray, 2003) will guarantee the return of Satyajit Ray's sleuth character Feluda, to be followed by sequels. Apart from a female truth seeker in Tarun Majumdar's *Kuheli* (The Mist, 1971) and two professional women detectives in Tapan Sinha's *Baidurja Rahasya* (The Mystery of the Emerald, 1985) Rangapisi is the only sleuth who solves a mystery not as a sleuth but as a common woman with sharp eyes, ears and nose for irregularities of any kind. On the other side of the spectrum there is Padmini

Chowdhury, the actress. She is a star in the film. Ghosh's preoccupation with star figures in his films is not new. His explanation is: "I am interested in the perception of power that comes with fame and the human frailty behind that." (Gupta, 2008). Padmini Chowdhury fits into this scheme of things. Interestingly with this film onwards most of Rituparno Ghosh's films will showcase faces of Bollywood stars. Rakhee Gulzar said later "While working in *Shubho Mahurat*, I found Rituparno to be an honest and sensitive director who is impartial to each character he deals with. He is careful and meticulous in handling women-oriented subjects." (Mukherjee, 2008). A very significant development was Rituparno Ghosh's ability to make Sharmila Tagore and Rakhee Gulzar do a film after years of cold war, vindicating the 'powerful director' tag that would be attached later on with his name. These extra-textual narratives also become part of the narrative of *Shubho Mahurat*.

The film has, to borrow Spandan Bhattacharya's expression, a certain 'Politics of Pastness'(2011).⁷ The narrative is driven by the force of the past. Memories out of the past propel Padmini to kill her co-actress Kakoli. Padmini's nephew Shubhankar remembers his childhood and his friendship with her. Neither of them has a happy memory to cherish. Rangapisi's memory of reading about her favorite actress Padmini and her engagement with her past thanks to Subhankar helps her to solve the case. When police comes in search of the murder suspect, unpleasant pasts involving Kakoli's husband and Sambit come to the fore. Thus like a classic whodunit the film is about present based on past events and its outcome. At another level the film harkens back to a glorious past of Bengali cinema. Towards the beginning of the film when Padmini contemplates on the forthcoming 'first- day- shoot-party' she sees the living embodiments of this glorious past and the film for a moment stops to showcase Sharmila Tagore along with veteran Soumitra Chatterjee, Shubhendu Chatterjee and Madhavi Mukherjee. Their presence does bring back the memory of the tradition of modernist realist cinema of Ray and nostalgia for the old 'good cinema' (Raha, 1991). It is further certified by the presence of another figure of the 'parallel cinema' namely Goutam Ghose who plays himself. His presence also invokes a certain memory of the filmic practices. Then the protagonist Padmini as an NRI producer for a Bengali film is very important as Rituparno himself became dear to the NRI audience when producer Tapan Biswas organized a retrospective of a few early films of his in the USA and when *Utsab* (The Festival, 2000) was meant to be commercially released in the States before it was to be released in Kolkata.⁸ Secondly, soon after the success of *Chokher Bali* (2003) Bombay and Delhi based film producing companies like

A.B Corp Limited, Planman Motion Pictures and Reliance Big Pictures came to produce Ghosh's later films. This development can also be seen in the light of 'pastness' and 'nostalgia' as mentioned by Spandan Bhattacharya (2008). To explain this I would like to cite two examples. Film-star Mithun Chakraborty agreed to work in Ghosh's film *Titli* as he felt "Rituparno makes meaningful films". (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKGKCM0kdJg>, accessed on 5/2/2012) According to producer Tapan Biswas "Gone are the good old days of good Bengali cinema when an Ajoy Kar, a Tapan Sinha or a Tarun Majumdar would vie with Ray, Sen and Ghatak. Cinemawalla⁹ took the initiative to bring back such good times and a film like *Utsab* happened"¹⁰. From these two examples it is clear that there is a notion of a aesthetically superior past of Bengali Cinema looming large over the contemporary, and that Rituparno Ghosh was considered a director capable of providing the audience the experience of a lost glory. The presence of an NRI producer in the film *Shubho Mahurat* evokes this aspect of the cinema of Ghosh too.

Thus, *Shubho Mahurat* marks a significant shift in the career of Ghosh as a director. First of all, this was the last film of Ghosh to be released in single screen theaters of Kolkata. His later films would be part of multiplex release. This change in the site of exhibition would subsequently bring change in the implied audience, which supposedly belongs to an upper stratum of the society and would bring changes in the film texts in terms of a reterritorialization of pro-filmic spaces and mise-en-scenes in the later films by the director. This will lead to a moment when, as Hamid Naficy describes, although in a different context,

Mise-en-scène and filming are alternately claustrophobic or immense; time is fragmented and retrospective; space and place are split among a lost home, an uncertain elsewhere, and transitional places in between; narrative is broken up by journey, memory, nostalgia, and past. (Naficy, 2009).

The change in the pro-filmic place also implies lavish sets with bigger budget for making films thanks to big producers. Enumerated spaces would be predominant in most of his later films like *Dosor* (The Companion, 2006) or *Sab Charitra Kalponik*. Secondly, after *Shubho Mahurat* Rituparno Ghosh's films would not confine themselves to depicting female characters vividly. They would equally concentrate on male characters in some significant detail as has been exemplified by *The Last Lear*. And finally, as one can see, the idea of 'pastness' would be interchanged with that of pastiche in quite a few films after *Shubho Mahurat*. Continuous reproduction of the past times by flashback memory as

well as by adapting a period piece would become a part of Rituparno Ghosh's films post- *Shubho Mahurat*.

References:

¹ Author's interview with Shantanu Chakraborty. (19/5/2011, Kolkata)

² Translation mine

³ Author's interview with the journalist. (2/11/2011, Kolkata)

⁴ Translation mine.

⁵ Translation mine

⁶ Author's interview with Shantanu Chakraborty

⁷ For a detailed discussion on the 'politics of pastness' see Bhattacharya, 2011: 64-95

⁸ Author's interview with the producer (19/12/2011, Kolkata)

⁹ A film producing company owned by Tapan Biswas

¹⁰ Author's interview with Tapan Biswas (19/12/2011, Kolkata)

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