

Article

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**The Many Lives of Bengali Cinema:
A Study of Srijit Mukherjee's *Autograph* and *Ek Je Chhilo Raja***



In my article, I attempt to address a gap in the study of contemporary Bengali cinema beyond the spotlight on Satyajit Ray-Ritwik Ghatak-Mrinal Sen and Aparna Sen-Rituporno Ghosh. In examining two of Srijit Mukherjee's films, I extend Sangita Gopal's argument about New Bollywood and its regional counterparts, reframing and citing older films and creating a new identity through the constitution of the couple; this article argues that Srijit recasts Bengali cinema within a genealogical framework through the analytic node of iconicity. The two films I study in this article, *Autograph* and *Ek Je Chhilo Raja*, were initially perceived as remakes of Uttam's films, vis-à-vis *Nayak* and *Sanyasi Raja*.

I contend that Srijit operates within the genealogical framework of Bengali cinema not only because he cites and reworks the classics mentioned above, which were all Uttam hits, but also because he references literary texts and historical research to revise the narratives of the films and their characters, literary or historical. In doing so, Srijit returns to

some of the core tenets of Bengali cinema, literariness, and rich storytelling while using New Bollywood technologies that have become standard protocols (See Gooptu and Gopal).

Srijit Mukherjee and New Bhadrakalok cinema

Srijit Mukherji is no longer an unfamiliar name in Indian cinema. Trained as an economist at the then Presidency College, Kolkata, and at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, Srijit entered the film industry in Bengal with his directorial debut *Autograph* (2010), which was initially perceived as an adaptation of Satyajit Ray's *Nayak* (1966).

However, does Srijit Mukherjee only re-tell older stories? Why would a filmmaker repeat older films for an audience well conversant with the predecessors? Anyone familiar with Bengali cinema knows that Uttam Kumar's films claim unparalleled longevity in Bengali cultural memory. So, the critical questions are: What does Srijit achieve in revisiting

the older classics? Why does he review them? How does he revisit them?

In her study of New Bollywood, *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema* (2011), Sangita Gopal defines New Bollywood as the post-liberalization Hindi language cinema made in Mumbai that features NRI characters that earns revenue from diasporic audiences that cultivate and disseminates Bollywood as a “global brand”; that cultivates links between film and the more significant entertainment industry; and that gets screened in multiplexes where the “transnational, urban, middle-class” audiences spend their now possible disposable incomes (14). This ‘New Bollywood’ cinema also cites, reframes, and reworks classic Hindi cinema, paying tribute while breaking away from it, and charts a distinct identity.

Later in her book, Gopal describes Bengali Bhadrak¹ cinema as being reoriented from merely being a vernacular product with a regionalised reach in Kolkata that has become a globalised form and is at once aligned with its cultural and economic parameters. It is achieved through state-of-the-art equipment and production techniques, which alter the look of a film and give it an international look while remaining local. At the same time, the industry has incorporated merchandising and modes of exhibition attuned to New Bollywood (Gopal 156-157). New Bollywood incorporates a system of new technologies, including equipment, new styles of storytelling, new formal elements, and dissemination mechanisms fed by star cultures, promotional strategies, and exhibition spaces where first screenings are often attended by the entire cast and crew (Gopal 157). Just like the methodology of New Bollywood, the new crop of Bengali films is released in multiplexes, in tune with the lifestyle preferences of the upcoming and mobile middle class. The resultant glamorisation of filmic content has entailed the creation of a celebrity culture that was once anathema to the ‘bhadralok’ sensibility. This is especially helped by the local English daily *The Telegraph* (with a substantial readership), which regularly carries celebrity gossip in its columns, indicating that such things are now integral to the consumption of Bengali cinema (Gopal 158). Moreover, interviews with film crews, including actors, directors, musicians, and producers,

proliferate YouTube and Facebook Live channels. Such mechanisms around a film tie in with the global culture of access through social media. What is extremely important, however, is that the New Bhadrak cinema returns to and reworks (with the aid of New Bollywood techniques and finesse) the terrain of ‘bhadralok’ culture and the cinema it engendered.

The formal differences between the traditional Hindi film and New Bollywood that Gopal highlights ring true for Srijit’s cinema, as it does for most Bengali films made since the turn of the twenty-first century. The lack of mimesis that song and dance sequences ushered into Hindi films to escape censors’ rejection when displaying romantic coupling, for example, is almost overhauled in many films that fit the definition of Gopal’s New Bollywood and regional cinema (Gopal 28). Srijit does not shy away from showing explicit scenes of conjugation, much like Rituporno Ghosh, because he emphasises the reality and relatability of his audiences. When Srijit recreates the world of the king-turned-ascetic or the glamorous world of a luxury hotel or a new film director finding his ropes in a fiercely competitive industry, Srijit portrays intimate scenes of conjugation in different instances of coupling to meet the narrative requirements (Bose and Chakravarty 132). The article examines how Srijit departs from the Bengali classics and adapts and reworks them to create a cinema that pays tribute to Bengali cinematic and musical heritage and captures the desires of the postmodern global Bengali.

Srijit’s films and their predecessors

In this section, I will discuss some of the departures that Srijit makes in his films in order to make a new cinema. I demonstrate how Srijit draws on, cites, refers to, and then reworks Bengali classics to tell new stories to which the globalised Bengali can relate.

Autograph (2010) and *Nayak* (1966)

By Ray’s admission, *Nayak* is about the reigning cine idol of Bengali cinema, Uttam Kumar, who went on to become the reigning superstar in Bengali cinema during the years 1965-1980 but, incidentally, whose iconicity also, to date, remains

¹ See Sharmistha Gooptu’s *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation* (2010) for in-depth discussion of ‘bhadralok’ society and cinema in Bengal.

unchallenged. Uttam Kumar is also often referred to as Mahanayak. Satyajit Ray had worked with Soumitra Chatterjee in fourteen films; however, when it came to an examination of the life of a superstar, Ray, known for selecting actors who fit in the mould of the character they were playing, could not look beyond Uttam Kumar and in a way acknowledged his iconicity by casting him in the role of the superstar in *Nayak*. In numerous interviews afterwards, Ray admitted to having written the script of *Nayak*, keeping Uttam Kumar in mind. In his film, Ray tries to project the superstar's life as he imagined: godlike but ultimately quite vulnerable. Through his shots and dialogues, Ray also dwells on the idea of the 'mask' that all superstars have to don to survive in the big bad world of cinema.

Srijit's film *Autograph*, however, adds layers to his narrative based on *Nayak*. *Autograph* revolves around a young director, Subhabrata, who tries to break into the league of prominent directors in Tollywood by re-making Ray's *Nayak*. Unlike Ray's straightforward narration of an actor's inner journey, Srijit adopts a meta-narrative and makes a film about adapting Ray's *Nayak*. The film dwells at length on the consequent relationship he develops with the reigning superstar of Tollywood, Arun Chatterjee, played by the real-life superstar Prasenjit Chatterjee. Incidentally, Uttam Kumar's real name (as given by his parents) is, in fact, Arun Chatterjee, a fact that strengthens our claim that Srijit dips into the genealogy of Bengali cinematic culture in order to rework the classics. Srijit's film involves three characters - the superstar Arun Chatterjee, who re-enacts the role of Uttam Kumar from *Nayak* in a film self-consciously entitled *Aajker Nayak* (Today's Hero) and, within Srijit's film, the director Subhabrata and his live-in partner Srinandita, a young thespian who also plays the role of Jahnvi in Subhabrata's film. Their lives change forever when they come together for the film *Aajker Nayak*.

In Satyajit Ray's film, the superstar awakens to his inner being prompted by Aditi's² sharp and penetrating questions, and all his insecurities come to the fore, as do many of the skeletons in his private life. In effect, the film examines the superstar's inner life - an examination of the human being behind the 'mask'. Ray's film then becomes an examination of the film industry and its moral trap of greed, adultery,

and ambition that stands exposed to the penetrating gaze of an astute and intellectual woman who is quick to announce she is no fan.

However, Srijit's film attempts no such thing, although his screenplay borrows heavily from Ray's *Nayak*. Arun Chatterjee gets involved with an upcoming actress much in the same way that Arindam Mukherjee in Ray's script gets involved with Promila, who asks him for a break in films and who tries to take advantage of his position and who, in turn, he too exploits. However, Srijit has Arun Chatterjee confess his feelings to Srinandita, his co-actor in *Aajker Nayak*. To complicate, contemporise, and make the narrative his own, Srijit has Subhabrata take advantage of this moment of Arun's weakness recorded on a Handycam (Srinandita was rehearsing for her play *Antigone* and was recording herself on camera when Arun calls on her unexpectedly and his confession gets recorded during one such rehearsal) and give it to various TV news channels as a means of marketing his film and which he believed would ensure the success of his film.

Srijit's subplot about the complicated relationship among Arun, Subhabrata, and Srinandita decenters the position of Arun's character in the remaking of *Nayak*. In Ray's film, Uttam Kumar plays himself as Arindam, in addition to The star-text of Uttam Kumar, the cine idol, which overwhelms the film's narrative. Uttam overshadowed his co-stars in almost all his films and loomed larger than life. Producers most took advantage of this very quality of the superstar, often pushing him to do roles that did not do justice to his considerable acting skills and often repeating roles that had been successful in the past. We argue that Uttam Kumar remains perhaps one of the most versatile actors in the Bengali film industry, pulling off different roles with panache and setting the cashboxes ringing.

However, in *Autograph*, Arun Chatterjee's life no longer remains the focal point of the film as the narrative progresses and assumes a back seat with the evolving relationship between Arun and Srinandita playing Jahnvi (in *Aajker Nayak*) being highlighted in the film instead. What is also perhaps interesting about this film, and what Sangita Gopal identifies as a tendency of New Bollywood, is the way Srijit re-thinks conjugal relations in this film. To

² In *Nayak*, Arindam Mukherjee (Uttam Kumar) meets Aditi, a young journalist, played by Sharmila Tagore, on a train on his way to Delhi to receive a prestigious award. Aditi poses

thought-provoking questions that compel Arun to reflect on his life, personal and professional choices, regrets, and the meaning of success.

the world and their friends, Srinandita and Subhabrata's relationship comes across as "loose," with Subhabrata not even displaying an iota of jealousy at the growing closeness between Srinandita and Arun Chatterjee. New Bollywood cinema, according to Gopal, disavows traditional romance, and Srijit employs similar strategies while depicting the two as live-in partners who are not overtly possessive about each other. However, as a postmodern couple, they are prone to loud displays of affection for each other. In fact, after one of the many outings with Arun, Srinandita comes home to a grumpy and rather rude Subhabrata. Fearing the worst, Srinandita tries apologising to him but is only surprised by his declaration that, unlike other boyfriends, he is not beset by feelings of jealousy or even possessiveness. This is one of the many examples of conjugation that Srijit highlights in his cinema, replacing the problematic concept of romance with intimacy.

Perhaps Srin and Arun's relationship is a wishful take off by Srijit on the Aditi and Arindam coupling in Ray's *Nayak*, which did not end on a romantic note and who let it remain just as an awakening examination of a superstar's life with Aditi acting as the interrogator and conscience. While Srijit's film can be read as a tribute to Satyajit Ray and the iconic Uttam Kumar, one can also consider it semi-autobiographical. Subhabrata could well be Srijit, whose debut film is *Autograph* and who had approached the real-life Tollywood superstar Prasenjit Chatterjee for the role of Arun Chatterjee, who tries to re-work the iconicity of Uttam Kumar in this film.

Ek Je Chhilo Raja (2018) and *Sanyasi Raja* (1975)

Ek Je Chhilo Raja is considered a remake of Uttam Kumar starrer *Sannyasi Raja* by Pijush Bose, a massive hit upon release in 1975. It was based on the early twentieth-century Bhawal court case famous for the apparent return of a zamindar (Bhawal Raja) as an ascetic, a sannyasi, a decade after his death in order to reclaim his estate from British control. The film traced the protagonist's journey from an extravagant and profligate zamindar to a sannyasi chronologically by charting out Surjokishore Nag Choudhury's daily activities as the zamindar of an estate in East Bengal, which yielded an annual income of ten lakhs a year in the early decades of the 19th century.

The portrayal of the zamindar maintains a clean image of a philanthropic but profligate man who wasted his time and resources on music and entertainment of hordes of dependents, thereby draining the coffers of the estate. The glamorous and gentlemanly zamindar is in keeping with the star image of Uttam and categorically did not engage with the historical zamindar who contracted syphilis before he was twenty-five years of age and was infamous for his affinity for women. Effectively, Bose paid heed to Uttam's dedicated fans belonging to the middle-class audience who would not have accepted such a role from their icon and superstar. Also, it was a fictionalised account of the Bhawal prince whose case in the early 1900s engendered much curiosity and imagination. Keeping in mind all of these factors, the director makes Uttam's character a connoisseur of good music and good dancing, much like the zamindar of Ray's *Jalsaghar* (1958), who did not have enough time for his wife whom he loved and cared about. Bose presents a gripping narrative in which a villainous and ambitious house physician plots the murder of the zamindar and usurps his position and wife. The chiaroscuro scheme of lighting further aids in painting the story in shades of black and white—evil triumphs with the apparent murder of the zamindar by the doctor. Then, the zamindar returns to his estate to save his subjects from the villainy of the wicked doctor by having been miraculously brought back to life by a couple of sanyasis whose order he joins after suffering a temporary lapse of memory. However, the British Raj is not indicted in this plot except in passing, who swiftly institutes a committee to examine the claims made by the erstwhile zamindar, whom the doctor wants to portray outright as an imposter. The zamindar, however, wins the case, having proved his identity, but in the process, loses his wife, who is shot dead by the doctor. Instead of resuming control of his estate, the zamindar presented more like a Christian priest than one initiated into an ascetic life of wandering Naga sanyasis, returning to the path of his spiritual guru. He hands over his estate and its considerable income to benefit his faithful retainers who had supported him by paying the money needed to defend himself in court.

In Srijit's film *Ek Je Chhilo Raja*, the focus is on carefully building Raja Mahendra Choudhury's character and foreshadowing the courtroom scenes and trial. Staying true to the historical character of the zamindar, Srijit portrays a handsome man devoted to music, hunting, and women in the film's first half.

Srijit boldly holds to light the zamindar's numerous acts of debauchery without any apology. However, in keeping with the older classic, Srijit succeeds in depicting a zamindar who was respected widely for his compassion for his people despite his weaknesses. However, Srijit's film differs considerably from the earlier film because he draws heavily on eminent political scientist Partha Chatterjee's book *The Princely Impostor? The Kumar of Bhawal and the Secret History of Indian Nationalism* (2002), which follows quite obsessively the story of the zamindar popularly referred to as the "Bhawal Sannyasi." Chatterjee's book provides exhaustive details about the zamindar's decades-long battle with the mighty British Raj to regain his estate and claim his identity that created sensations then and was followed up in fiction and film. Srijit also contextualises the story within the 1905 Banga Bhanga Andolan.

In *Sannyasi Raja*, the doctor is portrayed as a villain in keeping with the simple schema. However, in *Ek Je Chhilo Raja*, the villain is the Raja's brother-in-law, Satya, whose motivations and intentions are not simplistic. Srijit makes his audience consider: Could Satya have engineered the murder or accelerated the deterioration of Raja's health to avenge his younger sister, who was neglected by the Raja? Or could it have been straightforward greed for the money from the Bikrampur estate that would have been assigned to his sister after the Zamindar's death?

The machination of the British is highlighted in *Ek Je Chhilo Raja* much in the style of Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* (1977), thereby critiquing the colonial policies that aided Satya in retaining the zamindari both as an imposter and a murderer as long as he paid the British their due. In contrast, *Sannyasi Raja* comes across as a work of fiction that merely tries to lend authenticity to the star status of Uttam Kumar. On one hand, Uttam's film could not access Partha Chatterjee's in-depth research. It relied more on anecdotal history about the Bhawal Raja/sannyasi, and on the other hand, depicting a clean image of the superstar who had the glamour quotient to portray a well-known local zamindar seems to have informed the 1975 film. Jisshu Sengupta, who plays the zamindar in Srijit's film, complied with Srijit's authentic depiction and covered himself with ash and wore dreadlocks and a loincloth to resemble Naga sanyasis with whom the historical Raja travelled around the country. Arijit Singh's rendition of "Tu dikhe na" ("You remain unseen") as the background

score for Raja's search for self-engenders the desired mood of deep soul-searching for a man who very recently was immersed in the self-destructive path of women and wine. The accompanying visuals are captivating, making the film immensely entertaining to watch. Once again, Srijit forsakes the 'image' of the star in order to narrate a story of one man's incredible journey.

Srijit uses a meta-narrative of the courtroom drama. He lets the life of Bhawal Raja/Sanyasi play out within its parameters, thereby raising questions of patriarchy, social power and privilege, British law and policies, and human beings' greed and need for revenge, all of which complicated the relationships among the leading players in the narrative. The one-on-one conversation between Mr. Mukherjee, the defending counsel in the film, played by Anjan Dutt and the lady public prosecutor, Anupama, played by Aparna Sen, hints at their personal histories and their commitments to a sense of justice for upholding law and a woman's right to disown a sham husband, respectively.

The two films conclude somewhat differently. While *Sannyasi Raja* is more in keeping with the iconic status of Uttam Kumar, where he depicts a selfless man who considers how his wealth could benefit his subjects, Srijit finds it prudent to stick to the end that Partha Chatterjee notes in his book. However, both films use the genre of melodrama to tell their story. Srijit's film differs from Chatterjee's book in that while Chatterjee keeps the identity of the Raja in doubt, Srijit indicates that the sannyasi and the zamindar are the same.

Conclusion:

Srijit's films appeal to the middle-class Bhadraklok sensibility; he "turn(s) to history" of the star and narrative and reinterprets them within a globalised context in terms of technologies of filming, marketing, distribution, and promotion (Gopal 164). As Gopal writes of New Bollywood, "Phenomena like urbanisation and multiplex exhibition have aided the process" (189). Taking both films as paradigmatic instances of how Srijit's films draw on technologies of representation codified by New Bollywood, I have tried to argue that even though they capitalise on Uttam Kumar's cult value, nevertheless, they become new texts that one must grapple with. *Autograph* is a metanarrative about a new director trying to find his way in a competitive

industry. The narrative of Nayak is part of the first film attempted by the novice. At the same time, *Ek Je Chhilo Raja* uses the briefly seen courtroom scenes to frame the story of the zamindar-turned-ascetic. He presents a more credible, historically researched version of a well-known mystery.

It is partly due to Srijit's transformation of the older films, I contend, that Uttam Kumar's iconicity

is processed for the new age. In a way, Srijit also rids Bengali Bhadrakalok cinema of its vernacular idiom (read provincialism) by presenting Bengali mores of dress, speech and mannerisms in an aesthetically up-to-date, capital-intensive package that meets the technical standards of global cinema and provides cultural satisfaction to globalised Bengalis everywhere.

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Notes:

Srijit refers to and cites old classics within frameworks of new narratives, thereby demonstrating the genealogy of Bengali cinema that also engenders and enables newer directions, much like Gopal identifies in New Bollywood.

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