



The Politics of Desire: Body, Space, and Queerness in Rituparno Ghosh's Cinematic Canvas

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Abstract— This paper explores Rituparno Ghosh's staging of desire that challenges established norms through the lens of body politics, queer sensibilities and spatial aesthetics that evoke desired emotions in *Unishe April* (1994), *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010) and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012). Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of biopower, Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity and Henri Lefebvre's concept of produced space, this paper explores an in-depth analysis of visual and textual colour schemes, stage designs and props across these three films. Whereas, *Unishe April* features intimate domestic interiors and maternal gestures that disrupt arbitrarily decided norms and *Arekti Premer Golpo* focuses on the trans identity in a medical gaze and dimly lit intangible spaces, *Chitrangada* turns the stage of theatre into a ritualized heterotopic gender fluid space. The study also digs into how recurrent themes such as gramophone, colourful textiles and quiet hallways do linger between the public and private spheres through the frame-by-frame interpretations of key moments. The study makes an assertion that Ghosh's presentation of visual arts creates queer enclaves inside heteronormative environments by merging spatial techniques with performative acts. In conclusion, this study showcases how Ghosh's avant-garde aesthetic interventions portray and impact the LGBT and queer identities.



Keywords— *Body politics, Spatial elements, Heterotopia, Queerness, Heteronormative.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Rituparno Ghosh's vibrant cinematic oeuvre comes to question under forcefully normalised society, but that never affected his ability to put forward what he stood for. This paper explores, examines, interprets the densely placed layers of the cinematic marvels like *Unishe April* (1994), *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012) where Rituparno Ghosh directly influenced the presentation of spatial elements and the superbly crafted queer spaces that challenge heteronormativity and in *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010), where under the direction of Kaushik Ganguly, Rituparno Ghosh acted to put life into the character itself. The stages lit by Ghosh portrayed heterotopic gender fluid spaces where the careful uses of luminosity and the symbolic elements that tries to develop a normalised queer enclave inside the gender rigid society. Drawing on ideas produced by Henri Lefebvre, the theory of gender

performativity proposed by Judith Butler and Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia and biopower, Ghosh displays how everyday spaces construct themselves as the sites of negotiation and resistance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Significant scholarly attention has been paid to the relationship between queerness, spatial aesthetics, and cinematic language, particularly in relation to South Asian film. Critics frequently point out how Rituparno Ghosh's visual storytelling subverts conventional gender norms and elevates marginal identities to the forefront of cultural representation, making his films an essential part of this conversation.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity forms a key theoretical foundation in queer film studies.

According to Butler, gender is not an innate identity but a repeated performance shaped by societal expectations (Butler 179). By embodying these performances in intensely emotional and visually charged environments, Ghosh's characters often challenge gender binary thinking. The interpretation of queer films is also influenced by Michael Foucault's concept of biopower, which is the control of bodies through social structures. In Ghosh's *Arekti Premer Golpo*, the portrayal of medical spaces and the intrusion of the clinical gaze directly speak to Foucault's critique of how power shapes bodily identity (Foucault 139). The movie questions the notion that identity needs to be repaired or categorised medically by problematising visibility and diagnosis.

Spatial theory is another key frame for understanding Ghosh's cinematic language. Henri Lefebvre's notion of produced space argues that space is socially constructed and actively shaped by cultural and political forces (Lefebvre 26). Ghosh uses domestic interiors, rehearsal spaces, and theatre stages not just as backdrops, but as dynamic sites of resistance and transformation. In particular, *Chitrangada*'s theatre space functions as a heterotopia, a place where alternate identities can temporarily emerge and be explored, a concept reminiscent of Foucault's idea of counter-sites (Foucault 24).

In conclusion, previous research emphasises how Ghosh's films are visual and spatial experiments that subvert heteronormative norms in addition to being narrative texts. Critics have demonstrated how Ghosh creates queer enclaves inside conventionally conservative settings by referencing theories of gender, power, and space. This makes his work both politically significant and artistically rich.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to film analysis, focusing on how visual and spatial elements in Rituparno Ghosh's cinema articulate queer desire and challenge normative structures. Rather than relying on statistical data or surveys, the research is grounded in close reading and textual analysis, guided by theoretical insights from Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Henri Lefebvre.

The paper examines three of Ghosh's most thematically rich films: *Unishe April* (1994), *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010), and *Chitrangada* (2012) (In *Unishe April* and *Chitrangada* as director and in *Arekti Premer Golpo* as an actor). These works were selected for their recurring engagement with questions of identity, space, and performance, making them ideal for exploring how Ghosh

constructs alternative queer narratives within heteronormative settings.

Key scenes from each film are analyzed frame by frame, paying particular attention to:

- Set design and spatial arrangement (domestic interiors, performance spaces, transitional zones)
- Visual-textual elements such as color palettes, lighting, props, and camera framing
- Symbolic motifs, including gramophones, mirrors, hallways, and fabrics
- Body politics and gesture, especially in relation to gender performance and gaze

The methodology involves aligning these visual cues with theoretical concepts. For instance, gendered performances are read through Butler's theory of performativity, while spatial transitions are interpreted using Lefebvre's and Foucault's ideas of produced and heterotopic space. Clinical and institutional settings, as seen in *Arekti Premer Golpo*, are analysed in light of Foucault's concept of biopower.

Throughout the process, the films are treated not only as narrative texts but also as cultural artifacts that reflect and reimagine queerness within a South Asian context. The goal is not to offer a definitive reading but rather to explore how Ghosh's stylistic choices, such as spatial, visual, and performative oeuvres, contribute to the creation of what might be called queer cinematic enclaves.

This interpretive method allows for a deep exploration of Ghosh's work and focuses on the potential of visual storytelling to question, resist, and reconfigure dominant narratives around gender and sexuality.

IV. DISCUSSION

Rituparno Ghosh's cinematic world is rich with subtle defiance—layered gestures, ambient spaces, and intimate silences that work together to stage queer desire in ways that resist conventional storytelling. Through an attentive manipulation of domestic and theatrical space, the politics of the body, and emotionally charged mise-en-scène, Ghosh constructs queer narratives that are deeply rooted in Bengali cultural contexts while simultaneously resisting their normative codes.

Ghosh reconfigures the inside of the home as a space for gender negotiation and emotional conflict in *Unishe April* (1994). The film, which is primarily set within a poorly lit flat in Kolkata, centres on the tense relationship between a mother and her daughter. Narrow hallways, dimly lit bedrooms, and peaceful living rooms where

mundane household tasks mask greater desires and regrets are the settings for the emotional tension. These interiors create a familiar yet unsettling atmosphere with their abundance of vintage furniture and warm earth tones.

Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's idea of produced space, the apartment becomes more than just a setting; it is an active participant in the characters' emotional journeys (Lefebvre 26). Her profession and independence defy conventional gender norms, making the mother figure who is generally considered as the epitome of conventionalism, a sign of upheaval rather than stability. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers insight into these familial dynamics. The daughter's anxiety about her mother's nonconformity reveals the social pressure to 'perform' idealized femininity, even within the private sphere (Butler 191).

Arekti Premer Golpo (2010) takes a bolder turn by bringing the transgender experience to the forefront. Here, Ghosh blurs the line between actor and character, casting himself in a dual role that echoes real-life figures while dramatizing personal identity struggles. The film navigates through clinical settings, old film studios, and motel rooms, using neon lighting and reflective surfaces to craft an ephemeral spatial grammar. These spaces feel intangible and constantly shifting, evoking what Michel Foucault terms heterotopias, spaces where social norms are suspended or inverted ("Of Other Spaces" 24). In medical settings, the trans body is subject to scrutiny, echoing Foucault's notion of **biopower**, where institutions exert control through the regulation of bodies (Foucault 139). Yet these same bodies resist categorisation. The protagonist's identity remains fluid, transcending binaries even as the world attempts to pin it down. Ghosh uses mirrors, flowing fabrics, and red lighting to visualize this resistance, turning the *mise-en-scène* into a field of psychological tension and quiet rebellion.

In *Chitrangada* (2012), Ghosh pushes this aesthetic experimentation further by staging gender transformation within a literal theatre space. The film adapts Rabindranath Tagore's play of the same name, but Ghosh turns the performance into a meditation on selfhood, transformation, and desire. The theatre is both a metaphor and a setting - a space where the protagonist negotiates his desire to undergo gender affirmation surgery. Here, Butler's concept of performativity becomes most literal: the stage becomes a space where gender is actively rehearsed, performed, and revised. The film also enacts Foucault's heterotopia, transforming the stage into a liminal zone where the boundaries between real and imagined, male and female, and self and tradition dissolve ("Of Other Spaces" 25). The repeated presence of symbolic objects - feathers, masks, traditional drums - infuse the scenes with ritualistic

overtones, aligning with Indian aesthetics of transformation and storytelling.

Across all three films, Ghosh returns to recurring motifs, such as gramophones, mirrors, textiles, and doorways - that bridge the divide between public and private, tradition and rebellion. These elements are not merely decorative but are charged with emotional resonance.

What unites these films is Ghosh's distinctive ability to make space feel alive, like imbuing corridors, curtains, and corners with the weight of desire, grief, and defiance. His visual grammar resists loud declarations and instead uses silence, softness, and texture to narrate queer lives. In doing so, Ghosh builds what can be called queer cinematic enclaves, emotional and spatial shelters where non-normative identities are not only seen but also hugged with the arms of care.

V. CONCLUSION

Rituparno Ghosh did not just tell stories; he created worlds. Worlds where silence speaks louder than dialogue, where a hallway can hold the weight of longing, and where gender is not a box to be checked but a choreography of becoming. His cinema, tender and defiant, turns the frame into a sanctuary for those whose desires are often left outside the margins of mainstream narratives. Through domestic interiors, theatrical stages, and ghostly institutional spaces, Ghosh carved out enclaves of queer survival, the spaces not only to exist but also to breathe, mourn, and transform.

By weaving Judith Butler's performativity, Foucault's critique of biopower and heterotopia, and Lefebvre's theory of spatial production into the visual grammar of his films, Ghosh built cinematic terrains that challenged what it means to belong. His characters resist neat definitions as they perform gender as poetry, inhabit space as resistance, and move through frames with the grace of defiance. Whether in the quiet mother-daughter confrontation in *Unishe April*, the fragmented identity in *Arekti Premer Golpo*, or the theatrical metamorphosis in *Chitrangada*, Ghosh's work does not ask for acceptance - it asserts presence.

In a region where queer lives are often shadowed by shame or invisibility, Ghosh's films offer something radical where emotional truth is rendered visible. He queered not only the characters but the very form of storytelling itself - its textures, its silences, its light. What emerges is not just a body of work, but a body of feeling: delicate, painful, exquisite. In looking at his cinema closely, we do not simply watch queer lives unfold - we feel them unfold in space, gesture, and gaze.

In the end, Ghosh's cinema teaches us that desire is not something to hide or fear, but something to stage - lovingly, defiantly, and with an eye toward liberation. And in that staging, he has left behind not just films, but safe spaces - frames within frames - where queerness is not a question, but an answer.

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