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## Reading the Screen: The Agony of Partition and Politics of Patriarchy in Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*

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### **Abstract:**

Ritwik Kumar Ghatak, the maverick Bengali filmmaker remains the most celebrated cinematic auteur of Partition narratives. Dismantling the conventional constructs of commercial cinema with its excessive sentimentality, Ritwik Ghatak along with Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen laid the foundation of the 'alternative' or 'parallel' cinema in Bengal during the 60s and 70s. The majority of Ghatak's films are narratives that focus on the post-Independence Bengali family and community, with a sustained critique of the emerging petite bourgeoisie in Bengal, specifically in the urban environment of Kolkata. This paper attempts to study Ghatak's film, *Subarnarekha* (1962) and explore the impact of Partition and the functioning of patriarchy in the lives of the refugees from East Bengal. The tragic predicament of the innumerable immigrants has been portrayed through the skilful cinematic technique in which Ghatak has blended melodrama with social realism.

**Keywords: Cinematic Auteur, Partition Narratives, Parallel Cinema, Petite Bourgeoisie, Social Realism.**

We live in a fragmented universe... We used to know whose children we were; now we are the children of no one and everyone. Since the past now be constructed out of virtually anything, and no one knows what tomorrow's past will hold, our anxious uncertainty turns everything into a trace. With the disintegration of memory-history... a new kind of historian has emerged, a historian prepared, unlike his predecessors, to avow his close, intimate, and personal ties to his subject... (and) entirely dependent on his subjectivity, creativity and capacity to re-create. (Pandey 10-11)

– Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. (2001)

Ritwik Kumar Ghatak (1925-1976) was born at Jindabazar in Dhaka. Since he was from East Bengal, he had first-hand experience of the catastrophic Bengal famine of 1943 and the impact of the Partition of Bengal in 1947. Ghatak was actively associated with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) which was the cultural front of the Communist Party of India. He began his career as a theatre artist before making his way to the world of cinema. Ghatak was witness to the significant political events that transformed the history of India and the world. Among these were – Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement, the Chittagong Armoury Raid under the leadership of Surya Sen, the impact of the Second World War on global economy and the consequent influx of people into cities in search of job. Against this

backdrop, a group of young Bengali writers emerged during the 1920s, forming the legendary 'Kallol' group. Ritwik's elder brother, Manish Ghatak was one of its members. Along with the native influences, Ghatak was also inspired by the works of Bertolt Brecht, C. G. Jung, Konstantin Stanislavski, Sergei Eisenstein, Jean-Luc Goddard, Federico Fellini and Louis Bunuel. These social, political, cultural and intellectual developments left a deep impression on Ritwik Ghatak – the filmmaker.

In 1947, after a year-long spate of communal riots; the representatives of the British government, the leaders of Indian National Congress and Muslim League agreed to divide India on the basis of religion. The consequence of this historic decision was the division of Bengal into East Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971. An estimated ten million people, primarily Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, were forced to abandon their homes where they had lived for generations. Muslims fled to West and East Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs fled to India. Families were divided, friends and neighbours were left behind, and an immense confusion developed as to where to go and what to expect when they reached there. The turbulent socio-political circumstances led to religious hatred, communal violence, riots and murders that ushered in India's Independence and the birth of Pakistan. Ritwik Ghatak viewed the division of Bengal as mishandled and ill-conceived of. He believed that the Partition had struck the roots of Bengali culture. In an interview, Ghatak had expressed his agony:

This Partition shook our economic and political life to their roots. I could never accept the Partition of Bengal. I can still not accept it. This was the feeling that I expressed through these three films. In spite of my wishes *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha* have formed a trilogy. My opinion was not in favour of a political union (of the two states) when I began *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. And I still hold the same position. What has once been historically accomplished cannot be reverted. The economic and political hindrances to cultural unification have caused me pain.... They have simply cut Bengal into two. They have played havoc. I have nothing else to say. (Ghatak 190)

In his films, Ghatak details visual and aural realization of a fragmented Bengal during a social, political and cultural revisionary phase of Indian history. In the initial years of his career, Ghatak made films like *Nagarik (The Citizen, 1952)*, *Ajantrik (The Unmechanical, 1958)* and *Bari Theke Paliye (The Runaway, 1959)*. However, Ghatak's films like *Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud-Capped Star, 1960)*, *Komal Gandhar (A Soft Note on a Sharp Scale, 1961)* and *Subarnarekha (The Golden Line, 1962)*; also the name of a river in Bangladesh) constituted the most important phase of his creative career. These three films collectively form Ghatak's 'Partition Trilogy'. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*, Ghatak had captured the searing spectacle of the Partition of Bengal, the bleak memory of refugee camp, the degradation of a rootless generation, the dehumanisation of the alienated and the emerging definitions of a new class struggle, during those brewing years of a post-war Bengal.

Ritwik Ghatak's film, *Subarnarekha* (1962) is set in a post-independence refugee colony in Kolkata during the early 50s. The film opens with the foundation of 'Naba Jiban Colony' – a colony for the refugees from East Bengal. The scenes portraying the pathetic

conditions of the refugees in the colony are juxtaposed with the scenes of optimism, as one comes to know about the establishment of a school in that refugee colony under the supervision of Ishwar and Haraprasad. The narrative of *Subarnarekha* focuses on Sita, whose parents were killed during the Partition, and who was being raised by her elder brother, Ishwar. The extent of suffering, utter confusion and rivalry among the refugees revealed the grim picture of the social reality of Bengal during the 50s. The landlord of the land where the refugees of 'Naba Jiban Colony' have settled tried to displace them. In the midst of this chaotic situation, a low-caste boy named Abhiram had been separated from his mother, as she had been abducted by the men hired by the landlord. The opening scenes of *Subarnarekha*, establishes the 'leitmotif' of the narrative – the theme of geographic, moral and emotional uprooting. The audience could realize the consequences of the Partition as the young Sita and the little Abhiram get separated from their mother as well as their motherland.

Rambilas, Ishwar's rich friend from college, offers him a job in his iron foundry in Chhatimpur on the bank of the river, Subarnarekha in Chhotanagpur. Despite being called a 'deserter' by his friend, Haraprasad; Ishwar takes Sita and Abhiram to Chhatimpur in search of a new life. Young Sita's repeated enquiry, '*Dadamoni, amader notun bari kothay?*' ('Brother, where is our new home?') seem to establish every refugee's eternal craving for a sense of belonging and rootedness. As days passed by in Chhatimpur, Ishwar sends Abhiram to a boarding school, while Sita remains at home and learns to sing. The picturesque landscape of Chhatimpur should have evoked a sense of fulfilment in Sita but it did not. Thus Ghatak proved a very important point that housing does not give emotional fulfilment, as it comes only in the companionship of the loved ones. The isolation of the brother and sister in the heart of Chhatimpur created a strange kind of dependence and possessiveness on the part of the brother over his sister. Sita respected Ishwar, but her life lacked the fulfilment of love that every girl of her age craves for. The pervading ambience of solitude saddened her heart with the agony of separation from her motherland, her parents and her only friend, Abhiram.

In the book *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993) Partha Chatterjee has identified the women with their motherland. In Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, the activities of 'women' and 'homeland' are inextricably intertwined in setting, sound and song. The plot structure and thematic issues of Ghatak's films are filled with socio-historical observations and critiques, which give his cinema a complex vision of post-Independence Bengal, where both dystopian and utopian futures are seen for the Bengali homeland. The character of Neeta in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Anasuya in *Komal Gandhar* and Sita in *Subarnarekha* become the embodiment of the archetypal mother figures who are suffering, struggling and yet striving to survive against the politics of patriarchy and agony of partition. It is important to note that in his films, Ghatak used the archetype, as a cultural sign bearing the sedimentations of one catastrophic history. In the book *Cinema and I* (1987), Ghatak quotes the following lines from C.G. Jung's essay "The Collective Unconscious":

The symbolic-imaginative view of the world is just as organic a part of a child's life as the view transmitted by the sense-organs. It 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 man what he is. It is the root of all creativity. (Ghatak 15)

Ritwik Ghatak stepped out of traditional Marxist domain and used Jungian theory to psychoanalyze the myth concerning the nationalistic use of the image of 'Mother Goddess'. In an interview Ghatak once said, 'In my films, one particular part of Jung's philosophy dominates. It is the "Mother Complex"... I cannot help if any deep attachment of that sort grows in the audience... You cannot deny that god is the primordial force. Mother is the basic primordial force' (Ghatak 203-204). However, Ghatak deconstructed the myth concerning the 'Mother Goddess' that lingered in the minds of people even after partition and protested about the betrayal of fracturing Bengal. In *Subarnarekha*, the first hint of mythology is given to the audience in the very name of the character, Sita who is the namesake of Lord Ram's wife in the *Ramayana*. Like Sita of the *Ramayana*, the character of Sita in *Subarnarekha* had a tragic life. They had a yearning to go back to their mother whom they had never known but as whose daughters they were sacrificed at the altar of mankind as objects or mediums of selfishness in the guise of veneration. According to Ghatak, 'The idea of this Great Mother image... with both its benevolent and terrible aspects has been in our civilization since antiquity, intermingled with our myths, our epics, our folklore and our scriptures... The Great Mother image in its duality exists in every fibre of our being' (Ray 123). In *Subarnarekha*, Sita had once seen a 'Bohurupee' (the impersonator) which had scared her. Ghatak described the 'Bohurupee' both as Goddess Kali and as the eschatological figure of Time ('Mahakala'). In either way, the 'Bohurupee' represents the trauma of history. In the book *Rows and Rows of Fences: Ritwik Ghatak on Cinema* (2000) Ghatak opined: 'In the film (*Subarnarekha*), I have drawn on this theme of *Mahakala* in several ways to underscore the hollow values of modern life rent asunder from its moorings in the *puranic* tradition' (Ghatak 50). In the book *Cinema and I* (1987) Ghatak further analyzed:

*Subarnarekha* has a little girl, Sita, who dances amidst the rubble of the Second World War. Suddenly an image of Kali – the terrifying mother – appears before her. The child runs away. Later we find that was a *Bohurupee* (Chameleon), a clown who masquerades in different fancy make-ups. From the far away past, the archetypal image which haunts us, which has a strong foothold in today's world, is the Hydrogen Bomb; its name is also the strategic Air Command, or, perhaps some other unmentionable name. Like the little Sita, we have come face to face with this killer force. (Ghatak 87-88)

On the bank of *Subarnarekha*, in an isolated aerodrome two children search for their forgotten past unaware of how many such aerodromes were there behind the calamity hanging over them. Thus the character of Sita, the 'Bohurupee' and the deserted aerodrome are used as 'archetypes' in the film, *Subarnarekha*.

The implied presence of patriarchy can be felt from the beginning of the film, *Subarnarekha*. Sita's brother, Ishwar was like her 'surrogate father' who was gentle yet over-protective and expected only compliance from Sita's side. The picturesque landscape of Chhatimpur which was a playground for Sita did not help her locate an ideal home. The magnanimity of the locale could not satisfy her soul, as she felt imprisoned in its vastness. As a young girl she does not seem to have many playmates. She grew up alone, isolated from the real world. It is interesting to note that Abhiram's education was arranged for but Sita's education was not even mentioned. Abhiram is sent away to boarding school, and then to college. He desired to pursue writing as a career after graduation, but Ishwar expected him to study engineering in Germany. Surprisingly, Ishwar had no such dreams for Sita. In this



context, one may recall Himani Bannerji's observations in the book, *Inventing Subjects: Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism* (2001):

The female body is invented in different ways in private and public spaces and in terms of the onlooker. Her clothes and presence thus possess a set of architectural and social correlates coded as 'andarmahal' (inner quarters) and 'griha' (home), and as 'home' and the 'world'. This spatial organization is imbued with moral-cultural imperatives which are embedded in a specific social reproduction entailing its own sexual division of labour... As noted by scholars of women's education such as Meredith Borthwick; women's education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and well into the twentieth had little to do with economic function, needs, or development of professional expertise among women: 'Whereas education for males was directly related to the pursuit of employment, female education had no economic function'.

(Bannerji 111-112)

In *Subarnarekha*, one comes across an extremely complicated brother-sister relationship. Ishwar considered Sita to be more of his property than allow her to be an individual who also had feelings and could even fall in love. Sita learned all the household work as she was expected to. She seems to have been brought up to be an ideal house-wife by her brother. As Sita grows up, she develops impressive musical and domestic talents. She adopts a maternal attitude toward Ishwar; at times, they interact more like a married couple, intimating a deep, unconscious incestuous tension. This constant blurring of kinship boundaries is further complicated when Sita and Abhiram, brought up as siblings, fall in love. Ishwar's opposition to their union, which stems largely from embedded feelings of loneliness and jealousy masquerading as propriety, hardens with the divulgence of Abhiram's low-caste roots when the latter publicly recognizes a dying, homeless woman as his long-lost mother – a revelation that threatens Ishwar's job and his social standing in the small-town community. *Subarnarekha* is full of dramatic and traumatic conflicts. Sita from the beginning appeared to be a docile, submissive character but she gives her first assertion when she refuses to appear in front of the people who came to see her for marriage. However, she finally gives in when Ishwar raises hand on her and even then, the caring Sita fears that Ishwar may fall sick. In this context, one may recall the words of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1947):

When a boy revolts against his father, against the world, his violence is effective: he picks a quarrel with a comrade, he fights, he affirms his standing as subject with his fists, in a word, he imposes himself upon a world, and he transcends it. But it is not for the adolescent girl to affirm or impose herself, and this is what fills her heart with revolt: She may hope neither to change the world nor to transcend it. (Beauvoir 377)

Sita grew up loving her brother but this love began to seem too much taxing on her. She was deeply hurt when Ishwar declared that he wants her to die as she refused to marry someone whom he had chosen for her. In Abhiram, Sita found the emotional solace as a human being. She was even considered as a mental support by Abhiram. This fact emboldened her self-respect as an individual and she felt needed. When Sita eloped with Abhiram, Ishwar became mad. However it is not clear that why he loosed his sanity. It may

be because he had loved Sita or his ego was hurt. The film, *Subarnarekha* traces Sita's journey from the refugee camp in 'Naba Jiban Colony' to the picturesque landscape in Chhatimpur on the bank of the river, Subarnarekha in Chhotanagpur and finally in the crowded slum of Kolkata. In spite of her familial deprivation and financial hardship, Sita is evidently happy in Kolkata on account of a sense of fulfilment in her new home and in the companionship of her husband, Abhiram and her son, Binu. Due to extreme financial crisis and untimed death of Abhiram, Sita decides to use her singing ability to earn money. She was unaware of the fact that it would endanger her womanhood. She did not want to go back to her brother, yet she agreed to depend on other men to earn money. Ghatak heightens the tragic intensity of the plot, when the audience confronts the truth that in the absence of father, brother and husband, prostitution is the only alternative left for a refugee woman to sustain her living. One may recall Paul Willemen's observations in this context:

The drama and the analytical presentation of socio-historical processes fit so closely together that it is impossible to say whether the environment is there to explain the characters and their drama, or whether the characters were selected/constructed as exemplary and necessary to convey an analysis of the social. In effect, the question becomes irrelevant: people are presented as living in and determined by history, superseding the false oppositions between the subjective and the social, between the individual and society, as idealist philosophies tend to put it. [Ritwik] Ghatak... depict(s) social existence, nothing less. (Sarkar 213)

Ritwik Ghatak was deeply influenced by the writings of the Soviet filmmaker and film theorist, Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948). In the books *The Film Sense* (1942) and *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (1949), Eisenstein had celebrated cinema as a medium that encompasses other aesthetic forms. In arguably a somewhat similar view, Ghatak conceived of film as an omnibus art form. He drew upon sources as disparate as music, folk theatre, classical drama, tribal dance, Buddhist sculpture, the Vedas, the Upanishads, popular music and mythology. As in the films of Eisenstein, each aesthetic form was allowed certain autonomy, so that a possibility of dialogue was maintained. Ghatak accepted the Soviet filmmaker's dictum that meaning is generated from the collision between elements, and not from their union. Thus in *Subarnarekha*, after Haraprasad stops his friend Ishwar from committing suicide, he brings him to Kolkata to experience the terrifying fun of the big city. As the two weary middle-aged men drown their sorrows in liquor at a cabaret; Haraprasad launches into a diatribe against the decadent apathy of an entire generation. He makes a recollection of history by referring to the famine, the war, the atom bomb, the riots and the Partition. He quotes from ancient Vedic texts, butchering the original Sanskrit with his typical 'bangal' intonation, mocking all forms of high idealism and simultaneously accentuating a sense of contagion. Ghatak's depiction of Kolkata in *Subarnarekha* reminds one of T.S. Eliot's notions of 'Unreal City'. The music that has been played in the Western-style bar, already a site of deculturation, is none other than the 'Patricia' theme from Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), which Ghatak takes to be both a celebration and a critique of European decadence. The collision of these wildly divergent elements produces a strong sense of decay and disorientation underlying the sensory indulgence – the orgiastic fun that reveals it to be a collective nightmare, setting the audience up for the subsequent sequence in which a brother turns up as his sister's client. In the book *Rows and Rows of Fences: Ritwik Ghatak on Cinema* (2000) Ghatak observed:

*Subarnarekha* is not a flawless film. The story chosen was screamingly melodramatic. I have joined the different phases of the narrative, one to another, to make it a story of fateful coincidences. There are several novels that offer parallels for such plotting, e.g. *Gora* or *Noukadubi* or *Shesher Kabita*, all by Rabindranath, where the author is not concerned exclusively with telling a story but more concerned with attitudes as they evolved with the events. Such coincidences, even if they occasionally appear incredible, would not really jar as long as there is verisimilitude to it all.

The death of Abhiram's mother or Ishwar discovering Sita in the brothel would not appear incredible if I have succeeded in projecting the problems of Abhiram and Sita, and Haraprasad and Ishwar authentically.

The divided, debilitated Bengal that we have known for days on end is in the same state as Sita in the brothel. And we who have lived in an undivided Bengal survive in a daze after a night of orgy. (Ghatak 51)

In the realm of Bengali cinema, melodrama holds an omnipotent role. However, its use along with realism is a spectacle that only Ghatak could bring. The film, *Subarnarekha* is one such example. In the end, Sita kills herself with a huge kitchen knife on seeing her brother as her first customer. The camera frames parts of Sita's musical instruments, as her body trembles and wheezes against the 'tanpura' off-screen, producing a terrifying drone and clatter for several seconds. Ishwar peers at the prone body: Sita's face gradually comes into focus. Shocked, he picks up the knife and lurches out of the room. In an extreme close-up shot, Sita's face, eyes wide open, floats in the dense darkness. Sita had killed herself but Ishwar blames himself for this disaster. He accuses everybody and recognizes the presence of many more Sitas by saying, '*Amar boner e sudhu ei durdosha? Tomar bon nei?*' ('Only my sister had such plight? Don't you have a sister?'). Ghatak captures the tragic predicament of the innumerable refugee women of post-Partition Bengal. Finally Ishwar comes back home along with his nephew Binu – the son of Sita. The song '*Aaj Dhaaner Khete Raudra-Chayaye Lukochuri Khela*' ('Oh my friend, today the sunlight and shade are playing hide-and-seek in the paddy field') sung by Binu and the shot of the child running to the paddy field liberates the audience's mind from the tyrannies of claustrophobic situation. Sita's existence lingers in our consciousness through her son who had the same yearning for a home to secure a sense of belonging and rootedness. The river Subarnarekha serves to permeate the film with a feel of yearning for a united Bengal. One may recall Ghatak's own words in this context:

Through decay I see life, growth. I believe in the continuity. A character in my film cries: 'Let me live!' She cries for life, even though she dies. It is not death; it is life's assertion. Nobody wants just to die. (Ghatak 147)

Partition played a substantial role in identity politics, increasing social interchange across borders and promoting debate about social change and social identity, and, thus, may well have been the most important factor opening up the society to change. In the fractured context of post-Partition Bengali society and polity, Ritwik Ghatak sought to articulate the indigenous, utopian strand with a Marxist concern for concrete, sensuous activity into a



radical cinematic practise. It was during the 50s and 60s that Bengali cinema appeared to be moving beyond its stable sentimentalism and excessive melodrama for its bourgeois urban audience. Ritwik Ghatak along with Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen pioneered the modernist-realist film aesthetic in Bengali cinema during the second half of the twentieth century. Ghatak's films represent an important and undoubtedly unique viewpoint of post-Independence Bengal. It is unique because he pointedly explores the fallout of the 1947 Partition of India on Bengali society and has been influential because he set a standard with his films for the newly emerging 'alternative' or 'parallel' cinema directors. For the first time in Indian cinema, Ritwik Ghatak showed that:

...the movie camera was not merely an obstructive eavesdropper but a commentator, philosopher, historian, critic and poet, not a peep-window into the lives of a group of characters but a testament – narrating, recalling, rejecting, accepting, questioning, protesting, losing and winning. (Chatterji 68)

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