

‘Matinee Idol’ and his Spectators: The Female and the Male Gaze

Sudarshana Sen

Abstract: *The 24 July 1980 was a fateful day for the Bengali movie viewers. The superstar of Bengali cinema breathed his last. The year 2020 marked his fortieth death anniversary. The euphoria with the star of fifties and sixties lasts even today. His mannerisms, styled acting and his charisma had inflated profit for the producer, showered fame for himself creating a furor among the cine-goers. This article will focus on how spectatorship and gendered gaze can build a ‘star’ and what their relation to the star may be and what were the elements that acted as a catalyst to this.*

Keywords: *Bengali cinema, stardom in Bengali cinema, matinee idol, male gaze, female gaze*

Introduction

Uttam Kumar (3 September 1926 – 24 July 1980) a reel name, a popular star of the Bengali cinema was born as Arun Kumar Chattopadhyay in Kolkata. Though primarily his acts made him a ‘star’ in Bengali film industry, ‘Tollywood’, he had some significant presence in national film screen too. This 2020 marked his fortieth death anniversary. The reason for writing about him is that after so many years of his death, Uttam Kumar, a film actor of a regional cine-market¹ still lives in the heart of his viewers, radiant and lively as a ‘star’, and to understand the male gaze for we all have been conditioned to adopt the male gaze because that is the way we were raised by traditional cinema. He was neither born a luminary nor was a star-child. He had to struggle against failed attempts, give himself a screen name to appear in his subsequent endeavors. He tasted success in *Sare Chuattar* (‘74 and a half’, released in 1953), after nine flops at the box-office. His last film was *Ogo Bodhu Sundari* (‘Oh Dear Beautiful Wife’) by 1980 he was averaging up to eleven films per year, bagging 374 films in his pocket out of which 211 films were released. He is considered the biggest film persona in Bengal and still is alive in blog-pages, newspapers and

magazines. He was and still is considered the 'Mahanayak' (the great hero) of Bengali movies by cine-lovers.

The significance of the study lies in the fact that the star now dead for more than forty years is still remembered as a luminary— an identity of Bengali cinema, an icon. His picture was used to advertise for Kolkata International Film Festival (KIFF) in 2022. The poster had a smiling Uttam Kumar with the words to invite people to KIFF to meet.

He has attracted publications in his name even on his fortieth death anniversary in 2020. For example, the leading newspaper, *The Times of India*¹ observed his contributions to Bengali cinema in acting, directing and producing film. Not only in a leading newspaper, but there are numerous such publications in Bengal that reminiscent his contribution to Bengali cinema. His reputation even after his death (1980) is validated in the popularity of his films that are re-run on televisions. The Tollygunge Metro station in Kolkata has been renamed as 'Mahanayak Uttam Kumar Metro Station' in his honor and there is a theatre-hall, 'Uttam Mancha', named after him in Kolkata. A life-size statue has been erected near Tollygunge the tinsel-town of Bengali films. The Department of Posts in 2009, released a series of new postal stamps featuring the actor on them and a brochure with a note that said "Uttam Kumar – The Legend of Indian Cinema." The government of India arranged for the 'Uttam Award' on 19 June 2015 for 'Best Acting'. In the year of 2016, a television series called "Mahanayak" was telecast based on his life. These adulatory acts were set after 2001, twenty years after his death, and now another twenty have passed but he still attracts his audience with the same zeal. In a commemorative article in 2020, Sayandeb Chowdhury writes,

¹ 1. Perhaps he is the most popular star of Bengali cinema since he is the only star who is fondly remembered even after forty years of his death. There are commemorative volumes, articles published every year in the month he passed away. He has a fan base with active fan groups in the media. For example, there are at least two closed groups in the 'Facebook' with 12067 (Uttam Suchitra-The Golden Pair) and 3.5k (Uttam-Suchitra and Golden Stars of Bengal Screen) members. Each group posts at least ten posts a day on him, his life and achievements on an average.

1.<https://www.thehindu.com/thread/reflections/uttam-kumar-and-intimations-of-immortality/article32184880.ece>; 24 July 2020, retrieved on 3 October 2020 at 7 p.m.

For every bit of this purportedly *bhadrolok* acts of retention, there are also spontaneous, streetwise displays of exuberant adoration. Land in Calcutta and you would see broadsheets, hoardings, shops, posters, books dangling with his face. In quickly disappearing atriums of single-screen theatres across the city, he is ubiquitous. Uttam's smiling portrait also peeps out from sudden nooks and corners — neighborly salons, dusty tailor-shops, bare-boned photo-studios, rusty sweetshops and grimy eateries that are either in thrall of his everlasting charm or touting the honor of his visit into their midst many moons ago. The scale of Uttam's easy visibility across Calcutta and towns of Bengal four decades since his death makes one singular claim: that Uttam has not only refused mortality but has made a permanent home in the collective memory of Bengal.²

A film critic and academic, Sanjay Mukhopadhyay (2020) stated in an interview that Uttam Kumar was perhaps the biggest star that Bengal could ever produce. But as he was not acceptable as one in the intellectual circles after the Left Front government came to power Uttam Kumar was not recognized as an actor of importance. He faced negligence and was considered an 'actor with no biography.' The renewed interest in Uttam Kumar makes us wonder how his stardom has managed to stay alive and vibrant even after years of such intellectual disregard. He did not become a star overnight. He had his struggles, failures, highs and lows. His versatility in the various roles he played resulted not only in a stardom but he also earned acclaim of the critics. The star that he was can also be précised by assessing that eight of his blockbuster films were enacted in Hindi by renowned Hindi film actors.³ The adulation of an artist living on in

² <https://www.thehindu.com/thread/reflections/uttam-kumar-and-intimations-of-immortality/article32184880.ece>; 24 July 2020, retrieved on 3 October 2020 at 7 p.m.

³ Saheb Bibi Gulam, 1962 (Saheb Bibi Golam, 1956), Hum Hindustani, 1960 (Bosu Poribar, 1952), Kala Pani, 1958 (Sobar Opore, 1955), Lal Pathhar, 1971 (Lal Pathor, 1964), Angoor, 1982 (Bhrantibilash, 1963), Jibanmrityu (Jibon Mrityu, 1970), Chupke Chupke (Chhadmabeshi, 1971), Amar Prem, 1972 (Nishipodmo, 1970), Kati Patang, 1971 (Surjotopa, 1965), Anurodh, 1977 (Deya Neya, 1963), Abhiman, 1973 (Bilombito Loy, 1970), Bemisal, 1982 (Ami She o Sokha, 1975) and Ijaazat, 1987 (Jotugriha, 1964). Other than these there are a few of his movies that were adaptations. The total number of films remade and adapted are twenty.

the regional cine-market even after forty years of his death is an enormous success in itself. It shows a special bond between him and his spectators. This article will focus on the social construction of the stardom of Uttam Kumar. This article will be based on analysis of secondary material available. The flurry of literature accessible on Uttam Kumar are books, memoirs, newspaper articles and academic articles in journals that mostly range between the years 2005 to 2017 which in turn serve to showcase the lasting popularity that he has. The two books, *Bengali Cinema: The Other Nation*, (2010) and *Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen: Bengali Cinema's First Couple* (2013) that form the basis of this research article focus on cinema in Bengal vis-à-vis its local presence in opposition to the national cinema where the reference of Uttam Kumar is on how he is a part of this endeavor (Gooptu, 2010); and focus on the famous pair of Bengali cinema, Uttam and Suchitra, dealing with their on-screen chemistry with a slice of comparison to other such pairs in Hindi cinema (Chowdhury, 2013). The articles referred to here deal with love and romance depicted through the performances of Uttam Kumar (Panda, 2012), to the actor as the link in the transition of Bengali cinema and its melodramatic acts (Chatterjee, 2010), to the city space as used in films of Uttam Kumar (Chaudhury, 2017).

The literature so far has focused on the stardom and its relation to the milieu in which it was formed but there is perhaps no study that has focused on how the fledgling stardom of Uttam Kumar was constructed through spectatorship.

Sigmund Freud had singled out scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality that exist as a desire apart from erotogenic zones in his *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1950). The convention in which mainstream mass films has purposefully grown portrays a hermetically enclosed universe that mysteriously unravels its world to the spectators, creating a sense of separation from it for the audience and at the same time appealing to their voyeuristic phantasmagoria.

Popularity and Stardom

We need to look at Uttam Kumar, as an actor who operated within the Bengali regional cine-market throughout his illustrious career, with a few exceptions when he acted in a few Hindi films. In 2016, a feature in a leading

newspaper in Bengali, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* carried a detailed analysis on his stardom. It said that many letters had reached their office after the star's demise in 1980. Most of it was from women among whom one author of a letter, a woman, stated that she had become 'a widow at the death of Uttam Kumar'⁴. He was an ideal man for any woman of the time. Rituparno Ghosh (2018) claims that Uttam Kumar was/is a 'phenomenon' in Bengal, the ultimate Guru (used in the sense Teacher/ Guide) despite Bengal having far more impressive personalities like Nikhil Bandopadhyay, Satyajit Ray or contemporary famous actors like Soumitra Chattopadhyay for instance to take the seat of a guru among the masses (Vol. 1, p. 230-31). It was Uttam Kumar who is/was established in the hearts of every woman in Bengal especially who were middle-aged and to whom love/romance meant the purushottam (the best man) named Uttam Kumar (Ibid; translation author's).

The directors with whom Uttam Kumar had acted, had great regards for his skills as an actor. Tapan Sinha, a renowned filmmaker once commented on Uttam Kumar that he had stood the test of time (Ghosh 2015, p. 26) and the actor could only be compared to himself and that he had very skillfully mixed his *Bengaliness* with international standard of acting in films...he had nurtured his sophisticated acting consciously with self-taught techniques (Chowdhury; 2013, p. 25). Satyajit Ray, an Oscar winning director from Bengal once commented to filmmaker Hrishikesh Mukherjee that Satyajit Ray could not have filmed *Nayak* (The Hero; 1966) without Uttam Kumar and referred to Uttam Kumar as the first and last hero of the Bengali cinema (Ghosh 2015, p. 49). Such was his popularity that he was not only adored by fans but was loved and admired by other professionals associated with Bengali film-making. In *Robbar*, a magazine commemorating Uttam Kumar's death in 2019 featured a number of articles among which a young Anindya Chattopadhyay⁵ wrote,

“...Uttam Kumar could be called the role model of the ideal net of infatuation. It was embodied in the 'guru' 'guru' (slang for boss) collective sounds...if he smiled at the viewers in his signature style of collecting his dhoti, the viewers would be mesmerized. This is called

⁴ A publication of Sambad Pratidin

⁵ A columnist, a singer, member of popular Bengali Band, Chandrabindu

sex-appeal. He had something infallible in his eyes, some prank in his smile, his relaxed personality which brought down every viewer. Many mothers and aunts of our times did not cook at home at his death, silently cried hiding their tears from their husbands..." [Translation by author]

Maitrayee B. Chowdhury (2013) writes that the Bengali intellectuals might not have been impressed by his popularity but most were silenced when Satyajit Ray selected him for the portrayal of the hero in his film *Nayak* (p. 65). Since he was regarded a hero in mainstream Bengali films and not so in the intellectually inclined Bengali films, Uttam Kumar's film acting was considered trivial by the intellectual class. Ray commented on his selection and noted the way Uttam had portrayed the character pointing that Uttam was a dedicated actor despite his Mahanayak status (ibid p. 65). In the 1950s, acting in films was theatrical. Uttam Kumar brought about a new taste by imbibing natural ways of talking, walking and other mannerisms which portrayed ordinary ways of everyday living. The interest to be different from others motivated him to do something new, that was the fundamental basis of his popularity (Anil Chattopadhyay, noted actor of Bengali cinema in Ghosh, 2015, p. 51). Critic and reporter Seabrata Gupta had echoed the same thoughts on Uttam Kumar citing his spontaneity in front of the camera. He was both an instinctive and a cerebral actor marking the distinctiveness of a complete artist (ibid: p. 84). As Rituparno Ghosh had commented, later on both kinds of film viewers, mainstream and intellectual, had to confide that he was an actor par excellence.

He had acted with a number of female actors, picturing romanticism on screen with ease and spontaneity, the monotonous rules of film acting could never tear off the naturalness from his performances. Gooptu (2010) claims that the character of Uttam Kumar as portrayed through films and perceived by Bengali audience was that of an exemplary Bengali *bhadralok* whose typicality stemmed not from large-scale associations but from the "subtext of an ordinary man". His style of wearing wrinkled dhoti (*Konchano* dhoti) and colorful punjabi (Long shirt with collars and side pockets) has been marketed by popular shops, even his style of wearing stripped shirt was a fashion in the name of 'Amanush Print' in the days after his film *Amanush* (1974) was released (Mukhopadhyay, 2012, p. 21). Such was his popularity that when he had organized a march calling all actors to join in order to raise fund for flood relief in 1950s, there was a crowd

which had to be handled by the state apparatus. He was advised not to walk with others and had to commute in a lorry. It was a big event where a sizeable amount of money could be collected and donated for the cause (Mukhopadhyay: 2012, p. 23). So Uttam Kumar was both an actor and a star. His popularity was such that he captured the entire attention of the public. No one except his heroine of many films, Suchitra Sen, could match his glamour and stardom in Bengali cinema in his life-time.⁶

Spectatorship and construction of Stardom

Psychoanalytic film theory is concerned with establishing the complex, myriad mechanisms by which the relationship of spectator to screen links the human psyche, particularly the unconscious, to the film text. Through the circulation of psychoanalytic attributes such as desire, phantasm, and identification, the spectator-screen process, among other cultural processes, constructs the psychoanalytic subject, also variously referred to as the desiring subject, the sexual subject, and the screen subject. Uttam had fitted the bill being the actor whom the audience desired and which helped him to keep other actors (heroes) of his time far behind.

The emergent spectator of cultural studies contributes two significant variations to the notion of spectatorship. First, the text is produced only at the moment of interaction with the audience member, bringing the spectator/reader/viewer to the forefront of the mediated event (which in cultural studies, to date, has been far more extensively researching on television analysis, not film). It becomes impossible to speak of the meanings of a text separately from its viewing subject, the two becoming indissoluble. Second, the viewing subject is composed of the interaction between the effects of discourses invoked by the text/representation *and* the effects of social and material discourses beyond. Spectatorship is formulated as the convergence of textual subjects and social subjects.

[T]he focus of critical attention in cultural studies switched from ideology and its effects toward audiences or readerships, since it is at this point that

⁶ Both actors worked in 30 films

meanings generated in and by media discourses actually go live socially, where textual and social power intersect, and where the distinction between them is meaningless. (Hartley 1996: 225)

Further, the spectator is no longer positioned in subjectivity by the text, but, under the concept of hegemony, can offer resistance to the ideologies of the text. Indeed, cultural studies understands popular culture as the terrain where cultural power, relationships, and systems of meaning are negotiated and established - and, consequently, can be resisted and/or reestablished otherwise.

Spectatorship has been theorized variously to date, as the construction of the viewing subject through psychic processes, discursive formations, and social and historical relations. It appears most productive to consider the spectator as the effect of such processes, formations, and relations as operating concurrently, rather than thinking of each dynamic as singular or exclusive of the others. Less clear, then, are the complex and simultaneous interconnections between these dynamics, which may render the spectator as anything along an indicator of viewership from passive swallower of pre-packaged ideology to active and successful resistant of the same oppressive psychic, discursive, and socio-historical forces. Each theorization - psychoanalytic, discursive, and social has contributed to the concept of spectatorship, while not managing to address all the problematic summoned up by the other, differing approaches.

Yet, neither the social subject nor the discursive subject adequately explains the determinants, the “why” of specific subject or spectatorial articulations, remaining open projects for both cultural studies and post-structuralism. This paper will take into account the spectator as a culmination of all: psychoanalytic, discursive and social.

The Gaze: Theoretical issues and Empirical Facts

The saying that ‘men act and women appear’ can be simplified in the sense that men look at women. When used as a verb in English language ‘gaze’ means looking steadily and carefully especially in admiration and surprise. There is a voluminous existence of the notion of ‘gaze’ in the writings of feminists and post-structuralists during 1970s and 1980s. Black feminist intervention which began to surface in 1990s was launched from two disciplinary locales: literary criticism and film studies. A steady glance through literature can take a point of

departure from Habermas (1989) who regarded public sphere as a way of cultural advance of the nineteenth century in the West that excluded the mass, producing a lively and knowledgeable citizenry. It debarred women since their intimate sphere was the family where discussions could take place (p.69). Women were given a subordinate position among the relatively small number of people who took part in the public sphere. With the decline of the public sphere and the rise of the mass media, the readership slowly gave way to viewership (p. 159) where women took an active part (Rabinovitz, 1990; p. 74). It was not same in the case of the Indian audience. In India, the transformation of readership to viewership was not so clearly visible. The Bengali public in particular were exposed to cinema at the turn of the nineteenth century but it was in the period between 1920s and 30s that there evolved a film culture in Bengal in the name of critical enquiry, writers on cinema etc. which was concentrated as a tradition in the hands of the *Bhadralok* elite class.

In the west, cinema appeared as a potential site of transgression, a setting that allowed women to reveal their troubling otherness, cravings and desires. It provided them with a new experience (Glover and Kaplan: 2013; p. 172). Cinema was considered as a new form of leisure available to working class women outside home. It was cheap, convenient; a part of shopping trip that which had a mundane accessibility. In India cinema was a luxury of the privileged class.

It began to spread as a medium of communication much later with the advent of capitalist endeavors. Cinema grew into a spectacle to be consumed (Mayne: 1988; p. 78). Because of its growing woman spectators in the West 'matinee idols'⁷ such as Rudolph Valentino of Hollywood were set as reliefs to them. He not only made women collapse, his appearances could lead to minor riots.

The viewers of Uttam Kumar were Bengali men and women, essentially middle-class. Uttam Kumar, was also a 'matinee idol', was a handsome male

⁷ 'Matinee Idol' is a term used to refer to male actors who were not only good-looking but were capable of giving massive hits in films that were showcased in the afternoons. The term was mostly used in 1920s to 1950s in Hollywood to denote male actors who were popular among women audience for their good-looks.

actor with good looks and extremely attractive to women spectators, was adorned both as an actor with merit and star in 1950s. He was portrayed in such way that he was shown as a desiring subject who can bestow the gift of 'sexual rapture'. Moreover, the publicity of the screen presence of Uttam Kumar was consolidated through fan clubs, magazines, interviews etc. such that the relationship of the star and the fans were perceived as obsessive. Tapan Sinha's *Galpo Holeo Sotti*, 1966 ('A Story, But True') has a sequence where three women of a middle-class joint household listen together to one Uttam Kumar interview, read aloud from a film magazine in their leisure. Yet Uttam Kumar referred to his female fans as sisters, thus prioritizing a domestic discourse that was against his romantic screen persona (Goopu, 2010). This insistence on a domestic image made him more popular among women. Despite his persona and acting, his image of a person circumscribed by domesticity was largely the reason of acceptance by his viewer, mostly among middle-class women.

Film studies and feminist underpinnings on women spectatorship revolve around Mulvey's contentions of male gaze. Mulvey (1989) draws upon psychoanalysis between this active male (actor) and passive female (viewers). Along with Mulvey, John Berger (1972) hooks (1992) and Judith Halberstam (2005) critique the culture of gaze as aligned with white, heterosexual, masculine subjectivity, producing images of women and ordered dominated subjects as fetishes to palliate male castration anxieties. hooks (1992) in particular argues that black women spectators construct a theory of looking relations that turn their delight in looking at films into the 'pleasures of interrogation'. The viewers in the mainstream have the determining 'male gaze' that projects its fantasy on the female figure while women are simultaneously consumers, are looked at and displayed. 'Female gaze' was later introduced as an antithesis to male gaze. Staiger (1992) claims that there can be no text without an audience, therefore women spectators had a mode of organizing and structuring a narrative surrounding around an actor whom they gazed at. Women here fantasized with Uttam Kumar. There are numerous stories that describe their anxiety over Uttam Kumar. But this feminine gaze is repressed, somehow irreversible producing women spectatorship as a position within the network of power relations defined by the dominant in the discourse. As Mulvey argued that the visual pleasures of Hollywood cinema are based on voyeuristic and fetishistic forms of looking and because of the ways these looks are structured, the spectator necessarily identifies

with the male protagonist in the narrative, and thus with his objectification of the female figure via the male gaze. The construction of woman as spectacle is built into the apparatus of dominant cinema, and the spectator position which is produced by the film narrative is necessarily a masculine one. It offers the spectator the pleasurable identification with the main male protagonist, and through him the power to indirectly possess the female character displayed as sexual object for his pleasure. Every woman, of all age desired Uttam: be it as a husband, as a boy-friend/ romantic interest or as a son. In every role that he played he became the object of desire and pleasure. The look of the male character moves the narrative forward and identification with it thus implies a sense of sharing in the power of his active look. Not only women spectators desired him, his male spectators blindly imitated his hair-cut, his style and choice of dresses, even his mannerisms in wooing girls as shown on screen. Mulvey's argument has subsequently been addressed in film criticism. The first raises the question of the male figure as erotic object, the second that of the feminine subject in the narrative, and, more specifically women's active desire and the sexual aims of women in the audience in relationship to the female protagonist on the screen (Stacey, 1987).

The discussion of gendered patterns of vision inevitably opens up the larger question of identification as the key player between film and spectator, the process that organizes subjectivity in visual and narrative terms. It seems useful at this point to invoke Mary Ann Doane's distinction of at least three instances of identification operating in the viewing process: (1) identification with the representation of a person (*male* character/star); (2) recognition of particular objects, persons, or action as such (stars, narrative images); (3) identification with the "look" with oneself as the condition of perception, which Metz, in analogy with Lacan's concept of the mirror phase, has termed "primary". These psychological mechanisms and their effects can be traced through the various levels of enunciation which structure cinematic identification, interweaving textual units such as shot, sequence and strategies of narrative. Most productively feminist film theorists have taken up the debate by insisting on the centrality of sexual difference, questioning the assumption of a single or neutral spectator position constructed in hierarchically ordered, linear processes of identification. Haywood (1993) had posited and questioned whether women as spectators successfully can acquire any authority within the structure of power relations.

While Mulvey initially reduced cinematic identification to a basically active relationship with a protagonist of the same sex (i.e., male), she subsequently modified this notion with regard to the female viewer who may not only cross but also be divided by gender lines (which in turn deflects identification from the fictive tales of a stable identity). As outlined above, the difficulty of conceptualizing a female spectator has led feminists to recast the problem of identification in terms of instability, mobility, multiplicity, and temporality (Hansen, 1986). de Lauretis believes that this 'sexual differentiation' within the spectators challenges Mulvey's and other film theorists' definition of cinematic identification as masculine: 'The analogy that links identification with the look to masculinity and identification-with-the-image to femininity breaks down precisely when we think of a spectator alternating between the two' (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 142–3). She proposes an either/or model of cinematic identification, in which the female spectator benefits from a double desiring position. She claims that there are two sets of identification, only one of which is already recognized by film theory. In addition to 'the masculine, active identification with the gaze (the looks of the camera and of the male characters) and the passive, feminine identification with the image', there exists another form of identification, which involves 'the double identification with the figure of narrative movement, the mythical subject, and with the figure of narrative closure, the narrative image' (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 144). This double figural narrative identification is what anchors the subject in the narrative flow – it is also what allows the female spectator to occupy both active and passive positions of desire at once – she is a doubly desiring spectator whose desire is simultaneously 'desire for the other, and desire to be desired by the other' (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 143). Uttam's fans especially women fans not only desired Uttam as their preferred personality in courtship but also sometimes nurtured a dedicated and close resemblance to his heroines in films, be it Suchitra Sen, Sabitri Chatterjee or the like and more importantly they wanted to be the center of attraction of Uttam Kumar as well. Mukhopadhyay (2012) notes an incident where Uttam had gone for a drive and settled for a cup of tea at a road-side tea-stall. Some women were astonished to find a gentleman who had such close resemblance to the actor. Others denied saying that it was impossible for the actor to come to an ordinary tea-stall. He quickly finished his tea and got into the car waving to those women that they were correct in identifying him; he was really Uttam Kumar. This incident shows

that he was a desiring subject to the women and that he too carefully constructed and cherished the 'desire' of these women.

People in Bengal especially women are nostalgic of the star that he was. Uttam Kumar himself had paid attention to the careful nurture of his fame. The resultant was an 'image of Uttam Kumar' and 'Uttam Kumar the person.' The two were very different. He was a married man yet a desired subject for women. He celebrated his marriage with his wife every year with quite pomp and splendor yet he was linked to many of his leading ladies. He stayed with one his female co-stars in the later part of his life. The burden of an extra-marital relationship and ensuing moral squalor was never questioned. It was commonly agreed by many in his audience that he was a victim of mischief. His image never got tarnished by the deviance that he portrayed in his personal life. Any matinee idol creates an aura of respect build on the viewer's benevolence. The actor becomes spontaneous in his actions and reactions in this milieu slowly. He becomes so mesmerized by the benevolence that this benignity becomes his existence. But without this compassion of the viewers the actor feels alienated and threatened (Ghosh, 2018, p. 236-238). The fans of Uttam Kumar have not accepted any of his after-generation actor as a star equal to him and the critics of Uttam Kumar have slowly accepted the actor in him. The viewers of Uttam Kumar's era have never left the cult that was 'Uttam Kumar'.

The Gaze of men spectators, fans and co-stars

The peculiarity of Uttam Kumar was that he was an object of desire not only to women but also to men. But their object in their gaze was not the same though the masculinity of the hero as projected in films was a matter of desire to both men and women. Rituparno Ghosh once commented that Satyajit Ray was clear in his projection of the hero and his masculinity in his film *Nayak* when he gauges on Uttam's handsome physique setting the camera on his broad shoulders and starts moving from back to the front thus specifying on the muscular toned body of the hero as the first projection of Uttam Kumar, the person playing the hero. In the film *Basanta Bilap* (1973) a character Sidhu played by Chinmoy Roy is asked by his aunt to buy two tickets for a matinee show. Sidhu takes the money but leisurely strokes off the time with his girlfriend. He insists his girlfriend to call him 'Uttam Kumar' ('Amay ekbar bolo, tumi Uttam Kumar'). The craze of every girl to see any man in a romantic relation as Uttam Kumar and the men's

awareness of it can be well understood here. Uttam Kumar was not the dream of women only but also an ideal set for any man. Adhir Bagchi a renowned singer and music director in many Uttam Kumar films thinks that the late actor was an ultimate in romanticism. He had a very proportionate figure, slightly thick lips, a special brightness taken together (from excerpts of an interview with Piyali Das, AnandaBazar Patrika, 2 September, 2017). Hrishikesh Mukhopadhyay, a noted filmmaker had once said that other than Durgadas Bandopadhyay⁸, Uttam was a handsome man with a sweet voice and restrained acting prowess (Ghosh, 2015). But Raja Sen, another noted filmmaker had said that Uttam did not have the good looks of Durgadas Bandopadhyay but possessed an appealing presence which brought him too close to his audience. Sailen Manna a noted footballer in Bengal commented that the director Asit Sen had introduced him to Uttam Kumar in 1961-62. He had a wonderful physique, broad chest and was handsome (Ibid)

Shankarlal Bhattacharyya, a columnist and reporter analyzed Uttam Kumar's popularity after death, saying that every woman was his fan but his haircut, his dress, his smile and his emotional outbursts and romantic glances and deep and intense looks into the eyes of his heroines were copied by men⁹ (Gooptu, 2010) Young Bengali men across class including the local loafers stepped smoothly into the actor's shoes and dreamt of romancing girls as he did on screen. Uttam Kumar had a broad popular appeal which could not be contained within middle-class domesticity. Uttam Kumar was undoubtedly the expensive Bengali star of his times.

The Gaze of the Woman spectators and co-stars

Women were not far behind in chronicling their vision of the actor. Both men and women were attracted to his physique and voice but women looked at something more. Noted music director, Ashima Mukhopadhyay, in an interview to a correspondent of Ananda Bazar Patrika once said, she being a Suchitra Sen

⁸ Durgadas Bandopadhyay was an actor, star and a 'matinee idol' of Bengali cinema before Uttam Kumar. He was called 'Douglas Fairbanks of the East'. <https://www.anandabazar.com/supplementary/patrika/some-unknown-information-about-bengali-matinee-idol-durgadas-bannerjee-1.675408> retrieved on 29 September 2020 at 7 p.m.

⁹ Posted by Alakananda Dasgupta in Uttam Kumar, Suchitra Sen-The Golden Pair, Facebook, 21 November 2020

fan did not feel any romantic pull towards Uttam Kumar when she first met him in person but acknowledged that he was 'really handsome' and that God had gifted him with all qualities that can make a man attractive to women. Supriya Chowdhury, a noted actress and a heroine of many Uttam Kumar starrers and his muse once remembered an incident where a group of women were awe-struck at Uttam Kumar at the lunch break during shooting of a film. The incident was so uncomfortable for both that they could not have their lunch in front of these women (Ghosh, 2015). Supriya Chowdhury in another interview had said that Uttam was like 'fire'. He was not conventionally good-looking but his sex appeal was so binding on others that it created a desire in every woman to have him as their desired man (Mukhopadhyay, 2006, p.36). Uttam too enjoyed the gaze and the unrestrained craziness that women fans and spectators displayed. Mukhopadhyay (2006) quotes an incident where a producer did not want to give Uttam Kumar the fees he had demanded and questioned his price in the market. Uttam took him to an under-graduate college in Kolkata and stepped out of the car to buy cigarettes from a shop nearby. The girls around the area flocked towards him as soon as they recognized who he was. Later Uttam was paid according to his demands for this eye-opener (p. 12). Mukhopadhyay also remembers an incident at a charity function organized by Films Production Assistance Guild in Mahajati Sadan in Kolkata. The police found it difficult to organize the crowd and the mob went crazy as soon as Uttam Kumar arrived. He heard an appeal of a woman and to his amazement found her at some height. He asked her how she had climbed so high to which she replied to everyone's amusement that she was standing on her husband's shoulders to view the hero of her heart. This amused Uttam Kumar too (Ibid). Uttam Kumar had also carefully nurtured his image of a star. Ranjan Bandopadyay, journalist and critic wrote that once in an interview, Uttam Kumar had revealed to him that the biggest quality a matinee idol should have was to keep himself away from public view as much as possible. Uttam Kumar had given Bandopadhyay his own instance by saying that no journalist could get dates for his interview too easily and also cited that the audience bought tickets to see him on screen. If he was easily available to them then they might not buy tickets for his films any longer. He, thus, disclosed his secret of maintaining the image of the 'matinee idol' that he had been successful in keeping alive.

The woman co-actors of Uttam were also awe-struck at the hero. A co-star of Uttam Kumar, Sandhya Ray remembers her first encounter with Uttam. He was already a star by the time she had started to act with him. In her first film shoot in *Mayamrigo* (1960) she had forgotten her dialogues while looking into his eyes while giving a shot. The same happened to her in *Bhrantibilash* (1963). In *Khana Baraha* (1981), the sequence where she wipes off Baraha's (played by Uttam Kumar) feet with her hair, the shot was too long as she had been lost in her thoughts of the opportunity of being able to do so (Mukhopadhyay, 2006, p. 68-70). Sumitra Mukherjee another co-star and the last leading woman with whom Uttam Kumar had his last sequence before he died, remembered her first encounter with the hero. She said she was so nervous that she could not deliver her lines, as her heart was pumping fast and shivering with excitement to be able to work with Uttam Kumar as a female lead. Lalita Chattopadhyay a fan of Uttam Kumar who later turned into actress once said, "Once I was in love with him and realized (later) that it was not romance but infatuation...he was an attraction, like a magnet, of extraordinary presence and acting. He was not good-looking in the conventional terms but had some flaws...but was flawless in his Bengaliness. This is the reason why viewers received him as a son, a husband, a father and a lover. He fitted in any role. It is for this that he is 'Uttam Kumar' the Mahanayak (the ultimate hero)." Sabitri Chatterjee, a renowned actress and a heroine in many Uttam starrers once in an interview said Uttam had a sex-appeal that transcended his characterizations in films. Be it the role of a servant in *Khoka Babur Protyabartan* (1960) or in *Saptapadi* (1961) he had an appeal that was created by him, well-practiced at home. This infallible attraction was such that all women viewers married or not, desired this man; all mothers wanted a son like him. There were many woman viewers who nurtured a secret desire to hug him like his heroine Suchitra Sen did in many films. This magic called Uttam Kumar is actually a common man's love of fame collectively spawned into a charisma that is Uttam Kumar (Robbar, 21 July, 2019; p. 22-23). Gooptu (2010) writes that Uttam Kumar had carefully cultivated the image of a respectful and cultured boy next-door whose domesticated masculinity made his sexuality unthreatening. It was this element of being domesticated coupled with ordinariness of discourse that produced such strong identification on the part of the Bengali public especially women. Himangshu Chattopadhyay (2004) writes:

Our acquaintance with Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen happened quite early in life. We were those born in 1950s. There was not a single day in our lives that they were not discussed and this was especially true among women. Young men styled themselves to be Uttam Kumar, for women it was fashion to the likes of Suchitra Sen...Bengali men were earnest Uttam Kumars in search of their Suchitra Sens. Uttam and Suchitra Sen pervaded every corner of Bengali life, the bedrooms, kitchens, drawing rooms....

Not only his women co-stars but also the contemporary woman actors of Bengali cinema think Uttam Kumar to be the ultimate hero. Swastika Mukhopadhyay, in an interview had said that she would have not gained her consciousness once given the opportunity to act with the actor. She said that the feeling of acting with him would have had such impact on her that she might have died. Paoli Dam, another actor of contemporary times echoed the same emotion and called it a dream or a fantasy to be able to act with Uttam Kumar. Uttam Kumar is considered the ultimate man of choice till now. He is living on in the heart of his followers with his charm and longing.

Conclusion

The gaze on Uttam Kumar by both men and women revolved around his physique, masculinity and his romantic image as portrayed in films. The fandom was such that Uttam Kumar was seldom evaluated as the person who acted but seen as the one who the spectators desired him to be. So, his liaisons with his co-stars never affected him or his star value. The stardom of Uttam Kumar had reached a peak (1950s to 1970s) at a time when India had consolidated an independent status but was persistent with the overshadowed postcolonial subjects, a time when Bengal witnessed a decline in national politics that brought about an erosion of Bengali life marked by refugee crisis, growing unemployment and food shortage. The Bengali *bhadralok* had been a part of the national politics and nationalist movement had steadily lost his ground and a sense of being historical agent. Gooptu (2010) points out that Bengali cinema of this time allowed the middle-class Bengalees an optimistic self-image through the emotions generated by Uttam Kumar's films. The intellectuals were faced with the challenge of burying Uttam Kumar and negotiating their intellectual objectives while Uttam's supporters transferred the authenticity of his acting as

the main tool and identity for advancing the values and ideals of the Bengali middle class. His star-struck audience remained dedicated to him and to his pursuits and carried his fame to the future generation. Till date his make-up room at New Theatre's studio is maintained as though he could walk in at any time. Most film makers and lovers of cinema agree that no other actor in Bengal has ever been able to generate the kind of mass hysteria that Uttam attracted. Such love, admiration and respect that a star has received so far in Bengal is rare. It is also rare perhaps at the national level. The stars of Hindi films, Raj Kapoor (1924- 1986), Dev Anand (1923-2011), Dilip Kumar (1922- if we think of the contemporaries of Uttam Kumar in Indian Film industry- had not been able to create, sustain and mesmerize the common viewers for long as did Uttam Kumar in Bengal withstanding the limited regional market of films in Bengali as compared to the larger cosmopolitan structure and demands of the market for Hindi. The male gaze persists due to the power structures behind it, and these structures generally do not support a gaze that women can look through. The star lives in the heart of his followers, both women and men.

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