

Towards A Gender Fluidity: Analysing Gender Constructs in Rituparno Ghosh's Movies

Thesis submitted to the
University of Calicut for the award of the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH

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ST. JOSEPH'S COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS)
DEVAGIRI, CALICUT**

2024

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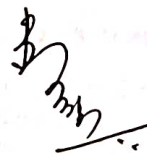
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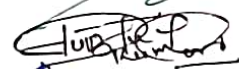



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DECLARATION

I, Veena A., hereby declare that the work presented in the thesis entitled **“Towards A Gender Fluidity: Analysing Gender Constructs in Rituparno Ghosh’s Movies”**, submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of the Doctor of Philosophy in English, is a bona fide record of research carried out by me and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any other degree, diploma, fellowship, or any other similar titles.



Veena A.

Research Scholar

Place: Devagiri

Date: 30 – 10 – 2024

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“At times, our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.”

--- Albert Schweitzer

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	TITLE	PAGE NO.
	ABSTRACT	
	INTRODUCTION	1-33
1	INTERROGATING THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER	34-71
2	WINDS OF CHANGE: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON QUEER MOVIES	72-103
3	EXPLORING GENDER AND KINSHIP: MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS IN GHOSH	104-146
4	GENDER SPECTRUM: READING THE QUEER TRILOGY	147-178
5	NAVIGATING WITH THE SPECTRUM: EMBRACING GENDER FLUIDITY	179-220
	CONCLUSION	221-229
	RECOMMENDATIONS	230-231
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	232-258

ABSTRACT

Gender has always been a point of contention in all eras and cultures, as it is a dynamic manifestation of each contemporary societal prescription rather than a fixed entity. These postulations on gender roles are the cause of the evolution of a culture that is binary and heteronormative. It took centuries for the intellectual circle and common folk to acknowledge the overt existence of a third-gender category as well as non-binary experiences. By the 1990s, queer depictions in cinema had made a considerable impact that instigated a new perspective towards their living experiences and sense of identity. The present study is an analysis of the intersection of gender, identity, and sexuality and their representations in cinema. Queer representations in global cinema are endured a gradual transformation of recognition has been pioneered by New Queer Cinema (NQC), which features honest queer narratives both about and by themselves as well as unabashed depictions of their desires and predicaments in this society where the binary, heteronormative state is standardised. This study narrows down the influence of NQC on the Indian cinematic landscape, which is an intricate web of traditionality and modernity in every stratum, with a prime focus on the Bengali regional film industry. This is an extensive investigation into the fallacy of gender suppositions and the notion of gender fluidity in the movies of Bengali director Rituparno Ghosh, who pioneered NQC in Indian cinema by examining the topics of gender fluidity, identity formation, and societal standards. His movies like *Bariwali*, *Shubho Muharat*, *Chokher Bali*, *Raincoat*, and *Shob Charitro Kalponik* are analysed to explore how Ghosh's characters, who are hitherto regarded as heteronormative, binary individuals, defy the conventional standards of gender performances, thereby exploring the elements of gender fluidity and illustrating NQC traits in Ghosh's movies.

Keywords: cinema, representation, gender fluidity, NQC, heteronormativity, queer

സംഗ്രഹം

എല്ലാ കാലഘട്ടങ്ങളിലും സംസ്കാരങ്ങളിലും ലിംഗഭേദം എല്ലായ്പ്പോഴും ഒരു തർക്കവിഷയമാണ്, കാരണം ഇത് ഒരു സ്ഥിരമായ അസ്തിത്വത്തേക്കാൾ സമകാലികമായ ഓരോ സാമൂഹിക കുറിപ്പിടിയുടെയും ചലനാത്മക പ്രകടനമാണ്. ഒരു മൂന്നാം ലിംഗ വിഭാഗത്തിന്റെ പ്രത്യക്ഷമായ അസ്തിത്വവും ബൈനറി ഇതര അനുഭവങ്ങളും അംഗീകരിക്കാൻ ബൗദ്ധിക വലയത്തിനും സാധാരണക്കാർക്കും നൂറ്റാണ്ടുകൾ വേണ്ടി വന്നു. 1990-കളോടെ, സിനിമയിലെ ക്വിയർ ചിത്രീകരണങ്ങൾ ഗണ്യമായ സ്വാധീനം ചെലുത്തി, അത് അവരുടെ ജീവിതാനുഭവങ്ങളിലേക്കും സ്വത്വബോധത്തിലേക്കും ഒരു പുതിയ കാഴ്ചപ്പാടിന് പ്രചോദനം നൽകി. ലിംഗഭേദം, സ്വത്വം, ലൈംഗികത എന്നിവയുടെ വിഭജനത്തെയും സിനിമയിലെ അവയുടെ പ്രതിനിധാനങ്ങളെയും കുറിച്ചുള്ള വിശകലനമാണ് ഇപ്പോഴത്തെ പഠനം. ആഗോള സിനിമയിലെ ക്വീർ പ്രാതിനിധ്യങ്ങൾ, അംഗീകാരത്തിന്റെ ക്രമാനുഗതമായ പരിവർത്തനത്തിന് തുടക്കമിട്ടത് ന്യൂ ക്വീർ സിനിമ (NQC) ആണ്, അതിൽ തങ്ങളെ കുറിച്ചും അവരെക്കുറിച്ചും സത്യസന്ധമായ ക്വിയർ വിവരണങ്ങളും അതുപോലെ തന്നെ ഈ സമൂഹത്തിലെ അവരുടെ ആഗ്രഹങ്ങളുടെയും പ്രതിസന്ധികളുടെയും സത്യസന്ധമായ ചിത്രീകരണങ്ങളും ഉൾപ്പെടുന്നു. ബംഗാളി പ്രാദേശിക ചലച്ചിത്ര വ്യവസായത്തിന് ഊന്നൽ നൽകിക്കൊണ്ടുള്ള ഈ ഗവേഷണം, പല മേഖലകളിലെയും ആധുനികതയുടെയും പാരമ്പര്യത്തിന്റെയും സങ്കീർണ്ണ ഘടനയായ ഇന്ത്യയുടെ സിനിമ പരിസ്ഥിതിയെ NQC എങ്ങനെ ബാധിച്ചുവെന്ന് കേന്ദ്രീകരിക്കുന്നു. ലിംഗ ദ്രവ്യം, ഐഡന്റിറ്റി രൂപീകരണം, സാമൂഹിക നിലവാരം തുടങ്ങിയ വിഷയങ്ങൾ പരിശോധിച്ച് ഇന്ത്യൻ സിനിമയിൽ NQCക്ക് തുടക്കമിട്ട ബംഗാളി സംവിധായകൻ ജുതുപർണോ ഘോഷിന്റെ സിനിമകളിലെ ലിംഗപരമായ അനുമാനങ്ങളിലെ തെറ്റിദ്ധാരണയെയും ലിംഗ ദ്രവ്യതയെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള ധാരണയെയും കുറിച്ചുള്ള വിപുലമായ അന്വേഷണമാണിത്. അദ്ദേഹത്തിന്റെ ബാരിവാലി, ശുഭോ മുഹറത്ത്, ചോഖെർ ബാലി, റെയിൻകോട്ട്, ഷോബ് ചാരിത്രോ കൽപോനിക് തുടങ്ങിയ സിനിമകൾ, ഘോഷിന്റെ കഥാപാത്രങ്ങൾ, ലിംഗാധിഷ്ഠിത പ്രകടനങ്ങളുടെ പരമ്പരാഗത മാനദണ്ഡങ്ങളെ ധിക്കരിക്കുകയും അതുവഴി ലിംഗഭേദത്തിന്റെ ഘടകങ്ങളെ പര്യവേക്ഷണം ചെയ്യുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നതെങ്ങനെയെന്ന് വിശകലനം ചെയ്യുന്നു. ഒപ്പം ഘോഷിന്റെ സിനിമകളിലെ NQC സ്വഭാവസവിശേഷതകൾ ചിത്രീകരിക്കുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നു.

കീവേഡുകൾ: സിനിമ, പ്രാതിനിധ്യം, ലിംഗ ദ്രവ്യം, NQC, ഹെറ്ററോനോർമാറ്റിവിറ്റി, ക്വീർ.

INTRODUCTION

Gender discourse has undergone an enormous shift in recent decades, leading to greater comprehension of its subtleties and repercussions across every segment of society. Gender identity has been the most contested and dynamic among the various strata of identities at socio-economic and political levels since the second half of the twentieth century, as accelerated by the widespread appeal to postmodern and feminist theories, leading to the emergence of gender and queer studies as independent areas of interest. Though a sociocultural construct, gender has been adjudged as an essentialist trait that determines the innate performance of every individual. The notion of predetermined gender qualities results in the development of heterosexual normalisation and the binary concept of gender, thereby forming certain expectations of how each one should behave according to their ascribed gender. This process of assigning and reinstating norms, roles, and suppositions that are ingrained in the social, cultural, and historical contexts of every society can be called gender construction. The idea that integrates gender and sex under an umbrella hypothesis and employs them concurrently has become outmoded as it lacks an empirical basis. Despite the rigidity of heteronormative cultural concerns, there has been a widespread acceptance of the notion that gender is a social product and sex is a biological construct conditioned through a collective process of one's cultural milieu. This imposed distinction between men and women for aeons, which is fundamental to all societies irrespective of geographical and political boundaries, has always been the elemental categorisation that catalyses heteronormativity and

fixity of the gender binary. The unquestioned and subtly crafted differentiation is further challenged by assimilating the idea of gender as a social construct and perceiving it as a lived experience.

Roused from the hitherto process of naturalistic interpretations to substantiate the female social existence as a second gender, feminist theorists made a paradigm shift in gender studies, which necessitated the separation of sex and gender. The postmodern as well as poststructural perspectives later encountered the fundamental notions of men and women as distinct, unitary entities. These theoretical advancements dismantled the formerly prevalent androcentrism and gave rise to an intersectional perspective redefining gender as a fluid condition that underscores the omission of a gendered habitual experience. At the beginning of the emerging feminist uproars, the nonbinary existence of gender as a continuum was completely absent for a couple of decades. The queer theory and queer wave have consolidated itself by making a conceptual shift from feminism.

The stereotypical portrayal of gender roles in media and cinema has made an evident shift in the depictions and thematic priorities of binary and queer concerns. This postmodern shift featuring an incredulity towards metanarratives emerged in the film industry all over the globe against the grand narratives that have established the standardised gender binary. It is in this realm New Queer Cinema (NQC) offers a postmodern approach to gender studies by unravelling standards, celebrating plurality, and embracing intersectionality in cinema. It liberates the illustration of queer affection and enticement from the constraints of heteronormative expectations

by celebrating queer pleasure and desire while confronting the stigma and guilt through a transparent and unapologetic portrayal of intimacy and sexuality.

Considering Indian cinema in the light of NQC tradition, the Bengali filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh can be considered the pioneer of the new queer wave cinema. Ghosh, who initiated a new agency and vitality in the Indian psyche, where homosexuality and gender fluidity are still treated as taboo, is the first to host gay pride in India. He is a connoisseur in carving human relationships, and his works often depict the complexities of the homophobic mindset of society interrogating cultural norms.

This thesis is an investigation of the elements of gender fluidity, with special emphasis on new queer traits in the movies of Rituparno Ghosh. It is divided into five chapters, along with an introduction and conclusion: the first chapter, titled “Interrogating the Cultural Construction of Gender”, examines the history of gender construction by heteronormative institutions and the evolution of queer theory. The second chapter, titled “Winds of Change: New Perspectives on Queer Movies”, focuses on the new queer wave in cinema and its distinctive features with special reference to Indian regional movies. While the third chapter, “Exploring Gender and Kinship: Major Thematic Concerns in Ghosh,” is an exclusive discussion of Rituparno Ghosh’s movies and the prominent themes in them, the fourth chapter, “Gender Spectrum: Reading the Queer Trilogy,” examines Ghosh’s queer trilogy as a manifesto of his overt gender politics. The concluding chapter, “Navigating with the Spectrum: Embracing Gender Fluidity”, is an investigation of the notion of

gender fluidity and the elements of new queer cinema in those movies of Ghosh other than the trilogy.

The scholastic interpretations of Ghosh and his movies have been constricted to addressing feminist concerns and overt queer representations in conventionally rooted Bengali society. One such study is “Representation of Womanhood in Rituparno Ghosh’s Films” by Dharmanayaka, which demonstrates how Ghosh defines and redefines women in his movies: multifaceted perspectives woven around womanhood, female bonds, sexuality, sexual jealousy, and the attempts to defy social norms within the conventional bonds. Shoubik Das’ study “Construction of Images of Femininity in the Cinema of Rituparno Ghosh” is another study discussing the impact of the scopophilic gaze or male gaze on women. He further examines the changes that evolved in the representation of women in Tollywood in response to various feminist movements around the country, especially in the Tollygunge region. Though the studies on Bengali cinema and its queer representations are limited, the investigations on queer desires and portrayals have a significant place in the scholastic arena. Sachin Ramesh’s “A Semiotic Investigation of Positioning of the Queer in Indian Film Narrative” is a holistic study that looks into certain Indian films with the intention of providing a rational comprehension of queer cinema in the light of queer subculture, female-same-sex desire and documentary apparatus. Finding the research gap in the limitations of scholastic interpretations of Ghosh’s films, which have been predominantly focused on female agency and explicit queer representations, this study envisions a novel attempt in this area. It attempts to reveal the fallacy of gender suppositions and evince the

concept of gender fluidity, which can be ubiquitously applied to every sexual and gender identity, as no individual can conform to a particular set of gender characteristics.

Among the academic investigations on Ghosh, Kaustav Bakshi is a prominent figure who has conducted a series of studies on Ghosh's films and has provided a detailed analysis of various aspects. While many other researchers observed the depictions of womanhood and nuanced human relationships in the movies of Ghosh, Bakshi concentrated more on the queer aspects of them. His studies on Bengali cinema and its queer realm through the papers entitled "Popular Cinema in Bengal: Genres, Stars, Public Cultures", "Queer Creative Indian City: Queer Film Festivals, Precarious Cultural Work and Community Making in Kolkata", "Writing the LGBTIQ+ movement in Bangla: Emergence of Queer Epistemologies in Kolkata in the Early Days of Queer Political Mobilizations", and "India's queer expressions on-screen: The aftermath of the reading down of Section 377" are pivotal benefactions to the understanding of queer culture and prevalent quandaries in India, particularly in Kolkata. The studies like "Rituparno Ghosh, Performing Arts and a Queer Legacy: An Abiding Stardom", "A Room of His Own: The Queer Aesthetics of Rituparno Ghosh", "Rituparno Ghosh, Sartorial Codes and the Queer Bengali Youth", and "Opening Closets and Dividing Audiences: Rituparno Ghosh, the Queer Star of Bengali Cinema" are certain detailed explorations of Ghosh's life and films in the light of his gender identity and sexual preference. These texts offered an insight into the existing image of Ghosh as a queer or gender-fluid icon who has infused his life visions into his movies, and his

gender politics has made a reverberating momentum in the conventional morality of the Indian psyche.

Apart from certain academic outputs, Ghosh has been investigated and rendered through *Reading Rituparno* by Shoma Chatterji, *Rituparno: Cinema, Gender and Art* edited by Kaustav Bakshi, Sangeeta Datta and Rohit K. Dasgupta, and the documentary *Bird of Dusk* by Sangeeta Datta. *Reading Rituparno*, the key secondary source of this thesis, is an extensive evaluation of Ghosh's movies that delve into the intricate explorations of themes like gender, sexuality, and the human psyche. Ghosh's visual sensibilities and distinctive narrative style often combine conventional Indian cinematic components with contemporary themes, which are methodically analysed by Chatterji. In *Rituparno: Cinema, Gender and Art*, several critical examinations of Ghosh's movies from multiple perspectives are compiled to underscore his role in overhauling Bengali Cinema along with addressing the themes of identity, gender, and social standards. The volume also covers Ghosh's narrative methods, creative reservations, and expertise in integrating poetry and visual art into his films, thereby enhancing his influence on Indian art, film, and the discourse of gender and sexuality. Finally, Sangeeta Datta's *Bird of Dusk* focuses on Ghosh's creative legacy and his pursuit of using film to examine the subtleties of human emotions and the fluidity of gender. The documentary provides a comprehensive study of his professional and personal life, incorporating personal anecdotes, excerpts from his films, and interviews with close associates, acquaintances and actors who worked with him. Observations focused on the queer history and gender fluidity in India: Oindri Roy's "Sexual Textual Consonance on the Tales of

Disorderly Bodies: A Comparative Inquiry into the Narratives of Gender Fluidity”, Isha Malhotra’s “Beyond Binaries: A Study of Androgyny in Literature and Popular Culture” and Jaya Yadav’s “Third Gender in Ancient India: Historical Inquiry” have provided the conceptual framework to this thesis.

Nivedita Menon’s *Seeing Like a Feminist* is one of the foundational texts that provided further conceptual support to this study. Her text is a lucid explication of intersectional intricacies between gender, race, class and body, and the gender construction by the process of imparting colonial modernity to the global psyche by the nineteenth century. This text is an extensive analysis of the queer evolution and its status quo, addressing the history of fluid existences and its normalised status once during the pre-colonial time. “Considerable fluidity still existed even till the mid-nineteenth century, when the process of colonial modernity, in alliance with the modernising nationalist elite began the process of disciplining it” (Menon 58). Heavily influenced by Foucault and Butler, she elucidates the notion of normal body in South Asian culture and triggers porosity and gender fluidity.

Subjected to textual analysis, this thesis examines the movies of Rituparno Ghosh, categorising them into two thematic distinctions: one, the queer trilogy of Ghosh, where he performed as a homosexual, gender-fluid persona and overtly discusses the themes of homosexuality and gender fluidity. The other is the non-queer movies, where the elements of gender fluidity with special reference to the characteristics of new queer cinema are studied. The movies of Ghosh are investigated in the light of multiple theories, viz. feminist film theory, queer theory emphasising new queer wave in the Bengali regional cinema along with Butler’s

theory of performativity, Sedgwick's concept of coming out of the closet, and Foucault's notion of power and sexuality.

The feminist film theory aims at interrogating classical cinema, predominantly for its stereotyped portrayal of women, and calls for illustrating female subjectivity and desire on the screen. In the later decades, this corpus of critique evolved and expanded in tandem with establishing film studies as a holistic discipline, eventually becoming integrated into many methodological and conceptual frameworks. Feminist film theory incorporates psychoanalysis to analyse the association between gender and gazing and further makes efforts to render some understanding of the role that gender serves in cinema spectatorship. The impact of poststructuralist perspectives that perceive gender as a dynamic performance rather than a fixed entity has greatly influenced the realm of advanced film studies during the twenty-first century, resulting in a shift in assimilating multiple perspectives of sexual differences and hybrid identities.

Feminist Film Theory plays a significant role in the analysis of Ghosh's movies, as his works are predominantly feministic in their thematic concerns. Unlike the other mainstream and popular movies of the time, Ghosh's female characters are not the princesses who await a gallant prince or knight to rescue them; instead, they possess independence of free will and display unpolished and explicit forms of female desires and preferences. His movies like *Unishe April (April 19)*, *Dahan (Crossfire)*, *Bariwali (The Landlady)*, *Shubho Muharat (Auspicious Time)*, *Chokher Bali (Sand in the Eye)*, and *Raincoat* illustrate this female agency and revert the established male supremacy of emotional security and social privilege. The

investigation on identifying the queer elements in his movies has been limited to the movies *Arekti Premer Golpo* (*Just Another Love Story*), *Memories in March* and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, where Ghosh appeared as an androgynous homosexual. The altering gender concerns have expanded the province of queer theory further without limiting it to homosexual and transgender identities through the advancing notion of gender fluidity.

Gender, being a sociocultural product, needs to be presumed as a fluid concept moulded by human intellect and language, like social reality created fictionally through words.

While for a social realist, an object such as a flower, a cat, a chair, or a university exists as a material entity to which different cultures give different names, for theorists of discourse, the words and constructs that human beings devise actually constitute and make up the world. The flower, the cat, the chair, and the university are as they are because that is how we have named them. (Bradley 5)

Gender is constructed like a sign contrived out of a repeated association of a particular signifier and signified. The concepts of man/woman or masculine/feminine are constructs that are in use concocted through iteration and are independent of any individual's intrinsic features. Julia Kristeva argues that this existence of demarcation and hierarchy in the name of gender in the symbolic realm is patriarchal. So, the feminine becomes the otherness difficult to define that catalyses the feminist concerns out of the autocracy of masculinity. Judith Lorber, the foundational theorist of the social construction of gender, in her 2006 essay

“Shifting Paradigms and Challenging Categories”, recognises gender as an overarching idea of fundamental social structure in present-day societies. She also analyses how power in contemporary society, especially Western countries – as most of the theoretical contemplations are Eurocentred – uncovers male domination and acts as an advocacy of a constricted type of heterosexual masculinity.

The forced imposition of the heterosexual binary structure of gender and sexuality constricted the feminine roles inflexible either to mother or whore, as discussed in the Madonna-Whore Complex of Freud, and widened the masculine roles to scholars, warriors, and intellectuals, where he is kept as the privileged one to own and manipulate nature, society, or culture. Apart from the conceptual transition, there are also gradual shifts in the pragmatic approaches from the attempts of institutional powers in the form of psychiatric normalisation and informal practices like bullying to keep one in the prescribed gendered place.

Beginning from the necessity of political representation and participation, feminist thoughts eventually started conquering the inner domestic circles and workplaces, voicing out for equal treatment and payment. During its initial decades of expansion, feminist movements overlooked the notion of gender as a spectrum of identity variations. Subsequently, as the demand for mainstream political and social legitimacy and acceptance expanded, queer theory became autonomous, and the queer wave evolved as a subset of third-wave feminism.

Queer activism began with the lesbian and gay rights movement during the 1970s and 1980s, which made an evident presence through the Stonewall Rebellion because of rapidly increasing homophobia and considering homosexuals as the root

cause of the AIDS epidemic. ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), which was established in 1987 under the orchestration of Larry Kramer and Vito Russo, led to the setting up of its offshoot, Queer Nation in 1990, calling for the attention of the legislature, pharmaceutical manufacturers, professionals from legal and medical fields, to tackle the escalating violence against the queer people. This was the time Teresa de Lauretis, a film theorist, coined the term “queer theory” and made a rapid momentum in the academic circles. She puts forth the step towards the normalisation of homosexuality not as an innate feature but as a cultural formula:

Homosexuality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined either by opposition or by homology. In other words, it is no longer to be seen either as merely transgressive or . . . Natural sexuality (i.e., institutionalised reproductive sexuality) . . . Instead, male and female homosexualities – in their current sexual-political articulations of gay and lesbian sexualities – may be reconceptualised as social and cultural forms in their own right.

(Lauretis 3)

Even though they share a common goal of social equity and the eradication of gender oppression, queer theory marks an evident deviation from the standard feminist frameworks by emphasising nonconformity, heterogeneity, and ambiguity rather than the present categories of rigid dichotomy. Even while protesting for the acknowledgement of non-heterosexuals, gay and lesbian activists conform to the binary structure by assuming lucid subjects for its movement: still pertaining to men

and women. But queer movement makes a unique stand here with an inclusive formula of embracing multiple gender identities and sexual preferences like asexual, bisexual, agender, gender-fluid, transgender, transsexual and more. Thus, with identity being viewed as a societal construct and subject to change, the constructionist approach seems to form the basis of queer theory.

Even before the advent of explicit political activism of queer culture and the dilemma of identity acceptance, queer existence and experiences in many cultures were marked clearly in earlier narratives in the form of epics and mythologies, out of which Greek and Asian narratives stand prominent. These cultural artefacts, like arts and literature, are not only the cultural products that reflect contemporary culture but leave the literary and oral shreds of evidence that substantiate the existence of queer and fluid identities. The man-boy love in Greek mythology that discusses the relationship between Poseidon and Pelops, as well as the portrayal of powerful and intelligent women characters like Athena and Artemis, who stand outside the shades of men but prefer the company of only virgin girls, are discernable examples. Though the Hindu philosophies acknowledge the existence of the female principle in men and vice versa, the Hindu society is inimical to the public display of the alternative self: Indian culture has a plethora of queer characters who display fluidity in their identity, like Shikhandi, who is the rebirth of Amba to avenge Bhishma, and Cudala, one who assumes both male and female forms and relates to her husband intellectually only when she is male and erotically when she is female, are to name a few. Mentions like *napumsaka* (neuter) in *Ramayana* and *pandaka* (impotent) in Buddhist literature acknowledge the existence of gender-fluid identities. However,

the range of acceptance, even in the mythical context, remains repugnant. Various Indian mythological tales vindicate the normalised gender transformation and fluidity prevalent in the earlier Indian culture that has later been stowed away by the colonial invasions and the imparting of Western culture. Nivedita Menon further arguments this thought in her text *Seeing Like a Feminist* about how the invasion of colonial modernity turned a range of bodies or identities invisible or illegitimate through certain cultural codes: “Since the hegemonic understanding of the human body now is that each and every body is clearly and unambiguously male or female, large numbers of bodies that do not fit this description are designated as diseased or disordered in some way” (Menon 71).

Visual media is a cultural artefact, like arts and literature, that has a wider impact on reinstating and refurbishing the existing notions and ideals regarding every aspect of culture. Jean Baudrillard argues that the “increasing importance of mass media has fundamentally changed the way that people see and understand their world. He goes so far as to suggest that the media ‘are’ our reality” (Holmes 12). The contemporary media creates hyperreality whereby even reality has started to imitate and follow the imposed model: “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precision of simulacra – that engenders the territory” (Baudrillard 2). Although this notion of distortion still demands some sense of reality to identify the artifice, Baudrillard is not only speculating that postmodern society is synthetic but attempts to demonstrate the incapacity of the spectators to distinguish between reality and artificiality. The possibility of a spectrum of gender roles in this context is

conveniently disguised, and the binary model is formulated as the standard criterion for better inclusivity.

New Queer Cinema (NQC) provides a postmodern perspective to gender studies by dismantling the conventions, foregrounding diversity, and embracing intersectionality. Among the prominent examples of NQC representations in international cinematic landscapes is Wong Kar-wai's 1997 Hong Kong movie *Happy Together*, renowned for its evocative visuals and introspective portrayal of intricate queer love. Similarly, the 2013 French film by Abdellatif Kechiche, titled *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, takes a bildungsroman approach to depict the romantic relationship of a lesbian couple, encompassing the themes of self-discovery, love and desire. The 2005 film *My Brother. . . Nikhil* by Onir is one the first Indian movies to sensitively and deeply tackle queer themes by portraying the life of a man who endured rejection by society after being diagnosed with HIV. Hansal Mehta's 2006 movie *Aligarh*, based on a true story, explores the life of a gay professor who experiences discrimination and persecution in a conservative Indian society, raising pertinent concerns about human rights, dignity and privacy in a culture that adheres to stringent codes of conduct and morality, despite its standards of learning and technological advancements. Faraz Arif Ansari's 2017 silent short film *Sisak (Sigh)*, touted as India's first silent gay tale, revolves around the conundrum of love between two regular passengers on a local train who share nerve-wracking feelings of desire silently through their eyes. Among the regional film industries of India, the Malayalam film industry has been established as a harbinger of distinctive and content-driven films and challenges the Bollywood cliches through its artistic

excellence. It experiments with nonlinear tales and symbolic images and features authentic portrayals of often overlooked communities in the name of gender inequality, caste prejudice, and environmental degradation. The other regional film industries, like the Bengali film industry, find their unique position and claim the global acclamation for nuanced and in-depth illustration of fluid identities, especially with the entry of Rituparno Ghosh and his queer trilogy that forms the principal investigation of this study.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is one of the foundational theories related to gender and queer studies, and her texts *Bodies that Matter*, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" are integrated to this context with special emphasis on the concept of gender fluidity, taking the non-queer movies of Ghosh as specimens. For her, sex or gender is not a static condition but rather a regulatory practice that is repeatedly acted on to form an identity. She calls gender a performance that lacks any innate characteristics to define it naturally, resulting in the creation of a fabricated dichotomy, thereby restricting the possibilities of more insurgent sexual perturbations of the dominant heteronormative system. Instead, it is nurtured under the condition of everyone's social, cultural, political, and economic environment: "For Butler, there are no natural bodies or bodies that pre-exist societal or cultural inscription. Although a body may not be in the space of appearance or the sphere of the polis, its exclusion from the realm is a result of discursively constructed performative effects upon the body that marginalises or excludes it" (Young n. p.).

Apart from the theoretical frameworks, it is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's idea of "coming out of the closet" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 15), which is discussed in her seminal text *Epistemology of the Closet*, that provides a pragmatic image of gender-fluid individuals. According to her, the closet is not a physical space but carries a metaphorical expression that represents the concealment and repression of marginalised identities. Sedgwick's argument of coming out is a seditious act of identity manifestation against rigid, conventional notions of the binary structure of gender and privileged heteronormativity. Coming out is a transformational act that subverts established power systems and challenges the existing norm, and she offers an evolutionary perspective on sexuality and places the binary notion of hetero/homosexuality as both a foundation and also a product of contemporary culture. She bestows the ongoing discussions on the intricate interplay between gender and sexuality and adds to the awareness of the role knowledge and power play upon the sexuality and identity of every individual. In this view, Ghosh's queer trilogy is thus an exemplum for the cultural expression of Sedgwick's concept through the medium of cinema as all the protagonists of his queer trilogy are those who come out of their closet to encounter society's prejudiced notions with dignity in diverse ways. Consistently wrestling with the dilemma of choosing between self-expression and social adherence, Ghosh's characters emulate the real-life problems of coming out, as articulated by Sedgwick, and these films delve into the questions of sexuality, societal prescriptions, and identity, providing an abounding terrain for analysing her ideas.

Michel Foucault's view on power and sexuality is a parallel concept discussed in this study, especially in analysing the female characters of Ghosh. According to Foucault, power dictates and governs social conventions, behaviours and identities other than being obstructive. Ghosh's films offer an engaging way to investigate Foucault's theories on power and sexuality, showing these are manifested in the lived experiences in certain cultural contexts: his characters display the complexity of desire and identity in a culture that stigmatises and ostracises alternative sexual orientations, and they negotiate social norms and hierarchies that aim to hinder their autonomy and freedom of self-manifestation.

Agglomerating the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, this thesis puts forth several objectives like attempting a thematic analysis of Ghosh's movies, specifically the female representation and agency, the overt queer portrayals with reference to his trilogy and the investigation of new queer elements and the illustration of gender fluidity in his non-queer movies. Based on these objectives, this thesis is distributed among five chapters arranged in a deductive model where the objectives are analysed from a generalised perspective and gradually narrowed down to the works of Ghosh.

The first chapter, entitled "Interrogating the Cultural Construction of Gender", addresses how culture shapes perceptions of gender roles through the influence of one's social relationships, behaviours, and beliefs. It contemplates the construction and maintenance of societal norms and expectations through the processes of socialisation, symbolic interaction, power dynamics, and historical and mythological influences in the form of cultural outputs like media, religion, law and

literature. Each binary category and its portrayal in various cultural records are discussed according to its evolutionary phases through decades until the present. The initial focus is on feminism and its concerns, analysing each of its launching stimuli, political intentions, major figures and seminal texts. Further, the paradigm shifts in the cultural conception from the hitherto granted androcentrism to the recent acknowledgement of varying exhibitions of masculinity or male characteristics are reviewed. The major thought referred to here is R. W. Connell's types of masculinity, where each type is explained with sufficient examples from popular literature and movies. An intellectual history of masculinity and the implications of masculinity discourse in cinema are also explored, with a foundation on the text titled, "*The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*" by George L. Mosse. Furthermore, Feyza Bhatti's examination of masculinity in her text "*Masculinity Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach*" focuses on how the advent of feminism in social, cultural, political and economic strata started diminishing the hitherto unquestioned 'privilege' of masculinity.

With the gains of liberal feminism, and increasing women's visibility in the economic and public life, men and the male identity faced with a crisis situation. As the women's economic participation increased, the struggle of women for gender equality in a patriarchal world was perceived as a success of women over men. Men were 'losing' their good provider role, and the traditional gender roles were challenged. The initial studies, therefore, were an effort to regain the lost status of men against women (Bhatti n.p.).

After discussing the binary concept and its altercations, the chapter moves to the discussion on queer existence and experience, which is the linchpin of this thesis. It exposes the queer and fluid existence in myths and earlier literature from both West and East, thereby claiming the proof that third gender and fluid identities had existed and were acknowledged even centuries back in the rooting of civilisations. Finding the initial spark from Butler's theory of performativity, the queer theory got disseminated to both intellectual and common terrains through the resolute influence of Sedgwick and her text *Epistemology of the Closet*, which constitutes the penultimate part of this chapter. The last quarter serves as a transitional section to the following chapter, bringing an idea of how mainstream media representations of the queer have evolved in the twenty-first century, adding a note that films have a significant role in reinstating these changes and influencing them.

The second chapter, "Winds of Change: New Perspectives on Queer Movies", focuses on queer portrayals and the evolutionary development of NQC in international, national, and regional film terrains. NQC is a pragmatic form of postmodern queer theories and an offshoot of poststructuralist concern, it narrows down the vast area of queer culture to a more lucid and defined area for the study by revolving closer around the concept of gender fluidity. Its further analysis of how queer portrayals have changed in Bollywood and Indian regional cinema, from the role of fraudsters and tricksters to independent, dignified individuals. Regional industries like Marathi, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Punjabi and Malayalam industries are taken for study, along with the Bollywood and Bengali film industries.

The evolution of Bengali cinema over the years, together with the waves of Bengali cinema, where each of its major themes, narrative techniques, and the prominent filmmakers of the time and their distinctive film approaches are discussed. Through the confabulation of their influences, the chapter concludes with a note on the Rituparno Ghosh era elaborating on how Ghosh pioneered the new queer wave characteristics and initiated NQC in Indian cinema, particularly in Bengali cinema.

The third chapter, entitled “Exploring Gender and Kinship: Major Thematic Concerns in Ghosh”, takes up the baton for the in-depth exploration of a myriad of themes experimented in the movies of Rituparno Ghosh. The theme of feminist concerns, where Ghosh introduced his idea of a new woman possessing an agency of free will and desire, is discussed along with the parallel wave that Ghosh initiated through his shift in the woman depictions in Bengali cinema. Other themes analysed are the importance of Durga Pooja and the portrayal of the city of Kolkata at different time intervals. The presentation of intricate relationships that cannot be confined to a definite label and the power of indoctrination of his female protagonists and thereby attaining knowledge of their self are a few of the other prominent themes examined in Ghosh’s works. The final theme observed is the pivotal and most sensitive one regarding Ghosh’s queer concerns: The queer trilogy and non-queer movies.

Chapter four, “Gender Spectrum: Reading the Queer Trilogy”, discusses three movies of Ghosh that explicitly portray gender-fluid homosexuals: *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* directed by Ghosh, *Arekti Premer Golpo* (Just

Another Love Story) directed by Kaushik Ganguly and *Memories in March* directed by Sanjoy Nag. The recent interest in Ghosh's sexuality and his gender politics regarding fluidity has made comparatively more studies on his queer trilogy. These movies are known in the name of Ghosh, not because of his directorial inputs but of the daring on-screen appearance he has made as an androgynous homosexual. They were released at a critical juncture in the history of Indian gay pride when the Delhi High Court made its verdict in 2009, ruling certain sections of the Indian Penal Code 377 concerning same-sex conduct as unlawful. Throughout the entire trilogy, Ghosh portrayed the queer character as an assertive defence of his coming out, which included presenting his gender independence and plasticity. The queer trilogy is treated as a statement of flexible identity that is positioned outside of accepted doctrine and a formal commitment to Ghosh's gender politics.

The final chapter, "Navigating with the Spectrum: Embracing Gender Fluidity", intends to bring up a novel thought to the studies of gender fluidity and Ghosh's movies. It triggers a new area in the realm of gender studies, especially in queer studies giving a lucid explanation of the concept of gender fluidity by analysing the non-queer movies of Ghosh: the movies that do not apparently present the queer characters and experiences. Ghosh's movies like *Bariwali* (The Landlady), *Shubho Muharat* (The Auspicious Time) (2003), *Chokher Bali* (Sand in the Eye), *Raincoat* (2003), and *Shobh Charito Kalponik* (All Characters are Imaginary) form basis of the study. Showcasing fluidity as his primary impulse in his own gender politics, Ghosh challenges the ingrained beliefs and accepted gender standards and advances conversations about inclusivity and acceptance. As a part of a deeper

understanding of Ghosh as a filmmaker and a queer activist, his personal and professional lives are studied in the first phase. His personal role as an androgynous homosexual is kept apart while analysing his movies as the primary texts, his views on gender construction and manipulation discussed both in his works and in public are considered functional in the study.

Rituparno Ghosh has distinguished himself among luminaries in Bengali cinema's investigation of issues pertaining to gender and queer themes, which has been tackled in a myriad of styles. Ghosh's works have greatly influenced the conversation around gender and sexuality, and his legacy continues to encourage succeeding filmmakers to tackle these subjects sensitively and in-depth. These works are renowned for their nuanced examination of queer lives and their sympathetic representation of queer people. He had a key role in igniting discussions about queer rights and representation in Indian culture, as well as in elevating queer tales in Bengali films. It is instrumental to note his works and gender politics to understand him as a filmmaker and a queer activist.

Born to an artistic household on August 31, 1963, as the son of an acclaimed artist and documentary filmmaker, Sunil Ghosh, he presumably inherited the fundamentals of filmmaking from his father. Following his postgraduate degree in Economics at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, he started his career as a media person by working at the advertising firm *Response India*. Ghosh, by then, had already become an accomplished copywriter, famed in the visual media through his advertisements that carried a novelty of thoughts and presentations. As Derek O'Brien commented in the online website of News18: "As an ad man, Rituparno had

a remarkable eye for detail - textual as well as pictorial. The right pen for a particular prop, the correct lighting, the appropriate word: it was an obsession, almost a fetish. We didn't know it then, but he was preparing the ground for a feverishly rigorous career in cinema” (n. p). Despite working in the visual media, Ghosh was also an editor and a critic for the influential Bengali film magazine *Anandlok*. Eventually, he transitioned from commercials to documentaries and then to his own exclusive cinematic empire, presenting his directorial debut, *Hirer Angti* (The Diamond Ring), in 1992. Although he encountered too many challenges and setbacks in his personal and professional life from that period of his career development until his death in 2013, nothing could expunge his spirit of revolution. It was not much time before his early demise that he completed his swansong *Satyanweshi* (The Truth Seeker), a mystery thriller inspired by the renowned fictional detective Byomkesh Bakshi, known as Indian Sherlock Holmes. Ghosh's films will be briefly addressed chronologically, based on the year of their release, with the intention of looking into each plot line and comprehending its essence before proceeding into an in-depth exploration.

Hirer Angti, adapted from the story written by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay under the same name, is Ghosh's directorial debut, which revolves around Ratanlal Babu's guard for a treasure waiting for its true heir. The entire event happens on the eve of Durga Pooja, when a young man called Gandharvakumar appears, claiming the treasure to be his ancestral property and all the succeeding dramatic events that follow. *Unishe April (April 19)* is a 1994 movie in which the story centres on the sentimental tension between Sarojini, a mother who permeated all other strata of her

life for her artistic commitments and accomplishments, and Aditi, a daughter who is apathetic towards her mother as she thinks her mother's art life is the reason for the death of her father. As the night turns out, the sentimental stagnation is gradually diffused with a candid and intimate conversation they have, and Aditi realises that the picture of the mother she carried along for these two decades is not what she cherished but is constructed by her egoistic father. *Dahan* (Crossfire) is the 1997 film adaptation of Suchitra Bhattacharya's novel with the same title. It discusses the turn of events that happened in the lives of two women, Romila Chowdhary and Jhinuk, on a night when Romila is physically assaulted by a group of ruffians and her husband Palash is beaten. During the trial, Romila is forced to give vague testimony under the pressure of her husband and in-laws, which makes the gang scot-free. Though Jhinuk sticks to her affidavit at the court, the defence lawyer portrays her as a woman of no moral character. The movie ends by showing both women accepting an alienated step towards their life with no hope left for rebellious responses.

Bariwali (The Landlady), released in 1999, revolves around the life of a middle-aged woman, Banalata, who is self-isolated from the sanctimonious world outside. Prasanna and Malati, her domestic helpers, are her only companions in this lonely world. The movie is about how the Arcadian life of Banalata and her dilapidated mansion gets distorted once a film crew comes there and how her closeted feelings and loneliness are tactfully exploited. *Asukh* (The Illness) is another movie by Ghosh released in 1999 that portrays meticulously crafted relationships and the tensions woven around them. Rohini, a renowned actress, is

torn between her break-up with her boyfriend and her mother's illness. In the movie, Ghosh skilfully presents many sentimental but deeply touching moments of a father's absolute love towards his daughter. *Utsab* (The Festival) is a 2000 movie by Ghosh, which deals with the present-day Bengali society grappling with the drift towards modernity from the traditional culture and values. The story begins on the day of Durga Pooja, one of the prominent festivals of Bengal, where all members of the family arrive at their ancestral home. As the movie progresses, it reveals the fragmented as well as stagnated lives of each of them. Everyone in the family is self-indulgent with their own problems and is in need of money, which is revealed during the events. Ghosh has given an open ending to the movie, where the mother watches a videotape of all the good memories they had in the previous days and laments over the plight of the family.

Titli (Butterfly), is a 2002 movie discussing the development of a teenage girl, Tilothoma Chatterjee alias Titli, from her capricious adolescence to mature adulthood. Unlike the usual teenager-parent relationship, Titli and her mother, Urmila, share a special and jovial bond. On a journey, she meets Rohit, a superstar and her celebrity crush, and eventually, she confronts her mother upon finding out that he is her mother's ex-lover. The movie ends by showing Titli's upliftment from a teenage girl's crush to a mature lady who can decipher the different shades of mature human relationships. *Shubho Muhurat* (Auspicious Time) is a 2003 movie and a strong deviation from all other Ghosh movies, which could be included in the thriller genre that Agatha Christie's Miss Marple greatly inspires. The movie revolves around the death of the retired actress Kakoli and the parallel investigation

done by the police and Ranga Pishima, a lonely widow. *Chokher Bali* (The Sand in the Eye) is a 2003 Bengali drama about the tug-of-war between modernity and traditionality, focusing on three generations of widowhood and how their values and beliefs have changed over time. Binodini is a young widow who manipulates the concealed desires of the widows that are bound to the traditional norms. She, like a *femme fatale*, through her manipulative erotic charm, ensnares the two men, Mahendra and Bihari, only to leave them and vanish at the end.

Raincoat (2003) is exclusively a “Rituparno adaptation” of O. Henry’s *The Gift of the Magi*, which is a gambling of destiny with desires and fate in the life of two separated lovers, Mannu *alias* Manoj and Neeru or Neeraja. Mannu visits his childhood friend in Calcutta to find a capital to start a new business, where, on his visit to Neeru, he learns about the harsh reality and her wretched living conditions. At the denouement, learning the actual image of each other’s life, Neeru leaves her only ornaments inside his raincoat while Manu settles her house rent with the money he has collected from his friends to start a new life, without the other one’s knowledge. *Antarmahal* (The Inner Chamber), yet another literary adaptation by Ghosh released in 2005, is based on Tarasankar Bandhopadyay’s short story titled *Pratima* (The Idol). The story happens in the late nineteenth century during the time of British rule, where the antihero, Zamindar Bhubaneswar Choudhary, tries to please the British at any cost for the Raibahadur title. Despite being impotent, Choudhary forces Yashomati, his young bride, for sex and literally rapes her every night. The devastated and lonely Yashomathi is attracted to Bhushan, the sculptor, who makes his masterpiece idol of goddess Durga with the face of Yashomati on the

day of Durga Pooja that leads to her suicide. *Dosar* (Emotional Companion) is a 2006 movie depicting the emotional journey of Kaberi, who is concerned with her husband Kaushik's illicit affair with his colleague Mita, a victim of an unhappy marriage. The movie centres on her quandary duties of a wife and that of an individual who finds it difficult to move ahead with an untrustworthy husband and his attempts to overcome the trauma of his lover's loss and to regain the trust of his wife.

The Last Lear (2007) is centred on Harish Mishra, a hard-core devotee of Shakespearean plays and a retired theatre artist who was renowned for his impersonation of Shakespearean characters. Siddharth Kumar, an ambitious but manipulative director, convinces Harish to play the lead role in his new project, *The Mask*, where the famous actress Shabnam plays the female lead. On the day of the movie's release, Shabnam visits Harish, who is by then in a coma, as he meets with an accident during the shoot. There, she encounters Vandana, a woman who possesses a complex, intimate relationship with Harish and blames the entire crew for his tragic plight. The story unwraps when there develops a bond between Shabnam and Vandana who share similar emotional conflicts in personal lives.

Ghosh's 2008 movie, *Khela* (Game), is about a film within the film in which Raja, an idealistic director, wants to make a film on Buddha, casting Abhiroop as little Buddha. The movie is not only about an ardent film crew making their dream project but also about the intertwining of complex human relationships. The movie draws a parallel plot of Raja and his wife Sheela, who yearns for a child while the former feels a child might compromise his profession and passion. The 2008 movie *Shob*

Charitro Kalponik (All Characters are Imaginary) portrays the thin line the relationship crosses amid reality and thoughts. The celebrated poet Indranil Mitra leads a surreal world of poetry and imagination, and his sudden death dramatically brings about changes in his wife, Radhika and her attitude towards Indranil. It is about her journey of understanding her husband both as a poet and a husband, thereby finding a new persona in him that she had never found while he was alive. Ghosh's *Abohoman* (The Eternal), the 2010 movie, opens with renowned director Aniket's death as his life gets unravelled through flashbacks of other characters. The plot is about the discombobulated life of Aniket and his wife Deepti with the arrival of Shikha, a young actress, and the love developed between the latter and Aniket. Apratim, Aniket's son, confronts a relationship tussle, when he develops a bond with Shikha in the end, like his father.

Arekti Premer Golpo (Just Another Love Story) is the first of the queer trilogy of Ghosh's filmography, released in 2010, in which he himself appeared as an androgynous homosexual documentary film-maker Abhiroop Sen. Abhiroop and his crew try to make a documentary on Chapal Bhaduri, a real-life *jatra* actor in Kolkata, who was well known for his female role but had to face strong criticism for his effeminate personality. The film also draws a parallel plot of the romantic life between Abhiroop and his bisexual partner Basu. The movie deals with the genuine life of the transgender community and the trauma they have to face in both their personal and professional lives. The second of the queer trilogy, *Memories in March*, is about a mother's realisation of her son being a homosexual. Arati Mishra arrives in Kolkata knowing her only son Siddharth died in an accident, where she comes to

know that her son is having an affair with his colleague Ornab Mitra, which puts her in a dilemma of whether to mourn for her son's loss or to feel anguish in knowing his sexual priority.

Noukadudi (Boat Wreck), a 2011 film, is yet another film adaptation of Tagore's novel with the same title. The movie is about a boat wreck that has turned the lives of four people upside down and their plight of getting captive in the intricate web of love and obligation. The story revolves around Ramesh's dilemma between his love for Hemnalini, his childhood crush, and his respect for his father, who forces him to marry another girl. On the wedding day, a boat wreck causes two newlywed couples, whereby Kamala, the wife of another man, Nalinaksha Chattopadhyay, ends up with Ramesh. Though Ramesh tries to find out Nalinaksha and hand over his bride on knowing the truth, the affection that develops towards Kamala leads to a flurry of dramatic incidents and emotional turbulence in both. In the turn of events, Kamala knows the truth and attempts suicide but ends up with Nalinaksha, her original husband. The third of the queer trilogy, *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, stands dramatically close to the real life of Ghosh himself and is often considered a semi-autobiographical work. Famed choreographer Rudra Chatterjee, *alias* Rudy, is currently doing a contemporary presentation of Tagore's *Chitrangada*, placing the character in a modern setting. The intensely passionate and profound relationship between Rudra and his love, Partho, finally makes them consider adopting a child, which stimulates Rudra to undergo sex-reassignment surgery, as the law stands against same-sex couples adopting. In the end, after a long

journey on an emotional roller coaster, the movie ends with the line “Be what you wish to be,” and Rudra aborts the final surgery and becomes what he is.

This thesis has employed certain theoretical terms to further contextualise the study, where the conceptual definitions are borrowed from the Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary and the *Glossary* by The Gender and Sexuality Campus Center under Michigan State University. The most used terms in this thesis are gender, sex, and sexuality, which are often misunderstood as interchangeable but are distinctive and connected simultaneously. Gender is a social construct, usually standardised as a binary structure, that dictates the way a particular society perceives the dispositions, functional roles, conduct, and suppositions regarding obligations and identities associated with masculinity and femininity. It is “the behavioural, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex” (Merriam-Webster n. p.). In the case of sex, it is something that is assigned at the time of birth, acts without the individual’s agency and volition, and is often mistakenly interchanged with the concept of gender. It can be defined as “either of the two major forms of individuals that are distinguished respectively as female or male, especially based on of their reproductive organs and structures” (Merriam-Webster n. p.). Sexuality, on the other hand, is one’s own personal choice encompassing that person’s sexual identity and associated with their romantic relationship and is the total sum of one’s sexual preference, conduct, and behaviour.

LGBTQ+, another term used in the study, is an umbrella term and an acronym for several non-normative gender identities and sexualities that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning and others. Regarding

sexuality, there are mainly four categories: the culturally normalised heterosexual, the demeaned homosexual, bisexual, and asexual, which are categorised based on the sexual attraction an individual possesses. If the sexual attraction or sexual activity is between two individuals of the opposite sex, it is called heterosexual, and if that is among the same-sex individuals, that is homosexual. There are also certain individuals who are attracted to both one's own gender identity and to other identities alike, which are termed bisexuals and asexual is "devoid of sexuality" (Merriam-Webster n. p.) or those who fail to experience any sexual desire for anyone.

While most of the terms in this category have a particular identity or sexual preference like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual or asexual, queer is a "term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It can also be a way of rejecting the perceived norms of the LGBT community ("List of LGBTQ+ Terms"). Though queer individuals and experiences have existed even before the term started representing a community in the early 1920s as a pejorative term, it entered into the academic realm as a theoretical interest only in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Thus, it is "a sexual identity term that may incorporate fluidity and antinormativity" (The Gender and Sexuality Campus Center n. p.).

Gender-fluid is a term that refers to an individual whose gender identity is not fixed or it is the individual who prefers "to remain flexible about their gender(s)" (Merriam-Webster n. p.). Gender fluidity is the act of traversing across multiple gender expressions across time and space and is "the ability to freely and knowingly

become one or many of a limitless number of genders, for any length of time, at any rate of change” (Merriam-Webster n. p.). In this study, gender fluidity is conceived as the acts by the labelled binary genders crossing the boundaries of their prescribed gender expressions and putting forth an attitude ascribed to the opposite gender or somewhere in the middle of the gender spectrum, not conforming to any definite entity of gender identity or sexual priority.

People who identify as gender-fluid or gender-neutral also have a repertoire of pronouns, much like the conventional binary system. In order to denote a third gender, that is, someone who resides outside the binary concepts of male/female or masculine/feminine, the most often used pronouns are they, their, and them. Certain academicians designate gender-fluid identities with pronouns like zie, zir, hir, hirs, and hirsself. Although Rituparno Ghosh exhibits an androgynous disposition by reflecting both masculine and feminine (or neither) traits in his physicality and attitude, the masculine pronouns he, him, and his are used for the purpose of clarity, but any instances of the neutral pronouns in references are clearly designated as such.

The entire study is thus divided into five chapters to discuss evolving gender perceptions and review popular media regarding its changing approaches to both reinstating and altering gender suppositions. When these films are subjected to an in-depth analysis, in addition to the protagonists’ self-reflection, it explores two crucial aspects: how one’s family perceives and supports their identity and how one’s immediate social circle and the peripheral society react to those deviant identities. The prior four chapters discuss the already established theories and their

implications, and the final chapter of the thesis makes a demarcation by putting forth a new contribution to the academic realm in the field of gender studies and also to the forthcoming investigations on Rituparno Ghosh. This study challenges the existing efforts to standardise binary identity concepts and heteronormativity and emphasises the radical shifts in thoughts and approaches occurring in both cultural perceptions and aesthetic interpretations, especially with regard to queer identity and their lived experience, iterating the individual's freedom of identity and sexuality.

CHAPTER 1

INTERROGATING THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Every element of human existence is influenced by culture, a set of beliefs, behaviours, and relationships that shape all societal types around the globe, which can broadly be defined as a shared collection of conventions, convictions, standards, customs, and artefacts that define a particular group. It is both dynamic and multidimensional and includes the cultural practices that are passed along from one generation to the next. The origin of any culture can be traced back to the early civilisations of humanity, where groups created distinctive customs, languages, social structures, and ways of living to adapt to their surroundings and meet their requirements. Culture is often described as a way of living and a method of integration of an individual who gets cognitively and socially incorporated into society, which produces and induces meanings to human life and existence. This process of cultural construction starts with socialisation, in which people acquire and assimilate various societal standards of expected conduct of their community through interactions with various societal institutions like family, school, peer groups, and media. Symbolic interactionism through shared languages, gestures, rituals, and artefacts further facilitates the cultural construction to aid individuals in expressing and understanding complicated concepts, emotions and identities.

Dominant groups often develop and establish cultural norms and representations that are inextricably connected to power relations, resulting in the

marginalisation or elimination of certain cultural practices, identities, and perspectives, leading to social hierarchies and inequities. Cultural creation is a place of confrontation and negotiation where individuals and groups participate in social change, subversion, and resistance. The marginalised communities attempt to contest prevailing cultural assumptions and promote more inclusion, representation, and equitable conditions through grassroots initiatives, cultural activism, and social movements. The process of creating culture is, therefore, intricate and continuous, reflecting the dynamic interactions of people, groups, institutions, and broader societal influences.

The accelerating discussions on the cultural construction of one's life, surroundings, and perspectives make Cultural Studies one of the most challenging and promising amid the academic curricula. In his *An Introduction to Cultural Studies*, Nayar defines cultural studies as “processes by which power relations between and within groups of human beings organise cultural artefacts (such as food habits, music, cinema, sports events, and celebrity culture) and their meanings” (4). Culture as an academic area was arbitrarily divided into two for a long time: elite culture, the one considered classical or true, and popular culture or mass culture which is treated disparagingly. Cultural studies states that a community's definition of the world creates its culture, and it is this interpretation that decides the admission and rejection of every individual. As defined by Wendell Pierce, “The role of culture is that it is the form through which we as a society reflect on who we are, where we have been, where we hope to be” (qtd in Cusick n. p). An individual and society serve as a metonymy for each other where the person echoes the society in which

they are raised, and society anticipates the dispositions and judgments of people in it.

Culture plays a crucial part in creating meaning by influencing how people see and understand the world through its various manifestations. It sets a framework within which everyone makes sense of their experiences and assigns significance to different occurrences. Language, practices and rituals, and cultural artefacts such as music, literature, art, and architecture serve as the archives of creative knowledge and collective understanding. They reflect the goals, values, and struggles of a society and permit individuals to explore and interpret their cultural identity. Further, certain artistic forms and associated meanings are subject to devaluation to accomplish the production of meaning resulting from authoritative control. This demarcation of culture constructs meanings to the existence of social identity through which differences in the hierarchy of sustenance and status are imposed. Culture has a ubiquitous diadem of maintaining an agency over individuals through its prescribed process of meaning production.

Cultural studies analyse the process through which certain meanings are produced in a particular culture. It believes that the processes of meaning-production are connected to the structures of power in society: certain meanings acquire greater power because of their sources, other meanings become less important. (Nayar, *An Introduction* 19)

Cultural studies later became an area of study that examined the production and maintenance of culture and its relationship with power. It attempted to understand

the intricate relationship between culture, power, ideology, identity, and social structures. Cultural analysts and theoreticians like Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Edward Said, and Michel Foucault further developed multiple theories on cultural establishment and power exertion.

Hall's perception of culture and its processes of power investiture demand a pivotal space of examination in this realm. According to him, this process of encoding and decoding culture and cultural artefacts is a circuit of "production, circulation, distribution, consumption, and reproduction" (Hall, "Encoding, Decoding" 508). It entails the conveyance of meaning, and several cultural and socioeconomic factors influence how messages are interpreted, shaping their construction. A message is created and delivered through various mediums like television, art, and advertisements in the process of encoding. The sender's cultural background regulates the perception of that meaning and adds predefined meanings and values to the communication. In contrast, decoding involves proactively engaging with the communication and requires comprehending the sender's message from the point of view of the recipient in any format. Like the construction of the message, the receptor's decryption process is also significantly impacted by their cultural upbringing, thus shaping an individual's perception and comprehension through a set of life experiences.

Popular culture performs as the manual of society and as its product, where the agency reinstates and reproduces its desired dominant practices, values, and belief system. The role of mass media in its extensive dissemination of these meaningful products and the "role that various institutions play as gatekeepers that

create limitations on what can be produced and how, and how cultural objects should be interpreted” (Kidd et al. 284) explains the current existence of conjectures and the negations of various representativeness. Hall's perceptions of popular culture and its commodification resulting in meaning cultivation set the underpinning regarding the agency intervention and inhibits the privilege of self-emancipation by any individual from the stipulations of the authority as they dictate how each individual has to be:

I want to end with two thoughts that take the point back to the subject of popular culture. The first is to remind you that popular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an arena that is profoundly mythic. It is a theatre of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time. As Freud said, sex (and representation) mainly takes place in the head. Second, though the terrain of the popular looks as if it is constructed with single binaries, it is not. (Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” 113)

Defining one's identity can thus be considered part of creating societal meaning, but it goes beyond rituals and shared belief systems.

Gender representations, which have been investigated and debated in gender studies for centuries, show the influence of the gatekeepers of societal hierarchy on how the products of mass culture are construed. The structural edifice of culture

asserts that forming an individual's identity is not an autonomous process and gender is an intrinsic attribute. An individual's identity results from accumulating the previously ingested ideology, beliefs, career, family and gender. In contrast to the notion of sex, gender is physiological and essentially a manufactured concept, where many individuals continue to find it challenging to comprehend it as a perpetual process of construction and modification through repeated human and social interactions and overt performances of social life. Gender-specific distinctions are imposed on individuals from birth, mandating certain prescribed methods for upbringing, leading to an inevitable sense of social alienation when they fail to get included and involved in a group.

The hegemonic agencies such as religion and law reinforce the predetermined gender norms and standardise them through certain cultural productions as domineering. Gender affirmation initially permeates one's consciousness when they are introduced to gender-specific toys in early childhood that underpin the fundamentals of supposed gendered roles either as masculine or feminine: the dollhouses and kitchen sets that symbolise femininity are given to the girl child, and the guns and electrical toys that symbolise masculinity are given to the boy child to bind them to this dichotomy. Every individual born into this structural confinement is subdued within the predetermined language to discover the other through possessing power in one's hand and the absence of power in its counterpart. They are continually reminded of the constant surveillance, causing them to face the repercussions through seclusion or medical assistance if opted out: "If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render

legitimate the institutional arrangements . . . If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals – not the institutional arrangements – may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions)” (West and Zimmerman 146).

The male-female dichotomy is the current gender division and the root cause of gender difference ubiquitously for ages around the globe that fundamentally categorises women as secondary to men, who are placed as the flawless criterion: to frame the male with the age-old essentialist masculine characteristics, a woman is made into what the man is not.

Women are defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute; she is the “Other.” Simone de Beauvoir links woman’s identity as Other and her fundamental alienation to her body – especially her reproductive capacity. (Brinda 317).

Society has imposed certain routines and behaviours since the beginning that are essentially treated as the fundamental characteristics of a man and a woman, regardless of geographic or political borders. These prescriptions stereotype women as inferior and vulnerable consider them as obstacles and a procreating device to be gazed at. A woman is educated to absorb the desirable and essentialist features into her identity that are considered intrinsic to re-establish this inferiority: “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf 37). One of

the paradoxes in human history is the persistent assertion that specific behavioural and living patterns are intrinsic to each gender, training people to adapt to them.

Feminism is a movement derived from the marginalisation of women by treating them as a second gender and a sexual object, whose demands have expanded but have never wavered from its aim of equality. In contrast to the general perspective, feminism is not against man and masculinity but focuses on how the woman and her body are represented as a commodity to assist the man in a society, thereby iterating the unequal divisions in the cultural, economic, and political contexts. From this ostracization and the need for an independent identity, four waves of feminism emerged that metaphorically distil the historical oppressions as well as complicated suppositions.

The imposition of the women to become the “angels in the house” (Patmore n. p.) and foisting them to bind to the ideal figures in Persian and Hindu myths, making no note of their existence impedes the liberation of women in all strata all over the world. Women have been deprived of a voice and opportunity concerning their potential but are perceived as individuals who ought to be protected and instructed on how to run a family: “She obviously did not know what life was all about” (Frieden 4). This conviction was questioned and overturned during the time of World Wars, marking a significant place for women throughout the globe. Their contributions during this time towards economy and wars – working in munitions factories, taking control of the businesses, serving medical aids in military camps, and volunteering in the Red Cross – “dispel the fears that surrounded women’s entry into the public arena” (Hume 281). The Black Women’s Movement, Indian freedom

struggles, recruitment of women cadets to the Soviet Union, and many more depict the principal departure from the existing gender supposition that reverberated worldwide.

The 1792 text *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft, a paradigm of Rousseau's philosophy of Enlightenment, is revered as the mainspring of the movement that began at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention upholding the Declaration of Sentiments. The primary goal of this movement, where three hundred men and women were gathered, was to expand women's opportunities by advocating the need for political presentation, particularly by emphasizing the right to vote. The debates were primarily around the constraints imposed on women to guarantee equal representation for men and women in political affairs through voting rights and women's partaking. The movement argued that women's moral superiority would be enhanced by their involvement in civic life, leading to improved public behaviour and the policymaking process. This wave was a vociferous contending against demeaning women as the property of the men with absolute authority over them and sought for an autonomous existence.

The pioneering feminists of the early 19th century in the West, particularly in the United States, were Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott. Concomitantly, the black feminists such as Ida B. Well and Sojourner Truth established their own paths to articulate the plight and predicament of African American women, exposed how their community was overlooked during the first wave of revolutionary movements and advocated for their defence against domestic violence and exploitations in the workplace. The two main events that established

the movement and drew it to the spotlight throughout the world were Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments, which demanded women's equality and their right to vote, and Truth's exhortative speech "Ain't I a Woman?" at the women's rights convention in Akron (Ohio). In the East, Tarabhai Shinde is considered the first feminist in India, whose 1882 publication *Stri Purusha Tulana* (A Comparison between Men and Women) is regarded as "the country's first modern feminist text" (Zubaan n. p.) about the patriarchal system prevalent in upper-class households that vehemently censures "the behaviour" (Zubaan n. p.) the religious texts dictate for women. The propagators of the first wave of feminism, like the writers, theorists, and activists, possess the need for political equality as well as equal recognition with men in work and home lives, finding a distinctive space of their own apart from being secondary: As Woolf in her seminal text quotes, "A woman must have money and a room of her own" (Woolf 6).

When women's political representation was the primary concern of the first wave, the second wave challenged gender obligations and cultural denigration of women and advocated for social and cultural progress. "One project of second-wave feminism was to create 'positive' images of women, to act as a counterweight to the dominant images circulating in popular culture and to raise women's consciousness of their oppressions" (Hooda n. p.). Along with the feminine gender, gender minorities clamouring for their right to sexuality and reproduction marked a partial participation in this movement. The movement was a retortion to the typecasting of women into homemakers catalysed by the unprecedented economic growth and baby boom in the late 1940s post-war period, as presented in sitcom series like *Father*

Knows the Best. The second wave is still considered a revolutionary period where the key stipulations were the right to own credit cards, the capacity to apply for loans in one's name, and the ability to acquire legal protection against spousal abuse. This wave of feminism can be divided into three distinct categories based on their presented demands: Mainstream or liberal feminism sought to combat gender discrimination and promote gender equality by gaining access to spaces that men had previously dominated, whereas Radical feminism demanded a radical transformation asserting the social institutions as patriarchal. Finally, cultural feminism asserted the essential differences between women and men and emphasised the "female essence". (Soken-Huberty n. p.). In this period, sexual minorities and queer theory found their pioneer expressions and began to critically examine gender and family roles in contrast to the essentialist aspects of gender binaries.

This wave of feminism swept across all continents during the two decades from the 1960s to the 1980s and introduced numerous social reforms like the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Equal Rights Amendment, and the approval of contraceptive pills, got its name from a 1968 *New York Times* story titled "The Second Feminist Wave: What Do These Women Want?" by an American journalist Martha Lear. Further, the writings of Simon de Beauvoir and Anne Koedt initiated conversations on female perceptions of sex, emotion, and intimacy and conscripted a significant departure from the stereotype of women as passive and subordinate partners in sexual relationships. Anne Koedt, in her work *The Myth of Vaginal Orgasm* (1970), critiqued the then prevalent focus most theorists like Freud had focused: on the

pleasure that men experienced and disregarded the woman's body and her involvement in sexual activity. Beauvoir is one of the pioneers of feminine dignity who argued against the demeaning of women to a status of second sex because of their biological conditions like menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation. Being an existentialist, she is sturdily influenced by Sartre's theory of "existence precedes essential" (Maden n. p.): There are no essentialist features of existence in human beings, and everything claimed to be essential is constructed for the sustenance of hegemonic power by creating the other. This influence was later reflected in the succeeding feminists, including liberal feminists like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, radical feminists like Casey Hayden and Mary King, and others like Celestine Ware and Patricia Robinson. The most significant of them was Betty Friedan, whose ground-breaking book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) confronted inequities in public and private life, including marital rape, domestic abuse, and reproductive rights. Her involvement with the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, which was founded by John F. Kennedy and chaired by Roosevelt, contributed to women's higher education and to the paid maternity leave. The diaries of Gloria Steinem exposed the objectification of female waitresses to the gazes of male customers in the Playboy Club, Helen Reddy's song "I Am Woman", and Florynce Kennedy's *Abortion Rap* (1971) discussed the feminine insecurities and clandestine plights. While all these feminists were forthright in their demands for change, Audre Lorde revealed flaws in the movement by drawing attention to marginalised minority populations and criticised the efforts to homogenise the idea of sisterhood, ignoring other influences of an individual's identity like colour, sexual orientation, age, and class. The second feminist wave came to an end when the

feminist sex wars or lesbian wars broke out at the end of the 1980s, polarising feminist movements of the time on issues of sexuality and sexual behaviour.

Whilst second-wave feminism was the consequence of cultural manipulations, third-wave feminism evolved as a culmination of the preceding feminisms in the 1990s and challenged mainstream ideas on sexuality and radical feminism through movements like 'Riot Grrrl'. This movement, popularised by Sarah Dyer and Alison Piepmeier, was an amalgamation of punk culture that rejected authoritarianism, classism, and hierarchical institutions in its manifestations and was built on the principles of independence and DIY (Do It Yourself) initiatives. The term was coined by Rebecca Walker in her article "Becoming the Third Wave", commenting on the then sensational case regarding Anita Hill's sexual assault acquisition on the US Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas.

It (to be a feminist) is to search for personal clarity in the mind of systemic destruction, to join sisterhood with women when often we are divided, to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them.... Let this dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don't prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a post-feminist. I am the Third Wave. (Walker 87)

This wave was guided by post-colonial and post-modern conceptions and confronted predetermined notions like gender essentialism and heteronormativity. The status of

women made a shift as they started seeing themselves and demanding to be seen as autonomous persons rather than objects for the male gaze and sexual fulfilment. This wave rectified the foremost condemnation of its predecessors by embracing a multiplicity of identities that had been marginalised in earlier eras, such as lesbians and women of colour, and the major areas of focus were intersectionality, sex positivity, transfeminism, and postmodern feminism.

Addressing racial and other forms of encroachments, Kimberle Crenshaw's 1989 phrase "intersectionality" emerged as one of the main terms of the period that marked the beginning of the discussions about the various manifestations of oppression. Crenshaw's 1991 essay "Mapping the Margins" outlined how discourses are "shaped to respond to one [identity] or the other" that are marginalised rather than both: "women and people of colour" (Crenshaw 1244). Furthermore, third-wave feminists expanded their perspectives with an inclusive conceptual framework referred to as sexual liberation and perceived one's sexuality and gender identity as social constructs.

There was a decided shift in perceptions of gender, with the notion that there are some characteristics that are strictly male and others that are strictly female, giving way to the concept of a gender continuum. From this perspective, each person is seen as possessing, expressing, and suppressing the full range of traits that had previously been associated with one gender or the other. ("Feminism | Definition, History, Types, Waves, Examples, and Facts" n. p.)

Consequently, the feminists of this era promoted gender consciousness and encouraged sex positivity that has a welcoming and democratic perspective on sex: “Sex positivity means embodying a liberating attitude towards gender, body types, sexuality, and all of its nuances free of shame or judgement” (Nguyen n. p.).

Judith Butler’s reflections on gender and its manifestations – which she called “gender trouble” (*Gender Trouble* 44) – made her one of the prominent feminists widely discussed in the past three decades. Her texts *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *The Bodies that Matter* (1993) continue to be paramount and foundational in the field of gender studies. She condemned the idea that gender is an essentialist construct but perceived it as a cultural construction expressed through repeated acts from birth until death: “Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalisation in the context of a body, understood in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (*Gender Trouble* xv). Butler established the theoretical framework that could encompass the whole human race regardless of gender norms or sexual preferences, laying the groundwork for a rigorous academic examination of queer experience.

As it was a time that witnessed an enormous rise of consciousness and the unified effort of men, women, and the queer, third-wave feminism took a distinct stance on the demands and perspectives on gender in general rather than femininity alone as in the previous waves. Butler contends feminism and instigates reconsidering the feminist arguments further:

Feminism works against its explicit aims if it takes 'women' as its grounding category. This is because the term 'women' does not signify a natural unity but instead a regulatory fiction, whose deployment inadvertently reproduces those normative relations between sex, gender and desire that naturalise heterosexuality

Butler contests the truth of gender itself, arguing that any commitment to gender identity works ultimately against the legitimization of homosexual subjects. (Jagose 83-84)

Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future, published in 2000, can be taken into account as a response to the criticism of the third wave by drawing comparisons with earlier versions: "We are not doing feminism the same way that the seventies feminists did it; being liberated doesn't mean copying what came before but finding one's own way – a way that is genuine to one's own generation" (Baumgardner and Richards 77).

The fourth wave, which started around the 2010s, is still in progress and has more in common with the second wave than its direct predecessor. The outcries against gender disparity and the acceptance of sexual minorities have taken on a new shape because of the widespread and active proliferation of mass media. This wave is a reminder that feminism is about more than "women only" concerns but a "clarion call for gender equity" (Soken-Huberty n. p.) that calls for a shift from equality to equity: the former is the ultimate objective, and the latter is the means to get there. Gender equity can be understood as the "fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or

treatment that is different, but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations, and opportunities" (K. Roy n. p.).

The internet and intersectionality are two potent tools supporting the fourth wave as they facilitate the world to gain awareness about the rape culture's censored afflictions such as sexual assault in homes and workplaces, sexism in offices, and objectification of the female body, owing to the robust and in-depth online campaigns. Hashtag movements such as *#MeToo*, which went sensational in 2017, and *#NotinMyName* gave victims of sexual profiteering a platform to speak out without being silenced by cultural or patriarchal obligations. Emma Watson's UN address at the *HeForShe* campaign launch has made a significant impact in this regard:

It is time that we all see gender as a spectrum instead of two sets of opposing ideals. We should stop defining each other by what we are not and start defining ourselves by who we are. We call all be freer and this is what HeForShe is about. It's all about freedom. I want men to take up this mantle so that their daughters, sisters, and mothers can be free from prejudice but also so that their sons have permissions to be vulnerable and human too, reclaim parts of themselves they abandoned and in doing so, be a more true and complete version of themselves (Watson n. p)

Despite the sociocultural advancements, the rigid compartmentalisation of gender and the restrictions on queer are still prevalent, upholding the systemic hierarchy. Numerous cultural analysts and theorists have examined and articulated

these power dynamics. Michel Foucault has consistently inspired every wave of feminism around the globe through his notions of body, gender, and sexuality, and the conversations on gender construction and agency functioning. For him, the concepts of the body and sexuality are the results of how power controls the people through its institutional structures like the law, education, the workplace, and even the family, and “creates hierarchical patterns of power based on factors like gender, class, and ethnicity” (Brooks 48). The predominantly held belief that power is a punitive force that operates only through the mechanisms of law, censorship, and taboo is challenged by Foucault's theory of power exertion, also referred to as his genealogy of power: from an open display of violence, the power and its institutions deviated their way to a new form of controlling, which is the "administration and management of life," which involves "the regulation of phenomena such as birth, death, sickness, disease, health, sexual relations and so on" (Amstrong n. p.).

One of the pivotal arguments of Foucault is regarding harnessing the human body as an instrument to exercise authority and sculpting by what he calls disciplinary power. Feminists focus on power dynamics that are formed from Foucault's genealogy of power to understand the nature and causes of women's subordination. Based on the conventional notion of power as repression, several schools of feminism have comprehended that patriarchal societal institutions perpetuating men's domination over women are the leading cause of women's oppression. According to Foucault's understanding of power as “exercised rather than possessed, circulating throughout the social body rather than originating from the top down, and productive rather than repressive” (Sawicki 164), feminist

theorists strive to explore how the power relationships engage in moulding women's behaviours, beliefs, attitudes, abilities and even self-understandings which they perennially in quest of to dismantle.

Foucault's focus is never limited to the societal institutions regarding the exercise of agency but analyses the power relations at the micro level of the society's hierarchical structure, which begins from the family. As Armstrong, in her article "Michel Foucault: Feminism", asserts, "Since modern power operates in a capillary fashion throughout the social body, it is best grasped in its concrete and local effects and in the everyday practices which sustain and reproduce power relations" (n. p). This idea of the social construction of gender can be taken as the whole summary of what Foucault proposed, " 'subjects' are created in and through discourses and discursive practices" (Brooks 62), upon which much of the feminist practices and theories gain their foundation against the essentialist notion of femininity.

The sex/gender distinction represents an attempt by feminists to serve the connection between the biological category of sex and the social category of gender. According to this view of social construction, gender is the cultural meaning that comes to be contingently attached to the sexed body. Once gender is understood as culturally constructed, it is possible to avoid the essentialist idea that gender derives from the natural body in any one way. (Armstrong n. p.)

The increasing prominence of feminist movements and their investigations on patriarchal control over women's bodies and space pioneered the need for men and masculinity studies as well.

The concept of masculinity, which is considered a social construct deeply intertwined with notions of power, identity, and behaviour, has faced a series of evolutions through ages and civilizations. Manhood in ancient societies was often associated with martial gallantry, physical endurance, and the capacity to support one's family. The Greek ideal of the "agathos" (Getui and Richard, n.p.) man instilled an elevated value on modesty, bravery, and knowledge. Following the popularity of chivalric narratives, the Renaissance and Enlightenment marked a transformation in ideals of masculinity by highlighting physical strength and consequently emphasising intellectual pursuits and refined manners. The modern sense of masculinity that is placed at the epoch of the social hierarchy of privileges unquestioned is, however, an effect of the Industrial Revolution that established the conceptualisation of gender roles discussed today. The rise of the working class persuaded the role of 'breadwinner' upon men and aided the supremacy of heteronormativity.

The importance of paid work in men's lives showing how central it was to realising a socially valued masculinity. In keeping with this men understood that their principal role in caring was as breadwinner (earner). In one sense this is unsurprising given how in modern Ireland throughout the 20th century to be a primary breadwinner

within the marital heterosexual family was the dominant expectation for men (Hanlon n.p.)

This implication exhorted the mandatory parameters “to be a man” (Mosse 9) and reinstated them to ages as undisputed stereotypes. Butler in her *Bodies that Matter*, along with her feminist manifestations and gender propaganda, also discusses the idea of abject masculinity that accelerates towards the examination of the irrefutable position of masculinity:

Abjection thus involves the general realm of bodily production, expulsion, leakage, and defilement. For Butler, the question of abjection is more sociopolitical than corporeal or psychosexual: ethically and analytically, she is concerned with the way the dominant patriarchal-heteronormative social order maintains itself by “constituting zones of uninhabitability” and unintelligibility, by constructing arenas of abject powerlessness, lifelessness, and meaninglessness to which it consigns its marginalized others (Mosse xii).

Analysing Foucault’s notion of gender roles as the products of societal construction, masculinity not only dominates women and men who are placed underneath them but also struggles with themselves. Patriarchy is a phenomenon linked with male dominance and is considered an unwritten and normalised supremacy of men over women. It is possible to understand how women are exploited by men – culturally and sexually – by the way they control and operate the power institutions, leading to the imposition of the concept of hegemonic

masculinity that represents an idealised form of male dominance placed at the apex of the social hierarchy. This idealised concept is prone to change, like any other cultural phenomena, as gender awareness and inclusivity spread widely across cultures and intellect. As Connell suggests in her text *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*, “hegemonic masculinity also changes, renews itself, or eliminates itself according to historical, spatial, and cultural dynamics in order to ensure the continuation of the masculine power of the patriarchal order” (qtd. in Yıldırım, “Hegemonic Masculinity” n. p.). Wherever there is a power struggle, there should be at least two opponents, one exerting power and the other resisting it. This formula is visible overtly in the second and third waves of feministic struggles, where the feminists questioned and resisted male dominance. This widely discussed patriarchal control is imposed on women as well as on men who are considered weak and on other sexual minorities.

R. W. Connell is one of the prominent theoreticians in the current century who has developed an authentic approach to masculinity and made credible contributions to masculine studies. When patriarchy and its dominance over women were the sole bone of contention until then, Connell and her fellow theorists like Messerschmidt put forward a novel perspective asserting that rather than women, it is the manhood and the man himself are the primary victims of this oppression. The feminist circles and the propagated feminism have marked the female resistance against downgrading and ostracising them as a second gender, which has not yet happened in any male circle and no such male protests are seen in the mainstream. Considering this concept of man’s power in his own community, Connell introduced

four types of masculinities, viz. hegemonic, complicit, subordinate and marginalised, initiating a novel arena of academic investigation on the sociology and social science of man.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity is inspired by Antonio Gramsci's thought of hegemony, which is the domination of a particular group over other classes established and sustained unquestionably: "I would emphasise the dynamic character of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which is not the functionalist theory of cultural reproduction often portrayed. Gramsci always had in mind a social struggle for leadership in historical change" (272). This concept of hegemonic masculinity puts forward an idealised portrayal of how a man should be providing cultural supremacy. A hegemonic male is characterized as a heterosexual or cisgender, handsome white man who possesses a heavy-built body and sporting skills, along with his aggressive and risk-taking behaviours. Such male figures are often portrayed as apathetic towards moral values along with his physical appearance and grave demeanour, placing him as a *man* (italicised to emphasise) whose role is to be the saviour or the protector of the hapless women possessing little identity.

The Angry Young Man era in theatres and movies introduced this idea into the proletarian sense ubiquitously. The hegemonic portrayals can be traced in the movie characters like James Bond, Sherlock Holmes, Batman, Super Man, and many more that are portrayed by actors like Daniel Crag, Robert Browney Jr., Christian Bale, and Christopher Reeve, whose physical portrayals match with these personas. Recounting from the global literature Edmond Dantes in *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1846) by Alexander Dumas, Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*

(1847), Mr. Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Long John Silver in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), Robin Hood in Howard Pyle's *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (1883), Bram Stoker's Count Dracula in *Dracula* (1897), and Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1960) by Harper Lee are a few in the endless list of characters who upheld the masculine notions in its idealised form and reinstating those upon the succeeding arts and literature. A plethora of examples can be traced in the oriental literature as well, particularly in the two renowned Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. These epics are the sycophancies of numerous male warriors who are in continuous battles for women and power, where torturing a woman as Lakshman did to Surpanakha, abandoning his wife as Ram and Lakshman did to Sita and Urmila, abducting a woman to avenge as Ravan did to Sita, and molesting a woman verbally and physically as Kauravas did to Draupadi are normalised. Regarding the dominant representation of masculinity in movies, Indian movies follow an equation of the macho male who fights against the villains and saves his mother, sister or lover. The most noted example of this during the initial days of the Indian cinematic evolution is the 1975 film *Sholay* (Embers), where the gender roles in Bollywood are defined and set as a touchstone for the successors. The 2006 movie *Vivah* (Marriage) re-establishes man's role as a saviour where the hero accepts his would-be even though her physical appearance went mutated due to a fire accident and is hailed by others for his *sacrifice* (italicised to emphasise). In the 1991 movie *Biwi No. 1* (Wife No. 1), the hero's infidelity towards his marriage by leaving his wife for the girlfriend is forgivable, but the girlfriend cheating on her lover has been reprimanded by the audience, irrespective of gender. Later, the 2000s movies portray women as mere

romantic partners without giving any clue of their education or job status but just waiting for their heroes to come and rescue them, which is seen from *Gadar* to *Veer Zara*.

Though there has been a panel for discussions on hegemonic male and female servitude recently, there are movies that glorify toxic masculinity, which is an extreme face of the hegemonic form, where the female counterparts are downgraded, voiceless and hapless and obliged to endure the harassment. The 2017 Telugu movie *Arjun Reddy*, directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga, initiates a current form of glorification of toxic romance, imprinting a magical realism among the youths to celebrate this noxious male dominance over women through verbal and physical abuse, and the woman attains her aura only on forgiving him nevertheless of this persecution. The recent Malayalam movies like *Kaduva* (Tiger) 2022 movie by Shaji Kailas, *Kumari* (2022) by Nirmal Sahadev, Vipin Das's *Jaya Jaya Jaya* *Jaya Hey* (2022), 2022 Kannada movie *Kanthara* (The Mystical Forest) by Rishab Shetty, 2021 Telugu movie *Pushpa* by Sukumar, Joe Baby's *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), and the 2019 movie *Kumbalangi Nights* by Madhu C. Narayanan fortifies the invincible patriarchal hold over the society.

Hegemonic masculinity is an exalted version of masculinity accepted ubiquitously over cultures to sustain control through societal institutions but does not coincide with the real identities of the lion's share of the male community. They contrive the evidence of their existence through cultural artefacts and mass media, converting the idea of a hegemonic male into an archetype. When only a meagre percentage of men are hegemonic, making a colossal momentum, there is another

group of men who do not meet the standards of a hegemonic or toxic male but enjoy the privilege as equal to that of the regnant group called the complicit masculinity: “Masculinities constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the front-line troops of patriarchy, are complicit in this sense” (Connell 79). Complicit men maintain the demarcations of gender but are ready to make the needful compromise with their female counterparts for the better functioning of family and community life, as opposed to outright dominance or an unquestionable assertion of authority. Unlike the hegemonic community, complicit men respect women and are ready to share the responsibilities, which sometimes leads to the demeaning of them by the former group. It is remarkably challenging to locate the portrayals of complicit men in cultural artefacts like movies and literature, as the hierarchical cultural propaganda is obligated to promote the ideals of hegemonic men. These restrictions in representation thwart the probable interrogations of the societal standardisation of gender dichotomy and heteronormality. Amal Neerad’s 2018 movie *Varathan* (Newcomer), Jibu Jacob's 2017 movie *Munthiri Vallikal Thalirkkumbol* (When the Grapevines Sprout), Suresh Triveni's 2017 drama *Thumhari Sulu* (Your Sulu), R. Balki’s 2016 movie *Ki and Ka* (Hers and His), Ranjith’s 2013 movie *Punyalan Agarbattis* (Saint Incense Sticks), and Imtiaz Ali’s 2007 romantic-comedy *Jab We Met* (When We Met) are the notable executions of complicit men recently. The men depicted in these movies are no less in physique or financial status when compared to the hegemonic men, but how they treat and support their female counterparts, and other men (whether subordinate or marginalised) makes the visible demarcation.

Marginalized masculinity is another set of men who stick to the hegemonic masculine profile – the strong physique, aggression, and emotional suppression – but are ostracised by the authoritative influence of the hegemonic group: “Marginalization is always relative to the authorization of hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group” (Connell 81). These men are repudiated not because of their sexuality but for their race, class and even physical disabilities, and are peripheralised from the equity of effective social, political, economic and cultural participation. Marginalised men enjoy their dominant power over women as well as over subordinate men generally but are often demeaned in comparison with the hegemonic men’s prescribed norms and portrayal. Zakariya Mohammed’s 2018 movie *Zudani from Nigeria*, Jordan Peele's 2017 American psychological horror film *Get Out*, Stephen Hopkins's 2016 movie *Race*, Rajeev Ravi's 2016 movie *Kammatipaadam*, Amal Neerad’s 2014 periodic thriller *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (Book of Job), Boaz Yakin’s 2000 movie *Remember the Titans* and Mira Nair’s 1991 movie *Mississippi Masala* are the obvious depictions of marginalised masculinity where the men of this group are deprecated by the hegemonic men but reinstate their power over the weaker sections emulating the societal hierarchy of power exertion.

Though different in their internal authoritative struggles, hegemonic, complicit and marginalized masculinities possess certain common masculine qualities, which guarantee them power over the fourth category of masculinity called subordinate masculinity. It acts as a strong opposition to the cultural term masculinity, where these men explicitly show deviant dispositions from the former standardised categories: “Subordinate masculinity refers to men who do not fit into

the construction of hegemonic masculinity and therefore treated as lower on the gender hierarchy” (81). Subordinate men are ostracised in every sector of the societal grading for their overt display of emotions and lesser aggressiveness that are considered more affiliated with femininity, where homosexuals or gays are the common victims. This subordination of the gay community through cultural stigmatization is made possible through several cultural practices and societal institutions to affirm the masculine principles about a man’s conduct and sustain the gender disparity through agency. Political and cultural marginalisation, cultural exploitation, legal violence (e.g., incarceration based on sodomy legislation, street violence ranging from harassment to killing), economic isolation, and personal ostracism are the key modes of power encumbrance on subordinate males. This bigotry limits homosexual men as well as heterosexual men who are sentimental, have weaker physical structures, and have less hair. They are treated as effeminate and are called several derogatory names, indicating partial femininity or unmanliness, like “wimp, milksop, nerd, turkey, sissy, lily liver, jellyfish, yellow belly, candy ass, ladyfinger, pushover, cookie pusher, cream puff, motherfucker, pantywaist, mother's boy, four-eyes, ear-' ole, dweeb, geek, Milquetoast, Cedric, and so on” (Connell 78). Shafi’s 2012 movie *101 Weddings* and Lal Jose’s 2005 movie *Chanthupottu* (Pigment Mark) are widely discussed examples of subordinate men showing how they are humiliated and treated as some mortifying individuals manipulated and victimised, though they are financially independent. Many men do not completely agree with any of these distinctions, even though no man is born to a particular group of these classifications of masculinities but is raised by the influence of their family, culture, and economic background. The expectation to

concur with any of the categories has become one of the major challenges men face off-late, resulting in a major tension between desires and obligations.

As a tangible expression of masculinity, its relationship with the body has been especially intricate and nuanced. As a potent cultural medium, film has been essential in forming and expressing these changing concepts. Critics have been studying how masculinity is portrayed in films for many years. Beyond how men are portrayed on the surface, films frequently represent and influence larger societal conversations about gender, identity, and power. Gender role and expectation changes in society have been reflected in and frequently foreshadowed by the way masculinity is portrayed in films. By situating the cinematic layers of masculinity discourses in the context of Butler, Foucault, and Mosse's theories, the twentieth century saw the evolution of conventional patriarchal standards and characters—often shown as powerful, stoic, and domineering. Films such as Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *The Wild One* (1953) by László Benedek examined the fears and disappointment of young men who felt constrained by social norms. These films started to inspect the intricacies and paradoxes of male identity, breaking with the conventional depiction of masculinity. Subsequently, movies like *Fight Club* (1999) and *The Social Network* (2010) by David Fincher and the American drama series *Mad Men* (2007) by Matthew Weiner explored the difficulties males confront in a post-industrial world. In addition to examining how men are finding it difficult to adjust to changing social and economic realities, these films frequently criticise the toxic masculinity connected to conventional gender norms.

Masculinity is portrayed as “an unstable cluster of fears about effeminacy and repressed homosexual or homo-social desires, rather than the simple opposite of femininity (Shivan n. p.). Ignoring female independence in social and financial reputations, men are obligated to be the primary breadwinners, expected to bear the monetary stress, and indoctrinated to suppress emotions to secure their manhood. The affliction caused by these notions that restrain men from choosing their actual gender and sexual priorities lay the foundation of men and masculinity studies. Like the feminist waves, discussions about masculinity have spanned several years, with the focus evolving from internalized sex roles and agency employment. The increasing advent of feminist movements and female participation in socio-political and economic realms questioned that monopoly and started considering masculinity as a social construction rather than an inherent asset. Beyond conventional stereotypes, films with LGBTQ+ characters or characters from marginalised races or ethnic backgrounds have contributed to a broader comprehension of masculinity. The shifting social and cultural context is reflected in the transition towards a more ranged and inclusive portrayal of masculinity. By the latter half of the twentieth century, “the contribution of queer theory and multicultural studies, masculinity studies lost its predisposition to focus on men’s power over women and other genders and has started approaching the area with a broader perspective” (Bhatti n. p.).

While feminism called for the equity of opportunities and eradication of gender disparity, masculinity describes the modus operandi of patriarchal vindication and the challenges of men based on the prescribed gender roles. Both

movements converge in the understanding and acknowledgement that gender is a social construct influenced by cultural values, and no theorist has been able to entirely confine or categorize all individuals as distinctly male or female based on their observable attributes. It can be analysed that the ideal figure of a man or a woman always overlaps with the real one, and the simulacra that are produced through the cultural artefacts and mass media confront reality. A better understanding of this gender performance happened in the post-1990s when the queer theory and Butler's performance theory started metamorphosing the ubiquitous concepts of heterosexuality and homophobia. Butler explicates the concept of fluidity and the fallacy of gender suppositions through her notion of the "heterosexual matrix" to refer to:

a sort of grid produced by the institutions, practices and discourses looking through which it appears to be 'a fact of nature' that all human bodies possess one of two fixed sexual identities, with each experiencing sexual desire only for the 'opposite sex'. The removal of this heterosexual matrix will reveal that sexuality and human bodies are desires are fluid and have no necessary fixed sexual identity or orientation (Menon 70).

Gender flexibility and its allied notions are not a novel thought to cultural theorists as the themes of gender transmutation have their roots in ancient mythologies of oriental as well as occidental cultures, ranging from Greek mythologies to Indian myths. Through a speculative new historical perspective, the resurgence of these mythologies reveals the gender performance and fluidity

practises of the time. The lucid examples of challenging these rigid concepts of gender are the Greek mythological characters Tiresias, who was both a man and a woman because of snake curses and served as the ideal mediator between Zeus and Hera, and Zeus himself was transformed into a woman to entice the nymph, Callisto. These myths report the possibilities of gender and sex transformations along with the homoerotic existences prevalent at the time, such as how Thetis hides her son Achilles in female guise and how Hercules cross-dressed in the court of Queen Omphale. Asian myths, particularly Indian myths, also illustrate the possibility of queer life, including transgender, transsexual, and gay existences. Lord Vishnu's mythological metamorphosis to Mohini iterates the chances transgender people may have existed, as these epics can be seen as hyperbolic portrayals of then-human lives. In a similar vein, the birth of Ayyappa, the son of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu as Mohini, suggests that homosexual or transgender couples could potentially be able to have a child – a conundrum that persists even to this day. The instances of gender transformations further include Arjuna's transfiguration to Brihannala in the final year of his exile and the birth of Shikhandi to take retribution on Bhishma for the dishonour she had endured in her previous incarnation as Amba. The *Ardhanareeswara* concept of Lord Shiva, who is revered as a half-woman god, is a potent reminder that everyone possesses a mix of both male and female traits and that there is no fixed gender, leading to the idea that everyone is in a state of flux: substantiating the concept of gender fluidity. Apart from literature, the sculptures of Khajuraho, one of the most important earlier repositories of Indian cultural history, protest perceiving homosexual partnerships and hybrid identities as a vilification of the conventional moral standards of civilization.

The references to persecutions and penances in legal texts like *Manusmṛiti* and the mentions in *Arthasasthra* and *Kamasutra* demonstrate that queer thinking was not a pristine problem that emerged in the late twentieth century but prevailed ages ago. According to *Manusmṛiti*, a person who indulges in homosexual love must make restitution, albeit the amount varies depending on the gender.

brāhmaṇasya rujahkṛtyaṃ ghrātir aghreyamadyayoḥ /

jaiḥmyaṃ ca maithunaṃ puṃsi jātibhraṃśakaraṃ smṛtam //

Manusmṛti 11.67

maithunaṃ tu samāsevya puṃsi yoṣiti vā dvijaḥ /

goyāne 'psu divā caiva savāsāḥ snānam ācaret // Manusmṛti 11.173

(Manusmṛti)

(In 11.67 (11.66), it is said that having sex with a man (maithunaṃ puṃsi) causes one to fall from his jāti (jātibhraṃśakaraṃ) In verse 11.174 (11.173), the prāyaścitta of it is mentioned. It is said that if a dvija (any of the upper 3 varnas) has sex with a man (maithunaṃ tu samāsevya puṃsi), he should take a bath while wearing clothes) (Satyan Sharma n. p.).

These verses elucidate the hypocrisy prevalent at that period, which spared the men of the upper class the minor penalty of taking a bath for their homosexual relationship through the minute punishment and deftly excluding the ostracised group, subjecting them to severe punishments. However, the punishment for female

homosexual relationships specified in the same text for the same "crime" is much different as the law is designed to uphold patriarchy:

kanyaiva kanyāṃ yā kuryāt tasyāḥ syād dviśato damaḥ /

śulkaṃ ca dviguṇaṃ dadyāc chiphās caivāpnuyād daśa // Manusmṛti

8.369

yā tu kanyāṃ prakuryāt strī sā sadyo maunḍyam arhati /

aṅgulyor eva vā chedaṃ khareṇodvahanam tathā // Manusmṛti 8.370

(Manusmṛti)

(The verse 8.369 mentions of kanya (virgin) committing a ‘sexual offence’ on another kanya, where the committer of offence is to be punished both physically and financially Same goes for the next verse (8.370), where a woman does that to a kanya because there would be a clear suspicion of a sexual intercourse (due to a clear physical change in the vagina), she wouldn’t be able also to be married to another man) (Satyan Sharma n. p.).

A *kanya* or a virgin committing a sexual offence on another virgin was supposed to be punished both physically and monetarily. Her head should be shaved or cut off her fingers and should make her sit on the donkey. Even masturbation (of women alone) was an unpardonable transgression, considering it homosexual behaviour, and so endangers her virginity, and she should be punished both physically and financially. Analysing the fundamental ratiocination during the time, only the woman was severely punished as these acts were considered disturbing or destroying

a woman's virginity, which would prevent her from marrying another man. These regulations were made to confine women to the binary construct and restrict them in the institution of marriage, providing them with no options for an alternate priority.

All these myths and codes protect the social hierarchy with its foundation of gender disparity binding every man and woman to duties of gender expectations, although the fundamental Indian philosophy acknowledges the "essential quality of all human beings as containers of the divine spark" (Pattanaik 8). Even though queer identities have been recognised for centuries, individuals often sense coerced to adhere to the binary framework limiting the understanding of diverse gender expressions and experiences. The widespread adoption of this notion is carried out as a biological obligation for reproduction across the globe. To persuade this view without debate, the cultural beliefs around the reincarnation of ancestors that a person might only get salvation through their descendants, as specified in the *Dharmasastras*, are reinstated in the name of tradition and cultural dissemination.

The imperial powers established and continued to promote heterosexuality as the paradigm throughout the nineteenth century, as rapid colonial power expansion intended to unify the world under a single integrated framework of regulations and morality. Through the process of colonisation and the widespread adoption of Western education, the obligation to adhere to the binary avoided the possibilities of gender choices scripted in the earlier literature and oral lineage. Nivedita Menon observes this invasion of colonial morality and how it transformed the fluid societies to conform to forced heteronormality through several examples around the globe. She cites the example of the Yoruba community, where "*seniority* is the defining

axis of hierarchy, not *gender*” (55), and observes that their language is gender-free. She further observes the Igbo community before colonisation, where “daughters could assume male roles and become sons, and wealthy women could obtain ‘wives’” (56). Her text further addresses the Indian culture as well by examining the Bhakti movement, where the saints “demystify their body and sexuality by dismantling the codes and conventions that ‘sex’ the body” (57).

Oscar Wilde's trials from 1855 are significant as they highlight the rigid Victorian standards in the West that penalised anyone who showed off an unconventional identity, regardless of social, political, or economic status. In his work, *The Intimate Enemy*, Ashis Nandy addressed the premise that Wilde's choice of sexuality could have been excused if he had kept it buried and avoided drawing attention to it from the public. He highlighted that a non-binary person's position is only in jeopardy once made apparent: up until that juncture, it is regarded as non-existent. This has even resulted in the slandering term "friends of Oscar" being used to refer to homosexuals, illustrating the prevalent prejudice and anxieties at the time.

But by demonstratively using homosexuality as a cultural ideology, Wilde threatened to sabotage his community's dominant self-image as a community of well-defined men, with clear-cut man-woman relationships . . . his blatant deviation from rigidly defined sexual roles. . . was working out meaning. . . in a colony thousands of miles away (Nandy 45).

She defines the closet as an undisclosed sexual orientation or identity concealed from the public eye to elucidate how a person's sexual orientation relates

to their public as well as private lives. She uses a range of tales of people who lost their professions and reputations after coming out of their closets to substantiate her conceptualization of homophobic attacks and queer anxiety. According to her, binary constructs like public/private, hetero/homosexual, and masculine/feminine do not exist as independent entities but are complementary and recognised only in relation to the other. She explicates the term closet in two ways: as “a room for privacy or retirement” (*Epistemology* 65) and as a “skeleton in the closet (or cupboard): a private or concealed trouble in one’s house or circumstances, ever-present, and ever liable to come into view” (*Epistemology* 65), which is the widely accepted one. This concept refers to the unexplored area of sexuality, acknowledging power struggles between sexualities and the pressure to conceal certain identities.

Even though the legitimacy of heterosexuality was scrutinized, it was never repudiated or resisted. Instead, it was only addressed in relation to the necessity for a space for queer representations, which postmodernist and poststructuralist organizations strongly supported. Post-structuralism, a theoretical and philosophical movement, turned down “the ‘essentialism’ of identity politics, and the binary opposition of heterosexual/homosexual in favour of a more fluid, and impermanent nature of the same” (Nayar, *An Introduction* 72), whereas the postmodernism associated with the interrogation of the gender philosophies and binary notion of sexuality through art and literature rejects the hierarchical concerns of gender and culture:

It rejects the claim of any universal or totalising theory. It celebrated plurality, heterogeneity, and the small, local, innovative, marginalized

and unfinished narratives that respect differences and specificities of culture, individuals and regions. Meaning is seen as differential, contingent and purely arbitrary (Nayar, *An Introduction* 59).

The beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed a burgeoning of queer culture in the mainstream media undertaking a greater change in queer portrayals, from the status of vilified jokers to the position of dignified individuals. This change happens both in art and in literature, reinstating and influencing through the medium of films – both internationally and locally, and is discussed further in the subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER 2

WINDS OF CHANGE:

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON QUEER MOVIES

The artefacts of culture with their inscribed values remain as the primary source of expression in any given epoch, with its diversity confined to the historical, political, social and linguistic circles. Literature is a poignant form of cultural production whose ability to portray and perpetuate culture is inherently limited despite its potency as a narrative and cultural medium of enquiry. The substantial linguistic dependency of literary works inhibits their extensive popularity and proper comprehension as they inevitably rely on the reader's imagination. By providing space for diverse interpretations, these works of literature might fail to convey the intended cultural essence accurately. Since the written media restricts the dynamic and growing characteristics of the culture due to linguistic barriers, it is arduous to convey the fluidity and diversity inherent in cultural practices through artistic endeavours. Cinema's visual and audio components can communicate this rich cultural diversity with a vividness that surpasses the limitations of written language, offering a dynamic platform for showcasing cultural practices, traditions, and artefacts. As an inclusive medium, it can further transcend linguistic limitations and foster a consciousness of diverse cultures worldwide.

Cinema and culture share a symbiotic relationship, often following a complementary attitude: a cultural artefact reflects and reinstates the values and ideologies of a particular culture and plays a pivotal part in challenging and altering

the existing flow by presenting the blemishes of that culture. As a cultural product, cinema draws inspiration from its cultural milieu and expresses the zeitgeist of the time. It catalyses cultural change, capable of refuting, questioning, and challenging the established societal norms, like many classical films that initiate the power to change social expectations as well as redundant views that often shape the public discourse. With its ability to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries through its aesthetic value and potent storytelling, the cinema is regarded as the most influential popular narrative, catering to a broader audience. As a medium capable of transcending borders and facilitating cross-cultural dialogues, cinema is both a testament to one's cultural heritage and a harbinger of cultural transformation.

Cinema perennially acts as a driving force leading to many social changes through a variety of significant movements in the past and present, like the working-class movements, women empowerment, racial, gender and economic equalities, other civil rights, LGBTQ+ rights and queer representations in mainstream culture. By portraying the struggles, accomplishments and routine experiences of ostracised individuals, it contributes to dismantling the existing preconceptions and promoting compassions, which stimulates further recognition and comprehension. Movies like Gus Van Sant's *Milk* (2008) and Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) humanised LGBTQ+ people, depicting an evident shift that happened in queer portrayals, and promoted their rights by bringing queer tales to a broader demographic. Contemporary films like Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016) and Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) further depict intricate and real-life queer experiences, while the early representations perpetuated prejudices of or portrayed

LGBTQ+ people as miserable or marginalised beings, thus helping to create a more inclusive narrative. Since the apex of prejudicial views and the delegitimization of queer identities, the community has always been viewed in tandem with HIV/AIDS and as its contagious cause. Movies like Ryan Murphy's *The Normal Heart* (2014) and Ron Nyswaner's *Philadelphia* (1993) were crucial in raising awareness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, supporting LGBTQ+ rights, and de-stigmatising the illness. These films refute stereotypes and raise awareness of the complexity of homosexual life by showcasing LGBTQ+ people with a variety of identities, occupations, and relationships. The way queer issues are portrayed in films has significantly altered are exhibited through dignified characterisations of queer individuals who possess self-consciousness and high esteem. The prominence and normalisation of the queer across various genres, such as action films and romantic comedies, foster a more accepting and tolerant society. From a prescribed set of distinctions amid the pride sexualities, a significant shift has happened towards the path of fluid approaches, creating a new wave called the New Queer Cinema.

New Queer Cinema (NQC) is a recent movement in the cinematic discourse that emerged during the last period of the twentieth century, around the 1980s and 1990s. It confronts and reformulates the conservative notions of gender expectations through an intrepid and avant-garde approach to queer narratives. NQC attempts to break out from heteronormative narratives and investigate the fluid and broad spectrum of gender identities, offering ample opportunity for an analysis of the broadening identities associated with gender and the multiplicity of sexual expressions. This movement has been instrumental in creating a space where gender

fluidity is acknowledged and celebrated as an integral part of the human experience. Nevertheless, a by-product of the feministic waves and a pragmatic application of queer theory, NQC or the Queer New Wave became an academic term in 1992 through the article “Village Voice” by Ruby Rich in a monthly magazine of British Film Institute *Sight and Sound* in which the term was coined. Rich used the term to describe “the renaissance in gay and lesbian film-making represented by the Americans Todd Haynes, Jennie Livingstone, Gus Van Sant, Gregg Araki, Laurie Lynd, Tom Kalin and the British filmmakers Derek Jerman and Isaac Julien” (Hayward 308). The widely acknowledged NQC canons to date are Haynes’s 1991 movie *Poison*, Lynd’s *RSVP* (1991), Julien’s *Young Soul Rebels* (1991), Jarman’s *Edward II* (1991), Kalin’s *Swoon* (1992), and Gregg Araki’s *The Living End* (1992).

With the advent of postmodern theories that prefer metanarratives against heteronormativity, NQC calls for the depiction of a multiplicity of sexual predilections and liberated voices. It marked its momentum in the 1980s and set out to “challenge and push further debates on gender and sexuality”, allowing the authentic portrayal of “confuse binary essentialisms around gender and sexual identity, expose their limitations” (Hayward 308 – 309). It further demonstrates how these fixed roles and suppositions are distorted by “embracing all ‘non-straight’ approaches to living practice” (Hayward 309).

NQC, as a trailblazer, introduces several characteristics to examine regional movies across the globe to validate the representations and elements of the queer culture they encompass. This wave confronts the primary focus of mainstream movies on heterosexual culture as the privileged one and stimulates to amend the

perceptions of queer experiences. It is characterised by an unapologetic representation of queer sex and an antagonistic approach to heteronormativity and homophobia. A robust political statement about the fluidity or non-fixity of a person's orientation is made by supporting the plurality of voices departing from the constructive images and tribulations of queer characters. Though it emerged in the occidental film industry, the beginning of the twenty-first century displayed NQC's influence in oriental regional films as well, manifesting an ascending acceptance of queer narratives in mainstream culture. The prominent feature of NQC is challenging the conventional norms of gender and sexuality by presenting the characters (queer or not) and narratives that defy traditional framings and expectations. It emphasises the authenticity and representation of queer elements to foster a sense of connection and resonance for queer people as well in mainstream cinemas and finally pushes the boundaries of narration through experimental techniques like gritty cinematography, nonlinear narration, and unconventional editing.

The use of a nonconformist narrative is another conspicuous feature of NQC that foregrounds the diverse experiences of its characters through a non-linear storytelling approach. The American director Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) has a tenuous allusion to the Shakespearean plays *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, and the Indian director Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), which juxtaposes a lesbian relationship with traditional Indian family culture, subvert the conventional narrative structure by submitting a unique storyline. Along with depicting gay and lesbian relationships, queer films embrace an extensive spectrum of marginalised identities

and examine the intersections of queerness with gender consciousness, racism, and class. Several such characters are presented as multifaceted and intricate, with diverse challenges and aspirations that transcend stereotypes. Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990) is one such film that examines the alienated identities of African-American and Latino homosexual and transgender communities during the 1980s in New York City. In this regard, Shonali Bose's *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) is another masterwork that explores the intersections of sexuality and disability in the context of the bisexual protagonist with cerebral palsy.

Deviating from the earlier representations of queer characters as hoaxers and an instrument for the comic interludes, this new wave of queer dignity started exploring and presenting multiple sexual identities and gender awareness as the central theme. Such films focused on addressing the complexities and exclusion faced by those characters who came out of their closet and also portrayed the genuine emotions and relationships they involved. Hansal Mehta's much-debated movie *Aligarh* (2015) is a poignant portrayal of the queer identity of Dr Shrinivasa Ramachandra Siras, a professor at Aligarh University, who had to endure persecution as a result of social prejudice and homophobia. This movie is a vociferous piece demanding the right to live and love irrespective of one's sexual choice, along with questioning the notions of individual freedom and privacy in a sophisticated society. Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) portrays the life of a transgender man and the prejudices he has to encounter on the revealing of his sexual preference and gender identity. Along with the representation of distinctive gender identities, many queer movies started explaining the notion of fluidity and

sexual ambiguity to elucidate the notion that sexuality is not always confined to any definite patterns or predefined labels. David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and Shakun Batra's *Kapoor & Sons* (2016) portray a fluid and open interpretation of gender by questioning the societal suppositions of established gender norms.

Distorted caricatures of queer identities were predominant in the earlier pieces of literature and movies, particularly in Indian movies to recent times. Apart from the purpose of comic relief, these characters were placed as villains of immoral disposition and meant to be defeated by the hero. Though contemporary society has the impact of conventional notions of prescribed gendering and trans-manic attacks in its collective memory, the queer legacy presented in the Indian film industry possesses a distinctive position. From the deliberate omission of queer representations in mainstream movies, the Indian film industry has made a significant shift in its attitude towards queer narratives in Bollywood as well as in the regional industries. The greater exposure of regional films signifies an accelerating endorsement of diverse identities among the common stratum by decentralising conventional standards. Shohini Ghosh, in her eminent text *Fire: A Queer Classic*, discusses the origination of queer movies in India:

Riyad Wadia's independent, experimental film *Bom Gay* (1996) inaugurated queer films in India. Wadia's next film, *A Mermaid Called Aida* (1996), is a feature-length documentary on well-known transsexual Aida Banaji. Like most documentaries, both films circulate through an expensive network of non-commercial screenings. The films of Pratibha Parmar, a UK-based director of

Indian origin, also exerted considerable influence on the emergent gay and lesbian movement in India. (qtd. in Warekar 578)

Bollywood, which was considered an appellation for Indian cinema, treated queer characters in a prejudicial approach for a long time, presenting them with exaggerated corpulence and raucous dispositions. An effeminate man with ambiguous physical characteristics and gaudy makeup, often placed as the companion of the manly hero to underscore the hero's hegemony, was presented for comic relief with exaggerated gestures. Likewise, transgender women were shown with malicious intent that was used to highlight the hero's position as a saviour and invincible. Dharmesh Darshan's 1996 movie *Raja Hindustani* (Raja, the Indian) is a prominent example that "features two homosexual characters Kammo, a manly woman and Gulab Singh, an overly feminine male, by representing them as comic characters, channelling a stereotype against the queer community" (Place and Val n. p.). Bobby Darling *alias* Pakhi Sharma (formerly Pankaj Sharma), the first openly homosexual actor in Bollywood, whose majority of characters are absurd gay homosexuals who hunt heterosexual males for their pleasure. She is a victim of popular cinema's bigotry towards the queer community through homophobic remarks and has been constantly stereotyped "as an effete cross-dressing gay male in tottering heels and over-the-top outfits" (Rego n. p.). She discloses that in the two decades of her acting career, it is in Santosh Sivan's 2005 movie *Navarasa* (Nine Emotions) that she received significant acclamation to depict a genuinely queer psyche for the first time. She further recounts the movie: "It is an experimental film about a girl who discovers that her uncle secretly wears women's clothes at night. I

played myself, Bobby Darling, whom they meet at the transgender festival” (Rego n. p).

Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) instigated a shift of queer narratives from a homophobic stance that built upon conventional gender notions to a sympathetic portrayal of nuanced lesbian affections and the subsequent afflictions in a realistic manner. Though released at the latter point of the twentieth century, the movie witnessed severe criticisms from manifold directions for its uncompromised depiction of female sexuality and intimacies. Consequently, Bollywood produced more films on homosexual kinships in line with new shifts in perceptions. Shakun Batra's *Kapoor & Sons* (2016) discusses a dysfunctional family and portrays a distinct image of queer from the earlier representations. The protagonist, Rahul, is portrayed as similar to a cisgender heterosexual without any overt distinctions, eschewing the conventional effeminate attributes of a gay man in outward appearance. The initial shock of his mother and other members when he discloses his identity as gay and the eventual acceptance of his priorities evince a change in attitude and the need for support from the family. Sudhanshu Saria's 2015 movie *Loev* is another movie that depicts the insecurities and honest portrayal of a triangular homosexual relationship between an aspiring musician, Sahil, his current boyfriend, Alex, and his childhood friend, Jai. The movie discusses the themes of unrequited love and consent through a weekend trip jointly planned by Sahil and Jai, which leads to Jai raping Sahil. Though there are movies that depict multi-facets of love – heterosexual and queer love – but the confabulation on consent places this movie distinct and significant: This list of cinematic portrayals that instigates

alteration in the attitude towards the entire community further includes Madhur Bhandarkar's *Fashion* (2008), Onir's *I Am* (2008), and Zoya Akhtar's *Bombay Talkies* (2013).

Parallel to the Hindi films, several regional industries started creating authentic queer tales without the prejudicial shades of queer stigmatisation but unveiling their plights due to these biases and boundaries. This involvement of multiple industries across India provided a broader space for queer voices and advanced the discourses on inclusion and plurality by vehemently denouncing homophobic and heteronormative societal standards. Jabbar Patel's 1982 movie *Umbartha* (The Doorstep) harbingered the queer legacy in the Marathi industry, along with making vociferous statements on gender prescriptions and women's empowerment. The movie centres on Sulabha Mahajan's struggles to gain independence by working at a women's reformatory home. Her husband is a pseudo-feminist and paradoxically takes pride in allowing her to work, often reminding her of his favour. Sulabha's portrayal distinguishes the movie as a queer piece, primarily because of her unconventional profession that is not commonly associated with women. The account of a lesbian couple at the reformatory further deviates evidently from the majority of homophobic presentations at the time. The movie demands a broader evaluation in the queer realm concerning the lesbian subject, while the mainstream cinema was plagued with the demeritorious stereotypes of the queer community. Gajendra Ahire's 2011 movie, *Dear Molly*, is another Marathi queer film discussing the journey of a transgender protagonist Molly. Exploring the psychosocial and emotional facets of a transgender character, the film challenges the

existing preconceptions and conveys the demesnes of identity, acceptance, and cultural incarceration.

Though it lacks queer movies in the Punjabi language, there are certain mainstream movies in which queer subplots run in parallel. Anup Singh's 2013 surrealistic movie *Qissa (A Fable)* is a "layered approach Providing a canvas for the discourse on gender fluidity and patriarchal stereotypes" (Kripakar n. p.). The movie discusses the obsession of Indian society for a male heir through Umber Singh, who raised his younger daughter Kanwar Singh, as a male. By becoming a truck driver and marrying Neeli, Kanwar transcends all the thresholds of gender essentialism. To save Neeli from Umber's sexual advancements due to his greed for a male child, they both elope to another village where Kanwar gets into a dilemma amid the possessing identity and fondness towards Neeli. As Kripakar observes: "Neeli motivates Kanwar to embrace his real identity and shed forced manhood. But Kanwar suffers from an identity crisis" (n. p.). Kanwar experiences a collapsed identity by "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 125), and the transformation from Kanwar Singh to Kanwar Kaur reiterates gender as a performance.

Kannada film industry, also called Sandalwood, often focuses on its cultural and linguistic heritage and experiments with multiple genres pushing the boundaries of narration to address women-centric and queer themes in both art and commercial movies. The industry has been recently claiming global acclamations and made conspicuous progress in treating queer tales as subplots to the main story. B. S. Lingadevaru's 2015 movie *Naanu Avanalla . . . Avalu* (I am not he . . . I am she) is one of the prestigious queer movies produced in Sandalwood, which is based on the

autobiography of the trans-Dalit activist Living Smile Vidya, *I Am Vidya*. The film portrays the trials and tribulations in the life of Madesh, who later embraces the identity of a woman, Vidya. The movie discusses the afflictions of a queer individual and the persecutions faced but ends with a note of hope by revealing the real-life persona of Vidya, who is now a prominent queer activist. Shailaja Padindala's 2020 movie by *Naanu Ladies* (I am a Lady), which has gained national attention, discusses the melee that revolves around "how a middle-class family, its culture, and thought process can affect a queer member and vice-versa" (Ashraf n. p.). The movie portrays the lives of a lesbian couple and their enduring struggles to accomplish their passion as an artist and an actor, respectively. It further exposes the responses of a typical middle-class family who finds it difficult to accept the existence of a non-binary identity or non-heterosexual preferences and treats it either as a psychiatric issue or taboo, finding a final solution in repudiating them to preserve the honour.

The Telugu industry, or Tollywood, is one of the three largest film industries in the country – the other two are Bollywood or the Hindi film industry and Kollywood or the Tamil film industry – grabbing swift attention with its pan-India blockbusters. Laden with commercial elements like drama, music and mass appeal, Tollywood has always maintained a perfect blending of traditional cultural elements in its narrations. Though renowned for the high-budget fantasy, action-packed, romantic, and family dramas, the addressing of queer themes in the industry is not much acknowledged, except a few. Prasanth Varma's 2018 movie *Awe!* (Wonder) is a psychological anthology of multiple plots ultimately intersecting at a restaurant,

establishing a platform for the queer voices in Telugu. The movie discusses an array of themes that Tollywood has been ignoring, like gender concerns, child abuse, and mental health, and attempts kaleidoscopic portrayals of queer identities like transsexual, lesbian and gender fluidity. Its first plot discusses the concept of transsexualism, where Shiva, an aspiring scientist, meets Parvathy, his future identity. Another tale in the anthology revolves around a lesbian couple, Radha and Krish *alias* Krishnaveni, who face strong objections from Radha's conservative parents against their relationship. However, the dignified portrayal of the queer subject in this movie reflects a changing landscape and the willingness of the industry to address inclusive narrations and diverse narrative techniques.

The Tamil industry, also known as Kollywood, is another prominent South-Indian industry rich in its cultural presentation and strikes a perfect balance between diligent narrations and commercial elements. Though queer characters were present in the earlier Tamil movies, they were often caricatures of comic interventions or ambiguous morality. However, the recent decade has marked an evident shift in the treatment by delving into the complexities of queer identities and their relationships with greater sensitivity. Raghava Lawrence's *Kanchana* (2011), a commercial horror-comedy, is the first among the LGBTQ+ portrayals in Kollywood that challenged the presumptions of *hijra* or transgender community in Indian movies, especially in Tamil Nadu. Though not a complete escape from the portrayal of stereotypic queer images, the films initiate an inclusive discussion regarding their right to live in dignity and opportunities. Lokesh Kumar's 2017 movie, *En Magan Magizhvan* (My Son is a Gay), is another movie that portrays a positive narrative

around homosexuality and humanising the struggles faced by queer individuals, particularly the challenges associated with coming out in a conservative society. The film narrates the tale of a gay and discusses how this act of coming out affected his relationship with his mother and others around him. This movie is about the tolerance and ostracised rights of queer individuals, their right to acceptance and a dignified life. Though not a queer film explicitly, Ram Subramaniam's 2018 movie *Peranbu* (Compassion) discusses a subplot of a transgender woman Meera, played by the renowned transgender model Anjali Ameer. The movie explores the multiple facets of human experience through the portrayal of Amudhavan, the father of a teenage daughter who has cerebral palsy, and the sensitive presentation of the character Meera as a sex worker. Reflecting on Meera's life and her burgeoning relationship with Amudhavan, the conventional prejudices are attenuated, fostering greater empathy and understanding of the lives of the transgender community. The movie transcends the preconceived notions of the national film legacy when a transgender sex worker rectifies and educates a heterosexual cis-gender hero about the different facets of love, giving him the confidence to confront life. *Peranbu* adds to a larger discourse about inclusiveness by challenging established culture, presenting Meera living with Amudhavan and his daughter and accentuating the value of acceptance in familial bonds and humanising queer characters. Tiagarajan Kumararaja's 2019 movie *Super Deluxe* is a Tamil black-comedy anthology that vehemently portrays society's detestation towards the transgender community in all strata. The film primarily rattles the entire industry by casting Vijay Sethupathy, a Tamil actor acclaimed for his alpha-male characters, as a transwoman, Shilpa coming back to the family after seven years. Silpa faces persecution from different

parts of the conformist societal setups that presume heteronormality: “Some of the patriarchal institutions like school, college and the state apparatus, such as the police, uphold heteronormativity and sometimes give an upper hand to people to perpetrate violence on queer figures, often by questioning the legitimacy of queer kinship” (Mishra n. p.). When the entire family stands against him and his wife in a bizarre condition, Rasakutty, his seven-year-old son, accepts him and takes him to his friends at school, where they share a conversation that gets in line with the veracity of queer identity.

Rasakutty: Are you a boy or a girl?

Shipa: A girl.

Rasakutty: Who changed you into a girl?

Shilpa: A doctor.

Rasakutty: You did not fight him?

Shilpa: Of course not! I asked him to do it.

Rasakutty: Why?

Shilpa: I always wanted to be a woman. Dressing up and makeup that is what I like.

Rasakutty: Why weren't you born a woman to begin with?

Shilpa: Sometimes, when we put our shoes in a hurry, we confuse the left with the right. Similarly, God, in a hurry, put me in a male body. (*Super Deluxe* 01:16:21

– 01: 18: 08)

Debilitated Shilpa, due to the vilification from the school and the sexual harassment from the police station, decides to return to Mumbai but is stopped by Rasakutty proclaiming the most revolutionary statement ever made in an Indian movie on queer context: “Be a man or be a woman, just be with us, damn it!” (*Super Deluxe* 02:36:51 – 02:37: 04) and thus reimaging “queer kinship by putting the idea of the normative family into question” (Mishra n. p.).

Nestled in the southern state of Kerala, the Malayalam film industry or the Mollywood, has matured into a creative powerhouse and made momentum with its gravity of narrative power, artistic vision, and commitment in addressing a broader spectrum of societal issues. Kerala is a land of thought-provoking narratives that delve into the complexities of human relationships, has instigated a lot of social transformations and reformations, and exist as a fertile ground for queer voices. Mollywood has demonstrated distinctive portrayals of queer characters well ahead of other regional industries and continues to expand its dynamic discourses with transformative narratives making an abundance of more inclusive queer movies.

While the national mainstream culture was caricaturing the platitudinal queer images, the Malayalam industry has provocatively ventured into the early depiction of lesbianism and female intimacy in a normalised way through the 1978 movie *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls) directed by Mohan, based on V. T. Nandakumar’s novel with the same title. The movie is about the female bond between two friends, Girija and Kokila, where the former explicitly confesses her love towards the latter, but Kokila’s relationship with a photographer creates a rift. Although a bold attempt during that period, the filmmaker ultimately forced the characters to adopt

heterosexual life as he was coerced to comply with the preexisting conventional standards. Though not an explicit queer movie, the 1986 film *Deshadanakkili Karayarilla* (The Migratory Bird Never Cries) is another earlier depiction of female sexuality in the industry, narrating the bond and intimacy between two friends, Sally and Nimmi, who eloped during their school excursion. According to recent scholastic interpretations, Sally is a lesbian who is overly cautious and possessive of her friend and pretends to be a tomboy cropping her hair. Conversely, Nimmi can be perceived as either a heterosexual or a bisexual female. Sally's insane jealousy of Nimmi's new male friend and the lack of acceptance regarding her identity from society lead them both to commit suicide, as Sally recurrently quotes in the movie about taking the other (Nimmi) and together going to a safe paradise. Ligy J. Pullappally's 2004 movie *Sancharam* (The Journey) explicitly portrays the intersectionality of gender, sexuality and caste curtailments that existed in the early 2000s in Kerala, narrating the tale of a triangle love between Rajan, Delilah and Kiran. Rajan asks Kiran to write love letters to Delilah in his name to confess his love. Eventually, Deliah and Kiran develop a relationship through those letters, which is strongly rebuked by their family, society, and religion. The movie leaves an open ending by showing Delilah running out of Church in her wedding gown, calling out for Kiran, who is about to commit suicide. Instead of a stereotypical joint suicide, the film presents a "positive image when Kiran and Delilah start a new life by cutting Kiran's long hair and throwing it into the river" (Renueliza n. p.).

Gender investigations in Malayalam movies not only discussed lesbianism alone but also the identities and preferences like transsexuals, transgender, gays, and

gender fluidity. Santhosh Souparnika's 2012 movie *Ardhanaari* (Half-Woman) discusses the plights of the transgender community in Kerala who are "still in the dark underbelly of the society" (etimes.in n. p.). *Mumbai Police* (2013) by Roshan Andrewes breaks the cliché representations of a gay individual, where the movie narrates the tale of ACP Antony Mosses, a homosexual who murders his best friend in the fear of disclosing his identity and confronting societal retribution. Unlike the flamboyant, effeminate gay characters hitherto presented in popular cinemas, Antony stays different with his alpha male characteristics, asserting hegemonic masculinity in each scene. It takes a further half a decade for another movie to discuss gay relationships without any hyperbolic shades. Geethu Mohandas's 2019 film *Moothon* (The Elder One) is one such movie that posits love is love and nothing else, regardless of gender identity – cis-gendered or trans-gendered, heterosexual or homosexual. The plot revolves around the journey of Mulla, who is cross-dressed as a boy, in search of her elder brother Akbar, who has run away to Mumbai. The entirety of the film elevates as it portrays the "chaotic greys of Mumbai" (Jose and John 119) and gets accentuated through the prior presentation of Akbar *alias* Bhai. The homosexual plot of Akbar and his love interest Ameer in Lakshadweep is perfectly placed in the movie as a parallel plot, along with the revealing of Mulla's original identity as a girl ascends the movie as one of the powerful queer entries of the decade. Ranjith Sankar's 2018 film *Njan Marykutty* (I Am Marykutty) is a ground-breaking presentation of transsexuals and the first movie that clarifies the difference between a transgender and a transsexual. The film is about the story of a transsexual who aspires to be a police officer and does the job of a radio jockey. This film advocates for the right to a life with dignity and self-respect of the queer and

demonstrates the stigma and persecution they have to encounter from society in this decade. The protagonist, Marykutty, is a strong-willed person who never conforms to societal demands and does not let her be a sex worker or bar dancer – a common fate imposed on a queer individual. The 2023 movie by Jeo Baby, *Kaathal - The Core*, is a daring and exceptional attempt at queer presentation, particularly casting the Malayalam actor Mammooty, who is hailed as the epitome of hyper-masculinity and masculine charm, to the role of Matthew Devassy, a homosexual. The film revolves around the clandestine relationship between Matthew and Thangachan, which is not overtly depicted in the film, and the emotional draining Omana, Matthew's wife, has to endure for two decades. As Matthew's identity is accepted by society and he wins the election, the film functions as an example of how to depict the inner agony of a queer person without the aid of explicit sexual scenes or private dialogues.

The Bengali film industry is another regional industry that has always produced a plethora of internationally honoured films with its meticulous balancing of minute Bengali culture with the shades of Kolkata and Tagore and its courage to experiment with novel genres and challenging themes. This industry possesses a distinctive space in the academic circles of film studies at national and global levels. The experiments and contributions of Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, and Rituparno Ghosh have made the industry a worthy reference for the future. As Bengali culture remains enmeshed in its past and customs, an expanded awareness regarding its evolutionary path is crucial for better comprehension of the queer heritage in the Bengali film industry.

The Bengali film industry, also known as Tollywood (same as that of the Telugu industry), has its upbringing in the Tollygunge region, the southern part of Kolkata, bears a history of grandiosity and was once the gravity point of Indian film production. The term Tollywood thus serves as a portmanteau by agglomerating Tollygunge and Hollywood. During the initial decades, Tollywood possessed a distinctive and pivotal role in the Indian film industry through its internationally acclaimed productions of parallel cinemas and art-house cinemas. Marking an evident departure from the existing mainstream melodramas, the industry experimented with Parallel Cinema or the New Cinema

Parallel cinemas evolved in the Tollygunge during the 1950s and can be considered the oriental inspiration of Italian Neorealism, pioneering the Indian New Wave through its perennial experiments in realism and aestheticism. Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Saroj Dey, Tapan Sinha and Ritwik Ghatak are the prophets of parallel cinemas and revived the Bengali cinema from its silent era to the most embellished golden era. During this time, the industry made its finest movie adaptations of popular Indian literature and portrayed the time's socio-economic tensions and political temperament. Although instigated in the Tollygunge region, the parallel movement has expanded to other regional industries as well: While the trio Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen, along with Tapan Sinha, Buddhadeb Dasgupta and Bimal Roy guided the Bengali wave, their contemporaries like Shyam Benegal of Telangana, Girish Kasaravalli of Karnataka, and Adoor Gopalakrishnan and G. Aravindan of Kerala made its proliferation in their respective industries.

Tollywood has its roots and inspirations predominantly from the Bengali theatres that provided and promoted Bengali artists during their early development stages. *Nil Darpan* (The Indigo Mirror), the first play by the National Theatre in 1857, prepared the ground for the first Bengali feature film, *Bilwamangal or Bhagat Soordas* (1918) by Rustomji Dhotiwala. Its inspiration further paved the way for talkies and silent movies but got its global acclamation only during the period from the 1950s. The trio of Tollygunge – Ray (1921-1992), Sen (1923-2018) and Ghatak (1925-1976) – reigned the industry during the latter half of the twentieth century, a period which is acknowledged as the golden era of Bengali films. They invigorated the Bengali cinema in developing from historiographies into an influential regional industry by imbibing the contemporary socio-political and cultural shifts through the art house cinema or parallel cinema. Since each filmmaker of this movement has established an exclusive style and treatment of distinctive themes, it was possible to anticipate the subject treated in a film with the director's name.

Ray's "Apu Trilogy" marks Tollywood's enormous shift and is considered the touchstone of Indian films to date to which any art movie produced is compared. *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road) (1955), *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished) (1956) and *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu) (1959) constitute the ubiquitously revered masterpieces of Ray. His trilogy has a principal position in the international and national film festivals and is being discussed and placed along with the international classics. Kurasova and Isao from Japan and Saura from Spain have admitted Ray's influence in their themes and cinematic style, proclaiming the momentum Ray has made among his contemporaries and successors, which is

further exemplified by the 1992 Oscar award for his lifetime achievements. Ray's contribution to Indian cinema began with the establishment of the Calcutta Film Society. During his European trip in 1950, he observed and became fascinated by the global shifts in filmmaking, which transformed his perception of cinema. He was significantly influenced by the Italian director Vittorio De Sica, whose Italian Neorealist movement demonstrated to him the potential of realism in cinema. This is reflected in the majority of Ray's movies, which echo every realistic aspect of ordinary life. For example, *Pather Panchali* revolves around "a poor Bengali family's grim struggle for survival" (Goritsas n. p.). Even though *Apur Sansar* is regarded as Ray's come-of-age product, an overt reflection of this maturity and deep-seated visions can be found in his later works like the 1958 movie *Jalsaghar* (The Music Room): "The film as a whole explores the idea that truly great art is created in that space of time just before disintegration takes over" (Goritsas n. p.). Ray proved to be a visionary and multifaceted individual who has experimented with every genre, mood and cinematic device. He assumed every role regarding a film production: direction to script writing, editing to credit title designing and promotions.

Although Ray continued experimenting with the subject matter and style more than most directors, he always held to his original conviction that the finest cinema uses solid and simple themes containing hundreds of little, apparently irrelevant details, which only help to intensify the illusion of actuality better. These themes cannot

come from the passing fashions of the period; they must be drawn from permanent values (Goritsas n. p.).

One of the unique features of Ray's films is his detailing of scenes and the finite balance between the form and content: Helen Goritsas, a senior lecturer on film and digital media at the Academy of Information Technology, Sydney and an award-winning director, analyses Ray's themes and styles as,

Much of his cinema's strength lies in the total impression of its average moments, which cannot be picked out as striking scenes. This is because he strikes a carefully judged balance between form and content. He does not let one part override the other. He was known to reject locations because he thought them too spectacular and overpowering, stating they would upset the balance. What is also distinctive in Ray's work is that the rhythm in his films seems almost meditative. There is a contemplative quality in the magnificent flow of images and sounds that evoke an attitude of acceptance and detachment, which is profoundly Indian. (n. p.).

When the harsh realities of life and extreme realism were Ray's concerns, Mrinal Sen's movies inherited his Marxist values and portrayed the political unrest through which India had been passing. Sen's movies are constantly criticised for their grave tone and provocative political attitude. Sen himself has been quoted in an interview regarding his politics and radical visions imparted and to be imparted in cinema as:

I don't agree with Godard when he says that the cinema is a gun. That is too romantic an expression. You can't topple a government or a system by making one 'Potemkin'. You can't do that with ten 'Potemkin'. All you can do is create an environment in which you can discuss a society that is growing undemocratic, fascistic (qtd in Katyal n. p.).

When hope, love, and extreme sympathy for humanistic needs were the concerns shared in Ray's movies, Sen's movies portrayed dark and raw modes that underlined extreme human suffering. His 1969 movie, *Bhuvan Shome*, is widely admired for launching the New Indian Cinema or Parallel Cinema movement, along with Ray and Ghatak, where the titular character discovers a new world of empathy on a lonely vacation in a Gujarati hamlet. He was greatly influenced by Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921). Sen had to wait until 1960 to be a notable figure, though he made his directorial debut *Raat Bhore* (The Dawn) in 1955. His second film, *Neel Akasher Neechay* (Under the Blue Sky) (1958), made a momentous political nuance, making it the first film in independent India to get banned. Sen set a benchmark on the international atlas of films through his third movie, *Baishey Shraavan* (The Wedding Day) (1960).

The story was set in the backdrop of World War II when West Bengal was going through one of the worst famines ever known. The film showed a poor couple struggling to sustain themselves without food. The story documented the change in their relationship as they

managed various difficulties and the dark side of human nature in the face of a calamity (Pothukuchi n. p.).

His films, particularly his “Calcutta trilogy” – *Interview* (1971), *Calcutta* (1972), and *Padatik* (The Guerrilla Fighter) (1973) – portrayed poverty, unemployment, famine, and political unrest with extreme realism. He also made an attempt in Telugu titled *Oka Oori Katha* (The Marginal Ones), a movie that Ray greatly revered.

While Ray and Sen were transnationally accepted in their lifetime, Ghatak was acknowledged and applauded only posthumously. His movies represented a group which was obliterated and demarcated from the elite circle of Ray and Sen, who “suffered abomination from political circles for daring to tell stories that mirrored the injustices by society and government” (Munsi n. p.). Departing from the themes of Ray and Sen, his movies discussed the silenced and unmentioned agonies of the Bengal partition as he was victimised and had undergone the woe personally. *Megha Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star), *Komal Gandhar* (A Soft Note on a Sharp Scale), and *Subarnarekha* (The Golden Line) encompassed another trilogy that spoke about this theme of partition and its effect at the grassroots of the city, and the female leads emphasised the torments of the crisis with great upshot. “He never celebrated independence through his films, choosing instead to show the cost at which independence arrived” (Munsi n. p.). He performed several roles in filmmaking concomitantly: a versatile actor, playwright, scriptwriter, renowned producer and well-accepted director who re-established the preexisting trends of cinema. Despite being released in theatres only in 1977, his 1952 movie *Nagarik*

(The Citizen) was made before Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) and is now considered the first art or parallel film in Bengali. One of the intriguing ways that set him distinguished from the others in the troika – Sen and Ray – is his fascination with the crowd that swarms the theatre. For him, genre was least vital because he never conformed cinema to a congested and defined framework: “My first film was called a picaresque episodic film along the lines of the eighteenth-century Spanish novel *Gil Blas De Santillane*; the second was called a film of documentary approach; the next was a melodrama, and the fourth, nothing at all, just no film.” (Ghatak 17)

Tagore and the city of Kolkata are the next prominent influences of Tollywood of all time. Tagore and his influence on contemporary artists revived the artistic milieu in Bengal after its decline in post-independence Indian politics through the adaptations and reworking of his philosophies and works. This revival in the artistic arena as a whole and the advent of parallel cinema, in particular, transmuted his position as a poet and a freedom fighter, further providing new colour. Being a playwright and a poet, Tagore had a translucent opinion about cinema and its purpose. In an excerpt from the letter written by Tagore to one of his prominent friends, he observes:

I believe that the expected emergence of cinema as an art form is yet to take place. As in politics, so in art, the aim is independence that cinema has so long been subservient to literature is due to the fact that no artiste has been able to redeem it from this slavery by dint of his genius. The principal element of the motion picture is the flux of images. The beauty and grandeur of this form in motion have to be

developed in such a way that it becomes self-sufficient without the use of words. If some other language is needed to explain its own, it amounts to incompetence (qtd. in Narang n. p.).

Along with the lucid movie adaptations of Tagore's novels and short stories by filmmakers like Satyajit Ray and Tapan Sinha, primarily during the silent era of Bengali films, his works and lyrics were also subjected to contemporary interpretations and retellings.

Rituparno Ghosh emerged as one of the contemporary filmmakers of the new millennium, exhibiting the enduring influence of Tagore in his works, following the strides of Ray. Through revitalising Tagore and reviving the Tagorean legacy in Bengali audiences of all strata, he pioneered the second wave of the Bengali Renaissance along with his contemporaries Anjan Dutta, Srijit Mukherji and Koushik Ganguly. Among the finest adaptations of Tagore ever had in the history of Indian films rests Ghosh's *Chokher Bali*, *Noukadubi*, and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*. Ghosh never made blind adaptations of Tagore but recreated it with his artistic freedom, giving the characters a distinctive tone of agency and shifting the plots and time accordingly: He altered the time in *Chokher Bali* to a decade after that in the actual story of Tagore, and he gave the character Annadababu in *Noukadubi* a new colour of dignity and respect that was absent in the original text. In *Chitrangada*, he has placed the original story as a parallel plot to his screenplay, like a story within a story. Ghosh integrated Tagore's lyrics in his other films as well as created several characters with strong traces, demonstrating his ardent admiration for Tagore.

Similar to Tagore, another significant influence in Tollywood is the city of Kolkata, as observed by Sayandeb Chowdhury:

Although studies of the metropolis as the locus of modernity in the films of Ray, Sen, and Ghatak have circulated within wider orbits and have a larger currency, what is revisited through this study are the ways in which post-independence Bengali popular cinema had a significant cultural-historical function in addressing this ‘metropolar’ modernity within the formal configurations of melodrama, exemplified by the commercially successful films starring the matinee idol Uttam Kumar. Exploring the visuality of the city of Calcutta in these films, Chowdhury also argues that the institutionalisation of the melodramatic form in the mid-1950s popular Bengali cinema effectuated a scopic interrogation of ‘postcolonial’ Calcutta as a locus primaire. (178)

Filmmakers of different eras depicted Kolkata and its different shades distinctively: Ray portrayed the harsh realities of the lower class where poverty, illness and death played a significant role, whereas Sen gave attention to the political unrest spreading all over the city as a result of new ideologies, independence, world wars and many more. While Ghatak portrayed the perils and afflictions caused by the partition, Ghosh focused on a new class of educated elite group who are at above-average strata economically. The city’s rich cultural lineage of art, literature, and parallel cinema has profoundly contributed to the “cultural intensity” (Roychoudhary n. p.) which can be found in Ghosh's movies. The modernists experimented with almost

every genre and mood with their *sui generis* perspectives and visions, bringing Kolkata into the national and international limelight and introducing the city to a wider audience. The most popular plots set in Kolkata and where the city had an indispensable place are *Kahani (Story)* (2012) by Sujoy Ghosh, *Piku* (2015) by Shoojit Sircar, and *Detective Byomkesh Bakshi* (2015) by Dibakar Banerjee.

After the era of the epic trinity, the Bengali film industry encountered a massive revival to modernity in form and matter alike. A plethora of artists emerged during this time, including directors and actors like Rituparno Ghosh, Aparna Sen, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Koushik Ganguly, and Gautam Ghose:

After Ray–Sen–Sinha–Ghatak, the Bengali film industry was still brimming with talent and bona fide story-tellers. The reigns were in the hands of filmmakers like Rituparno Ghosh, Aparna Sen, Goutam Ghose and Buddhadeb Dasgupta, who travelled across the oceans and surprised the world with their candid stories (S. Roy n. p.).

The period widely incorporated the features of parallel cinema in the past, integrating the artistic quality and the commercial elements of mainstream cinema to attract audiences to the theatres. While the chronic parallel cinema rebuked the insertion of dance and music in cinema, the modern revival incorporated them to retain artistic integrity rather than placing them for monetary gain. The period serves as a bridge between parallel cinema and mainstream cinema because of its distinctive selection of themes and approaches. While Ray, Sen, and Ghatak honoured the golden age of the Bengali film industry, the deviated and radical period of Rituparno Ghosh, Aparna Sen, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, and Goutam Ghose can be

considered as the silver age: “The current army of directors, including the likes of Aditya Vikram Sengupta, Srijit Mukherjee, Kaushik Ganguly, Kamaleswar Mukherjee, Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, Suman Ghosh strives hard to keep up the reputation of West Bengal and its colossal contribution towards Indian cinema” (Roy n. p.). Tollywood continues to offer movies with high artistic and intellectual guarantees produced in minimum monetary margins, unlike the high budget Bollywood commercial movies: “Their movies are rooted in reality and warranted a discourse over things that matter. They touched various topics that are gnawing at the social fabric of our country and were still entertaining” (Supriyo Mukherjee n. p.). Several industries still struggle to produce worthy movies, compelling their spectators to adjust to the hollow entertainment, whereas Tollywood accomplished it decades ago by presenting different phases and faces of human emotions, contemporary realities, and fantasies through its quality productions.

Tollywood has experimented with kaleidoscopic perspectives on human emotions and relationships. But for a long period of time, it refused to investigate queer aesthetics and portrayals as it was preoccupied with its cultural grandiosity and contented in the secure domains of family and politics. Though there produced certain queer explorations, the majority of them were not appreciated by the common audience: *Nil Nirjane* (Vacation Blues) (2003) by Subrata Sen, *Samo-The Equals* (2010) by Chandreyee Ghosh, *Teen Kanya* (Three Girls) (2012) by Agnidev Chatterjee, and *Nagarkritan* (Processional Singling of Holy Hymns) (2017) by Kaushik Ganguly. Tollywood elevated its ubiquitous recognition of the queer realm through the depiction of authentic queer relationships through the queer trilogy of

Rituparno Ghosh. The trilogy includes *Arekti Premer Golpo* (Just Another Love Story), *Memories in March* and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*. In the 2010 movie *Arekti Premer Golpo*, directed by Kaushik Ganguly, Ghosh plays the roles of two androgynous homosexuals – the young Chapal Bhaduri and Abhiroop Sen, while in *Memories in March*, a 2010 drama directed by Sanjay Nag, he plays the role of a homosexual lover who lost his partner in an accident, and the 2010 movie by Ghosh *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* he performs as a renowned choreographer Rudra Chatterjee. *Chitrangada* hoisted him as the pioneer of a new queer philosophy, in which he deliberated the profound inspiration of Tagore through this partial adaptation of Tagore’s play *Chitr* and his statement on gender concepts. Despite these movies being directed by three different filmmakers – Kaushik Ganguly, Sanjoy Nag, and Ghosh – they are known under the umbrella term of Rituparno Ghosh’s queer trilogy because of the momentum Ghosh as an actor has made.

Besides triggering a second wave of Bengali Renaissance after Ray, Ghosh pioneered the radical wave of New Queer Cinema (NQC) in Tollywood and reverberated its influence all around other regional industries. His movies encapsulated the spirit of NQC, often examining the intricacy of gender and sexuality and convoluted human relationships. Ghosh revolutionized queer representation in the Bengali industry by subverting gender norms and humanizing queer characters, providing depth and authenticity to their experiences. His compliance with unconventional narrative structure and visual elements once again took the industry to global attention after the demise of Ray. Ghosh’s films and the

queer statements they reflect are essentially notable, as Sangeeta Dutta asserts: “Ghosh’s films were “intelligent” and not explicit same-sex relationships. She says even though they were treated like drawing room conversations (Like a son telling his father that he wants to change his gender), it could still unsettle the audience” (qtd. in DHNS n. p.).

Bengali films started acquiring the second wave of international approbation following the entry of Rituparno Ghosh. The same year of Ray’s demise, Ghosh made his directorial debut in 1992, which still seems to be a magical coincidence that respectively intersects the fall and rise of two eras. His life and filmography were marked by controversies over gender depictions and conflicts between traditionalism and modernity in both society and cinema. Rituparno Ghosh is an overt and audacious queer icon who made vociferous appearances in public in his fluid state or androgynous form in the final phase of his life and career: He experimented with his body and movies by being part of the trilogy. Alongside the queer trilogy, this study becomes further scholastic in the succeeding chapters examining his other movies where indications of fluid dispositions are discovered in the characters who are hitherto accepted as heteronormal cisgenders.

CHAPTER 3

EXPLORING GENDER AND KINSHIP:

MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS IN GHOSH

Rituparno Ghosh's entry into the Bengali film industry was at a critical time following the demise of Satyajit Ray in 1992. Notwithstanding the strives of subsequent generation filmmakers like Aparna Sen, Goutam Ghose, and Buddhadeb Dasgupta, the Tollygunge productions were facing a void caused by Ray's death, whose legacy of the ostensible intellectual cinema was seldom matched by any filmmaker. The later productions in the industry were placed at the peripherals of the mainstream cinema because of their impertinence in the subject matter and financial deprivation, leading to the estrangement of the *bhadralok* (middle-class) Bengali audiences from the big screen and to get satisfied in the small screen productions. The extensive remaking of Tamil and Telugu movies further catalysed this alienation of the audiences as they failed to connect with these plagiarised releases. The televisions purposefully re-telecasted Bengali classics, which once hailed the Tollygunge at the international acclamations, aiming at resuscitating the reminiscence of the bygone golden age of Ray, Sen, and Ghatak. Ghosh's entry into the industry during this phase was with an elaborate plan and knowing the needs of the middle-class audience from his experience in the advertising field. He introduced a perfect blending of art-house cinema and commercial elements that instigated the retrieved audiences back to the theatres:

With a persuasive style of storytelling as his forte, Ghosh thoughtfully merged the distinct categories of art-house and commercial cinema, reviving the middle-of-the-road genre. With several years of experience in a top-notch advertising firm, Ghosh was adept at pinpointing the pulse of his target audience. Quite effortlessly, he tapped the sensibilities of the educated urban audience by reviving through his films not only Ray's intellectualism and art of storytelling but also the simplicity and candour of commercial Bengali cinema represented by the likes of Ajay Kar, Tapan Sinha, Tarun Majumdar, as well as the Bombay-based Bengali filmmakers Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Basu Chatterjee (Dasgupta et al. 2)

The harbinger of the Bengali Renaissance in the audio-visual media, Rituparno Ghosh, along with his contemporaries like Kaushik Ganguly, Srijit Mukherji and Anjan Dutta, elevated the Tollygunge for the second time to its golden era of global accolades after the period of Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen. Widely known as *Ritu da*, he is one of the most celebrated faces internationally from the Indian film industry, particularly Kolkata regional industry.

Ghosh's films, whether written, directed, or performed, are sensitive depictions of the inner turmoil spurred on by suppressed desires. They discuss the anguishes, trauma, and unrequited and unattainable love that swings amid the burdens of responsibilities and frameworks of relationships that are rooted and structured in every Indian psyche. Ghosh, with his masterful narratives, locates the post-liberal Indian audience who stride away from the tedious traditional family

dramas by presenting them with more relatable plots and characters in the contemporary period. His movies are like poems leaving space for further exploration apart from direct dialogues and pregnant with unexplored emotions, written from an unravished perspective of an ordinary Bengali middle-class individual: “For example, the mother-daughter relationship in 'Unishe April' was refreshing, yet realistic in a society that was going through churning”. (Ghose n. p.)

Ghosh’s movies render a pattern of growth, theme selection and treatment when analysed from a critical stand point as Dr Chatterji, in her book *Reading Rituparno*, demarcates the film career of Ghosh into five phases, taking into account the themes those movies are framed upon: Phase one is the women-centric films, which is entitled “Giving Women a ‘Voice’” including *Unishe April* (April 19), *Dahan* (Crossfire), *Asukh* (The Illness), and *Bariwali* (The Landlady). As per her study, these are the female-oriented movies amongst his films in which Ghosh gives women a voice, which is not the explicit physical articulation but the voice of real life that has “physical, cinematic, emotional and metaphorical dimensions in cinema” (Chatterji 21). Though each of these feminine protagonists is from an entirely different social, economic, educational and marital status, he knots them in a single string of psychological isolation and emotional loneliness. Phase two is named “Relationships Redefined”, which includes movies *Utsav* (The Festival), *Titli* (Butterfly), *Khela* (Game), *Shob Charitro Kalponik* (All Characters are Imaginary), and *Abohoman* (The Eternal), which deals with different stages and oscillations of relationships in a broader sense. Phase three, “Adaptations of Classical and Contemporary Literature”, includes the visual adaptations of canonical and

contemporary literature in which Ghosh incorporated the works from both regional and international writers, including the film adaptations of the works of Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay titled *Hirer Angti* (The Diamond Ring), and *Dosar* (Emotional Companion), along with *Antarmahal* (The Inner Chamber) adapted from Tarasankar Bandhopadhyay's novel. Ghosh further renders and interprets the contents from Western literature in an Indian setting, helping the spectators relate the story to their experiences: *Subho Muharat* (Auspicious Time), a Rituparno's Indianized version of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, *Raincoat*, an adaptation of O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*, and *The Last Lear* which is not a precise but conceptual adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Phase four, titled "Rituparno Re-reading of Tagore", includes movies Ghosh got inspired and revamped from the works of his metaphysical guide, Tagore, like *Chokher Bali* (Sand in the Eye), *Noukadubi* (Boat Wreck), and his most critiqued movie *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*. He has also directed a documentary exclusively on Tagore entitled *Jeebon Smriti* (In My Reminiscence), considered as a tribute to Tagore. The last phase, titled "Rituparno - Actor, Director and Alternative Sexuality", treats Ghosh as an actor exhibiting an overt deviation from his till date role as a director. Ghosh forthrightly presents his actual identity as a gender-fluid in real life and in certain movies like *Arekti Premer Golpo* (Just Another Love Story) by Kaushik Ganguly, *Memories in March* by Sanjoy Nag, and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* by Ghosh. In these movies, he appears as an androgynous homosexual and offers him a space to present his conceptualisations on gender and represent the respective fluid community in its authentic sense, devoid of the prejudicial interpretations of mainstream media. Although Chatterji has made this division "not in chronological sequence but in

terms of genres he explored, often quite unwittingly without conscious design” (19), it is pertinent to analyse the themes and treatments of Ghosh’s movies collectively for better comprehension of the works. Ghosh’s movies put forth an avant-garde narrative style to Bengali cinema and serve as the propagandas of his gender politics, offering substantially towards the exploration of female subjectivity, sexuality, gender identity, and an inclusive queer understanding.

Among the key exposes that Ghosh's films addressed, distinctive depictions of female subjectivity and agency are significant for receiving special attention in his filmography. Indian cinema is celebrated for its reflection of rich cultural diversity through which it reinstates the standardised values and norms bequeathed for generations, and it indicted the portrayals of altercations with gender representations, identity preference, and inequities for several decades. The conventional female portrayals in Indian cinema, especially during the latter phase of the twentieth century, have been relegated to preposterous roles and were often portrayed as either vicious vamps or virtuous heroines that can be alluded to Freud’s idea of Madonna-Whore Complex:

A psychological complex often perpetuated by heterosexual, cisgender males which place women into two categories the “Madonna”, a woman who is pure, virtuous, and nurturing, or a “Whore”, a woman who is deemed as overly sexually manipulating and promiscuous. The dichotomy of MWC creates a rigidity that limits women’s sexual expression, agency, and freedom by defining their sexuality into one of two categories (Brownlee n. p.).

This idea of placing women as either seductive temptresses or holy mothers is further reinforced by these archetypes, which were reiterated in the standard Indian psyche by the popular actors like Madhubala and Nargis.

Ghosh marked a paradigm shift in the Bengali film industry through his sensitive portrayal of nuanced female characters and complex exploration of gender dynamics bridging between the modern phase and the penultimate phase of parallel cinema. By providing his female characters with autonomy and agency to articulate their desires and perceive their identity as they wish, he challenged the status quo and initiated a new era of more inclusive and feminist cinema. In the popular discourse of Bengali literature and cinema from the latter part of the previous century, feminist ideology and powerful female characters have consistently assumed the pole position. This trend has been brought to the global contemplation, which was pioneered by Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, Kaushik Ganguly, Tarun Majumdar, and Aparna Sen, and further perpetuated by Rituparno Ghosh in recent decades. They assisted the female portrayals to transcend from a dutiful housewife, whose sole responsibility is to obey her husband and make sure that household duties are done to perfection, to an educated, self-conscious individual capable of independent and logical reasoning, voicing her opinions and emotions.

In the pre-and post-Rituparno periods, the concept of voice, which articulates female existence and individuality, was not fully discussed in this modern sense. Prior to Ghosh, it was Ray who nearly played with voices both physically and metaphorically in his movies. According to Chatterji and a few other scholars of Rituparno movies, the term voice is more than a physical articulation of sounds and

has a larger meaning in life. The movies of his predecessors like Ray, Ghatak, and Sen and contemporaries like Aparna Sen, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Koushik Ganguly, and Gautam Ghose consider voice as a social connotation about the submissive feminine psyche surrendered to the societal pressures: “A woman may create a shell of ‘silence’ around her and retreat into it as her language of rebellion. She expresses herself through her body language, through the expression of pain, anguish and betrayal on her face as she rapidly moves towards her ultimate ‘voice’ of rebellion – suicide.” (Chatterji 22-23). In contrast to his contemporaries who articulated the structural domination of the unjustified patriarchy, Ghosh focused on the fundamental manifestation of the feminine spirit and perceived patriarchal domination as a sub-theme. Most Indian movies consider patriarchy as the “legitimisation of hierarchy, exploitation and violation through which women are systematically subjugated, disempowered, silenced, and marginalised” (Chatterji 43), whereas Ghosh’s movies portray the innermost essence of a woman. For him, cinema is a medium to “tape and unfurl the delicate nuances of the female experiences” (Datta n. p.).

Regarding this sphere of female 'voice' exerting her agency, Ghosh's *Unishe April* reveals the less probed life of a working woman and the tussles she must face while striving to find her place in the world. The film is about the forced image that is continually imposed upon a woman who is compelled to follow the roles of a wife and mother and the vicious image she has to bear when crossing the standards expected by the patriarchal ego in pursuit of her independence and identity. It is indebted deeply to Ingmar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata* (1978), which uses the scuffle

between a mother and daughter to unbolt a can of worms, inflicting mayhem inside *bhadralok* living rooms. But after the pretence of filial combat and the dreadful costs of the creative life, there is a chilling critique of the notion of motherhood: successful women may not be forgiven for crossing, even by one of their own (Jonjua 16). The film recounts the stagnant cold war that existed between Sarojini, a renowned dancer and her daughter Aditi, a medical student. This single-day plot unveils the fissures in the mother-daughter bond, which is the result of Aditi's father's grudge and jealousy towards Sarojini's fame and independence. He introduced Sarojini to Aditi as an irresponsible wife and unaffectionate mother. On April 19 – the death anniversary of Aditi's father – the mother and daughter spend the day together and confabulate around their prejudices and justifications. The initial hostility Aditi showed towards her mother eventually transformed and both started to understand each other. Sarojini is an independent woman who earns more money and fame than her husband, which hurts his patriarchal ego. As a product of the conservative society, he took his revenge upon his wife and found pleasure in defaming her and alienating their daughter from her mother. Sarojini taught her daughter that there is more for a woman to achieve than settling down in a family: "Neither the mother nor the daughter is a housewife in the ordinary sense of the word. The kitchen arrives like a point of catharsis in a narrative and visual space of the film" (Chatterji 51).

Ghosh's subsequent film, *Dahan*, is another example of his ability to depict the shaping of womanhood and the victimisation of women in a culture that is skewed. It illustrates how women are constructed as guilty by the male-dominated

society for a reason out of their control. The story shows how the idyllic life of a recently married woman transforms upside down abruptly on an evening into dismal when she endures a humiliating experience from a gang of strangers. The movie “interrogates the intersections of a woman’s molestation in a Kolkata substation, the retribution she faces from her community and husband, and the solidarity offered by another young woman, a radical schoolteacher, who is witness to the incident” (Mukherjee and Bakshi 117). The film revolves around the molestation of Romita Chowdhary, a newlywed housewife, and Jhinuk, a schoolteacher, who attempts to get justice for Romita. Finding it embarrassing to answer the questions of his colleagues regarding his wife’s rape – whether she was raped really or was that just an attempt, whether she had any affairs with any of the goons, and so on – and due to his deeply affected male ego, Romita’s husband rapes her which further exacerbated her agony. Her in-laws and husband forced her and tortured her emotionally to give false statements in court against the goons during the trial that eventually denied her justice. In this film, Ghosh provides two types of voices to his characters: One is the voice of the defenceless controlled by the people around her and the other is of Jhinuk’s – the voice of an independent, rational and sagacious woman – who attempts to save Romita and toil for the justice.

Both women, at the end of the film, seem to find a modicum of freedom by being on the road, being between spaces – travelling from one impossible shelter to another which also perhaps does not exist. Romita does not break up her marriage legally but decides instead to travel to her sister in Canada. Jhinuk, too, struggles with herself but

finally agrees to marry Tunir in spite of her utter disillusionment and her loss of respect and trust. (Banerjee n. p.)

This open and perturbed ending deviated commendably from the usual submissive feminine fate, which is either to be confined into the darker rooms for further life or commit suicide as she is molested. Ghosh has given a cue for this change from the very beginning, as the movie began with a female voice-over, which is unprecedented in the Indian film industry.

Dahan succeeds in freeing the portrayal of women in cinema, both narrative-wise and cinematically, from its obstinate permanence of glamour and objectification to transform a rigidified 'image' into a surface which functions in complex and contradictory ways rather than as a purely referential 'commodity' offering one-dimensional meanings. (Chatterji 83)

Among the feminist portrayals of Ghosh, his *Chokher Bali* is an unconventional feminist manifesto propounding a poignant exploration of nuanced female desire and subtly challenging patriarchal structures. It is one of the most vociferous movies of Ghosh all time, which questions the conventional standards prescribed for a woman and defies the codes of conduct placed upon female sexuality that women have internalised for ages. This adaptation of Tagore telling the plight of widowhood during the pre-independent and independent era ascends the global fame of Ghosh through its bold representation of female portrayals. Ghosh's *Binodini* is an educated and independent-thinking widow who refuses to conform to the societal norms and expected status of a widow. Her exploitative

power begins by manipulating the other widows to drink the supposed forbidden tea. Unlike other widows, she breaks the conduct of a widow by having chocolates and wearing Aashalata's silk dress and ornaments, thereby seducing the latter's husband, Mahendra. She also tempts the isolated Behari by manipulating his literary interests. As mentioned in Tagore's own words, this novel "tries to expand the story of four young people trapped in a tangle of sensuality" (qtd. in Fainaru n. p.). But when it comes to Ghosh's, the movie is the revenge of a radical, rebellious young widow upon the two friends who rejected her without any solid reason. For Ghosh's Binodini, her body is her voice as well as her rebellion against society and her crippled widowhood. In this movie, Ghosh cultivates a new culture of objectifying the male body to the 'female gaze', a perspective projected diametrically opposite to Mulvey's male gaze theory.

Ghosh's *Bariwali* is another example of Ghosh's advocacy of female subjectivity that explores the intricacies of feminine desire and societal expectations through the perspective of a widow, Banalata. The film is an adaptation of his own short story of the same name, which earlier appeared in a prominent women's magazine, *Sananda*, edited by Aparna Sen. This movie revolves around a dilapidated old mansion in suburban Kolkata and the residents and visitors there. The protagonist, Banalata, the landlady, is a victim of the societal manipulation of presupposed gendered norms by the patriarchal society. Banalata is treated as a widow, though her husband died on the eve of their marriage, and no one ever bothers to renew her life in a society where a widower is encouraged to remarry. While she subjugates herself to the societal regulations and manipulations of

Deepankar, the director, her maid Malati and the heroine Sudeshna exercise more power and independence than her primarily due to their financial autonomy. The character Sudeshna, a renowned actress, is set as an alien in the movie, taking her dedication to her work and her sympathy towards the world around her into account. Unlike the other movie stars who are subservient to the directorial instructions, she showed courage to question Dipankar's deviations from the original script and his manipulations. She is an independent woman not only in the case of financial independence but also in making independent decisions, and she is efficient in drawing lines to limit any relationship from challenging her independence. Ghosh has “boldly portrayed women’s desires in almost all of his films, but chose to call himself a “womanist” and not a feminist” (Ians n. p.). He has assigned a unique place for women, setting them free from the hitherto celebrated male gaze in Indian movies and providing them with the agency and autonomy that his male characters failed to achieve.

Besides contributing to the feminist concerns, Tagore is a substantial presence in Ghosh's movies. Tagore and his works are inspired extensively by the Bengali movies of the pre-Rituparno period and considerable influence thereafter, which continues up to the present. Tagore has always been adulated as Ghosh’s spiritual mentor and a perennial influence in Ghosh’s personal life and career. Tagore has always been persistent throughout the evolutionary stages of Bengali cinema. As mentioned in the article, “Rituparno Ghosh and the Enduring Influence of Tagore”, “The great trinity of Bengali cinema – Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen – have all used Tagore explicitly in their cinema. Whether with his

compositions, his fiction work or his politics, Tagore has been a looming presence in the sensibility of these filmmakers” (Roychoudhury n. p.). Ghosh has made three direct adaptations of Tagore’s literary pieces, viz. *Chokher Bali*, *Noukadubi*, *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, and a documentary on Tagore titled *Jeebon Smriti*. Though they were adaptations, Ghosh has given a new shade and dignity to Tagore’s characters by diffusing his notions of gender volatility and kinship relations.

Chokher Bali is one of the most debated adaptations of Tagore by Ghosh that expounds a quadrangular love plot with the same title. The plot is a complex matrix of intertwined relationships between Mahendra, “arrogant, hedonistic, manipulative”, Behari, “an idealistic, with Utopian dreams about nature and the country’s struggle for freedom”, Aashalata, the illiterate, beautiful child bride of Mahendra, and Binodini the femme fatal, “a beautiful, educated and intelligent widow” (Chatterji 211). Though the basic plot remains the same, Ghosh has made his unique deviations from Tagore, pointing out some anomalies in the movie adaptation. The primary difference is in the time period where Tagore’s story happens around the years 1901 and 1902, and Ghosh’s time period shifted to 1905. Another striking historical imbalance is Behari’s character. Amid the story, Binodini, with her charming beauty and guileful vocabulary, convinces Behari to drink tea against his nationalist concerns as his idol Pal himself has acted against the British tea planters in Assam. Though Tagore was never satisfied with his climax, Ghosh’s rendition has made the existential climax a burning affliction in the mind of the spectator. Binodini has played the dice of four lives, including hers and left everyone

in a quandary. Ghosh's Binodini is more of an exotic character than the then-Indian society, especially in terms of widowhood. Her body serves as a weapon for taking meticulous retribution on the two men – Mahendra and Behari – who coldly rejected her. This rejection leaves her unbridled desire for life's hues and flavours to a tasteless and colourless widowhood. Tagore's novel upends society with the portrayal of the emerging new woman in Binodini, whereas Ghosh's plot was designed to consider the demands of contemporary society.

Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish is another adaptation by Ghosh of Tagore's one-act play *Chitra and* elucidates a novel revision of the story of Chitrangada and Arjuna from *Mahabharata*. Tagore drew the plot with much resemblance to that of the original story, in which Chitrangada, who is brought up as a male warrior and falls in love with Arjuna, prays to the god of love, Madan, to transform her into a woman. Ghosh placed Tagore's piece in a modern setting, in which he depicts Madan as a cosmetic surgeon and the process of gender transformation through a series of surgeries, giving a rational and logical shadow and making the mythical plot of Tagore into a contemporary plot. The protagonist of the film, Rudra Chatterji, choreographs a new version of Tagore's play, which is juxtaposed with his own life events. Discontented by the betrayal of his bisexual lover, Partho, Rudra decides to call off his surgery, like Chitrangada who pleads with Madan to transform her back to the male disguise. The movie concludes with both Rudra and his character Chitrangada deciding to embrace the self instead of changing their identity for others: "Rituparno insisted that *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* explores the right of a person to choose his/her sex in a world where

everything is in a state of constant flux” (Chatterji 243). *Chitrangada* is a vociferous proclamation of Ghosh that he never fails to provide a distinctive essence of uniqueness to his film adaptations.

Noukadubi is another novel by Tagore, which is often regarded as his profoundly cinematic scripted novel, Ghosh has adapted and placed his characters in a gyre of free will and fate. Tagore’s *Noukadubi* is “a moving tale of human lives stuck between the wheels of fortune and of complicated human relationships” (“Micro review” n. p.). While Tagore’s 1906 novel was set in 1903, Ghosh has shifted it to the 1920s, providing several alterations in the setting as well as in characters' dispositions as they depart from the existing cultural suppositions that have caused certain traces of anachronism. Annadababu is one such character who shows convinced transmutations in his temperament and perceptions different from Tagore’s character. He is the father of Hemnalini, who is the lover of the protagonist Ramesh. Ghosh has made him a modern-day father by making him a more self-assured character than Tagore’s, where he brought up his son Yogin and daughter Hemnalini alike by providing them with the freedom of choice and expression. He asks Hemnalini whether she loves anyone and approaches Ramesh in response to her wish. Ramesh is another character to which Ghosh has provided a unique identity through his voicing.

Tagore’s Ramesh - wavering, feeble, who is unable to voice his opinion persistently before his father when pressed for marrying Shushila. He merely says that he is committed to someone and that it would be wrong to marry someone else. But when his father presses

that it will be even worse if he does not consent to this marriage, Ramesh remains silent. In the movie, Ramesh explicitly says that a marriage within three days is absurd and that he is engaged to another lady. When Ramesh's father introduces Shushila as a sober and good homemaker, Ramesh retorts. This compelling articulation of his commitment makes Ramesh more human, though much more modern. (Times of India, "Micro review: 'The Boat-wreck' is a Moving Tale of Human Lives" n. p.)

Ghosh added conversations between Ramesh and his father as an extension to Tagore's version, which is not in the novel, to elucidate the father's assertions regarding the obligations of a typical Bengali *bhadralok* (middle-class) patriarch towards his words and duties.

Apart from the inspirations from Tagore's ingenious adaptations, Ghosh always viewed Kolkata with appreciation for giving him a comparable amount of milieu that assisted him become an established filmmaker as it did for his philosophical and intellectual predecessors, Ray and Tagore:

Calcutta is critically important to my upbringing as a filmmaker, as a person, and as who I am today. It is not Bengal; it is Calcutta, and the distinction between the two is important At the same time, Calcutta is not a very high-brow city. It is a very ordinary, plain city where you can mix with different kinds of people; it is not a bureaucratic city, it is not a clinical city. In Calcutta, you see

everything that a Bengali has in a slightly refined and filtered form, so it makes the city very interesting. (Shaikh n. p.)

Rituparno Ghosh's movies possess a unique representation of Kolkata as themes and motifs that can be traced in most of the movies. More than a location in his movies, Kolkata assumed the roles of a character, psyche, emotion, and a gravitational force that enables the entire plot and its characters to revolve around. There are hardly any other filmmakers in Tollygunge who have portrayed such a variety of faces of Kolkata city in different times as Ghosh did.

Ghosh's *Antarmahal* is set in late nineteenth-century Kolkata, when India was a British colony during the time of Queen Victoria. Like his other adaptations, Ghosh made a radical deviation in the time from that of the original text *Pratima*, a Bengali short story by Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay. The movie takes place in 1878, and the thoughts and customs of the society are depicted accordingly so as to elucidate the cultural reference to the time. It was the time when the feudal lords were in constant competition to please British rule, and its extension can be found in the movie where the Zamindar demands Bhushan, the sculptor, to imprint the face of Queen Victoria. It is a dubious question to ask whether any other film depicted the aristocratic life to this extent with harsh depictions of womanhood in feudal chambers of the time. Ghosh demonstrated three types of society prevalent during that time in Kolkata: the landlord and his family, depicting the ruling class, the priests, representing the *Brahmana* class, and the labour class, represented by Bhushan. Priests were accorded the highest reverence during that period, even positioned above the throne. This is further demonstrated explicitly by Zamindar's

recurrent inquiries to the head priest for counsel on his sexual life, his necessity for a male heir, and his blind adherence to his manipulative advice. One such instance is the priest demanding the king to make love with Jashomathi in his presence while he reads Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhava* (The Birth of Kumara). They even persuaded the landlord to let his first wife, Mahamahya, sleep with five priests to hasten the impregnation of Jashomathi. In the context of the film, the ludicrous guidance of the royal priests can be equated with the British officials who exploit and demote the Zamindar as a puppet who plays according to their strings.

Although Kolkata was a hub for avant-garde movements in arts and politics at the national level, it also upheld certain cultural conventions of society, especially regarding gender and class. Discussions on female-oriented concerns like menstruation, female psyche, emotional swings, and sexual interests were frowned upon and frequently disregarded for a long time. Through the character of Zamindar, who "indulges in violent sex with Jashomathi every night and keeps asking if she has had her periods this month" (Chatterji 178), Ghosh disrupts the conservative Indian psyche that considers a man discussing menstruation with a woman as taboo. Though the movie was released in contemporary periods, "*Antarmahal*, a period piece, the explicit and crudity of sexual scenes "shocked" a section of the middle class" (Ians n. p.)

Chokher Bali is yet another tour de force of Ghosh, where he portrays another shade of Kolkata by pushing forward the time period of the story from that of the original inspiration. Kolkata was the epitome of rituals and customary practices during that time and there were hardly any artistic pieces with a Bengali

context depicting the harsh realities of widowhood existed. A specified time border given by Ghosh has witnessed two prominent historical events in Bengal, viz., the death of Swami Vivekananda in 1902 and the partition of Bengal in 1905, which obviously influenced the story. Though every stratum of Bengali society was impacted by these events, Ghosh illustrated the brutal reality through the widow society as they are ostracised in multiple ways.

Kolkata is a land of rituals and religious sacraments, which shape the everyday life of the land and are nurtured by the notions they prescribe. These prescriptions and proscriptions imposed on an entire community of widowhood are precisely portrayed in the film. The rebellion displayed by the character Binodini is not her own but of Ghosh as well. Although Kolkata is a land of radical advancements in thoughts and science, the religious roots and the predetermined *dharmas* or duties are still stuck at heart, as shown through the lives of widows in the movie. According to the *dharma shastras* or the laws of conduct, widowhood can either be the penalty for the sins of previous birth or a result of her *pathivrathya* or chastity in thoughts and deeds in this birth:

“A true *pativrata* can never be widowed because she will never leave her husband, even in death. She will either die before him as a *sumangali* or will accompany him in death . . . according to the ideology of Brahminical patriarchy, if a woman is actually widowed, it means she has not been a *pativrata* . . . She has not taken the opportunity of redeeming herself by committing *sati* and dying with her husband. She is, thus, an outcast and a person to be condemned,

feared and hated. She needs to atone for her sins, the main one being that of having become a widow.” (Chatterji 215)

In most of the literary and artworks that reflected the disposition of nineteenth-century Indian society, widows were represented as “one figure that symbolised total human ignominy (Chatterji 216)”. In *Chokher Bali*, three widows in Kolkata during that time are portrayed, who represent three generations of diversity in perceptions and approaches: Rajalakshmi, Annapurna, and Binodini. Rajalakshmi is the matriarch and the mother of Mahendra, who possesses a firm hand over the household. As a widow, she adheres to traditional recommendations of widowhood with crop hair, fasting and restrictive diets. She constantly inculcates her daughter-in-law Ashalatha, accusing her of bewitching her son Mahendra, who would not otherwise marry such an uneducated village girl who was supposed to be Behari’s bride. Rajalakshmi brings the widowed Binodini to her house as a constant comparison to reproach Ashalatha showing her unworthy to be Mahendra’s wife. Though she represents the widows of the period, she also possesses a few exceptional privileges because of her upper-class status. Being a member of an affluent family in Kolkata, she was not ostracised like other widows of her age, enjoying luxuries, such as a cogent room with opulent furniture and obedient maids to serve. These exemptions gave her the confidence even to amend certain restraints for her own satisfaction, such as defending the act of having tea as a medicine for headaches. However, this is not the case for other widows who are at the lower strata in terms of pecuniary prosperity and social eminence.

Annapurna, the childless widow and Rajalakshmi's sister-in-law represents widowhood at an average level that is neither too rigid nor too malleable. She is not a voice of authority like Rajalakshmi nor a rebellious figure like Binodini. But she represents a great number of widows who succumb to the regulations put forth and followed by the patriarchal social order. She is not much into coercing the household or authorising the code of conduct as her sister-in-law but into spirituality, as most of her community members ought to be.

Binodini is portrayed as a coming-of-age woman who is unwilling to live according to the directions instructed by society. Kolkata could never imagine a revolutionary widow like her, who is educated and possesses free will and agency. She consistently violates the boundaries prescribed to a widow by reading, learning English, and having forbidden foods like chocolate and tea. While widows are not allowed to ornate themselves with jewels or bright-coloured clothing, Binodini disavows the societal norms by adorning Ashalata's crimson red jacket and gold jewellery, which are both prime cyphers of nuptial bliss. She further goes beyond the expectations as an Indian woman, where the tradition has instructed her that the only man she ought to admire and think of is her husband, and as a widow, the only thought she possesses should be spiritual. Binodini, being a radical young widow with a defiant disposition, is not ready to conform to these: she compliments Behari's physique during a picnic and gazes at the wrestlers at Kashi, and the conjugal life of Asha and Mahendra has always been her matter of interest. Binodini is the face of the women in the city who yearn and try to enjoy the colours of life, breaking away from the entanglement of customs and traditions.

Noukadubi is yet another quadrangular love story of Ghosh set in another realm of Kolkata. Chatterji, in a chapter entitled “The Fourth Phase – Rituparno Re-reading Tagore”, in her *Reading Rituparno* makes a pertinent observation that,

(the movie) makes a strong social indictment of the time (a) on the institution of arranged marriages forced by dictatorial fathers on their obedient, duty-bound sons; (b) on the misguided belief in horoscopes to match the pair ideally suited to strike an arranged match; (c) on the patriarchal dictates that deny women the truth even when they deserve it; (d) on how lives of young men and women can be destroyed because, during the wedding rituals, they might not have even seen each other’s face; (e) to establish that one boat wreck can destroy all pre-conceived, socially conditioned arrangement at one stroke of storm, thunder and rain (238).

The intensity of forced consent in marriage is shown through the film when Ramesh fails to recognise whether the lady at the shore is his wife or not. There is a tradition in Kolkata called *shubho drishti*, (the fortuitous look), where the husband and wife look at each other’s eyes three times after the marriage ceremony. In most instances, these will be a forced alliance for the men, and they avoid looking at their brides and women who are too shy as they are brought up in a confined and closed culture of Bengali Hindu households. Though this scene of *shubho drishti* is not portrayed in the movie, it is implied that neither Tagore nor Ghosh will not spare the details of the Bengali culture deep-rooted in the time. The assumption is that neither Ramesh nor his intended bride, Susheela, nor Kamala nor her intended husband, Nalinaksha,

have performed this custom. Otherwise, Ramesh and Kamala would have understood that they were not each other's spouses, and Nalinaksha could have recognised Kamala when she reached his house at Kashi.

The movie draws a parallel between the cities of Kolkata and Kashi, which can be considered as the cities of revelations and realisation, respectively. Kolkata in the film embodies art, love, and modernity, whereas Kashi represents the religious, customary practices that have intertwined with the lives of the locals, and traditional values. Ghosh further presents the educated strata indicating the transforming educational culture of Kolkata with liberal and independent thoughts and visions, which includes Hemnalini, her father Annadababu, her brother Yogi, and Ramesh. Though the basic plot pays courtesy to Tagore, Ghosh skilfully places Tagore as a perennial presence throughout the movie through the constant reference of the characters towards Tagore, his works and his lyrics out of reflective love and admiration: "He (Ghosh) places the story as if written by someone else because Tagore, through his songs, music, and photographic portrait as a young man makes his powerful presence felt through the film" (Chatterji 234).

Kolkata and Kashi are placed in a balanced state where the characters identify the central problem at one point, and they reach a resolution at the counter place. It is from Kolkata that Ramesh and Kamala identify that they missed their real spouses during the boat wreck. Everyone leaves Kolkata with heavy and chaotic hearts at different times. Once she finds Ramesh's advertisement regarding her real husband, Nalinaksha Chatterji, Kamala fails to withstand the fact that she has been living with a strange man all the time. Being brought up in a rural, conservative and

secluded Hindu family, she could not even think about the defamation which might fall upon her for the sin of living with another man, whatever be the circumstances. To escape from this guilt, the solution she finds is to commit suicide by plunging into the river, but she is saved and reaches Kashi, where Nalinaksha resides. Ramesh goes to Kashi to meet Nalinaksha to disclose all the predicaments that have happened in their lives. In the case of Hemnalini, she fails to accept the truth of Ramesh's marriage, and this mental ailment deteriorates her health critically. Due to the advice from the physician, Annadababu takes her to Kashi for a change of her mental trauma. In Kashi, she was in search of serenity, with Tagore and his lyrics. At Kashi, this triangular love puzzle turns into a quadrangular puzzle of four lives shattered simultaneously on a day. All four – Ramesh, Hemnalini, Kamala, and Nalinaksha – seek clarification, and all the chaos gets settled from this point. By the end, Ghosh leaves the question of Kamala to Ramesh unanswered: "Which home is a lie and which, the truth? Do you know? Can you tell?" (*Noukadubi* 02:19:27 - 02:19:34).

Shifting gears from the historical narratives of his earlier works, Rituparno Ghosh's *Memories in March* offers a glimpse into the present-day soul of Kolkata by delving into the complexities of human relationships and the evolving spirit of the metropolis. The movie identifies the drawings of modern Kolkata where the major difference lies in its characters' level of rational understanding of accepting the differences in identities. The movie revolves around Arthi Mishra, whose only son has passed away in an accident in Kolkata. The apparent shift in the disposition and the policies of such an urban life in modern Kolkata is primarily shown through the

family of Shahana Choudhary. The movie opens with the displeased mother of Shahana, *alias* Sona, talking to her husband about the late-night work and tardy behaviour of their daughter, but he tries to convince her with a placid attitude. This demonstrates the unchanging Indian norms on bringing up a woman, and Sona's mother becomes a typical representative of all Indian mothers.

The death and cremation of Siddharth, around which the story revolves, reveals the modern face of the city. A dead body is usually cremated on the banks of the sacred river Ganga, according to Hindu customs, especially for the residents of Kolkata. However, Sid's body is cremated in a gas crematorium, something which has gained popularity in other parts of Indian urban and rural life only in recent years, setting a stark deviation from Ghosh's other movies that uphold the traditional values and customs of rustic India or Kolkata in particular.

The traces of a group of well-educated and radical individuals of a new age where alternative identities are accepted and not scorned can be seen in this film, depicted through the life and career of Ornat Mitra. There are many real-life stories regarding the hostilities faced by homosexual groups, and this indignation varies according to the education, cultural values, and socioeconomic status one holds, which is elucidated through the respect and the reputed position Ornat enjoys in urban Kolkata. Neither his colleagues nor his driver or even his social circle is concerned about his identity, and all that matters is his disposition and his ability as a creative head. No sense of humiliation is explicitly shown to Ornat except by Arati, who thought Ornat "seduced" (*Memories* 00:54:55) her son, and it might be due to Sid's "abnormality" (*Memories* 01:12:20). Thus, this movie reflects the

evolving attitude of modern-day Kolkata towards understanding and accepting humans beyond their sexual preferences and identities.

Deeply inspired by Kolkata and its customs, Ghosh has always devoted space to Kolkata's cultural artefacts and portrayed the land's age-old customs like Durga pooja integrated either to the main plot or to the parallel plot in a number of movies: *Hirer Angti*, Ghosh's debut directorial attempt, happens on the day of Durga pooja, where Gandharva Kumar arrives at Ratanlal Babu's mansion, claiming he is the heir to the family property that Ratanlal has enjoyed for years. This confession disrupts the festive mode of the family and unveils a number of dramatic incidents. The movie begins on the eve of Durga pooja and ends on the night of the festival, presenting the preparations of the pooja, the festive mindset of the children and the dilemma faced by the family members. *Utsab* is another film by Ghosh set in the background of Durga pooja, presenting a family get-together after many years. The reminiscence of childhood memories fades out, giving way to the harsh realities of the middle-aged siblings' financial crises and marital predicaments. In lieu of a reunion of three generations, the festival opens the door to an honest account of how human relationships, values and kinship relations have changed over time. Each character in the movie is created with an intricate web of complex emotions and desire for survival.

Another movie that is placed in the background of Durga Pooja and its allied politics is *Antarmahal*, which is a considerable deviation from the other movies sharing the same theme. While the former two are in a jovial setting of the festival, unravelling familial conundrums, this movie is associated with the male ego and

striving for political autonomy. It is set in the nineteenth-century British India and revolves around the Zamindar's yearning for a male heir at the cost of any atrocities or imprudence. The entire movie happens in association with the preparations for Durga pooja, where Brij Bhushan, the sculptor, is entrusted with making the idol of Goddess Durga with the face of Queen Victoria to please the British for his "Rai Bahadur" title. Weary of Zamindar's brutal marital rapes, his second wife, Jashomathi, gets drawn to Brij Bhushan, who ultimately makes the effigy with the face of Jashomathi instead of the queen, leading to her suicide. Ghosh interprets it as a paradoxical portrayal in which a woman is tortured by the same man or patriarchal culture that reveres her as a goddess. When the film closes with Jashomathi's hanging legs, it raises a question about the divinity and the spiritual and cultural value of the effigy unveiled in the penultimate scene. Ghosh employs the festival as an open podium to discuss and debate human relationships, disclose buried enigmas, and review the devious gender parity.

Apart from depicting multiple angles of Kolkata and retelling Tagore, Ghosh strives to illustrate variegated and discrete sets of human relationships from multiple perspectives. Indian movies have always endorsed advocating the values of relationships, especially family relationships when compared more with foreign and occident productions. It is at this point where the Bengali movies set a clear line of demarcation, where Ghosh and his master Ray can be considered the master carpenters in keeping the relationships in multiple angles and presenting it in a novel perspective. Both were particular in treating the human relationships in their actual encounters with harsh realities rather than the melodramatic counterfeit exchanges

between the characters. Ray made a visible deviation from his contemporaries like Ghatak and Sen by substituting stronger emotional appearances with the accompaniment of music, sometimes silence, and found it to be the most effective way:

But, such devices did not appeal to me; I strongly believe that the most crucial developments in a film should be conveyed as far as possible in predominantly visual terms. I write my own dialogues, and like doing it, but I still find grappling with visual problems a far more exciting task than finding the right words to put into the mouths of my characters (Ray n. p.)

Biswas, in his study “Conjugalities in Satyajit Ray’s Films – Romancing the Humane Way”, noted that Ray has “established this idea of love, longing and intimacy” (n. p.) in an array of his movies, especially in those like *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu), *Devi* (The Goddess), *Kanchanjangha*, and *Mahanagar* (The Big City).

Ghosh has also treated raw human relationships as another recurrent theme through kaleidoscopic perspectives, as “the unpretentious portrayal of physical relationships played a major role” (Ians n. p.) in most of his movies, placing *Chokher Bali* and *Antarmahal* as the best examples. Along with the relationships at the social level, Ghosh also portrayed familial relationships at different strata, which shows considerable deviation from the conventional representations. Rather than the purity and tranquillity of a family, he mainly portrayed a ruptured image of a family with immense tension persisting among the members:

Every Indian film is a 'relationship' film.... Rituparno Ghosh's films are no exception. In fact, he often said that he was interested in exploring the finer nuances within relationships in every film. The 'loneliness' in some of his films and the self-willed 'solitude' in some others are also subtle pointers to what happens and what can happen to a person who feels lost and lonely even within a given relationship. (Chatterji 94-95)

Unishe April, one such movie which is always treated at this stratum of thematic analysis, revolves around the emotional stagnation between Aditi and her mother, Sarojini, and meets its culmination on April 19th, on the death anniversary of Aditi's father. Sarojini, the renowned dancer, has found her own space through dance, which alienated her from her own family and substituted herself as a surrogate for her students. Aditi lost her father long back when she was a child, but the picture he created of her mother remained rooted in her. The fissure in the relationship between Aditi and Sarojini is further accentuated when her boyfriend breaks up with her, stating that his family is not ready for an alliance with a dancer's family.

Ghosh portrayed a strained relationship between two women – a mother and daughter – who never attempted to break the ice between them. On that particular day, when they both were alone, they started pouring out all the genuine emotions that had been stagnant in their minds. In the beginning, Aditi accuses her mother of leaving her and her father alone and running after fame. The frigidity that persists among them starts to dissolve when Sarojini helps Aditi in cooking with her recipe

book. The movie is a journey regarding Aditi's understanding of her mother from the perspective set by her father to the one she really experienced. This understanding was not only of her mother but also of a vast majority of working women. Aditi's father, who was envious of his wife's fame and growth, injected his patriarchal ego into Aditi's little mind. He pictured his independent, sophisticated, and talented wife as an irresponsible wife and unaffectionate mother who prioritises money and fame above family in order to conceal his incompetence and his ego. With a mutual understanding, Aditi and Sarojini put a beginning to a new kinship. Sarojini makes Aditi understand that marriage or rejection is not the end, but it is the sense of independence that one should strive for, and admits her mistake of letting Aditi to be alone for years without showing her love and affection in times of need. Ghosh magically portrayed these emotional diffusions and showed society's patriarchal grudge towards independent women.

Ghosh further knits each character of his other movie, *Bariwali* with fine threads of human relationships from multiple angles, as he states, "My film is about specific forms of exploitation of individuals that we, as filmmakers, practice with impunity" (qtd. in Chatterji 73). As her would-be succumbed to death on the night before their marriage due to snakebites, the landlady Banalata leads a lonely life as a widow in the decrepit ancestral house with her two servants, Malati and Prasanna. She makes a surrogate family for herself with these two companions to escape from her solitude. Her suppressed sexuality and sexual instincts get disguised as her dreams, where marriage rituals form a recurrent symbol.

Ghosh places different perspectives of human relationships that wobble in the tides of indefiniteness and complexities of desire and destiny: one between Banalata and her two servants and the other between Sudeshna, the female lead in Deepankar's movie and the protagonist Banalata. Despite being employees of Banalata, Malati and Prasanna share entirely different treatment to and from their landlady, reflecting the unequal power dynamics in the mansion. Though she is their employer, at times, Malati overpowers her and scolds her for her deeds. She is not shy about sharing her intimate relationship and the gossip regarding her boyfriend with her employer, a sort of freedom that no servant takes during that time. Prasanna, the old male servant, is portrayed as an ambiguous piece in the movie, where he possesses no macho features as a man is supposed to be, but is posed as an inevitable factor in the course of the movie as he is present throughout and even appears in Banalata's dreams. He is very much feminine and is Banalata's only companion throughout, while Malati is intermittently out with her boyfriend.

The next level presents a silent bond between Sudeshna and Banalata, where the victimisation of manipulation conjoins them. She rebukes Dipankar for his iniquitous plot of making Banalata arrange all the needful for his film – her house and each thing in the house Banalata has preserved like the silver betel box and the embroidered mat – revealing the compassion Sudeshna has developed for the latter. She immediately discerns his manipulative disposition to put his career above other's emotions, as she had already suffered it earlier from Deepankar. The relationship between Sudeshna and Banalata is based on sympathy, evident through the former's soliloquies, sighs, and her support for the latter during the shoot.

Ghosh's *Utsab* is an agglomeration of all these bonds and its contemporary reality that unfurls the web of nuanced human relations, delineates a get-together in a joint family during the time of a festival or *utsab*. The movie is about a family reunion of three generations, and the plot gets thickened once the perils and harsh realities of each character are unwrapped and intersected with the other. Ghosh portrays the harsh, ineffable phases of a joint family, like incest, extramarital affairs, domestic abuse and financial instabilities. He intermittently leaves hints about each character and skilfully joints the dots to form a complete picture in the end.

Through their interpersonal feud and familial dynamics, Ghosh's characters dissected hypocrisy, pain, love, and sacrifice that an entire generation was experiencing at the time, questioning where they stood as liberal thinkers in a world that commodified love The family's favourite daughter, Parul, a self-assured and sensible woman, finally broke down to confess what a pathetic marriage she had been in, the second son, Nishit, disclosed that he had been laid off from his high-flying corporate job, and the youngest daughter Keya come clean about her husband Arun's alcoholism and their consequent financial distress. (Shreya Paul n. p.)

Though everyone is preparing for the Durga Pooja, the family's attention is on selling the house and possessing their share so that they can move along with their prosperous future. In the beginning, the viewer witnesses a well-affluent family where all the members seemingly lead an opulent family life, which is shattered, and the reality of the monetary burden each member encounters is shown over the course

of time. “The fragmentation of the joint family has broken people into private islands of isolation and alienation” (Chatterji 97). Each member is living on their own isolated island but is somewhere interconnected with the idea of family.

Parul, the daughter of the house, endures a miserable and abusive family life due to her husband, Hiren, who possesses obnoxious control over her. Hiren constantly insults Parul about her past love with her cousin, Sisir, as a tool for manipulation. When other family members eventually find some resolution to their problems towards the end, Parul remains trapped in her husband’s control and sacrifices her son’s desire to do film studies but sends him to the USA for an MBA.

A hint towards the next generation's repetition of Parul’s and Sisir’s life is shown as if in a loop through the infatuation between her son Joy and her niece Shompa, and Parul, being aware of the pain in such relationships, tries to keep them apart. Meanwhile, Keya, the younger daughter and her alcoholic artist husband, Arun, who are on the verge of divorce due to his political activism and alcoholism, ultimately reconcile and decide to stay with her mother to start an art school, stepping into a new beginning. The second son, Nishit, plans to mortgage the property with everyone’s consent and eventually regain financial stability. Nishit is the character through which Ghosh makes a delicate balancing of the bond of siblings. Once his wife gets to know that he lost the job, she handles it maturely and extends all her support to her husband. Likewise, Ashit, the elder brother, also agrees with Nishit to keep the house as a mortgage by speaking to their sisters to help his brother if everything remains unresolved. However, everything ends well as Nishit gets his job back, and Keya’s marital life begins to see a new spring at her home

with Arun, and no one again discusses selling the house: “He fleshes out every single character in the film even the visually absent ones. He stresses the positive side of each character, making each resolution all that more credible and smoother” (Chatterji 100).

Ghosh has shown all colours of human relationships in this film, keeping some in eternal darkness like that of Parul’s, Joy’s, and Sisir's and leaving some unanswered but with evident knowledge regarding the result like that of the unrequited love between Joy and Shompa and the unresolved perils amid Parul and Hiren. This film is a perfect example of Ghosh’s protest on the fairy tale ending of all ends well and everyone living happily ever after, as actual human life is never such a utopia.

Shob Charitro Kalponik is a unique representation of human kinship portrayed in any of Ghosh’s filmography and an entirely novel treatment of love pictured in Indian cinema, which is a “posthumous love” (Datta, Bakshi, and R. K. Dasgupta 228). The movie is about the protagonist Radhika “building a relationship with her dead husband” (Datta, Bakshi, and R. K. Dasgupta 229) Indranil, an acclaimed Bengali poet. The entire plot, thus, can be encapsulated as: “*Shob Charitro Kalponik* is a beautiful story of a husband and wife whose love for each other erodes and decays when both of them are alive, but gains new life when one of them dies while the other is left to find a new meaning in the same relationship” (Chatterji 116). Indranil is a reckless partner and least careful about his wife, making Radhika invest extra effort to run the house, which obviously gets harder once he resigns from his job without informing her soon after he receives the prestigious

prize. Chatterji keenly analyses this state of their marital life and adeptly observes: “He wallows away his time with drinking friends, watching cricket on TV without even wanting to know about the terrible financial disaster Radhika is burdened with” (115-116). There always persisted an invisible wall between them, restricting them from showing their true concerns and affections towards the other: for Indranil, it was his surreal world of poetry and poetic symbolism, and for Radhika, the financial afflictions her husband has dumped over her head. Both have failed to give an explicit presentation of their emotions, but at times, they were realising the residual cascade of affection. “The Mont Blanc pen Indraneel chances upon inside his wife’s purse is a subtle suggestion that she too cared but was vulnerable to the practical pressures of running the family” (Chatterji 118). Radhika’s relationship with Shekhar in the movie remains a question amid the clamour of her relationship with Indranil. Upon a deeper analysis, it cannot be treated as an extramarital affair where she finds a good companion in Shekhar, which Indranil was never, and the former provided the emotional companionship she longed for from her husband. This made her think at one point about divorcing Indranil and marrying Shekhar. But after Neel’s death, the situation changed and “she forges a new relationship not just with her dead husband but also with a language she had rejected” (Chatterji 229).

Indian culture perceives marriage as a new beginning of bliss and hope, which is symbolised by flowers and crimson red, whereas death is the end of all such hopes and is symbolised by dull colours and white flowers. Ghosh equates Radhika’s journey back from her home on hearing about Neel’s death to her first journey to Kolkata with Neel as a bride: “The whole house is full of flowers because

funerals and marriages are rituals that overlap. Therefore, there is a ritualistic similarity in her entering the house for the first time as a new bride and then as a widow” (Chatterji 230). Bringing the colossal portrait of Indranil and placing it in the living room, starting to admire his poetry, and finding references to the poetic symbolisms in it are certain changes that happen within Radhika, which Neel would have expected.

Nandor Ma is a minor character gaining major importance during the movie, where Radhika finds a new guardian in her. Nandor Ma is their maid who was a refugee during the partition. Neel has written a poem about her, which Radhika gets to know only during his condolence ceremony. Though Nandor Ma took care of her even before Neel’s death, she has become more like a guardian to Radhika in her new life of solitude, which buds the building of a new relationship between them. Radhika was explicitly indifferent to her husband’s poetry that was altered after his demise, and she overtly admits his poetry after listening to the poem on Nandor Ma.

Rituparno Ghosh's *Noukadubi* is a poignant exploration of the complexity of human emotions, where societal expectations collide with personal desires. The film delves deep into the complexities of love, duty, and sacrifice, painting a nuanced portrait of characters caught between the pull of tradition and the yearning for individual freedom. The plot revolves around the interchanged couples Ramesh and Kamala, and their true counterparts Hemnalini and Nalinaksha, respectively, by fate through a boat wreck which ingrafted all these lives into a conundrum: “A boat wreck on a night of storm, rain and thunder that throws the lives of the four main characters out of gear, metamorphosing the relationships into something radically

different from what the original plans were” (Chatterji 230). In the beginning, the spectator might sympathise with Ramesh’s situation to marry a village girl named Susheela upon his father’s insistence and on his feeble resistance by noticing that he has given word to Hemnalini, his love interest. The contention between free will and the traditional notions of an Indian upbringing is discussed in the plot.

On his wedding day, his boat wrecks, and he finds a bride on the shore whom he mistook for his wife Susheela until she later reveals herself to be Kamala, the bride of Nalinaksha Chatterji from Kashi. When the truth gets unwrapped before Kamala, she finds herself guilty of being with a strange man and considers her chastity and character in question. Though she attempts suicide by plunging into the Ganga, the currents of fate beached her onto the shores of Kashi, where she meets her intended mother-in-law, Nalinaksha’s mother. A novel relationship devoid of carnal infatuation transpires between Ramesh and Kamala before Ramesh clarifies with Nalinaksha his role as a guardian to Kamala. Ghosh portrays a neoteric, uncontested tone of the relationship between a man and a woman, unprecedented in the Indian tradition.

Ghosh's cinematic masterpiece *Memories in March* offers a unique and sensitive perspective on the complexities of family dynamics, grief, and the acceptance of one's loved ones' identities. is the journey of a bereaved mother, Arati Mishra, toppled in a quagmire on knowing her son’s alternate sexual preference and her attempts to tackle the paroxysm out of the new revelation. The film's central focus is on the mother who interrogates the homosexual relationship between the son and his partner introduces a layer of complexity and challenges societal norms,

ultimately presenting a nuanced and compassionate portrayal of love, loss, and the enduring power of memory. She confronts her son's homosexual partner, Ornob, with a conservative prejudicial mentality but eventually understands him, and through his reminiscence, she encounters her son in his identity, which is new to her. The film presents an array of relationships – between a daughter and her father, a son and his mother, two partners, and an open gay and their surroundings – to demonstrate a novel exemplar approach through a group of educated middle-class society, which is obviously Ghosh's established milieu where he places his characters.

There are three mother characters in this movie who portray three different types of maternal affection and care: the mothers of Shahana, Sidharth and Ornob: The last one is introduced only through his words but never made an explicit appearance. The film opens where Shahana's parents discussing her job and late-night shifts. Shahana's mother is an ordinary Indian mother who is worried about the reputation of her daughter, which could get ruptured by her job at the advertising company and late-night shifts. For her, the late night for a girl is night eight or nine. The conventional mother, ingrained in her, overpowers the proud feelings at her daughter's achievements with conformist concerns regarding the latter's marriage and societal acceptance. She feels torn between her conformist thoughts regarding a girl child, irrespective of her independence and status and being happy with her daughter's accomplishments. Ghosh places Shahana's father juxtaposed with her mother as an alien father figure in a conservative society who deviates from the age-old fatherly expectations of an autocrat. He explicitly expresses his pride about his

daughter's accomplishments and is not bothered about what others think about her. He is a man who respects women and believes in their self-respect and independence. There are certain moments that might feel the utopian shades in his characterisation, but he also notes that there are such male figures who are away from their hegemonic strata but render a position of male feminists, a commendable and imitable personality.

Arati Misra, the second mother figure, is the female lead of the film. Unlike Shahana and her mother, there are no combination scenes of Arati and Sidharth presented, but their bond is depicted through Sid's letters to her and his voice-overs. She is a single mother who brought up her son alone after the divorce and shared an intense emotional connection with her son: she was his best friend with whom he shared every detail of his day, except the fact that he was gay and had a partner. Though an educated, self-made woman, the conformist society in which she has been brought up made her think her son is "abnormal" (*Memories* 01:12:20) and might have required counselling. After learning the truth, Arati meets Ornob, Sid's partner: a meticulously knitted scene where the tension of bursting anger stagnates in the air. As a lovable mother, instead of blaming her son, she accuses Ornob of seducing her son. But once she starts understanding Ornob, she also gets to know her son better. It was only later that she understood that Sid tried a lot to disclose his affair but could not, and they were planning to visit her in person in Delhi. Ornob asks Arti, "Which of the two is more unacceptable to you – the fact that he (Siddharth) is no more or the fact that he was gay?" (*Memories* 01:18:52 - 01:19:02). This is the dilemma of most families who encounter the knowledge of their

children's alternate sexual preference, which suddenly makes the hitherto acquaintance into an alien. What demarcates Ghosh and his movies from other contemporaries and predecessors are the treatment of emotional presentation and the unique way of dealing with an inimical situation without losing its momentum and gravity. Arati is the perfect example, as she never left the grip of her patriciate manners, even at the brim of an emotional jolt. Though she makes her stand clear by showing explicit hostility towards Ornob at the beginning, Ghosh never placed her to a degenerated level of over-dramatic mother of Indian soap dramas.

Like Siddharth, around whom the entire plot revolves, Ornob's mother is also not shown anywhere. She is present only in a couple of dialogues where Ornob confabulates with Arati that his mother is fond of Sid. What puzzles Arati is the Ornob's mother's acceptance of their relationship, and she makes a comparison between Ornob's mother and herself: She is the face of a mother who accepts her child as it is. Through these two mothers of distinctive class and educational and societal statuses, Ghosh depicts two distinctive motherhoods but connected with pure love for their sons.

In the movies of Ghosh, self-learning and indoctrination are less explored, but evident themes: the uneducated or entirely dependent females get educated during the course of the plot, getting uplifted into a free woman who can think independently and possess a free spirit. In these films, learning is not restricted only to scholarly practices but also to knowledge regarding one's own life and its control. In this realm, Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* sets a benchmark for enduring academic investigations through an involuted comparison between the four major characters:

Binodini, Ashalata, Mahendra, and Behari. Except Asha, all others are educated and well-versed in both Bengali and English. Ghosh's Binodini is the prelude to the new woman who can think independently. She was from a time when society believed that women receiving education, especially learning English, was a sin. Her education from the convent sisters laid the foundation for her independent thinking. Ashalata is placed in stark contrast to Binodini and is a measurement of the insurgence in Binodini, providing a comparison between a new woman and a conventional one.

Chokher Bali can be treated as a *bildungsroman* narrative considering the transition of Ashalatha from an ignorant, naïve innocent girl to a woman of realisation and sapience. In the beginning, she is the product of a conformist society who is illiterate, finding happiness in carnal pleasures by wearing bright sarees and ornaments, thinking her sole duty is to please her husband in bed. Even though Mahendra tries to educate her so that he can have some quality time sharing his poems and discussions, she is least interested and upholds the thought that this might get her husband in trouble. Later, the knowledge she acquired was not from books but from her life. The nail marks she has found on the body of Binodini gave her the cue regarding the latter's affair with her husband. Other than confronting her husband's illicit affair, she takes a moment to retrospect and comprehend the life she had, which was largely superficial. Though she leaves Mahendra, knowing she is pregnant, she comes back to the mansion not as the old one but with an aura of cogency.

Identical to *Chokher Bali*, Ghosh's *Noukadubi* also recounts a story of cognisance and ignorance of the protagonists, Ramesh and Kamala, whose lives have taken a turnabout through a boat wreck. In the beginning, both are ignorant that they are currently living with a stranger as they have mistaken the partners, but Ramesh comprehends the fact when Kamala discloses that she is not Susheela as he calls her. She asks why they are not going to Kashi as she had been informed that her husband is a doctor, Nalinaksha Chatterji, a resident of Kashi. She is the microcosm of the Bengali traditional woman who is illiterate and is trained only for household chores. Rather than Ramesh, this movie is about the expedition of Kamala. He takes initiation to educate her and takes her admission to a convent school, which is an unimaginable opportunity for a girl like Kamala. Like Ashalata in *Chokher Bali*, Kamala has also become a scholar of life.

Ghosh is always a global icon from Tollygunge who proudly presents selfhood above all the obscurities and bullying around. During prior phases, he “confined himself within the comforts of the bourgeois living room” (Datta et al. 2). Like his personal vision, his characters are also the proponents of free will and individual choices. It was during the latter phase that he made a radical transformation in his physical appearance through a novel sartorial choice that makes an evident deviation from ubiquitous gender norms hitherto practised and prescribed. Ghosh's queer trilogy has played a substantial role in promoting him to a new stratum of gender concerns by introducing the concepts of gender fluidity to the common Indian perspective. Queer trilogy is a distinctive categorisation that has been made by the scholars of Ghosh and discussed primarily in an article by Kaustav

Bakshi entitled “A Room of Hir Own: The Queer Aesthetics of Rituparno Ghosh”, grouping the movies *Arekti Premer Golpo*, *Memories in March* and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* a trilogy. Later, Mukherjee explicitly used the term “gay trilogy” in his article entitled “Gays and Society, Home and the Self: A Study of Rituparno Ghosh's ‘Gay Trilogy’” (Akaitab Mukherjee n. p.).

Although referred to as Ghosh’s trilogy, not all the movies are his directorial productions but got their acclamation just because of his prodigious performance. *Arekti Premer Golpo* is directed by Kaushik Ganguly, in which Ghosh plays the roles of two queer characters – the young Chapal Bhaduri, a renowned Bengali folk theatre artist and Abhiroop Sen, a documentary director. In *Memorie in March*, directed by Sanjay Nag, Ghosh plays the role of Ornob Mitra, a bereaved homosexual who lost his partner in an accident. *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* is the final one in the trilogy directed by Ghosh and performed the role of famed choreographer Rudra Chatterji. In the earlier two in the trilogy, one cannot overlook Ghosh’s influence as creative director, which made them ubiquitously celebrated as the voice of queer identity along with the third film. They not only confine to a single term of gay, as mentioned in Mukherjee, but discusses queer as an umbrella term where masculine and feminine genders get into an ambiguous distinction.

CHAPTER 4

GENDER SPECTRUM:

READING THE QUEER TRILOGY

Rituparno Ghosh is internationally reputed for his delicate and subtle portrayals of intricate human emotions and relationships. In his extensive filmography, the queer trilogy excels in the exploration of queer themes and illustration of their honest experiences, which is atypical in Indian mainstream media. His trilogy constitutes Ghosh's *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, Kaushik Ganguly's *Arekti Premer Golpo* (Just Another Love Story), and Sanjoy Nag's *Memories in March*. Among these, the 2012 movie *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* is a loose adaptation of Tagore's play *Chitra*, placing it in a contemporary setting. His involvement in the other two movies goes beyond that of an actor as he served as their creative director, lending those productions a sure *Rituparno touch* (italicised to emphasise). Several elements in Kaushik Ganguly's 2010 movie, *Arekti Premer Golpo*, including its chromaticity, music, frames, and other components, subtly and overtly demonstrate Ghosh's enormous impact and potential. Similarly, Ghosh and Sanjoy Nag collaborated on *Memories in March* (2010), with Ghosh authoring the screenplay and Nag directing the movie. Ghosh's presence and influence provide unique aesthetics and grandiosity in the character portrayals, each with a distinct identity and room for several interpretations that can be traced in these movies.

Even under the limelight of international acclamations, he was a disputed figure under constant scrutiny regarding his sexuality and its explicit acceptance. The period in which Ghosh worked on his notable trilogy was a pivotal time for queer pride in India, where certain parts of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code were declared illegal by the High Court of Delhi in 2009 regarding same-sex acts. According to the court, penalising the consensus sex between two adults, whether heterosexuals or not, is a violation of Article 21 of the Constitution of India, which guarantees the right to privacy and personal liberty. However, in 2013, the Supreme Court turned down this verdict, showing it is the privilege of the Parliament to make and amend the decisions and not of the Court (Supreme Court Observer, n. p.). It was around this time that Ghosh made a statement regarding his views on sexuality while reacting to a statement made by the then Minister of Health, Ghulam Nabi Azad, in his column in 2011 in *Robbar*, a Bengali magazine he worked for:

Read in the newspaper that the Minister of Health, Ghulam Nabi Azad, has addressed homosexuality as a ‘disease from the West’.

After reading the news, he seems to me, not just a conservative but also parochial. I cannot imagine that a central minister of India is so ignorant about the homosexuality depicted in the temples of Khajuraho or Konark. Not only his mind is narrow, but his cultural knowledge is the same... After the verdict of the Delhi High Court, Baba Ramdev said similar things about homosexuality—he said that he could cure the disease. At that time, I made a joke to my friends ‘I should then go to Ramdev for treatment. I am not sure how much the

disease will be cured, but I can guarantee that after a few days, Ramdev Baba will be completely homosexual.’ That journey to Ramdev did not happen. However, after returning from London, I am thinking of spending some days with the Health Minister. (qtd. in Acharjee n. p.)

Like Ghosh, his characters also consistently refrain from portraying prejudiced, stereotypical notions in their performance. His characters in the queer trilogy and other works emphasise an array of identities than consistently adhering to the binary distinctions of the binary structure of gender formulations. A great deal of inspiration from the Bengali culture, like the *Brajabuli* songs, Tagore’s lyrics of the *Vaishnava* songs, and an assortment of Bengali literature, is evident in his films.

In the entire trilogy, Ghosh played the role of a queer, which is a strong declaration of his coming out through the explicit display of his fluid identity and non-conformity into the binary edifice. He was in a relentless experiment with his own sexuality through the globally much-wrangled sartorial adoptions rather than being alarmed or bashful by the stigmatisation and alienation from society. His surfacing in the limelight during the culminating years of his life was a revolution by his choice of gender-neutral attires and vociferously affirming his fluid state. The queer trilogy thus becomes the documented pledge of his gender politics, proclaiming a fluid identity which is placed at the peripherals of established dogma. Ghosh’s trilogy provided a powerful objection to the preconceived notions of queer in any artefact – either as a jester with an exaggerated action of reprehensible deeds of the counter-gender or a fraudster who earns their livelihood through prostitution

or deception – along with the robust proclamations of his gender politics around the idea of fluidity and his sexual preferences, thereby insulating himself from the standardised binary norms. His queer characters are all well-educated, intelligent, sophisticated, opinionated, integrated into society through their respectful careers, and essentially, all of them are comfortable and have a strong understanding of their own sexuality and gender preferences.

Kaushik Ganguly's *Arekti Premer Golpo* is a reworking of his telefilm *Ushnotar Jonno* (For Warmth), which is also about the life of Chapal Bhaduri, the movie's primary focus. The main protagonist, Abiroop *alias* Roop is Ghosh's most profound dramatic character in appearance among the other queer characters in the trilogy. Roop is a filmmaker and is in a relationship with the bisexual Basu. His life draws a parallel with the life of Chapal Bhaduri, who was once a celebrated *jatra* artist – a popular Bengali folk theatre performance – in feminine roles. The partners of Roop and Chapal were bisexuals who left them for a heterosexual female at different points in time. At this juncture, the story of Rudra in *Chitrangada* intersects with the lives of Rudra and Chapal, where Rudra's partner Partho starts a relationship with Kasturi and leaves Rudra in the hospital bed. Unlike the other protagonists Rudra and Ornob in the trilogy, Roop is a resilient rebel not only in his voracious arguments regarding his identity but even in his presentation of the self to society: wearing sound make-up, applying thick *kajal* (eyeliner) and with deep defined lips using lipstick and lip liner and, notably, in sartorial choices, opting the clothes sticking not to either of the gender binaries, but an amalgamation of both.

The renowned and controversial director Abiroop Sen, played by Rituparno Ghosh himself, with his partner Basu and the team, including Momo, the creative head, and Dorothy, the foreign producer, approach Chapal Bhaduri (played by the legendary performer himself) to document his enforced seclusion. While Roop represents the coming out of category from their closets, Chapal, a product of the conformist society, rests in his closet. The society, to please their heterosexual insecurities, conveniently reinstates that Chapal's effeminacy is not because of his sexuality but due to the years of performance in a female role in *jatra*. Roop's sexual priority as a homosexual and his deviant sartorial codes provoke the homophobic psyche of the residents at Chapal's locale, instigating intemperate outbursts from the mob against him. This is further worsened by a newspaper article by an infuriated reporter who represents the homophobic media. By concealing the documentary's real intention, they provoke the people through the article headline, "Gay Bonding Gets Festive?" (*Arekti* 00:25:05).

Through the role of *Shitala*, the goddess of vile pox in the *jatra*, Chapal Bhaduri (renowned by his stage name as Chapal Rani) articulates the accepted truth that society has only venerated male gods forgetting any female goddess who outperforms the former and provides solutions to their ailments. This is further elucidated through the beginning shot of the film, pointing towards the hysteric heteronormativity and homophobia prevailing for ages:

Render unto me thy feverant deference. I know the celestial medicine
 – men rule here. Ashwinikumaras and Dhanwanthiri. And the world
 accepts their medicine.... But they have any cure for the vile pox to

relieve mankind No! yet these established ones gain men's respect. But the one who has no status in society, be she ever so worthy, will always be ignored. This is the eternal law. (*Arekti* 00:00:30 – 00:01: 34)

The film features three explicit queer characters as they defy cisgender prescriptions, viz. Roop, Basu, and Chapal, in which Chapal and Roop manifest homosexual predilections, and Basu identifies as bisexual as he is already married to Rani and is in a relationship with Roop. Even though they all share similar dilemmas about agency and identity, they identify with themselves differently. While Roop is a self-declared gay and admits his identity as a non-heterosexual individual, Chapal, on the other hand, feels guilty thinking he would have had greater acceptance if he had acted like a man. Against this, Roop quotes, “I think women are one category, men are another, we (Roop and Chapal) are third category” (*Arekti* 01:53:25). Here, Roop asserts the perspectives of both the character and the artist together and tries to make Chapal understand that his displaying disposition is because of his orientation and motivates him to accept his identity. Roop considers himself neither a man nor a woman: he performs a neutral, fluid state of gender where characteristics of multiple genders are exhibited.

This movie explicates the concept of fluidity as a part of queer existence, alongside questioning the restricted emotional and sexual exhibition of queer individuals who are forcefully confined to cisgender practices. Roop's acts deconstruct the reinstated hegemonic ideals of a man through the overt presentation of emotions: He is open in showing the emotional peaks and downs, like passing

kisses to his mother in the phone calls and breaking down in front of Uday, his friend when the police and the natives of Hetampur object to the further shooting of the documentary, which is out of sanity to the conventional masculine picture. This transcending of gender perceptions is further accentuated through the scenes where Roop recurrently addresses Basu as a “bitch” during their intimate conversations, a feminine name attributed to the male that seems awkward to the conventional psyche.

The movie broadly depicts two types of society: the educated class, which is ready to accept the individuals as they are, and the less educated Bengali middle class. If the class of the society is taken into consideration, it is always the middle-class society that stands chaotic, possessing insecurity in upholding their customs and cannot tolerate the impending change. At the same time, there is a distinctive class in the movies of Ghosh, which is an upper middle class – a well-educated, sophisticated group within the middle class itself – who are moulded to accept and initiate changes in the values and age-old proscriptions of the conventional society. The first set of society shown in the film is the neighbourhood of Chapal, who instantly demurs the crew after the news article. They are the bigoted group who blurts, “Having enough problems with two sexes . . . you (the crew) are the perverts! Promoting ‘homos’ and disrupting the society” (*Arekti* 00:29:48 – 00:29:50). They assume the role of the protectors of the societal conventions, and they hinder Chapal from being an open gay or from coming out of his closet. This homophobic community not only includes the aged community preserving conformist norms but also the young generation who imbibe conservative perceptions. The reporter Sandip

is one such youngster who possesses such prejudice towards the queer. His interview regarding the documentary shoot shows how the majority, irrespective of education and money, approach the queer:

Sandy: What is the USP of your film? His (Chapal's) personal life or his career?

Roop: It's hard to tell.

Sandy: What I meant was, is your film focussing on his career or his sexuality?

Roop: Sexuality? I'm not doing an ad film on Viagra!

Sandy: I'm sorry. I meant sexual preference.

Roop: And why would that be particularly relevant?

Sandy: I mean, you're doing a documentary on THE Chapal Bhaduri!

So....

Roop: Suppose I was making a film on ... say Amitabh Bachchan.

Would it still be relevant...his sexual preference?

Sandy: Obviously not.

Roop: What's so obvious about it?

Sandy: Because it's normal

Roop: Ok. And what makes you such an authority on what's normal and what's not?

Sandy: I just want to know the details of the film.

Roop: In that case, can we just conclude that I'm making a film on a forgotten legend of Bengali theatre. And the art of male actors impersonating female roles. Is that ok? (*Arekti* 00:16:50 – 00:18:00)

The second group, represented by Momo, Rani and Dorothy, starkly contrasts the orthodox prejudiced society. They are the educated, upper-middle-class group who accept their colleagues irrespective of identity and sexual orientation and even defend them, as Momo always supports Roop. There is a subset of people on the outside of these classifications of acceptance and rejections of the gender spectrum who are unable to receive individuals like Chapal and Roop but do not explicitly rebuke them. The manager Ashok is a representative of this group, who attempts to persuade Roop to change his dress while going to the shooting by asking him, "Can you come in plain clothes?" (*Arekti* 01:45:09), where he reveals the fears underneath the sweet facade of compassion. He thinks that Roop's identity is what incites the locals there to protest the shooting, rather than the fact that they are making the documentary on Chapal, who has concealed his identity in the dilapidated room in the outskirts of Kolkata. Ashok's question to Roop further underlines that the overt presentation and revealing of one's sexual preferences catalyses society's fears about the remotest possibility of deconstructing the long-standing beliefs about gender standards is what causes them to be exasperated and anxious than the existence of that reality. However, Ashok's euphemistic concern enrages Roop, who responds whether he is wearing a uniform, pointing towards the widespread tendencies to adhere to predetermined codes of conduct founded upon

the binary structure of gender, analogous to a herd of sheep that exhibits no sign of differences; if any are discovered, they are promptly banished from the mainstream before making any changes. Instead of trying to comprehend those individuals who do not wear such *uniforms* (italics mine to emphasize) and step away from conventional notions, there is a mass tendency to quarantine them. This infuriation gets even worse when Basu asks Roop to back off from the shoot with his physical presence, and the rest of the team can handle it, which is a clear statement of his fear of expulsion and unreadiness for being a rebel like Roop. Basu's action of leaving alone Roop at a pivotal time serves as a premonition of Roop's impending separation from Basu forever.

Ganguly and Ghosh have deliberately infused certain scenes that a majority of ordinary Indians are dubious about the concept of the third gender due to their temptation of confining a person either to the gender called male or female. Prasantho, a crew member, recurrently calls Roop "madam", which is many times rectified by Basu and Roop: "Please stop him calling Madam. No *dada, didi*, just Abhiroop" (*Arekti* 00:31:13). After a point of tolerance, Roop mocks at Prasantho that if he calls him madam once again, he will have to buy imported sanitary napkins. Ganguly attempts to illustrate another form of monitoring that the misinformed lower class and the insecure middle class impose on homosexuals or non-binary groups through the character of the cab driver. There comes a point at which his staring at Roop and Basu in the rear-view mirror becomes downright voyeuristic. He keeps his eyes fixed on Roop during their ride. This approach

exposes the insecurities and the urge for heteronormativity among the ordinary middle and lower classes, who become mired in their unchanging daily routines.

Arekti Premer Golpo renders the classic montage technique, keeping the lives of Roop and Chapal juxtaposing each other. This extends a significant effect on the spectatorship in understanding the final alienation of these characters from their respective lovers who left them for a heterosexual woman companion. Both have faced ostracization, though in different forms, due to the change in the time period. Roop is more privileged than Chapal in multiple ways, irrespective of these efforts of ex-communication from the mainstream appearance from different parts of his personal and professional life. Roop's independence and autonomy are achieved through his education and a reputed career, which is further aided by the changes in the mentality of his family and colleagues caused by wider global exposure and understanding. However, the fate of Roop and Chapal resides in isolation, as Ghosh observes:

Time and space collapse into each other as the chronicler (Roop) assumes the persona of his subject (Chapal Bhaduri), creating a virtual reality that mirrors both their lives, one from the past and another happening in the present. Similar complexities of divided loyalties weave themselves into each other and into the film and its actors/characters. The bonds of sisterhood with a lover's suffering 'legitimate' wife are also similar, forcing Roop to question his fake liberation and face his essential solitude as a marginal being in society. (Chatterji 271)

Most of the characters of the main plot are placed in Chapal's story in the past to highlight the similarities between these parallel plots of Roop's and Chapal's lives: Ghosh plays the roles of both Roop and young Chapal, Indraneel Sengupta being Basu and Kumar (the bisexual partners of Roop and Chapal respectively), Jisshu Sengupta in the roles of Uday and Tushar, Churni Ganguly as Rani and Gopa – the wife of Basu and Kumar respectively – and Raima Sen as Momo and Sheela.

The movie weaves together the moments from the lives of Chapal and Roop: Scenes from Roop and Basu's current life are placed in between those of Chapal's and Kumar's in the past. One such example is the scenes that are collaged with physically intimate scenes or the act of fornication between Roop and Basu, along with showing the same between Chapal and Kumar. Also, the interference of a third person – Sheela and Gopa in the past and Rani in the present – and how it is affected in their relationships are discussed in a similar pattern. When Roop and Basu discuss Rani and the future of their relationship as Basu experiences a dilemma in leaving either (Roop or Rani) from his life, the viewers are shown a similar conversation in the next scene between Chapal and Kumar about Kumar's wife, Gopa, where confronts a similar predicament. If it was Gopa's continuous ailments, primarily, and also the fear of societal expulsion on getting revealed his homosexual preferences that hinder Kumar from leaving her, it is Rani's pregnancy that dissuades Basu from moving away. In parallel to these dilemmas of Kumar and Basu, the film portrays a delicate relationship of sisterhood that develops between Chapal-Gopa and Roop-Rani, thereby sharing an emotional connection. Both Gopa and Rani are portrayed as the ones who really understand Chapal and Roop more than their partners, as Rani

says: “Sometimes I can’t help it envy him (Basu), you know. I also want someone to love me as much as you love him.” (*Arekti* 02:00:39 - 02:00:57). Similarly, Chapal offers physical and emotional support to the bedridden Gopa and taken care of her as a child. The most exciting technique used here is not only the scenes are montaged but also the dialogues. Most of the time, Chapal’s questions to Kumar in the past are answered by Basu in his reply to Roop’s concerns in the present. Another instance of this immaculate integration of time and space is when Uday uses his camera to capture some pictures of Roop and Basu standing beneath a tree, the viewers are shown the intimate scenes between Chapal and Kumar as seen through the camera. The embarrassment flickered on Uday's face conveys without saying that what he saw is a similar intimacy between Roop and Basu, which Ganguly deftly substituted with Chapal and Kumar.

Other than Gopa and Rani, the lives of the queer couples are further strained by the introduction of another character at a desperate point in their life – Tushar, a carpenter in the past and Uday in the present. It runs side-by-side when Uday, least concerned about the controversies overblown about Roop’s and Chapal’s sexual preferences, enters the life of Roop as a solace, offering his ancestral house for the completion of the shooting, whereas the desolated Chapal meets Tushar in the past, with whom he finds the protection and sense of being in a family. Chapal is later brought back by Kumar to his house as a free servant, though he says that Chapal will be the owner of the house. As the years pass, Kumar moves away from Chapal entirely and starts a relationship with another artist, Sheela. He even dares to introduce Chapal as the housekeeper to Sheela. Kumar’s lean towards Sheela is

juxtaposed with the alternative shots where Basu and Momo share some quality time discussing the former's relationship with Rani and Roop.

The two homosexual protagonists showing fluid characteristics exhibit differing degrees of subservience, which is explained through the spatiotemporal gap between the two parallel plots. Chapal, who identifies as a woman trapped in a man's body, thus involuntarily acts docile to the gender expectation of a woman. He is dependent on some man physically, emotionally and financially at different periods of his life. He depends on Kumar at the beginning, and later Tushar when the former abandoned him as the physical and emotional pillar, whereas the theatre manager was his monetary provider, who left him with the emergence of more female participants on public platforms. Chapal's prominent feminine qualities made these men treat him like a woman and exploit him physically and emotionally.

Chapal goes on playing the role of the other 'woman' in Kumarbabu's life without demur, almost taking for granted the heteronormative family as a legitimate institute to which he is a natural outsider. Therefore, he does not protest when he is eventually abandoned. Even for that matter, he lets himself be completely dominated by Tushar as well when they start living together, and when he decides to leave, Tushar almost nonchalantly becomes violent and slaps him, clearly signalling the hierarchy of the relationship they share. Whatever happens to Chapal would have been unexceptional had it happened to a woman. (Bakshi, "Arekti " 119)

In contrast to Chapal's overreliance on others, Roop is more independent and even gives Basu the space to return to his family life. His mother is always a phone call away and is the only one whom he heavily relies upon for emotional support.

This movie presents the notion of queer at three levels: one is their physical appearance or how they present themselves in public, how the public deal with them, and their struggle and longing to have an ordinary life. Roop's appearance is a novel stroke to the middle-class Bengali society, which is restricted to neither gender norms. Being a man in sex, he prefers unique and fluid sartorial fashion to conformities. Besides his clothing and bright makeup, his hairstyle grabs their attention, though short as most males, the fringes make it different by approximating that to of women. When Uday asks Roop to change his hairstyle as it resembles someone else, it implicitly shows the unconscious efforts of Roop's inner psyche to resemble Rani through a similar hairstyle and makeup with dark *kajal* and lips, thereby fruitlessly trying to replace her in Basu's life. It might be this attempt is understood by Uday, which made him advise Roop not to be someone else and to be himself. Decoding what he meant, Roop goes for a haircut which is later explained as a rebellion in Indian film history in queer representation – a completely shaven head. Ashok misunderstands Roop's shaved head as mourning, but that was his statement regarding his queer identity, especially of Ghosh's fluid state in which one becomes ambiguous in deciding whether this shaven head belongs to a man or a woman or neither.

The movie also discusses the least addressed segment in the life of every queer: the right to have a regular family life like anyone else. Here, Chapal and

Roop constantly try not to lose their partners and have a family. Chapal got the sense of being in a family and someone to really take care of from Tushar, but when Kumar called him back, he could not resist. As Chapal once said to Kumar, “You lured me here with the promise of a home of my own. If this family’s joys and sorrows have become a part of me, I can’t help it” (01:48:20 – 01:48:30). In Chapal’s case Kumar was not remorseful in making him a servant or covertly asking him to leave after squeezing out all his youth and health. In the case of Basu, he is not ready to leave Roop for Rani, but Roop’s question of which one of them (Roop and Rani) he would be choosing leaves him wordless. Roop understands that Basu cannot risk losing both Roop and Rani, especially after knowing Rani has conceived. Rani is presented in the movie as the one in the border community who is educated and understands Roop’s plight, but at the same time, she is a typical Bengali wife who cannot spare her husband, particularly when she is becoming a mother. This tug-of-war for a stable family between Roop and Rani is shown through short, condensed dialogues.

Rani: You probably think I want to separate the two of you. Let me be honest with you. You are not wrong. I know Basu for the past ten years. He won’t be able to keep up this balancing act all his life... he is going to slip

Roop: But we are there, we can hold him up

Rani: We? . . . It’s not easy . . . Just not easy. (*Arekti* 02:01:56 – 02:02:45)

Rani's question "We?" (02:02:32) displays the impossibility of leading a threesome family life, which ultimately leads to a loss for all three. There is a connotation of disbelief in Rani's words and stating life is a *cul-de-sac* of having a life together by a queer and a cisgender, ultimately meeting a dead-end. Though Rani is the mouthpiece of the director, showing immense sympathy for Roop and the community he represents, Ghosh, through his character, poses a relevant question: "If I were a woman, would you have reacted the same way?" (*Arekti* 02:04:56).

Amid all the insurgencies in the name of their identity and sexuality that subvert the rigid conventionalities and social hierarchy, Roop and Chapal share a sense of empathy for each other. Roop, being an outsider of the binary concept, discerns the feminine fancies and impulses in Chapal's male body, which is articulated to Basu in responding to his concern about the continuity of the documentary: "How does it matter? What is more important? The way we actually live our lives or the way we want to?" (*Arekti* 00:09:43). In turn, Chapal also understands Roop's predicament on the arrival of Rani to the shooting set with the news of her pregnancy. Though Roop tries hard to maintain a calm tone while sharing the news with his mother, his voice gets quavered and is comprehended by Chapal, who had gone through similar or worse situations. Chapal's words to Roop at this time expose the grim reality of their inevitable fate, transcending time and space: "But the real truth about you and me is of no value to the world" (*Arekti* 01:45:09).

Memories in March is a 2010 Indian drama by Sanjoy Nag and the second in Ghosh's queer trilogy. This movie portrays Ghosh as an actor with a magnificent

graze through his character, Ornob Mitra. The movie moves along the journey of a mother, Arati Misra, regarding her deceased son Siddharth's alternate sexual preference of being gay. The movie discusses the shocked mother's confrontation with and hostility toward her son's partner, Ornob, and the later change of events that leads to the burgeoning of a new form of indulgent relationship between Arati and Ornob. In Nag's words, "This film is about a different kind of border crossing, an interior one. It's about borders drawn between normative social prejudices and a non-normative existence A homophobic and conservative mother who learns to accept that her son was gay and his friend" (qtd. in Chatterji 274).

The movie begins when Arati Misra, a resident of Delhi, travels to Kolkata to find out about her only son's death in an accident. She is received by Shahana Choudhary, a colleague of Siddharth *alias* Sid and is taken to the crematorium, where she meets Ornob, the creative head of their team. Later, Arati is taken to Sid's flat, while in the background Sid's letters to her about his flat are voiced over. Her entrance was not just a physical entry to Sid's flat but also to her own son's closeted self. She visits Sid's office to take all the possible things that belong to her son but ends up in a dispute regarding it with Ornob. For her, she is the only right person to possess her son's belongings and she feels Ornob is being rude and unreasonable in delaying this. She indignantly says to Shahana: "The stuff belongs to somebody closest to me, and nobody else has the right to stop me from taking it. It's my basic right" (*Memories* 00:42:32 – 00:42:37). At this point, Shahana is forced to reveal about the "special relationship" (*Memories* 00:42:51) Sid and Ornob had that literally devastated Arati. She believed this happened just because Sid had never met

someone of his taste, and that is why he turned down all the girls who used to drool while he was in Delhi, which made Shahana confess her love for Sid. Though she had made her feelings towards him evident many times, Sid rejected her on the grounds of his relationship with Ornob. This newly exposed truth about her son makes Arati show hostility towards Ornob when he visits her with Sid's possessions and deliberately avoids him. Both Shahana and Ornob loved Sid unconditionally, but Arati could only accept Shahana's feelings and comforted her while rebuking Ornob, accusing him of seducing her son. Ornob's affliction is left unacknowledged by her, which is depicted through his lamenting at the railings where Sid's accident has taken place, patting on his arms and struggling to cope with the bereavement. These consecutive situations render much of Abhiroop's question to Rani in Ganguly's *Arekti Premer Golpo*: "If I were a woman, would you have reacted the same way?" (*Arekti* 02:04:56).

Arati, though a highly educated and self-made woman, is doomed to the thoughts of a common Indian middle-class mother whose mind searches for cues to prove her son to be a straight man. This makes her call and argue with Shahana, even at midnight, as soon as she finds a packet of condoms in Sid's bag. The picture of a conventional mother who desperately wants to pull her deceased son into the accepted circle from a marginalised cult is meticulously portrayed. She contends with Shahana, saying: "You admit it. Admit it right now . . . you were blaming him for no reason at all. I have proof here in my hand" (*Memories* 00:52:11 – 00:52:19). All the insecurities and prejudices the society has imprinted on her regarding alternate sexualities are unwrapped during her conversation with Ornob. From a

biased attitude that accuses Ornob, without enquiring the truth, of his recklessness in leaving Sid alone during that night, Arati starts to understand Ornob and his admiration and love towards Arati through Sid's descriptions. Arati gets to know the depth of their relationship when Ornob recounts every minute detail of her like her pet's name, maiden name, and studies. It is only after reading a drafted message by Sid to Arati but left unsent out of worry of her reactions that the latter comes to know how much he loved and respected Ornob. They both were planning to see her in person in Delhi, and Sid was hoping for a "big happy family" – Ornob, Arati and himself – where he confesses, "And ya, it's a He" (*Memories* 01:03:05 - 12). From that note, she comprehends that Ornob was not just a partner for Sid but truly as special as herself.

Arati's biases about queer or alternate sexualities get deconstructed through the confabulation with Ornob. There are many instances that Ornob insists she re-examine the statements made before and the beliefs she had until then. The fish tank Sid had is treated as a central metaphor in the movie and probably the strongest symbol deployed. Ornob always hates life being caged. He says to Arati: "Caging everyone...putting them in boxes. See a beautiful bird and put it in a cage. See colourful fishes and immediately keep them in the aquarium. What nonsense! Why do you have to box everybody? Set them free. Let them be what they are." (*Memories* 01:08:13 – 01:08:37). This is not only applicable to an animal or a bird being caged but also in a context where everyone is caged in conformist gendered expectations. In a society where everyone's thoughts are framed according to the requirements of the hegemonic agency, each identity gets caged. Once they are set

free from these caged ideologies and strive for independence, they are either left isolated or hunted down back to the cage. Here, Arati is also confined and tries to put her son in the cage of her thoughts failing to accept he has already flown away. For her, Sid's choice of romantic relationship is an abnormality caused due to her negligence while she was trying hard to meet the ends after her divorce. But Ornob rebuffs that it is she who really needs counselling as she tries to grab them to a normalise circle irrespective of the fact of individuality. Arati was adamant in placing her son either as an "abnormal" (*Memories* 01:12:21) or a "seduced" (*Memories* 00:54:55) one, standing on the other side of the shore. Ornob tries to make her understand the essence of individual freedom of choice that it is up to everyone regarding the choice of their sexual preferences and physical presentation to society: "And anyway, who am I to decide whether they should stay in a box or should be set free? Maybe they have accepted this little box as their world. Outside of this they won't survive" (*Memories* 01:18:10 - 24). It is the freedom of every individual to decide whether to follow the flow of society and gain inclusive acceptance or to stand away from that and choose the road not taken.

Whether in past or present, it is the lucid declarations about an individual's gender choice and self-assuredness that disrupt the preexisting norms set by the heteronormal agency rather than the fact that they possess an alternate identity. This is overtly questioned by Ornob as a representative of the queer community to Arati, who represents the cultural construction in a society: "What is more unacceptable to you? The fact that he is no more or the fact that he was gay?" (*Memories* 01:18:55 – 01:19:02). Without wearing a mask of the civilized, open-hearted sympathy she

admits that she can never accept that her son was gay even if she comes to terms with her son's demise later. However, the mother in her, who came to Kolkata to see her dead son and take back all his belongings, undergoes a drastic transformation by understanding her son and getting initiated to a new stratum of life which she had never dreamt of encountering: "I had come here to collect my son's belongings. What I found was something much larger. He has left so much of himself with you all that can never be packed away and so much of me too in the process even before destiny brought us together" (*Memories* 01:36:15 – 00:36-35).

Memories in March is more intelligible than the other two in the trilogy not only because of its extensive use of modest Hindi and English dialogues rather than mere Bengali but also due to the unpretentious plot, making the audience comprehensible everything explicitly so that none need to ponder between the lines. The film follows a modest approach in its treatment of the queer subject than the other two in the trilogy, which with their outwardly audacious display of fluidity and homosexuality, shook the heteronormative anxieties. This movie is a journey through the emotional quandary of a gay person, though possessing a good professional and economic status in society, who must face the ailment of being alone after the death of his lover along with the usual isolation faced from society in one way or the other. Ornob's character in this film is much luckier than Abhiroop and Chapal in Ganguly's *Arekti Premer Golpo*, as he is accepted among his colleagues, and even his driver shares familial affection with him. Arati, in the beginning, shares the common bias of indifference or apathy towards the queer, thinking they are not at all affected by the loss of their partners and for them if one

goes, they will chase another. But, Ornob criticizes and reconstructs this prejudice when he says to Arati that at least she has two emotions to switch between the loss of her only son and the shock of his newly revealed queer identity. He further explains that for him, it's a "huge solid ball of grief" (*Memories* 20:06), which turns down Arati's biases and cultural conditions and initiates a new level of understanding.

This film hides the face of Sid throughout the movie, but his voice guides the entire plot. Sid's facelessness can be read as an act of giving face to all the queers ubiquitously. This is not just the story of Sid but everyone who is queer and is not ready to come out of their closets out of the fear of stigma and segregation they have to confront. Ornob, on the other hand, has a face of a queer individual who dares enough to come out of the closet with a unique identity.

Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish is a loose adaptation of Tagore's play *Chitra*, where he describes the tone of the film and poses the question towards the viewers to ponder after watching the movie:

This is a changeable world. Nothing is permanent – possessions, love, things we own, even our own bodies. Why then do we cling to things like gender and identity with such fierceness? Why do we turn them into such issues? *Chitrangada* is Tagore's exploration into the reality of identity. It asks the question – who are we, really? (qtd. in Chatterji 252)

Ghosh places the plot of Chitrangada and her love for Arjuna from the *Mahabharata* into a modern terrain as a parallel to the story of Rudra's life. The movie is about the life and events of the character Chitrangada in Tagore's play choreographed by the renowned Rudra Chatterji and that of the choreographer himself, who shares unusual similarities with his character's life. Chitrangada is a Manipuri princess who was brought up as a male warrior in both physical appearance and mental processes, as she is the only heir of her father, Chitravahana. For the first time, she felt feminine emotions and got the impulse to become a woman when she met Arjuna, the gallant warrior and the third among *Pandavas*. She approaches the cupid Madan to transform her into a woman, from the point where Ghosh transforms Madan in the myth to the modern rational settings. He portrayed Madan as a cosmetic surgeon, thus making a novel and revolutionary idea that could probably provide rational explanations for many of the celestial interventions that are made in myths and mythologies. Rudra's life also parallels his artistic production, and many events are shown in montage: While Chitrangada meets Arjuna on the stage, Rudra meets Partho (another name for mythic Arjuna) the talented percussionist and develops a relationship. Understanding Partho's love for children and adoption by a gay couple is illegal in the country, Rudra decides to alter his gender and change completely into a woman despite Partho's admonitions and hopes to have a family with Partho and possibly adopt a child. In the true story of Chitrangada, Arjuna leaves her and returns to his kingdom after being with her for a short period. Similarly, Partho leaves Rudra in the hospital amid the surgeries for Kasturi, another dancer in Rudra's troupe.

Ghosh's *Chitrangada* is an assertion and an explanatory text on the gender performativity of Butler, whose arguments are founded upon the cultural construction of gender rather than any inherent possessions and dealing with gender roles as mere performances. During their practice, Rudra scolds Kasturi, who is playing the role of Chitrangada, for her feminine gestures as if she is acting as Radha playing Holi with Krishna. He explains further, "Chitrangada is conditioned to be a man. That's how she's been brought up. She acts like a man even in saree" (*Chitrangada* 00:08:56 – 00:09:04), which is the central argument of the film that states anyone can be made into any gender through proper training and nurturing as nothing is kept stagnant as naturally acquired gender qualities. Chitrangada's transformation into a woman by the cosmetic surgeon Madan is juxtaposed with Rudra's multiple surgeries of gender reassignment by Dr Shom. Rudra has completed a series of surgeries, including the penultimate breast implantation and has been waiting for the final surgery of vaginal reconstruction as a way of attaining womanhood. Though this process of reassigning gender possesses great risks, it is easier and more feasible than changing the perception and reception of people shaped by cultural norms. When the nurse repeatedly calls him 'sir', Rudra rectifies her, explaining the purpose of his surgery and the need for acceptance from the surroundings: "I've come here to become a woman...which is why I'm going through a series of operations. I've got my breast implant done... It needs a lot of mental preparation. If you keep calling me sir, it becomes more and more difficult for me to prepare myself" (*Chitrangada* 00:09:53 – 00:10:33).

Being an open queer, Rudra continues to face ostracism from the public in various forms. Maybe because of this experience of isolation that he faces makes

him help Partho get rid of inebriation and his complete servitude to substance abuse. The relationship between Rudra and Partho meets the level of toxicity and suffering at just one end – that of Rudra. Analysing the entire trilogy, the case of suffering rests solely upon a single partner, be it Abhiroop, Chapal, Ornob or Rudra. The other ones are –Basu, Kumar, and Partho (Sid is the only one exempted) – taking it for granted as if it is the responsibility of the other in the words of Partho, “I told you to suffer me, and you agreed” (*Chitrangada* 34:29). Abhiroop in *Arekti Premer Golpo* also shares similar thought: “You try very hard to maintain the status quo. But you forget that somebody somewhere is paying the price for it” (*Arekti* 23:25 – 23:34). Ghosh’s trilogy has always been showing the ailments and afflictions encountered by a homosexual due to his bisexual partner who leaves halfway. In *Chitrangada*, Rudra undergoes suffering and becomes a martyr by annihilating his identity to bring back Partho to a normal life and lead a family. In contrast to the expectation of an upright man who must assume responsibilities and ignore the extent to which he relied on Rudra, Partho fabricates arguments to win his altercations, “I never wanted you to change. The man I loved was not this half-thing. If I want a woman, I’d rather have a real woman. Not this synthetic one” (*Chitrangada* 01:38:00: - 13). The trilogy depicts the ending of queer relationships shortly before they become public, where the bisexual partner embraces socially approved heterosexual relationships rather than taking the risk of facing ostracization for coming out of the closet.

The queer protagonists of the trilogy, Abhiroop and Ornob, possess a supportive family, especially their mothers, and they have a team of well-wishers around as colleagues and friends – Momo for Abhiroop and Shahana for Ornob –

showing the changing attitudes towards the queer identities in a public sphere. In contrast, Rudra in *Chitrangada* must deal with both personal and public circles as he lacks the essential emotional support and understanding from his own family for a long time.

Ghosh's movies always share a special space for familial depictions from different points of view. In his queer trilogy, the family and the emotions they share with the protagonists demand its importance. In Indian cinema, the families of queer individuals are depicted in their constant struggles to settle their non-standard children into the accepted circle of heteronormativity. They may resort to rituals or psychotherapy, failing which leads to disowning them to preserve the family's honour. Ghosh's trilogy portrays a family of less educated upper-middle-class who choose neither of the extreme stands. In an article entitled 'Of "Incomplete" Buildings and Transient Spaces', Rounak Ghosh discusses the objective attitude of the family in the trilogy, which is completely novel to the ordinary spectators: "The arrangement of the objective point-of-view shots and reverse field shots create a visual set-up that transcends the boundaries of both time and space; one version of Rudra's transgender body and another" (111).

Rudra is the only child of his parents, born as a male at birth, but chooses to defy gender standards. His parents, who were raised in a traditional cultural environment, often express disapproval of his non-conforming disposition, particularly his father. Though his mother stands in support of his personal and artistic endeavours, she is in a quandary amid her role as a dutiful wife and an affectionate mother. It is only the mother who admires her son's stardom as a

renowned choreographer and is a spectator to his shows. The dining table is a powerful symbol in the movie which is the only place where one can see the family together during the meals, where various tides of emotions and breakdowns are being served. Rudra's father shows evident dissentience towards his son being a stage artist and encounters the decision to perform the role of Madan. He asks Rudra to conform to the role of the director, thus constraining him from an explicit depiction of deviant portrayals. Even if a member of the elite middle class, the thought that being deviant from societal norms is an abnormality that makes him ask Rudra to go for counselling so that "it won't be difficult to get back to normal life" (*Chitrangada* 01:14:46). Rudra further blames his father that it was because of the pressure that he studied engineering, which was an attempt of his father to confine his son to the standardised procedures of societal perceptions for a long time, girls should choose their careers as doctors or teachers and boys be engineers. He also notices that every time he provides tickets for his parents, only the mother attends with one of the aunts, never the father. Such conversations not only disclose the pains that are undergone by the character but it describes the tension that fills the air in a home of a queer ubiquitously. The introduction of a father figure itself is a meticulous act as only a few father characters are in the entire Ghosh's filmography and there is no such character in the other two of the trilogies. When the mothers in these movies show the unconditioned face of motherly affection that can only love their children, this father figure shows the rational side as they are the prominent agency through which the society decentralises its powers. Just before disclosing the news of the surgery, Rudra shares his decision to move to another house with Partho as he does not want to be "a perennial embarrassment" (*Chitrangada* 01:13:12) to

his parents. Though his mother warns him about Partho that he will also leave him as the earlier ones, Rudra retorts, “Which is better, tell me? Being lonely all your life or, even for a while, to find a companion?” (*Chitrangada* 01:13:36 – 01:13:48), directing towards the greater necessity and longing of any member of a subaltern group. For him, nothing is permanent, including the physical body, which is believed to be unchangeable: “Now I see that one’s own body, what we regard as the most permanent, a given truth, that itself is changeable” (*Chitrangada* 01:49:44 – 01:49:53). Commendably Ghosh has scripted the situation when Rudra discloses his decision to undergo the gender reassignment surgery, unlike the cliché family dramas Rudra’s parents were calm but, clearly in a state of perplexity.

Mom: We knew it all along, but we wouldn’t accept. We insisted just because he’s born a boy, he should act like a boy

Dad: What’s to insist? Boys should be boys. That’s natural.

Mom: What his nature dictates is natural with him. Nature has its own desires. If we’d accepted what was natural for him, today he wouldn’t be lying under a surgeon’s knife. (*Chitrangada* 01:20:27 – 01:21:33)

Ghosh illustrates the impending change in the conditioned mindset of conventional Indian families through the acceptance of Rudra by his family at the hospital as they extend their support when Partho has left him. This change is further accentuated by his father, who was once an ardent critic of Rudra, asking him to return home and they have renovated his room as per his mother’s feminine tastes. When Rudra's

father compares seeing him in post-surgery sedation to seeing his wife after delivery, Rudra feels the acceptance and understanding he has always sought.

Though possessing the physical body of a man, Rudra could not fit into any of the binary ends as he firmly believes that it never designs one's capacity and competence: "I tell you, plain and simple, that for me, it's a technical necessity. All I need from you is a certificate that I'm a woman. No other change. I won't wear sarees or evening gowns. So, to me, it's more of cosmetic surgery" (*Chitrangada* 01:10:55 – 01:11:17). His decision for sex reassignment is out of the necessity for adopting a child rather than due to any dilemma of being trapped in the wrong body like Chapal in *Arekti*, and he possesses inclinations to Abhiroop in *Arekti* in asserting his identity and self-resilience. Ghosh, through his movies, portrayed the third gender as a fluid category that acts as a bridge between the male and female dichotomy and not as a conformist group that rejects the binary existence. None of the queer characters acted by Ghosh has limited their identity into a single-gendered disposition but adopted from both the binaries, like wearing jeans and a kurta along with *kajal* and lipstick, growing hair with fringes as women, or even appearing shaven heads that make his dubious state more vibrant.

Chitrangada's plot about free will and desire serves as a better choice to place the life of a queer individual: "It's a story of wish. Her father's wish vs her own. A story of desire, that you can choose your gender" (*Chitrangada* 00:11:16 – 00:11:28). In lieu of living for one's own, every individual in a society which is tightly bound by obligations and norms, is conditioned to devote their existence to complying with the community's demands. It is in this predetermined environment

that Ghosh primarily places the individual will and identity, which is further aided by his appearances as androgynous, fluid and homosexual characters in the trilogy, thereby elevating the authenticity and credibility of his gender manifesto.

In all three movies, gender is seen as a choice, i.e., a relative amount of autonomy is given to the protagonist when it comes to expressing their gender identities Representation of queer characters by people who identify as queer is important to shape narratives as well as to accurately describe what an individual experiences through their perspective instead of stereotyping them into faulty prejudices
(Shatarupa Paul n. p)

Ghosh not only establishes the queer cult in the mainstream media but vociferously questions the disguised heterosexual insecurities. He asserts that every individual is unsatisfied with their physical attributes and understands the disparity between their desires and perceptions. This insecurity results in constant modification of the overt guise, leaning more into either of the binary categories and, to an extent, catalysing the ingrained homophobia: “Most of us are not happy with what we naturally are. Then guys wouldn’t go to the gym and develop six packs to become a man. Girls wouldn’t thread and was to become a woman” (*Chitrangada* 01:08:49 – 01:09:01).

Just before the final surgery of vaginal reconstruction, Partho leaves Rudra, leaving him in a baffled condition losing the only reason for his choice of this transformation. Most of his questions are answered by the Shubho, the counsellor, a persona Rudra hallucinated to grapple with the loneliness. Shubho is clearly the alter ego of Rudra, who, through his Socratic interrogative method, shows the latter

the path towards enlightenment. Subho asks Rudra how he has to be remembered – “as the vivacious, energetic, eccentric, creative dancer or, as the beautiful, transformed Chitrangada?” (*Chitrangada* 01:57:39 - 01:58:23). Comprehending the underlying essence of Subho’s question – a question he asks to himself – Rudra thus abandons the surgery and undergoes another surgery to take out the breast implants to embrace his true self. This series of surgeries deconstructs the fundamental idea of a permanent body or the engraved idea of gender and sexuality as an innate feature.

The trilogy presents multiple perspectives of queerness and the associated relationships that undergo constant transmutations. Ghosh’s idea of queer is not about confining to a definite label in the non-binary group of multiple identities but embracing a fluid state that can fit into any gender manifestations but confines to none. He considers the binary and heteronormal categorizations as futile rituals for establishing and disseminating power hierarchy. He philosophises the theory of gender fluidity, which fades the demarcations of gender cataloguing and presents them as a ceaseless process, as the concluding statement of *Chitrangada* asserts: “Why is a Building called a building, even after it is complete? Because no transition is ever complete. It’s an ongoing process” (*Chitrangada* 01:59:19 – 02:00:02).

CHAPTER 5

NAVIGATING WITH THE SPECTRUM:

EMBRACING GENDER FLUIDITY

The negotiations on gender have moved beyond traditional binary classifications as cultures open new contours to a more inclusive understanding of the variety of ways people perceive and express their gender. Within this dynamic terrain of gender discourses, gender fluidity emerges as a crucial and intricate component taking its origin from the theoretical assumptions of the queer theory. Challenging the imposed restrictions of gender presentations, the idea of fluidity stimulates one to embrace one's gender identity as a dynamic, multifarious spectrum that transcends all old definitions of gender. Several theorists contributed to the dissemination of queer theory and established the groundwork for the fundamental concept of fluidity: of which Judith Butler is prominent. Butler introduced the idea of performativity of gender to demolish the constrained gender fixity and essentialism, as stated in the preface to the 1999 edition of her book *Gender Trouble*:

In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effect through its naturalisation in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration (xv).

She accentuates gender as a repeated stylised performance where the notion of a fixed gender is an outcome of societal construction, whereas the manifestations of gender are not indicators of gender identity but are constructed performatively through a set of assumed gendered expressions. Butler's theories make sense to understand the individuals who identify themselves as gender fluid and voluntarily indulge in performances that subvert the rigid binary conceptions of gender. The performative nature of gender validates the notion of gender fluidity, where people perform different gender expressions at different times.

Gender fluidity addresses and investigates the intersections of identity and the progress that ensues from embracing fluid manifestations as a form of resistance against the limitations imposed by heteronormative frameworks. This characteristic of fluidity has its roots in the thoughts and theories of Michel Foucault, whose works on sexuality and power comprise one of the influential elements of queer theory. While Butler limits her theory to the performativity of gender expressions, Foucault debates how power is exercised and agency is exerted through gender discourses. Gender fluidity thus can be comprehended as a form of defiance against the power structures that strive to define and control gender.

The fluidity of gender fundamentally contradicts the societal pressures imposed on individuals to adhere to rigid gender norms. It disrupts the heteronormative presumptions that heterosexuality is the standard form of relationships and critiques the essentialist perspective that seeks to define fixed and innate gender characteristics. Apart from Butler and Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also provides a space that sets the ground to elevate the consciousness of

the common psyche to acknowledge the existence of alternative gender and sexual priorities to come out of their closet. Her seminal work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) examines the formation of distinctive closets where individuals are urged to hide their orientations that are deviant from the established norms of culture. Her perspective on the queer asserts the pliability of its nature through the concept of the closet, which has a metaphorical meaning of one's secluded identity, "that is one of the things that "queer" can refer to: 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, are not made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (*Tendencies* 7). Sedgwick introduced queer temporalities to the public domain by challenging conventional linear narratives through the non-linear nature of time and characters, reinforcing the idea that gender is a fluid or flexible concept existing outside the predetermined timescales. Though she has not explicitly mentioned the term *gender fluidity* (italicised to emphasise), her works are crucial in promoting a more expansive and fluid definition of identity.

Gender fluidity is a profoundly personal experience where individuals prioritise their understanding of gender over societal expectations, forming a strong insight into one's identity. The concept of fluidity embraces a flexible identity that changes over time or in different situations: a fluid person may choose an alternate gender, conform to a particular gender, or choose neither. The "Gender Fluidity: What it Means and Why Support Matters", a study on the perspectives and effects of gender fluidity among youths, states: "For some youth, gender fluidity may be a way to explore gender before landing on a more stable gender expression or identity. For

others, gender fluidity may continue indefinitely as part of their life experience with gender” (Katz-Wise n. p.). The renowned American singer, actor and activist Justin Vivian Bond’s observation becomes relevant at this point:

I don’t feel that I am a man or a woman. I don’t believe that the soul is gendered. That is my truth. But when our choices are limited to just two options - man or woman - some people are left with no choice but to express their truth. There is so much gender policing in society. Some people might want to wear a dress or be away from the restrictions imposed on them because of their perceived gender, but it is not worth the struggle. But for some people (who reject the binary), it is worth the struggle. These people led the way (qtd in McGuire n. p.).

Dr Gabriela Pichardo, in his medical newsletter *WebMD*, elucidates that gender fluidity and gender neutrality are not one and identical. A gender-fluid individual identifies themselves as either one among the three genders or none and accepts the notion of identity and gender expression as flexible, whereas a person of any gender can be gender-neutral as the gender identity and sexual orientation they experience are not defined and confirmed absolutely. C Sharma further explicates that: “‘gender fluidity’ is a way of identifying as neither of the two set genders and instead having a fluctuating gender identity.” (n. p.). Gender fluidity offers liberty to manifest and alter the way an individual wishes to – feminine, masculine, neutral, androgynous, and many more – without any restrictions “at random points of time or

in response to a certain event or circumstances” (C Sharma n. p.) that deconstructs the foundation of conventional structures of culture and morality.

Though there is an obvious absence of a distinctive genre in literature and movies that depict gender fluidity, there are certain artistic productions that feature fluidity through the plots and characters, considering their striving for an independent identity, resistance, the flexibility of gender expressions, non-binary identity, intersectionality and queer activism. Loki, the God of Mischief in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), is one such character whose identity is revealed as “gender-fluid” (*Loki* 00:15: 44) through the first season of *Loki* streaming on *Disney+ Hotstar*. The character is already there in Norse mythology and comics, where he (the pronoun used widely in the MCU franchise) is portrayed as gender fluid: “In Norse mythology, Loki was first recognised as a “shapeshifter” when Loki lived as a handmaiden for eight years” (Fitz n. p). While the other superheroes of the MCU series model for an alpha male, Loki presents a strong anti-hero figure starkly away from a stereotypic super-powered one. Compared to his counterparts and opponents, his long black hair, blue eyes, pale face, and low physical demeanour make him dubious while trying to conform to a particular gender. Munson’s study on Loki states, “As neither a god nor a giant in Norse myth, Loki is outside the normative structure; as a figure with female attributes, but referred to with male pronouns, Loki is uniquely positioned as a character through which to view gender constructs in the sagas and folklore” (1).

Recent experimentations in Indian cinema, in its plot and narration, have marked an evident shift in the portrayal of fluidity with characters subverting gender

expectations, though it is still controversial in public awareness. Anurag Basu's 2020 anthology, *Ludo*, is an intriguing movie that disrupts the conventions of masculinity in Indian cinema and dispels prejudices by portraying gender-neutral aesthetics. Alok Kumar Gupta, alias Alu and Rahul Awasthi are the central characters who depart from stereotypical male inception and can be considered fluid as they do not settle into any counter genders. Alu's physical presentation, which deviates from the expected template of a masculine appearance, and his easily manipulatable disposition raise questions regarding his identity. Contrary to the consensus that men should not weep or express emotions in their raw form, they are distorted here through Alu and Rahul as they explicitly express their feelings. Alu cries and expresses his happiness and sorrows through tears and dance whenever his childhood crush, Pinky, approaches him for assistance. Rahul, on the other hand, works as a salesman and endures severe abuse from his manager but seldom reacts. He exhibits several traits that defy the expectation of being a man: sobbing when his manager slaps him in public, the way he stands in front of the latter (which is typical as a girl stands in front of her senior), his mode of running with short gaits, the way he runs after the bath and many more. While the other male characters of the movie possess manly features like a well-built body, a beard and a moustache, Alu and Rahul appear with frail physiques and clean shaves. Rahul's facial features, like pale white complexion and highlighted pink lips, underscore this element of transcendence towards fluidity. The movie confronts established gender norms through its characters that display a range of emotions and dispositions countering societal prescriptions of gendered roles.

The Indian regional films, particularly in the early twenty-first century, incorporated gender-fluid portrayals and initiated a wider discourse on fluidity. In this context, Rituparno Ghosh demands pivotal recognition for the unconventional presentation of characters, thereby rewriting the academic realm of film and gender concerns in and out of the industry. Tollywood is a great example that consistently offers representations challenging preconceived beliefs and providing new insights to initiate discussions for the new era.

Rituparno Ghosh emerged as a conspicuous queer icon in the Indian mainstream during the early decade of the twenty-first century: the time when Indian public conscience was in turmoil caused by its conventional intransigence of heteronormativity and a precipitous coming out of more queer individuals. His intricate and daring narratives elevate the regional industry by tackling subjects that are often taboo in mainstream Indian films. His deft management of nuanced human relationships and his exploration of unconventional subjects like gender identity and fluidity can be traced in most of his movies. For him, his works are the medium to promote acceptance and awareness regarding the abstractness of gender and the core of gender fluidity through an empathetic and compassionate lens.

Considering him as the pioneer of NQC or the new queer wave in Indian industry, this theme of gender fluidity can be traced in most of his works, besides his queer trilogy – *Chitrangada - The Crowning Wish*, *Just Another Love Story* and *Memories in March*.

An assessment of Rituparno Ghosh's queer aesthetics should not be limited to the three overtly queer films in which he essayed lead

characters. Rather, these films should be analysed in the light of his earliest films, in which he vociferously challenged the incontrovertibility of heteropatriarchal structures by attributing to his female protagonists an agency and a voice of protest while simultaneously evoking the agony of being in the closet, metaphorically (Shatarupa Paul n. p.).

The postmodernist thoughts have influenced Ghosh's notions of identity and gender expressions as presented in his movies: "Drawing on postmodernist and poststructuralist academic theories of the 1980s, the New Queer Cinema presented human identity and sexuality as socially constructed, and therefore fluid and changeable, rather than fixed" (Alchetron n. p.). Being a propagator of NQC, most of Ghosh's movies are depictions of intricate representational politics that challenge the status quo of gender identity and sexuality. The movies under this consideration are *Bariwali*, *Shubho Muharat*, *Chokher Bali*, *Raincoat*, and *Shobh Charito Kalponik*.

Bariwali is one of Ghosh's critically acclaimed movies that discusses the themes of identity, solitary existence and societal expectations. The plot revolves around the life and desperation of the middle-aged protagonist, Banalata, who leads a desolate life after her would-be spouse dies of a snake bite on their wedding day. She leads a reticent life with her servants, Malati and Prasanna. The showing of a film crew led by the famous director Deepankar interrupts her solitude as he persuades her to consent for them to use her property. The latter part of the movie is about the developing relationship between Banalata and Deepankar and the former's

psychological and emotional journey due to her longing for companionship and the social expectations of an unmarried widow-like woman. Her life becomes an emotional roller-coaster once she discovers that Deepankar's affection was a mere manipulation only to ensure the successful completion of his film.

Bariwali is not an explicit portrayal of Ghosh's theme of gender fluidity; instead, the boundaries between gender expectations, personal identity, and fluidity of emotions are often blurred. Banalata, the protagonist, endures a transformation in the film when she finds herself drawn to Deepankar. Though the movie begins and ends with the loneliness that haunts Banalata, the unexpected seclusion by the crew at the end procures a greater momentum than the prior one. She surpasses the boundaries of a woman and subverts the expectations of dispositions the society demands from her living as a sinister. She is not an ordinary woman of conventional prescriptions as she lives alone without depending upon any man. There is no mention anywhere in the movie regarding her relatives, giving a picture of her incontestable agency in her mansion. She is portrayed as the last vestige of the extinguished feudal rule, albeit leading an opulent life as the undisputed matriarch.

Banalata's agency is further reinstated through the expressions of sexual repression by way of some dream sequences, though conventional Indian society possesses an acrid attitude towards a woman's sexual experience and its discussions. Ghosh transcends his female characters from the boundaries of traditional notions of femininity to the strata of independence and pleasure, which were earlier reserved for men. *Bariwali* is one such movie that avant-garde the portrayal of the repressed sexual desires of a woman who was denied nuptial pleasures. The recurrent images

of marriage and the background lyrics of a marriage song in the dreams of Banalata can be read as her longing for a man's company in her vacuous, sinister life. Though the initial dreams were devoid of a groom, after Deepankar's entry, she starts visualising him as the man she longed for. In a dream, she envisions herself as a married woman with Deepankar, who forcefully opens the tightly bound pages of his *Chokher Bali* novel with a screwdriver, and Banalata's face is shown with a splashing of blood. Ghosh used these dream sequences as a metaphor for Banalata's unrequited sexual desires, whose overt confession is seen as taboo: the screwdriver and the blood splashes on her face metaphorically align with her longing to know the nuptial pleasures of losing her virginity. Ghosh's female characters possess the overt manifestations of sexual desires that can be traced in his *Chokher Bali* and are supported through a meticulous sharing of common homogenous themes like unrequited love, sexual deprivation and sexual jealousy through an intertextual reference.

Bariwali discusses masculinity not as a predetermined characteristic but as a gradient that presents it as a flexible or fluid concept existing in a spectrum. Two principal male characters in the movie are intimate with Banalata: the servant Prasanna and the director Deepankar. These characters can be analysed in light of R. W. Connell's thoughts on masculinity and its types, thereby exploring the spuriousness in the imposed expectations of masculinity. Prasanna is the first character introduced in the movie, even before the protagonist, and he is presented as the alter-ego of Banalata. Though a male-servant, he is the only one with whom Banalata shares her thoughts and solitude. Prasanna's role is further elucidated by

Dasgupta and Banerjee in their article “Exploration, Victimhood, and Gendered Performance in Rituparno Ghosh’s *Bariwali*”:

He has been a companion in Banalata’s childhood games; now, he is the caretaker of the house, Banalata’s personal assistant, her sole advisor on household matters, and her representative when it comes to dealing with outsiders. He is the only male character, perhaps the only person of any gender, with whom Banalata has shared her solitary existence (39).

Banalata never acknowledges him as a masculine figure anywhere in the plot, which is iterated in her disclosure to Malati that no man has ever been inside her mansion’s inner chambers, particularly the bedroom. His effeminacy is covered up to an extent but becomes apparent in the presence of Banalata, and his gender identification as a man is called into question on several occasions throughout the film as Banalata treats him as a female companion. He is the only one who listens to and responds to Banalata’s frenzied fantasies and feminine impulses. His feeble physical attributes, weak voice, and resemblance to Banalata’s feminine sitting position further diminish his manliness and expectations of being a man. Prasanna’s identity as a man is further probed when analysing that Banalata is least embarrassed about her misplaced saree, unhooking her blouse, or changing her saree in his presence. He even appeared in Banalata’s dream in the guise of a woman – wearing a saree and bindi – and participating in some rituals that only women are supposed to do. His act of admiring Deepankar’s agility and manliness further questions his identity as a man. Analysing the defying of the stereotypical expectations of

masculinity in Prasanna, Dasgupta and Banerjee states, “If physical prowess, mechanical skill, and conscious nonchalance toward “womanly matters” are the conventional determinants of masculinity, Prasanna contradicts all” (39). This mention of womanly matters is referred to many times in the movie, where the divergence of Prasanna from a conventional male is reinstated through his recurrent acts of pure womanly concerns: passing a towel to the surveyor after washing his hands, asking Banalata to switch off the fan while wearing a saree, and keeping the things at the kitchen at proper places after cooking.

Prasanna’s clothing is an evident deviation from all other manly male characters like Deepankar, Abhijeet (the actor), the crew, and Narayan (Malati’s lover). Prasanna wears shorts or dhoti of medium length, while the male characters in the film either wear pants or pyjamas of full length, and female characters like Banalata, Malati, and Sudeshna (the actress) wear saree, skirt, kurta or night dresses of full length. This form of dressing, which is a blending of masculine and feminine fashion or a fashion that does not adhere to any ends, points towards his fluid identity that transcends between the binary entities. His middle-parted hair and the mark of vermilion on it, resembling a married woman of a traditional Indian household, and his dark eyes using *kajal* (eyeliner) accentuate his departure from the predetermined masculine sartorial prescriptions. As a character of Ghosh, Prasanna transcends his gendered expectations towards feminine features that can be connected to Connells’ idea of subordinate masculinity, which is characterised by a lack of agency and a refusal to comply with the social norms that elevate hegemonic masculinity and the idealised and flawless entity of the binary concept.

Malati is a transitional character who simultaneously shows the features of conventional femininity with humility and that of a new woman with independent power. She evidences that she is a product of the conventional society that idealises masculinity's hegemonic form, admits women as inferior, and considers the hybrid gender identities at the periphery of the binary concepts as unworthy. Her consent to her lover Narayanan's forceful sexual advances and acquiescence to the film crew's scopophilic gaze showcase this mentality. Ghosh makes her character more intertwined when she refuses to accept even her master Banalata's authority through her stubborn, conceited confabs. Her confidence can be explicitly understood as the potential possibility of married life and obtainable normative proposition, which is nearly impossible for Banalata. Prasanna's failed masculinity is placed in stark contrast with Malati's overpowering attitude towards him and her landlady Banalata. When Malati debates with Banalata, often in the name of electricity bills, going out with her lover for movies and many other things, Prasanna stands alongside the latter. Though inferior in social status to Prasanna, she refuses to take orders from him, reinstating that they are both equals in their employment as servants in the same house. At this point, Malati concomitantly disrupts and conforms to the conventional gender and social norms.

Deepankar, the director, who contrasts starkly with Prasanna's character, possesses an overpowering masculine demeanour. He is presented as an ideal figure, which a Bengali *bhadralok* or middle class expects. He exemplifies Connell's conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity: well-built physique, deep guttural voice, and virility. His competency in manipulating Banalata's feminine impulses is

apparent from their first meeting, after which she takes care of her physical appearance by combing and braiding her hair and admiring her reflection in the mirror.

Inclusive analysis of the movie traces truancy in the fixity of binary expressions of the characters Banalata, Malati, Prasanna, and Deepankar. Though the characters, other than Prasanna, identify as part of the binary concept, they are placed in a spectrum of undetermined expressions that do not entirely conform to either of the entities. The character Prasanna possesses inimitable importance for being the first queer character established by Ghosh much before his overt coming out as a prominent queer icon both in his later films and in real life.

Through Prasanna, then, Ghosh was able to allude to the historical-social position of eunuchs and Third Sex beings in Indian queer history. Prasanna was guarding Banalata and the old mansion just like the eunuchs guarded female spaces and harems in ancient and medieval India. Prasanna is one of the first queer characters to be introduced in modern Bengali cinema and the first queer character created by Ghosh (Dasgupta and Banerjee 41).

Albeit *Bariwali* was not a queer adventure of Rituparno Ghosh, the reflections of his gender politics are conspicuous at diverse planes. He wants them to be identified in their distinctiveness and agency of gender independence rather than confined to a predetermined role upon their outward appearance.

Shubho Muharat, an adaptation of Agatha Christie's *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, is notable for its breach of gender expectations passed down for

ages. The movie is a mystery thriller about the sudden death of a retired actress, Kakoli Sengupta, and the consequent investigations. An aspiring journalist, Mallika, approaches Kakoli for an interview and accompanies her to the house, but the latter's health suddenly deteriorates, and she collapses to death. Further, the plot moves around solving the mystery of Kakoli's death by Mallika's paternal aunt Ranga Pishima who finds the real culprit before the police based on the information she gathers from news reports and articles.

Ranga Pishima's character is portrayed in a deviant format from the stereotypical presentation of an ordinary widow living an arid existence and even questioning the effectiveness of police authority, which is led by masculine figures. Pishima's character exemplifies Ghosh's gender politics and evangelises the thought on gender and its spectrum of fluidity in the domestic spaces: "More interestingly, the woman who gets to the end of the mystery does so not through the male-dominated public sphere of media or police but through the private space that women have run through ages in Bengali families: the household" (Goswami n. p.).

Gender fluidity is the concept of transcending and challenging gendered expectations without altering one's existing gender or possessing a fluid identity. As Luxery suggests, "Essentially, the idea of gender fluidity starts with the radical notion that gender is not neatly contained within the binary of man and woman It is about transcending gendered expectations" (Luxery n. p.). Pishima surpasses gender suppositions through her indomitable intelligence and denounces the unchallenged position of male domination as the hero of mystery thrillers. Men are always portrayed as saviours and are presented with uncompromising qualities like

being highly handsome and well-built, undeniably witty, and intelligent in most literature and cinema for ages. He is embodied as the discoverer who reveals the ultimate truth and remains omnipresent. Ghosh decorticates this stereotype through his self-reliant woman Ranga Pishima by placing her as the lead of a mystery plot. Pishima possesses an agency over her fellow male characters by making them secondary through her sole contribution to solving the crime. She blurs the boundaries of a woman set by the conformists to be subservient to men and to control her quest and wit above him. Several recent Indian films like *Irugapatru* (Hold Tight) by Yuvaraj Dhayalan, *Piku* by Shoojit Sircar, *Pink* by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, and *English Vinglish* by Gauri Shinde effectively portray the conflict between the male ego and the feminine struggles to assert themselves despite the constraints of social expectations.

Padmini Choudhury, the NRI producer, challenges the male-dominated domains of the film industry through her successful career as an actress and producer. She enters as an independent producer in the realm of filmmaking, a field that is type-casted as the empire of men. Ghosh disrupts the Indian domestic concept of man being the monetary head of a family and woman being dependent on him through his portrayal of Padmini as a prosperous artist and her husband Sambit as an unsuccessful director. Besides Padmini, Mallika also makes the conventional Indian psyche uncomfortable through her flirtatious approaches to police officer Arindham and freelance photographer Shubhankar Chowdhury. In a society that has put restrictions on the overt portrayal of female affairs and sexual feelings, Mallika's question, "Is it possible for a woman to love two men at a time?" (*Shubho Muharat*

02:11:25), disrupts all the prospects of a conventional gender structure. Ghosh accentuates his idea of fluidity in a distinctive context by critiquing the essentialist nature of gender by assigning the male characters like the director Sambit Roy, the police commissioner Arindam Chatterjee, and the freelance photographer Shubhankar Chowdhury, who possess male-dominated positions in the society to auxiliary positions, and placing the woman characters like Ranga Pishima, Padmini Chowdhury and Mallika to lead the plot.

In the domain of Ghosh's gender politics, his poignant Tagorian adaptation *Chokher Bali* demands a remarkable space. The movie revolves around the desire and temptations in a quadrangular love story involving a young widow, Binodini, Mahendra, his young wife Ashalata, and his best friend Behari. As the title suggests, the movie is about the constant discomfort in the mansion of the widowed matriarch Rajalakshmi caused by Binodini's intrusion into the lives of Mahendra, Ashalata, and Behari. Just like the sand in the eye causes discomfort, the infiltration of desires, sexual jealousy, and societal expectations causes the lives of the characters to traverse into emotional anguish and conflicts. The enticement and desire obscure the moral vision of the characters and thrust them into moral quandaries, thus leading to an unanticipated result. The film's central characters can be analysed as a spectrum of gender manifestations, each moving beyond the binary entities of gendered expectations towards an ambiguous middle pathway.

Binodini, presented as Ghosh's spokesperson, differs from Tagore's character in possessing agency and manifestation of free will. She faces ardent restrictions from various corners of societal institutions for being an English-educated young

widow: she is even blamed for her husband's early death. Among the characters crafted by Ghosh, Binodini is one of the most intricate and debated portrayals. She radically defies the traditional gender norms of the time on two fronts: She is educated and seeks the guidance of an English tutor for learning English, and disregards the customs dictated for the conduction of a widow by all possible means. As a widow of the pre-independent time, where rigid and orthodox rules were ingrained in the communal consciousness, she was placed on the outskirts of the social hierarchy. The British nun comes to meet her after the death of her husband Vipin and asks with distaste on noticing her misplaced half-exposed saree, "Are you expected to remain uncovered like this?" (*Chokher Bali* 00:0:24), demonstrating the constant scrutiny and trial that widows must endure, irrespective of culture and religion. To reinforce the conventional statutes and regimentation upon the individuals, particularly women, the nun and the elderly widows can be positioned at what Althusser called the Ideological State Apparatus: "I shall call Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialised institutions. I propose an empirical list of these which will have to be examined in detail, tested, corrected and reorganised" (Althusser n. p.). To Althusser, the ISA, like education, religion, and family, is a collection of realities that take the shape of exclusive, specialised institutions that are visible to the immediate observer. In this movie, ISA functions by instituting a moderation process in the lives of the outcasted widows, who are represented by Binodini, as well as every individual like Mahendra, Behari, and Ashalata.

Despite the restrictions imposed by religion and culture, Binodini's initial appearance as a widow imposes an uneasiness on the conventional psyche, where Ghosh establishes his character's fundamental revolutionary disposition. Though a woman in physical appearance, she subverts and calls into question the surmises to become a woman, especially a widow. Widows of the pre-independent era were subjected to numerous curtailments in their social and personal lives and were denied many lifestyles and cuisine; they were not supposed to wear anything colourful but white, not ornate their bodies and enhance their physical appearance through ornaments or cosmetics, and they were supposed to follow strict food restrictions devoid of fish and meat, tea, and sweets. Binodini crosses all those restrictions through her independence and the abomination towards her fate and society. Regardless of the widow's admonition against eating sweets, she surreptitiously eats the chocolate that the nun gave her and eliminates the evidence by burning the candy wrapper. By recurrently serving Mahendra's mother Rajalakshmi a cup of tea, she persuades the conventional matriarch to break the rules and feel freedom from the breach of restrictions. Through her refusal to relinquish her desires, it is evident that she does not conform to age-old Indian customs but embodies the characteristics of a modern woman driven by impulses and composure. The proclivity to reinstate her individuality as a new woman is further accentuated through Rajalakshmi's description: she had learnt English from a white tutor and went to a photographer alone to take a photo when both were frowned upon. Though she made a proposal of Binodini to her son Mahendra and later to Behari, both vehemently repudiated it. Binodini's agency against the hypocritical deeds of the time is recurrently shown in the movie, where she is the

one who always opens the doors and windows in contrast to the others who try to break the rules stealthily, like Rajalakshmi closing the windows and doors while taking the forbidden tea, and when Mahendra meets her in closed rooms and carriage. By opening those closed areas and letting the light of freedom in, she emphasises her courage and independence irrespective of societal pressures and mocks their fear towards exclusion from mainstream society.

Ghosh's exploration of gender flexibility and identity is made primarily through Binodini, arguing that an individual's identity is established through personal experiences, requirements, and desires, which are not to be confined to obdurate societal authorisations. Her strong sexual desires towards Mahendra and Behari and her sexual jealousy towards Ashalata substantiate this deviation from the obligations of a widow. Rajalakshmi takes Binodini with her to make her daughter-in-law, Asha, feel unworthy to be her son's wife by showcasing Binodini as an ideal woman, but never has any clue that her plan will backfire and disrupt the family. Binodini's attraction to Mahendra challenges societal double standards, where a man's interest in multiple women is praised, but the reverse is condemned. Her enthusiasm for marital bliss and a romantic life is portrayed through the scene of reading a letter given by Rajalakshmi, which was written by Mahendra to Behari about the joys of married life with Asha. She keeps the letter with her and seeks the nun's help to understand the passion expressed in the poem, emphasising her longing for carnal pleasures. Later, when she meets Asha, the latter's married bliss and symbols like vermillion, bright-coloured sarees, jewels, and the whisperings and laughs from their bedroom constantly remind her of her irrevocable loss. She

manipulates Mahendra through her devious exhibition of English language expertise and devises her physical structure. Ghosh disrupts the heretical societal ego through the unexpected acts of Binodini, like smelling the handkerchief of Mahendra, admiring his photograph in front of Asha, interfering in the intimacy of the couple, wearing the blouse Mahendra gifted to Asha and decorating her body with Asha's jewels. She tries to unsettle Asha by disclosing that she was the first choice of Rajalakshmi. Her desire gradually transcends to sexual jealousy, taking vicious pleasure in causing trivial troubles to Asha that leads to her separation from Mahendra.

The theme of gender flexibility in Binodini is evident in this film and can also be alluded to by another character of Ghosh, Rudra Chatterjee, in *Chitragada: The Crowning Wish*. There are many similarities between Binodini and Rudra as both are outcasted: one as a widow and the other as an androgynous homosexual, where both are placed at the peripherals of the gender hierarchy constructed through rigid conventional norms. Despite being ostracized, they firmly hold onto their non-conforming gender identities and reject societal restrictions on moral conduct. Bakshi, in an article, further marks the findings of Madhuja Mukherjee:

Mukherjee . . . analyses intricate scenes highlighting Binodini's desire for jewellery, something which a widow is forbidden to possess. This desire, in Binodini's case, symbolises a norm-bending, akin to her sexual desire, for which she is castigated by the moral police represented by the elderly women of the family. A bejewelled Rudra, on the other hand, visually dismantles the received standards

of male attire. . . rebels against heteronormative assumptions of gender performativity. For both Binodini and Rudra, jewellery are forbidden material objects. But both adorn themselves elaborately with this forbidden object, making a strong, unsettling statement of non-conformity visually. (“Rituparno” 2–3)

Binodini’s characterisation becomes more complicated with her approaches to Mahendra and Behari: she emotionally manipulates the two friends by making them fall in love with her wit and beauty and concludes that if one of them had accepted her alliance, her destiny would have been different. In the end, she rejects Mahendra’s proposal and asks him to accompany her to Kashi to meet Behari, where she finds pleasure in other’s pain and shows the traits of *schadenfreude*, an emotion seldom associated with women in Indian cinema before. In a society where women are obligated to be docile and subservient in matters of love, Binodini defies this supposed standard by being assertive and pursuing her own wishes. When Behari asks her to sign the petition against the British, he demarcates her from other women as she possesses a distinctive identity of lucid opinions and decisions. She exhibits traits and conduct such as drive, determination, assertiveness, and intellect, often correlated with men. Binodini hardly compromises her identity as a woman by birth but performs it: “The anatomy of a performer is . . . distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of these are distinct from the gender of the performance”, which suggests a “dissonance . . . between sex and gender, and gender and performance” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 137)

Ashalata, the second prominent female character of the movie and the wife of Mahendra, portrays the traditional woman of Bengali culture. She is a naive woman who constantly worries about others' opinions of her despite her training from childhood to cater for the household of her husband. Since she is not the expected bride for her son, Rajalakshmi repeatedly rebukes her and calls her the one who bewitched her son: “She has made a meek lamb of my son” (*Chokher Bali* 00:13:54). Adhering on to the conventional Indian thought that women should not be more educated than men, she has only attained primary education in Bengali. Due to her platitudinous upbringing, she assumes that Binodini’s ramshackle life is due to her education, particularly her English education. It is normal in many cultures to blame a woman for not getting pregnant shortly after the marriage, and Ashalata, being the product of a similar society, blames herself for not conceiving even after one year of her marriage with Mahendra. Considering her character, *Chokher Bali* is a bildungsroman that shows her development from an innocent damsel in distress to a mature woman. Though the change is not revolutionary compared to the other characters, it is undeniably a greater one to Asha, like wearing the blouse and starting to learn English from Basanta, an eight-year-old boy who is taken care of by Behari. She returns to Mahendra, forgiving him for the sake of her child, as she is not ready to challenge the family institution. In contrast, upholding her rebellious character, Binodini finds the institution of marriage as another prison, and she protects her uncompromised agency by rejecting both men.

Ashalata is often seen as a stereotypical woman, but she surpasses the conventional expectations of a wife in her feelings towards Behari. She knows that

he was the intended recipient of her marriage proposal, and several situations in the movie leave the audience uncertain about her feelings towards him. One such instance is when she asks Behari, not her husband Mahendra, to get her some flowers from the pond, Binodini adeptly alluding to an instance in *Mahabharata* where Bhima goes to get flowers for Draupadi. Although she has a great sexual life and is gifted with many materialistic gifts like jewels and silk, Mahendra is not willing to back the whims and fancies of his immature bride, who has not even outgrown her childhood. Thus, clandestinely mentioning, Asha sees Behari as a lighter version of her husband as she considers Behari to be what Mahendra is not. She finds Behari to share her childish desires and needs without any hesitation, thereby distorting her image of a conventional woman as it was a time in which women were forbidden from looking at a strange man other than her husband. Even Mahendra has likely noted this uncustomary relationship that made him prohibit Asha from wearing the golden necklace gifted by Behari. Asha's infatuation with Behari is further questioned through her letters to him, not to her husband, asking both of them to come to the house earlier, which is not a common but clearly a nuanced act even in the prevailing Indian psyche.

While Binodini remains fixed to her unwomanly disposition throughout the movie, Mahendra's character exhibits a gradual transition in the spectrum of gender suppositions from the hegemonic end of masculinity to the vulnerable and helpless temperament of femininity. He is introduced as the unconcerned, rude young doctor who prioritises his own wishes and whose decisions and arrogance made the lives of Binodini, Behari, Ashalata, and Rajalakshmi crumble in unforeseen fate. For a

conformist Bengali society, Mahendra is considerably privileged and is portrayed as the pinnacle of conventional masculinity, with a well-built physique, dominance, erudition, and emotional tenacity. He brutally rejected the marriage proposal of Binodini, and married Behari's bride, Ashalata. Though he is not interested in Binodini, her beauty and wit drag him to indulge in an extramarital affair, initiating a demotion in his prerogative class of hegemonic masculinity and unmanly traits of emotional complexity and vulnerability. His image as a valiant man gets shattered when he returns the letters written by Binodini, as he lacks the courage to face the consequences once they are discovered by anyone.

Ghosh disrupts the stereotypical male portrayals of hitherto films and literature through Mahendra, who repositions from a rational male figure to a despairing one encountering emotional and inner anguish amid his mistress and wife – between desire and obligation. Asha embarks on a pilgrimage with her aunt Annapurna, leaving Mahendra after discovering the relationship between her husband and her best friend. After his wife deserts him, Mahendra wilfully proposes to Binodini, but she retaliates by rejecting his offer and confessing her love for Behari. She instantly shatters Mahendra's masculine ego by refuting his assertions that he left Asha for her, reinstating the fact that it is Asha who abandoned him, foregrounding Asha's newfound authority. A detour from the established gender norms and expectations can be seen in Mahendra's journey towards compassion and self-awareness, especially towards Ashalata and Binodini.

Mahendra's departure from an aloof and solid male figure at the beginning is completely transformed at the end. At first, he mocks Behari about his lean towards

the freedom struggle and about his concerns regarding protrusive participation, while in the later part, his uncanny temperament gets mutated to a compassionate and solicitous disposition and warns Behari regarding the struggles happening outside: “Be careful, it is not safe outside” (*Chokher Bali* 02:25:04). He transforms to a new being from a man who feels flustered on being in the house, which is a commonly alluded trait to masculinity, to one who finds peace inside the house and feels it safe in his own closet remarking a clear statement of deteriorating stage of hegemonic manliness. A more complex depiction of masculinity in the movie is further enhanced through his preparedness to confront his own discrepancies and vulnerabilities.

Complying with Connel's classification, Behari sets a stark contrast to Mahendra as a complicit male in his exercising of masculinity. His gender-fluid characteristics can be found in his demeanour, actions, and relationships with other characters showing an evident deviation from the prescribed gender norms of the time. Though a doctor by profession, he partially participates in the Indian freedom struggle by filing petitions and participating in freedom campaigns. Behari's family is not mentioned anywhere but is shown more like an adoptive son to Rajalakshmi, filling the void of a son that she yearns from the frigid Mahendra: he reads the epics and other literature to her, frequently visits and enquires about her well-being, takes care of her health. He is sympathetic to women and children, which can be understood from his respectful approaches towards Binodini, Ashalata, Annapurna, and the orphan kid Basanta, whom he takes care of, describes him as a complicit male. Though he desires to witness a transformation in familial and social spheres,

his outward commitments and participation are weak, as he is unwilling to jeopardize his privileged status quo.

In contrast to conventional notions of masculinity, Behari is shown as a sensitive and sympathetic figure who values understanding and emotional connection. Without imposing conventional gender expectations or stereotypes, he extends companionship and emotional support to Binodini without demeaning her to the level of a widow. Departing from the stereotypical masculine figure, his willingness to listen to and understand Binodini's experiences and her rational yet revolutionary thoughts challenge the notion that men must be distant and aloof, illustrating that strength and resilience can be found in vulnerability and compassion. His propensity to extend beyond the standards of gender aids in making the portrayal of male characters in the movie more inclusive and intricate.

Mahendra and Behari often transcend the borders of commonly agreed male friendship to a more nuanced and intimate level. Their journey departing from rigid masculine entities, though in two different ways, along with their acts, results in considering them as gender-fluid persons. Though of opposite temperament and character, they are inseparable in life and profession and cross the boundaries of male friendship commonly perceived. Behari paradoxically concurs with leaving his bride for Mahendra, as he values the latter more. Mahendra's letters to Behari about his marriage and sex life with Ashalata, describing her beauty through a passionate poem, differ from informal letters between friends recounting good old memories and current life events. Rather than Binodini reading the letter, it is Mahendra's words that make the audience sceptical and uneasy about how a husband can share

such intimate moments with his wife with a friend. Further, they show objection to including a third person in their conversations irrespective of the subject, which is substantiated when they converse in English in front of Asha and switch back to Bengali once she leaves. Their intimate relationship has a parallel allusion to a 1998 Malayalam movie, *Harikrishnans*, directed by Fazil, that discusses the lives of two intimate friends and lawyers, Hari and Krishna and how their relationship gets strained when they are both attracted towards the same woman, Meera. Similarly, in *Chokher Bali*, Mahendra and Behari first reject Binodini but later fall for her, only to find it uneasy about having her. Whether it is Ashalata, Binodini, or even the mother Rajalakshmi, a woman seems to have limited space in their relationship. Their friendship is more nuanced than the common psyche of the time could decipher, and its profundity can allude to *Wuthering Heights* quoting, “He is more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same...” (Brontë 68).

As the male friendship of Mahendra and Behari displaces them from the masculine entities, Binodini and Asha move further beyond the gender spectrum through the act of the female gaze, which questions their typical roles as women. The female gaze, which emerged as a counter-theory of Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze, challenges privileged masculinity, subverting the practice of gender roles in visual media. Since the perspective of the heterosexual, the white man is often considered as the standardised one, the visual media of any time reflect the same patriarchal norms. This reflection of male domination has created a binary in the realm of visual media: the one who looks (man), assuming the roles of actor, spectator, or director, and the other who is looked at, preferably women. The concept

of the female gaze emerged from feminist theories because of incredulity towards the male gaze, which treats the female body as an instrument for sexual pleasure. The female gaze bestows women an autonomy that the men exercised hitherto, as it is the women – the female spectator, director, or actor – that look at the male bodies. This agency is rendered by Ghosh in his *Chokher Bali*, showing how the male body is objectified and gazed at by the female characters Binodini and Ashalata. Considering them in a spectrum of gendered expressions, which do not conform to a single entity of prescribed role, the concept of fluidity and the female gaze are related as they both question the established norms of gender expectations and representation in media and society. In the case of Asha, she admires Behari's muscular body as a voyeur, especially when he swims in the pond to get flowers for her. Binodini, who already possesses masculine traits, is preoccupied with the voyeuristic way as she gazes at the bodies of Mahendra and Behari and looks through the binoculars at the bodies of the wrestlers who practise on the bank of river Ganga with an intended sexual desire. These scenes are shown from Binodini's perspective, setting a stark contrast to the presented male and female bodies. There had been no movies up to that point that had showcased male bodies in a voyeuristic and objectified manner as female bodies had been portrayed. Instead of objectifying the individual body and sexuality for the cause of entertainment, the movie exemplifies Ghosh's gender politics by recognising and celebrating their subjectivity and agency. The goal of the female gaze is to challenge the constantly imposed gender preconceptions and offer a distinctive interpretation of gender and sexuality that is both fluid and subjective.

Rituparno Ghosh's 2004 movie *Raincoat*, an inspiration from O. Henry's short story *The Gift of the Magi*, presents intricate human relationships that portray an exchange of gender roles, subverting expectations. The film makes a poignant take on the most profound human emotions through its unembellished plot of two lovers who are separated due to certain unanticipated events. The movie follows Mannu, an unemployed man's journey to Kolkata, to seek financial support from his successful friend for his upcoming business venture as a last resort. He sets out on a journey to find his childhood love, Neeru, who left him for a wealthy man. Eventually, he arrives at a run-down house and discovers a completely different Neeru from the vibrant, young, and beautiful girl he once loved. While reminiscing about their good old days, both build a card castle of lies regarding their luxurious lives: Mannu impersonates the identity of his friend as a successful television producer, and Neeru places forth her life to be full of prosperity and having a very caring husband. The true picture of each other's lives unravels when the landlord arrives and discloses Neeru's devastated state while she goes to the market. She finds Mannu's broken life through the letter in his raincoat regarding his financial liabilities. The movie ends with an untold pain reverberating as they both sacrifice for the other: Mannu gives the only money he has received from his friends to Neeru's house owner, ensuring her security, at least for a short time, and Neeru places her remaining bangles in Mannu's raincoat. The past and the present are repeatedly swapped as contrasting sequences to immerse the spectator into the resentment and desire that Mannu and Neeru are trying relentlessly to conceal their truth from one another. With the improvisation of light, the tones of the past and

present are dramatically juxtaposed: the memories are presented in a radiant colour tone, while the present is characterised by intricate and grey patterns of agony.

Raincoat witnesses a reversal of expected gender roles, creating a nuance in their supposed performance in a conventional culture. Several societies around the globe are androcentric and place a strict demarcation between gender performances, except a few countries organised as feminine societies, where overlapping of gender roles normalises any gender and sexual orientation. In the case of the conventional androcentric communities, “Men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success; women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life” (Tidwell n. p.). This perspective is demolished in this movie as the male protagonist marks a lucid deviation from stereotypical masculine depictions characterised by strength and stoicism, shown as vulnerable and desperately in emotional turmoil. John Gray, in his book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, examines the established stereotypic expectations of the male and female binary and elucidates their rational and emotional variances: “A man’s deepest fear is that he is not good enough or that he is incompetent. He compensates for this fear by focusing on increasing his power and competence. Success, achievement, and efficiency are foremost in his life” (Gray 59-60). Mannu, played by one of the prominent icons of macho or masculinity, Ajay Devgan, subverts these prescribed traits and is presented as an incompetent, unsuccessful, unemployed man who sets out to seek charity from his friends. In the conventional notions of masculinity, asking for help and the explicit manifestation of their dilemma are considered unmanly, displacing Mannu from an ideal male figure.

Ghosh places Mannu for the further analysis of men's emotional complexity and fragility which is least discussed in a public platform. While Mannu ridicules his friend Alok's wife, Sheela, for crying during the time of her marriage, she retorts by pointing out Mannu's crying in the bathroom. Ghosh accentuates the significance of normalising tears and the explicit display of emotions regardless of gender through Mannu's emotional vulnerability and critiques the presumed impositions on gendered performance. Mannu is shown as an unmanly figure who fails to show courage and earn respect to marry his love. Later, his act of helping Neeru in making the bed makes the audience frown upon him because, in a conformist culture, household jobs are completely allied to women, and a man who is concerned about chores is labelled as unmanly.

While Mannu subverts his position as a man to an unmanly character, Neeru, played by Aishwarya Rai in the movie, deviates from several stereotypical narrations of a cultured, well-brought-up woman. Throughout the movie, Neeru demonstrates autonomy and agency in her choices and deeds despite her familial and economic setbacks. Leaving Mannu and marrying a man with a higher fortune for a settled life was her own choice, and nowhere in the movie, she admits that her marriage was a forced one. Neeru demolishes the often-celebrated sycophancies related to a woman's love that place materialistic pleasure as secondary. She challenges the traditional notion of a woman by watching an A-certificate movie in public and asking Mannu to fix the buttons of her kurta, not only disturbs Mannu but the viewers as well. Ghosh portrays an interchange of gender roles through the performances of the despicable Mannu and the dauntless Neeru, challenging the

preconceived notions about submissive female characters and emphasising the tenacity and fortitude of women. Regardless of gender, Ghosh's *Raincoat* illustrates a broad spectrum of emotions as both Mannu and Neeru convey desire, heartbreak, and vulnerability, challenging the preconception that certain emotions are gender-specific.

Shob Charitro Kalponik is one of Ghosh's globally acclaimed movies that discusses intricate human relationships and how they are affected before and after death. For Ghosh, "the protagonist of this film is the Bengali language, and it is through the vehicle of the language that the love story of the film travels" (Parul n. p.). The story explores the relationship between Radhika, an urban-educated woman who is more comfortable in English, and her husband, Indraneel, a Bengali poet and an ardent admirer of his land and language:

Shob Charitro Kalponik is the story of Radhika's journey into the life of her late poet-husband, Indraneel and the revelations and contradictions she learns about Indraneel as a poet and husband. She realises how much he romanticised their mundane, everyday life. Yet, in reality, he was often insensitive, negligent and apathetic towards her. She wonders about his dual identity. How can a poet be unaware of his day-to-day realities yet highlight moments from it in his art?" (Parul n. p.).

Exhausted with Neel's recklessness and efforts to get rid of responsibilities, Radhika decides to file a divorce, and she finds solace in the presence of her colleague Shekhar, who provides everything she expected from Neel: companionship, care,

love, and mutual support. Despite her constant frustration and disdain for him, she still cares for him and worries about his financial incompetence. This is evident when she returns from an official trip when Shekhar delivers the news of Neel's award and brings a special gift for Neel – a costly pen. However, Neel does not make any effort to inform Radhika about his achievement but gives her a shock by disclosing his resignation, leaving her alone amid the enormous monetary culpability. Later, Neel's death leads to a dramatic transformation in the psyche of Radhika, where she struggles between memories and present realisations: In the past, she understood Neel as a husband, while in the present, after his death, she begins to understand him as a poet, which she never attempted for any time before.

At a superficial level, the movie represents nuanced human relations in which Radhika is placed in a dilemma oscillating between her love for Neel and her efforts to get rid of him. Ghosh, like in his other movies, provides the shades of his convoluted gender politics, such as the exploration of female subjectivity and subversion of gender norms. The primary focus of Ghosh in this movie is in the context of marriage and widowhood, and the secondary phase is the interrogation of subverted traditional gender roles. Radhika's entry as a new widow makes conventional prescriptions uneasy as she sticks to none of their norms of a widow, neither in form nor in disposition. Her arrival from her mother's place to Kolkata on hearing the news of Neel's death itself is confounded as her inner voice explains that journey:

Indraneel died yesterday. November morning 4.17 am. A massive heart attack. I will never see him again. Somehow, it didn't seem

different. I made arrangements for Ma, comforted poor Papa, packed my things, even checked to see if I'd left anything behind. Nothing seemed to have changed. Except the journey. (*Shob Charitro Kalponik* 00:59:04 - 00:59:34)

She diverts evidently from a shared conception of mourning a death: she returns from Kolkata without any haste after completing the necessary duties there, as if she returns to her house on a typical day. Customarily, women are depicted more dramatical in emotional outbursts in anyone's loss or vicissitudes, and men are often expected to perform an exceptional balance of emotions. Radhika confronts the preconceived notions that dictate how she is expected to manifest her grief for her husband's demise. She is portrayed as an urban widow who does not follow any traditionally imposed masquerades of widowhood, like wearing a white saree, not being present in front of others in an appealing manner, not wearing bindi and many more. Radhika, as a widow, has not changed terribly in her physical appearance compared to her earlier stage but possesses the same agency and independence, while the only difference may be her void caused by Neel's absence. Her denial of the expected performance as a widow is further illustrated in the scene where she prepares to participate in Neel's memorial meeting. She asks Nandor Ma, her maid but a mother-like figure, regarding the saree to wear without any shadow of affliction on her face, which partially shocks the still sobbing Nandor Ma. Her initial apathy towards her husband's death and her vexation about being in the meeting is patently shown through her recurrent checking of time on the phone and messaging

to Shekhar and her mother which is an unexpected and bizarre form of action at a societal gathering.

This movie further traverses gender roles and expectations through Radhika and Indraneel, and paves the way for exploring the elements of gender fluidity in it. For generations, numerous cultures have adhered to traditional gender roles, where men are expected to be the primary breadwinners, while women are perceived as passive figures within the family structure. Ghosh demolished this foundation through his movie *Shob Charitro Kalponik*, placing Radhika as the breadwinner and Neel as passive. Neel defies the stereotypical expectations by opting out of an engineering job and going three months without a salary. His desire to be known as a poet is an attempt to escape from the harsh realities of financial onus and the rationality of a family man. Although Radhika reminds him of their dooming financial stability and her inability to handle it alone, Neel never extends any monetary or emotional support. Several incidents underscore his negligent conduct as a fellow being and his indiscretion as a spouse: On his visit to one of his poet-friends, he forgets that he has left his wife in the taxi with the driver at midnight, and he carefreely reads his draft to the former. When Radhika was almost bedridden with a high fever, instead of attending to her and calling a doctor, he used the excuse that the doctor was not reachable on the first try. Instead, he called his friend and casually chatted about his recent trip, leaving his suffering wife unattended.

Neel crosses the imposed gender roles celebrated in literature and films that illustrate the male ego of being the financial linchpin of the family by being dependent upon his wife. His anticipated masculine role is put at stake when he

resigns from his job the next moment he learns about the prestigious national award, “Krishti Puraskar”, given to regional language poetry. Neel is portrayed as a child who disports in his own whims and fancies rather than a poet of deep thoughts and a mature man of words and action. The viewers are left dubious about the role of Radhika in his life and his existence as a man who is supposed to be sensible and competent. He hardly thinks to share his award news, pass the message of her mother’s heart attack, and discuss his decision to quit the job. It can be assumed that Neel neither proves to be manly in the traditional sense nor serves to be modern as he does not give ample space for her.

While Neel obviates his role as a conventional male, Radhika transcends the spectrum of stereotypical presumptions by becoming the sole monetary supplier of the family. She clearly departs from the position of a customary woman by taking on the responsibilities of a primary earner and managing the family. Amid these persistent emotional and pecuniary bothering, Radhika barely has time to support Neel’s artistic endeavours. Though conventional society has always looked down on those women who develop an extramarital relationship, in the case of Radhika, Ghosh makes her guilt-free for her sense of security and support she felt from Shekhar since Neel has irrationally denied those.

More than these crossing of traditional roles, Neel and Radhika exemplify the elements of gender fluidity strangely and uncannily, which is seldom discussed in the scholarly investigations of Ghosh and his film *Shob Charitro Kalponik*. Though there lingered an air of apathy in Radhika after the death of her husband, a tranquil transition occurs in her without any dramatic accompaniments of

background scores or emotional dialogues. Ghosh illustrates this character mutation through subtle acts of gestures and minimal words: Radhika's act of taking the colossal portrait of Neel from the memorial meeting to the living room in her house, her listening to the words of those acquaintances of Neel at the gathering and her response to the poems they recited composed by her husband. Though Shekhar approaches Radhika for her permission to disclose their relationship to his parents, in light of Neel's demise, she responds with a cold shoulder. She confabulates with Shekhar with the same apathy she had once received from Neel, marking an evident transformation of Radhika becoming her late husband, and her choice of words and their brevity further resembles that of Neel's. Though it lacks scientific support, it is a common presumption that women talk more in detail than men ever do, which is again challenged by Radhika through her transformation of attitude to a man in words and deeds of complete autonomy. Neel's death is not the end of their relationship but the beginning of a new one in a new form:

Neel: I will write one more poem. Then, your mad husband will really die. All will be over. No one will bother you anymore.

Radhika: Is death the end of everything?

Neel: It isn't, is it?

Radhika: It will start again somewhere. (*Shob Charitro Kalponik* 1:34:21 - 51)

Shob Charitro Kalponik is an exceptional work in the entire filmography of Ghosh in its administration of recurrent reveries and supernatural elements, which

are not used in other movies except *Chitrangada*. From the memorial gathering of Neel, Radhika starts seeing a woman wearing the same saree she wears, whom she assumes as Kajori Rai, one of the characters in Neel's poetry. There are only limited academic discussions on Kajori, which provide some vague assumptions that she is the alter ego of Radhika. Kajori can also be understood as a reincarnated persona of Neel in the mind of Radhika, who takes the form of a woman. Ghosh puts forth and shudders the essential existence of gender notions by presenting the soul of a man as a woman. Ghosh already impedes the possible assumptions of alluding Kajori to Radhika through Neel's overt confession that she does not inspire Kajori, and Kajori is not her poetic persona. From Neel's expression and words to Radhika, it is evident that Kajori is Neel himself, through whom Neel presents his feminine urges and desires. Neel has never answered anyone who questions the inspiration behind Kajori except Radhika, which shows his uncertainty and fear of being expelled from knowing the feminine existence he has been wrapping with his poetry so far. Kajori can be seen as Neel's feminine guise, in which he feels more accepted and understood, whereas Neel is shown as an incompetent, unsuccessful partner, employee, and person.

Kajori is Neel in the way that Radhika has longed for, in whom she sees Neel and herself as one and equal in thoughts and appearance. Kajori gives Radhika companionship, where they do all the chores together, like making the bed, folding the saree, and reading the poems together. Radhika feels a sense of belongingness with the presence of Kajori, which she had never felt before, and as Neel once said, his death puts a beginning to something new in his new guise. In another dream,

Kajori massages Radhika's neck, which gradually veers into an erotic or sexually intimate state, and she feels that Neel is indeed doing that. By the death of Neel, an exchange of gender existence in their performances happens as Radhika transposes her temperament and nature to that of Neel, and Neel's soul appears as a woman, Kajori. Ghosh, thus, underscores the irrationality of the essentialist nature of gender and foregrounds his idea of non-fixity or the fluidity of gender as present in every individual.

Exploring Rituparno Ghosh in the light of gender fluidity, it is evident that his artistic endeavour extends beyond his queer trilogy. Every artist possesses certain recurrent themes and motifs that can be identified in their works: Ghosh's conceptualisation of gender variances and fluidity are present in most of his works, regardless of the primary plot that carries on. Ghosh's works serve as a validated source for understanding gender identity beyond the traditional binary conception. They embrace the diversity and hybridity of gender expressions and identity, surpassing conventional expectations and standards. Though revolutionary in his approach by placing rebellious personas, his films are strong reflections of the cultural fabric of India, especially Kolkata, where gender roles are typically conditioned by social customs: "Ghosh's characters are not struck between tradition and modernity, but they are seamlessly fluid – the social structuration of the society finds these roles and newer identities in conflict" (Bhatkar 98).

Ghosh perceives fluidity as a politics of existence that confronts ingrained notions and promotes discourses about acceptance and inclusiveness. His characters are his munition for propagating the irrationality behind heteronormativity and

promulgating the existence of fluidity in every individual, irrespective of their recognised gender.

Ghosh's films make a mark in launching an acrid critique of heteropatriarchy, often revealing the reality behind apparently happy marriages, romantic relationships, and familial equations. As the characters are fluid, their roles are subversive to the traditional model of patriarchy and, therefore, through the means of these desires and identities, are exposed to the gaps and vacuum in the patriarchal structure that lacks spaces for women for their changing roles, identities and fluidity (Bhatkar 98).

Ghosh demolishes the entrenched reliance on the successive nature of heteronormal families and exposes the hypocrisy and fabricated contentment through *Chokher Bali*, *Shob Charitro Kalponik* and *Raincoat*. His characters overturn the conventional patriarchal model and gender hierarchy that outcasts women and non-binary identities and expose the voids in the existing structure that restricts the space for individuals to choose their identity and perform it freely, as in *Shubho Muharat*, *Bariwali*, and *Chokher Bali*.

Ghosh effectively circulates his idea of fluidity and the cynical effect of heteronormativity in an amenable way through his movies like *Bariwali*, *Shubho Muharat*, *Chokher Bali*, *Raincoat*, and *Shob Charitro Kalponik* from the margins of queer identities. In these movies, the non-binary performances and fluid actions are imbibed in the characters, who are treated as heteronormative and binary. These movies pave the way to a new prospectus of gender approaches in any form of

artistic expression in a culturally embedded land like India. Critics around the globe have praised his subtle approach to challenging subjects and his ability to provoke spectators' thoughts and consideration. Ghosh encourages the viewers to contemplate their own ideas of gender and identity through intricate character introductions, riveting plots, and avant-garde narrative techniques, ultimately advocating for further acceptance and inclusiveness in society.

CONCLUSION

Gender has always been a point of contention in all eras and cultures, as it is a dynamic manifestation of each contemporary societal prescription rather than a fixed entity. These postulations on gender roles are the cause of the evolution of a culture that is binary and heteronormative. Cultural artefacts that are the products of the existing culture perpetuate this role division hitherto in multiple forms. Being capable of initiating changes, they use these artefacts throughout history as a medium to dictate the necessary changes in thoughts and deeds. It raises the importance of cinema as a potent tool in both reflecting and influencing the conceptions of gender and identity.

It took centuries for the intellectual circle and common folk to acknowledge the overt existence of a third-gender category as well as non-binary experiences. The rise of gender theories and political necessities eventually prompted the evolution of queer theories and queer movements during the last decades of the twentieth century. By the 1990s, queer depictions in cinema had made a considerable impact that instigated a new perspective towards their living experiences and sense of identity, which marked a momentous shift from holding them responsible for the spread of the AIDS epidemic.

The present study is an analysis of the intersection of gender, identity, and sexuality and their representations in cinema. It particularly emphasises the multifarious perspectives and voices, elevating a set of ostracised narratives and questioning conventional gender expectations. This is reflected in the queer

representations in global cinema: from the status of a fraudster or a comic interlude, their existence gets gradually consolidated. This transformation of recognition has been pioneered by New Queer Cinema (NQC), which features honest queer narratives both about and by themselves as well as unabashed depictions of their desires and predicaments in this society where the binary, heteronormative state is standardised. It is reflected in many international movies, and this study narrows down the influence of NQC on the Indian cinematic landscape, which is an intricate web of traditionality and modernity in every stratum, with a prime focus on the Bengali regional film industry.

This study is an extensive investigation into the fallacy of gender suppositions and the notion of gender fluidity in the movies of Bengali director Rituparno Ghosh. It emphasises the relevance of regional narratives for fostering discourses about gender diversity and inclusion by placing Ghosh's works within the broader context of Indian film and cultural exchange. It sheds light on the intricate manners in which gender identities are established, negotiated, and challenged within the socio-cultural context of Indian cinema. This study further contributes to a better understanding of the nuances of gender dynamics in both cinematic depictions and larger social contexts by examining the topics of gender fluidity, identity formation, and societal standards.

The scholastic discourses on Ghosh and his films have often centred on feminist perspectives and the obvious queer representation. The study makes an attempt to encounter how Ghosh's non-queer films approach the concept of gender fluidity and reflect on the new queer traits. The thesis is divided into five chapters

along with an introduction and conclusion: The introduction provides a theoretical framework as well as explores the latent issues raised in relation to vis-a-vis feminist and queer studies. It explores theoretical underpinnings, including the concepts of Butler, Foucault, and Sedgwick. The biographical background, along with the outline of his texts, is embedded to provide a better comprehension and analysis.

The first chapter, “Interrogating the Cultural Construction of Gender”, sets the ground for the entire study through a reconceptualization of gender notions and their evolutionary path from an earlier phase till the present time. Meaning being a cultural construct lacking a quintessential quality, gender stands not as an exception but as a rationale underpinning the solidification of gender standards that are established with the backing of the dominant institutions - religions and law - imposed through culture. In the light of feminist waves and queer theory, it can be presumed that gender roles are never stable but are refurbished with evolving socio-political changes.

The queer existence is not a new discovery of the twentieth century; rather, they were present throughout the centuries and are a part of the texts and myths that are the cultural records of the time. The power politics of the hegemonic heteronormativity made it intricate for an explicit exposition of the queer in the artistic format and public domain. The advent of colonialism and its widespread acceptance of Western learning resulted in adhering to the predetermined dichotomy rather than embracing the array of gender alternatives mentioned in the older literature and oral tradition. Nivedita Menon’s observations about the existence and normal status enjoyed by queer until the pre-colonial period around the globe are

discussed in the light of gender construction by colonial modernity along with her elucidations to Butler's "heterosexual matrix". In the twentieth century, the term queer had changed from being a derogatory term due to the rapid proliferation of queer identities and countercultural convictions. Halperin's elucidation of Butler's concept of queer further accelerated the shift in proletarian perceptions about queer: "queer . . . does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions, rather it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance" (qtd. in Jagose 131). Sedgwick's concept of the closet, which she refers to an undisclosed sexual orientation that has been kept concealed from the general sight, offers a distinctive vision to the queer culture. This calls for a global sociopolitical attentiveness to the marginalised minority and highlights differences in the mainstream perception and comprehension of queer culture.

The second chapter, "Winds of Change: New Perspectives on Queer Movies", is an extension of the first chapter, focusing on the overt queer necessities and portrayals in popular media. Cinema as a cultural object reflects and restores cultural values and ideologies and challenges the existing standards by exposing its flaws, thereby establishing a complementary relationship between cinema and culture. Through the depictions of the perils and plight of the daily existences of the ostracised, cinema aids in demolishing prejudices and promotes empathy and consciousness. New Queer Cinema (NQC) provides a more sophisticated and inclusive society fostered by the admission and normalisation of the queer through

which a substantial transition towards flexible approaches, giving rise to a new wave of queer movies.

Debuted in the Western cinematic arena in the twenty-first century, the increased acceptance of queer themes in the mainstream media became evident in the oriental industries as well. The Indian film industry has evidently shifted its stance towards candid queer narratives. By outsourcing conventional expectations, these films elevated regional participation, suggesting an increasing appreciation of diverse identities among common strata. This chapter delves into an analysis of the regional film industries in India, in addition to Bollywood, to gain a comprehensive knowledge of the portrayals of the queer community in each culturally divergent region. Films from the Marathi, Punjabi, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, and Malayalam industries form part of the analysis contributing to a comprehensive understanding of queer experiences in India. The evolutionary development of the Bengali film industry and its status in queer subculture are discussed in the light of NQC features, along with the emergence of Rituparno Ghosh as the pioneer of NQC in India.

The third chapter, “Exploring Gender and Kinship: Major Thematic Concerns in Ghosh”, is a kaleidoscopic investigation of various themes in the movies of Rituparno Ghosh. Ghosh’s movies are a recurrent proof of three major influences on him: Tagore, Ray, and Kolkata, which can be traced in his movies. While Ray’s influence is evident in his cinematography, Tagore exists as a perennial presence, either through his lyrics or with the cinematic adaptation of his works. Among the major themes, the feminist concerns centres on the portrayal of the new woman in the Indian conventional landscape demands special recognition. His

female characters cross the barriers of stereotypic expectations and possess an independence of free will and courage for the explicit presentation of their desires, thereby elevating the gendered roles of women in Bengali cinema. Ghosh has portrayed almost every possible form of human relationships and has created a new group both in his films and in his audience, who are well-educated and radical individuals of a new age who accept alternate identities rather than condemning them.

The fourth chapter, “Gender Spectrum: Reading the Queer Trilogy”, is a declaration of his gender politics, where he presents himself as an androgynous, fluid persona both on screen and in his personal life. His movies *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, *Arekti Premer Golpo*, and *Memories in March* are categorised under the term queer trilogy as they explicitly discuss the honest lives of queer individuals. The individuals who are labelled as queer in these films exhibit diverse gender identities and sexual orientations that illustrate the range of the gender spectrum and the absurdity of categorising people into one identity. The trilogy has made a significant contribution in bringing gender fluidity notions to the common Indian perspectives.

Ghosh’s queer personas are distinctive and possess a great extent of self-respect, which is contradictory to the earlier portrayals of non-binary queer roles in Indian cinema. His queer characters, whether it is the androgynous Rudra Chatterji, the gender-fluid Abhiroop Sen, or the homosexual Ornob Mitra, are highly educated, sophisticated, innovative and adapted into society through reputed professions and are comfortable with their sexuality and gender state. The trilogy is a microcosm of

several facets of queerness and the myriads of relationships. Ghosh marks robust propaganda of gender fluidity through the trilogy that blurs the lines between gender and sexuality groupings and suggests the current progress of new gender thoughts that are inclusive and adaptive to diversity and non-fixity.

The final chapter, “Navigating with the Spectrum: Embracing Gender Fluidity,” is an investigation into Ghosh's non-queer movies considering Butler’s notion of gender performativity, the foundational concept of fluidity. Gender fluidity deals with the interconnections of identity and the progression that results from adopting fluid expressions as a sort of protest regarding the bounds placed on by the conventional hegemonic systems. It intrinsically disregards the institutional expectations placed on people to comply with restrictive assumptions about gender.

As an advocate of new queer culture, Ghosh’s films portray nuanced representational politics that interrogate the status quo regarding gender and sexuality. Apart from the trilogy, other movies that adhere to this notion of gender politics in his filmography are *Bariwali*, *Shubho Muharat*, *Chokher Bali*, *Raincoat*, and *Shob Charitro Kalponik*. These movies are analysed to explore how Ghosh’s characters, who are hitherto regarded as heteronormative, binary individuals, defy the conventional standards of gender performances. These characters often transcend the gender spectrum by not adhering to any fixed gendered identity as a man, woman, or any non-binary category. These movies serve for further comprehension of the fluid existence and experiences as they embrace the multiplicity and flexibility of gender and sexual priorities. The heteronormal elitism and the established gender-biased paradigm that stigmatises non-binary orientations are

dismantled by Ghosh's characters, who disclose the discrepancies in the institutional agency that constrains individual liberty to choose and express their identities. These characters, who have previously been seen as heterosexual binary category, are rendered with non-binary performances and fluid actions. Consequently, these films open new doors to gender perspectives and foster a broader inclusivity and acceptance in society.

This study leads to an understanding of the absurdity of the cultural construction of the gender binary and the fallacy of false pride on which the society is built regarding how each individual should behave. There is no essentialist characteristic that can term an individual as a distinguished identity considering the conventional standards. All these prescriptions of gender manifestations are made and imposed by humans upon the same species to establish and retain certain hierarchical privileges. The propagation of gender fluidity can act as a panacea for the existing disparities and restructure the power institutions. The demolishing of prescribed gender manifestations extends equal opportunities for every individual to express their orientations rather than struggling to comply with a predetermined framework. The debate over the notions of gender is bound to continue as gender is a perpetually shifting phenomenon that is contingent on the respective cultural contexts: as stated by Ghosh, a building is called a building even after its completion "because no transition is ever complete. It is an ongoing process" (*Chitrangada* 01:59:19 - 02:00:02). Ghosh's this thought of identity under continuous construction aligns with Edelman's perceptions on queer and fluidity: "Queer is always an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming: utopic in its negativity,

queer theory curves endlessly towards a realization that its realization remains impossible” (qtd. in Jagose 131). The more the queer theory gets appropriated into the mainstream academy, the more it loses its radical edge and momentum to be imbibed into a normative discipline.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Rituparno Ghosh's movies have left spaces for perennial explorations in the realm of gender conceptualizations and its treatment of intricate constructions of human relationships. The ingrained influence of Indian literature, culture and Tagore has encouraged him to make certain film adaptations like Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's *Hirer Angti* and *Dosar*, Tarasankar Bandhopadhyay's novel *Antarmahal*, Tagore's *Chokher Bali*, *Noukadubi* and his play *Chitra* as *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*. He also adapted from Western literature in his movies like *Subho Muharat*, where he presents an Indianized version of Agatha Christie's celebrated character Miss Marple and *Raincoat*, which is an adaptation of O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*. There is a scope for broader explorations on how Ghosh has interpreted these literary pieces and how he might have altered the characters or narratives to reflect contemporary understandings of gender.

In the realm of gender constructs, this study is exclusively limited to the works of Ghosh. As a result, the door is open for further research on how he approaches gender fluidity in comparison to other Indian and international filmmakers. This will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which other cultures and filmmakers address gender issues and how they vary over time. Furthermore, Ghosh's use of visual and dramatic methods to depict gender—such as performing styles, costume design, and cinematography—may be the focus of upcoming academic exams because these methods frequently straddle established gender norms.

Ghosh's films offer an extensive range of opportunities to examine the ways in which gender intersects with other identities, including sexual orientation, class, and race. His films frequently include individuals navigating several facets of their identities, offering a wealth of material for intersectional study. Ghosh's body of work transcends queer studies. Ghosh's films may be analyzed via a variety of theoretical frameworks, such as queer theory, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic theory, which provide diverse perspectives for interpreting his investigation of gender notions.

By following these suggestions, one may gain a thorough grasp of the ways in which Rituparno Ghosh's films interact with and depict gender fluidity and gender constructions.

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