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Autor: Bhattacharya, Binayak

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Binayak Bhattacharya*

Seeing Kolkata: Globalization and the Changing Context of the Narrative of Bengali-ness in Two Contemporary Films

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Abstract: The article engages with the question of an exclusivity, an ‘otherness’ of the Bengali culture, in the available representative modes of Indian cinema. It studies the socio-cultural dynamics through which this ‘otherness’ can be found reorienting itself in recent years in a globalized perspective. It takes two contemporary films, *Kahaani* (Hindi, 2012) and *Bhooter Bhobishyot* (Bengali, 2012) to dwell upon. The analysis aims to historicise the construction of a cultural stereotype called ‘Bengali-ness’ in Indian cinema by marking some significant aspects in the course of its historical development. Using the films as cases in point, the article attempts to develop a framework in which the changing landscape of the city of Kolkata, shifting codes of the cultural habits of the middle class and reconfigured ideas about a ‘Bengali nation’ can be seen operating to develop a refashioned relationship between the state of Bengal and the rest of the country. It suggests that the global cultural inflow, along with the localized notions of the new, globalized Bengali-ness, are engaged in developing a new politics of representation for the city and the Bengali society in the cinemas of India.

Keywords: Bengali cinema, Kolkata, Indian cinema, *Kahaani*, *Bhooter Bhobishyot*

The situation that faces us now is this: working in Bengal, we are obliged morally and artistically to make films that have their roots in the soil of our province. Secondly, having in mind the nature of our audience and the resources at our disposal, we are further obliged to aim at an overall simplicity of approach.¹

Bengali cinema of India, categorically different from the Bengali cinema of Bangladesh, has its production centre in Kolkata (Calcutta). The industry operates from this city, the present capital of the state of West Bengal, since its beginning in the early 1910s. Considered as one of the important urban conglomerates of India, Kolkata enjoys certain privilege in popular representations. It traces a

¹ Ray 1977: 42.

*Corresponding author: Binayak Bhattacharya, Manipal Institute of Communication, MAHE, Manipal, Karnataka 576104, India. E-mail: binayak.bhattacharya@manipal.edu

historical legacy, spread across the last few centuries, where the city, as well as the region, have contributed generously to the intellectual history of colonial and post-colonial India. Such a phenomenon enables a typical articulation in Indian cinemas, which is often represented by a number of cultural signifiers. Sharmistha Gooptu's comprehensive work on Bengali cinema² attributes Bengali culture and films with a certain sense of 'otherness'. In her opinion, this 'otherness' extricates itself from the major cinemas of India by alluding to a different national culture. This is done through developing specific iconographic patterns, stereotypes, narrative techniques and cultural references.³ Interestingly, this 'otherness', often referred to as one of the defining parameters for 'Bengali-ness', does not only provide the cultural foundation of Bengali films, but also enters into the world of Bombay (now Mumbai) cinema, the heart of the most powerful film industry in India, the Hindi film industry.

However, in recent years there have been some changes in this formation. Mostly because of changes in the nature of the film capital operating in the industry and the emergence of a new set of audiences in the post-liberalisation era in India, the structures of narrative and aesthetic articulation has also undergone radical reforms. These changes are accompanied by a simultaneous reorganization of film distribution and exhibition networks across the country. The present article considers this perspective to identify a dissemination of the said 'otherness' in the development of a new cultural code for representing Bengali-ness on screen. It considers two commercially successful films themed on the city of Kolkata— *Kahaani* (The Story, Sujoy Ghosh, Hindi, 2012) and *Bhooter Bhobishyot* (Future of the Past/Ghost, Anik Dutta, Bengali, 2012). The formal strategies of the films, the article argues, contend with conventional and popularly perceived representative forms and attempt to create a new dimension of Bengali otherness in Indian cinema. This 'new' dimension negotiates with the redefined popular ideology of neo-liberal West Bengal.

After the success of *Barfi* (Anurag Basu, 2012) (which takes two major city-sites of West Bengal, Calcutta and Darjeeling, as its narrative locations), film journalists often commented that through *Kahaani*, somehow the interest in Calcutta as a filming location has been renewed.⁴ Interestingly, in *Kahaani*, Calcutta does not appear merely as a space for the narrative to unfold, but also provides a meta-narrative of the contested city-scape and its people. *Bhooter Bhobishyot*, being a story of supernatural beings living in an old mansion in Calcutta, reiterates the history of the loss of Bengaliness and calls for resistance

² Gooptu 2010.

³ Gooptu 2010: 17.

⁴ Basu 2013; Dasgupta 2012.

through several stereotypes and metaphors. In both of these films, various forms of representation of the city and Bengali culture, along with their specific historical functions, attain centrality within the visual and narrative spaces. Moreover, they operate in a certain way to create a sense of historical belonging. The article engages with the nature of the historicity that both of these films evoke. The reconstructed cultural space of Calcutta that appears in the films and the nostalgia for the past in a globalized world, formulate a number of narrative tropes in the films. In order to proceed, the article looks into the historical changes that took place in the domain of Bengali culture and cinema during recent years. It also considers the process, which assimilates various cultural aspects of globalization by localizing them in the context of Bengal and its middle class populace during those years. While doing this, the articles analyses the construction of a particular mode of representation in the films.

1 Historicising the paradigm

Bengali cinema, since its early days, appeared to be maintaining a constituency for Bengali middle class culture. One could think of a studio such as New Theatres, which has progressively emerged as one of the primary institutions of Bengali cinema, as an emblematic representative of '*bhadralok*' culture during the 1930s.⁵ The term '*bhadralok*', which literally translates as 'gentleman', broadly defines a social set of people with a distinct cultural and political symptomatic. Partha Chatterjee writes:

More recently, historians inspired by the well-meaning dogmas of American cultural anthropology called it by the name the class had given to itself- the *bhadralok*, "respectable folk"; ... Whichever the name, the object of description has, however, rarely been misunderstood: in the curious context of colonial Bengal, all of these terms meant more or less the same thing'.⁶

Also, Michelguglielmo Torri mentioned the contextual origin of the term as:

As a matter of fact, Gallagher, although careful in avoiding such demode terms as "westernised middle class" or "westernised elite" - conveniently substituted with less compromising labels such as "the politicians of Calcutta", the "oligarchs", "the Hindu politicians" are really talking about that same political group that J H Broomfield called "the *bhadralok*", namely, the Bengali westernised middle class'.⁷

5 Mukherjee 2009: 38.

6 Chatterjee 1993: 35.

7 Torri 1990: PE4.

However, it is quite impossible to consider the social section of *bhadralok* as a 'legitimate' representative of all strata of the Bengali-speaking people. Neither does the category reflect any demographic entity. The term *bhadralok* represents to the outer world a set of social signifiers, commonly associated with the identity of the Bengali people (of India). It may include the sartorial culture, food, intellectual legacy, gender norms, etc. There are specific historical reasons that made this set of practices to become synonymous to the idea of Bengali-ness, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Nevertheless, starting from the first talkies in Bengal, *Dena Paona* (Premankur Atorthy 1931), New Theatres continued making social films like *Palli Samaj*/Life in a Village (Sisir Kumar Bhaduri 1932), *Kapalkundala* (Premankur Atorthy 1933), *Devdas* (Pramathesh Barua 1935), *Grihadaha*/Burning the Nest (1936) and mythological films like *Chandidas* (Debaki Bose 1932) and *Vidyapati* (Debaki Bose 1938). Not only New Theatres, but also almost all the production units in Calcutta were for a long time engaged in producing 'culturally exclusive', 'secular' and 'modern' films. Interestingly, as Gooptu observes, Bengali cinema of that period also aspired to emerge as the 'national cinema' of India.⁸ It desired to be 'all-India' in its character, the experience which inherently embodies the 'vestiges of Bengal's national aspiration'.⁹

It was only after Independence, or more categorically after Partition of Bengal in 1947, that the Bengali film industry was forced to undergo a structural transformation. It lost almost 40% of its market while half of its exhibition outlets fell into East Pakistan.¹⁰ However, parallel to this economic disaster, a new practice emerged since the early-1950s. The idea of a 'cultural difference' from the rest of India was already in place. In addition to that, an awakened sense of political dissent and the agony of a national mutilation incited the industry to construct a new political discourse for its cinema. The post-Partition mainstream Bengali films were largely successful in developing the sense of an alternative post-coloniality in their representational modes within the greater nation-scape of independent India. It indeed appears to be an attempt to construct an alternative to the nationalized imaginary set by the 'social' films, a distinct characteristic of Bombay's Hindi cinema during its heydays in the 1950s.

The Golden era of Bombay cinema, namely the Hindi cinema in India in the 1950s, has a curious history. During and after World War II, a new group of independent producers started experimenting with Indian commercial films. This followed on the decline of the established studios in India and the huge

⁸ Gooptu 2010: 60.

⁹ Gooptu 2010: 60.

¹⁰ Gooptu 2010: 124.

influx of wartime money into the film industry. This tendency gradually became the dominant practice in Bombay. In an attempt to expand the audience, the more sensational elements like a star-cast, more spectacles, song and dance and action sequences became inseparable parts of a film. At the same time, a large number of films also were being pushed as ‘social’ films. Ravi Vasudevan notes that in 1949, as many as 51 films were branded as ‘social’.¹¹ This is supposedly to project them as socially credible and responsible entities and also to get some concessions from governmental agencies. Vasudevan argues that these films consolidated “a redefinition of social identity for spectators”, as the mass audience who previously engaged in appreciating the moral and sensational narratives, “were now solicited by an omnibus form which also included a rationalist discourse as part of its ‘attractions’”.¹² Films like *Awara/The Vagabond* (Raj Kapoor 1951), *Do Bigha Zameen/Two Acres of Land* (Bimal Roy 1953), *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan 1957), *Boot Polish* (Prakash Arora 1958) are the most famous examples of this creed. However, ‘socials’ did not remain exclusive to the Bombay films, but developed their own characteristics in other industries as well. Bengali cinema’s response to the Bombay model was unique in its own sense, as it hardly aspired to become an enthusiastic constituent of the Indian nation-building exercise in the 1950s.

Bengali mainstream cinema also had its Golden era during the 1950s and 1960s, mostly with the popular success of Bengali romantic and social films. The dominant culture of Bengali cinema of that time was dominated by middle class values, aspiration and predicament anchored in a period of political turmoil, uncertainty and crisis. Nevertheless, the idea of ‘otherness’ in Bengali cinema happened to survive the partition and cultural and economic aggression of Hindi film industry, powered with heavily loaded nationalist rhetoric in post-independence India.¹³ The situation made the Bengali industry to make an essential demarcation to project and promote its ‘cultural superiority’ over Bombay cinema, which was done by upholding the notion of Bengali-ness moored to a rich literary tradition.¹⁴ The deployment of this strategy came into prominence from the early-1950s as a specific practice and gave rise to the legendary pair of Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen. The formation was important as, Moinak Biswas argues, the project was carried out by “synthesiz[ing] a vernacular version of the citizen” through the body of Uttam Kumar.¹⁵ Films like *Sare Chuattor/Seventy Four* and *A*

¹¹ Vasudevan 1995: 315.

¹² Vasudevan 1995: 315.

¹³ Raha 1991: 34.

¹⁴ Raha 1991: 34.

¹⁵ Biswas 2000: 75.

Half (Nirmal Dey 1953), *Agni Pariksha*/Trial by Fire (Agradoot 1954), *Harano Sur*/The Lost Tune (Ajoy Kar 1957), *Chaoa Paoa*/To Want and to Receive (Yatrik 1959), *Saptapadi*/The Seven Steps (Ajoy Kar 1961) are representatives of this cluster. It was the middle class who always found a comfortable position within the formal configuration of these films. Moreover, the emergence of ‘parallel cinema’, specifically with the release of *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Road 1955), Bengali cinema strengthened its position as a culturally superior entity. International acclamation for the films of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak, along with others, helped the industry to continue a certain sense of cultural exclusivity in terms of its politics of representation.

Nevertheless, there was a regular traffic between Bombay and Bengal. Yet, the process through which the influence of Bengal spread over the Bombay film industry is complex and multifarious. The Bengali literary domain always acted as a potential resource for the supply of narrative materials to Bombay cinema. Madhava Prasad comments: “The industry found in those narratives a ready supply of ‘difference’ which could be re-presented.” Examples of films directly based on and iconographically faithful to Bengali narratives were *Balika Badhu*, *Upahaar*, *Amar Prem*, *Choti Bahu* and *Swami*.¹⁶ He understands this genre as “middle class cinema”. For a significantly long period the physical involvement of a number of Bengali actors, directors, script-writers, musicians, editors and other film technicians in the Bombay industry continued to mediate the process of disseminating Bengali culture in that environment. Sharmistha Gooptu finds a significant presence of ‘Bengali life’ in Bombay during the 1940s and 1950s which characteristically made possible “Bengal’s infiltration of Bombay cinema”.¹⁷ However, this influence gradually weakened during the 1960s and experienced a spectacular rejuvenation during the early 1970s with the emergence of films sponsored by the Government of India’s Film Finance Corporation. Prasad’s articulation concentrates on this second phase where he identifies “middle class cinema” and earmarks the genre as “the resource for a major thrust towards product differentiation and market segmentation”.¹⁸

The 1990s mark an end to this equilibrium. Already, a wedge was developing in the Bengali film industry from the 1980s. Uttam Kumar died in 1980, thereby marking the end of an era of Bengali cinema. Simultaneously, there was a sudden surge of ‘rural’ Bengali films in the industry. Shifting from the idea of secular, rational, political morality-based middle class cinema, these films started addressing the feudal confrontations within a familial space. An

¹⁶ Prasad 1998: 165.

¹⁷ Gooptu 2010: 147.

¹⁸ Prasad 1998: 165.

apparent unsophistication in terms of its narrative articulation, oft-repeated avoidance of realist representation, song-dance sequences (modelled on Hindi ‘*masala*’ films) and physical violence. The most prominent example of this genre is Anjan Chowdhury’s films, like *Shatru*/The Enemy (1984), *Bidrohi*/The Rebel (1987), *Indrajit* (1992). In *Shatru*, “Anjan Chowdhury for the first time brought to Bengali cinema a configuration that overturned the industry’s middle-class orientation, and related to more subaltern”.¹⁹ Within a few years, the ‘rural’ films did not only establish themselves as a powerful and viable sector of the Bengali film industry, but also successfully provided an important cultural substitute for the emerging sections of the rural middle class. This phase also established a parallel mode of film economy, often resonating the instability of the agricultural economy, which necessitated a non-urban aesthetic to emerge in the films.

Starting from the 1990s, India witnessed a silent yet significant change in the cultural politics of the middle class. Historically, the middle class had immense symbolic importance in the modern history of India. It played a crucial role during the colonial era in mobilising mass opinion and as a harbinger of the nationalist thought. In the years after Independence in 1947, the middle class helped to mediate the social legitimisation of the state-sponsored projects of modernization. During the 1990s, after India’s adoption of a liberalised economic policy, this scenario started to change. There was a sudden surge of information technology (IT) enabled corporations, which started providing employment to thousands of fresh graduates. Besides the Indian companies, foreign corporations also expanded their business to India. Simultaneously with this development, new urban conglomerations emerged as centres for this ‘IT revolution’. Old cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad were drastically refashioned and new suburbs like Noida and Gurgaon (near Delhi) came into prominence. From the 2000s, a steady process of extensive internal migration started to resettle a substantial part of the youth population of India. The long-cherished idea of a ‘classical’ middle class began to desiccate with this new demographic shift. In many cases, the participants of this new middle class can be seen coming from a rural background, without having any ‘modernist’ cultural baggage like the colonially nourished Indian middle class. In contrast to the images of the “civically minded discipline and frugality” of the Indian middle class, Shehzad Nadeem writes, this “new Indian middle class” seems to carry few of the “moral scruples of its predecessors”.²⁰ The erstwhile concerns for a

¹⁹ Gooptu 2010: 264.

²⁰ Nadeem 2009: 109.

‘social welfare society’ and for class and caste stratification were gradually replaced by a “focus on wealth and consumption as the only indicators of progress”.²¹ Consumerism was about to fill the vacuum left by the “lost sense of civic duty”.²² The cultural politics of this new middle class in India, in turn, sought to construct an imaginary national institution by often promoting several quasi-religious ideas about a homogeneous national belonging.

In addition, with the national emergence of the ‘new’ Indian middle class, the long cherished privilege of Bengal came under serious jeopardy. For centuries, Bengal enjoyed this privilege by virtue of the historical formation of a middle class that had gone through a relatively systematic and classical phase of social existence. The Bengali middle class enjoyed this status to claim its stakes in the social processes where intellectual capacity remained one of the requisite criteria, namely in the academic, administrative and judicial positions. The newly emerged middle class, mostly employed in the service sector, did away with the existing hierarchy that maintains the supremacy of intellect. The cultural exceptionalism in the form of an ‘otherness’, which for long remained as the intrinsic characteristic of the most eligible representatives of the Bengali people, gradually found replacement in a religious, cultural nationalist version of Indian nationalism. The political status of Bengali youth in their twenties and thirties, who, mostly as the participants of the IT industry started residing outside the geographical boundary of West Bengal, enabled a different, nationalised version of Bengaliness to emerge into vision. In most cases, they happened to be the first generation of their family to migrate to a completely different cultural location. The cultural and economic thrust of neoliberalism shifted the locus of Bengaliness to make it apt for new millennium. It is no surprise that *Kahaani* emerged as one of the most successful ‘middle class’ films of this era. The post-liberal scenario of West Bengal, within a changed expressive domain of the ‘national’, thus appears to reflect a blurry demarcation between Bengal and the rest of India.

2 *Kahaani* and the new constituencies of Bengali-ness

Kahaani begins with an event that Kolkata has never experienced – a terrorist attack in the city’s prestigious Metro Railway. The film introduces Vidya

²¹ Fernandez 2000: 617

²² Fernandez 2000: 617.

Venkatesan Bagchi (Vidya Balan), a pregnant woman from London, who arrives at Kolkata airport in search of her lost husband Arnab Bagchi. Curiously, all the recordkeeping agencies fail to produce a single trace of Arnab's whereabouts. The airport does not have any trace of him; the hotel where Arnab was supposedly staying does not have any note in their logbook. Even his office (National Data Centre), where he had come for an assignment, cannot locate any evidence. However, Vidya finds a young police officer (Parambrata Chatterjee), who is sympathetic to her feelings and tries to help her to find Arnab. They look for him in almost every nook and corner of the city, wherever a single trace may be found. They enter into the old record room of the National Data Centre to find a secret file, even sneak into the responsible manager Sridhar's office to tap some data from his computer. Meanwhile, she nearly escapes death as she recognizes the contract killer Bob Biswas (Saswata Chatterjee). From the data recovered from Sridhar's computer, it appears that the intelligence bureau chief Bhaskaran (Dhritiman Chatterjee) is himself responsible for the attack in Kolkata Metro.

Vidya finally meets the mastermind of the attack, Milan Damji (Indranil Sengupta) during Vijaya Dasami (the final day of the Durga Puja festival). The last sequence of the film discloses a number of secrets: Arnab Bagchi is not actually her husband, it is a purely fictitious character that Vidya creates only to perform her job. Her husband Arup Basu (Abir Chatterjee) had been working as an officer in the Army's intelligence wing and was killed during the Kolkata Metro attack. She carries a hidden assignment to find and kill the mastermind of that attack. This agenda is however continuously kept under the guise of a pregnant lady in search of her husband. She was not even pregnant as there was a miscarriage after she went to see the dead body of her husband in the mortuary. Moreover, the photograph she carried with her to make people identify Arnab was a forged one. It was a superimposition of Milan Damji's face over Arup's. A rather redundant voiceover at the end concludes the story and compares Vidya's hunt for the terrorists with the myth of the goddess Durga.

Balan, who started with a Bengali film *Bhalo Theko* (Gautam Haldar 2003), is now well-known for her Bengali-like appearance. Even within the narrative space there are several attempts that try to make her more Bengali by pronouncing and writing 'Vidya' as 'Bidya' (as pronounced in the 'Bengali' way). The case of the other protagonist, Satyaki alias Rana (Parambrata Chatterjee), is nonetheless curious. Chatterjee's career began in television serials. His first celebrated film appearance was in *BombaiyerBombete/The Bandits of Bombay* (Sandip Ray 2003), an adaptation of a detective story written by Satyajit Ray. In the same year, he appeared in *Bhalo Theko* with Vidya Balan. During recent years, his characteristic screen presence developed into a peculiar persona which tends to

operate as a purposeful self-signifier, as a representative for the new generation of Bengali male.

The narrative of the film resonates with the mythological narrative of the goddess Durga. Even the publicity materials of the film deliberately connects Vidya with the popular iconography of the Goddess. The film's fascination for the narrative of the goddess articulates through Vidya's vision of the city's festive mood. The festivity appears to provide an intertextual basis to the film narrative, where Vidya's gradual approach to Milan Damji reaches a climax. The allegory of killing the demon on an auspicious day coincides with her finding the antagonist. The city appears in *Kahaani* as the shadow of a specific cultural landscape of Bengal. The eclectic visuals of the *Durga Puja* festival (undoubtedly the most enchanting social event that one could think of in Bengal²³), the streets and the sequences which depict the immersion of the *Durga* idol (mostly borrowed from iconic paintings²⁴ and photographs of the city and its people), the popular allusion to *Durga* (with Vidya Bagchi) and *Mahishasur* (the villain or a bunch of villains) in the narrative, the nostalgic background tracks played in the roadside food and tea stalls (largely from the Hindi and Bengali compositions of RD Burman, one of the most famous composers of 1970s–80s), a fairly popular *Rabindra Sangeet* (Tagore song) in Amitabh Bachchan voice (Bachchan, a famous son-in-law of Bengal) and the frequent use of Bengali colloquial words in dialogues collectively form a fascinating bricolage. Simultaneously, the arrangement of the narrative elements invites a standardized gaze (for both Bengalis and non-Bengalis) to identify the city-scape through the film's perspective. This act of identification is important as it cuts across a general set of audiences, irrespective of their ability to decipher the specific cultural codes. *Kahaani*, in a way, reconfigures the myths about Calcutta and Bengali culture and forwards it to a wider arena. It does so, marking a significant change in the conventional history of middle class cinema in India, to make it fit with the emergent ideology of the new middle class. This aspect changes the status of *Kahaani* from just a crime thriller to a different level, as a new generation middle class film which represents the neo-liberal performative domain of Bengali-ness while gathering scattered signifiers to construct a bricolage and to showcase the landscape of the city of Kolkata and its people.

²³ For a huge number of diasporic Bengali people, visuals of such an event often evoke nostalgia, as a cultural signifier to reinforce their sense of belonging.

²⁴ One can think of a painting like *Pratima Bisarjan*, by one of the most important modernist painters of Bengal: Gaganendranath Tagore.

However, the visual element of the film hardly subjugates itself to the conventional Bengali gaze. It rather generalises this vision in order to develop a national rhetoric for Bengali-ness in the present era. It is often said that to taste the authentic charm of Bengali-ness, one has to be culturally well versed to at least communicate with Bengali culture. It therefore becomes mandatory to fix the position of the subject within the cultural realm to make it an active participant in the process. Historically, there exists a self-prohibition to prevent any of these kinds of alien participation. That norm was legitimized through the construction of a post-Independence/Partition Bengali-nationalist cultural discourse. The cultural politics of *Kahaani* signifies a break in this formation. The strategy that the film adopts, constructs a peculiar thread for a national spectatorship. While doing this, it removes the already weakened demarcator between the once ‘privileged’ Bengali culture and the rest of India in the imagination of the post-global Indian middle class.

Fredric Jameson suggests understanding reconstruction of the past in the era of postmodernism as a “pastiche” by imitating “a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language”.²⁵ But, at the same time, it also appears to be a “neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter”.²⁶ Jameson was particularly critical of the films that deal with the themes of nostalgia and/or memory. The ‘nostalgia films’ precisely re-present history with a specific use of characters, mise-en-scene and other signifiers of a historical period. Moreover, they necessarily restructure the pastiche and project it “onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation”.²⁷ *Kahaani*’s appearance as a ‘nostalgia film’ mostly works through recreating the festivity along with the popular legend of the goddess, through the act of refashioning familiar narrative elements (mostly pertaining to everyday life of city) in a contemporary way. The process has two complementary aspects working simultaneously – the first one provides a characteristic representation of the city, whereas the other tries to extend the scope of this vision in order to arrive at a more general cultural agreement in universalising the gaze that sees the city and its people. Stefan Roesch mentions that the sense of a place is being conveyed through a structural underplay of “power, the physical setting (i. e. physical attributes of a place)

²⁵ Jameson 1991: 17.

²⁶ Jameson 1991: 17.

²⁷ Jameson 1991: 19.

and one's own identity shaped by the cultural and historical context of self (i. e. self-identity) with its subsequent pre-visit conceptions and on-site of a place".²⁸ The place gains popularity through the production and subsequent consumption of a series of cultural images. It develops around a notion of, what Baudrillard suggests, "mystical, providential, *sovereign* reality".²⁹ It goes through a dynamics where the "three geographies of consumption" comprising "the local setting, the global community system and the imaginative geographies, the latter encompassing both the global and the local level", work effectively.³⁰ *Kahaani* predominantly moves through a new generation of Indian audiences who have been seriously engaged in restructuring the existing ideas of an Indian city through their corporate everydayness.

The film also tends to operate within a seemingly 'local setting' to formulate the narrative. It addresses a spectatorial community within a 'global' cultural milieu. The process, by conforming to the effective assimilation of both its Bengali and non-Bengali viewers (consumers) on an elusive, virtual landscape of spectatorship, makes that community seamless and universal. *Kahaani* therefore offers a 'national' perspective along the line of this spectatorial position and consequently invites the gaze of the globalized Indian middle class. This is perhaps the major factor that makes *Kahaani* different from its predecessor 'Calcutta Films' within the domain of mainstream Bombay cinema³¹ (like *Do Bigha Zameen*/Two Acres of Land (Bimal Roy 1953), *Jagte Raho*/Keep Awake (Shaombhu Mitra 1957), *Howrah Bridge* (Shakti Samanta 1958), or even the later films like *Calcutta Mail* (Sudhir Mishra 2003), *Yuva*/The Youth (Mani Ratnam 2004).

3 Modes of resistance in *Bhooter Bhobishyot*

The second film, *Bhooter Bhobishyot*, interestingly revolves around the same political tendency set by *Kahaani*. The young director Anik Dutta spins his yarn in an old mansion in Kolkata where a number of ghosts from different periods of Bengal's history start residing together. Playing with a number of stereotypes, a story about the plight of the ghosts is told to an emerging

²⁸ Roesch 2009: 58.

²⁹ Baudrillard 1998: 86.

³⁰ Roesch 2009: 60.

³¹ However, there are many films made on Calcutta, among which there are remarkable works by Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak. The scope of the present article, as it considers only mainstream Bombay films on the city as references, does not allow bringing the works of these great auteurs' into the discussion.

director Ayan (Parambrata Chatterjee), by a ghost-resident of the mansion. However, the identity of the narrator is not revealed till the end of the film when he proposes Ayan to make a film on their plight. Biplab (Sabyasachi Chakrabarty), the narrator, was a Physics professor-turned-Maoist revolutionary who was killed in a false police ‘encounter’ in the 1970s. Through his narration the audience comes to know about the ghost-residents of the mansion: a former British official Donald Ramsey (George Baker), an aged landlord Darpa Narayan (Paran Bandopadhyay), a Muslim Bawarchi Khaja Khan (Pradip Dasgupta) who sacrificed his life during the Battle of Plassey in 1757, a celebrated singer-turned-actress Kadalibala who used to rule the screen during the 1940s, a refugee from East Pakistan, Bhutnath Bhaduri (Sumit Samaddar), who came to Calcutta after partition, a Bihari rickshaw-puller Atmaram (Uday Roy) and a young girl and a boy who represent the current generation. Their abode comes under attack because of an aggressive Marwari³² promoter Ganesh Bhutoria (Mir) who wants to build a shopping mall by demolishing this old building. By virtue of their supernatural power and intellect, the ghosts get rid of the promoter and save the mansion at the end. Ayan finds a huge chunk of money for his upcoming film from a suitcase, apparently reserved by the ghosts. As a note of honour, he decides to make a film based on the ghosts’ struggle to save their place of living.

Bhooter Bhabishyot is full of stereotypes and metaphors that try to reiterate the urgency of a cultural resistance to save the essential object of Bengali-ness. The name of the film is a deliberate pun on the word *Bhoot*. It has two meanings in Bengali, on the hand it signifies ‘the past’ and on the other hand it refers to ghosts. At one level, the name expresses its concern about the future of the ghosts, whereas it also draws attention to the fact that the future of the Bengali culture appears endangered. The politics of representation of *Bhooter Bhabishyot* place it in opposition to the representational strategy adopted by *Kahaani*. The struggle of the ghosts in *Bhooter Bhabishyot* implies a resistance to the cultural blow inflicted upon the structure of Bengali middle class culture during the years of globalization. The choice of characters in *Bhooter Bhabishyot* creates a historical *mélange* where the film accommodates representatives from almost every crucial period from the history of modern Bengal. Moreover, the characters constantly engage themselves in conversation with each other to produce a historically condensed notion of Bengali identity within the narrative

³² A traditional business community hailing from North-India having a well-establish wealthy capital base in Kolkata and many other cities in India. Marwaris are often vilified in Bengali popular cultural representation for their ‘allegiance’ with wealth and money.

space. The film also creates a chronological tableau of the city and its people. In addition, there are numerous cross references, mostly taken from the well-known works of art, cinema, literature or even the cuss words available in Bengali vocabulary.

The diegetic world of the film, however, never places itself in the past. Rather, it continuously reiterates its presence in present, twenty-first century Kolkata. The past comes out only by means of flashbacks, or narration (story-telling) within the film. Also, the events from the past, even a glimpse or a casual occurrence, appear only to strengthen the the conventional Bengali imagination about the visual stereotypes that represent some interesting moments from the cultural history of Bengal. The poor English pronunciation skill of Darpanarayn reminds the spectator of the early days of English education in nineteenth century Calcutta. It follows another level of stereotyping too. The characteristic stylization of Paran Bandopadhyay as the *zamindar* (landlord) Darpanarayn constantly refers to Utpal Dutt, the charismatic figure of Bengali film and theatre. Dutt, acting in the role of an aspiring *Raibahadur* (an honorary title given by the British Government to loyal Indian elites who were obedient enough to the empire by their acts and credits) in *Sriman Prithwiraj* (Tarun Majumdar 1973), had set a specific acting convention that was later followed by whoever wanted to portray a Bengali native striving to be an Englishman.

The act of the false encounter where Biplab gets killed is another example where the past appears as a condensed form of the visual and narrative elements of a Maoist activist. Also, the duties that the ghosts perform are simply a reflection of the cultural conventions that the creed of Bengali '*bhadralok*' has maintained through the ages. The narrative finally urges for a grand coalition between the ghost characters, namely the colonial official, the landlord, and the army officer, who represent various unrelated, even contradictory domains in the Bengali psyche, in order to refute the plan of demolishing the house. The unnatural relationship between the participants of the coalition symbolically tries to invoke the sense of an urgency where every constituency of historical Bengaliness should stand up to resist the onslaught of global cultural inflow. The Maoist revolutionary, who is narrating the story and eventually building it up as the narrative of resistance, thus appears as the emblematic intellectual leader of the struggle. Commercially too, *Bhooter Bhoishoyt* was a success. After crossing the initial hurdles, it did good business all over West Bengal. Interestingly, the film was re-released in April, 2012 in three major metro cities, Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, where a substantial part of the diasporic Bengali population resides.

4 Conclusion

What makes that these two films are discussed together here? They have not been produced under the same industrial environment, nor do they use the same vernacular as their language. Yet the fact that brings them together is their use of the trope of the city in the narrative. *Kahaani*'s Kolkata appears fairly symbolic in mythologising the character of Vidya Bagchi and her hunt for the demon. As the city endures the festivity of goddess Durga with a certain degree of archetypal attachment to the mother image, the presentation of Vidya's character receives a parallel recognition. While doing this, *Kahaani* short-circuits the position of Vidya, an apparent outsider to Kolkata, with the cultural core of the city. The gaze of the city gradually associates itself with the vision through which Vidya sees the city. In *Bhooter Bhobishyot*, the same city appears as a historically layered entity, where representatives from various periods create a juxtaposed identity of this space. In that way, both of the films put their claim on the city-space from two complementary perspectives. If *Kahaani* accommodates the quintessential Bengali elements which try to make Bengal more aligned with post-liberal India than ever before, *Bhooter Bhobishyot* vows to retain the authenticity of Bengali imagination through hailing the unique and popular cultural symbols of Bengali-ness.

On the other hand, both films try to create a sense of nostalgia through two different avenues. In *Kahaani*, the nostalgia evokes a sense of lost belonging, which is not defined by its own historicity, but by the gaze of post-liberal Bengali-ness. The city-scape of Calcutta is used in *Kahaani* to extract a specific form of pleasure out of this ahistorical nostalgia. Such forms appear to be principally passive and does not require any participation in the historical process which enables this representation of the city and its people. Whereas *Bhooter Bhobishyot* re-fabricates the nostalgia for the city by placing it into the time-space of everyday life of post-liberalization Bengal. The spectators communicate from within, and the narrative attains the required signification only through a process of cultural decoding.

This idea may also hold for the changing production dynamics of the contemporary Bombay film industry. One of the recent trends in Bollywood can be found in its attempt to restructure its ideological understanding of Indian cities. The trend manifests its presence in Bollywood's increasing interest in new generation city films. In recent years, there were a number of Hindi films, which have taken non-metro cities or even the small towns as their film locations. The emerging set of middle class spectators without any previous cultural baggage might be influencing the making a number of city films for a new generation of Indian citizens.

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