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Soumshree Mukherjee

Guest Faculty,
 Department of Mass Communication and
 Journalism, Kanyashree University

Suman Mondal

Guest Faculty,
 Department of Mass Communication and
 Journalism, Kanyashree University,

‘Arekti Premer Golpo’: The Other Story of Acceptance, Identity and Performativity

Soumshree Mukherjee, Suman Mondal

Abstract

Kaushik Ganguly’s *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010) occupies a singular position in the history of Bengali queer cinema, released in the immediate aftermath of the Delhi High Court’s 2009 decriminalization of homosexuality under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. This article argues that the film’s most significant achievement is not its topical daring but its structural deployment of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity as a cinematic grammar: the film does not merely represent queer identities but formally enacts the Butlerian proposition that gender is constituted through repeated, coerced performance rather than through any innate essence. By placing two queer subjects; Chapal Bhaduri, a female impersonator of the “jatra” tradition, and Abhiroop Sen, a contemporary transgender documentary filmmaker across a fifty-year temporal gulf, Ganguly constructs a comparative structure that measures not simply social change but the differential terms under which performative conformity and resistance become available to queer individuals. The article undertakes close readings of key scenes, examining the film’s visual and narrative language in relation to Butler’s theorization of performativity, social acceptance, and the regulatory fiction of gender norms.

Keywords: Queer cinema, Bengali film, performativity, Judith Butler, gender identity, Kaushik Ganguly, Rituparno Ghosh, Section 377

I. Introduction: A Film and Its Moment

In 2009, the Delhi High Court’s reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code produced, almost immediately, a cinematic response. The following year, Kaushik Ganguly released *Arekti Premer Golpo* (‘Just Another Love Story’), a film that exploited the legal rupture not as backdrop but as constitutive context. The deliberateness of the timing matters. The film arrived when the question of what queer recognition could mean within Indian civil society had been freshly, and precariously, opened. Ganguly’s decision to make Rituparno Ghosh, then among the most recognizable public figures of Bengali cultural life, the lead actor and to cast him as Abhiroop Sen, a transgender filmmaker making a documentary about another queer figure, compounded the film’s recursive self-awareness. The film was not simply about queer experience; it was, structurally and epistemically, made through one.

Scholarship on queer representation in Indian cinema has grown considerably since the early 2000s, much of it properly focused on Rituparno Ghosh’s directorial work *Chitrangada* (2012), and performance in *Memories in March* (2011) as the primary archive of queer aesthetics in Bengali cinema. What has received less sustained attention is the particular theoretical work that *Arekti Premer Golpo* performs as an object rather than a vehicle: the film itself, through its double narrative structure and its casting decisions, produces a model of gender that is thoroughly Butlerian in its logic. This article proposes to read the film not only as cultural event or as biographical document of Ghosh’s public identity but as a theoretically self-conscious text whose formal choices, the parallel timelines, the *mise-en-scène* of ritual enforcement, the dialogue about

Correspondence:

Soumshree Mukherjee

Guest Faculty,
 Department of Mass Communication and
 Journalism, Kanyashree University,

gender's grammar enact the argument that gender is a compelled repetition, not a condition.

Existing studies have documented the film's cultural significance within the Bengali queer cinema landscape (Bakshi 2014; Acharjee 2020; Labade and Ajgaonkar 2022). This article extends that scholarship by proposing a specific theoretical claim: that the film's structure is organized around what Butler calls the 'matrix of power' the network of norms, coercions, and citations through which subjects are compelled to inhabit gendered positions. The fifty-year gap between Chapal's world and Abhiroop's is not simply historical texture but a formal device for demonstrating that the matrix, though historically variable, has not dissolved.

II. Performativity as Structure: Butler in Ganguly's Hands

Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) is, in its essential form, this: gender has no originary source outside its performances. There is no interior, pre-social gendered self that performance expresses; rather, the performance is the constitutive act, and what feels like an interior self is the sedimented effect of repeated performances regulated by social norms. This is not a voluntarist claim; Butler is explicit that the subject does not choose her performances from a menu of free options but is rather compelled into them by the threat of social sanction. The domain of the 'abject' those identities that fall outside the normative grid and are rendered culturally unintelligible is constituted precisely by the refusal of certain performances.

What distinguishes Ganguly's film from other contemporaneous representations of queer life in Indian cinema is its structural literalism with respect to this theory. Most films representing non-normative sexuality in this period like Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh* (2015) being a notable example, focus on the pathos of exclusion: the damage done to the individual by social rejection. *Arekti Premer Golpo* is interested in something harder to dramatize: the mechanism of compulsion itself. The film asks not 'what happens to queer people?' but 'how does the normative machinery of gender operate on bodies?' The answer it gives is consistently, rigorously Butlerian.

This article traces the performative logic through three nodal points in the film's narrative: the ritual coercion of Chapal's mourning performance; the misgendering of Abhiroop by those around him; and the confrontation between Abhiroop and a journalist who deploys homophobic language as social control. In each case, the scene stages Butler's claim that identity is not expressed through performance but produced by it and that the production is always already a site of struggle.

III. The Mundan Ceremony: Ritual as Gender Inscription

One of the film's most precisely theorized sequences occurs early in Chapal's narrative strand. Following the

death of his mother, Chapal's relatives enforce the "mundan", the ritual head-shaving that Bengali mourning custom requires of the eldest son. Chapal protests; he is shaved regardless. The sequence then moves to the riverbank, where the accompanying funeral rituals require him to be partially unclothed in public, a requirement he experiences as acute bodily violation. He emerges from the water wrapped in a gamcha, his face communicating shame that is inseparable from his sense of gendered exposure.

The scene is doing more than dramatizing cultural oppression, though it does that too. Read through Butler, the "mundan" sequence stages what Butler calls 'citationality': the cultural norm does not precede its enforcement but is constituted and reiterated through each act of enforcement. When Chapal's relatives compel him to perform the mourning ritual, they are not simply applying a pre-existing rule to a pre-existing body; they are, in the Butlerian sense, calling into being a gendered subject, the son who mourns through the very act of coercion. The production of the gendered subject requires force because there is no natural inclination toward the performance being enforced.

Ganguly's visual choices here are telling. The film frames the shaving in close-up, emphasizing the physicality of the act on Chapal's body rather than the emotional distress of the witnesses. The gamcha that Chapal wraps around himself at the riverbank is not presented as a modest concession but as a defiant remainder, a material sign of his refusal to surrender his sense of bodied selfhood entirely to the ritual's demands.

IV. Misgendering, Language, and the Production of the Unintelligible

If the "mundan" sequence dramatizes ritual coercion, a series of recurring scenes involving Prashanta, a figure in Abhiroop's domestic orbit who persistently addresses Abhiroop as 'madam' despite being corrected dramatizes the coercive power of language in the constitution of gendered subjects. The film revisits this misgendering across several interactions, and what might appear to be a minor comic motif on first viewing reveals, with attention, a carefully constructed argument about pronouns, power, and the limits of self-nomination.

Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter* that language does not describe a pre-given reality but calls subjects into being through what J. L. Austin terms the 'performative': the utterance that does what it says. Prashanta's 'madam' is not a descriptor of Abhiroop's identity; it is a citation of the normative gender grid that insists on categorizing every legible body as either masculine or feminine, and then assigns Abhiroop on the basis of his appearance and affect to the feminine category. Abhiroop's objections do not dislodge the address because the address is not describing Abhiroop but enforcing the grid. The scene is not about Prashanta's rudeness; it is about what Butler

calls the 'regulatory fiction' of binary gender, which requires that every subject be legible as one or the other. This reading gains further weight from the film's most philosophically concentrated scene: the conversation between Abhiroop and Chapal about whether Chapal thinks of himself as a woman. Chapal's answer is indirect, he suggests that his difficulties might have been fewer had he simply claimed masculinity but Abhiroop refuses this logic:

'No, I do not think so. I believe that women are separate, men are individual, and we are separate.'

The gesture that accompanies this line Abhiroop pointing left, right, and then centre is the film's most explicit formal statement of a third gender position: not a position within the binary but one that exists by virtue of the binary's insufficiency. Butler's own work insists that the abject, the unintelligible, the uncategorized is not outside the normative matrix but is its constitutive outside: that which the matrix requires in order to define what it includes. Abhiroop's gesture maps that theoretical claim onto the screen with striking economy.

V. The Journalist Scene: Social Rejection as Regulatory Enforcement

The scene in which a journalist interviewing Abhiroop about his documentary escalates into a confrontation culminating in a homophobic slur is, on one reading, a straightforward depiction of the discrimination that queer individuals routinely encounter in professional contexts. On a more careful reading, it is a scene about the social function of abjection. The journalist's slur is not simply an insult; it is an attempt to reinstate the normative order that Abhiroop's presence threatens. By naming Abhiroop as 'faggot', a term that marks the body as outside the normative grid and therefore as legitimately excludable, the journalist performs what Butler describes as the operation of the 'abject': the constitutive exclusion that defines the domain of the normatively human.

What is significant about Abhiroop's response is that it does not consist of an appeal to tolerance or sympathy, the conventional humanist register of protest. He continues the interview on his own terms, asserting the legitimacy of the documentary and of his subject. This is not simply resilience in the colloquial sense; it is what Butler means by agency within the performative matrix: the capacity to reiterate the terms of one's address in ways that subtly but materially refunction them. Abhiroop does not escape the normative order in this scene; he does not neutralize the slur. What he does is refuse to be fully constituted by it.

The film's parallel treatment of Chapal's corresponding exposure, the newspaper article that publicizes his sexuality and triggers neighborhood protest, the family's subsequent instruction to stay indoors, Basu's request to Abhiroop to dress in 'normal clothes' insists on the temporal continuity of the normative mechanism. The

fifty-year gap between Chapal's generation and Abhiroop's has not dissolved the compulsion to perform normatively; it has altered its forms and, to a degree, its penalties. But the matrix remains structurally operative. This is the film's most politically sobering claim: increased visibility does not, of itself, constitute acceptance.

VI. The Temporal Structure: History and the Limits of Progress

Much of the film's analytical force derives from its double temporality the way it holds Chapal's mid-twentieth-century experience and Abhiroop's 2010 present in sustained comparative tension. The film is not, on this reading, a progress narrative. Chapal's world is one of near-total suppression: his relationship with Kumar must remain clandestine, his gender expression is contained within the licensed space of the jatra stage, and his longing for a domestic life, a husband, a household, a legitimated role is permanently frustrated. Kumar Babu's proposal that Chapal manage his household in the tacit role of 'wife' is at once a concession and an insult: it offers Chapal the domestic life he desires while denying him the public recognition that would give it meaning.

Abhiroop's world is not a resolution of Chapal's. His mother's quiet acceptance, perhaps the film's most emotionally generous gesture, offers a pocket of genuine support that Chapal never experiences. The familial recognition that Abhiroop receives gives him what Ganguly's film presents as a partial but real form of agency: the confidence to end his relationship with Basu on terms that preserve his dignity rather than compound his exploitation. This is not a triumphant liberation narrative; it is a measured account of what partial social acceptance makes possible.

And yet Abhiroop's self-assertion carries its own anxieties. The head-shaving scene, in which Abhiroop, at Uday's urging to simply 'be himself,' shaves his head entirely at a village barber is presented simultaneously as an act of liberation and as a desperate overcorrection. The visual language of the sequence close-up shots of falling hair, the stark reflection in the mirror, Abhiroop's face moving between determination and something closer to anguish refuses the reading of the shaving as simple triumph. It is, rather, a performance of self-acceptance that reveals how much the need for that performance is itself a measure of the ongoing pressure of social non-recognition. The peacock feather that recurs in the film's symbolic register, brilliant, ambiguously gendered, conspicuous does not resolve into a stable meaning. That instability is the point.

VII. Rituparno Ghosh and the Meta-Performative

No analysis of this film can bracket the question of Rituparno Ghosh's off-screen identity and its relation to the role he plays. Ghosh was, by 2010, a figure of

considerable cultural authority in Bengali cinema, and his public appearance the long kurtas, the *uttariya*, the kohl-lined eyes, the lipstick had already staged, in the domain of everyday social performance, a systematic disruption of conventional Bengali masculine presentation. When he appeared on screen as Abhiroop, the casting introduced a recursive layer that Ganguly clearly intended: the audience watching Abhiroop watching Chapal is also watching Ghosh performing a version of his own public identity through a fictional screen.

Butler's observation that those deemed 'unreal' by the normative matrix can nonetheless apprehend and contest reality that the abject position carries its own form of critical purchase is given embodied form in Ghosh's presence in the film. His 'performative surprise,' to use the Butlerian phrase that several scholars have applied to Ghosh's public persona, does not simply represent queerness but demonstrates performativity in action: the unsettling of normative expectations through the repetition of gendered signs in unexpected combinations. That this unsettling was experienced as such by conservative Bengali audiences as outrageous, as 'unreal' is the Butlerian mechanism working precisely as theorized.

It is worth noting, however, a complication that the film itself begins to register in its later sections. The tendency of the Bengali public imagination to reduce the complexity of Ghosh's gender presentation to a single, stable 'gayness', the conflation of androgyny with homosexuality, transvestism with gay identity is addressed in the film's own dialogue. Abhiroop's insistence that 'we are separate' is precisely a refusal of the collapse of queer difference into a single recognizable type. The film understands that cultural visibility, even when hard-won, tends to operate through the production of legible types rather than the acknowledgment of irreducible particularity.

VIII. Conclusion: Cinema as Theoretical Practice

Arekti Premer Golpo does something that most films with political intentions do not: it thinks. Its double temporality is not a narrative device for generating pathos but a formal argument about the persistence of the normative matrix across historical transformation. Its close attention to the scenes of compulsion, the ritual enforcement of mourning, the social regulation of dress, the linguistic violence of the slur, the clandestine architecture of queer desire constitutes a sustained engagement with the Butlerian claim that gender is not a condition but a compelled performance, and that the compulsion is as active in 2010 as it was in 1960, however differently it operates.

The film also refuses two of the characteristic temptations of queer cinema: the triumphant narrative of liberation, and the consolatory narrative of exceptional individual resistance. Abhiroop is not liberated; he is partially supported, and that partial support enables a form of agency that remains genuinely constrained. Chapal is not

simply victimized; he has found, in the performance of feminine roles on the *jatra* stage, a licensed space for self-expression that his everyday life cannot provide a distinction the film is careful to honor. The comparison between them does not produce a hierarchy of suffering or an arc of progress but a differential mapping of the terrain on which queer subjects have navigated, and continue to navigate, the demands of the normative.

In this respect, Ganguly's film makes a contribution that extends beyond its immediate cultural moment. It offers a model for how cinema can function as theoretical practice: not by illustrating ideas developed elsewhere but by producing, through its specific formal and narrative choices, an analysis that neither a sociological study nor a theoretical essay could replicate. That it does so in the vernacular of Bengali popular cinema available to the audiences who most needed to see it — is, finally, what makes it not just an important film but a serious one.

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