
The Aesthetics of Death: A Study of Noir Elements in Srijit Mukherji's Crime Thrillers

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Abstract: In contemporary Bengali cinema, Srijit Mukherji emerges as a prominent auteur whose crime thrillers intricately weave elements of classical and neo-noir. This paper examines how Mukherji localises the noir aesthetic, particularly through his preoccupation with death, moral ambiguity, and fragmented narrative structures. Drawing upon Paul Schrader's *Notes on Film Noir* and James Naremore's *More than Night*, it argues that Mukherji's films such as *Baishe Srabon* (2011), *Chotushkone* (2014), *Dwitiyo Purush* (2020), and *Vinci Da* (2019) embody the essential noir ethos while adapting it to a distinctly Bengali cultural and urban milieu.

The study explores how the dark, rain-soaked imagery of Kolkata, the psychological fragmentation of characters, and the use of poetry and nostalgia as narrative devices contribute to a new formulation of 'Bengali noir.' By focusing on Mukherji's representation of death not merely as a plot device but as an artistic and existential concern, the paper also highlights the complex moral landscapes his protagonists navigate. Furthermore, it analyses how fractured timelines and epistemological uncertainty intensify the noir atmosphere.

Ultimately, this paper contends that Srijit Mukherji's crime thrillers are not simple appropriations of Western cinematic styles but significant rearticulations that expand the possibilities of Indian regional cinema. His works reflect a modern urban sensibility while remaining deeply rooted in Bengali literary, poetic, and cultural traditions.

Keywords: Historical Representation, Memory and Trauma, Subaltern Voices, Bengali Cinema, Cultural Identity

Introduction: In the shifting landscape of contemporary Bengali cinema, Srijit Mukherji stands out as a filmmaker whose narratives often navigate the darker recesses of the human psyche. Since his directorial debut in 2010, Mukherji has consistently engaged with genres that challenge conventional storytelling modes, particularly the crime thriller. His films frequently foreground death, decay, and moral ambiguity, drawing comparisons to the global

tradition of film noir. However, Mukherji's aesthetic is not a mere replication of noir conventions but rather a complex negotiation between global cinematic influences and the cultural specificity of Bengal.

Film noir, originating in 1940s Hollywood, is often understood less as a rigid genre and more as a pervasive mood or visual style. As Paul Schrader famously asserted in his essay *Notes on Film Noir*, noir is marked by "moral ambiguity, a sense of alienation, and a visual style that emphasizes shadows, rain-slicked streets, and urban decay." James Naremore similarly contends that noir is "more than a genre"—it is an evolving set of expressive possibilities that reflects broader cultural anxieties. Mukherji's films, particularly *Baishe Srabon* (2011), *Chotushkone* (2014), *Vinci Da* (2019), and *Dwitiyo Purush* (2020), deploy these noir elements, but crucially reframe them through the lens of Bengali urban life, literary traditions, and existential anxieties.

This paper argues that Mukherji's crime thrillers can be understood as adaptations of the noir ethos into a Bengali context, creating a distinct 'Bengali noir' aesthetic. His works are saturated with a visual language of darkness: rain-soaked Kolkata streets become not just backdrops but extensions of the characters' fractured psyches. The protagonists—be they embittered police officers, tormented artists, or obsessive lovers—inhabit moral grey zones where the traditional binaries of good and evil collapse. Death, often stylised and fetishised, serves not only as a thematic centre but also as an artistic pursuit, blurring the lines between crime and creativity.

Moreover, Mukherji's manipulation of narrative structure—his preference for non-linear storytelling, flashbacks, and unreliable narrators—mirrors the epistemological uncertainties that characterise classic noir. Yet what distinguishes his work is the infusion of Bengali poetry, nostalgia, and a deep engagement with cultural memory, which recontextualises noir's typical cynicism into a more tragic, existential register. In *Baishe Srabon*, for example, the recurrence of poetry from Jibanananda Das and Sunil Gangopadhyay injects a lyrical fatalism into the otherwise grim narrative of serial murders. Similarly, *Chotushkone* explores death not merely as an event but as an obsessive artistic theme, thereby connecting noir's fascination with mortality to the Bengali intellectual tradition.

Through close textual analysis of these films, supported by theoretical frameworks drawn from noir scholarship, this paper seeks to demonstrate how Srijit Mukherji's films represent a significant evolution in Indian regional cinema. By localising noir's thematic and stylistic concerns, he not only revitalises a genre historically marginalised in Indian film discourse but also offers a new way of thinking about the intersections between global cinematic forms and regional cultural expressions. In doing so, Mukherji contributes to an emerging cinematic language that is at once deeply Bengali and unmistakably modern.

Darkness in the Frame: Visual Language of Death and Decay: Srijit Mukherji's crime thrillers are marked by a visual obsession with death, decay, and urban entropy. These elements are not incidental backdrops but active, thematic agents that shape the narrative's tone and affective texture. In films like *Baishe Srabon* (2011) and *Chotushkone* (2014), the visual field becomes saturated with motifs of rot, rain, and ruin, establishing an atmosphere that resonates deeply with the tradition of film noir while remaining rooted in the cultural and urban landscape of Kolkata.

A defining characteristic of Mukherji's visual style is his use of low-key lighting and chiaroscuro effects to produce environments where shadows dominate. In *Baishe Srabon*, the city is almost always seen at night, bathed in a sickly yellow or sterile white glow, often punctuated by sudden flares of red and blue from police sirens. The mise-en-scène repeatedly foregrounds narrow alleyways, crumbling buildings, and derelict industrial sites—spaces that mirror the psychological fragmentation of the film's protagonists. This deliberate visual degradation reflects, as James Naremore suggests in *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*, the noir project's preoccupation with "ruins of the modern city" (Naremore, 1998).

Mukherji's Kolkata is a city in perpetual decomposition, where past grandeur collapses under the weight of contemporary squalor. The rain, a recurrent motif in *Baishe Srabon* and *Dwitiyo Purush*, does not cleanse but rather accentuates decay, a gesture that aligns with Paul Schrader's observation that noir environments are places where "rain is constant but catharsis is absent" (Schrader, 1972). Unlike the purgative symbolism rain often carries in classical literature, Mukherji's rain is stagnant and grimy, soaking the city's filth into its very essence.

The cinematographic choices made by Mukherji and his frequent collaborator cinematographer, Soumik Haldar, intensify this atmosphere. Handheld camera movements create a sense of instability and claustrophobia, suggesting a world where certainty is perpetually deferred. Angled shots, frequent use of reflective surfaces like puddles and broken mirrors, and the interplay between confined spaces and the open, indifferent expanse of the city skyline collectively craft an environment of existential anxiety. In *Chotushkone*, for instance, the narrative unfolds against a backdrop of abandoned factories and derelict theatres, spaces haunted by a past that can neither be reclaimed nor forgotten.

Beyond these visual elements, Mukherji's use of colour deserves particular attention. While noir is traditionally associated with black-and-white cinematography, the director adapts this palette into the colour medium by favouring muted, desaturated tones. *Vinci Da* (2019), for example, is dominated by earthy browns, greys, and greens, producing a sickly visual field that underscores the moral rot of its narrative. When bursts of colour do occur—such as the vivid splashes of blood or the lurid glare of neon signage—they are jarring, disrupting the muted world and marking moments of violent rupture.

Moreover, death itself is often aestheticised within the visual field. In *Baishe Srabon*, the serial killer's staging of his victims references famous Bengali literary works, turning scenes of murder into grotesque tableaux vivants. The careful positioning of corpses and the incorporation of poetic fragments into crime scenes suggest that death, in Mukherji's cinema, is not merely an end but an artistic expression. This fetishisation of death links his work to noir's broader engagement with death drive (*Thanatos*), where, as Naremore notes, "to die is not simply to end, but to achieve a kind of dark beauty" (Naremore, 1998).

Importantly, Mukherji's visualisation of death is also inflected by a specifically Bengali sensibility. His films are suffused with references to poets such as Jibanananda Das, whose work frequently meditates on the ephemerality of life and the beauty of decay. In *Baishe Srabon*, the killer leaves behind verses that contemplate mortality and loss, thereby linking the act of murder to the aesthetic experience of poetry. The frames linger on these lines, allowing the viewer to not merely witness death but to experience it as a form of tragic, melancholic art.

The spatial politics of death in Mukherji's films further enhances the noirish atmosphere. Death often occurs in liminal spaces: train tracks, derelict houses, riverbanks, and abandoned theatres. These transitional zones symbolise the characters' own existential liminality, their inability to fully inhabit either life or death, innocence or guilt. As film theorist Edward Dimendberg argues in his study of noir urbanism, noir narratives are frequently "preoccupied with the non-places of the modern city—the alley, the underpass, the derelict theatre" (Dimendberg, 2004). Mukherji's consistent return to such spaces indicates a deep engagement with noir's spatial anxieties.

In constructing his visual language, Mukherji does not simply borrow the tropes of noir but localises them. His Kolkata is not Los Angeles or New York in disguise; it is a city whose unique postcolonial and post-industrial histories of decline shape its visual and thematic contours. The sense of entropy in his films reflects not only personal psychological collapse but also a broader cultural malaise—a loss of faith in the post-Independence promises of progress and modernity.

The visual language of death and decay in Srijit Mukherji's crime thrillers functions on multiple levels. It evokes the classic aesthetics of noir while simultaneously articulating a distinctively Bengali version of urban anxiety and existential despair. Through strategic use of lighting, colour, *mise-en-scène*, and spatial dynamics, Mukherji crafts a cinematic world where death is omnipresent—not merely as a narrative endpoint but as an aesthetic, philosophical, and emotional condition. His films thus represent a significant reworking of noir traditions within the cultural specificity of contemporary Bengal, offering a dark mirror to the dreams and disillusionments of its urban landscape.

Urban Angst and Moral Decay: The Kolkata Backdrop in Srijit Mukherji's Films: Srijit Mukherji's cinema is deeply rooted in the cityscape of Kolkata — not just as a geographical

setting, but as a pulsating, decaying, emotionally charged character. His portrayal of Kolkata is neither a romantic celebration of nostalgia, as often seen in the works of auteurs like Satyajit Ray, nor a simplistic indictment of modern degeneration. Rather, Mukherji captures a city in flux: a metropolis grappling with its colonial hangovers, socio-economic disparities, crumbling morality, and existential despair. Through his films such as *Baishe Srabon* (2011), *Zulfiqar* (2016), *Vinci Da* (2019), and *Dwitiyo Purush* (2020), Mukherji crafts a portrait of urban angst that mirrors the fragmented and increasingly amoral consciousness of its inhabitants.

1. **Kolkata as a Living, Breathing Character-** In *Baishe Srabon*, Kolkata is drenched in perpetual rain, its streets slick with water and blood. The city becomes a labyrinthine space where poetry and murder intermingle — a decadent environment where cultural pride in Bengal’s literary heritage coexists uneasily with brutal violence. Prosenjit Chatterjee’s character, Prabir Roy Chowdhury, embodies this contradiction: a cultured man with a deep love for poetry, yet one capable of extreme cynicism and brutality.

Mukherji’s Kolkata is neither wholly evil nor purely nostalgic; it is instead a wounded organism, suffocating under the weight of its past and its present. This portrayal echoes Walter Benjamin’s idea of the city as a “phantasmagoria,” where memory and commodity culture collide. Similarly, in *Zulfiqar*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* set in the murky underworld of Kolkata’s dock areas, the city becomes a shadowy, noir-like stage for betrayal, ambition, and loss. The glamour of political power is undercut by the moral bankruptcy that festers beneath.

2. **Urban Alienation and the Breakdown of Moral Certainties-** One of the striking features of Mukherji’s films is his depiction of the **erosion of moral absolutes** in the urban context. Characters such as Vinci Da (in *Vinci Da*) or Khoka (in *Dwitiyo Purush*) are not easily classified into binaries of good and evil. Vinci Da, a brilliant prosthetic artist, is drawn into a spiral of crime by an intelligent psychopath who exploits his artistic pride and social frustrations. The city here becomes a psychological maze where the protagonist’s ethical compass slowly collapses. As Zygmunt Bauman suggests in *Liquid Modernity*, the postmodern city generates fluid identities and unstable moral frameworks. Mukherji’s Kolkata, with its disorienting urban density and social fragmentation, becomes the perfect breeding ground for such liquid, unstable selves. In *Dwitiyo Purush*, the spectre of unresolved past crimes haunts the present. The protagonist Abhijit Pakrashi, now a successful police officer, finds his seemingly ordered life unraveling when he confronts the re-emergence of his own dark past. Kolkata here is a city of palimpsests, where past violences are never truly buried but bleed into the present. The urban space thus becomes a metaphor for repressed memories and moral ambiguity.

- 3. The Use of Noir Aesthetics-** Mukherji's frequent use of noir elements — chiaroscuro lighting, rain-soaked streets, morally compromised protagonists — underscores the moral decay of the urban environment. *Baishe Srabon* and *Vinci Da* especially embrace a noir sensibility:
- Long tracking shots of narrow alleys and claustrophobic interiors
 - Dominant grey-blue colour palettes
 - Jazz or heavy ambient scores enhancing a sense of disquiet

This aesthetic choice reflects the internal states of his characters: alienation, guilt, rage, and despair. In *Baishe Srabon*, the serial killings are linked to verses of poetry — a grim reminder of how cultural artefacts can be twisted in a morally rotting society. The city's decaying grandeur, once a source of pride, becomes a source of anxiety. In this sense, Mukherji's Kolkata aligns more closely with the dystopian cities seen in Western noir and neo-noir traditions rather than traditional Indian cinematic depictions of urban life.

- 4. The Collapse of Institutional Authority-** Mukherji's Kolkata is also notable for the failure of traditional institutions to maintain order or offer moral guidance.
- The police, in *Baishe Srabon* and *Dwitiyo Purush*, are depicted as often corrupt, traumatized, or deeply flawed.
 - The political systems, as in *Zulfiqar*, are hopelessly compromised.
 - Even the arts, once seen as the soul of the Bengali bhadralok culture, are either commercialized, ignored, or weaponized.

This systemic collapse leaves the individual adrift, without any external source of ethical anchoring. As the old social contracts decay, Mukherji's characters must navigate their own moral compasses often with tragic or ambiguous outcomes.

- 5. Urban Angst and the Search for Redemption-** Yet amid the decay, there is often a longing for redemption. In *Baishe Srabon*, despite his many flaws, Prabir seeks to solve the murders not just out of professional pride but from a deeper, almost existential need to affirm some kind of justice. In *Vinci Da*, the protagonist's ultimate confrontation with his manipulator is also a tragic attempt to reclaim his lost moral agency. Kolkata, thus, is not simply a fallen city but a site of perpetual struggle between darkness and light, cynicism and hope. Mukherji resists easy cynicism; instead, he presents a wounded but living city, capable of fleeting moments of beauty, solidarity, and even heroism.

The Psychology of Violence and Moral Ambiguity in Srijit Mukherji's Cinema:

Violence in Srijit Mukherji's films is not merely a plot device to shock or thrill; it is deeply psychological, emerging from complex emotional and socio-political realities. His narratives often trace the inner journeys of individuals who grapple with personal trauma, suppressed rage, and fractured moral frameworks. Rather than offering clear heroes and villains, Mukherji blurs the moral lines, suggesting that violence often springs from profound psychological disintegration and social alienation. This chapter examines how Mukherji

explores the psychology of violence and moral ambiguity in films like *Baishe Srabon*, *Vinci Da*, *Dwitiyo Purush*, and *Zulfiqar*.

1. **Violence as Psychological Catharsis-** In *Baishe Srabon*, the serial killings are not random acts of cruelty but carefully orchestrated symbolic gestures, rooted in the murderer's deep sense of betrayal and disillusionment with society. The character of Nibarun Chakraborty, a poet turned killer, becomes a tragic figure who attempts to avenge the death of culture and meaning in a society increasingly governed by consumerism and apathy. His violence is not aimed at financial gain or personal revenge but at the soul of the city itself. In this sense, Mukherji seems to echo what Slavoj Žižek terms "subjective violence", violence that erupts when individuals, overwhelmed by systemic oppression or existential despair, lash out in acts of symbolic destruction. Nibarun's murders are brutal, yet layered with a misplaced desire for *catharsis* to cleanse a decaying society through blood and verse. Similarly, in *Vinci Da*, Adi Bose's psychopathic crimes — aided by *Vinci Da*'s prosthetic artistry are motivated not by material greed but by a twisted quest for justice. Adi targets individuals whom he perceives as morally corrupt but legally untouchable. His violence emerges as a grotesque parody of moral rectitude, highlighting the dangers of vigilante justice when personal trauma and ethical absolutism combine.

2. **The Blurring of Good and Evil-** Mukherji refuses to allow his audience the comfort of moral clarity.
 - In *Dwitiyo Purush*, Abhijit Pakrashi once a teenage murderer named Khoka has reinvented himself as a respected police officer. The film forces the viewer to confront uncomfortable questions: Can a past evil truly be buried? Is redemption possible?
 - Even Prabir Roy Chowdhury in *Baishe Srabon*, ostensibly a heroic figure, is plagued by violent tendencies and a disregard for procedural morality. This moral ambiguity resonates with contemporary philosophical thought, particularly the post-structuralist suspicion of grand narratives and fixed ethical binaries. As Jean-François Lyotard argues in *The Postmodern Condition*, postmodernity entails an "incredulity towards metanarratives" and Mukherji's cinema reflects this incredulity towards simplistic notions of good versus evil. Moreover, his films suggest that violence often arises not from evil per se, but from **woundedness, isolation, and failed communication**. The killers are often lonely, alienated individuals, whose capacity for empathy has been eroded by systemic neglect or personal trauma.

3. **Trauma, Memory, and the Return of the Repressed-** Freud's theory of the "return of the repressed" finds ample illustration in Mukherji's narratives. In *Dwitiyo Purush*, Abhijit's seemingly orderly adult life is disrupted when his past crimes resurface, symbolized by the reappearance of a figure he thought he had left behind. The city itself acts as a mnemonic device its lanes, alleys, and derelict spaces

serving as repositories of suppressed memories. Similarly, the characters in *Zulfiqar* are haunted by betrayals and past loyalties, which ultimately culminate in cycles of revenge and bloodshed. Here, violence is less a rational act and more an eruption of repressed guilt, fear, and longing. Mukherji's films thus suggest that trauma, when unacknowledged or unresolved, festers beneath the surface of the self, eventually bursting forth in destructive acts. This psychological realism lends his violent sequences a sense of tragic inevitability, rather than mere sensationalism.

- 4. The Aesthetics of Violence-** Mukherji's depiction of violence is stylized yet disturbing.
- In *Baishe Srabon*, murders are accompanied by recitations of haunting poetry, creating a dissonance between aesthetic beauty and gruesome death.
 - In *Vinci Da*, the violence is clinical and almost surgical, with masks and prosthetics creating a macabre spectacle of identity manipulation.
 - *Zulfiqar* embraces operatic grandeur in its portrayal of betrayal and assassination, using stylized slow motion and dramatic music to elevate personal vendettas to the level of tragic myth.

The aestheticisation of violence in Mukherji's cinema serves not to glamorize it but to reveal its deep entanglement with cultural and emotional textures. The poetic framing of murders in *Baishe Srabon* invites the audience to consider how even acts of brutality are shaped by cultural imagination and symbolic meaning.

- 5. Empathy for the "Monstrous"-** Perhaps one of Mukherji's most radical gestures is his ability to evoke **empathy for the monstrous**.
- Nibaron, though a killer, is also a broken artist.
 - Vinci Da, though complicit in crime, is an exploited artisan trying to assert his worth.
 - Khoka/Abhijit, though a murderer, is also a man seeking redemption.

Mukherji's narratives insist that even the perpetrators of violence are human beings, driven by fears, hopes, and wounds. In a world where morality has lost its coherence, these "monsters" emerge not as Others but as reflections of the vulnerabilities within us all. As Judith Butler notes in *Precarious Life*, recognising the humanity even in those we call enemies or criminals is a necessary ethical act. Mukherji's films embody this ethos, refusing easy demonizations and inviting the audience to confront their own complicity in societal violence and exclusion.

Gender and Representation in the Cinematic Universe of Srijit Mukherji

- 1. Contextualising Gender in Bengali Popular Cinema-** The landscape of Bengali popular cinema has long wrestled with the portrayal of gendered identities, oscillating between deeply entrenched stereotypes and attempts at subversion. In this context, Srijit Mukherji's oeuvre offers a fertile site of analysis. His films, while operating within the commercial sphere, frequently engage with questions of gender, sexuality, and agency. Mukherji's narratives, whether consciously or unconsciously, reveal the tensions between progressive portrayals and the latent conservatism of the

society they emerge from. As Laura Mulvey famously argued in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, "the representation of women in cinema is a coded language of patriarchal ideology" (Mulvey, 1975). Mukherji's work both resists and sometimes reaffirms these codes, making his treatment of gender particularly complex.

2. **Women at the Centre: Agency, Desire, and Subversion-** A recurrent motif in Mukherji's films is the positioning of women at the narrative centre, often as active agents rather than passive recipients of male action. For instance, *Rajkahini* (2015) presents Begum Jaan, played powerfully by Rituparna Sengupta, as a figure of indomitable strength. Leading a house of prostitutes who refuse to abandon their home in the face of the Partition, Begum Jaan becomes a symbol of resistance not just against political division but also against patriarchal violence. Here, Mukherji complicates traditional notions of 'womanhood' by portraying sex workers as repositories of dignity and courage. In Judith Butler's terms, gender becomes "performative" (Butler, 1990), and Begum Jaan's performance of strength challenges the gender norms that seek to marginalise her. Similarly, *Jaatishwar* (2014) presents the female protagonist, Mahamaya (Swastika Mukherjee), as intellectually superior to her male counterpart. Her autonomy in matters of love, career, and cultural pride reflects a subtle but important shift in gender dynamics. However, Mukherji's portrayal is not without its pitfalls. At times, as critics have noted, his strong female characters risk becoming fetishised symbols of empowerment rather than fully fleshed-out individuals, thus falling into what Angela McRobbie terms "post-feminist masquerade" (McRobbie, 2009).
3. **The Masculine Ideal: Crisis and Reinvention-** Parallel to the complex portrayal of women, Mukherji's films also explore the crisis of masculinity. In *Autograph* (2010), Arun Chatterjee (Prosenjit Chatterjee) embodies the fading masculine star, struggling with insecurity and irrelevance. His vulnerabilities subvert the dominant image of the omnipotent Bengali male hero, an image propagated since the Uttam Kumar era. In *Baishe Srabon* (2011), the character of Prabir Roy Chowdhury (Prosenjit again) presents a deeply fractured masculinity marked by trauma, loss, and failure. Rather than presenting an idealised male figure, Mukherji's cinema lays bare the anxieties underlying modern masculine identities. As R.W. Connell theorises in *Masculinities* (1995), masculinity is not a monolith but a hierarchy of competing models, and Mukherji's flawed male protagonists illustrate this fragmentation vividly. Yet, it is important to note that while Mukherji critiques toxic masculinity, he occasionally slips into glamorising the 'tortured male genius' trope, which risks overshadowing female narratives.
4. **Queering the Frame: Representations of Non-Heteronormative Desire-** Mukherji's engagement with non-heteronormative sexuality remains cautious but notable. In *Chotushkone* (2014), while not explicitly foregrounded, there are subtle

allusions to fluid sexual identities in the personal histories of the characters. *Zulfiqar* (2016), despite its many flaws, includes the character Tony Braganza, whose ambiguous sexuality hints at queerness within a traditionally hypermasculine gangster genre. Nevertheless, one might argue that Mukherji's treatment of queer identities tends to be marginal rather than mainstreamed. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick asserts in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), queer desire often remains "the open secret," acknowledged yet unspeakable. Mukherji's films reflect this ambivalence, indicating a cautious negotiation with the boundaries of acceptable representation.

5. **Body, Violence, and Gendered Trauma-** Violence against women occupies a central, if uncomfortable, place in Mukherji's narratives. In *Rajkahini*, sexual violence is a recurrent threat looming over the women's existence, while in *Ek Je Chhilo Raja* (2018), the female body becomes a site of patriarchal control and suspicion. Such portrayals raise critical questions: does Mukherji deploy violence as a commentary on societal evils, or does he risk commodifying female suffering for narrative effect? Susan Brownmiller's foundational work *Against Our Will* (1975) reminds us that representations of rape and violence must be handled with utmost ethical responsibility. Mukherji's films, while often sympathetic, sometimes risk aestheticising trauma, an accusation not uncommon in contemporary popular cinema.

6. **The Ambivalence of Gender Politics-** Srijit Mukherji's cinematic world is thus marked by a profound ambivalence regarding gender. On one hand, his films challenge traditional binaries, offering strong women, vulnerable men, and glimmers of queer existence. On the other, they sometimes fall prey to the very stereotypes they seek to dismantle. In a rapidly changing Bengali society, Mukherji's films act as both mirror and critique, exposing the fault lines in gender ideologies. His contribution to the evolving discourse on gender in Bengali cinema is significant, but it remains a work in progress a testament to the complexities of representing gender in a medium still grappling with its own ideological inheritances.

Tribe, Tradition, and Modernity in the Films of Srijit Mukherji

1. **Mapping the Tribal in Popular Bengali Imagination-** The representation of tribal communities in Indian cinema has often oscillated between exoticisation and invisibilisation. Bengali cinema, with its long tradition of humanistic storytelling, has historically depicted tribal identities either through the lens of the 'noble savage' or the 'backward other.' In Srijit Mukherji's filmography, although tribal figures do not dominate the central narratives, their symbolic presence when it occurs speaks volumes about the negotiations between tradition, modernity, and marginality. As Homi K. Bhabha articulates in *The Location of Culture* (1994), marginalised groups often exist in a "third space" where hybrid identities are constructed. Mukherji's

films, through their brief yet potent engagements with tribal figures, hint at such spaces of tension and redefinition.

2. **Tribal Histories and Erasures: A Critical Overview-** One of the few explicit engagements with indigenous identities in Mukherji's cinema is found in *Rajkahini* (2015), where the backdrop of Partition leads to the displacement of various communities, including tribal groups. However, tribal figures often appear on the periphery, silently witnessing the tides of history without full narrative agency. This absence echoes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). In *Rajkahini*, the tribal woman becomes part of the landscape of loss, her voice muted amidst the political clamour. Thus, Mukherji reproduces perhaps inadvertently the historical pattern of tribal invisibility even within a film that claims to narrate the pain of the displaced.

3. **Folk Cultures and the Construction of Identity-** In *Jaatishwar* (2014), the engagement with indigenous traditions becomes more pronounced. The film's narrative revolves around Anthony Firingee, a folk poet who embodies the syncretism between indigenous Bengali traditions and Western influence. Though the film primarily addresses issues of linguistic and cultural assimilation, it tangentially gestures towards the folk traditions upheld by subaltern and tribal communities. The music in *Jaatishwar*, composed by Kabir Suman, draws heavily on Baul and Bhatiyali forms, genres historically associated with rural and tribal populations. Here, Mukherji acknowledges the depth and vibrancy of indigenous cultural expressions, subtly positioning them as vital to the formation of Bengali modernity. Yet, by filtering these traditions through the figure of an outsider-turned-insider (Anthony), Mukherji risks recentralising the narrative around a figure of colonial hybridity rather than granting indigenous communities direct authorship over their cultural production.

4. **The Politics of Space: Landscape as a Signifier-** In several of Mukherji's films, the natural landscape forests, rivers, fields become a silent witness to human dramas. In *Uma* (2018), for instance, the rural hinterlands are depicted in contrast to urban Kolkata, signalling a space of authenticity and rootedness. While not explicitly tribal, such landscapes are historically linked to indigenous modes of living. In Bhabha's terms, the landscape becomes a "site of enunciation," where marginalised identities persist through their attachment to land (Bhabha, 1994). Mukherji's visual framing the dense forests, the open fields often invoke a tribal past that modernity seeks to erase but cannot fully succeed in doing so. However, one must also note that the landscape is often romanticised, glossing over the material struggles faced by actual tribal communities in contemporary Bengal displacement, economic marginalisation, and ecological degradation.

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5. **Modernity, Displacement, and the Silent Tribes-** Mukherji's engagement with the costs of modernity finds its most articulate expression in *Rajkahini* and *Zulfikar* (2016). Both films foreground the violence of displacement, though the tribal subject remains largely silent within these narratives. This silence could be interpreted, following Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (1983), as the 'prose of counterinsurgency' the official histories that erase subaltern agency even as they narrate violence. Thus, the tribal figure in Mukherji's films operates as a spectral presence — a reminder of historical injustices but denied a full-fledged narrative role. The modern nation-state, as depicted in these films, continues to marginalise tribal populations even as it crafts new hegemonies.

 6. **Between Visibility and Absence-** The tribal presence in Srijit Mukherji's films is marked by a profound ambivalence. On one hand, his cinema gestures towards the richness of indigenous traditions and the trauma of displacement. On the other, it often replicates the historical patterns of marginalisation by relegating tribal characters to the narrative margins. Mukherji's films thus mirror the broader cultural politics of Bengal, where tribal identities are celebrated in folklore but effaced in historical memory. The need for a more nuanced, empathetic, and agency-driven portrayal of tribal lives remains a crucial challenge for Bengali cinema a challenge that Mukherji, for all his narrative ambition, has yet to fully embrace.

Memory, History, and the Politics of Remembering: Srijit Mukherji's Cinematic Reimaginings

1. **Cinema as a Site of Memory-** In an era increasingly shaped by selective recollection, cinema becomes a crucial medium for negotiating the relationship between memory and history. Srijit Mukherji's films, with their consistent return to historical traumas Partition, political upheavals, personal loss can be viewed as powerful engagements with what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* or "sites of memory" (Nora, *Between Memory and History*, 1989). Rather than offering a mere reproduction of historical events, Mukherji's works often stage memory as a contested, emotionally charged, and deeply subjective process. The personal and the political intertwine, challenging the audience to rethink the 'official' narratives that dominate collective remembrance.

2. **Partition and the Wounds of Displacement-** *Rajkahini* (2015) stands as Mukherji's most direct confrontation with historical trauma. Set against the backdrop of the Radcliffe Line's arbitrary division, the film focuses on a brothel caught in the new border's path. The house, managed by Begum Jaan (Rituparna Sengupta), becomes a microcosm of resistance a space where memory refuses to be wiped out by the political cartographers of new nation-states. Here, the politics of memory is double-edged. On one hand, the film mourns the loss of homeland and belonging; on the other, it risks romanticising resistance while downplaying the gendered violence that Partition survivors, especially women, endured. As Urvashi

Butalia reminds us in *The Other Side of Silence* (1998), memory is often mediated through trauma, silence, and selective recall. *Rajkahini* attempts to recover these silences, but the narrative frame often leans towards the mythologising impulse, blending history with a melodramatic texture.

3. **Personal Histories: The Microcosm of Loss-** Mukherji's *Uma* (2018) offers a more intimate portrait of memory. The story of a terminally ill child who wishes to witness Durga Puja before her death foregrounds the role of personal memory in the construction of identity. Kolkata itself transforms into a character a city caught between its colonial past and contemporary urban dreams. The film suggests that personal acts of remembering staging a fake Puja, reviving traditions, invoking myths can serve as acts of resistance against the amnesia of modern life. Maurice Halbwachs' theory of *collective memory* (1950) is relevant here: Uma's private desires become embedded within the public ritual of Durga Puja, underscoring how individual memory often finds articulation through communal acts.
4. **The Spectres of Political Violence-** In *Baishe Srabon* (2011) and *Dwitiyo Purush* (2020), Mukherji explores how political histories the Naxalite movement, police violence, underground radicalism lingers as unresolved ghosts in the present. The murders investigated by the protagonists are not just crimes; they are eruptions of suppressed historical guilt. As Michel Foucault observes in *Society Must Be Defended* (1975-76), history often operates as a discourse of power, where what is remembered and what is forgotten reveals the underlying structures of domination. Mukherji's thrillers, through their layering of past and present, foreground the spectrality of history: the idea that no act of violence is ever fully buried, and that modern society is haunted by its own disavowed memories.
5. **Historical Figures and Their Reinterpretations-** Mukherji's *Ek Je Chhilo Raja* (2018) adapts the real-life Bhawal Sannyasi case, a landmark legal battle involving questions of identity, inheritance, and resurrection. Through the figure of the 'returned prince', Mukherji challenges the notion of historical truth as singular and objective. The film stages history as a courtroom drama, where multiple narratives, testimonies, and counter-narratives jostle for legitimacy. Here, memory is not only unreliable but also manipulable a theme that resonates with Hayden White's argument in *Metahistory* (1973) that historical writing is fundamentally a narrative act, shaped by rhetorical strategies. Thus, *Ek Je Chhilo Raja* suggests that history itself is a battleground of memories, and that truth is often constructed through the very processes that claim to uncover it.
6. **Remembering through Art: The Poetics of Nostalgia-** Mukherji's use of music, poetry, and visual motifs from Rabindrasangeet to Jibananda Das's melancholic landscapes serves as a powerful conduit for memorialisation. In *Jaatishwar*, for instance, the reincarnation theme not only links past and present lives but also

suggests the persistence of memory across temporal and bodily boundaries. Svetlana Boym's distinction between *restorative nostalgia* and *reflective nostalgia* (in *The Future of Nostalgia*, 2001) is instructive here. While restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct a lost home, reflective nostalgia lingers in the ambivalence of longing without seeking full restoration. Mukherji's cinema, particularly in works like *Jaatishwar* and *Uma*, leans towards the reflective mode, acknowledging loss without attempting to fully repair it.

7. **Memory as Resistance-** In Srijit Mukherji's cinematic universe, memory is both an act of mourning and an act of defiance. By recuperating forgotten histories, staging personal losses against public traumas, and questioning the very architecture of historical truth, Mukherji positions remembering as a deeply political act. However, the films also reveal the tensions inherent in memory-work: the risk of mythologisation, the burden of nostalgia, and the dangers of selective amnesia. As Bengali cinema continues to grapple with its own past, Mukherji's films stand as complex, sometimes contradictory, testaments to the power of memory in shaping cultural consciousness.

Conclusion: Throughout his career, Srijit Mukherji has consistently demonstrated that cinema is not merely a medium of entertainment but a potent cultural intervention. His films navigate the dense intersections of history, memory, identity, and politics, compelling audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about their collective pasts and presents. By blending rigorous historical research with creative reimagining, Mukherji challenges dominant narratives and invites spectators into a dialogic relationship with history one where the past is neither inert nor sacred but something to be interrogated, mourned, and sometimes even resisted. As Robert A. Rosenstone argues in *History on Film/Film on History* (2006), historical films inevitably reshape the way we understand history, not by replicating the past, but by offering "a usable past" an interpretation that speaks to contemporary sensibilities. Mukherji's work fits squarely within this paradigm.

This study has explored several key themes across Mukherji's body of work:

- **Hybrid Historiography:** Rather than strictly adhering to factual reconstruction, Mukherji employs a hybrid form of historiography where personal memories, myths, and political realities coalesce. Films like *Rajkahini* and *Ek Je Chhilo Raja* exemplify this method.
- **Subaltern Voices and Resistance:** In giving space to marginalised groups sex workers, political dissidents, the urban underclass Mukherji's cinema resonates with subaltern studies, though at times risking the pitfalls of romanticisation or simplification.
- **Memory, Trauma, and Nostalgia:** His films, from *Uma* to *Baishe Srabon*, reveal the affective dimensions of historical trauma and the ways in which private griefs and public histories are inextricably linked.

- **Gendered Histories:** Despite some progressive representations, Mukherji's treatment of women within historical narratives remains an area demanding further critical engagement, especially in light of feminist historiographical critiques.
- **Spectral Histories and Political Amnesia:** Mukherji's thrillers particularly underscore how suppressed histories and political violence haunt the present, destabilising neat narratives of progress or modernity.

While Mukherji's films offer rich material for rethinking history and culture, they are not without contradictions. His negotiation between commercial viability and artistic ambition sometimes results in compromises for instance, the melodramatic overtones in *Rajkahini* or the occasional moral absolutism in films like *Dwitiyo Purush*. Moreover, Mukherji's use of nostalgia often walks a fine line between critical reflection and sentimental longing, a tension that reflects larger cultural anxieties about modernity, loss, and belonging in Bengal's socio-political landscape. As Stuart Hall reminds us in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990), identity itself is not a fixed essence but a "positioning" an ongoing negotiation between past and present, self and other. Mukherji's cinema captures this dynamic process, refusing closure and inviting continuous reinterpretation.

Srijit Mukherji's cinema reminds us that history is not a static archive but a living, breathing narrative shaped by memory, trauma, hope, and desire. Through his films, we are invited to remember not as passive inheritors of a monolithic past but as active agents capable of questioning, mourning, and reimagining. In an age when histories are increasingly contested and rewritten, such acts of cinematic remembrance are not just artistic endeavours; they are profoundly political acts of resistance against forgetting. Mukherji's work, with all its contradictions, complexities, and courage, thus stands as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling to recover, to resist, and ultimately, to reimagine who we are.

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