

Rethinking Bengali Identity : Depiction of Early Nineteenth-century Eurasian Singer-song writer in *Antony Firingee* and *Jaatishwar*

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Abstract. Christopher Pinney in his book, *Photos of the Gods : The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (2004) calls visual culture “an experimental zone” where new possibilities and new identities are forged, and Pinney here focuses primarily on the chromolithographs produced from the late 1870s onwards in India (8). For Pinney these chromolithographs were an integral element of history in the making rather than produce a narrative that conforms to what is already known about India. Pinney tries to study the relevant question of what images can ‘do’ or ‘want’ rather than how they ‘look’. By stressing on the extraordinary power of images or the notion of *darshan* of ‘seeing and being seen’, Pinney discusses the possibility of physical transformation that forms the backdrop against which a new kind of history has to be written. Cinema which is an important part of visual culture helps to reconstruct identities and represent figures that remain elusive to history, and are often missing in archives and records. In this paper attempt shall be made to focus on the figure of early nineteenth-century Eurasian *kabiyal* or singer-songwriter on whom two Bengali films are made – Sunil Banerjee’s *Antony Firingee* (1967) and Srijit Mukherji’s *Jaatishwar: A Musical of Memories* (2014). As this figure occupies a contradictory position because of his racial identity so the concept of ‘the body’ shall be discussed in this paper. The ‘body’ that is constantly being redefined through social and cultural practices forge new identities but at the same time ‘the body’ also carries with it the imprint of past identity. Hence this idea of constructing and retaining identities shall be critically analyzed and studied in this paper through the figure of early nineteenth-century Eurasian singer-songwriter of colonial Bengal who is depicted in Bengali films, and see how these twentieth and twenty-first century filmmakers have depicted him within the framework of the ‘alternative Bengali imaginary’ that constructs a sense of Bengali self or a ‘Bengalination’ as discussed by Sharmistha Gooptu in her book, *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation* (2010). Therefore, in this paper attempt shall be made to rethink the concept of ‘the body’ by focusing on the term *firingi* that is attached to the singer-songwriter’s name, and secondly, attempt shall be made to focus on the time period in which the two Bengali films on Antony Firingi were made to critically analyze the deeply contested idea of ‘Bengali identity’ as constructed through the figure.

Keywords : *Firingee*; Bengali cinema; Bengali identity.

Antony Firingee was an Eurasian ‘*kabiyal*’ or a singer-song writer of early nineteenth-century Bengal who was popular among the Bengali audience for his participation in ‘*kabi-gan*’, one of the folk songs of colonial Bengal. *Kabi-gan*

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was primarily influenced by the Baishnab thought that shaped the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century folk cultures of Bengal but in the mid nineteenth-century *kabi-gan* was marginalized as it failed to contribute to the nationalist project that the elite class of Bengal was promoting. What makes this figure so fascinating among the Bengali filmmakers and audience is one of the main concerns of this paper. The visual presence of such figures reminds one of the many differences and possibilities that it embodies. In case of Antony Firingi, 'body' becomes an important subject that embodies different meanings made through different social and cultural practices. It becomes an extension of the larger environment that changes geographically, climatically, gastronomically, culturally, and linguistically, and this change however, is never complete rather it carries with it an imprint of its past environments (Harris,1). By focusing on Jonathan Gil Harris's discussion on how a '*firingi* body' complicates the fixed categories of identity attempt shall be made to critically analyze the filmmakers' understanding of depicting the figure of this early nineteenth-century Eurasian singer-songwriter, Antony Firingi in their films. To understand 'the body' not as an unchanging unit, especially in context of Antony Firingi, the racial epithet *firingi* that is attached to his name needs to be discussed. The 1886 entry in *Hobson-Jobson*, the well-known dictionary of Anglo-Indian colloquial words and phrases says:

This term for a European is very old in Asia, but when now employed by natives in India is either applied (especially in the South) specifically to the Indian-born Portuguese, or, when used more generally, for 'European', implies something of hostility and disparagement. (Yule and Burnell, 269)

According to the 1886 entry the term *firingi* was used to address the India-born Portuguese and the Europeans mainly as term of abuse. It is also important to note that there are different spellings of this term such as *farangi*, *feringee*, *firangi*, *firanji*, *firingi* which were used to address the settlers who came to India during different time periods. For example, the terms *farangi* or *firingi* are primarily Persian terms while the term *firanji* are Arabic terms. These discussions on the term are also made by the later historian and scholar, J. J. Campos in his book, *History of Portuguese in Bengal* (1919) while discussing the sixteenth-century Portuguese settlement in Satgaon or Saptagram, a major port of Bengal during sixteenth century. Campos refers to the seventeenth-century historian, Abdul Hamid Lahori's account that says "a party of Frank merchants" came to Satgaon to trade before Akbar's conquest of Bengal in 1576. What draws our attention is the use of the term 'Frank'. Campos further adds in the footnote of his book that the term 'Frank' has different connotations, and is the parent word of '*Feringhi*'. The term was used by the Arabs and Persians to refer to the settlers who came from Europe to India during the sixteenth century. That means the Arabs and the Persians used the term 'Frank' initially to refer to the 'French crusaders' but after the arrival of the

Portuguese and other Europeans in India, the term was used to address these foreign settlers. Both the 1886 and 1919 entries give us a historical understanding of the term *firingi* but the discussion that is made by Jonathan Gil Harris, the twentieth-century scholar gives us wider implication of the term.

Jonathan Gil Harris in his book, *The First Firangis: Remarkable Stories of Heroes, Healers, Charlatans, Courtesans & other Foreigners who Became Indian* (2015) goes beyond the historical understanding, and focuses on the complex process of migration, mixing and transformation which question the fixed categories of identity. Harris writes:

Which is to say: this book [*The First Firangis*] trades on the fact that the word ‘firangi’ possessed – and still possesses – an imprecision that neither the English ‘foreigner’ nor the Hindi *pardesi* or *videshi* can quite communicate. Yet this imprecision is precisely what I love about the word. ‘Firangi’ can never mean simply British or Christian or white non-Indian (although it is still often used that way) and it can never be simply derogatory (although it is, again, still often used to that effect). (284)

The racial epithet *firingi* is an integral part of the singer-songwriter’s life, and the reason why detailed discussion has been made is to focus on the contradictory nature of the term and the different social implications it has, as mentioned by Harris. According to conventional readings ‘white’ colour was inextricably linked to the *firingi* body, and the mixed-race singer- songwriter about whom this paper is all about remains unavailable in visual records. What was Antony Firingi’s skin colour? Or, what did he wear? What were his sartorial choices? – the answers to these questions rely ‘only’ on the films made on him by the twentieth and twenty-first century filmmakers. The word ‘only’ is important to note because it is through visual medium that we form a mental image of the character of Antony Firingi. Films play an important role in making the elusive characters alive. There are, however very few research materials available on Antony Firingi, and among them we have his songs that exist till today. Some of the biographical details that are available includes Rajnarain Basu’s *Se Kal Aar E Kaal* (1874), Gopalchandra Bandyopadhyay’s *Prachin Kabi Sangraha* Vol. 1 (1877), Brajasundar Sanyal’s article, “Kabiwala” (5) published in *Nabya Bharat* in 1905, and Purnochandra De’s article “Kabi Antony Saheb” published in *Bangashri*, Vol. 2 in 1935. These are some of the textual sources that give information about the early nineteenth-century singer-songwriter, Antony Firingi but visual medium plays an important role in re-establishing the identity of Antony Firingi by creating a mental image of this figure in the minds of the audience. Bengali filmmakers’ depiction of Antony Firingi played by the popular Bengali actors, Uttam Kumar and Prosenjit Chatterjee, as a Eurasian who has not only embraced the culture of colonial Bengal by participating

in 'kabigan' but has also undergone physical transformation, focus on the idea of a 'single identity' that this paper tries to critically analyze. The physical transformation or the sartorial choices made by the character of Antony Firingi can be comprehended through visual medium. In one of the scenes in Sunil Banerjee's film, *Antony Firingi* we see a poetic duel is arranged between Antony Firingi and Thakurdas Sinha, one of the singer-songwriters of nineteenth-century Bengal where the latter sarcastically questions Antony Firingi's sartorial choices. As a reply he sings the most famous line in the film: "In Bengal I am happy to wear this Bengali attire, by becoming the son-in-law of Thakre Sinha's father I have disowned shirt and hat" ("এই বাসায় বাসার বেশে আনন্দে আছি, হয়ে ঠাকুরের বাপের জামাই কুটি টুপি ছেড়েছি।"); The role of Thakurdas Sinha in Sunil Banerjee's film was played by the Bengali actor, Haridhan Mukhopadhyay (1907-2004) who is addressed as "ঠাকুরের বাপের জামাই" by Antony Firingi. The word "ঠাকুর" [Thakre] is a corruption or the colloquial form of 'Thakur', and here he is being insulted indirectly by Antony Firingi as "ঠাকুরের বাপের জামাই" [son-in-law of Thakurdas Sinha's father] which means Antony Firingi is the son-in-law of Thakurdas Sinha's father, and Thakurdas Sinha is Antony Firingi's brother-in-law which in Bengali means 'sala' – a common insult.

Through this scene we also see the transformation taking place in the character of Antony Firingi where he disowns his Western attire and owns Bengali dress. In Srijit Mukherji's film, *Jaatishwar* the image of Antony Firingi that the audience gets to see is a man having long blonde hair and beard but after adopting Hindu culture the audience see him wearing long kurta and loin cloth.

The practice of embracing Indian culture or 'going native' was very common in late eighteenth century colonial Bengal, and the different sorts of racial, class and gender hierarchies that structured the experiences of the native women and European men too, played a crucial role in establishing colonial state and governance in British India in the films - *Antony Firingi* and *Jaatishwar* too, Antony Firingi is shown to have married a Bengali widow. The story of the widow who is named Nirupama, the role played by Tanuja in the film, *Antony Firingi*, and Soudamini, the role played by Swastika Mukherjee in the film *Jaatishwar*, is absent in historical records. It seems that the story of this widow has been incorporated in the films by the filmmakers either as a result of popular construction born of nothing more than imagination or it might be the local legends that are inextricably attached to the story of Antony Firingi. However, the role of the female characters in both the films cannot be dismissed as they tend to "break traditional "templates" – the phrase mentioned by Srimati Mukherjee in her book, and reconceptualize the given role. She mentions in her book, *Women and Resistance in Contemporary Bengali Cinema: A Freedom Incomplete* (2016),

In choosing to cinematize these endeavors of women who have largely been accorded secondary status in a patriarchal culture, the makers of these films

break traditional “templates” themselves, opening the way for a reconceptualization of given or expected roles. The fact that a number of these women characters suffer a double disempowerment as, say victims of abuse, prostitutes, or widows, still engage in such unmaking and making [that it] renders such directorial choices even more significant. (12-13)

The women figures, who are depicted in the films are strong enough to break the “templates” or social codes, and re-make it in their own ways. Both the films which are set in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal represented widows – Nirupama and Soudamini as strong women capable of taking decisions even though they are shown to suffer “double disempowerment” in the films. But like most of the love-centered plots that demand sacrifice and selflessness, the plot of these two films too, follow the same trend. The films end with the death of the women characters – Nirupama and Soudamini while Antony Firingi is shown to participate in *kabigan* where he achieves recognition and fame on that same fateful day. The filmmakers have followed this conventional ending perhaps to fulfil some commercial interests but at the same time we cannot deny the fact that such tragic representation of characters have always helped the figures to remain alive in the memory of the Bengali audience. However, both the films – *Antony Firingee* and *Jaatishwar* gained praise and appreciation from the audience when they were released for its star cast, music and story but what I want to point out here is that figures like Antony Firingi who occupy liminal position “carries with it the imprint of its past environments” but the filmmakers are constantly trying to situate him within a single category. The tendency to locate a character within a fixed category or follow one culture or one belief continues in films but complete transition from one identity to another or shedding the habits of previous identity is often very difficult and impossible. Filmmakers have represented Antony Firingi along that same vein where he is shown to have disowned Christian identity and embraced Bengali lifestyle. Harris mentions that this kind of owning and disowning of religious and racial identities occur, and was common in colonial India but at the same time one cannot or fails to completely detach oneself from his previous culture or environment. In the films the filmmakers have done the reverse. The character of Antony Firingi is shown to have accepted Bengali culture and at the same time he has completely detached himself from his previous religious identity. This ‘Bengali identity’ or ‘Bengaliness’ that the character of Antony Firingi embodies in the films are not absolute terms rather they are deeply contested ones. So, discussion on these contradictory terms is made in the next and the final section of this paper. Sharmistha Gooptu in her book, *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation* (2010) studies how the construction of Bengali *bhadralok’s* worldview aims to recreate ‘Bengaliness’ and ‘a sense of Bengali self’ through 1960s Bengali cinema. What is this ‘Bengaliness’? Gooptu mentions that there emerged a public domain that

contested, in terms of the idea of a 'cultured Bengaliness', the prevalence of the Hindi language, and the construction of Hindi-nation. The Bengali cinema however worked to forge a sense of 'imaginary Bengali identity' where Bengali audience was driven to newer forms of self-assertion and identity, and these shifts according to Gooptu are inextricably linked to the nationalist politics. The 1930s and 1940s political scenario had an impact on the films made on Bengal, and one such example was the Congress party's biased attitude towards Bengal's Hindus with regard to McDonald's Communal Award that created a boundary between the nation and a region., "In the late 1930s and 1940s, *bhadralok* politics reacted negatively to these challenges by becoming inward-looking and defensive" (Chatterji, 12). This inward-looking vision and the tendency to recreate Bengali identity can be understood through the figure of Antony Firingi who is depicted in 1967 and 2014 films. Earlier, too I have mentioned that complete transformation is not possible in real life as certain traits of previous life remains.

The reason why the figure of Antony Firingi is repeatedly brought on screen or why the Bengali audience still craves to watch such figures on screen is because of the fact that these figures cannot be a part of reality. That does not mean I am negating the figure of Antony Firingi who existed in the early-nineteenth-century colonial Bengal. No doubt there are some archival sources and his songs that are still available, and prove his existence. Keeping in mind the visual representation of Antony Firingi, I am trying to critically analyse the politics of representing such figures who are always portrayed as ideal figures by the filmmakers. Sunil Banerjee's film, *Antony Firingee* that was made during 1960s had Uttam Kumar in the lead role. While discussing 1960s Bengali cinema one cannot miss out Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen's pairing which made 1960s era, the 'golden period' of Bengali cinema. Through their films they redefined the paradigm of love for their generation, and "signified the perfect balance of permanence and change in Bengali life", as mentioned by Gooptu (158). Considering Uttam Kumar for the role of Antony Firingi was a wise decision. Uttam Kumar's acting abilities and stardom no doubt, has given life to an elusive figure, Antony Firingee as he was almost obliterated by history. Popular representations brought Antony Firingi back to the fore, and has immortalized him through the acting skill of Uttam Kumar. In this context Gooptu writes :

Uttam Kumar, as he was projected through industry discourses, and imagined by Bengali audiences, was the archetypal *bhadralok* Bengali, whose extraordinariness stemmed not from larger-than-life associations but rather the subtext of him being 'the ordinary man'. This persona, as it was circulated in film and extra-filmic discourses, came to embody, for his generation, the very essence of being 'Bengali'. (177)

The image of Uttam Kumar that was rooted in the ordinary and idiomatic, and his ability to project middle-class man helped him to convey the story of the mixed-race singer-songwriter, Antony Firingi. Though he had to play the role of an Eurasian turned native what seems to add to his glory was the image that was already imprinted on the minds of the Bengali audience. The story of Antony Firingi, the acting of Uttam Kumar, and the music of Anil Bagchi not only helped the film to gain appreciation from the Bengali audience but it also earned National Film Award for Best Actor in 1968 for Uttam Kumar.

Visual representations play an integral role in bringing back to fore a figure who has always remained elusive to history. The embellishments and the additions that are made in the stories, one set in 2013 and the other in nineteenth-century Bengal. Unlike Sunil Banerjee's *Antony Firingee*, there is an element of suspense in *Jaatishwar* but what makes the filmmaker to work on the figure of Antony Firingi even in this twenty-first century is the story of cultural difference and cultural assimilation that forms the main crux of the film. As complete transition from one identity to another is difficult so figures such as Antony Firingi 'as depicted on screen' by the filmmakers can hardly exist in society. That doesn't mean he did not live. His songs are the proof of his existence. Cinema becomes a space for historical reconstruction where new meanings are invented or rewritten as Pinney has tried to do "by studying the chromolithographs. Hence popular representations have played a crucial role in keeping alive a figure who was almost obliterated by history but what has survived the test of time is the slim corpus of his songs". (67)

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