

Srimati Mukherjee, *Women and Resistance in Contemporary Bengali Cinema: A Freedom Incomplete*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. 155 pp. ISBN 978-1-138-12095-2.

The present volume is an examination of the films of three directors from West Bengal – Rituparno Ghosh, Buddhadeb Dasgupta and Goutam Ghose – to address the juxtaposition of tradition and culture in selected films from their oeuvres. Dividing her study into three parts, the author focuses on four primary areas for discussion integral to this study. She argues that the films of these directors often reveal an antithesis or, more specifically, paradox, that is, the representation of a disjuncture between the public and private spheres, particularly as this applies to ideas of resistance and revolution. The study illustrates how such contradictory attitudes affect women as portrayed in this cinema. Next, she locates an attempt in the films of these directors to rupture the traditionally prohibitive, and a simultaneous effort to validate “alternate” lives, narratives, and desire within the social structure. Further, this study examines the foregrounding of notions of unmaking and making in women at the same time as these films expose a traditional inclination to align women with ideas of absence, substitution and disposability. Following from this point, the author also argues that a number of these films portray women as active agents in processes of meaningful “exchange” rather than transactional commodities. Thus, by analysing these four areas of directorial focus, she shows how selected auteurs in contemporary Bengali cinema break with certain traditional representations of women and gesture towards spaces that are more akin to Tagore’s understanding of a “common future” and a culture more liberating for women.

The temporal arc of this book is approximately 1995 to 2010. Although selected directors, notably Aparna Sen, have done considerable work with women’s issues in Bengali cinema during the above-mentioned period, the author has chosen to focus largely on the films of Rituparno Ghosh, Goutam Ghose, and Buddhadeb Dasgupta because several of their films reiteratively address the themes explored in this study, namely, disjuncture between attitudes in, or towards, the private and public spheres; women rupturing the traditionally prohibited; processes of unmaking and making in women; and women portraying agency and being mobilised by these directors to show meaningful exchanges. In Part I of this study, the author focuses on the representations of disjuncture through three films. In the first chapter, she focuses on Feminism in a Kolkata context: assault, appeasement and assertion in *Dahan*. The second chapter is a study of the impossibility of incestuous love: woman’s captivity and national liberation in *Utsab*. Impermanence in *Dekha* with its fragility of the present and the passing of a “traditional” perspective is the content of the third chapter. In this whole section the author addresses at length how two of these three directors

expose double standards in the attitudes of the characters, especially when they judge the nature of women who resist or are revolutionary by nature. Even as these films were made at the turn of the twenty-first century, the directors span decades and depict both urban metropolitan and more rural settings to locate such attitudes. Thus, as audiences, we are witness to such disjuncture in multiple settings.

Part II, which the author calls “Narratives of waste and rupturing the prohibitive,” contains detailed studies of two films, namely *Barivali* and *Chokher Bali*. Rituparno Ghosh’s *Barivali* (*The Lady of the House*, 1999) unfolds the theme of the woman’s body as alienated and a gratuitous commodity. By analysing Ghosh’s treatment of the idea of “waste,” both metaphorically through dream and metonymically through representations of deteriorating property inhabited by his female protagonist, this chapter addresses the notion of woman as redundant object. Mukherjee further argues that while *Barivali* commences and closes with ideas of “left-over excess,” the middle section of the film dramatises a possibility of “transaction,” whereby the lead female character attempts to use property, albeit deteriorating, in an effort to empower herself. Although this endeavour to move out of the stagnating conditions of her life is “unsuccessful,” the fact that property alone cannot stand in for woman might precisely be Ghosh’s point. The concluding section of this chapter thus posits that, for Ghosh, cinema itself, by embodying such incompleteness or “failure” on the screen, can become a means for activating audiences to think beyond certain kinds of relegation and consider possibilities of liberation from restrictive social spaces.

In transferring to screen Rabindranath Tagore’s novel *Chokher Bali*, Rituparno Ghosh brings us the story of a newly-married couple, Mahendra and Ashalata, who are passionately in love, until this love is temporarily tarnished by the arrival into their extended family of a young, intelligent and educated widow, Binodini. While in line with Walter Benjamin’s thought in his renowned 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” it is certainly true that many copies of Ghosh’s *Chokher Bali* (*Sand in the Eye*, 2003) are available and, in some cases, these travel globally and evoke a range of reactions, the author focuses more specifically on Benjamin’s notions of the “shattering of tradition,” the “destructive, cathartic side” (22) of film, and his concept of reactivation or actualisation. What is more important to her discussion is the passage of *time*, between the publication of Tagore’s text, *Chokher Bali*, and the predicament of widows in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal on the one hand and the making of Ghosh’s film in the early twenty-first century on the other, rather than the ability of the reproduction(s) to travel through *space*. Ghosh’s film permits us to “meet” the “reproduction” of Binodini in our “own situation,” that of the early twenty-first century, and makes us ponder how entrenched the “aura” of tradition is and what role film plays in disrupting this “aura.”

An important factor and one that the author considers the most unfortunate, is that women are shown to also be participators in such transactions involving women. Her discussion of this factor in contemporary Bengali cinema is limited in this study to the representation of prostitution and how in this area women enable such transactions of women, but primarily for purposes of survival. The third and the final part of the book studies Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Mondo Meyer Upakhyān* for substantiation and as a reading of rebellion within broken social systems. The author shows in this chapter that if a "traditional" conceptualisation of women as commodities for exchange has spawned a system as deeply entrenched as prostitution, a system in which even mothers are ready to trade their daughters for benefits, then Dasgupta leads us to consider multiple sites and agents within culture that help subvert such transactions. In the film Dasgupta returns more than once to the themes of broken social systems and the urgent need to escape from these, no matter how unsupported such escapes may be. The last shot of the film shows the three lesbian women leaving the brothel and the author sees this as their prioritising queer desire over masculinist commodification.

To conclude, we can say that the author has done a commendable job in bringing such diverse women related issues within the covers of this book. By discussing in details how the three Bengali directors cinematise female agency in various striking ways, she reiterates that the directors do not find it easy to depict when female subjects challenge double standards within tradition, or rupture aspects of tradition, or engage in processes of unmaking and making and securing meaningful exchanges for themselves. Thus, the theme of women's unmaking and making as it manifests itself in different ways in recent Bengali cinema, is addressed in all the three sections of her study.

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