

LOOKING AT SOCIETY THROUGH FEMALE GAZE: A JOURNEY INTO RITUPARNO GHOSH'S WORLD OF CINEMA

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Article History: Received: 22.03.2023 | Accepted: 25.03.2023 | Published: 01.04.2023

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56602/TDJ>

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56602/TDJ/12.1.1581-1585>

ABSTRACT

Eminent Bengali filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh has unmistakable contribution in Indian cinema. Recipient of 19 National Awards, Ghosh is a film maker par excellence. Apart from handling several social issues and homosexuality through his creations, Ghosh has always excelled in portraying women with sensitivity going deep into their psyche and nurturing their emotions with utmost care. Ghosh has delineated women not as conventional epitomes of virtue and sacrifice being subservient to the dictates of patriarchy; rather Ghosh's women stand tall asserting their own choices, emancipated and inhibition free hurling challenges against the male hegemony and set social codes.

INTRODUCTION

Unishe April deals with subtle emotional realities and strained relationship between a mother and a daughter and further interrogates the conventional trope of motherhood. The movie centres around Aditi, a young doctor ready to forego her career for a happy married life and Sarojini, a celebrated dancer who happens to be Aditi's mother. The movie portrays the resentment of the daughter towards her mother who has always prioritized her career over marriage and motherhood. 19th April happens to be the death anniversary of Aditi's father whose fond memories have been cherished by Aditi throughout her life. What is striking is that Sarojini completely forgets about the date, which is unthinkable for a widow in the patriarchal social set up where a widow is expected to be wearing white, eating vegetarian food, forsaking all the luxuries of life and lamenting for the deceased husband for the rest of her life. Sarojini's character has been delineated by Ghosh in a completely antithetical manner where we find that Sarojini is a confident, successful, careerist woman who flaunts her success by hanging her photographs in her house. She is inhibition free to wear gorgeous sarees and eating fish, hurling a challenge to the conventional social code of conduct laid down for a Hindu widow. She is

absolutely comfortable about her relationship. with Somnath who not only visits her house every day but is also a close friend with whom she shares a deep emotional bond. As a mother Sarojini could not give adequate time to Aditi during her growing years which created a distance between the two. Aditi accuses her for deprioritising her husband and daughter and finds her indifferent towards the family.

In the first half of the movie the strained mother-daughter relationship is evident. However, towards the end of the movie they engage in a conversation through which Aditi comes to understand that there was no compatibility between her father and mother who were temperamentally poles apart. Realisation dawns upon her that her mother cannot be blamed fully because her father had his own inferiority complex and despite her mother's attempts to leave her dancing career for the sake of the family, her father could never really appreciate Sarojini's efforts. Aditi learns to respect the fact that apart from being a mother, Sarojini has her identity as a woman who has followed her heart to pursue her passion for dancing. Ghosh here interrogates the traditional expectations from a mother who, to reach the ideal state of motherhood, must sacrifice her desires, priorities and wishes. A mother is expected to forget her identity as a woman to become an image of perfection. Ghosh questions this stereotypical image of a mother and creates a compatible relation between the mother and the daughter, where the latter appreciates the fact that apart from being a mother, Sarojini is a woman with her own choice. Being a mother does not take away her right to be happy in her own way.

Dahan is a movie which celebrates solidarity amongst women. The storyline revolves around Ronita a newly-wed homemaker who is molested one rainy night by a group of men near a metro station. Several passers-by witnessed the abject helplessness of Ronita but no one stretched a helping hand except another young school teacher Srobona. Though injured, she somehow prevents the hooligans from abducting Ronita. Immediately appreciations pour in for Srobona from relatives, colleagues and media because of her courageous act. On the other hand, Ronita fights her own battle to overcome physical bruises and the trauma that she has been subjected to. Too soon the concern of her husband vanishes when rumour spreads that she has not only been molested, but raped. News also spreads that she must have had some relation with the molesters earlier. Her husband starts questioning her integrity as a woman heartlessly despite the vulnerable emotional state she is in. Instead of protecting her from all humiliations, he forcibly gets physically involved with Ronita without her consent, literally raping her. Srobona sticks to her own ideologies and principles despite the pressure built up on her as her fiancé, Tunir, insists her to retract her testimony against the molesters. Finally, mustering courage, when Srobona reaches the court room she is harassed by being asked irrelevant questions which are insinuated

hints at her character. To the utmost shock of Srobona, Ronita refuses to identify the molesters because of pressure from her in-laws and husband.

It is true that Ronita succumbs to family pressure and cannot take a stand at the court. But the solidarity that is shown by Srobona towards Ronita is commendable, particularly taking the fact into consideration that they were strangers to each other. It is the bond of sisterhood without being related by blood. Another significant relation that is pertinent to be discussed in this context is Ronita's relation of trust and companionship with her sister-in-law who shows unflinching love and affection towards her. She does not have the courage to raise protesting voice against the wrongs meted out to Ronita but silently tends to her and provides mental support during her time of distress and pain. Again, Srobona's trust in her grandmother showcases bonding between two women hailing from two different generations all together. The rapport Srobona shares with her grandmother, the emotional connect that she enjoys with her supersede her relationship with her fiancé. Thus Ghosh presents various facets of relationship amongst women in *Dahan* all of which speak about solidarity, trust and love of one woman for another holding each other's hand unconditionally in times of dire need.

Bariwali is the story of a lonely spinster, Banalata, who is the custodian of a somber mansion, Mohini Malancha in the outskirts of Kolkata. Banalata's life is essentially mundane. and she whiles away her time doing small domestic chores, watching television and giving instructions to domestic helps. She is a loner who is deprived of marital bliss and suffers from ungratified sexual desires pent up deep within her. Hence, the arrival of Dipankar Sengupta, a reputed film director in her mansion for the purpose of filmmaking stirs her thwarted desires. She is captivated by his charming personality, misinterprets Dipankar's courteous gestures as emotional involvement, cooks and serves him food on his birthday like a loving and dutiful wife, gives away expensive, antique art pieces and utensils for the film shooting and even agrees to play a small role in the film forgetting all her inhibitions since Dipankar requests her personally. Her drab, dull life is illuminated by the vibrant personality of Dipankar. He has access to her room at any point of time. In fact, she gradually becomes possessive about Dipankar and turns jealous of Sudeshna, an actor in Dipankar's film with whom he had a relationship in the past. Banalata's possessiveness goes to such an extent that she does not unlock the main door of her mansion despite ardent request of Sudeshna so that she could go and wish Dipankar on his birthday. However, Dipankar is thoroughly professional and does not even bother to reply to her letters after departing with his crew from Banalata's mansion. He does not even hesitate to leave out Banalata's role in the movie because it was increasing the duration of the film. Dipankar's

attitude towards Banalata can be interpreted as a subtle form of exploitation. Definitely he is too polished to get involved in any kind of physical or verbal abuse towards her. However, holding her hand while relishing the sumptuous lunch cooked by Banalata on his birthday or asking her to look into his eyes while delivering dialogue during the film shooting, is enough to generate ray of hope in Banalata's heart regarding the prospective intimacy with Dipankar and stir her latent emotions. This is brilliantly conveyed by Ghosh through the employment of dream sequences. Her first dream is suggestive of her ardent desire to get married while in another dream Dipankar is seen painting a wall of the mansion red. This colour is invariably associated with the colour of the vermilion linked closely with the new bride. During her dream Dipankar is seen splitting the pages of a book with a screwdriver and there are spots of red splashed on the face of Banalata. It is an unmistakable reference to Banalata's longing for marital unison and desire for the loss of virginity in the nuptial bed.

However, at the end of the movie when all her emotions are shattered because of the complete negligence of Dipankar and when all the prospects of her romantic involvement get crushed she cries her heart out. But she does not say no to life. She rises up and begins her daily chore going towards the electric meter box to fix the problem of the fuse. This suggests that she regains her composure and goes back to her own reality coming to terms with life and living it with her own dignity.

Chokher Bali, an adaptation of Tagore's novel centres around Binodini, a beautiful young widow, a woman with multiple shades in her character. She has been given refuge by an old widow who happens to be Mahendra's mother. Ashalata, the wife of Mahendra and Binodini strike a chord of friendship. However, Ashalata, dressed as a Hindu wife clad in bright-coloured sarees adorned with jewellery and vermilion on her head is in sharp contrast to Binodini who is draped in plain white cotton saree with her hair tied back. She is witty, intelligent and educated but deprived of all happiness because of her widowhood which has restricted her life because of social conventions. She has her own desire which is reflected at the very beginning of the movie when she devours chocolate, relishes the taste and immediately burns the wrapper so that no one could see it. She longs for love and spends sleepless nights all alone. Getting opportunity, she wears a red blouse to teach Ashalata how to wear a blouse and later on flaunts Ashalata's jewellery which customarily Binodini is not allowed to wear being a widow. The movie is a tale of forbidden passion and emotional struggle of Binodini, her physical craving and listlessness for unison with a man because of which she could not restrain herself from getting physically involved with Mahendra. However, she is actually in love with Bihari which prompts her to be

implore Bihari to get married to her. Thus, Binodini has her own conflict and her character is critique of the restrictions imposed by patriarchy on the lives of the widows in the contemporary society. On one hand, Binodini confirms social regulations by wearing white saree; on the other hand, she transgresses the confines of widowhood time and again by giving in to her sexual desires and subverting the socio-cultural practices. She has no inhibition to assert that though she is known to everyone as a young, education widow, yet she is a woman of flesh and blood. She is not ready to be the epitome of sacrifice depriving herself from all the pleasures of life. She is a rebel in her own way and craves for freedom from the shackles of conventional norms laid down by society. The choice that she makes at the end of the movie bears testimony to it. When Bihari agrees to get married to her, she chooses to disappear leaving a letter for Ashalata. Her disappearance is a symbol of her craving for emancipation. In her letter she talks about a country which is beyond the periphery of the kitchen, veranda and confines of domestic life. Her rebellious spirit, her search for identity and her non-confirmative nature would not allow her to inhabit a socially proclaimed space offered by marrying Bihari. Hence, she chooses to discard all ties and thus proclaim her independence.

CONCLUSION

Ghosh's films are "full of women who constantly negotiate with what is taboo and transgress into forbidden spaces" (Dutta 232). Ghosh delves deep into the psyche of women and unravels their desires, ambitions and urge of emancipation questioning the rules laid down by patriarchy. His women do not reject social structures; rather they operate within the social fabric and fulfil their roles of being mothers, beloveds and wives, retaining their own dignity and asserting their own principles and ideologies. They are rebels; they search for emancipation; they are bold and inhibition free; they are courageous and spirited enough to question the male hegemony and essentially patriarchal social structure.

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