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Familial Space and Struggle for Identity in Rituparno Ghosh's World of Films

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Abstract: In modern intellectual discourse, the family is increasingly regarded as a contentious arena in which individuals navigate the potential for genuine self-actualisation. Once envisioned as a site of intimacy and unity, it now functions as a tool for voyeurism, domination, and subjugation. The pursuit of unconventional familial relationships in contemporary society signifies a yearning for autonomy within or outside the established confines of familial existence. Rituparno Ghosh, known for breaking mainstream rules, changed the way families are shown in movies by giving them a subversive point of view. His stories include women whose cultural norms limit their voices, but whose desires show that they want to be free. This paper critically analyses two of his films to examine the contradictions inherent in family life.

Keywords: Family, Bonding, Familial-Space, Home, Kinship.

Introduction

Indian English literature consistently explores interpersonal relationships, situating them within the interconnected contexts of family, community, and nation. Narrativistic novels illustrate the impact of historical and socio-political experiences on individual identity, whereas the Indian context emphasizes the significance of familial relationships, in conjunction with national influences, in the construction of subjectivity and the dynamics of selfhood. The deep connection between family and nation shows how the idea of belonging that comes from primordial kinship slowly becomes part of the larger idea of national identity. Timothy Brennan's essay, "The National Longing for Form," posits that the concept of the nation intrinsically includes the idea of family.

George Murdock provided a foundational definition of the family in his 1960 work *Social Structure*. He described the family as:

“A social group characterized by a common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship and have one or more children, own or adopted”. (Murdock 1)

Family, constituted by bonds of blood irrespective of shared residence, furnishes a primary and intimate sense of identity surpassing national affiliations. The conceptual locus of ‘home’ emerges as a sanctuary of affection and security, where selfhood is cultivated. Hence, familial space assumes a pivotal role in stabilizing and rooting individual identity.

The terms 'home' and 'family' frequently evoke a sense of 'safety and stability.' Yi-Fu Tuan, in *Space and Place*, suggests that:

"Home is an intimate place to human beings everywhere. The importance of home is profound and is felt more keenly by those who are separated from it. It is a place of security and stability, but not without its tensions and conflicts." (Tuan 3)

The family environment is one of both conflict and support, encompassing elements of violence and nurturing. As a psychological space, it experiences ego conflicts, power struggles, and a deep-seated need for personal identity. The family serves as a crucial domain where various emotional connections, such as love, fear, and power dynamics, are expressed and experienced.

The conceptualization of ‘familial space’ as a site for consolidating selfhood renders it inherently unstable. Extending Bhabha’s categories of the pedagogic and the performative from the nation to the family, one observes how internal fissures generate counter-narratives that resist normative authority. Such micro-narratives privilege elective affinities over prescriptive obligations, advancing the legitimacy of chosen kinship alongside inherited bonds. Historically anchored in genealogical recognition, kinship is now reinterpreted through affective and pragmatic dimensions, wherein relational value is determined less by blood or legality than by the experiential depth and transformative potential of interpersonal connections. In the postcolonial and multicultural context, familial space transcends fixed national borders, emerging instead as a shifting mental landscape—most vividly expressed in diasporic communities that continually negotiate and redefine ‘home’ across global terrains.

In "The World, The Text, and The Critic" (1983), Edward Said differentiates between two types of connections an individual can have: filiations and affiliations. To quote Said:

“Relationships of filiation and affiliation are plentiful in modern cultural history. One very strong three-part pattern, for example, originates in a large group of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers, in which the failure of the generative impulse—the failure of the capacity to produce or generate children—is portrayed in such a way as to stand for a general condition afflicting society and culture together, to say nothing of individual men and women”. (Said 16)

Filiation refers to the connections an individual has with places and people rooted in their birth culture, encompassing ties of biography and geography. Affiliation, which often replaces filiation, involves bonds formed with institutions, associations, communities, and other social constructs. The transition typically moves from filiation to affiliation, with filiations being inherent and affiliations being adopted. However, in today's globalized and multicultural context, these ties have become intertwined, blurring the clear boundaries and sequences between filiation and affiliation, as well as the distinct moments of transition from one to the other.

Another important aspect to examine is the nature of this new extended family. Does it offer a haven and security, or does it turn out to be an awkward, inadequate, or even a pointless substitute? These questions frequently challenge the psychological dynamics of family life.

It is often noted that it is a migrant who suffers the most. He gives up his familiar environment, faces a new and unfamiliar language, and finds himself among individuals whose social behaviours are significantly different from and sometimes even disturbing to his own. The establishment of a new family is vital for overcoming this crisis for it is the family or home that helps to counteract the sense of alienation encountered in an unfamiliar setting. It is this newly established concept of home that enables individuals to move beyond their homeland and address their identity issues in a foreign land.

In critical theory, queer aesthetics is not bound to the artist's sexual identity but rather to a resistant stance against dominant ideological and cultural structures. To adopt a queer perspective is to interrogate what is conventionally treated as natural or sacred, extending beyond gender norms to question broader social and cultural fixities. Examining Rituparno Ghosh's queer aesthetics thus requires attention not only to his

explicitly queer films but also to his earlier works, where he critically engaged hetero-patriarchal norms. By granting female characters the agency and voices of defiance, Ghosh disrupted patriarchal authority while symbolically addressing the tensions of living in the closet. In this way, his early films served as subtle articulations of his sexual queerness, conveyed through narrative strategies that resisted normative structures. For Ghosh, filmmaking has always been a path to personal freedom, both through storytelling and performance. (Bakshi and Sen 204)

Rituparno Ghosh was far more than just a filmmaker. His public coming out, along with his noticeable physical transformation through cosmetic surgery and cross-dressing, established him as a queer icon who challenged traditional notions of gender and sexuality in Bengal. To fully appreciate Ghosh's queer aesthetics, one must not only consider his explicitly queer films: 'Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish' (2012), and 'Arekti Premer Golpo' (2012)—but also place these films within the broader context of his diverse contributions to media and culture, and his exploration of queerness through his various roles. After the 2009 Delhi High Court ruling partially decriminalizing Section 377, these films initiated a new cinematic vocabulary in Bengali cinema, foregrounding previously marginalized, sexually non-normative identities with cultural specificity.

The release of *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010), which is known around the world as *Just Another Love Story*, is a turning point in Indian queer cinema. It is the first film to deal with same-sex desire after Section 377 was partially decriminalized without using apologetic stories, caricatures, or extreme sensationalism. The film does not treat queerness as a mere spectacle; instead, it embeds it within the realities of lived experiences, offering a nuanced and culturally rich examination. The story is about the intersection of reality and fiction: the real life of Chapal Bhaduri, a famous female impersonator in Bengali theatre, and the made-up story of filmmaker Abhiroop Sen, played by Rituparno Ghosh. The film emphasizes emotional resonance over inflexible identity constructs, defying easy classification. According to Chapal, queerness is expressed through performance, which is best exemplified when he takes on the role of Rani. This demonstrates the dynamic yet socially defined identities that are typical of precolonial traditions. On the other hand, Abhiroop completely rejects identity labels in order to offer a postmodern critique. The film reframes queerness as a dynamic discourse within the context of Indian modernity by highlighting it as both culturally shaped and individually interpreted through these opposing points of view. While Chapal contends that true fluidity requires stable

reference points, he views life as immutable rather than dynamic and believes that true fluidity requires transitions between discrete states. Despite his repudiation of gendered attire and cosmetics, Abhiroop paradoxically demands to be referred to as 'Sir' rather than 'Madam' by his crew, exposing a contradiction in his stance. While Abhiroop remains assertive in his dealings with non-queer individuals, he exhibits notable vulnerability when faced with varying expressions of queerness.(Ahmad)

The film begins on a frustrating note but ultimately garners sympathy for homosexual relationships. While it seeks to generalize the experiences of its two queer characters—Chapal Bhaduri and Abhiroop Sen—the story slowly uncovers the significant differences between them despite their apparent similarities. The depiction of their homoerotic relationships varies greatly: Chapal becomes a submissive figure in Kumarbabu's (Indraneil Sengupta) household, taking care of a bedridden wife and never fulfilling his dream of building a family with Kumarbabu. On the other hand, Abhiroop's relationship with Basu (Indraneil Sengupta) fails because Basu, who is bisexual, cannot leave his wife. The film examines these narratives within their distinct temporal and spatial contexts, illustrating the varying levels of subservience faced by each queer protagonist in their same-sex relationships. (Ganguly)

Abhiroop Sen, who is well-versed in contemporary discussions on sexual identity politics, perceives himself as neither fully man nor woman, in contrast to Chapal, who feels like a woman trapped in a man's body. For Chapal, cross-dressing on stage is a necessity rather than a political statement. Conversely, for Abhiroop, it is a deliberate choice and a representation of his identity, embodying a sense of 'thirdness.' The film links this 'thirdness' to androgyny, using the subtext of the legend of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and his devotion to Krishna, as highlighted by the refrain “Bonomali Tumi Poro Jonome Hoiyo Radha”(Ganguly). Although Abhiroop insists that he feels distinct from both man and woman, his identification as a gay man is problematic because modern sexual identity politics has developed a taxonomy that distinguishes between gayness and transvestism. This confusion extends beyond the film, significantly impacting the public's understanding of the complexities of queer politics and the dynamics of same-sex desire.

Arekti Premer Golpo centres on love and highlights that a romance between two men is fundamentally similar to other love stories, which is why its title, Just Another Love Story, is fitting. In the

film's climax, Kaushik Ganguly subtly portrays the tragedy of a bisexual man struggling to balance his relationships with both his wife and his boyfriend. Basu's tragedy lies in his struggle to balance two relationships: one that is socially accepted and the other that is not, with both holding equal emotional significance. The final scene, where Abhiroop and Basu share a poignant kiss and cry before parting ways, starkly highlights the painful reality of their in-betweenness and the lack of any real solution to their predicament which underscores the film's strength. (Bhatkar 104)

In societies where queer families remain unrecognized, the concept of family becomes a matter of individual interpretation. Rituparno Ghosh's 2012 film *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* foregrounds this tension through its exploration of same-sex couples' inability to adopt in India. To circumvent this legal restriction and adopt a child with his partner Partho (Jisshu Sengupta), Rudra (Rituparno Ghosh) chooses to undergo gender reassignment surgery. His sacrifice, however, culminates in tragedy when Partho rejects him, declaring he would prefer "a real woman" over "this half thing." The film thus poignantly represents the struggles of a queer man, highlighting his relationships with family, his experiences of rejection, and the broader societal and institutional challenges faced by LGBTQ communities.

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chitrangada* reimagines Vyasa's narrative through an exploration of gender, identity, and authenticity. The princess of Manipur is born to a king who longed for a son but, receiving a daughter as a divine 'curse,' raises her as a warrior. In a chance encounter during a hunt, she captures the exiled Arjun and falls in love. Yet, fearing rejection because of her masculine traits, she seeks transformation through Madan, the god of love, who grants her a conventionally feminine form. Arjun, enchanted, reciprocates her affection. However, when Manipur is threatened, he admires the warrior-princess, compelling Chitrangada to reclaim her true self. Arjun's love endures beyond appearances, affirming Tagore's vision of authenticity, selfhood, and acceptance as essential to human relationships. (Ghosh 171)

While Tagore wrote on the threshold of modernity, Ghosh creates within the milieu of a globalized, postmodern cultural sphere. His reinterpretation of Tagore's narrative is marked by intertextuality; through which he inscribes a distinctly queer dimension. In *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, Ghosh transposes Tagore's dance drama into cinematic form, drawing upon the performative aesthetics of Jatra, where transformation becomes a mode of liberating the physical, intellectual, and emotional self to embrace identity.

Through this framework, Ghosh's *Chitrangada* emerges as a narrative of desire and self-realization, critically engaging with questions of gender and identity. In the film's introduction, he remarks, "from Tagore's writings comes a realization". (Ghosh) The film interlaces two narratives: the tale of Chitrangada and that of Rudra, the film's protagonist.

In the film, Kasturi (Raima Sen), who is the principal dancer in Rudra's troupe or 'dol', brings in a new percussionist, Partho, a heroin-addicted individual whom Rudra decides to support. Over time, Rudra develops romantic feelings for Partho and makes earnest efforts to help him overcome his addiction, though these efforts are in vain. Despite clear indications, including from Rudra's mother that Partho is taking advantage of Rudra's loneliness, Rudra is resolute about undergoing a sex-change operation, convinced that he can create a family with Partho.

The film focuses on the theme of family, examining it from three angles: the family consisting of Rudra and his biological parents, the theatre troupe Rudra considers his family, and Rudra's goal of creating his own family. The film highlights how children's desires can surpass their parents' expectations. It delves into the issue of choosing one's gender identity, juxtaposing the wishes of the parents with those of their child. To understand what "family" signifies for a trans-person such as Rudra, Kath Weston's seminal work *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* offers a useful framework. A closer examination of Rudra's relationship with his parents reveals how kinship is negotiated through everyday practices. The film situates much of its most intimate discussions within the private space of the dinner table, where shared preparations for eating and cooking function as kinship and belonging rites. Rudra claims the right to reinterpret not only what "family" means, but also the conditions under which it can be established in a society that rejects him. His father, played by Anjan Dutta, opposes both his sexual orientation and his dancing career, while his mother, played by Anasua Majumder, fosters empathy and camaraderie. Rudra's meticulously manicured appearance, complete with jewellery, kohl-rimmed eyes, and gestures that defy hegemonic masculinity, serves to reinforce his sense of self. His painful admission that he has long been considered a "perennial embarrassment," revealing the weight of familial opprobrium, serves as justification for his decision to undergo gender-reassignment surgery. This, along with his insistence on moving out, highlights the tense negotiations between normative kinship formation and queer self-definition. But in a trans-figurative

movement, his parents reject abandonment, effusive with care, culminating in the father's gentle kiss at the hospital. His parents later insist on an affidavit that legally sanctions his gender change, foregrounding the ways in which legal acknowledgment becomes the keystone of family legitimacy, inheritance, and kinship validation. The film intercuts these elements of kinship, demonstrating that legal acknowledgment of identity is critical for family legitimacy and inheritance concerns.(Gangopadhyay)

Regarding the theatre group, Rudra often considers them as his family, reflecting the deep connections he has with the members of his 'dol.' He tells Partho, "they love me, they are fond of me, and they respect me" (Ghosh). Within this supportive environment provided by the theatre group, Rudra is able to express himself freely. He himself notes, "my dance is not confined by my gender, nor is my identity" (Ghosh). He often refers to the younger members as his 'children', who may serve as a substitute for the children he had hoped for.

In a society that fails to recognize queer families, the notion of family becomes a matter of personal perspective. For Rudra, the value of family lies in his power to select those he considers family. In a context that marginalizes him, Rudra establishes his own definition of family and kinship. Despite this, the film ultimately indicates that biological ties are more significant. By the film's conclusion, Rudra depends exclusively on his parents for support.

Rudra's wish to adopt a child arises from his desire to build a family with Partho which is driven by his fear of being alone. Rudra believes he might not find another loving partner like Partho and he justifies their relationship by highlighting that Partho has the courage to love him in a way that others might not. When Rudra realizes that he cannot have biological children with Partho, he offers to leave. It is Partho who proposes adoption as an alternative. Rudra chooses to undergo a sex-change operation after Partho accuses him of dissatisfaction with his natural self. Rudra responds by stating:

"If everyone were content with their natural selves, men wouldn't spend hours at the gym to build six-packs, and women wouldn't wax or thread their eyebrows." (Ghosh)

Despite this, Partho's preference for biological kinship becomes evident when he asserts, "If I have to have a child, I'd rather it be one of my own blood" (Ghosh). This moment crushes Rudra's dream of forming a

family that defies conventional norms. Ultimately, Partho ends the relationship, as he values having a biological child over adopting, regardless of Rudra's dedication and efforts.

The significance of biological ties is reinforced by Rudra's mother, who demands information about his surgery despite his reluctance to disclose details. She asserts:

"...You were born from my body, and I have a right to know about it... I have cared for this body extensively, and if you plan to undergo surgery, I deserve to be informed." (Ghosh)

While Rudra had hoped to find a supportive family among his theatre troupe, it is his parents who ultimately stand by him and offer their support.

Conclusion

When examined together, the films create a unified meta-narrative that explores similar thematic issues. In *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, Rudra contemplates gender-reassignment surgery after learning of his partner's desire for children. This parallels *Arekti Premer Golpo*, where Abhiroop loses his partner to the latter's pregnant wife, whose motherhood reclaims marital authority and forces the dissolution of the queer relationship. Rudra's contemplation of a sex change in *Chitrangada* can be interpreted as an effort to bridge this gap by aligning himself with the biological female form, thus trying to resolve the opposition. Each of these films highlights the theme of the collapse of traditional family aspirations. Collectively, they contribute to a queer aesthetic that addresses issues of sexual subjectivity, as examined by Rituparno Ghosh. (Bakshi and Sen 216)

Thus, by integrating familiar cultural elements, Ghosh sought to normalize queer identities for audiences who might be unfamiliar with or prejudiced against non-normative forms of love and relationships. Through these final three films, Ghosh has created or enhanced a space for the discussion of queer identities within middle-class settings, offering a platform for these voices to be recognized and heard.

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