

Book Review: Rituparno Ghosh: Cinema, gender and art edited by Sangeeta Datta, Kaustav Bakshi & Rohit K. Dasgupta

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This collection of essays is the first scholarly study undertaken on Bengali filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh and seeks to explore his work within the dynamics of a rapidly evolving film industry in Bengal and more broadly the cinematic landscape of India. Alison Macdonald finds the book a timely intervention which opens up the complexities of Indian art house cinema via Ghosh's unique style, and writes that it would appeal to students and academics with a strong interest in cinematography and the politics of gender and queer theory.

Amidst the wash of media praise after Rituparno Ghosh's untimely death in 2013, and the recognition of a premature closure of the filmmakers far-reaching appeal, this edited collection offers a timely study that crystallises Ghosh's legacy as a 'cultural producer'; one which extends from films, into television, music and print journalism. The editors have skilfully brought together a range of multi-disciplinary perspectives, as well as unique interviews with cast, crew and the filmmaker himself, to illuminate Ghosh's visionary cinematic style. According to the contributors, what makes Ghosh so successful – and indeed poignant – to his target audience of the urban-educated Indian masses is the way he merges aesthetic flair with social commentary. The result is at once radical yet nuanced films about the reality of the liberalising Bengali 'bhadrolok' or middle-class and its associated politics of gender and sexuality.



Rituparno Ghosh and Deepti Naval in *Memories in March*, Photo courtesy: Venkatesh Films

Ghosh's films tend to focus on the comforts of bourgeois living in both contemporary and period settings. On the one hand, Ghosh has been criticised for unashamedly conforming and celebrating liberalising middle-class lifestyles in India. However, on the other the editors are quick to point out that Ghosh has also been widely applauded for exposing subjects rarely discussed openly in such contexts. For example, his films depict marital rape, transgressive social codes, same sex desires and the moral hypocrisies of the new middle-class.

A real strength of this volume is thus the way the contributors vividly disentangle the 'intertextuality' of Ghosh's subversive cinema in relation to social, cultural, political, and institutional discourses, and situate it within the wider canon on both Bengali and Indian cinema. This endeavour is pervasively elaborated on from different angles

throughout the volume via what I have identified as three broad intersecting themes: freedom, transgression and aesthetics.

On the subject of freedom, the book argues that in his earlier work especially, Ghosh is notable for his critique of ‘heteropatriarchy’ within the comforts of the middle-class family and the nation state. A number of essays in the volume draw attention to the myriad ways his female and/or queer protagonists struggle to break free from convention by problematising social codes or engaging in alternative modes of self-expression. Wimal Dissanayke’s contribution explores freedom as key ingredient of Ghosh’s construction of a ‘cinema of possibilities that was motivated by a transgressive impulse’. In his analysis of the period drama *Choker Bali*, Dissanayke illustrates how Ghosh has a fundamental concern with both ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ freedom, that is the need to liberate oneself from constricting external forces in the former, together with the imperative for self-realisation in the latter. Both aspects of freedom are captured by the female protagonist who is desperately trying to break free of out-moded shackles of social convention. In doing so, Dissanayke illuminates Ghosh’s engagement with freedom as a capacity for choice, self-reflection and consciousness raising, which become fundamental from a gendered viewpoint.

The theme of freedom in relation to transgression is recapitulated in other essays that examine how Ghosh problematises notions of compulsory heterosexuality. This is a topic that gains momentum in his later work where he started to experiment with form and style. Here contributors illuminate how both the positive and more ambiguous visions of transgendered desire and homosexual passion emerge through the productive tension of Ghosh’s characters that constantly break and cross binary distinctions. This is not only in relation to gender, but also speaks to caste/class distinctions in Indian society more broadly. The contributors emphasise how Ghosh’s films directly challenge distinctions between the bourgeois, ‘modern’ and economically privileged, and the ‘traditional’, vernacular and the destitute (cf. for example, Srimati Mukherjee and Aniruddha Dutta)

Ghosh’s empathy for the marginalised also gains traction in the volume as the contributors consistently draw attention to the oppositional subtexts in his films. This oppositional reflex is often told through original screenplay. However, it also emerges through Ghosh’s signature appropriation of older social texts such as those by Rabindranath Tagore, who was a pervasive source of inspiration for the filmmaker. According to Daisy Hasan, Ghosh’s ‘queer reading’ of Tagore’s *Chitrangada*, a modernist dance drama with roots in Hindu epics, infuses it with sexual and political liberalism and thereby reframes the story as one about sex reassignment and queer desire. Hasan convincingly argues that the film has wider political significance not only because it reinvents a hetero-normative history via novel modes of queer reading, but because it also challenges the manipulation of Hindi mythology by right-wing political forces in ways reminiscent of Deepa Metha’s seminal queer film *Fire*.

All the essays in this volume examine cinematographic aesthetics such as production, design and the use of props, or what some contributors term more broadly the ‘*mise en scène*’. The contributors highlight how these aesthetics instrumentalise Ghosh’s key themes of transgression, freedom and sexuality. Particularly notable is the fruitful focus on the interior space of the home. Both Madhuja Mukherjee and Richard Allen argue that this works to capture the discord between gender, longing and desire inhabited by Ghosh’s protagonists whose sexual repression and ‘closeted desire’ is so often at once physically, emotionally and socially contained. Other essays focus on the way Ghosh brings the debates of gender and sexuality directly into the central interiority of family space. The dinning space in particular emerges as the site where family nurture and bourgeoisie comforts are often transformed into a ‘politicised arena for confrontation, debate and negotiation’ (Sangetta Datta) as Ghosh works to disrupt the moralities of middle-class consumerist convention.

A particularly positive feature of this volume is that it does not shy away from addressing wider criticisms of Ghosh’s work. I found several contributors reflected on the potential limits of Ghosh’s work whilst productively moving beyond them by making use of a range of academic and cinematographic theory, as well as drawing on unique interview material that lead to fresh and insightful analysis. This balanced approach to Ghosh’s legacy felt honest yet intellectually rigorous.

This book offers a timely intervention opening up the complexities of the world of India art house cinema via the

specific style of Rituparno Ghosh. It would certainly appeal to students and academics with a strong interest in cinematography and the politics of gender and queer theory. Save the technical language, the volume is also accessible to anyone curious about Indian/Bengali cinema, and the personal legacy of Ghosh as a filmmaker.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Dr Alison Macdonald is a Teaching Fellow in the department of Anthropology at University College London. Her research interests are in the field of South Asia and include a focus on the politics of personhood, gender, kinship and the body in the context of health, religion and patient activism. She has conducted ethnographic research on grassroots breast cancer voluntarism in urban India since 2008.

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