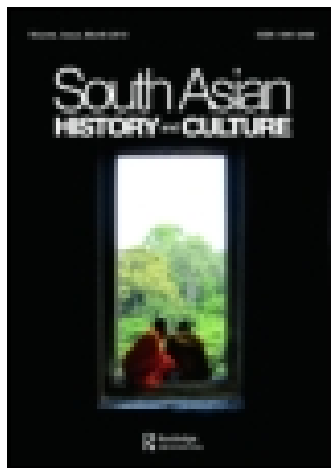


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Sayandeb Chowdhury<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University, New Delhi, India

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## The endangered city in Rituparno Ghosh's early cinema of confinement

Sayandeb Chowdhury\*

*School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University, New Delhi, India*

This essay looks at the cinema of Rituparno Ghosh from the vantage point of urban cultural studies. Ghosh was at a forefront of a new cinema in the mid-1990s that purportedly 'brought the Bengali middle classes back to the theatre'. Under the rubric of this claim which is verifiably true, lies the understated idea: who or what was the nature of this new middle class and how in the initial years of globalization did they relate to the imperatives of cultural and global capital. One obvious critical paradigm in the early cinema of Ghosh is its internality, a parcelling out of larger conceptions of space and place into metonymic, drawing-room dramaturgy, a chambering of orchestrated relationships away from the politically volatile, lived, identifiable vestiges of the city of Calcutta, where the films are apparently based. This article hopes to add to contemporary debates about the de-politicization of the middle classes by looking at Ghosh's cinema as a major contributor to middle class's conscious, cultural self-fashioning under globalization and the construction of their spatial and locational aesthetics. It concludes by looking into how Ghosh's films severely challenge notions of space around the idea of the 'cinematic city', and how that ultimately relates to his assumed position as a feminist filmmaker.

**Keywords:** city; chamber drama; television; the home; sexual economy

The article makes an attempt to look afresh at the cinema of Rituparno Ghosh from the vantage point of urban cultural studies. Ghosh was at a forefront of a new cinema in the mid-1990s that purportedly 'brought the Bengali middle classes back to the theatre'. But this claim cannot be vindicated unless it stands up to a range of critiques, especially those inquiring into the nature and scope of this *new* middle class and how in the initial years of globalization they located themselves in the imperatives of cultural and global capital. Since class categories are always problematic and part of larger social and cultural formations, Rituparno Ghosh's work, must be interrogated accordingly. And in doing so, the article hopes to locate Ghosh's cinema as a major contributor to middle class's conscious, cultural self-fashioning under globalization and the construction of their spatial and locational aesthetic. That aesthetic, as this article hopes to show, was achieved by a conscious disenfranchisement of the idea of the City, which was part of the broader de-politicization process that the middle class went through as liberalization seeped in. In fact, the absence of the city was so total that it would not be exaggeration to claim that the vanishing city *reinforced* Ghosh's cultural authority and created the necessary capital for his kind of cinema to dominate middle-class imagination for more than a decade. A detailed critique of Ghosh's production and appropriation of space

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\*Email: [sayandeb@aud.ac.in](mailto:sayandeb@aud.ac.in)

further leads us to re-interrogate Ghosh's apparent critique of phallogocentrism in his cinema, which concludes the essay.

## I

The cultural capital of sudden, unexpected and untimely death in a highly sentimentalized social and cultural formation often obfuscates the vigorous critical distance that ideally separates the artiste from his/her art and that art from those who consume it. Rituparno Ghosh's death on the wee hours of 30 May 2013, in his home in Calcutta, belonged to this unfortunate category. It earned him a degree of immunity from sincere critical evaluation, especially in the popular press, which almost uniformly and without deliberation, decorated him with maudlin hyperbole. Ghosh had in fact, in recent years before his death, walked the tightrope between the personal and the filmic with too much alacrity, probing sexual boundaries and limits, both as a person and as a storyteller. In fact if anything, Ghosh's films seemed to have somewhat faded to the background while he stood turbaned, behind dark glasses, in cross-dressed flourish, eloquent and intelligent, secured in his queer forthrightness. This fact remained fastened to his posthumous evaluation, making it all the more difficult to identify and mark out Ghosh the man from Ghosh the artiste.

But the fact was that in the recent years his cinema, with the exception of *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010), a film which he co-wrote and acted in but did not direct, had fanned a coldness of both critical and commercial reception. Moreover, Rituparno, just 51 at the time of his death, was already a veteran in the Bengali cinema industry, which since at least the middle years of the last decade, had seen a new crop of filmmakers emerge. Ghosh, once the trailblazing *new* filmmaker, the chronicler-in-chief of the *new* middle classes, was neither ignored nor silenced. But he floated in the discourse as *one* of the prominent filmmakers in Bengal. His films were still awaited but he had evidently lost the position of pre-eminence he had successfully cultivated for himself since his much-eulogized *Unishey April* arrived in the cultural life of Bengal in 1995. Ghosh was to complete two decades in filmmaking soon and increasingly seemed to be battling his own past achievements. His untimely death did cut short this embattled side of Ghosh, though it may have also brought to an end the serious efforts he seems to have been making to reinvent himself artistically.

It is with this understanding that it is necessary to rescue his name from both undiscerning aplomb and premature closure and to situate him within the broader cultural debates in cinema in the last two decades.

## II

Though the unreleased children flick *Hirer Angti* (1992) was his first film, it was the sleeper hit *Unishey April* that brought Ghosh recognition. He managed to follow *Unishey April* with a string of critically and commercially successful films in the decade that followed. One must not see commercial 'success' as an absolute, unqualified marker but only on a scale. The revenues that Ghosh's films generated were no match for the more box-office friendly commercial fare that earned the Bengal film industry its bread. However it was reasonable enough to earn him financiers. Also, Ghosh managed to give his backers the 'safety' of awards, his films having had an uncanny sense around accolades at various local and national film forums. Soon his films garnered enough attention and managed to marshal their own audience. This audience was not only a

significant demography in Calcutta and Bengal but was also, significantly, spread across borders in the metropolitan centres in India and in Europe and the US. Across the borders, there was a sizeable presence of a professional, Bengali speaking, moneyed class with tenuous and variable links to Calcutta and Bengal – their intellectual but inevitably inhospitable homeland. With his films, Ghosh seemed to have sunk deep into their tenuous sense of belonging, their slippery subjectivity, their relentless self-fashioning, and their contentious identity. The liberalised media economy and the new-fangled worldwide web helped his case further. Soon, Ghosh was to find himself as not just a noted filmmaker but as a cultural powerhouse. His name was to become part of a celebratory cinematic mythology, as the man who brought the middle classes back to the theatres. Ghosh was seen to have singlehandedly retrieved Bengali serious cinema at a time when it was choking under the weight of *popular* cinema<sup>1</sup> – whose disregard for the middle-class aesthetic – an aesthetic that was regarded as *raison d'être* in Bengali cinema's historico-cultural aura, was becoming ever more assaultive.<sup>2</sup>

To understand better Ghosh's centrality in the new cultural economy of Bengali cinema, one must look into the circumstances – social, political and cultural – in which *Unishey April* was released in 1994, circumstances that are not external to the film's appeal and its consequent claim as a watershed film in recent Bengali cultural history.

### III

Any critical debate tracing the genealogy of *new* Bengali cinema must go back to the death, again shockingly untimely, of Uttam Kumar, the legendary Bengali matinee idol. From mid-1950s to his death in 1980, Uttam Kumar not only had carried the industry's prospects on the shoulders of his phenomenal popularity but gave it a significant aesthetic and cultural modernity.<sup>3</sup> Cinematic modernity in Bengal, thanks to Kumar's overwhelming presence never could secure for itself a *safe* ghetto – in the art-house behemoths-Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak – which proved to be its biggest windfall. Largely on account of Kumar and a collective of talented behind-the-scenes individuals, the mainstream Bengali cinema never really relinquished its deeply organic and spacio-cultural links to metropolitan modernity.<sup>4</sup> Though the rot started to set in while he was alive, Kumar's sudden death finally left Bengali cinema bitterly divided into morbid art-house cinema and garish, insipid melodrama. I have written previously<sup>5</sup> how the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the ruling dispensation in Bengal since 1977 had put its significant weight behind the former, pouring money into what it thought were serious, durable narratives which would cement its self-image as a custodian of high cultural tastes.<sup>6</sup> With this favour to the cultural imperative of 'good cinema', the Communist Party led government thought they could help build a repertoire that, in the years to come, would reinforce the party's own founding mythology through cinematic memory. But in spite of their formidable patronage, through the 1980s and early 1990s, 'serious' Bengali cinema was a washout.<sup>7</sup> Popular cinema, on the other hand, having lost both public and institutional backing, sought out the lowest common denominator – by cutting costs and looking for desperate patronage beyond the metropolis, distant from the tastes of the city and its dominant classes. The so called 'good' cinema made with public money never really took off, while popular cinema, once the touchstone of Bengali cultural taste, languished in abandonment so far as the city-bred *bhadralok* were concerned. The most visible impact of this decline of a public cinema culture was felt in two aspects. The physical space of the single theatres, suffering heavy losses, started to wind up. Second, the substantial patronage and energy of the middle-class found new areas of

concentration. Bengali cinema's cherished space and spectatorship of the metropolitan centres in Bengal and most identifiably in Calcutta evaporated, changing the experience of *going to cinema* forever. Instead, the drawing room and television became a somewhat lame substitute for the middle classes' cultural engagement. Television, still a public broadcasting engine, largely dished out family entertainers and cinema of yore. Resultantly, a whole new generation grew up in 1980s and 1990s on the staple of old Bengali movies on television and faced with the possibility of having seen not a single specimen of Bengali cinema in the theatres.<sup>8</sup>

The first ripple of change was felt with the arrival of liberalization in the mid-1990s. Though Calcutta, owing to the posturing of its communist bosses, was slow to wake up to the possibilities of a new economy, it was a matter of time before private financing began to tiptoe its way into the 'serious' cinema.<sup>9</sup> One must remember what other alleged riches the early years of liberalization were to bring. Among significant developments was the broadening of the market, easy loans and access to consumer articles, a heightened exposure to global issues through a new liberalized media economy, and new possibilities thrown up by telecommunication technology. There were also factors such as swelling of the middle class in size and purchase-power, the manifold reach and scope of televised entertainment, the arrival of a young crop of actors and technicians bred largely in the television format and new money that could come to the entertainment industry without government gate-keeping. Ghosh's debut in 1994 must be seen within the broader context of these developments.<sup>10</sup>

Ghosh managed to start a *new* dialogue with the urban middle class, a segment that was itself consistently on the increase throughout the first decade of liberalization. Unchained from the burden of being government-approved tableaux such as in the years of CPM funded 'art cinema', Ghosh's films had consciously set out to de-politicize their contents and environs to create a universe of their own, a universe of the class which chiefly patronized these films: doggedly self-conscious, strenuously auto-telic, unrepentantly isolationist, and deeply consumerist. Ghosh's greatest joy was to throw a group of middle and upper middle-class characters into a tightly controlled domestic eco-system in which they were tested, tensions would mount, passions would play their turn and the possibilities of subtle melodrama were to be fully realized. Ghosh's chamber-drama set-pieces were sharpened with sartorial attention to make them fit into this tightly lit, closely-observed, neatly packed environ of the posh house where the drama was usually set. Several of his films, from *Unishey April*, through *Dahan* (1998), *Asukh* (1999), *Utsab* (2000), *Shubho Muharat*<sup>11</sup> (2003) and *Dosar* (2006), wooed the middle classes with *their* story. Having relished watching 'themselves' on screen, the middle-class went back home from the theatre contented. It was often assumed that this was what sophisticated cinema had to do to keep alive its cultural aura, its baggage of seriousness. Having been denied a chance to partake in cinematic narratives for over a decade, the middle classes across towns and cities in Bengal and the Bengali demography outside India lapped up Ghosh's films as their own. Ghosh found an eager audience who also doubled as an expanding market. The *new* chamber cinema was born.

Sooner than later, this kind of self-same cinema became the staple of serious cinema in general, a benign formula. The conversion of his limited celluloid vision into an apparent asset for Bengali cinema marked Ghosh's vanguardism in creating a 'new' Bengali cinematic taste. To understand how Ghosh managed to create and sustain his much-feted middle-class narratives, we must understand how his early cinema conspicuously became a 'cinema of confinement' and how it managed to create an operative distance from both the Cinema of the City<sup>12</sup> and the City itself. One might begin with an excerpt

from an interview of Rituparno Ghosh at the Asia Society in New York where he talks about Calcutta:

Calcutta is not a very high-brow city. It is a very ordinary, plain city where you can mix with different kinds of people; it is not a bureaucratic city, it is not a clinical city. It is a very warm, pulsating, vibrating city, almost like New York, and certain areas of London remind me of Calcutta too. It is busy, there are people walking on the streets all the time, jostling against each other, there is constant energy and complete over-reaction to everything: when people in Calcutta are happy, they're crazy, when they're angry, they're crazy as well! In Calcutta you see everything that a Bengali has in a slightly refined and filtered form, so it makes the city very interesting.<sup>13</sup>

Such exaltation usually borders on bombast but Ghosh still manages to invoke the apparent exuberance of the city of his birth. Such a salutation to Calcutta is not new of course and neither are the various discontents that challenge Calcutta's unique, complex, and hard-to-classify charm. But in his films is there a Calcutta that he exults about? Is there a teeming, cheek-by-jowl, crepuscular, cacophonous, empathetic and ever-clammy city in Rituparno's cinemascapes? Evidently not.<sup>14</sup> A critical look at some of his early films, starting with *Unishey April*, will hopefully bring us nearer to this claim.

In an interview with Kaustav Bakshi, Ghosh had detailed the germination of his first prominent film.

The story of *Unishe April* was largely inspired by Ray's *Jalsaghar*. I was watching the film on Doordarshan, when the story idea of *Unishe April* came to me. *You know, watching a film on television can change your response to it; for television facilitates a more intimate viewing, and a more intimate connection with the characters in the film. To a large extent, my experience of watching Jalsaghar on television made me read the film in a new light: I saw the film as a man's much-cherished relationship with his mansion. Almost immediately, the idea of a story with a retired dancer as protagonist and her intimate relationship with her house came to my mind. The character of the daughter, which eventually superseded the mother, was conceived much later. (emphasis mine)*<sup>15</sup>

The inevitable response to this excerpt would be to find similarities between Ray's film and that of *Unishey April*, which, to be honest, are hard to locate. I will be more interested in the fact that Ghosh 'found' his film through an 'intimate viewing' experience on television. So it is not the film but the medium that attracts my attention. If what Ghosh claims is true, what indeed he borrowed from his watching *Jalsaghar/The Music Room* was not the plot of *Unishey April* (which anyway was borrowed from Ingmar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata*) but the experience of intimacy he felt with television – a severely constricted, formulaic, middling, in other words, non-cinematic space. Hence it will be a mistake to see Ghosh's first major film as having aesthetic connections with Satyajit Ray's masterpiece. Instead, what struck Ghosh was how he could locate his own sensibilities more profitably in the television format, a format whose intimacy, he must have thought, would outdo its severe limitations. So when Ghosh arrived on the Bengali screen, he was in no way building upon a legacy of great cinema of the past but he was merely transferring the tried-and-tested *intimacy* of television into the format of celluloid.<sup>16</sup> His audience too, so long unused to the viewing experience of large screen format, and by now addicted to an uncritical reception of bedroom television, warmed up to his narrative space, as much as they warmed up to his narrative content. Ghosh responded to this demand by returning again and again to the visual, chamber-drama format: stagey in its management of space,<sup>17</sup> confined in its narrative logic, private in scope and deeply

middle-class in concern. It is entirely through this set of storytelling motifs – heightened interiority, protracted conversations, endless close ups and fade-ins and measured twists of narrative – that Ghosh achieved the intended *dénouement*. His films were hence the story of the middle classes told in their preferred scopic format. Either way, the *new* chamber cinema came to become *de rigueur* of the *new* middle class.<sup>18</sup>

#### IV

*Unishey April*, a watered-down, unacknowledged adaptation of *Autumn Sonata*, concerns the day in the life of Sarojini, a famous danseuse whose daughter, the distant and lonely Aditi, arrives after finishing her medical school. It happens to be the day Sarojini's husband died years ago leaving behind a young Aditi. The film opens with the arrival of news that Sarojini had won a prestigious award. In response to the excitement of the award and the consequent noise around her mother, Aditi pushes herself further and further into isolation thinking only of her father, whose absence becomes ever more conspicuous when compared to her mother's self-absorption. The mother and daughter's sentiments runs against each other till it reaches a peak, after which things start to settle down. Clearly, this film, in spite of Ghosh's claims on the contrary, was not inspired by Ray at all but entirely by Bergman. However any comparison with Bergman cinematically would be superfluous, which I have tried to enumerate later in the article.

When one watches *Unishey April* closely one cannot help but be struck by how dramaturgical, non-cinematic the writing is. Ghosh's camera pans simply between one room and the next, from one set of conversation to the next, from one sequence of close-ups to the next. Some films do demand rigorously confined spaces to make it imperative to its restive drama. But in Ghosh, as we will see, confinement became an unfortunate, self-referential trope. Because once this formula managed to hold forth with *Unishey April*, he repeated himself in film after film. It is hence imperative to establish the critical paradigm in the early cinema of Ghosh through its unrepentant internality – a parcelling out of larger conceptions of space and place into metonymic, drawing-room dramaturgy, a chambering of orchestrated relationships away from the politically volatile, lived, identifiable vestiges of the city of Calcutta, where the films were apparently based. Clearly he was not interested in cinema in its broad, sweeping, spatial, throbbing, scopophilic largesse,<sup>19</sup> but cinema that abjures its original scopic claims for a copious, sanctimonious, claustrophobic internality. One can surely demand this to be Ghosh's signature style, all the more because having struck gold with his first major film, Ghosh found it logical to repeat himself. But at the same time, it is important to locate his cinematic habitus in the wider cultural taxonomy of Calcutta/Bengal, for which one must critically analyse the limitations of his style. And moreover, as I have tried to show, his style is not foreign to the appeal of his films, their commercial viability with a class that Ghosh has unfailingly addressed and repeatedly mined.

Consider *Dosar*, an otherwise luminous film in monochrome, made in 2006. The premise of the film is promiscuity, as are in many of Ghosh's films. On his return from a rendezvous outside the city with his girlfriend, Kaushik's car meets an accident that injures him brutally and kills his companion Mita. The accident forces Kaberi, Kaushik's wife, into a split: between her *duty* to nurse her husband and the emotional detachment his infidelity provokes. Needless to say, this is as chambered a dramatic material as it could be and Ghosh makes no effort to exercise any other option. The result is that after a full decade after *Unishey April*, one sees the same film all over again: two



characters drifting apart in intimate space, confrontation, near-breakdown and then sudden reconciliation, every fault-line evoked in aching domestic detail.

Ghosh's fourth film *Asukh* had pushed this tendency of detailing to its extreme. In this film, a successful actress, while slowly coming to terms with the supposed infidelity of her lover, starts to suspect her own father when her ageing mother's protracted illness hints momentarily at the possibility of immunity-deficiency. Her fears are not only proved erroneous but she comes across as no more matured than an irritating and fidgety adolescent, throwing accusations as easily as owning up to her mistakes. But the film's real failure was in its inability to salvage the thinness of the story which Ghosh had forcefully stretched into a two-hour chamber-drama. Devoid of any real sense of tension and any real empathy for the grim-reaping protagonist, the film seemed like a silly, tiresome medley of dimly-lit scenes with a meticulous, obsessive attention to the banalities of everyday life. Such tender attention to pointless detailing as seen in *Asukh* and *Dosar* may remind one of French avant-gardist Chantal Akerman. However, like Bergman, the association is fortuitous, because Ghosh is incapable of either intellectualizing loneliness or forging an experiment of layered time, both actual and cinematic.

Even when his camera does manage to tread outside the four walls of designer bedrooms, the city is usually empty, devoid of its humungous humanity, almost deserted. In *Dosar* for example, the city emerges only as passing scenery from a taxi, that too only around the total emptiness of the green space in the heart of the city. Another scene *set in the city* is when characters from a subplot hotly debate the state of paralysis in their adulterous relationship (again), on an empty stretch on the bank of the river Hooghly. In another scene, Kaberi, while waiting for her husband to emerge into consciousness, waits in the hospital corridor while outside a solitary corporation waste-van glides down an abandoned road. So conspicuous is the effort to depopulate the outdoor that it raises serious curiosity and concern about what kind of city Ghosh's narratives engender.

*Dahan* a film about sexual assault, marital rape and the luridness of legal scrutiny has a similar visual distance from the city. In this film, the camera sets out to capture a small stretch of the city, empty and barren again, only when Romita, the assaulted woman, writes confessional letters to her sister in Canada. 9, Golf Club Road, the address of her in-laws and the site of most of the drama in the film, remains just an address, unqualified by any specific detailing, any neighbourhood and any real, physical habitation. Except some minor scenes, the film largely moves between the home of Jhinuk, a conscientious school teacher and Romita, the housewife and battered woman of the assault. Their embattled lives as the saviour and the saved become the crux of the drama. Here too, like *Dosar*, the drawing room, the bedroom, the lighted premises of the elite clubs and restaurants, the chatty school classroom and the daunting confines of the courtroom become metonymic of the city itself. Even the pivotal scene of the assault of Romita and her husband remains clumsy, to say the least, with Ghosh preferring to narrate the sequence of events mostly through the gaze of apathetic passers-by sitting *inside* vehicles till Jhinuk, comes to the rescue. Unlike his other films of the time, *Dahan's* dramatic potential, because it was based on a true incident and a popular novel based on that event, had saved the film from becoming another innocuous pontification on promiscuity.<sup>20</sup> But that did not mean that the film could evolve into a realistic commentary on the city's hidden but festering sleaze and its overwhelming parochial and patriarchal authority. Like its peers, *Dahan* too triumphs in its obsessive love of the interior space to create the necessary dramatic tension, thanks to which the arrogance of sexual crime and the legal impunity offered to the well-heeled remain foreign to a frame confined to sequestered,

isolated moments. The film never manages to spill out into the city, contributing to its larger meaning-making process.

In *Shubho Muharat* a film inspired, this time officially, by Agatha Christie's Miss Marple whodunit *The Mirror Cracked from Side to Side*, Ghosh continues with his usual concerns. This time the narrative 'justifies' his logic of concealed space because the Indianized version of Miss Marple, unlike her original, never leaves her home. In the original story, Marple does visit the scene of crime, Gossington Hall. But in keeping with Ghosh's dogged logic of internality, Rangapishi (Marple) is denied that. She spends all her time at home, picks up her cues from television, film magazines and newspapers and uses the information gathered by her journalist niece to crack the case. In fact, Rangapishi's *homebred* intelligence is a special highlight of the film's drama, which tries to juxtapose her eye for detail from *within* the confines of her home with the cavalier inquiry of the police, who keep missing out on clues.

In this film too, all possibilities of contact between the characters and the city are severed. The city is banished into a vast unknown, kept outside the closed doors in carefully arranged confinement of the rooms – be they the house (or houses), the film studio or other, inevitably refined interiors. One scene in the film becomes symptomatic of this tendency. While on a date with a police officer, who is investigating the case, Rangapishi's niece Mallika parks their car in an open space in the city only to recoil in horror when poor children accost them for alms. They readily pull up the windows of the car and move out. Clearly, even if Ghosh's comfortable, bourgeoisie space unlocks itself for a moment, it takes no time to recoil into its sequestered interiority and locks out the dirt of the city's nether apparitions.

In *Utsab*, Ghosh apparently manages to create a site that is more intrinsic to its plot than others.<sup>21</sup> *Utsab* is located outside the city in an old mansion that has seen its better days. Here during the four days of the Durga Puja, a family gathers every year. Their mother is the sole inhabitant of the mansion. The film opens with the hint that the house, the last, residual connect between the members of the family scattered in various parts around Calcutta, could be sold to a cousin. Ghosh repeats the close-fitting scenario again (not for a single frame does the camera leave the house) but this time with a mythological design: the matriarch and her two daughters and two sons are like the goddess Durga who visits the earth with her four children. The earth – the goddess's home for the four days of festivity is signified by the house, the ancestral *bhite*, of Bhagabati, the mother. We learn that a cousin who on allegation of an incestuous affair with the elder daughter, was banished from the house years ago, now wants to buy the house. The situation is further complicated by the current crises that each sibling is facing – the odds and ends usual to the aspirational middle classes: insecurity at the workplace, vacuous mid-life meddles, unhappy marriages, or funding the children's education. A hint of incest, between cousins now growing up, hovers again around the house while the one of the past, that was erased, comes back. The tensions, however, are resolved rapidly as festivities come to an end. The house is saved for the time being and fractured relations are, even if temporarily, restored.

## V

The total absence of the City in *Utsab* and the endless references to the power it exerts over the family is symptomatic of Ghosh's larger world view. We have tried to see how in film after film, Ghosh's characters seek to freeze the contours of their confines, declare external agency unwarranted, and deny any associative reference to the world at large. And yet in his films, the *city* repeatedly seduces, weans away, provokes and petrifies,

ushers in fractured aspirations. However the *city* is also conspicuous by its absence, severely banished, circumscribed, and almost always stopped at the gates.<sup>22</sup> But why is Ghosh so obdurate in making any allowance to anything that is external to his confined environs and to the middle-classes' selfish needs?

The answer perhaps lies in *Utsab*. In this film, by substituting the *mythical earth* for the *confines of the home*, Ghosh's reversal of the *home and the world* is total. And this *home* is marked by its non-denominational physicality, like a play, where the space is determined by the square-foot of the stage, where characters converse on a seemingly endless loop, where props stand in as signifiers of external objects, where painted walls and pasted papers signify the absent weight of *the city*.

But what does one mean by mining of the needs of the middle classes? One way of connecting selfishly to the city is to have the utilities taken care of. In Ghosh's films, the *needs* of the professional middle class are fulfilled by a retinue of service people: chauffeurs, maids, baby-sitters, nurses, sweepers, watchmen. They are always in the shadows of Ghosh's dimly lit chic interiors, always an unquestioning, servile presence behind the burgeoning consumer needs of the middle-class which foreground his narrative and aesthetic spaces, spaces which in itself are a catalogue of merchandize and riches made available to the newly moneyed middle classes. This is the height of the consumerist ethic that was unleashed by neo-liberalism, an ethic in which there is both an unquestioning enforcement and a self-congratulatory *jouissance* about the efficacy of capital to monetize not just goods but also relationships and services.

The other motif of the city's metonymic presence in Ghosh's films is the telephone. In every early film of his, the telephone is the link to the external world. Its presence is not just constant but almost imperative, like a narrator that creates and resolves tension in the film, disrupts and heals. The dependence on the telephone sometimes becomes so obsessive and ostentatious that one wonders if his films are located in a mythic space, a sort of cinematic outback where the telephone brings in the news from a world afar.

Hence Ghosh's city, if any, is *not* Calcutta, contrary to his many claims. His films, non-denominational as they are, can be based anywhere as long as there is a telephone. This is the Calcutta of the post-90s, fuelled by real estate boom, luxury condominiums, and protected habitations. To extend Gyan Prakash's argument about the 'urban turn'<sup>23</sup> in the Indian context, this was a moment when the middle class finally and fully uncoupled itself from seeing the city as part of any nationalist imagination. The new bourgeois city, as Partha Chatterjee argues,<sup>24</sup> grew outside the sphere of 'the governed' and sought to provide a new urbanism that is in service of neo-liberalism through a utilitarian exchange of monetized functions and services available for purchase. As Chatterjee writes, 'The idea of what a city should be and look like has now been deeply influenced by this post-industrial global image everywhere among the urban middle classes in India. The atmosphere produced by economic liberalization has had something to do with it. Far more influential has been the intensified circulation of images of global cities through cinema, television and the internet as well as through the Indian middle class's far greater access to international travel. Government policy, at the level of the states and even the municipalities, has been directly affected by the urgent pressure to connect with the global economy and attract foreign investment'.

If the Bengali cinema of the '80s and early '90s *turned away* from the metropolitan consciousness to invoke a fractious provinciality, Ghosh's cinema turned unctuously *inward*. The reverse-image of the desired city replaced the actual. The global network of services and functions that the middle class increasingly aspired for was levied as something that the lower classes and the poor were supposed to provide. In the new world

order of the 90s, the desirous subjectivity that the middle class nurtured was entirely dependent for its instrumentality on the needs and riches that the market economy had ushered. In Ghosh's cinema, the dividends of *becoming* the newly globalized middle class were clearly laid out in the production of interior space which could be controlled by carefully orchestrating the *entry* of the undesirable. Hence, by interchanging the *home with the world*, Ghosh is merely repeating the biggest fantasy of the neo-liberalized, a-politicized middle classes<sup>25</sup>: to reduce the physical, actualized space of the city into an entourage of metonymic devices and payable services. All other links to the city are consciously minimized if not obliterated; even the need for movement or mobility. This is the middle class of the gated housing estates in which a lifetime worth investment is in keeping the vagaries of the city out of sight and its grime out of bounds. The sizeable attraction of his films for the middle class is precisely because it successfully feeds into this fantasy. It is precisely again in this sense that the absent *homeland* of part of his audience – those who have lived a substantial part of their life outside Calcutta and other metropolitan centres of Bengal – becomes realizable. The posh rooms and other privileged settings of familiar emotional traction appear more recognizably anywhere-territory to this demography which would otherwise shudder to drop their feet on the onerous dirge that is Calcutta. They do want to connect to their so-called *homeland* but only in their own way, only through signifiers that feed into their collective ennui about the real, embodied, city.

In this sense the *home* in Ghosh is not a parallel form of habitus in the world but its *other*. Home is the new middle class accumulation – not just a private but a *privatized* property. This repeated investment in privatized non-space, the aesthetic truisms and the unproblematic alliance with middle class fantasy is what forbids Ghosh's films from finding acquaintance with either Bergmanesque minimalism, or the economy of objects as in Ackerman, or in the several superlative movie experiences that the idea of confinement has produced.<sup>26</sup>

The notion of confinement as serialized in Ghosh's cinema provokes a far more damaging indictment of his oeuvre than can be easily understood. The *home and the world* has much bigger implications in Bengali cultural history and memory, the name obviously referring to Tagore's classic work about the arrival of modernity in colonial Bengal and its conflict with vulgar nationalism. The same theme resonates in Ray's *Charulata* (or Tagore's *Nostoneer/The Broken Home*) and *Mahanagar* (The Big City), where the idea of the city as a liberating space is set against the doctrinaire orthodoxy of the *home*. Undeniably, in both Tagore and Ray, the *home and the world* are not equipose but necessarily indicators of spatial progress, of movement from *former to the latter*.<sup>27</sup> This idea has hence garnered a deeply embedded cultural logic in Bengali and even Indian cinema. A serious filmmaker should have been, ideally, aware of what he might risk by making his films politicize domestic confinement and displace the city. By reversing the idea of *home and the world*, Ghosh, who has always made claims of strong cultural kinship to both Ray and Tagore, is actually *reversing* the legacy of liberty as engendered in space. If his films are essentially 'feminine' narratives, as has been repeatedly argued, doesn't his kind of feminism forfeit any claim for the public space, the space in which its demands are most regularly violated? What kind of modernity does this femininity propound in a confined, sequestered, privatized space? By forcing the public space to be confronted within the liminality of the private, Ghosh's early cinema ends up deeply problematizing the foundational idea of women's politics itself. In trying to critique dominant modes of phallogentrism, do Ghosh's films not threaten to become their impenitent apogee? If nothing else, this in itself should provoke us to rethink Ghosh's legacy as a protrusive artist.

## Notes

1. For a detailed exposition on the trappings of Indian popular cinema, especially in its proclivity to narrativize an imagined Indian national space, see Gokulsing and Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema*. A more sophisticated theoretical discourse is available in Vasudevan, *Meaning Making in Indian Cinema*.
2. The popular-art cinema divide is always fraught with conflicting ideas because though it was somewhat an applicable duality till the 90s, the division over the next decade or so became doubtful, thanks to money that came the way of 'art' cinema and the talent that came the way of popular cinema, two things they were said to be mutually lacking in their past incarnations. In Bengali cinema, critically speaking, this division is even more unreliable on account of the presence of a top actor like actor Uttam Kumar or filmmaker like Tapan Sinha, who effortlessly juggled and achieved considerable success with both.
3. For a detailed analysis of Kumar's early career and the conflicted modernity of the melodrama form that dominated his early films, see Nag, "Love in the Time of Nationalism".
4. For more on Kumar's cinema and his continuing cultural deification, see my essay "The Heroic Laughter of Modernity".
5. See my essay, "Power to the Bourgeoisie".
6. There is no quantifiable reference for this claim. However if one looks at the history of production of the 'art film' in Bengal since mid-1970s, it becomes clear that the Bengal government backed a significant number of 'serious' films in the next decade or so. The national equivalent of this norm were the films produced by National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) and the fact that Bengali 'serious' cinema was *not* patronized by NFDC but the Bengal government is evident in the fact that none of the NFDC produced films were in Bengali (but had several other regional languages in its repertoire).
7. Exceptions such as Gautam Ghose, Aparna Sen and Buddhadeb Dasgupta were not significant to cause any ripple in the radar.
8. For a nuanced discussion about the *television* of broadcasting space and the emerging discourse around a de-nationalized scopic regime, see Vasudevan, "National Pasts and Futures". Vasudevan writes: 'A complex historical account of the changing patterns of film production and its constituencies would bring into focus the ever more complicated map of diversity and overlap in India's contemporary audiovisual sphere. It is here, in the efflorescence of new systems of delivery, especially satellite relays and cheap cable networks, that a picture of the future seems most radically presaged. In a context in which cheap cable access is still beyond the reach of a substantial part of the population, India's state television, Doordarshan, still dominates the field through its extensive network of terrestrial broadcast. But satellite channels relayed through cable command very substantial viewerships in India's populous cities and small towns and amongst the well-to-do in the countryside'.
9. The so-called art cinema movement in the 1970s was largely public funded but not every serious film before or after was made with public money, and, private financing existed even at that point. Liberalization however greatly extended the scope of private capital.
10. For a critical understanding of the various turns in the history of Bengali cinema from its early years, see Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema*. Apart from being the first serious academic study of the whole history of cinema in Bengal, Gooptu is also keenly attentive to its attendant dualities and disjunctures.
11. The appropriate English title of this film remains elusive. The title refers to a practice in Indian cinema of launching a film on an auspicious day. The film plays on the semantic possibilities of *auspicious* but English titles in circulation like 'The Beginning', or 'The First Day of Shoot'; cannot hope to highlight that irony.
12. For a detailed theoretical exposure of *Bombay/Mumbai* in cinema, see Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema*, and her detailed treatment of the 'unintended city' and the 'unreal city' in Indian contexts as against studies of the archetypal cinematic metropolis in the West.
13. Shaikh, 'Rituparno Ghosh and the 'Intellectual Film' in India'.
14. This claim follows Ghosh's trajectory from 1994 to 2006. However *Bariwali* (1999) *Titli* (2002), *Chokher Bali* (2003), *Raincoat* (2004) and *Antarmahal* (2005) are kept out of the discussion for the fact that they are either period pieces or set mostly outside Calcutta. It is worth noting however that the dividing line between his early cinema and his so-called late cinema (post-2006) is not necessarily clinical and there are, as is mostly the case, obvious

- overlaps. However, the concerns of his cinema did change over the years and the change was unfolding rapidly at the time of his untimely death.
15. Bakshi, "My City Can neither Handle Me nor Ignore Me."
  16. For a detailed thesis on how the television and its audience construct each other, see Gray and Lotz, *Television Studies*. Gray and Lotz write: 'As much as television programmes matter much of their importance is only felt in as much as there is an audience in the first place. To say a programme "does" or "means" something is to assume it does so to an audience. We might often convince ourselves that commercial television is the business of creating and selling *shows* but in truth it is the business of creating and selling *audiences*' (p.58).
  17. By cinematic space I mean a space whose scopic range is unlimited and open ended as against theatrical space whose range is limited by its proscenium practice. For more detailed understanding of use of city space as cinematic space, see Shiel and Fitzmaurice, *Cinema and the City*. For more pertinent discussions on Calcutta see essays by Moinak Biswas, Supriya Chaudhuri and Sudipto Kaviraj in Kaarsholm, *City Flicks*.
  18. I use *new* to denote a series of films that consciously belonged to this particular cultural and ideological formation of the middle-class. There are of course older specimens of chamber drama in Bengali and Indian cinema but Ghosh's films are different and form part of a broader, neo-liberal construction of identity of the new middle class post liberalization and globalization.
  19. There is no denying that cinema's relationship with modernity is highly contingent upon its purchase as a medium of extraordinary visual scope, a purchase which has given a normative understanding of cinema.
  20. See a detailed discussion of this film in Mukherjee, 'Feminism in a Calcutta Context: Assault, Appeasement, and Assertion in Rituparno Ghosh's *Dahan*'. Also see Macdonald "Real and Imagined Women".
  21. Unlike the other films discussed where each house could be any house, the old, airy, decaying, colonnaded mansion, with its long corridor and neatly separated spaces for living, relaxing, cooking, eating and receiving guests assume a character of its own.
  22. Among other things the city makes itself present through a series of sounds – the cries of peddlers, songs played at local Puja festivals, horns of cars and bicycles.
  23. Prakash, "The Urban Turn," 2–7.
  24. Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*, 143–4.
  25. Moinak Biswas's Bengali essay, "Neo-Bhadrolok Darpan", (Mirror of the neo-bhadrolok) in *Baromash*, a Bengali journal published annually, critically discusses this idea in detail. A concise form of his argument has recently appeared in his essay 'Rich Tradition'. The following quote is from the online edition: 'The new middle-class cinema of the post-economic reform period, on the other hand, has developed a thoroughly apolitical character. Realism continues to be a yardstick for the latter, but curiously, it is now a realism committed to the details of the new urban interior and spaces of consumption opening up for gated communities. The signs are clear: it is the television screen that now stands as the spectral mediator for self-reflections of a class. It seems not only to be using those chamber reflections for closing off larger dimensions of reality, it also betrays a happy ignorance of things happening in the cinema outside'. (Accessed 3 October 2013). I have tried to further his argument in trying to define the said cinema, its ideological, spatial and aesthetic concerns in terms of confinement and interiority.
  26. The cinema of confinement has also produced some of the finest specimens of world cinema: *12 Angry Men*, *The Fireman's Ball*, *Taste of Cherry*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, *Russian Ark*, *Dillinger is Dead*, *Persona*, *Jeane Dielman*, *Wait Until Dark* etc. But it is impossible to trace any of the effects generated by these films in Ghosh's cinema, both in terms of narrative and aesthetic practice.
  27. Satyajit Ray's cinema is too heterogeneous and multi-referential to make allowances for any singular claim about his narrative patterns. It is beyond the scope of this essay to deal in great detail about the same. However it would be sufficient to claim that Ray's cinema manages to avoid any kind of straight-jacketing as far as his female protagonists are concerned. Ray excelled in crowding the visual and locational motives of his protagonists, ennobling them with a heightened sense of humanity and cultural referentiality. His *Mahanagar* is a case in point. His *Home and the World* is perhaps the only film in which, adapting Tagore's locational imperative, he heightens the effect of space as an engendered identity. Otherwise interiority was

not a given locale of his female protagonists but a site of serious intellectual enquiry itself, a space that Ghosh, perhaps unwittingly, manages to politicize as essentially female.

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