



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



---

ISSN 2278-9529  
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## The Epic Vision and the Crisis of Partition in Ritwik Ghatak's Films

**Dipayan Mukherjee**

Junior Research Fellow (JRF),  
Department of English,  
Rabindra Bharati University,  
Kolkata, West Bengal.

### **Abstract:**

The crisis of Partition had been a recurrent theme in Ritwik Ghatak's films. To cope with this crisis which had haunted the film-maker throughout his life, Ghatak undertook an epic vision in his films. By recurrent use of mythologies, folklore, symbolisms and Jungian archetypes, Ghatak continuously tried to search the lost cultural roots through his films. In this paper, through analysis of his films separately I shall discuss the techniques which constituted his epic vision and how these techniques were being used in relation to his portrayal of the crisis of Partition. Finally, I shall try to analyze how the dialogic interplay between this search for lost cultural roots and the bitter socio-political reality gave birth to the haunting cinematic effect in Ritwik Ghatak's films.

### **Keywords: Partition, Collective Unconscious, Archetypes, Mythologies, Folklore, Epic**

Along with Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak was a very influential film-maker, not only in the Bengal Renaissance era but also in the context of the entire Indian film scenario. Unlike his celebrated contemporary Satyajit Ray, Ghatak had to continue film-making against all odds --- against abject poverty and a hostile section of film society and his once party-comrades turned foes, who unable to tolerate his uncompromisingly independent attitude towards art, tried to pull him down at any cost. However, what eventually stamped Ghatak's greatness for the future generation was his undying dedication and honesty towards film-making. With the advent of rapid commercialization of cinema, with the fast dissolving boundary between commercial and art film, Ghatak staunchly upheld his notion of cinema as an art—an art which like any other art, could be used to reflect the dreams and tragedies of common people.

The historic event of Partition of India had been a recurrent theme in Ghatak's films. Partition of Bengal and the emergence of East Pakistan brought about an unwitnessed epoch of tension, dislocation and violence, which like to any other refugee from East Pakistan, completely shattered Ghatak to the core. Coming from a secured middle-class childhood, this dislocation, forever, put into question the concept of 'home'—a crisis which comes out of the sudden foreign tag on one's geographical land, one's dialect, one's memories, one's 'roots'. And as because for Ghatak, film as a work of art was directly connected to one's essential being, the ever-haunting realities of the pangs of Partition was again and again reflected in his works. In Ritwik Ghatak's films, thus, often is found a resurfacing of a glorious past, a confrontation with the gap resulting from an encroachment of a bitter present onto the glorious past, and finally a desire to fill up the gap through the epic vision in his films.

The epic outlook of his films was required to cope with the magnanimity of the loss that was at the center of his films—an irrecoverable loss of a nation, of the culture, of the people. As

a part of the epic outlook, Ghatak often reverted to use of mythologies and archetypal figures, folk culture and rituals. It was through use of archetypal figures and through references to Indian mythologies that he tried to attain a symbolic-imaginative view of the world that would be able to touch the Collective Unconscious of people of Bengal. This symbolic-imaginative outlook should be emphasized upon in context of his films because, it must be remembered, the past he had been trying to go back to did not exist anymore. From a postcolonial perspective, this involves a process of analepsis which in the words of Pramod. K. Nayar “involves a negotiation with a retreating history, past, traditions and customs” (Nayar 188). So there remains a possibility that the ‘home’ he had been trying to go back to would be at best, in words of Salman Rushdie an “imaginary homeland”(Nayar 192). Ghatak was very much aware of this symbolic imaginative aspect of his vision but for him it was only through imagination and symbols that he could reclaim a part of his memories that was a part of his very being, which had been permanently lost. In his book *Cinema and I* (henceforth abbreviated as *CI*), Ghatak quotes the following line from C.G.Jung’s essay “The Collective Unconscious”.

“The symbolic-imaginative view of the world...represents the natural and spontaneous striving which adds to man’s biological bond a parallel and equivalent psychic bond, thus enriching life by another dimension --- and it is eminently this dimension that makes a man what he is.”( *CI* 60).

This dialogic interaction between past and present, between memories and reality, between fiction and fact takes place in the epic canvas of Ritwik Ghatak’s movies.

### **Use of the Great Mother Archetype:**

Ritwik Ghatak’s films are famous for portraying strong female characters played by strong actresses. The recurrence of such characters testifies to the fact the characters besides being ordinary women figures, are portrayed by Ghatak as archetypal figures. In his famous 1960 movie *Meghe Dhaka Tara* ( *The Cloud-Capped Star*) the central character Neeta is while on one hand, representative of the numerous Bengali girls sacrificing their own happiness for the well-being of their poverty-stricken families in the post-partition era, on the other is exalted by Ghatak as an embodiment of the mother archetype figure---- the ultimate paragon of self-sacrificing care and love. And for Ghatak, The Great Mother archetypal figure has always a certain connection to the image of Mother Bengal—a mythical mother image caring and loving her people though totally maltreated by her own sons. Like the image of Mother India, in Ghatak’s films the mother archetypal characters symbolize the essential caring and nurturing spirit of Bengal, though totally brutalized by the fanaticism of Partition. Some cinematographic techniques like excessive use of close-up shots and low-angle shots are used in *The Cloud-Capped Star* to exalt Neeta ( played by the strong actress Supriya Choudhury) as a larger-than-life archetypal figure. Side by side, is depicted the extreme poverty of Neeta’s family—a condition very common among the refugees from East Pakistan who were torn away from relatively financially secure condition and were thrown into abject poverty as a result of the dislocation. This is most strongly presented in the last scene of the film, whereby by a stroke of cinematic genius, Ghatak shows Neeta’s desperate cry for survival in the face of imminent death echoing throughout the entire landscape. Her desperate cry on one hand can be connected to the traditional pain which Indian girls have felt when being transferred from the security of parental home to the uncertainty of the in-laws house after marriage. Their pain had fossilized into folklore and folk songs like the songs on Goddess Uma’s sorrow at final separation from Her family after marriage to Shiva. But in modern times,

the situation has been subverted. In the film *Neeta*, the only earning member, is indirectly forced to stay back in the paternal home because of pure financial need. Her manner of self-sacrifice though apparently different from traditional self-surrender of girls whose personal opinion regarding their marriages were of no significance at all, is basically at the root the same, except the fact that for *Neeta* there waits no distant hope of a happy married life. Complete destruction is her only direction. Her tragic predicament is accompanied by a scrutinizing commentary on the post-Partition socio-political turmoil bringing untold miseries onto the lives of the middle-class people. Thus in Ghatak's film abstract folklore and concrete socio-political commentary overlaps and through the epic canvas of his film he discovers the image of the Great Mother archetype in the tragic plights of a modern-age woman.

In the 1961 film *Komal Gandhar* ( *A Soft Note on a Sharp Scale* ), set in the backdrop of IPTA theatre Movement, Ghatak mixes the characters of his hero and heroine, *Bhriku* and *Anusuya* with strong mythological colours. *Anusuya* is again an archetypal figure ( incidentally played again by *Supriya Choudhury*) and represents Bengal with all Her feminine vitality. Ghatak uses the myth of *Shakuntala* and in one instance in the film, *Bhriku* makes *Anusuya* see herself as *Shakuntala* ( a role to be played by *Anusuya* in the theatre next day), the folkloric girl whose pain at leaving behind her 'home' after marriage stands for the pain of all girls of traditional Bengal. In the film *Anusuya* becomes *Shakuntala* of the modern world, *Calcutta* with all the post-Partition miseries and turmoil becomes her 'tapoban' ( destined land), the little beggar child become to her like *Shakuntala's* 'harin shishu' ( baby deers) that is her objects of care and empathy. While *Anusuya* is demure, essentially feminine but with an unconquerable inner strength, *Bhriku* is representative of the embittered youth whose life has been turned upside down by the Partition. The scene where the fast-moving camera runs through the now abandoned rail tracks and bangs at the so called border between India and East Pakistan, is ever memorable for Ghatak's passionate depiction of the absurdity of Partition by a simple cinematic sequence. The film ends in the idealized union between *Bhriku* and *Anusuya* that is between the idealistic youth ( like Ghatak himself) and the archetypal heroine embodying Bengal with all Her care and vitality. This movie is one of the very few Ghatak's movies with a happy-ending and here Ghatak deals not only with analepsis that a vision of the past but also with prolepsis that is a vision of the future. Here a vision of an ideal future is presented only symbolically through the ending of the film where young-blooded idealism unites with the cultural root. It must be remembered that the backdrop of the film being IPTA movement and considering *Bhriku's* dedication to theatre in the film, Ghatak throws light on his didactic notion of good art which, for him, "cannot be divorced from life" ( *CI* 29).

Finally in the 1974 autobiographical movie *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* ( *Reason, Debate and a Story*), Ghatak names an important female character as "Bongobala" ( Bongo = country / land and bala = girl that is "girl of the land"). In the film, Ghatak plays a self-styled character named *Neelkantha Bagchi* ( the name with the religious connotation of self-sacrifice for other's welfare), an alcoholic intellectual who, being rejected by society and near ones, takes on a journey to search humanity's lost 'roots' amidst the neglected folk traditions and cultures. In his journey he is accompanied by an ex-teacher of Sanskrit whose school has been closed down due to political killings ( representative of the plight of educated middle class whose education is of least importance in the post-Partition turmoil), a youth ( probably of leftist inclination) and of course "Bongobala" who is a female refugee from East Pakistan. A glimpse at the way Ghatak presents *Bongobala* in the film, from his decision to cast *Shaoli Mitra* ( daughter of eminent

theatre personality Shambhu Mitra and later to become a noted theatre personality herself) as Bongobala to the use of long close-up shots focusing on her eyes, the make-up, the local dialect of her words, should reveal to the audience the archetypal mother figure with both perfect innocence and enduring inner strength, that Ghatak was trying to present through Bongobala. With her haunting presence in the film, she embodies the essential spirit of Bengal--- the untainted Bengal that Ghatak so dearly loved. The film ends with Bagchi's death but with the possibility of a future union between Bongobala and the leftist youth and it is again through the union between the revolutionary ideal and the deep-seated cultural roots that Ghatak envisions a better future even after his own intellectual defeat.

Sometimes Ghatak uses certain archetypal figures to portray the age-old fears and violence embedded in the Collective Unconscious. In one such instance in the 1962 movie *Subarnarekha* Ghatak shows the little girl named Sita ( the name with the mythological reference to Sita's tragic fate and self-sacrifice), playing amidst ruins of abandoned airstrips used in the Second World War. She at that moment becomes symbolic of innocent childhood unacquainted yet with the evils of the vast adult world. This scene, in retrospect, considering the tragic fate of Sita at the end of the film, is filled with deep pathos. Suddenly she accidentally comes face to face with a passing "bohurupi"( a by now nearly extinct profession in rural Bengal) dressing up as Goddess Kali. This image, in contrast to the Great Mother archetype, is the Terrible Mother archetype. Here the Kali image symbolizing the "Mahakal"( eternal Time) with its recurring evils like the Second World War and Partition , suddenly intrudes into the pristine childhood, and gives the audience a forecast of the dark adult world that Sita will get into as she grows up. Ghatak here links eternal Time along with its age-long recurrence of human tragedies with the destabilizing effects of emerging capitalism and consequent moral degradation in the post-Partition India, thereby linking abstract time with concrete socio-political situation. The very climactic tragedy of the film that is of a brother visiting a prostitute and thereby discovering the fallen woman is none other than his own beloved sister, is not only a real situation but also metaphorical in the sense that any girl in the sister's place should be like a sister to the brother and such moral degradation is very much probable in such materialistic society totally uprooted from its traditional culture. In *Subarnarekha*, by using symbols and metaphors, Ghatak deeply probes into the question of "home" and depicts a step-by-step process of breaking down of a culture as a result of being uprooted from its very roots, then trying to build the old "home" in the new land, and finally inability to do so in the morally degrading condition of an emerging materialistic society. The movie is thus the tragedy of rootless urban Bengal in the post-Partition era.

### **Use of Folk Songs and Rituals:**

Ghatak's epic narrative style---his use of symbolisms, archetypes, mythologies would be largely incomplete without use of songs in his films. Besides using a wide range of classical and Rabindranath Tagore songs, he also used a quite a few songs from Bengali folk tradition. The use of such songs in the film has the advantage that such age-old nearly forgotten songs can easily connect to the collective unconscious of modern audiences and can link a modern day situation with history and myths. Thus use of folk songs directly contributes in creating archetypal characters and situations. For example playing of a folk marriage song in the background of the imminent union between Bhriku and Anusuya in *A Soft Note on a Sharp Scale*, immediately bestows to the contemporary situation an archetypal gravity. An example of Ghatak's sincere

adoration and interpretation of Rabindranath Tagore can be seen when the Tagore song “keno cheye acho go maa”( “what are you looking for Mother”) is lipped by the character Neelkantha Bagchi while addressing Bongobala in the film *Reason, Debate and a Story*. The song in which Bongobala is thus addressed as the Mother ( in Tagore’s song Mother Nation was referred ), immediately stamps Bongobala’s archetypal status as the embodiment of Mother Bengal. Besides these Ghatak made a fantastic use of Indian classical music in *The Cloud-Capped Star*.

Ghatak also used folk dances in his films. Two instances of the use of folk dance are depiction of the dance of Oraons in the 1958 movie *Ajantrik (The Unmechanical)* and that of the traditional Chhau dance in *Reason, Debate and a Story*. Dance, Ghatak believed, is directly connected to the primitive collective unconscious of the tribal people because to the Oraons dance is the only form of expression of intense and spontaneous feelings. In *Cinema and I*, Ghatak made the following observation in context of his analysis of the connection between the collective unconscious and the dance of the Oraons.

“The voice and feet develop sound and motion. And, in a collective which is the be all and end all of all primitive society, this expression has a spontaneous tendency to be rhythmic, harmonious. It is so because many are involved always—the unit is collective and not an individual.”( *CI*, 93-94)

And the reason why Ghatak includes the dance of Oraons in the film *The Unmechanical* is because it is only to the primitive magic-believing collective unconscious of the tribal people that the protagonist Bimal’s loving relationship with his car will have meaning, unlike to the modernized urban people. Bimal’s extreme simplemindedness and pure heart which makes him find life even in a machine, represents a rare form of humanity which is akin to the Oraon’s spontaneous primordial instinct expressed in their collective dancing. The presence of the Oraons in the film thus again confers to Bimal’s love for his old car an archetypal simplicity—a simplicity which is regarded in morally degraded materialistic society as insanity.

### **The Epic Canvas of *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*:**

Among Ritwik Ghatak’s films, 1973 movie *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam(A River Named Titash)* deserve special mention because of the distinctly epic pattern of the film. After a gap of eleven years during which various adverse situations forced Ghatak not to make any films, he returned to film-making with *A River Named Titash*. With this film he made a desperate effort to go back to his roots and thus, notwithstanding a fast-declining health, he travelled to his birth-land Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan) in order to make the film. The film thus, ought to be symbolic affirmation of the essential oneness of Bengal in spite of the political division and hence the epic treatment of the film was needed to accommodate that gravity. However, Ghatak soon realized that the situation had gone beyond recovery and it is this disillusionment that was reflected at the ending of the film and also added to the final deterioration of Ghatak’s health.

The film opens with a heart-touching Bhatiali song in the backdrop along with beautiful glimpses of the Titash river, the riverine landscape, and that of instances in the daily lives of the fishermen. Bengal had been a riverine land and the age-old river with the age-old daily lives of the people living by it, immediately creates a scope for epic setting. Ghatak’s choosing an era before Partition, his use of folk-songs in the film, the slow pace of the film along with panoramic portrayals of natural landscape, the use of local dialect--- all these add an intense poeticism to the

film's treatment. This epic treatment justifies Ghatak's comment that "cinema at its best turns into poetry"(CI 64). The film thus becomes a poetic saga on the lives of the fishermen community on the banks of the Titash river. Just as J.M.Synge added to the lives of Irish fishermen community a mythopoeic quality in *Riders to the Sea*, for Ghatak also, the little dreams and pathos of this age-old rural community contain an undeniable beauty and poetry. Most importantly it is through their lives that Ghatak searched for his long-lost roots. In this context Ghatak's intense faith in the essential oneness of Bengal can be compared with Synge's belief in Irish nationalism and both artists in order to trace their roots used a poetic approach to their works so as to bring out the timelessness of the local community's lives. The central female character, Basanti is again presented as a Great Mother archetype who has to ultimately sacrifice her all humanly desires and wishes for her community's welfare's sake. In the early moments of the film an elderly fishermen says to the little Basanti the following words.

"eirokomi to hoy maa. Ei sob ache, ei nei..." ( This is how happens child. At this moment we have everything, the next moment all's gone.....")

The film ends with the realization of the same prophesy with Basanti dying on the banks of a now dried-up Titash river. The ending indicates the death of a culture which also needs to be interpreted in the light of Partition and its decaying consequences. The film however ends on a faint optimistic note with Basanti's vision of the playing child symbolizing Ghatak's faint dream of a better future.

### **Conclusion:**

Some modern film critics have accused Ritwik Ghatak of excessive romanticism regarding his lifelong inability to accept the Partition. However the tormenting effect that Partition had on the film-maker can be seen from an interview-extract documented in *Cinema and I*.

"To me it was the division of a culture and I was shocked...You kids are finished, you have not seen that Bengal of mine...whatever I have seen unconsciously or consciously comes out in my films...the cardinal point remains: that I am frustrated with what I see all around me, I am tired of it." ( CI 80)

But it was this eternal frustration that stirred Ghatak's genius. Influenced by the Soviet school of film-making, Ghatak undertook an epic treatment in his films with a rich blend of realism and symbolism, of concrete and abstractions, of present and past. Unable to communicate his pains to the distracted and ever-complacent modern audiences seeped in materialistic anarchy, Ghatak, by a curious mixture of Marxism and Jung's notion of archetypes( Ghatak was attacked by contemporary Marxists for this), created a different genre of film-making targeting the collective unconscious of his audiences---a genre rarely developed by later film-makers after him. His films, therefore, reflect the passionate love and pains of a fiercely honest artist. So, it can be concluded with the following lines regarding his views on epic tradition and the use of mythology in his films.

"There is an epic tradition which dominates Indian mentality. It has seeped into the Indian subconscious. It is no surprise, therefore, that Indians are attracted to mythologicals. I am a part of it. I cannot think of myself without the epic tradition." (CI 78)

**Works Cited:**

Ghatak, Ritwik.

----- *Cinema and I*. Calcutta : Ritwik Memorial Trust, 1987. Print.

-----*I Strode My Road: Montage of A Mind*. Trans. Sudipto Chakraborty. Kolkata: Monfakira, 2013. Print.

-----*A River Called Titash*. 1973. Film

-----*A Soft Note on a Sharp Scale*. 1961. Film.

-----*Reason, Debate and a Story*. 1974. Film.

-----*Subarnarekha*. 1962. Film.

-----*The Cloud-capped Star*. 1960. Film.

-----*The Unmechanical*. 1958. Film.

Chakraborty, Rathin, ed. *Ritwik Ghatak Collection of Selected Articles on Theatre and Film*. Kolkata : Natyachinta Foundation, 2015. Print.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. New Delhi : Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd, Licensees of Pearson Education in South Asia, 2008. Print.