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Doomed to Loneliness: The Image of the Bengali Woman in the Films of Rituparno Ghosh

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present and analyse the image of Indian women presented in Rituparno Ghosh's films. The analysis is focused especially on the cultural background of women's depiction in India. Ghosh's movies are a kind of confrontation with traditional images of Indian women. In spite of the gynophobic tendencies of Indian society, Rituparno Ghosh analyses the psyche of woman and creates a depiction very different from the Sanskrit heroine's attitude and the sex appeal of Bollywood stars. So, the question is: what are the women of Rituparno Ghosh like? The paper presents four models of femininity we can find in the director's movies: Woman as Body/Object, as Mother, and Widow.

Keywords: Rituparno Ghosh, cinema of Bengal, India, Indian parallel cinema, woman in Indian cinema.

Indian culture, understood here primarily as the dominant, mainstream tradition shaped by Sanskritic and Brahmanical heritage, is fundamentally patriarchal in structure. Although regional variations and alternative cultural configurations exist, the normative frameworks that have historically exerted the greatest influence on social organisation, religious ideology, and symbolic representation have been largely male-centric. Within this predominantly patriarchal paradigm, femininity is approached in an ambivalent manner: women are simultaneously idealised, venerated, and symbolically exalted, while at the same time subjected to social control, normative regulation, and structural subordination. On the one hand, femininity is identified with *shakti* – female energy and divine creative ability, on the other hand, it is responsible for the lowly position of women in Hindu society. In the Hindu tradition, the determinant of a woman's social role is her biology. The ability to give life puts her on an equal footing with the Great Goddess – the mother of the universe. On the other hand, menstruation – seen as a monthly uncleanliness – excludes a woman from most religious rites. This dualism in the approach to women is perceived by some researchers as gynophobia, i.e. fear of women and femininity (Goldman, 1993, pp. 374–401). Woman was considered subordinate to man and simultaneously necessary for him, predominantly as a wife, but not only.

For this paper, the cultural are of South Asia is treated as Bengal - understood as a historical and cultural region currently divided between India and Bangladesh. Bengal – until the Partition of British India – largely constituted a cultural whole; however, it is impossible to ignore the fact that differences between the cultures of Bengali Hindus and Muslims did exist. In the present study, the point of reference is the heritage and culture of Bengali Hindus, since they are both the creators and the primary recipients of the texts and films discussed. In Bengali culture – i.e. Bengali Hindu culture in this case – as Barbara Grabowska claims, two images of a woman have dominated in literature: the ideal wife and the ideal mistress (Grabowska, 2001, p. 247). Each of them has a different social role to play. A mistress is primarily supposed to satisfy the senses – she has to be beautiful, passionate and infinitely in love with her man. An ideal wife is the opposite of a lover – her duty is total obedience and devotion to her husband, caring for his health and well-being, caring for the house, and giving birth to sons who will extend the family. A wife's virtue can be a husband's strength and protection from dangers. The image of the ideal female lover from literature, both Bengali and Sanskrit, plays a crucial role in cinema.

Bollywood cinema developed as a result of the blending of Western theatrical and film influences on the one hand and indigenous performance traditions and aesthetic theories on the other (Dissanayake, Gokulsing 2004). In the context of this paper, it is worth emphasizing that Bollywood cinema is largely a continuation of the tradition of Indian theatre. It is based primarily on the same aesthetic concept, described around 300 BC by the sage Bharata in *Natyashastra* (Grabowska, Śliwczyńska, Walter, 1999, p. 301). Commercial cinema has adopted many conventions and cultural patterns present in classical and semi-classical theatre forms. Moreover, since its beginnings, Indian cinema (also artistic) has been largely based on literature, and the first productions were screen adaptations of classic texts, including *Mahabharata*. As Krzysztof Maria Byrski claims:

> Intense melodrama, tear jerking partings and reunions, the hero or heroine (or both) saved from a dreadful fate at the last minute, the conventional exaggerated over-acting (…), the regular interpolation of songs and dances (…) – all these features show a striking continuity with the ancient Indian dramatic tradition (Byrski, 1981, pp. 111–118).

The legacy of theatre and literature includes the practice of constructing characters modelled on heroes from epics and poems. This applies, inter alia, to the model of woman-mistress. In commercial Indian cinema (in this context mostly in the Hindi language), known as the *masala movie*, a woman is almost exclusively a sexual object (Tulshyan, 2014). She is perceived as

a sensual temptress, but remains a passive participant in interactions with a man – she lures with her beautiful body, clothes and jewellery, and with a sensual dance, allows herself to be looked at, but does not take the initiative. The man is described as the active side. In the past ten years, however, this cinema has undergone significant changes, assuming the role of middle cinema – between mainstream Hindi films such as *Bajirao Mastani* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2015) or *Padmavaat* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2018), and films from the parallel cinema movement, i.e. a trend in Indian cinema that was created in the state of West Bengal in the 1950s as an alternative to mainstream commercial cinema. The women issue in parallel cinema is represented by such iconic films directors as Satyajit Ray, Aparna Sen, Rituparno Ghosh, Buddhadep Dasgupta, Kaushik Ganguly and Kaushik Mukherjee (aka "Q"). Although the social position of women and issues of gender-based violence had been the subject of sustained public debate and scholarly reflection in India for several decades, the brutal gang rape and subsequent death of Jyoti Singh in Delhi in 2012 constituted a critical turning point. This tragic event not only catalysed unprecedented public outrage and mass mobilisation but also generated a renewed cultural and cinematic engagement with the problem of violence against women. The recent wave of films addressing gender-based violence and women's vulnerability can thus be understood, to a significant extent, as a response to the Jyoti Singh tragedy, which brought these issues into sharp national and international focus. Even stars such as Shah Rukh Khan admitted then that commercial cinema has a big problem with gender equality (Thakkar, 2013).

Western viewers often accuse Indian commercial cinematography of being excessively unreal. This detachment from reality, however, can be interpreted as an inheritance from Sanskrit drama. According to the Kashmiri 11th century philosopher Abhinawagupta's theory of generalisation (*Sanskrit*: *adharanikarana*), one of the conditions for obtaining drama is to make a work of art universal and general (Byrski, 1981, pp. 111–118). A theatrical performance cannot be interpreted as an imitation of the real world, as art creates its own world. What the viewer sees on the stage (or screen) has nothing to do with his own emotions and life experiences. Thanks to this, both the viewer and the actor can enjoy the action of the performance (film) without relating it to their own lives. It is a safe way of experiencing emotions, in opposition to the Greek concept of *catharsis*, which assumed purification through in-depth, emotional "immersion" in the performance. Moreover, a significant part of the performances was created in court circles and was intended for audiences from higher social classes. Thus, among the heroes, apart from deities and other supernatural beings, representatives of the aristocracy dominated. *Masala*

cinematography – a genre of Indian films that combine various elements such as action, comedy, romance, drama, and music, often in a single narrative – has inherited this type of hero, even though its audience has changed. The world presented in Indian productions has nothing to do with the life of an average inhabitant of the subcontinent. Increasing numbers of contemporary popular film makers, like Alankrita Shrivastava, Sanjay Chhel and Pan Nalin, deal more vividly and boldly with social problems in India. Following the example of artistic Bengali cinema, this trend in Indian popular cinema uses new means of artistic expression, and increasingly deviates from its musical character, which had made it one of the most recognisable Asian cinematographies in the world. Movies such as *NH 10* (2015), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Mardaani* (2014), *The Dirty Picture* (2011), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017)*, Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015) or *Who Killed Jessica?* (2011) show strong, independent women who find themselves perfectly in the world of men and are able to fight for themselves and other women. As Anupama Chopra notes in *The Times of India* online edition:

> Actresses have spent over 100 years as second-class citizens in Indian cinema. They have provided visual relief, pleasure and plot points that enables the hero to display heroism – count down all the damsels in distress, the sisters who were raped, the mothers who were trampled by tyranny until their sons rescued or revenged them (Chopra, 2015).

One evidence of change is the 2011 film *Dirty Picture*, inspired by the life of Silky Smithy, a South Indian actress known for her erotic roles and considered as a sex symbol. Directed by Milan Luthria, the film tells the story of a woman determined to pursue her life dream and strong enough to succeed in a masculinised world. *Dirty Picture* in a way opened the way to other images, in which strong, independent protagonists came to the fore. They include, among others, *Kahaani* from 2012 - the story of a woman taking revenge for her husband's death, *Mardaani* from 2014, in which Rani Mukherjee plays the role of a tough policewoman chasing traffickers, *Mary Kom* from the same year, which is the story of a famous Indian boxer, or such films as *English Vinglish* (2012) and *Queen* (2013), showing the process of women's emancipation from male partners. This kind of cinema plays an important role, among other media, in the public discourse on the situation of women. Indian cinema, accused so many times of contributing to the widening scale of violence against women, was becoming an advocate of gender equality and women's rights.

The situation is completely different in the art cinema, the centres of which are traditionally the states of West Bengal and Kerala. As Sara Hamblin claims:

> The term *art cinema* is typically used to denote feature-length narratives structured according to a specific set of aesthetic codes that position them in opposition to mainstream films (…) It is used to signify films–usually made outside the major studios–in which the personal artistic vision of the director takes precedence over narrative intelligibility and marketability (Hamblin, 2018, p. 65).

Indian art cinema, otherwise known as *parallel cinema* and created by two film centres in West Bengal and Kerala, has always been eager to take up topics that are social taboos, such as class inequalities (*Ek Din Protidin, Kharji, Neem Annapurna*), homosexual relations (*Memories in March, Arekti Premer Golpo*), or the position of women in society (*Antarmahal, Paroma, The Lonely Wife, Tasher Desh)*. Bengali film directors are sensitive to women's problems and at the same time are brave artists not afraid of facing social taboos, such as female sexuality, mother-daughter relations or sexual violence against women.

Unishe April (1994), Ghosh's first feature film, already showed his extraordinary sensitivity to women's problems and understanding of the female psyche. The loneliness of women, resulting from the pressures of patriarchal Indian culture and their sense of social alienation, became one of the main themes in the director's work. A woman, seen through Ghosh's eyes, is an eternally lonely being, regardless of her social, educational, and marital status. Even surrounded by a loving family, she is unable to shed this feeling. The loneliness of the female protagonists is emphasized in Ghosh's films by the scenery and cinematography. The action of nearly all of them takes place in closed rooms, often dark, overloaded with furniture and knick-knacks, creating a stuffy, overwhelming atmosphere. The low-key technique, with black dominating the screen, additionally emphasizes the drama of the protagonists. The director described his films not as feminist, but "women-centric" (Bakshi, 2013) and claimed that his passion is for dealing with the things he knows best. One can argue that his work understands female emotions and desires perfectly.

Rituparno Ghosh's depiction of women can be understood as both a continuation of and a critical dialogue with the ways in which the older directors of Bengali parallel cinema – Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and Ritwik Ghatak – conceptualised female subjectivity. Their movies established a powerful cinematic language for representing women caught between tradition, social constraint, and emerging forms of autonomy, a language that Ghosh both inherits and transforms. A detailed comparative analysis of these intertextual and intergenerational dialogues – although highly illuminating for understanding the genealogy of Ghosh's aesthetic and ideological project – lies beyond the scope of the present paper and must therefore be reserved for a separate, more focused study.

Woman as Body

In 2005, Rituparno Ghosh shocked Indian society, especially the inhabitants of his native city of Calcutta. The director was accused of spreading pornography due to the extremely bold, by Indian standards, erotic scenes in the movie *Antarmahal* (Rediff, 2005). Indian cinema is subject to strict moral censorship - it cannot show love scenes, even kisses are not very welcome. In this movie Ghosh told the story of two wives of a wealthy landlord Bhubaneswar, a man who has only two goals in life: to beget a son and to please the British (the film takes place in 1878). In both cases he has to resort to divine help and the bodies of his women. To achieve the second goal, he uses the upcoming festival in honor of *Durga* (one of the most popular Hindu goddesses, form of the Mother Goddess worshiped especially in Bengal); he hires a poor sculptor to create a statue of a goddess with the face of Queen Victoria. The first goal Bhubaneswar has been trying to achieve through 12 years of marriage with the beautiful Mahamaya. When he realises that his wife will not give him the desired heir, he decides to marry another woman – Jashomati, much younger than himself.

In her marriage with Bhubaneswar, Jashomati is reduced to a body. She is reduced to a womb that is to give birth to the desired heir, and the nightly attempts to bring him to conception are a real torment for her. In this respect, the image of woman as a body (often sexualised) merges with that of woman as mother. Bhubaneswar is a coarse and rough man who takes from his wife what is legally owed him, and does not heed her feelings and fears. Meanwhile, Jashomati suffers more and more and withdraws more and more into herself. Her only consolation is, paradoxically, Mahamaya. The first wife treats Jashomati roughly at times, but is not unfriendly to her. She also quickly realises that the girl is not a rival for her, and being a sensitive woman, she understands the anguish of the young wife. She herself was also, throughout the entire marriage, only a body that was to please a man and give birth to sons. Worse - a body that has failed, a body that the husband can use as he pleases, even to implement his political plans. Bhubaneswar agreed to give his wife to the local Hindu priests for one night in exchange for their support. Not without hesitation, however, resulting from the reluctance to share his property with others rather than worry about his wife's feelings. Rituparno Ghosh's view of the social situation of Indian, and especially Bengali, women fits in with the theory of symbolic clitoridectomy[1] developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. This term signifies the recognition of the female body as a complete

[1] The surgery, also called female circumcision, which involves the partial or complete removal of the clitoris, sometimes also the labia minora. This tradition operates mainly in African countries, including Sudan and Egypt.

male property, while depriving women of cultural competence. According to this theory, women cannot function in culture, express and realise themselves in certain spheres of social life solely because of their gender – in a patriarchal society they only function as reproducers (Spivak, 1990, p. 10).

To Zamindar's chagrin, the younger wife also failed to fulfill her husband's hopes; Bhubaneswar was thus forced to appeal to divine help. From then on, the young couple was accompanied in their bedroom by a Brahmin priest who recited sacred texts to increase the chances of conceiving a child. For Jashomati, the presence of a stranger during such extremely intimate moments was the ultimate humiliation. She was too shy to actively oppose her husband, but Mahamaya seized the opportunity. One night she slipped into her husband's bedroom and, sitting down opposite the priest, slowly began to remove her clothes from her body. Mahamaya was playing with the sari, skillfully revealing successive parts of the body and bringing the priest out of concentration. This is a key scene for the entire film: reduced to the body, a woman uses her beauty to take revenge on men:

> The central point of interest here is Mahamaya's sexual use of her body and sari to challenge male power and dominance. Just as Binodini and Urmila do a type of bodywork in negotiating social values, Mahamaya strategically uses her body and sari in a sexualised manner that ridicules and undermines the domination and exploitation of Jasomati by Bhubaneswar (…) Bhubaneswar and the priest symbolise patriarchal society and religion and Mahamaya's body, in an ironic move, is transformed into a site of resistance in which she uses the very medium that women are subjugated by, her body, and arguably her sari, the traditional symbol of chastity and virtue, to confront and criticise rigid dominant moral values of society (Macdonald, 2009, p. 16).

This scene is important also for another reason: it shows that a woman, like a man, is endowed with sexual needs, which in patriarchal society are kept under the control of men. Quite boldly and frequently, by Indian standards, Bhubaneswar's show of intercourse with his young wife caused indignation in the Indian public. The director himself expressed his amazement at the fact that Indians are incapable of accepting sexuality as a permanent element of their lives:

> Antarmahal spoke of times as they were in 19th century Bengal. The period witnessed the sexual exploitation of women and my job was to recreate that (…) The wife is used and abused every night by her mindless husband. Through the oft-repeated 'intimate' scenes, my intent was not to focus on the sex, but on the way the woman in question was exploited

> by her husband. It's a pity that people are equating Antarmahal with cheap exhibitionism (Roy Mitra, 2005).

Jashomati and Mahamaya lived in luxury, they did not lack great costumes and beautiful furniture, but in fact they resembled favourite toys, not wives. They were reduced to the body, deprived of the right to feel shame, sadness and, above all, dignity.

Object or Subject?

The wife in Indian tradition is not one of marriage's constituent entities – she has been relegated to a subordinate role, connected with giving birth to children and taking care of the house. She is not perceived as a subject, but only through the prism of her social function. Women's subordinated status threads its way through the dominant Indian Hindu-Sanskritic tradition. We can find it in many normative texts (for example *Manusmriti*[2]) and religious narrations (Sanskrit epics and Puranas). Even if the husband is a wicked man, the wife is to be faithfully by his side. As the mythological author of legal and normative texts, *Manusmriti* states, that "a woman must never seek to live independently" (Olivelle, 2005, p. 146). Even if their marriage is based on a lie, as is the case with Neeru, the heroine of the 2003 film *Raincoat.* Neeru gave up her youthful love in order to marry a rich man chosen by her family. However, Neeru's husband turned out to be a failure, a thief and a liar. Indebted, penniless, and always absent from home, he leaves his wife to face numerous creditors alone. Neeru fights not only with them, but with the whole world, pretending to be the woman she has never become – rich, pampered by her husband. She is unable to tell the truth even to her former lover, Manoj – the man she still loves. Lonely, abandoned by everyone, she spends her days in a cluttered, dark house. Her behavior towards Manoj, after many years of separation, oscillates between a cynical and calculated lie and a melancholy flirtation. Neeru is a combination of the withdrawn and virtuous housewife with the passionate girl she once was. Most of the scenes of the film for *Raincoat* were shot in one room, and the claustrophobic crampedness of four walls, so characteristic of Rituparno Ghosh's films, and the ever-falling rain emphasises her loneliness and sadness. As Richard Allen points out, *Raincoat* is a film that, "intricately anatomises a condition of unrealised desire that is created by the social expectations and constraints of arranged marriage, yet a desire that still exists at a level of 'open secrecy', at once acknowledged and disavowed. Raincoat evoke the metaphor of the 'closet' to characterise

[2] *Manusmriti* is an ancient Hindu legal text (c. 200 BCE–200 CE) attributed to the sage Manu, outlining social, moral, and legal codes that influenced traditional Hindu law and caste hierarchy.

the mortifying ways in which desire is confined and denied within arranged marriages*"* (Allen, 2015, p. 477). Neeru's imprisonment was created with her own expectations of wealth and happiness, derived from the cultural norms, which determine her desires, and at the same time fears related to social status. The woman is poor and she is afraid of poverty. Moreover, she is not able to live on her own money in any other way. She must therefore agree to an arranged marriage. *Raincoat* is one of Ghosh's most poetic films of – made in a subtle, a little blurred by light colouring, using the play of light and shadow to emphasize the melancholy and bitter sorrow of the characters.

As Wimal Dissanayake notes, Ghosh was primarily driven by the issue of seeking freedom and the anxiety over its lack in the lives of Indian women (Dissanayake, 2017, p. 52). Freedom, understood as financial independence, is provided by education and professional work. But in modern India the percentage of economically active women still remains relatively low – what is more, in recent years this percentage has decreased dramatically (Deshpande, 2021). Ghosh saw this problem and was eager to talk about it through his films.

Dahan, which was released in Indian cinemas in 1997, tells the story of Romita, a girl who was harassed by a group of bandits in front of passersby. Of the many witnesses to the incident, only a young teacher named Jhinuk has the courage to help the victim of the assault. Jhinuk also wants to convict five of her attackers, but her media campaign for justice is having quite different results. Jhinuk has to face the indifference and even aversion of Indian society to the situation and rights of women. She and Romita are intimidated and humiliated while the criminals go free. In his third film, Ghosh not only continued the themes related to the situation of Indian women, but also - following the example of his great predecessors Mrinal Sen or Satyajit Ray, drew attention to the problems faced by contemporary India, including corruption and abuse of power by the police and politicians.

Deepti, the heroine of the 2010 film *Abohomaan,* sacrificed her professional career for the benefit of her family. She devoted herself to her husband Aniket – a recognised film director, and their only son. The couple met on the set of a film directed by Aniket, in which Deepti was to play the lead role. The project was not implemented, Aniket returned to it only years later, thus turning his family's life upside down. The main role is to be played by Shikha, an aspiring actress who resembles Deepti from her youth. Aniket was fascinated with Shikha's beauty from the beginning, it didn't take long for the couple to start an affair. Aniket's romance ruined his marriage and his relationship with his son, who sided with his betrayed mother. *Is it not possible for both of you to coexist in my life?* – the director asks his wife, as if not realising how much torment it causes to her. Trapped in a love for her husband on the one hand

and a sense of hurt on the other, Deepti lives in the shadow of the woman she has taken under her wing and prepared for the role. But it is Deepti, not Aniket, who calls Shikha when she tries to kill herself. Ghosh thus seems to draw attention once again to a kind of female solidarity. Like Mahamaya in *Antarmahal*, Deepti apparently realises that her rival, too, is actually Aniket's victim. Once again, Ghosh also points to the extraordinary situation of women: even when established actresses, stars of the stage, they are in fact only toys in the hands of men.

> The irony inherent in a man's attempt to educate a woman is to make her serve him better. Apparently, the woman who is liberated is actually all the more subjugated by patriarchy. This is what I wanted to bring out in juxtaposing the tales of a nineteenth century female actor and an actor of our contemporary times. Nothing has really changed – explained the director (Bakshi, 2013).

He did not explain, however, how the scene of Aniket's death should be understood. Dying director calls Sreemoti to him – does this mean that despite his affair with Shikha, his wife was his only love? Or, more likely, was Sreemoti an imaginary ideal woman that Aniket loved more than a real wife and mistress?

Demythologisation of Motherhood - Woman as Mother

May you be the mother of a thousand sons (Bhattacharji, 1990, p. 50) – one of the most common wishes to Indian brides. Traditional wishes are not related to love or having an appropriate partner. Based on mainstream Indian tradition, real happiness for a woman is provided by a child. And preferably a son. Motherhood is a woman's only vocation and a guarantee of her social position – since antiquity, a standard blessing for a bride was the wish that her arms would never be empty, that she would always hold her son in them (Bhattacharji 1990). However, as Sukumari Bhattacharji notes in her research on motherhood in ancient India, being a mother did not necessarily bring emotional security to a woman: "She was a mere child-bearing machine who could be discarded with impunity as soon as she failed in her primary reproductive function. Motherhood thus was fraught with suspense, tension, insecurity and physical and mental pain." (Bhattacharji, 1990, p. 50). The researcher adds that the only compensation for this state was the birth of a son. The male heir was not only a confirmation of a woman's social usefulness, but also a guarantee of livelihood in the future, in the case of her husband's death. The apotheosis of motherhood, after ancient treatises, apparently took over the cinema. The image of the mother shown by Indian cinema is an idealised

image of a life giver who deserves respect. She is selfless, protective, devoted to her children and prone to sacrifices. She is a moral compass to all members of her family. We can see this kind of mother in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham, Maa, Deewaar, Karan Arjun.* As Rosie Thomas notes, in Indian cinema, the biological mother is hardly ever a negative character:

> Mother is a fount of nurturing beneficence and a vulnerable innocent, a protector, of her boy child and in a need of protection from him (she often appears slightly crippled or blind). She blesses him with her prayers, feeds him homely food, and sometimes mediates between him and his father, and she serves as the focus that keeps the family and home together (Thomas, 1996, p. 167).

The mother is therefore, according to most of Indian filmmakers, something like an icon, not a living being. She is completely devoid of sexuality, as if she sheds femininity with the birth of a child, becoming only the guardian of the hearth and not a flesh and blood woman. Ghosh breaks social taboos in this case. His films show a completely different picture of motherhood: more complex, full of contradictory emotions, and thus definitely more human. Some recent mainstream Indian films also provide nuanced representation of this concept. Films like *Tribhanga* (2021)*, Mom* (2017), *English Vinglish* (2012), *Secret Superstar* (2017)*, Nil Battey Sannata* (2015) show mothers stepping out of the traditional seen roles.

Unishe April (1994), inspired by Bergman's *Autumn Sonata* (1978), shows how much the relationship between a mother and her daughter can affect the life of the latter. The film's protagonists are two women: a mother and a daughter. Sarojini is a famous dancer appreciated by critics and audiences who, at least in the eyes of her daughter Aditi, puts her professional career ahead of her family life. Aditi was a child when her beloved father died unexpectedly. The girl had to face the tragedy on her own, because her mother was at a performance at that time. The death of her father was a blow to eight-year-old Aditi and led to a secret conflict between mother and daughter. Aditi grew up with two feelings: adoration for her long-deceased father and resentment towards her mother. This grief was dictated, of course, by Sarojini's life choice. Sarojini never had much time for her daughter. She was busy with a brilliant dance career and placed the upbringing of Aditi on her father's shoulders. Dancing was Sarojini's passion and an important part of her life, but it was drawing her away from her family. The woman in fact admitted that marriage and motherhood had never been her vocation; however, she did not have enough courage to oppose traditional social norms. Ghosh turned the ideal of an Indian family, in which the mother takes care of the children and the father pursues his professional career, upside down. According to Sudhir Kakar, an Indian

psychoanalyst and writer, the Indian mother is completely subject to her child's wishes and demands, whether they are for feeding, washing, putting to sleep or keeping company. Moreover, she has the habit of extending this type of motherhood until the 'baby' is ready for independent life (Kakar, 1983, p. 71).

The mother in Ghosh's films does not cease to be a woman. On the contrary: she is still attractive, well-groomed and exudes subtle eroticism. Full of feminine charm, Sarojini is the opposite of a neglected daughter. One gets the impression that Sarojini's beauty and femininity overwhelm Aditi, that the girl wants to be as different as possible from her mother, becoming her opposite. This opposition could be realised in creating a loving and full family.

Unishe April is therefore not an accusation against overly ambitious women, but against Indian society. Ghosh implies that it is time to redefine the concept of motherhood and the social roles of women, as traditional norms no longer correspond to the realities of behaviour and of a society increasingly dominated by the middle class at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. Contemporary Indian society is much more influenced by the West, which is the result of globalisation. As Alison Macdonald points out:

> Ghosh tries to demythologise the mother from her iconic social status by portraying motherhood as a complex and problematic role that women must negotiate along with their other identities. Yet he does this by opening up the domestic sphere and exposing the politics of the private by showing the intricate emotional workings of relationships between women as they struggle to find their identity and place within domestic roles of mothers and daughters (Macdonald, 2009, p. 12).

Ghosh continued the topic of mother-daughter relationship in *Titli (2002)*. The title character is a teenager, in love with a man twice her age, the well-known actor Rohit Roy. The news that her mother has had an affair with Rohit years earlier becomes a milestone in Titli's maturation. The girl realises that her plans were in fact just the dreams of an infatuated teenager. More importantly, however, she discovers that Urmila is more than an ideal mother and wife. The fact that her mother in her youth could have had romantic feelings, Titli could probably understand and accept. The fact that Urmila can also be in love when she is mature is a huge surprise for the girl. Titli, of course, asks her mother if she has ever loved her husband, but she seems to have a completely different kind of love in mind than the one they both have for Rohit. Love for a husband is devotion, affection, and obedience rather than romantic gusts of heart. In relation to her husband, Urmila is a dignified, devoted wife, while with Rohit she shows the face of a romantic lover: with flowers in her hair she sings and recites poetry to her beloved.

Ghosh returned in *Titli* to the issue of the carnality of mothers. The key scene for the film is when Urmila slides off her nightgown, revealing her naked body. This scene symbolises Titli's discovery of her mother's own latent sexuality and the fact she did not bury her sensual desires after the birth of the baby. As Macdonald claims, "Ghosh strategically uses Urmila's 'body work' to unite sexual desire and motherhood which serves to demythologise the idealised chaste virginal body of the all giving mother, the body of 'Mother India', and its concomitant ideal values and norms." (Macdonald, 2009, p. 14).

Adapting to the demands of traditional society, Urmila gives up Rohit twice and lives in a marriage full of mutual respect, attachment and friendship, but not love. Sarojini, pursuing her dreams of a dancing career, gains fame and awards, while losing contact with her daughter and husband; she lives on the outskirts of her family, being more of an exotic guest than its member. The mother in Ghosh's films tends therefore to be a woman trapped in social expectations. Regardless of whether she decides to stay in it or tries to break free, it is always lonely.

Buried Femininity - Woman as Widow

The situation of widows in India has changed quite significantly over the centuries, systematically pushing them to the margins of society, where they are today. A widow's remarriage is no longer socially condemned as it was a hundred years earlier, but it is still not popular – especially in the higher castes. To this day, in some parts of India widows are excluded from community life as cursed beings, burdened with the evil deeds of their previous lives, which caused their husbands to die (Kota, 2018, p. 43).

Already in his first film, *Unishe April*, he showed a widow who absolutely does not live up to social expectations. Sarojini not only does not give up her femininity, but even emphasizes it: with makeup, beautiful outfits, and behaviour. She is a happy and professionally fulfilled woman. The director himself claimed:

> I had completely de-familiarized the image of the traditional widow in cinematic representations; Sarojini was always decked up, particular about her make-up and accessories (...) I believe, because Sarojini did not feel victimized as a widow, Aditi took away the sympathy of the audience… the so-called Bengali middle class audience. Had Sarojini played up her widowhood in the conventional way, the sympathy would have been equally divided (Bakshi, 2013).

In August 2003, *Chokher Bali. A Passion Play* premiere took place – this movie was directed by Ghosh and the screenplay was adapted from Rabindranath Tagore's novel. One hundred years earlier, with this work,

Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian Nobel Prize winner, not only initiated a new literary genre in India, the realist-psychological novel, but also challenged traditional social norms. Tagore, followed by Rituparno Ghosh, tells the story of Binodini, a young widow who, against tradition, tries to fight for her own happiness. An educated, intelligent and beautiful woman does not want to – figuratively – bury herself alive after only a year of marriage and, as Kaustav Bakshi emphasizes, questions the age-old assumptions about female sexuality that have been internalised by women (Bakshi, 2017, pp. 284–299). Binodini is a multidimensional figure - she wears white saris, resigns from jewellery, eats only modest meals. All these elements are prescribed by Hindu legal texts as parts of appropriate Hindu widow lifestyle. According to Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra,[3] the widow (in the case of intercourse with the brother of her deceased husband in order to give birth to a son) must spend twelve months on mortification, consisting mainly of giving up eating meat, honey, alcohol and salt. Even later *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra*[4] shortened the widow's "penance" to six, instead of twelve, months. The most famous treatise from the group of Dharmashastras, *Manusmriti*, imposes on widows almost complete asceticism. The widow had to wear only white saris, she was supposed to shave her hair to the bare skin, and was not allowed to decorate her body with jewellery, makeup or flowers. Manu even forbade the use of perfume. Moreover, he ordered sleeping only on bare ground and eating only two meals a day, in addition completely devoid of spices that could stimulate a widow's libido.

Binodini seems to follow these regulations. However, under this facade there is a woman full of life and energy, including sexual energy, symbolised by long, loose hair. Binodini's rebellious nature is already shown in the first scenes of the film: a newly widowed girl is visited by a nun, her former teacher. She hands Binodini her favourite English chocolates, not knowing or not remembering that these delicacies are forbidden for the Hindu widow. However, Binodini eats them greedily, quickly burning the packaging left over from the delicacy – her rush, surreptitiously checking whether she is actually alone in the room, and her face full of guilt and shame, revealing that although it already contains the seeds of rebellion, the woman does not let him fully flare up. Binodini increasingly reveals the rebellious side of her personality, as soon as her position in the home of Mahendra and his young wife Ashalata became established. She expresses her point of view on the duty of a Hindu widow in calm, intelligent discussions with Mahendra and his friend Behari, often highlighting the absence of logic in the restrictions imposed on widows. In one of the scenes, she draws attention

[3] *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* is an early Hindu text (c. 500–200 BCE) attributed to the sage Baudhāyana, containing rules on law, conduct, and ritual duties that form part of the *Dharmasūtra* tradition.

[4] *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* is another ancient Hindu legal text (c. 300–100 BCE).

to the dietary guidelines: in her opinion, prohibiting widows from eating fish is pointless, as fish are the basis of the diet of the people of Bengal. However, there comes a point when the young widow is unable to hide her emotions. When Ashalata is convinced that God does everything for the sake of the people, the widow explodes with anger, asking: "I was widowed a year after my wedding, is this supposed to be good for me?" Asalata has no answer to this question. The young wife understands, moreover, the despair of her friend and, in her innocent, slightly infantile way, tries to support her even at the cost of going against tradition. Noticing the extraordinary beauty of Binodini, she encourages her to put on her jewelry - she is delighted with the effect and tries to convince her friend to wear this type of ornament at home. However, Binodini explodes with anger and, screaming, asks the astonished Ashalata: "Why should I wear jewellery secretly? Is it a sin to wear jewellery?" In order to support her friend, Ashalata summons Mahendra and Behari to see how harmful it is to the young woman not to decorate the body. On the one hand, men are fascinated by the striking beauty of Binodini, but on the other hand, they are filled with the awareness of the inappropriateness of her actions. The young woman stands before them like a living challenge to fossilised social and religious norms: dressed in a coarse widow's sari and at the same time ostentatiously adorned with jewellery – as Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K. Dasgupta note: "By desiring and donning a forbidden object, in this case, gold jewellery, the widow as well as the queer men demand acknowledgement of their status and sexual desires which are either repressed by violence or are treated as non-existent." (Dasgupta, Bakshi, 2018, p. 74).

The contrast between the plain clothes and the splendour of jewels blurs the clearly delineated line between the sterile state of widowhood and a marriage based on passion (Macdonald, 2009, p. 16). Mahendra and Behari loudly express their insecurity, which is met with an outburst of anger from the quiet, peaceful Ashalata. Mahendra's wife screams a truth that they both realise but do not want or cannot accept: Binodini has nothing to do with life, so why not let her at least wear jewellery? Mahendra seems to see the life force of Binodini, unrestrained even by widow's dictates and prohibitions – he himself affectionately describes it as "the Elixir of life".

Ghosh also shows the rebellious nature of the young widow in a less obvious way, through the motif of redness that runs throughout the film (Bakshi, 2011) – in Indian culture redness is regarded as the colour of passion, and thus inextricably linked with the institution of marriage. On her wedding day the bride wears a red sari, her feet and hands are painted red with henna[5].

[5] Henna is a plant-based dye created from the henna tree. It is used in cosmetics, hair dyes, and hair care products, and also as a dye for clothing. Temporary skin tattoos, made with henna, is a part of many religion celebrations in Hinduism.

All these elements symbolise love and fertility. The first step in the new home is taken by the young wife by dipping her bare foot in the red-coloured water. For Binodini, this colour is therefore forbidden - she can only wear a sari in a white colour symbolising the widow's state. Ghosh thus reversed the convention again: "The rebellion she puts up is symbolised by the repetitive use of the colour 'red'. 'Red' is not just the colour of passion; it's also the colour of revolt in 'Chokher Bali'" (Bakshi, 2013).

This colour, as a symbol of rebellion, appears four times in the film. First of all, Binodini's menstrual blood is red. Menstruation occurs suddenly as the widow is busy cutting vegetables with the other women, so viewers can see a blood trickling down the ground, which Binodini cannot hide. This scene, like no other in Ghosh's film, shows that – according to him – the widow is still a young, fertile, sexually desirable woman. She can still give life, but her fertility is going to be limited due to the strict moral code of India at that time. Nowadays, menstruation is still a subject of cultural taboo in India, so Rituparno Ghosh realized that by showing a menstruating woman on the screen, in addition a widow, he was breaking unwritten social norms (Bakshi, 2013). What's more, Binodini's monthly blood is mixed with streams of monsoon rain – considering the fact that in Indian culture rain is associated with love and sex, it reinforces the sexual and fertile symbolism of this scene. Already in *Rigveda*, rain was equated with fertility (Hopkins, 1916). In the aforementioned *kavya*, nature played an extremely important role, both as the background of events and an active factor influencing the experiences of the heroes. The rainy season was associated with domestic and sexual life, as field and farm work was suspended during the monsoons. Poets willingly described lovers meeting under dark storm clouds swollen with rain or in torrential downpours (Warder, 1990, p. 600). The sad gaze of Annapurna, Mahendra's aunt, also dressed in a white – characteristic for the widow – attire, shows that Binodini's situation arouses pity and understanding in other people.

In one of the scenes of the film, after having a sexual intercourse with Mahendra, Binodini smears her forehead with the vermillion from the sacrificial basket she has with her. The red vermillion that spread in a part of the bride's hair right after the marriage ceremony emphasized her status as a wife. In these scenes Binodini considers herself to be Mahendra's wife. At Mahendra's order to wipe his face, the woman hugs his arms and smears vermilion on his shirt – thus seemingly confirming her right to this man as a wife. Seeing the embarrassment in her lover's eyes, she states despairingly: "I only lived with a man for a year. He's just a ghost now, but I still bear his mark". The red color, like a clamp binding the plot, also appears in one of the final scenes of the film. Binodini, after breakup with Mahendra, demands a red scarf from him. The

man is surprised by the inappropriateness of this request, because a widow shouldn't wear clothes in the color reserved for wives. Binodini, however, dismisses his warning with an outburst of laughter.

Binodini often expresses her longing for life, which – in her opinion – she should live as a wife. With regret mixed with jealousy she watches as the servants paint Ashalata's feet with henna; the same feeling accompanies her when she decorates her friend's hair with jewellery, glancing at her own face, devoid of flowers, ornaments and makeup. In another scene, Binodini helps Ashalata wash the vermillion off her face after the Durgapuja[6] ceremony, from which she herself, as a widow, was removed. Binodini does not give the young widow water for a long time, watching her awkward attempts to remove the soap from her eyes with silent fury. As Srimati Mukherjee points out:

> Here Ghosh has Asha occupy the center of the frame, while Binodini is positioned to her side. The scene has us focus on the easy mobility of Asha's fingers as she quickly soaps and rinses her face while Binodini's gestures are deliberately presented as slow and meditative, drawing the spectator's gaze towards her face and its expressions. It is also noteworthy that Asha's face is often covered in this scene while we are never allowed to lose sight of Binodini's. Thus even as the framing of the scene situates the privileged wife at the center, it is Binodini, one of the peripheral figures in the scene, who ultimately commands our attention through her expressions and temporary act of denial (Mukherjee, 2012).

Binodini's bitter jealousy also manifests itself in her interference in the sex life of Ashalata and Mahendra. The widow has a habit of observing the spouses in the bedroom with binoculars, as long as they forget to close the windows. In this way, Rituparno Ghosh inverts the convention dominating in mainstream Indian cinema, assuming that the man is the active side of the male-female relationship. The woman, on the other hand, is only a passive object of his observation and possible action. A similar point of view was adopted two years earlier by Bollywood director Mahesh Manjrekar in the film *Astitva (2002)*. The heroine of this movie is neglected by her workaholic husband Aditi and falls in love with a music teacher, Malhara. In one of the scenes, she observes a man dancing in the pouring rain, succumbing to a long-lasting desire.[7] This

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[6] Durgapuja, also known as Durgotsava, is major festival of Hinduism, particularly celebrated in Bengal and Assam. Durga Puja celebrates the victory of the goddess Durga over the demon king Mahishasura.

[7] Compare with the procedure used by Amitabh Chakraborty in *Cosmic Sex* (2012). In one of the scenes of this picture, a teenage girl named Sadhavi, sitting on a tree, observes boys bathing in the Ganga River.

is another example of rain related to sexuality and fertility. Ghosh probably referred to the famous scene from the cult film *Charulata. The Lonely Wife* (1964) by Satyajit Ray, in which the title character watches her husband through binoculars. Bhupati passes by his wife, but he is just as distant and inaccessible as the people watched by Charulata through the windows of her apartment. In these similar scenes, Satyajit Ray and Rituparno Ghosh emphasize the sexual and emotional needs of their characters, but Ghosh does it more bluntly, emphasizing the control that the Indian tradition takes over widow sexuality. It is not the only moment of the film in which the Bengali director decides to reverse the convention. In the picnic scene, he again shows Binodini staring at Behari's naked, athletically built body. It is worth noting that throughout the movie *Chokher Bali. And Passion Play* exhibits male nudity, while women bodies remain tightly covered with saris. As Kaustav Bakshi notes:

> There are several shots in which the camera almost lovingly films the male body; in scenes of physical intimacy involving Mahendra and Ashalata or Binodini, it is Mahendra's body that is exposed rather than those of the female characters. The gaze of the spectator and that of the camera are fused in all these shots thereby transforming the male body as spectacle. In this sense, the film makes an attempt 'to reverse the relation between the female body and sexuality which is established and reestablished by the classical cinema's localisation of the woman's spectacle' (Bakshi, 2011, p. 3).

Banalata, a protagonist in the film *Bariwali* (2000), is the woman Binodini could become if Ghosh remained faithful to the novel's ending: mature, bitter, living a barren and lonely life in too large a household. Banalata, after the death of her fiancé, just before the wedding, voluntarily locked herself in a cultural cage prepared for her by Indian tradition. Believing that a woman could love only one man in her life, she devoted herself to a widow's existence in a large, neglected house, with only two servants: Maloti and Prashanna. Banalata practically does not leave the house, she has no entertainment, except for a TV series watched with the servant. Her bitterness and passivity are confronted with Maloti's joy, appetite for life and unfettered sexuality. The young maid knows what she wants from life and is not afraid to reach for it, does not run away from life as her mistress does. Banalata's dormant desires and emotions are only revealed under the influence of the director, Deepankar. He was working on a film based on the novel *Chokher Bali* by Rabindranth Tagore and was looking for a house where he could shoot. His friends recommended him Banalata's residence. The woman is so charmed by his superficiality and eloquence that she not only agrees to share her home with the film crew, but even to play a small role in the movie. Deepankar is aware of her romantic

feelings, but does nothing to dispel the woman's dreams. When the film crew leaves Banalata's house, the woman writes letters to the director, to which she does not get an answer. And when the long-awaited letter finally arrives, it is like a slap against her illusions. Deepankar informed her that the scene with her participation was cut out of the final version of the film. Banalata takes this as a betrayal by her lover and realises that for Deepankar she was just a useful tool.

Speaking about female sexuality Ghosh again turned to symbols (including, as in the movie *Chokher Bali*, red as the colour of passion and marriage). The house itself has a symbolic meaning – Banalata somehow gives it to Deepankar like her virginity. Her dreams also have a hidden and symbolic erotic dimension. As Rohit K. Dasgupta and Tanmayee Banerjee note:

> The apparently incoherent shots of white pigeons on clean white linen, of Dipankar painting the wall red and paint splashing on the floor, or a sequence of 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 onto the face of Banalata as pigeons prowl on the red paint splashed on the floor – all are carefully composed visual metaphors for the idea of the loss of virginity that is cherished by Banalata in her dreams (Dasgupta, Banerjee, 2016, p. 43).

Ghosh claimed that the film spoke of the selfishness of artists who often unconsciously exploit people, chasing after their artistic dreams (Chatterji, 2000). In his opinion, artists can be extremely cruel, and Banalata is just another victim of this cruelty. However, not only selfish, Deepankar also bears the guilt of woman's next disappointment. The guilt is deepened by the controlling the sexuality and emotionality of women – a mechanism present in mainstream Hindu culture in India. This process is symbolised by the bedspread, under which Banalata lies in a dream, and which Deepankar pulls from her. However, the woman herself is also to blame – Ghosh seems to say in his film that although the cage for Banalata was prepared by Indian tradition, she entered to it voluntarily. India is a country where the limitations of women's existence were introduced by men, but women are their most faithful guardians (Chatterji, 2000).

Conclusions

In Bengal in the 21st century, as in many others parts of India, women still occupy a subordinate position in society. This applies to almost all spheres of life (including economic, political, educational and professional work). At the same time, however, gender-based violence is publicised and present in the media, which is linked to the fact that women's emancipation has become a subject of media and scientific discourse as well.

Ghosh's films are an artistic critic of a patriarchal social system based on male supremacy. His cinema emerges as a deeply humanistic and socially engaged body of work that exposes the contradictions within Bengali and broader Indian patriarchy. For violence against women, Ghosh blames men who see in a wife, sister or daughter only an obedient servant or a body to give sons. In Ghosh's films, this objectification of women is one of the causes of her permanent loneliness. The director is against social exclusion on the basis of gender, seeing a woman as a person completely equal to a man - a woman in his eyes is a gentle and subtle being, but she has an inner power and strength that do not require male protection. His films offer a sustained critique of the ways in which women are silenced, objectified, and spiritually isolated within cultural frameworks that outwardly glorify them as mothers, wives, or goddesses. Ghosh dismantles these idealised archetypes–derived from Sanskrit literature, Hindu law codes such as the Manusmriti and Dharmasūtras, and perpetuated through commercial cinema–by portraying women as multidimensional beings capable of moral ambiguity, desire, and rebellion.

Ultimately, the article demonstrates that Rituparno Ghosh's portrayal of the Bengali woman constitutes a powerful form of cultural critique and moral redefinition. His heroines, often described as "doomed to loneliness," are not merely tragic figures or passive witnesses of social change. Rather, they emerge as complex subjects navigating a civilisation in transition – suspended between inherited orthodoxy and the desire for a modern, self-defined identity. While long positioned as silent observers and survivors of patriarchal structures, in Ghosh's cinema they increasingly acquire voice, agency, and ethical presence, actively negotiating their place within a transforming moral order. By rendering their interior worlds visible and audible, Ghosh not only restores women's humanity but also compels Indian society to confront its own unresolved moral contradictions and failures.

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