

# The Queen of Crime in Tollywood: Adaptations of Agatha Christie in Bengali Cinema

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## Abstract

Agatha Christie is known all over the world as one of the most loved writers of detective fictions. Her ingenious plot construction, deep understanding of human psychology and presence of the two celebrated detectives viz. Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple have impressed the global reading public for nearly a century. Many of her tales have been adapted in Hollywood and also by BBC for its tv series. She has influenced quite a few Bengali authors as well, however, adaptations of her stories in Bengali cinema are only three till date and this paper attempts to find out whether those few Bengali films are able to satisfy the audience as likable adaptations of such a literary genius.

**Keywords:** detective fiction, movie adaptation, Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, narrative style

One of the most well-known writers of all time Dame Agatha Christie is known as the queen of crime for her scintillating detective stories centered around her two creations Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. Her works have been translated into all the major languages of the world and have also inspired various other writers across the globe to take up detective fiction. In this context, her influence upon quite a few Bengali authors should also be taken into consideration. Celebrated Bengali author Narayan Sanyal admittedly borrowed many of his plot outlines from Christie for his widely read 'Kantay Kantay' series featuring barrister P.K Bose as the sleuth. Literature has a close connection with dramatic arts and even in this age of superstars and megastars the success of a film often depends on its plot or script. So, it is well expected that the popular tales by Christie would find many takers among the Bengali film makers as well. However, adaptations of Christie's stories for the Bengali film industry are rather few which is pretty surprising considering that Bengali audience in general are quite fond of watching the homegrown detectives Prodosh Chandra Mitra popularly known as Felu da and Byomkesh Baksi on screen, moreover, Christie's tales render themselves well on celluloid. The attempt of this paper is to find out whether these few adaptations, three to be precise, have been able to retain the essence of Christie's signature style or followed a different trajectory altogether.

The first Bengali cinematic adaptation of Christie is *Chupi Chupi Ashey*<sup>i</sup> released in 1960 when the 'Queen of Crime' was at the peak of her repertoire. This film, directed by noted Bengali author and film director Premendra Mitra is an adaptation of Christie's very famous play *The Mousetrap*<sup>ii</sup> which itself was an extended version of the short story *Three Blind Mice*<sup>iii</sup> and holds the record of being the longest running play in the world as acknowledged by the Guinness Book of World Records<sup>iv</sup>. Although the writer-director Premendra Mitra chooses not to acknowledge the source material nevertheless the similarities between the play and the film in contention are all too apparent to ignore. The Bengali film in contention had Chhabi Biswas and Tarun Kumar essaying major roles and turned out to be a commercially successful as

well as critically acclaimed production. The original story was based on a real-life tragic incident called the Longridge case in which a young boy of eleven years was tortured by his foster parents resulting in his death. This caused much uproar in England and Christie chose this incident as the primary source material of her story in which we are told that three children are sent to the care of their foster parents and one of them died after a few months. Many years later, the victim's elder brother decides to take revenge for his brother's unfortunate demise. With an intention to murder three people whom he holds responsible for his brother's death and he starts by killing the primary accused in London. In order to achieve this purpose, he makes an elaborate plan and fakes his identity as a police inspector out to capture the culprit of the first murder committed in London. He knows that the two other targets are in a health resort but in different roles, while one happens to be the young lady running the resort with her fiancé another is a guest there. He manages to kill the guest, a retired lady but is caught while trying to murder the young lady. In the end, we are made to believe that he is mentally unstable and therefore would possibly be sent to an asylum instead of a prison. This storyline is faithfully followed in *Chupi Chupi Ashey* where the setting is transported to Kolkata and parts of Bengal. In the beginning we see that an old woman is murdered by an unidentified person in a Kolkata locality and then the scene shifts to another part of the state where Kalyaneswari health resort run by Prabir and Kanika welcomes their first few guests. The excessive snowfall which cuts the resort off from the rest of the country in the original story is replaced here by a devastating flood. In this situation, Inspector Ghosal comes to look for the murderer and yet the second murder is committed. Finally, it is revealed that Inspector Ghosal is actually the criminal in disguise and he is caught red handed by the actual police inspector who had been living in the resort as an ailing old man Beni babu. There is a minor deviation from the original story though as we see that the killer escapes the police and drowns to his death. The air of suspense which hangs heavy over every character and makes even Kanika question the motives of her fiancé Prabir are masterfully created by the director. In accordance with the tropes of the whodunit genre of which Christie is a recognised maestro the culprit is revealed only in the very end and the doubts are cleared. Thus, *Chupi Chupi Ashey* can be hailed as a successful adaptation of *Three Blind Mice* or *The Mousetrap* which bear the quintessential mark of a classic Christie tale the essence of which is preserved in *Chupi Chupi Ashey* as well. It is also to be noted in this context that *Three Blind Mice* is one of the few stories which feature neither Miss Marple nor Poirot and the less glamourised police forces do the job instead.

The second film in question is a creation of another very popular director of the late 90s and early 2000s Rituparno Ghosh who proved his mettle time and again. His *Shubho Mahurat*<sup>v</sup> is adapted from Christie's *The Mirror Crackd from Side to Side*<sup>vi</sup>. The novel portrays a vengeful heroine of the yesteryears who cunningly poisons the drink of one of her fans and kills her in this way because this fan had infected her with German measles when she was pregnant. As a result, the child born to her was mentally retarded. The storyline was inspired by a real-life incident of Gene Tierney who had given birth to a premature child called Daria due to Rubella or German measles infection from an ardent fan and suffered nervous breakdown thereafter. Ms. Tierney however, bore her misfortune quite bravely and refrained from killing that fan unlike Marina Gregg modelled upon her by Christie. Miss Marple, one of the two famous detectives created by her, finds out the truth in her inimitable style. Gregg, however, is beyond the clutches of law when the truth comes out as she has apparently died from a drug overdose. This is faithfully followed by Rituparno Ghosh who himself wrote the script and the screenplay of *Shubho Mahurat*. The two protagonists viz. Padmini Chowdhury, the film actress played by Sharmila Tagore and Ranga Pisima, modelled on Miss Marple and essayed by Rakhi Gulzar, simply steal the show while the supporting cast

comprising Nandita Das, Anindya Chattopadhyay, Tota Roychowdhury and Sumanta Mukhopadhyay lend their support quite ably. The premise is a bit altered though as the victim is shown to be Padmini's one-time colleague Kakoli Sengupta played by Kalyani Mandal. More than just being a murder mystery, Rituporno Ghosh chooses to foreground a grieving mother's pain and suffering whose realisation of the true cause of her child's congenital disease drives her nearly insane. She plans and executes revenge minutely and is also successful to imply that she was the primary target of the crime instead of her colleague Kakoli as she had unknowingly handed over her poison-laced drink to Kakoli. But Ranga Pisima sees through her ruse and confronts Padmini with the actual truth. Padmini is full of remorse after this meeting and finally commits suicide to atone for her guilt. This role of an unfortunate mother driven to crime is portrayed perfectly by Sharmila Tagore, the protagonist of the movie. The fall from grace for a well-known socialite in her own eyes and the ensuing shame probably drives Padmini Chowdhury to commit suicide. Unlike his predecessor, Premendra Mitra, Rituporno Ghosh acknowledged his debt to Christie in the beginning of the movie. Incidentally, this happens to be the only detective film by Rituporno Ghosh and he turns Miss Marple into a lovable middle-aged Bengali woman with aplomb in keeping with the localised flavour of the entire movie.

The latest one till date, *Chorabali*<sup>vii</sup> released in 2016 is based on yet another successful Christie novel *Cards on the Table*<sup>viii</sup> featuring the Belgian sleuth Hercule Poirot. In the original story we find that a house party is in progress and the flamboyant host Mr. Shaitana, one of the richest men in London, is found dead at the end of the party. He had arranged two tables for the eight guests to play cards in two separate rooms while he himself was enjoying a drink. As this party was strictly meant for a few selected guests so no outsider could have possibly murdered him. As Poirot was one of the invited guests so he naturally takes up the task of finding out who the culprit is and after much deliberation is able to establish the facts at the end of the story. In the process, we come to realise the powerful motives of not just one but a few of the characters to put an abrupt end to Mr. Shaitana's life. It is a layered story that delves deep into complexities of human psychology which motivate one of the characters to murder him. In fact, Poirot reveals that the card games and the party were actually an elaborate gameplan laid by Mr Shaitana who wanted to be murdered by one of the guests as he was tired of his life. He is an unusual host who had invited people who supposedly committed murder and went undetected and therefore unpunished by law. He knew their secrets and provoked them by openly referring to those misdeeds albeit in an indirect manner. After the card games begin, he drinks a sedative laced drink and waits to be murdered which happens as per his expectations. Published in 1936, *Cards on the Table* turned out to be both popular and critically acclaimed. The movie adaptation *Chorabali* however, fails to live up to the standards set by the already mentioned films. Here, Mr. Shaitana is replaced with psychiatrist Dr. Dasgupta who knows the dark secrets of four of his invited guests. He is discovered dead at the end of the party and the police enquiry led by Deputy Commissioner Vishnu Das Sharma, one of the guests in the party, ensues. However, it is Dr. Ardhendu Chatterjee, a retired professor of Criminology modelled on Hercule Poirot, who uncovers the truth of the crooked Dr. Sanyal being the actual murderer of Dr. Dasgupta. The plot deviates from the original in two aspects; firstly, it brings in an angle of another attempted murder by a guest named Tilottama, an author modelled on the fidgety Mrs. Ariadne Oliver from the original, who also had a strong motive for killing Dr. Dasgupta and offered him a poison laced drink and ensured that he consumed it just a few minutes before Dr. Sanyal broke his neck. However, she remains undetected to everyone except for Dr. Chatterjee. It also introduces the element of meta fiction or story within a story in which Tilottama writes a story based on her experience of being there and the elements of fact and fiction merge with one another. But

this interesting concept is poorly executed and the rather convoluted script drags the movie to its unconvincing end and Tilottama, is let go off the hook by the professor as he sympathises with her motive of the murder. Instead, Dr. Sanyal, equally guilty of this murder is handed over to the police by the professor. Although Barun Chanda being a good actor tries his best to do justice to his role but lacks the charismatic charm of Hercule Poirot which keeps the reader glued to the pages of a typical Christie novel. Moreover, the script fails to create that intriguing atmosphere quintessential for such a thriller. One feels that the director Mr. Subhajit Mitra should have paid more attention to building the plot properly and tying up the loose ends effectively.

Thus, to sum up, the three different productions differ from one another in treatment, while the first two are generally considered by critics to be pretty good adaptations that live up to the original the last one fails to do justice to its source material. Only three Bengali movie adaptations of Christie's novels hardly seem adequate for the connoisseurs of detective fiction on celluloid and one sincerely hopes that some more Bengali films based on her stories will be released in future.

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