

Depiction of Women in Bengali Classic Cinema through the Films of Rituparno Ghosh's Unishe April and Utsab

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Abstract

Bengali cinema has a long glorious list of famous film directors. Starting from Satyajit Ray to Mrinal Sen to Ritwik Ghatak, all the directors who brought Bengali cinema to a significant place in the stage of world cinema; among them Rituparno Ghosh is also notable. His cinema talks about relationships. The way he portrays women in his cinema is particularly noteworthy. This study aims to show the representation of womanhood in Rituparno Ghosh's cinema through special reference to his selected films, Unishe April (1994) and Utsab (2000). These three films are written and directed by Rituparno Ghosh. This study will mainly examine how he depicted the actual thoughts of progressive woman in his cinema. His films are the documentation of real struggles of Bengali middle-class women: their continuous efforts to maintain the balance between personal and professional life and the struggle to prove their love and affection. Through his story telling format, he has created various shades of women which bring light to the battle of progressive women that inspired contemporary gender discourse. This study focuses on his use of cinematic language and will discuss about its impact on showcasing womanhood, portraying women from different time frames, express the socio-economic structure of the society. This study will dig into the sundry factors that help in crafting the character of progressive women in Ghosh's films.

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Depiction of Women in Bengali Classic Cinema through the

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Introduction

After the glorious 50's, Bengali film industry faced almost a decade of darkness. Either high-intellectual content or remaking of Tamil, Telegu or Hindi cinema were ruling the industry. Both the subjects were facing difficulties in terms of viewers' attention. Some of the notable film directors like, Aparna Sen, Buddhadeb Das Gupta, Goutam Ghosh were making genuinely good films. These films were recognised critically, but commercial hit was a big miss for them. Rituparno Ghosh came into the film industry during late 1990's, and his way of story-telling gradually erases the mass and class debate (Dey, 2015). He started his career as an advertising copy writer. Ghosh became special in the world of Ad commercials by his effective copy writing. The beautiful portrayals of middle-class Bengali life and detailing their emotions, made Rituparno Ghosh a drawing room discussion. (Dasgupta, R K, Dutta. S, Bakshi. K, 2015) He depicted the Bengali middle-class women in a very trustworthy way. Their day-to-day struggle, balance in relationships and continuous effort to establish their feelings within family as well as the society, took a big part in Ghosh's cinema. Though his directorial debut "Hirer Angti" (1992) failed to achieve commercial success, his second direction "Unishe April" (1994) won two national film awards in 1995. This movie was loved by the audience as well. After this, Ghosh made some movies that will remain a document of contemporary time. Films like "Dahan" (1997), "Asukh" (1999), "Bariwali" (2000), "Utsab" (2000), "Titli" (2002), "Subh Muhurat" (2003), made him an unparalleled classic film maker of Bengal. His works were critically acclaimed beyond Bengal and beyond the boundaries of the country. In 2004 Rituparno Ghosh made his first Hindi film "Raincoat". Aishwarya Rai, Ajay Devgan starer "Raincoat" was an adaptation of O'Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" (1906). Under his direction living legend Amitabh Bachhan worked in the movie "The Last Lear" (2007). Through films like "Antar Mahal" (2005), "Khela" (2008), "Sab Charitro Kalponik" (2008), "Abohoman" (2009), he continued his excellent work with different types of scripts. Rituparno Ghosh also made movies inspired

by literature. Specially, he was a Rabindranath Thakur admirer. In his films he has beautifully used Rabindra Sangeet. He made "Chokher Bali" (2003) based on the famous novel "Chokher Bali" writer by Rabindranath Thakur. He has also made a movie based on the love story of the third gender, like "Chitrangada: The Crowing Wish" (2012). In his films, Ghosh continued to describe the stories of relationship. The portrayals of independent and free-thinking women and their emotions took almost a stage of celebration through his lens. Through dialogue, dressing, use of lights and shadow and by using different experimental shots, Rituparno Ghosh successfully depicted the Bengali middle-class women in Bengali classic cinema. The female characters of his movies are so close to heart that their joy, their struggle, their sorrows all touche the soul of cinema lovers. (Das, S, 2021)

Review of related literature:

Dharmanayak, G.V, in the thesis "Representation of Womanhood in Rituparno Ghosh's Films" (2022) describes how Rituparno Ghosh shows the motherhood, wifehood, daughterhood and sexual wishes of middle-class Bengali women in his films. This paper highlights the progressive abilities of womanhood in his films. This study also tries to show, how the use of cinematic narration makes the difference in representing women in Ghosh's film, which draws the line of difference from other directors. This study is based on six selected films, *Unishey April* (1994), *Dahan* (1997), *Bariwali* (2000), *Choker Bali* (2003), *Antar Mahal* (2005), *Sob Choritro Kalponik* (2009). The use of feminine lens in Rituparno Ghosh's cinema tells the story of middle-class Bengali women, who are not following the patriarchy path set by the society. This article offers an inclusive and perceptive examination of Rituparno Ghosh's cinematic representation of womanhood in his cinema.

Roy, Romita in her article "At Home with Durga: The Goddess in a Palace and Corporeal Identity in Rituparno Ghosh's Utsab" (2014) explores the relation of goddess Durga with daily life Durga. The main focus of this article is to examine the significance of divine Durga in society and the role of the same society while portraying it to the real-life women. This paper describes how the family showcased

Depiction of Women in Bengali Classic Cinema through the

in the film "Utsab" (2000) is interrelated to each other in a complex relationship structure. Roy argues that the iconic presence of goddess Durga in the mind of the family members is actually motivated by the physical and mental state of the female characters of the family. This article also focuses on the conflict between tradition and modernity. By analysing different shades of goddess Durga and realistic women this scholarly article offers insightful understanding on feminism and cultural study on Indian cinema (Chakravorty & Kayal, 2024).

Das, Souvik in his thesis "Construction of Images of Femininity in the Cinema of Rituparno Ghosh" (2021) examines twenty-one films of Rituparno Ghosh; right from Unishe April to Raincoat. He highlighted all the female characters of Ghosh's films. This study mainly focuses on the inner and external struggles of women in the society. The complex relationships and the societal expectations from women are one of the major discussed topics of Rituparno Ghosh's cinema. Scholar argues that, Ghosh's films often challenge the traditional societal norms of patriarchy society. This thesis discusses about the use of cinematic techniques, narratives, dialogues, and all other aesthetics in Rituparno Ghosh's films. His films are much in discussion for portraying the intersection of gender, class and culture. Themes of different films are vividly discussed in this thesis, so that it will provide a wide range of understanding the plots of Rituparno Ghosh's cinema. This study offers an exceptional thoughtful insight to know the depiction of femininity in Rituparno Ghosh's cinema (Chakravorty & Das, 2024).

Objective of the study

The objective of the study is to explore the working style of one of the most celebrated Bengali film directors, Rituparno Ghosh. He is famous for his nuanced depiction of emotions in his films. Gender has always been a subject of his movies. The struggles of middle-class independent thinking women are very prominent in his works.

This study will focus on the selective works of Rituparno Ghosh to examine his way of depicting women on celluloid. Moreover, by analysing these films this study will also highlight the impact of portraying women in Bengali cinema on society.

Methodology

This research will explore the selected films, *Unish* April and *Utsab* by analysing them under Auteur Theory and the concept of social realism in cinema. Here the director of these films Rituparno Ghosh will be treated as Auteur. This study will analyse his working techniques, use of plots, dialogues, dressing, and other components of mise-en-scene to describe his way of depicting women on screen. The concept of social realism in cinema will be discussed to understand the relevance of the stories in the society. This will open a scope to realize the state of women in real life. This research will specially focus on the methods of portraying female protagonist characters on screen.

This study will follow secondary data sources. Watching the selected films and analysing the same will be the major process of gathering data.

Theoretical Framework

The Auteur theory:

The term "Auteur Theory" has been credited by the film critics of the French film journal *Cahiers Du Cinema*. This term became popular during the period of French new wave. American film critic Andrew Sarris first coined the term "Auteur Theory" in his essay "Notes on the Auteur Theory" 1962. Later on, this idea became popular with notable critics like Francois Truffaut, Andre Bazin, Alexandre Astruc and many more.

Auteur Theory argues that, director is the author of the cinema. According to this theory the director's artistic vision is reflected through the films they make. A director has full control on the visual representation of the film. Right from the camera placement, lighting, editing, using narratives to depict the story, a director controls every nuanced thing of film making.

Concept of Social Realism in Cinema:

Social realism in cinema refers to the way of depicting real life on reels. The everyday struggles of common people, injustice, struggles of working class and the power structure behind all of these inequalities are the subjects of social realistic films. In this genre, film is the tool to highlight the social issues with the hope of bringing changes. Films which aim to capture the real image of contemporary time, provides clear image of the society (Leong.2004) in that era.

Discussion

Depiction of women in the selected films in reference with Auteur Theory and the concept of social realism -

Unishe April (1994)- "Unishe April" was the second direction of Rituparno Ghosh. This film is based on the story of a complex relationship between mother and daughter. Rituparno Ghosh portrayed a different kind of mother on screen which is different from the traditional middle class Bengali society. The centre characters of this film are, Sarojini and Aditi. Role of the mother, Sarojini is played by critics' and people's favourite popular female actor, director Aparna Sen. One of the most prominent female actors of Bengali film industry, Debashree Roy played the role of the daughter, Aditi.

Auteur Theory

The story of "Unishe April" is based on a middle-class Bengali family. A young beautiful girl, Sarojini falls in love with a doctor, Manish. Dance was the passion and profession of that girl and she was quite successful on her way. The doctor could not make it big financially. They got married. After marriage Sarojini wanted to continue with her career. But Manish was neither comfortable with her stardom nor he was supportive towards her career. Sarojini stopped practicing and kept herself away from stage and media for some years for the better interest of doing her family duties soulfully. She gave birth to their daughter Aditi. But Manish somehow felt guilty or the urge of not being blamed for ruining Sarojini's career, he poked Sarojini to start again with her passion. Manish and the house hold help Boya, character played by senior female actor Chitra Sen, look after little Aditi's well-being. From here the misunderstanding between the mother and daughter become the centre attraction of the plot. Their relationship and talking to each other in passive voice made a suffocating atmosphere at the house. But as the story progressed, it poses an open question for the audience (Ganguly & Singh, 2024).

As an auteur Rituparno Ghosh has created his signature style of work. "Unishe April" is the second direction of Ghosh. Still, he managed to continue his working style throughout his later works.



Scene1- Sarojini and Aditi is discussing about their past days.



Scene 2- It was the same day on what Aditi lost her father and after few years on the same day her mother got a prestigious award. Sarojini, Aditi and Somnath (friend of Sarojini who helped her in everything) were having lunch together on the same day. Sarojini and Somnath wanted to celebrate the day as Sarojini wins an award, but Aditi was not agreed to join in their celebration as she remembers the day as her father's death anniversary.

Social realism in cinema

"Unish April" was released in 1994. While discussing the social realism of this film, it is important to shed light on the societal structure of Kolkata at that time. The middle-class Bengali society

Depiction of Women in Bengali Classic Cinema through the

was not prepared to accept an independent woman from their heart. Specially, when it comes to the role of a wife and mother, societal expectations were towards a sacrificing home maker. But Sarojini was not suitable for this patriarchal societal norm at all.

Sarojini runs dance classes at home. That sound of Ghungru make Aditi uncomfortable throughout her life. The favourite perfume of Sarojini was a nightmare for her daughter. Aditi felt closeness with Boya, the house helps who raised her. This state reflects the expectation towards a mother that she must be around her child all the time, no matter what she is into.

Another social taboo is visible in this film, when Aditi was dumped by her long-time partner as soon as the boy's family came to know that Aditi is the daughter of famous dancer. They categorise her family and would not agree to keep any relation with a dancer's family.

Traditional societal norms were broken several times in Rituparno Ghosh's films. He always tried to convey the message of equality and acceptance through his works.

Utsab (2000)- This cinema filmed the most joyful occasion of Bengal, Durga Puja. The story of a middle-class Bengali family is portrayed in this film. Love and tension bond every possible factor of a big family is the plot of this film. The subject of this film is based on complex relationships, love interest within family member, planning of financial benefits based on the property.

Discussion on Auteur Theory

"Utsab" is such a movie which reflects Bengali's family traditions. Talented actors have portrayed the characters believably on screen. The role of Bhagabati is played by legendary female actor, Madhabi Mukhopadhyay. Other important roles were played by celebrated actors like, Mamata Shankar, Prosenjit Chatterjee and Rituparna Sengupta.

Bhagabati is an aged widow mother of four children, Asit, Nishith, Parul and Keya. They all are married and stayed away from their home. They all gathered together at their native place during the Durga Puja celebration. They all have their own problems to solve. Rituparno Ghosh wants to show poetic justice. Throughout the movie, he used the representational strategies by visualising Durga Pratima as a paradigm of time, memory and corporeal identity for a one family required to survive with claim of modernity (Ray, 2014).

The portrayal of women in "Utsab" has many layers. All the female characters have different shades of their personalities in the film. Bhagabati, Bonani, Shampa, Monica, Parul and Keya- they all played very familiar characters of our society.



Scene 1- Parul, Keya and Banani are busy for Puja preparation. They are discussing Shishir, which makes Parul nostalgic. As well as she is discussing how her husband taunted her all these days for the past relationship with Shishir.



Scene 2- While Keya is performing the boron at the day of Dashami, her husband came back to her native place which surprises her.

Depiction of Women in Bengali Classic Cinema through the

Social realism in the film

"Utsab" reflects some real social life issues through its complex narration of relationships. The love towards native place, urge to fulfil family responsibilities, standing by each other through difficult times and obviously old prides, these all resemble a perfect middle-class Bengali family.

The discussion of selling ancestral house and conversation on having own shares, bring the family together on a table at the same time. But in the end they did not sell the property. The sentiment wins over the need.

Bengali middle-class society does not look favourably on establishing marital relationship within families. Due to this reason Bhagabati and her sons threw Shishir out of the house to ensure that Parul and Shishir could not be together anymore. Parul still carries the desolation in her heart as she tries to settle down with her husband, but that too was not possible as he came to know about her previous relation. Meanwhile Shishir has now made it big and wants to buy the same house from where he was kicked out one day (Ghosh, 2020).



Scene 3- Bhagabati and Keya, mother- daughter are discussing about future of the house over a cup of tea.

In this movie the sentiments, emotions, protective nature of family members and standing together in trouble, make audience feel connected with the film. The social realism through a family story has been successfully drawn by Rituparno Ghosh in "Utsab".

Findings

This study focused on the directorial style of Rituparno Ghosh and his techniques of portraying women characters on celluloid. This article discussed his two films. From the analysis few findings must be highlighted:

Rituparno Ghosh portrayed women characters on screen in such a way that they seem like the face of the society,

- Female characters in his movies are independent in thinking and they are confident about their statement on their own life,
- The strong independent characters are not only extrovert, alongside they are also trying to do their best in their role as mother, wife, daughter and so on,
- Most of the Ghosh's women are protagonist characters of the movie,
- The mannerism of the female characters is so vivid that audience can easily feel connected to them.

This discussion clearly shows that Rituparno Ghosh has depicted such women on screen who can carry tradition along with modernity. These female characters actually represent those women in our society who are trying to balance their personal, professional and social lives simultaneously.

Conclusion

This article is based on the analysis of two films made by Rituparno Ghosh. Both the films, "Unishe April" & "Utsab", are written and directed by him. His way of depicting women on screen demands special focus. The dialogues of female characters are enough to understand their stand against the societal norms. All the characters are not the protesters. Some of them are soft and very much homely. But they also held their own views. This is the beauty of Ghosh's lens that he never tried to portray women as rebels. His women are homely, but confident. They have motherly warmth, but they are not

Depiction of Women in Bengali Classic Cinema through the

ready to sacrifice their everything just to be with their child. Rather Ghosh's women are more into making decisions of life and live their life on their own terms.

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