

Body, Myth and Culture in Arekti Premer Galpo

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Body as a cultural signifier has gained popularity in the discourse of gender mainly from the second wave of feminism, but body as the signifier of alternate gender narrative has got into the critical acumen only recently, in the last decades of the twentieth century, where gender has been questioned on the male/female binary as a presupposition. The film *Arekti Premer Golpo*, directed by Kaushik Ganguly is a questioning of stereotypes in gender roles, but what the film further delves into is the question of identity itself and whether identity can be politicised to such an extent where individuality is lost. The film is a journey to selfhood, to understanding about one's body and to the questioning of society's insensitive treatment of gender leading to marginalisation and pain related to "subjects" who suffer from such marginalisation. The film's narration works on two planes- one at the "fictional" scale where a gay documentary film maker Abhiroop Sen from Delhi comes to shoot to Calcutta with his partner Basu for a film on thespian Chapal Bhaduri, who is deemed to be the first self-professed gay actor on Bengali stage, and the other part of the narration works on the "real" scale, as the film pans into the flashback mode to peep into the life, or more precisely, the sexuality of Chapal Bhaduri. What's interesting is Kaushik Ganguly casts Chapal Bhaduri to play his character in the film, thereby giving a dimension of meta-narrative to the film. The other aspect is of course Rituparno Ghosh, who plays the character of Abhiroop Sen as also the character of Chapal Bhaduri in his youth and thus creating levels of meta-narration. The film makes use of gaze as an agent of suppression as also the engage the audience in the visual narrative to construct the "meaning" of body in a deeply prejudiced culture. The narrative opens with the stage, Chapal Bhaduri dressed as Ma Shitala, the goddess of plague, urging the local landlord to give her an "establishment", since society always respects the "established" but those outside that dominant discourse is left marginalised. The myth of Ma Shitala is a potent subtext to the film, contributing to the theme of forced seclusion and hiding of the reality of the body, that Chapal Bhadur, better known as Chapal Rani, or "the queen of hearts in the open air theatre" (the title card of the film) has exercised and is getting re-enacted by Abhiroop Sen. The opening title bears out a subtle satire on the heterosexual matrix of the Bengali society as it says the in 1959, when the silver screen was ruled by Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen (hence an essentialised construction of heterosexual 'romance') and when Satyajit Ray was on an award winning spree (a master filmmaker of alternate cinema, but providing no voice for the alternate gender discourse in his so-called "meaningful" cinema), Chapal Rani was performing the roles of "women" on stage and creating his own revolution for voicing the concerns of the oppressed.

The film uses the mirror image as a leit motif to construct the meaning of body as imaged by society. The opening shot pans into the character of Abhiroop applying his make-up, and the gaze of the society is projected through the camera panning from behind. The audience's expectations are played with as we see Abhiroop applying kajal or soot on his eyes, which is the usual practice among Hindu women. In fact, the very visual impact created is that of a problematic gender identity for Abhiroop, since he does not look like a "man" or a "woman" on camera. Similarly, when the narrative goes back in time and concentrates on the life of Chapal Bhaduri, there are back shots on him putting his make up for a show, inevitably for a role of a woman. A parallel is drawn between the relationship of Abhiroop and Basu, and Chapal Bhaduri and Kumar Babu. However Chapal and Abhiroop's character remain perennially marginalised and unconsummated since their partners are bisexuals and hence in their balancing act between social expectations and individual sexuality, they cannot provide their gay partners with the social sanction and space that they crave for. The patriarchal heteronormativity constructs Abhiroop as a "homo", a detestable entity within a society that is strictly gender biased. Hence, when Abhiroop wants to placate the "protest" of the locals for portraying the sexual orientation of Chapal Bhaduri in a documentary film, others advise him to not to go down, since his dress, talking mannerism and behavioural patterns will invite jeers from a heteronormative crowd. As Susan Bordo argues in her essay *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*:

"The body is not only a text of culture. It is also, as anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Michel Foucault (among others) have argued, a practical, direct locus of social control" (Bordo, web).

However, the director of this film problematises the language of protest through the 'yext' of body. A very interesting character is made use of in both the narratives of Abhiroop and Chapal Bhaduri, played by Jisshu Sengupta. Uday helps the film party to find another location since the locals in North Kolkata does not allow the despicable details of homosexuality to be filmed, even though the 'truth' is known to all. Uday points to

Abhiroop that his haircut is too “desperate”, trying to prove a point, which leads Abhiroop to become bald. The body of Abhiroop is a locus of protest, he uses his body to protest against the politics of gender essentialisation, but there is also the counter point that the narrative of protest needs to be integrated within other social roles and expectations to reach for a holistic cognition of gender equations. Abhiroop perhaps makes the point too obvious to the extent that the text of his body becomes more of a ‘show’, a performance that is devoid of the real concerns of the gay community. This is pointed out by Chapal Bhaduri as well, when he asks why is Abhiroop always shooting the ‘dressing’ of Bhaduri into the role of a woman, applying kajal and wearing the attire of women, and why isn’t he shooting the undressing of Bhaduri to find out the real space in which his body operates. Bhaduri’s case delves into the queer narratives, since he says that he feels like a woman trapped in a man’s body. So the presence of male organs in Bhaduri’s body is perceived by him as an epistemological gap, a point of non-linguistic communication that seeks to create a space for ahistoricised narration of the body. Abhiroop on the other hand constructs his body as non-loci functionality, saying that men are different, women are different and “we” are different too. His construction of the self is a desire towards creating an autonomous identity for the “third gender”, but being a transgender brings with it its own problems of stereotypification—having long hair and wearing “different” clothes is a signifier to that kind of an identity politics as pointed out by Uday.

In postmodern context, gender is no longer a noun, as much as it is a verb, defined by the functionality of the role that one plays in the performative arena of social roles. Judith Butler observes:

“The domains of political and linguistic ‘representation’ set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended” (Butler, 1990: 2).

The formation of the “subject” is an important discourse for Butler, and in this film, subject is formed not only by performative behavioural patterns, but also by the stage and camera as “second order” signifieds. It is important to note that the stage creates the space for Bhaduri in which he can performatively construct the identity with which he identifies himself. The stage becomes an embodied space where the spatial and psychological consciousness of Bhaduri is constructed, often through the mythical subtexts of local legends. For Abhiroop, the camera becomes his tool of protest, and when he comes across the narrative of Chapal Bhaduri, he almost uses it as a psycho-biographical frame of reference to express his point of view, thereby using representation as an episteme for constructing his body as a cultural site. Sandy Stone depicts the clash of complex bodies of theory and experience:

“We find the epistemologies of white male medical practice, the rage of radical feminist theories and the chaos of lived gendered experience meeting on the battlefield of the transsexual body: a hotly contested site of cultural inscription, a meaning machine for the production of ideal body type” (1996: 294).

The body type that Stone talks over here requires a material consumption for the body to operate on a given cultural context. The Capitalist interventionist politics consumes the body as a pre-constructed image of heteronormativity, and therefore when Abhiroop wears “queer” clothes and has a different behavioural pattern than “masculinity”, he is tagged as a “homo”, a derogatory term that is used by the society to marginalise the LGBT community in order to maintain the status quo. In the case of Chapal Rani, the case is somewhat different, because in the open air theatre, or jatra, it is an established practice to see males performing the role of women because it was considered that women acting in the public space are “fallen”. However, when the same Chapal Rani demands an identity from Kumar Babu, he is angrily retorted since a virile “male” to be a homosexual is too demeaning. Kumar even does not hesitate to share the bed with an “outsider” actress, because it is rather a “manly” act to have sexual dalliance with women outside the ethical domain of marriage, but to be openly gay compromises Kumar’s image in society. Chapal is therefore left lonely and unconsummated, often moving from theatre to Tarapith, back to Bhowanipore and then to Baghbazar in a state of forced seclusion. Chapal dreamt of having a songsar, a family outside the heterosexual essentiality with which it is inevitably associated with, but when he sees that he is treated no better as a social/class inferior by Kumar (especially after he is thrown out of theatre because in the new age “original women” will play the part of women), all his illusions about social sanction of being a transgender is shattered.

The position of Abhiroop is significantly different to that of Chapal Bhaduri, even though the two does empathise with each other because of their similar quest for identity. Abhiroop is comparatively more liberated than Chapal, because he comes from a metropolitan background, knows English and has the platform to voice his opinion, even though that might face violent opposition. After he sheds his initial inhibitions about his self, his expressions become more lyrical and universally appealing. Tushar, who is a wildlife photographer, sees Abhiroop as his mentor. The film maintains an intriguing silence over the sexual orientation of Tushar; repeated prods from Abhiroop about his girlfriend is met with a sturdy silence or a passing jest. Earlier, Abhiroop is met with often derisive jokes about his self and appearance. In fact, the driver of his car adjusts the view of the front mirror to have a look at him, representing the constant gaze that Abhiroop has to contend with, even though he

meets that gaze by using his body as his politics of protest. He is even called a “faggot” by a journalist because Abhiroop questions the “naturalness” behind everyone asking the sexuality of Chapal Bhaduri while he is making a documentary on him, when the same would not have happened if he was making a feature on Amitabh Bachhan, because as a popular icon of Bollywood, he is also a heterosexual icon. Body is one of the problematic sites of cultural signifiers, since stereotyping starts with such “bodily discourses” that hinder the naturalisation of the ‘normal’. The question really is what is normal? Deconstructing the body as a problematic text, can be, as Bryan Turner argues, “a fleshy discourse within which the power relations in society can be both interpreted and sustained” (1996: 27). Abhiroop’s mirror image is constantly used as close up shots to interrogate and counter interrogate the gaze on the body of a person who seems to be ‘queer’. Tushar calls him his “Bird of Dusk” when Abhiroop relates to him about a painting by Abanindranath Thakur, essentially talking of the mortification of soul through the symbolism of evening. In a moment of inter-textual lyricism, Kaushik Ganguly talks of the loneliness and psychological marginalisation that people like Bhaduri and Abhiroop has to go through. Construction of a problematised subject creates an identity all right, but how much that identity is integrated within the dominant social narratives remains to be a potent question. Chapal finds his vocation in a moment of transitory ecstasy when he dances with the ailing wife of Kumar Babu to Tagore’s “Prano bhorie trisha horie, more aro aro aro dao pran”, where the poet asks for more passion and energy into mortal existence so that life becomes more meaningful. The denouement remains problematic, with Basu leaving with his wife since they are expecting a baby thereby leaving Abhiroop as the eternal “outsider”, trying to fit in as a “subject”, but failing. Chapal reminds the director that every emotions of an outsider cannot be represented to its fullest potential in an art form. Not every word can express the sense of “betrayal” that Abhiroop senses when his lover is moving out with his baby, and similarly Chapal can never articulate the feelings of the devastating rejection and the sheer feeling of abandonment that he faces when he has to live outside the “family” of Kumar Babu. Family is an essentialised commodity of heterosexual capital and people like the protagonists of the film have no space in it. They are only destined to exist as ‘non-loci’ elements of social prognostication of a meta-narrative that only speaks for subjects that have a space within the mainstream politics, but they are to remain as “they”; unnamed, unaccepted pronouns with no human dignity. The plight of the transgender community as projected in the film can perhaps be summated by the lyrics of one of the songs used in the film- “Bonomali tumi, poro jonome hoio Radha/ Sundoro biroho mone hobe jeno/ keno kande bodhu bala/ poro jonome hoio Radha”, which can be roughly translated as:

“Dear Lord, Be born as Radha in the next life Affected loneliness will seem As eternal tears of your sin Be born as Radha in the next life”

The myth is of course on how Lord Krishna left his divine consort Radha, never to return back to Vrindavan, leaving Radha eternally lonely. Apart from the usual links with loneliness and exile, the myth song also transposes the world of myth into the narrative of body politics. The “men” in the protagonists are questing desperately for liberation, to find their individual “subject” in the social narrative, but like the mythical Radha, their timeless suffering seems to have no end. If only Krishna knew what it is to be born as Radha!

Notes:

The dialogues of the film are referred from the original DVD of the film, presented by Cinemawalla.

Works Cited

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