

Exploitation, Victimhood and Gendered Performance in Rituparno Ghosh's *Bariwali*

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Rituparno Ghosh (1961-2013) was a filmmaker, lyricist and writer who first emerged on the cultural scene in Bengal as a copywriter at Response, a Kolkata-based advertising firm in the eighties. He made a mark for himself in the world of commercials, winning several awards for his company before directing two documentaries for Doordarshan (National Television). He moved into narrative filmmaking with the critically acclaimed *Hirer Angti* (Diamond Ring, 1992) and the National Award winning, *Unishey April* (19th April, 1995). He is credited for changing the experience of cinema for the middle-class Bengali *bhadrolok* and thus opening a new chapter in the history of Indian cinema.¹



IMAGE 1: Rituparno Ghosh, © Sangeeta Datta, 2013

Ghosh arrived at a time when Bengali cinema was going through a dark phase. Satyajit Ray had passed away in 1992, leaving a vacuum. Although filmmakers such as Mrinal Sen, Goutam Ghose, Aparna Sen and Buddhadeb Dasgupta contributed significantly to his genre of ‘intellectual cinema’ they did not have much command over the commercial market. The contrived plots, melodrama, and obligatory ‘fight’ sequences of the action-packed Hindi cinema, so appealing to the masses, had barely anything intelligible to offer to those in search of a higher quality cinema. Increasingly, Bengali films became clones of earlier box-office hits. Filmmakers who were aware of the educated urban audience’s abhorrence of the kind of films made by directors, such as Anjan Chowdhury, Swapan Saha, Sujit Guha, Anup Sengupta and Haranath Chakraborty, relied instead on the rural or suburban audiences and the urban poor for box-office returns. The educated Bengali middle-class audience, which could not relate to the new populist films, turned away from the movie theatres entirely. Bengali art house cinema, as it is still called, scarcely found producers, and globally acclaimed directors suffered a major setback.

Ghosh, clearly influenced by Ray and Sen, addressed the Bengali middle-class nostalgia for the past and made films that were distinctly ‘Bengali’ yet transcended its parochialism. Ghosh’s films were widely appreciated for their transgressive and challenging narratives. His stories explored such transgressive social codes as incest (*Utsab*/Festival, 1999), marital rape (*Dahan*/Crossfire, 1997), polyamory (*Shubho Muharat*/First Shot, 2003), the sexual desires of widows (*Chokher Bali*/ A Passion Play, 2004), same-sex love (*Chitrangada: A Crowning Wish*, 2012) and the moral hypocrisies of the new middle class (*Dosar*/Emotional Companion, 2006).

Always censured on the ground of his non-conformist gender and sexual orientation, Ghosh has constantly attempted to expose the sham progressiveness of his immediate society

that has more often than not been insensitive to human emotions and desires under the pretense of conservatism². *Bariwali* (The Lady of the House, 2000) is one of his most important films, and won two National Awards from the government of India³. It clearly marked the beginnings of Ghosh's gender and sexual politics, which finally culminates in *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012), and was one of the first Bengali films to introduce a visibly queer character in Bengali cinema. Oddly, while his later films including his queer trilogy, have received widespread attention from scholars in recent years, *Bariwali* has received almost none. This article addresses the ways in which the discourse of victimhood is narrated through the trope of gendered agency in the film, positioning hegemonic masculinity and heteropatriarchal privilege as markers of exploitation within India's gendered politics.

Through the figure of Prasanna, the first 'queer' character created by Ghosh, this article interrogates the boundaries of masculine performance and subjectivity and contrasts it with the ways in which female agency is problematised against a masculine axis. The protagonist Banalata, positioned within both feudal space and *bhadralok* discourse, embodies the transition from tradition to modernity, from discretion to aggression and from politeness to brazen appropriation in Ghosh's film.

Situating *Bariwali*

Bariwali is set in a suburb on the outskirts of Kolkata. Though it is one of Ghosh's first films to be set exclusively outside the urban space of the city (apart from his later period dramas) the characters mark Ghosh's continuous preoccupation with mannered upper/upper-middle class people. Here Ghosh delves into the everydayness of a lack-lustre suburban aristocratic mansion occupied by the lineage's only surviving member Banalata (Kiron Kher), a middle-aged spinster, who seems to be caught in a time warp. Banalata's life is pretty idle, apart from small household

chores, watching television and scolding her domestic helps. Her only companions are an ageing man-servant Prasanna (Surya Chatterjee), who has been serving the family since childhood, and an extroverted pert maid, Malati (Sudipta Chakraborty).



IMAGE 2: Banalata and Prasanna talking to each other © Anupam Kher Production 2000

Into this mundane setting, diversion arrives in the form of a film production company, which wants to rent the house for a period drama. Banalata is secretly overwhelmed by the arrival of these people, especially the beautiful actress Sudeshna (Rupa Ganguly), and the charismatic director Dipankar (Chiranjeev Chakraborty). Though aware that Dipankar has a wife back in the city and that he had been Sudeshna's lover in the past, Banalata finds herself charmed by this worldly man of a sort she has never encountered before. He even persuades her to play a small role in the film when the original actor in the role is suddenly taken ill. But once the film crew leaves, Banalata is forced back into her lonely existence. Her letters to the film director go

unanswered and a final betrayal comes in the form of a letter from the film crew announcing that her bit role in the film has ended up being left out.

Bariwali was originally a story penned by Ghosh in a short fiction special in *Sananda*, a Bengali women's magazine, which he then adapted into the script and dialogue for the film.⁴ It is an important work for a number of reasons: it marks the debut of Kirron Kher, one of the most versatile actors in Bollywood and regional films, in Bengali cinema and for which she received the National Award for the best actress. It is also one of the first Bengali films to introduce the queer figure, and it was Ghosh's third film to be recognized at India's National Awards.

As far as the urban educated Bengali is concerned, Rabindranath Tagore is an integral part of Bengali consciousness, and Ghosh was no exception. The influence of Tagore's writings and Satyajit Ray's adaptation and appropriation of Tagore into his cinema created an indelible impression on Ghosh's sense of aesthetics, particularly his filmmaking, and has been the subject of several discussions.⁵ Ghosh has borrowed bits and pieces from Bengali literary and cultural elements and made a mosaic out of them in *Bariwali*. Banalata, the protagonist, shares her name with the character created by Jibanananda Das, the most famous Bengali poet after Tagore, in his most celebrated romantic lyric "Banalata Sen" composed in 1934. Banalata embodies timeless beauty that bears traces of history and mythology, who the poet narrator wants to sit face to face with at the end of his life's journey. Thus Banalata's existence remains confined only to the imagination of her admirer, the narrator in this case. He creates her and it is he who enjoys reminiscing about the beauty of his own creation..

Like Banalata's beauty Charulata's literary accomplishments in Tagore's short story "Nashtanir" and its film adaptation, *Charulata* (The Lonely Wife, 1964) by Ray brings

appreciation to her brother-in-law Amal who is believed to have been instrumental in getting Charulata to make use of her literary talent. Charulata did not seek public recognition as a writer but appreciation from Amal of her intellectual prowess which was on par, if not superior to him. In both the cases men were satisfied to believe that these women owe their achievements to them.

Other than *Charulata*, *Bariwali* also carries resonances of *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World, 1984), another film adaptation of Tagore's novel by Ray, particularly in Ray's discussion of patriarchy, desolation, exploitation and, in certain cases, the abandonment of women by the *bhadralok*. In *Ghare Baire* Bimala, the zamindar's wife, also meets similar fate. Her husband takes every effort to impart western education to her, teach her western customs and manners so that he can take pride in his wife and present her to his friends as his greatest achievement. However everything falls apart when progressive Bimala, the creation of her husband Nikhil, begins to assert herself and defy her husband. Ray's successful adaptation of Tagore in a visual medium validated the writer's immortal significance in the cultural landscape of Bengal and India, whereas Ghosh's deployment of Tagore's novel within his own narrative reinforces the continuing contemporaneity of those issues and concerns.

Ghosh would later film Tagore's *Chokher Bali* (2003) but he was already paying attention to it here, intelligently weaving its traces into the narrative of *Bariwali* in order to emphasize the continuity of its narrative of the exploitation of women in a heteropatriarchal society across two different timeframes. This continuity is validated through the plot of *Bariwali* and the relevance of an early twentieth-century text to the women of the twenty-first century. In *Bariwali*, Banalata reads Tagore's novel out loud to her maid Malati. Banalata's reading of *Chokher Bali* is interrupted by Malati's vehement criticism of Binodini (the young widow in the

novel who yields to forbidden passions and quite boldly seduces a married man). Banalata's response, a compassionate understanding of Binodini's desolation, serves as Ghosh's first hint of the deep sense of frustration in the inner recesses of Banalata's mind.

Class divides

One of *Bariwali*'s most palpable and important aspects is the class divide that exists and influences its characters. Banalata represents a fading (feudal and suburban) aristocracy with a certain form of vulnerability. The first scene opens with the ornate yet lack-lustre entrance to Banalata's mansion. A tax-and-revenue settlement officer (a *bhadralok* in Bengali parlance) has come for an inspection; Prasanna is showing him around and giving him necessary information about the family. Malati is about to serve tea while her lover Narayan is coaxing her to accompany him to a movie; when he suddenly gropes and kisses her, the fancy bone-china cup-and-saucer reserved for special guests falls from her hand and breaks into pieces. Malati is absolutely nonchalant about the loss. Thus the narrative begins with a contemporary *bhadralok*, the tax settlement officer, trying to assess the value of the house that bears the remnants of Bengali tradition and conservatism, two lower-class people brazenly defying upper and middle class values and norms, and in between, someone with a 'problematic' class and gender identity trying to mediate. Banalata is a living remnant of an old feudal order that has been gradually eroded by social change and decadence.

Historically the *bhadralok* class was a group of tax collectors and clerks who occupied some of the highest positions in the colonial administration. It is coterminous with the Bengal Renaissance, a time when the introduction of Western education led to the growth of a new class of intelligentsia. Indira Chowdhury argued that the stereotypes associated with the Bengali *bhadralok* was a way of justifying colonial rule.⁶ Unlike the *bhadralok babu* depicted in 19th

century *Kalighat* paintings as effeminate gentleman leading scandalous lives and subservient to domineering wives, other indigenous conceptions of maleness were being asserted through social discourses in which the Bengali *bhadralok* was seen to thrive on education, success and social propriety. In creating this idealised hegemonic *bhadralok* masculinity, the *bhadramahila* (the gentlewoman) was cast as the repository of the family honour whose transgression had the power to dismantle this carefully constructed ideal of Bengali conservatism. Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted how the figure of the *grihalakshmi* (the chaste Hindu wife) symbolised the *bhadralok*'s attempt to differentiate themselves from the colonisers. The self-sacrificing Hindu wife was seen as an antithesis to the Eurocentric model of individualism. But Chakrabarty does not deny the violence concealed in this process of rewriting Indian womanhood through patriarchy.⁷ Tanika Sarkar reads this as an attempt by the *bhadralok* male to exert dominance within the private domestic sphere now that colonisers had subordinated his position in the public sphere.⁸

The decadence of the feudal order is portrayed in *Bariwali* through the vulnerability and weakness of the old order in the face of changing circumstances. The film crew clearly take advantage of Banalata in every way possible, from renting her house at a lower cost to using her silver and furniture as props for their period film. Malati despite her lower class status is represented as belonging to the new order with her street-smart understanding of the world around her. In fact, there is an unmistakeable resonance of E.M Forster's classic masterpiece *Howard's End* within the characters of Banalata, Dipankar and Malati, as *Bariwali* performs a similar emblematic dissection of the new class/social relations in contemporary India.

The Exploiter and the Exploited

The film is about exploitation. ... The fact that the exploiter ... is a man, and the exploited is a woman, or rather two women, is merely incidental as I see it. The

issue is not gender sensitive in that sense, but rather of universal vulnerability to the predatory instincts of the creative person.⁹

The theme of the oppressive man and the oppressed woman has been a recurring trope in many of Ghosh's films. In *Unishey April* Sarojini, a famous dancer, finds it difficult to reconcile the demands of her career and her home dominated by an egoistic husband who cannot put up with his wife's celebrity status. In *Utsab* (Festival, 2000) Parul, the eldest daughter of an upper middle class family, is trapped in an unhappy marriage having failed to tie the knot with her cousin due to insurmountable family objection to the match. While most of his films prior to *Bariwali* end with the emancipation of the woman from the forces that tie them down, or at least on a note of reconciliation, *Bariwali* ends in utter distress. Until the critique of aristocratic decadence and patriarchy in *Antarmahal* (2005), no other film by Ghosh ends on such a dismaying note as *Bariwali*. The last shot which focuses on the empty bed and the receding silhouette of the protagonist transforms loneliness into a palpable object.



IMAGE 3: Final scene of the film © Anupam Kher Production 2000

Banalata's vulnerability is subject not only to, what Ghosh calls, the "predatory instincts of the creative person," that is Dipankar in this case, her vulnerability is also subject to other forms of exploitation which is revealed as the narrative unfurls. The film strikes at the core of middleclass values especially around sexuality and gender through the lens of power and gender privilege. It also complicates gender performance and the discursive means through which dominance and power play out.

In *Bariwali*, Dipankar, Prasanna and even Abhijeet (an actor in Dipankar's film played by Abhishek Chatterjee) and Debashis (Dipankar's assistant played by Shiboprasad Mukherjee) can be seen as different points on the axes of masculinity. One particular manifestation of masculinity is patriarchy, which in India as in the rest of the world shifted from its private nature,

with women oppressed by husbands, fathers and other male members of their family to public patriarchy, where they are collectively subordinated by a society led by men.



IMAGE 4: Banalata's dream sequence where she imagines herself as a bride on her marriage day. © Anupam Kher Production 2000

In *Bariwali*, Banalata's first interaction with the world, at least metaphorically, is engendered by the arrival of the film unit. Her isolated life in the ghostly mansion is transformed overnight, as she is jolted into action by the various requests the film unit members endearingly make to her. But most importantly, she falls in love with Dipankar, the director, who breaks through the sprawling mansion despite her hesitations and coaxes her into renting the house for his shoot, while also breaking through the fortifications of conservatism, which guarded Banalata's sense of traditional morality.

Smitten by Dipankar's educated, suave and *bhadraloki* charm, both Banalata and Sudeshna allow him to exert his agency on them. Banalata offers her house, her personal belongings (even her father's portrait) and her special skills of lighting lamps and folding betel leaves. Breaking out of her puritan reservations she also agrees to act in his film only in order to prevent his financial loss. Sudeshna on the other hand cannot refuse Dipankar's offer and agrees to work in his film with nominal remuneration and yields completely to his strict task-mastership. In spite of his intentional aloofness from Sudeshna, Dipankar does not shirk from asking her favour in coaxing her co-actor Abhijeet and bring him back to the shooting location as the latter leaves after a tiff with the assistant director.

It is important to recognize that Ghosh here is dealing with a very subtle form of exploitation. There is no physical or sexual abuse involved in the exploitation which victimizes Banalata and Sudeshna. They become victims as a result of Dipankar's shrewd manipulation of their emotional weakness. This subtlety also resonates in Ghosh's earlier work *Unishe April* when in an emotionally charged scene Aditi (Debasree Ray) asks her mother (Aparna Sen), 'baba ki korto tomay' (what did my dad do to you?) to which she answers, 'kichu korto na! Tumi ki mone koro mar dhor korlei kharap hoy' (Nothing. Do you think physical abuse is the only expression of disregard?).

Ghosh has often brought such unseen violence/exploitation meted out to women to light in his films. In a way, Ghosh is directly engaging with Sarkar's thesis of the neglected *bhadramahila* whose liberation and agency needed to be controlled, manipulated and exploited to maintain a status quo at home, a status quo which the colonial Bengali male had lost to the colonisers in the public space.

Frail Masculinity and Queerness

Prasanna appears in the opening scene of *Bariwali* and is the first character from Banalata's household that the audience is introduced to. 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, or perhaps the only person with whom Banalata has shared her solitary existence.

Banalata does not seem to remember that Prasanna is a man. In a particular scene, with Prasanna sitting in front of her, Banalata reminds Malati that no man has ever dared to enter the inner chambers of the house. Prasanna fails to qualify as a male on the basis of the stereotypical parameters that are deployed in the appraisal of masculinity within a parochial socio-economic structure. If physical prowess, mechanical skill and conscious nonchalance towards "womanly matters" are the conventional determinants of masculinity Prasanna contradicts all. Prasanna's frailty and effeminacy offer a direct contrast with Dipankar's robust and overpowering masculine dispositions.

Prasanna is amazed to watch Dipankar's agility when the latter leaps over the railings of the terrace and watches helplessly while Banalata tries to fix the blown up fuse; furthermore, he indulges in typically 'womanly' concerns by advising Banalata to switch the fan off before wearing her saree. Ghosh provokes a sense of discomfort with Prasanna from the very beginning. Banalata's loosening of her saree and baring her blouse in the presence of Prasanna unsettles the viewers. It becomes difficult to reconcile this particular act of Banalata with that of her conservatism that keeps her confined within the precincts of the house and does not even allow her to visit the ground floor of the house and meet strangers without a genuine cause. The piquing of the sense of discomfort among the viewers, for which the director definitely had a specific purpose, reaches its height when Prasanna appears in Banalata's dream, dressed in a

saree and participating in *stree achar* (wedding rituals performed only by women). In an interview with Kaustav Bakshi, Ghosh agrees:

It's difficult not to miss Prasanna's queerness, so to speak. Banalata does not even treat him like a man. The relationship they share is not typical of a mistress of the house and her servant. Banalata shares everything with him, uninhibitedly; Prasanna has ready access to her bedroom; she does not even hesitate to change in his presence. Prasanna's queerness is best expressed in the first dream sequence, where Banalata dreams of him as one of the women, participating in *stree-achar*.¹⁰



IMAGE 5: Prasanna in Banalata's dream participating in *stree-achar* © Anupam Kher Production 2000

For the viewers, the first reaction after seeing Prasanna in a saree with a conspicuous blotch of vermilion on his forehead and on the parting of his hair is that of surprise. His appearance is uncannily distressful, which intensifies the eeriness of the scene all the more when he mentions the death of the groom by snakebite. The sense of surprise (and possible discomfort for some viewers) with Prasanna has at its roots in the inconceivability of the idea of a trans/queer individual in the popular Indian imaginary.

While Banalata does not acknowledge Prasanna's masculinity, Malati on the other hand, does not miss any opportunity at taunting Prasanna's 'womanly' dispositions. Naturally bold by nature she ignores Prasanna outright. Moreover, she sees no difference between Prasanna and herself so far as their status in the house is concerned – they are both servants. Therefore, while Malati does not care to take his orders, her sarcastic remarks on Prasanna are targeted more towards the performance of the latter's gender identity – the basic masculine traits which he is expected to have, as opposed to his actual dispositions which confounds the definiteness of the male/female binary.

Prasanna's cross dressing/effeminate body is framed alongside Banalata's and Dipankar's body and Ghosh often uses medium length shots to underpin the 'denaturalised' performance of Prasanna. In a telling scene, Prasanna can be seen walking into the balcony drying his hair against a group of men from the film crew in the background. Steve Derne in his work on culture, class and gender in India understands gender to be kind of an act. In his ethnography with male filmgoers he argues that understanding of gender and culture is mediated through class, making a distinction between 'locally oriented' middle classes which remain attached to traditional understanding of gender roles and position in society and a transnational Indian

middle class embracing values and gender lifestyles depicted in Western media forms.¹¹ Gender thus has a history that exists beyond the subject who enacts those conventions.

Prasanna underscores and subverts dominant imaginations surrounding the male body and subjectivity. It is indeed ironical that Prasanna's "un-manliness" makes him a point of ridicule for Malati, who despite her inferior class status, can challenge him, for he isn't 'man' enough.

In a conversation with the authors, Ghosh mentioned that Prasanna belonged to a tolerant and benevolent feudal world, where he could live and inhabit female spaces without any problems. Through Prasanna, Ghosh was alluding to the historical-social position of eunuchs and third sex in Indian queer history.¹² 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 that introduced in modern Bengali cinema and the first queer character created by Ghosh. *Bariwali* and Prasanna's character in particular can be traced as the genesis of Ghosh's lifelong interest in narrating and critiquing the neo liberal identitarian discourse.

Problematizing Agency

In Ghosh's films, subjectivity and agency come from one's interactions with society and are shaped by the socio-political institutions within which one resides. Suffused with a questioning minoritarian agency, they bring an exploiter/exploited binary into focus through the construction of character and narrative.

It is apt that Ghosh uses an intertextual reference to *Chokher Bali*'s Binodini in *Bariwali*, given its tale of freedom and obstructed female agency. Sudeshna, who essays the role of Binodini in Dipankar's film, is a stark contrast to Banalata who is limited by her social position within a suburban community. In the film, however, Ghosh uses Malati's character (especially

her liaison with a hot-headed working-class man, Narayan) to show how patriarchal exploitation works across intersectional lines.

The actions of Malati, Banalata's young maid, both disrupt and conform to the demands of patriarchy in interesting ways. Malati is in love with Narayan and is about to get married. She stands for the fulfilment of all Banalata's unfulfilled dreams. Though Banalata does not lose any opportunity to exert her employer-like dominance over Malati, the latter is too stubborn to yield or ignore the former's rebukes without a retort. Thus, Banalata's status as the employer fails to ensure her respectability. Her vulnerability is recognised by Malati and there are several instances where they can be seen as equals. It is interesting to note that Malati draws her confidence essentially from the possibility of a settled life, a normative proposition which forms a stark contrast to Banalata's single status with no hope of marital settlement.



IMAGE 6: Malati and Banalata © Anupam Kher Production 2000

However, Malati's handling of male agency and patriarchal exploitation is problematic. Initially she seems to ignore patriarchal control by defying Narayan's disapproval of her working and continues to work for Banalata. The possibility of Malati's exposure to a film crew (and thus to strange men) was at the root of Narayan's sense of insecurity, which is justified later through Abhijeet's sexist male gaze at Malati. She becomes the object upon which both the agencies of male domination and male gaze are exercised. She ignores Narayan but enjoys Abhijeet's coquetry. In the end, Malati will give in to Narayan's desires by resigning from her job and refusing to live in Banalata's house, as Narayan considers it a disgrace to his manly respectability. On another level, Dipankar's appearance and behavioural dispositions conform to the idea of the Bengali *bhadralok*. He embodies the abstract ideal of the desired man that Banalata had been nurturing throughout her life.

Banalata does not unquestioningly accept the masculine order, though as times goes by Dipankar encroaches on her domestic space through subtle and immediate means. It is through her sexuality that Dipankar tries to manipulate Banalata. Twice in the film he offers his hand to Banalata. Even though it might seem a casual gesture, in fact, a man offering his hand to a woman who is not related to him is a definite gesture of emotional (if not physical) intimacy for the conservatism to which Banalata subscribes. Dipankar's polite words loaded with concern for Banalata also help him to manipulate her emotions.

Dipankar's emotional drama with Banalata reaches its climax with him convincing her to play a small character in his film. She is clad in a red-and-white saree, adorned with jewellery and vermilion on her forehead and parting of her hair (the definite visual markers of a Hindu married woman) for the scene. This is also a poignant cinematic expression which brings a stark contrast between Banalata portrayed as a married woman in Dipankar's film and Banalata, the

eponymous protagonist of *Bariwali* with the drab and dishevelled appearance languidly moving about in the house weighed down by desolation and repressed desires. Even the viewers situate themselves in her position and try to imagine how things were and how things could have been. The idea of opportunistic involvement and withdrawal by Dipankar finds a cinematic expression in a wooden railing that is temporarily constructed to keep residents of the house and members of the shooting team away from each other. Though the separating panel is entirely Dipankar's idea, throughout the film he crosses the boundary without permission and enters Banalata's room.

This arrangement of temporary separation signifies Banalata and Dipankar's different attitudes towards the sense of boundary. For Banalata, the boundary gradually dissolves as she begins to misinterpret Dipankar's amiability as his love for her. On the other hand, Dipankar makes use of the boundary to further his own interests. He crosses the boundary whenever Banalata's help is required, but eventually builds a more permanent wall of disregard and stops communicating with Banalata altogether and cuts her scene from the finished film without even informing her, decisively casting her aside.

Ghosh uses a variety of striking visual tropes to register the complexity of Banalata's mind, especially her sexual repression, which is, expressed through the dream sequences. Triggered by the accidental witnessing of Malati and Narayan's physical intimacy, Banalata's repressed desires get manifested in her dreams. At night, sleep draws her into the mazes of her inner psyche and through her dreams a different reality finds expression: her longing for a man, a companion to ease her out of the drab and futile existence.

Banalata's long wait for a groom, as envisioned in her first dream, has finally come to an end with the arrival of Dipankar. There is a presence of a man in her second dream, and he is none other than Dipankar. The apparently incoherent frames such as white pigeons on the clean

white linen, Dipankar painting the wall red and paint splashing on the floor, Banalata holding a virgin book with a brown cover and Dipankar splitting open the uncut pages of the book with a screwdriver followed by spots of red spurting on the face of Banalata and pigeons prowling on the red paint splashed on the floor; have composed visual metaphors for the idea of the loss of virginity which is cherished by Banalata in her dreams.



IMAGE 7: Banalata's dream sequence © Anupam Kher Production 2000

Allowing of the male agency by the female characters reaches its climax in the dream in which Banalata hands over the unread copy of a book covered with a brown paper to Dipankar and asks him to split the uncut pages apart. It is she who is ready to offer her untainted virginity to him. Ghosh's choice of a screwdriver with which he makes Dipankar split the uncut pages of the book recalls the powerful sexual metaphors created by Ray in *Apur Sansar* where the camera zooms in to frame Apu (Soumitra Chatterjee) holding his wife's hairpin as she wakes up and

leaves the bed in the morning; or in *Ghare Baire* where Sandip (Soumitra Chatterjee) is in focus, holding Bimala's lost hairpin which he keeps with him as a memorabilia of their brief yet intimate encounter.

Like the hairpin used by Ray, Ghosh uses the screwdriver as a sexual metaphor; and in both cases it is the man who is given the sexual agency, an agency which has been subtly yet penetratingly woven into the socio-cultural discourses of Bengal.

The last dream in the narrative is even more direct. Dipankar removes the coverlet under which Banalata is found lying in her fancy lingerie. The coverlet, Banalata claims, has been embroidered through generations, thereby making it a signifier of the age-old tradition and conservatism which is being removed by Dipankar. Banalata and Dipankar's chancing upon Sudeshna's chic innerwear drying on a statue on the terrace also has a definite bearing on this dream in which the stylish innerwear becomes a direct signifier of desire. The fact that the innerwear belongs to Sudeshna is worthy of attention. Banalata's jealousy of Sudeshna and her desire to replace the latter in Dipankar's affection finds an exquisite cinematic expression through the dream sequence. Thus, the presence of Dipankar in her dreams is always associated with sexual insinuations.

Ghosh has problematized the issues of agency and freedom right from the opening scenes of the film, one which appears as the backdrop towards the end of the title card and the subsequent shot in which Prasanna lets the settlement officer into the temple. The film opens with the still shot taken from outside of the closed door flanked by the composite columns supporting the ornate arch. This antiquarian gateway is indicative not only of an old-fashioned house but also of the antiquated conservatism of the owner, Banalata. In the subsequent shot the perspective changes. The camera is placed inside the temple and captures the opening of the door

from outside and entry of two men into the temple. The surveyor enters the temple smoking a cigarette but on the insistence of Prasanna stamps it out on the floor. The perspective of this scene is that of the interior and interiority has no agency in its penetration by the outside world; nor is it able to preserve its sanctity from being sullied by the agents of the outside. Banalata is the personification of this incapacitated interiority whose vulnerability would be exploited by the outsider, in this case Dipankar. In another intertextual reference to Ray's *Ghare Baire*, Ghosh shows that female emancipation (in this case Bimala's) occurs only when the interior has been left behind for the *bahir*. Brinda Bose has argued that in the film, Bimala's passage towards sexual liberation is a return journey, a form of centripetal movement.¹³ In *Bariwali* too, Banalata's awakening and liberation happens when an 'outsider' film crew take over her interior space and the return journey back to her cloistered existence after the exit of the film crew in a way disciplines her liberation and sexual transgression.

The character of Dipankar is primarily judged from the perspective of Banalata and Sudeshna, who was once involved in an affair with Dipankar and is still not able to break out of the attachment. Just as Dipankar's 'manly' charm helps him get access into Banalata's house and her heart, it also aided him to exploit Sudeshna emotionally. In the dialogue between Sudeshna and her hair-dresser (Sudeshna Roy) it is revealed that Dipankar knew that Sudeshna could not refuse him when offered this film. He rings up Sudeshna and says, "I am making *Chokher Bali* and considering you for the role of Binodini. What about your available dates?" He is sure that Sudeshna would not refuse him, and he is right, as can be seen from some of the scenes which are poignantly illustrative of how smitten she is by Dipankar. Ghosh subtly touches upon her desire for a physical intimacy with Dipankar in a sequence where she lightly places Dipankar's

black shawl on her shoulder during the shot. The shawl, for her, is actually an extension of Dipankar with whom she desires a physical closeness.

The intertextual reference to Tagore's *Chokher Bali* is highly significant so far as the themes of unrequited love, sexual deprivation and sexual jealousy in *Bariwali* is concerned. Banalata constantly plays an imaginary emotional tug-of-war with Sudeshna. Like Binodini, Banalata too yearns for a companion, suffers from the same sexual deprivation, but unlike the former she is too conservative to break social taboos to gratify her desires. In the same way as Binodini's awakened sexual urge was intensified by her passive witnessing of Mahendra and Ashalata's overwhelmingly physical relation, Banalata's chancing upon the physical intimacy between Malati and Narayan stirred her sexual desires which had been lying dormant in her subconscious mind. Also, her appreciation of Binodini's deprivation in *Chokher Bali* is indicative of a similar pain she suffers from. Moreover, Sudeshna's playing the role of Binodini in Dipankar's *Chokher Bali* is highly significant. Just as Binodini was to the married couple in *Chokher Bali*, Sudeshna is also an outsider in Dipankar's married life.



IMAGE 8: Sudeshna and Banalata filming a scene from *Chokher Bali* under Dipankar's direction. © Anupam Kher Production 2000

It is worth mentioning that Ghosh does not entirely take away the possibility of Banalata forging relationships with other people, nor are the entire film cast and crew presented as a homogenising group of oppressors. In fact the relationship that grows between Banalata and the assistant director Debashis is almost sibling-like, something that is permissible by society and therefore easy for her to handle. It is her sexual agency that is problematic in this regard. Sumita Chakravarty writes, "Female sexuality, on balance, is an aberration that is both exploiter and exploited".¹⁴ Whilst Malati uses her sexuality to her advantage, Banalata's female sexuality works against her. *Bariwali* critiques masculine/patriarchal hegemony and brings the ostracised figure of the spinster into the centre, thus problematizing gender inequality and dominance. The feminine dichotomy of the mother/daughter, wife/widow is shaped by the male public sphere and

most notably apparent in Banalata's pains and joys, foregrounding her experience of emotions against the actions of Dipankar.

Through Narayan, Dipankar and Prasanna, Ghosh projects patriarchal hegemony and the woman's victimhood across class hierarchies and locations, metropolitan or suburban. Prasanna, who does not conform to the image of the 'man', provides an interesting example of failing to live up to the expectations which hetero-patriarchy makes of men thereby failing to find a 'meaningful' life. Ghosh negotiates with different registers of hetero-patriarchal domination and exploitation, through which it perpetrates itself. Banalata, Malati and Prasanna are but incidental victims or even unwittingly complicit in this hetero-patriarchal discourse, which repeatedly establishes itself as inviolable, despite muted or strident rebellions against it. Ghosh unravels two facets of this exploitation: seduction and force. Prasanna's alienation on the other hand occurs mainly because of his failure to imitate the performative codes of conventional masculinity.

Coda

Bariwali is not just a film about the exploitation of a woman as Ghosh himself claims – it is much more than that. By interweaving *Bariwali* with Tagore's *Chokher Bali* Ghosh situates the former in the discourse of exploitation where the characters grow beyond their exploiter/exploited identity and become larger-than-life representations of social and cultural norms. Allowing the repressed desires hidden in the dark recesses of the human mind to see the light of day has been Ghosh's primary challenge throughout his life. He was not as much concerned with the fulfilment of those desires as with unveiling the veneer of social norms and exposing the crude reality of exploitation lying underneath. Ghosh puts the conventional sense of propriety to question through the narrative of *Bariwali* just as he did with his own life and work.

The idea of freedom, dynamics of personal relationships, politics of the home, identity, and sexuality continued to inform Ghosh's films throughout his career. While being strongly rooted to a local Bengali culture, his films remain remarkably global in execution and appeal.

Author's Note

The authors would like to thank Sangeeta Datta and Kaustav Bakshi for their sound advice. They would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Film Quarterly* for feedback and comments. And special thanks to B. Ruby Rich whose perseverance and editing made this article possible.

¹ Sharmistha Gooptu explains that *Bhadralok* indicates a certain social class amongst the Bengalis who, since the nineteenth century, have been the recipients of some kind of English/western education. They were mainly engaged in the professions and services, and found in cinema a modern form, which could encapsulate the movement of their lives. This *bhadralok* middleclass, was the Bengali Film industry's mainstay. See Sharmistha Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation* (London: Routledge, 2010). Also see Rohit K Dasgupta, Sangeeta Datta and Kaustav Bakshi, "The World of Rituparno Ghosh: An Introduction" in *Rituparno Ghosh: Cinema, Gender and Art*, (eds.) S. Datta, K. Bakshi and R.K. Dasgupta (London: Routledge, 2016), 1-25.

² Ghosh identified as an androgynous male, and used his sartorial style to constantly challenge the rigid binaries imposed on gender through clothes. See Sumit Dey, "The Style of Being Rituparno Ghosh" in *Rituparno Ghosh: Cinema, Gender and Art*, (eds.) S. Datta, K. Bakshi and R.K. Dasgupta (London: Routledge, 2016), 83-103. Also see Lipi Begum and Rohit K Dasgupta,

“Contemporary South Asian Youth Cultures and the Fashion Landscape” *International Journal of Fashion Studies*.” 2.1 (2015), 131-145.

³ The National Film Awards is the most prominent film award ceremonies in India. Established in 1954 it is administered by the government of India. Every year, a national panel appointed by the government selects the winning entries in various categories, and the award ceremony is held in New Delhi, where the President of India presents the awards. *Bariwali* won the National award for best actor (female) and best supporting actor (female). Ghosh himself won the Netpac award for best filmmaker at the Berlin International Film festival, the same year.

⁴ *Sananda* is a respected woman’s magazine that used to be edited by Aparna Sen.

⁵ See Rohit K Dasgupta, Sangeeta Datta and Kaustav Bakshi, “The World of Rituparno Ghosh: An Introduction” in *Rituparno Ghosh: Cinema, Gender and Art*, (eds.) S. Datta, K. Bakshi and R.K. Dasgupta (London: Routledge, 2016), 1-25.

⁶ Indira Chowdhury, *Frail Hero and Virile History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁷ See Dipesh Chakraborty, “The Difference Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, (eds.) F. Cooper and A. Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 373-405.

⁸ See Tanika Sarkar, “Many Faces of Love: Country, Woman and God,” in *The Home and the World: A Critical Companion*, (ed.) P.K. Datta (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 28.

⁹ Available in the DVD cover for *Bariwali* (Shraddha Records, 2000)

¹⁰ See Kaustav Bakshi “My City Can Neither Handle Me Nor Ignore Me: Rituparno Ghosh in Conversation with Kaustav Bakshi.” *Silhouette: A Discourse of Cinema* 10.3 (2013), 5

¹¹ Steve Derne, *Movies, Masculinity and Modernity: An Ethnography of Men’s Filmgoing in India* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000)

¹² Also see Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, *Same Sex Love in India: A literary History* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008)

¹³ Brinda Bose “From Nashta Nir to Charulata: Ray’s Creation of a Postcolonial Aura for Tagore Fiction,” in *Filming Fiction*, (eds.) M Asaddudin and A.Ghosh (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 154-168.

¹⁴ Sumita Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993)