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The Muted Voice of a Refugee Woman: Looking at Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* through the Feminist Lens

Victor Mukherjee

M.Phil. Research Scholar.
Department of English.
Rabindra Bharati University,
Kolkata, West Bengal.

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Abstract:

During the 1960s, the eminent Bengali filmmakers such as Ritwik Ghatak, Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen struck at the patriarchal consciousness of the Bengali middle-class in a realistic way and endeavoured to evaluate the position of women in the perspective of contemporary socio-economic and political scenario. However, it was Ritwik Ghatak who was the first in Indian cinema to give a distinct dimension to Bengali refugee women's struggle for existence within the social-constraints and patriarchal dominance in the post-Partition Bengal. This paper attempts to study Ghatak's film, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*The Cloud-Capped Star*, 1960) and explore the impact of Partition and functioning of patriarchy in the lives of the refugees from East Bengal. The tragic suffering of Nita, the central protagonist of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* becomes emblematic of thousands of refugee women struggling to find a means of livelihood and establish their identities in post-Partition Bengal.

Keywords: Patriarchal Consciousness, Refugee Women, Indian Cinema, Partition.

Ritwik's women are eternal, infinite, because they are drawn from mythology, interwoven with Marxist ideology imbued with a Marxist critique of the materialist, immoral, petty bourgeoisie that defined Calcutta when he stepped into it from Bangladesh, where his roots went too deep. In this sense, his female characters are unique and Indian and also have within them, the grains of the Universal Woman by virtue of the fact that they are eternal. (Chatterji 60)

– Shoma A. Chatterji, *Ritwik Ghatak: The Celluloid Rebel* (2004)

One of the catalytic moments in the history of Indian cinematic realism was the release of the films directed by Ritwik Kumar Ghatak (1925-1976) which was marked as an early attempt to portray the border crisis and refugee issues as major themes with a distinctly artistic yet realistic mode of cinematic expression. In the context of an emergent modernist-realist film aesthetic, dominated by Satyajit Ray's restrained style, Ghatak's films struck a

high-pitched, anachronistic chord. Just as Bengali cinema appeared to be moving beyond its stable sentimentalism, the excessive melodrama of Ghatak's narrative constituted, for bourgeois urban audience, a regression to an archaic maudlin sensibility. Ghatak's films consciously used the melodramatic mode – prevalent in the Bengali cinema of the 1950s and 60s – in order to forge an artistic practice which was inherently political. During the 60s and 70s, the politicized viewers who formed an alternative audience in Bengal and who were drawn to the legacy of realism as introduced by Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen; were baffled by the centrality that Ghatak accorded to the subjective experiences of his characters, and accused him of self-indulgence, pessimism, nihilism, even decadence. Presenting cinematic accounts of the Partition of India in 1947, Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*The Cloud-Capped Star*, 1960), *Komal Gandhar* (*A Soft Note on a Sharp Scale*, 1961) and *Subarnarekha* (*The Golden Line*, 1962) – often clubbed together as the 'Partition Trilogy' – used the melodramatic mode to expand the scope of representation beyond mere realism.

A Marxist by conviction, Ritwik Ghatak, in his films, situated his characters in the complex historical interaction of contemporary socio-economic and political scenario and endeavoured to depict through a thorough scrutiny of facts. For those uprooted people coming to West Bengal from East Pakistan following the Partition of India, West Bengal was never a paradise. It was a bitter struggle for existence, be it on the platforms of Sealdah, in squatters' colonies or in refugee camps. In his article entitled "*Aloukik Pratispardha*", Prof. Abhijit Sen observes:

After Partition we were like helpless and terrified birds in a cage. Our guardians were baffled by Partition and they felt terribly insecure. They struggled extremely hard to ensure the existence of their families. Yet, at the same time, this struggle often bred baseness and cruelty on their part which was a sordid tale, a dark chapter, by all account. (Sen 147)

Women of the uprooted families in post-Independence Bengal along with men, started out on the path of earning in order to secure their existence as women, on the one hand, and get rid of the stigma of being refugees, on the other, though, even in the 1950s and 1960s, men in these uprooted families were hesitant to recognise their role as earners. Men's position was patently hypocritical. While they repeatedly laid stress on woman's going out to work in order to augment family income, they were silent on exploitation and humiliations suffered by the earning women of refugee families at home and outside in the patriarchal society.

Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*The Cloud-Capped Star*, 1960) depicts the struggle of a working woman to support her refugee family living in a colony in post-Partition West Bengal. When Ghatak gave Shaktipada Rajguru's story, *Chenamukh* a cinematic form, it became not just a fictional story on celluloid. It turned into a document of the struggle for existence of the uprooted people from East Bengal following Partition. But it is not a document of their suffering in graphic detail. Rather, Ghatak turned his gaze on a recurrent

phenomenon among them – their cruel indifference towards the only breadwinner, son or daughter, of their family. Nita, who sacrifices her life for the sake of her family, is eminently illustrative of this cruel aspect, which gives the film a different dimension. Thus the story of uprooted people takes on a complex form, rather than being a general narrative of their lives. On another level, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is a story of dreams and thwarted dreams in the lives of lower middle-class uprooted people.

From the beginning, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* inverts the dominant conventions of archetypal portrayal. Ghatak has used some recurrent images – a large tree covering the entire frame; the stagnant, shallow pond and the monotony of the whistling suburban train passing

through the meadows. In contrast to Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*, 1955), the train in Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* symbolises the mundaneness of the machine-era, not a call for the distant and remote world. In the very first shot, Nita comes from beneath the enormous fully-grown tree, emerging, as it were, from the natural forces themselves. The opening shot presents the invocation of the Mother through Shankar's recital of *Raga Hamshadhwani*, sung in praise of the Mother. In the second recital sequence the camera actually frames them once in the iconic composition of Nita as the Mother-deity standing upright and Shankar as the devotee, sitting on the ground. Introduced with the elements of nature that symbolise the principles of fertility and the mother, Nita is in a way introduced as an archetype. In this context, one may recall C.G. Jung's observations:

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)

C.G. Jung's theory of the 'Collective Unconscious' revealed that man carries in his brain, images that were born long before civilization. One may come to know that in the history of different races, certain fundamental archetypes repeat themselves. Throughout history, in the evolution of different civilizations, we see the same complex life images transform into symbols through archetypal images. Unlike its use in commercial cinema, where the birth of the hero or the separation of twins is accompanied by a raging storm to indicate the cataclysmic nature of the event; this archetypal dimension is used in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* to portray the character of Nita. She is identified with *Jagaddhatri* – an incarnation of Goddess Durga, the benevolent image of the central giver and universal sustainer. The archetype defined in terms of the three women in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is itself a reversal of the usual means of elevating characterisations beyond the individual through its use. It is interesting to refer to the film director, Kumar Sahani's views in this context:

The breaking up of society is visualised as a three-way division of womanhood. The three principal woman characters embody the traditional aspects of feminine power. The heroine, Nita, has the preserving and nurturing quality; her sister, Gita, is the sensual woman; their mother represents the cruel aspects. (Sahani 166)

The incapacity of Nita to combine all these qualities, to retain only the nurturing quality to the exclusion of others is the source of her tragedy. If the exploitation of Nita is at the focus of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, there is a rich complexity in Ghatak's association of Nita with *Jagaddhatri* – the Mother Goddess who nurtures the universe. '*Jagat*' means the universe and '*dharan*' means 'to bear'. With the day of her birth coinciding with the date of '*Jagaddhatri Puja*', Ghatak symbolically signifies the role of Mother Goddess that is imposed on and internalised by Nita. The role is recognised and accepted unquestioningly by her family and herself, but without a trace of the veneration that a goddess would naturally command the '*devi*' having been demeaned to a '*dasi*' in the process. Ghatak's critique of mythology as an instrument of torture uses Nita's illness – specifically, tuberculosis which is depicted as a metaphor; the '*devi-dasi*' dichotomy itself, reflected in Nita's acquiescence in her slavery in an aura of divinity eventually consumes her.

In accessing the meaning of the lived female body, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was perhaps the first to question the assumptions that framed human experiences. In the introduction to *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir makes her purpose very clear:

I am interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty... How can a human being in woman's question attain fulfillment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? ... Then from woman's point of view I shall describe the world in which women must live. (Beauvoir xxix)

Ritwik Ghatak seems to answer these speculations through the characterisation of Nita in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. Initially, she challenges the patriarchal hegemony and gender discrimination and transcends this gender inequality by taking upon herself the entire burden of her family and helping every member to attain success in life. While doing her M.A., Nita gives up studies and takes up the job of a clerk, for she has to see to it that her ailing parents are taken care of. The whims and fancies of her self-centred sister, Gita and brother, Montu result in further demands being made on her. The elder brother, Shankar, who doggedly pursues his dream of becoming a classical vocalist, remains her only true sympathiser till the end. Yet, being unemployed and in need of sympathy and encouragement himself, he is more dependent on her than the rest of the family. Sanat, with whom she is in love, betrays her idealism and faith by discontinuing his research and marrying her sister Gita. Suffocated by the oppressive claims made on her, Nita's isolation is tragically complete when the people in her life establish themselves one by one, and go their own ways. Significantly, Nita's self-sacrifice is totally ignored by the patriarchal authority of the Bengali middle class. Male

hegemony manifests its ugly form in terms of deception, betrayal and pursuit of self-aggrandisement and Nita learns the basic lesson – it is futile to go beyond gender discrimination as enforced by patriarchy, and one is condemned if one tries to do so. Nita's brilliant endeavour gets lost in the complex mosaic of relationships driven by self-interests in a patriarchal society.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the characters of Nita and Gita are diametrically opposite. Nita's life is that of forsaking her own happiness and comfort in order to maintain her entire family, whereas Gita is a typical self-centred woman concerned only with attaining personal happiness and comfort. Gita's character is conceived in the image of those refugee women who easily did away with values, driven by the imperative to live against adverse financial circumstances, for they realised it was not possible to survive in the face of disintegration by clinging to moral values. Gita, driven by this, seduces her elder sister's feeble-minded suitor Sanat with her feminine charms. One may refer to Laura Mulvey's observations in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in this context:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance

coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote '*to-be-looked-at-ness*'.

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen.

(Mulvey 309)

In the film, Gita pays scant respect to her sister's sacrifice of self-interest in her pursuit of achieving her selfish ends. She snatches away Sanat from her sister to fulfil her dream of a prosperous life, sacrificing her human values and finer sensibilities. On the other hand, Nita's mother is a typical refugee housewife coming from East Bengal who, torn apart by day-to-day bitter struggle for mere survival, is led to measure all relationships in utilitarian terms of profit and loss. Thus, she reproaches her eldest son and provokes him into leaving home. If one cannot earn money, one forfeits the right to have meals at home – that is the message she brings home to her eldest son loud and clear. She is alarmed by Nita's relationship with Sanat. She is afraid that if Nita marries Sanat, the family will lose their only source of income. She does not hesitate to indulge Gita's game of seduction in the obscure room in the colony or beside the dark pond, when her eyes shine with a peculiar air of relief. Shankar, her eldest son, has left home to become an artist; Gita for a prosperous conjugal life and Montu is after attaining better status in life. All this is of little concern to Nita's mother. It is Nita; she clings to like a spider, for Nita is the only support, the only means of survival of the

impoverished family. Unwittingly, she lets Nita become a machine for earning money. When Nita's father raises the issue of her marriage, she is alarmed, for that would spell doom for the family. She reprimands her ailing husband in these words, 'You're too naive. If she gets married, what will we be left with? Sucking our thumbs?'

Ritwik Ghatak problematizes the notion of femininity through the characterization of Nita's mother in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. Although the film critics have categorized Nita's mother as a cruel, selfish and crooked woman; Ghatak did not intend to portray her either as a symbol of selflessness or as a stereotypical selfish woman. Through her characterisation, Ghatak has revealed the helplessness of a refugee woman who had to prioritize her role of a housewife over that of a mother for the sake of her family. It is from this commitment that she exploits Nita as a machine for earning money. But, somewhere, one discerns her latent feelings of affection for Nita, though these are not articulated in tangible terms in the perspective of poverty and social insecurity. Her latent motherhood pricks her conscience for she has smothered her daughter's dreams for the sake of her family. Thus, she repeatedly says, 'It's not what I wanted'. Driven by feelings of motherhood, she bares her soul, tormented by remorse, before Nita and wants to be with her helpless dying daughter in a friendless world. In mainstream Indian cinema, the character of mother was constructed in the image of a biological mother who has some pre-determined role to play. In other words, mother means a selfless figure whose affection is bountiful. Ritwik Ghatak debunked this conventional construction of motherhood as he portrayed the character of Nita's mother against the backdrop of an uncertain world where bare survival was at stake. She emerged as a flesh and blood mother with all her failings and redeeming features too. Eminent film critic, Chidananda Dasgupta refuses to categorize Nita's mother as a destructive mother or Goddess Kali. In his article, "Cinema, Marxism and Mother Goddess", Dasgupta observes:

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the idea of the Bengali traditional courtyard as the *Yagna-Mandapa* or sacrificial space, of Nita as Mother Goddess *Jagaddhatri* and her mother as the destructive *Kali* can be largely dismissed – without reducing the importance of the film either as art or as social statement. Anyone who has seen conventional Bengali films of the forties and fifties knows the inevitable courtyard with a long-suffering female in the middle of it. The daughter as bread-winner and the mother as selfish guardian of the family, ready to sacrifice the daughter's happiness at the family altar, are equally familiar figures. Particularly, the comparison of the mother with *Kali*, the destroyer, runs counter to the evidence of the film.

In at least three major statements, the mother places her understanding of and sympathy for the daughter beyond all doubt. First, she scolds her singer son for scrounging off his sister. Secondly, she is distinctly annoyed when the younger sister shows an excessive eagerness to bring tea for her elder

brother's lover when she is sitting with him. Thirdly, when Shankar, now a successful singer, discovers that Nita has tuberculosis, she is extremely sympathetic even though she no longer needs Nita's money; and she regrets that Nita, in her reserve, had not told mother about her affliction. In mythology, *Kali's* destruction is a motiveless cycle, not born of the earthly want to which the poor mother is subject. Ghatak's film-making is sharp and his feelings so acute that he elevates these stereotypes to real people whose lives are distorted by want.

(Dasgupta 260-261)

Ritwik Ghatak's art of film-making seems to conglomerate two strands: the *Ravindrik*, Marxist, rationalist, secular, world-embracing on the one hand and the tribal, magical, nostalgic, and regionally self-contained on the other. As a consequence of the cultural and ideological assimilation, Ghatak embraced the Jungian notion of archetypes and Eric Neumann's idea of the Great Mother, seeking a modern, scientific correlate to what may have come from the depths of a specifically Hindu consciousness. In Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Nita becomes an artistic reincarnation and extension of the Great Mother – Goddess Durga. But she fails to win her battle, because the modern world turns the mythical icons into their opposites. Nita's visit to the mountains at the end of the film (with her brother, Shankar) connotes Uma/Parvati's return to her father – the Himalayas. Ritwik solved the issue of 'incest' quite interestingly, in an Eastern backdrop, in this film. Shankar means 'Lord Shiva' (who is Uma's husband) and from a neo-Jungian perspective Ritwik establishes that Nita and Shankar were predestined to be a couple and not brother/sister. In the film, Nita is sacrificed so that the rest of her family may survive. To quote Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'Life affirmation is linked with life-perpetuation. Nita has been sacrificed so that others might live' (Rajadhyaksha 55). Ira Bhaskar describes it as the deconsecration of Nita. She writes:

Deconsecrating is the final phase of ritual whereby the concretisation of myth returns to its state of abstraction. The *Baul* song, used repeatedly in the film, sets off all the implications of the archetype that Nita is leaving. Evoking the

ritual of immersion of *Durga*, it foreshadows the end of Nita herself. Legend has it that Durga spends five days at her father's house (on earth) and then returns to her consort *Mahadeva*. The enactment of the immersion to the strain of holy chants and folk songs – 'Come *Durga*, come to me' – is the ritualistic deconsecrating of the *Durga* image. (Bhaskar 50)

The return to the elemental state is, therefore, achieved by destruction. The song, with its associative memory, recurs almost proleptically at various points in the film: for example, when Sanat hints that he cannot wait for her; at the time of Gita's marriage, when Nita realises that she has contracted tuberculosis; and finally when she leaves her home. On this

last occasion, Ira Bhaskar points out, as the camera closes in on Nita's rain-drenched face, the suggestion of immersion in the regenerating rain is obvious. From this close-up, Ghatak cuts to a shot of the hills – the surroundings of the sanatorium where Shankar is taking Nita for treatment. In the penultimate scene of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, which focuses on Nita, and her desperate cry to live: 'Brother, you know I really want to live? I love so much to be alive. Brother, tell me once that I will live!' – bringing the individual out of the shell of the archetype. The last words of Nita are amplified and reverberated on the sound track and buffeted with a droning sound and a whip cracking as the camera pans the surrounding hills of Shillong. Ghatak deliberately uses nature, the hills, and a space outside her family, distant from her private space, closeted within the family – the claustrophobic, semi-darkened room – to situate Nita in a space from where she establishes her unrelenting affirmation of life. Outside her family space, in the bounty of Nature, when Nita desperately cries out for life, it symbolically critiques the exploitation of the women that the class of Nita underwent in the post-Partition Bengal. There is enlightenment only at the end of the tunnel, with the realisation, 'I have committed a great sin, I never protested.' While Nita says that she has sinned for not protesting against her humiliations; her actual sin was that of acquiring the potential to pierce the veils of patriarchy and invert the unseen order of power. Dire straits actually made her too responsible, too powerful as the sole earning member of the family and she had to pay her price by, firstly, being 'iconized' as a Mother figure, then being left with no other choice but to disavow her desire, her sexuality. Then her coughed up blood proving contagious, this Mother had to be discarded, disavowed. In the book *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1991), Catharine A. MacKinnon opines:

Sexuality is the social process through which social relations of gender are created, organized, expressed and directed, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society. As work is to Marxism, sexuality to feminism is socially constructed yet constructing, universal as activity yet historically specific, jointly comprised of matter and mind. As the organized expropriation of the work of some for the benefit of others defines a class, workers, the organized expropriation of the sexuality of some for the use of others defines the sex, woman. (MacKinnon 3)

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Nita has debunked the process of 'becoming a woman' as analysed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) and Catharine A. MacKinnon in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1991). Here, we can ponder whether money takes the role of the phallus and Nita becomes the phallic Mother. However, we may draw our attention to a specific aspect of Ghatak's *mise-en-scene*: in many iconographic compositions Nita is framed in low angles; the confident presence of the erect, upright body either occupying the centre or the upper half of the frame, rendering the presence of the males in the frames redundant, peripheral, vulnerable or marginalized. Her iconic presence invokes awe. Interestingly, it is around this figure of the young woman as seen in the character of Nita in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Anasuya in *Komal Gandhar* and Sita in *Subarnarekha* that Ritwik

Ghatak has articulated his despair against the division of Bengal and his hope of cultural redemption. At the end of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, as Nita is dying of tuberculosis in a distant sanatorium, her elder brother sadly looks on as another young woman drags her feet to work in worn-out sandals: the oppressive structures live on, the exploitation continues. Drawing the audience's attention to the continual objectification of women in daily life and within nationalist discourses, Ghatak carries out a protofeminist critique of Bengal society and culture. Feminist scholarship of the past two decades has underscored the critical potential of melodrama in engaging women's worlds and subverting narratives that appear to maintain the status quo of patriarchal oppression. In sharp contrast to Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy* – a bildungsroman charting its male protagonist's gradual maturation as a citizen; Ghatak's 'Partition Trilogy' focuses on women characters and stages the precariousness of an incipient national subjectivity. While Ray's Apu emerges stronger from each successive loss of a female tradition (aunt, sister, mother and wife); Ghatak's male characters – Shankar in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Bhriku in *Komal Gandhar* and Ishwar in *Subarnarekha* – cannot do without their female counterparts. Ghatak's recording of women's struggle and suffering, both in and outside the domestic sphere, and of the virtual erasure of their pent-up hopes and desires, is marked by a deep empathy. It is interesting to refer to Nirmal Goswami's observations in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (1983) in this context:

If you are looking for Nita, look at her rain-swept face defying the deep inroads made by the fatal disease and listen to her last cry asserting life. Heroism is human and exists beyond the hypnotic pale of the divine deities embedded in mythology. Time and again, you saw her juxtaposed against the primal elements of nature – stepping out of the enormous shadow of the tree at the beginning and later, the sky, water, storm and the hills. This deep affinity with nature transcended ritual and reaffirmed her human vitality till the end. (Chatterji 64)

Meghe Dhaka Tara finds its full form in Nita's character. Her struggle is not only to earn bread for her family against great socio-economic constraints but also to hold together the family as a unit against the depredations of an engulfing economic crisis. This stems from her intense feelings of compassion and desire to maintain intra-familial, selfless relationships. Ghatak had stressed on two aspects while delineating Nita's character. He emphasised on the depiction of a woman's sacrifice to make her family financially stable which itself becomes a commentary on the socio-economic sufferings of an uprooted family in a colony. Secondly, Nita's helplessness underscores contemporary societal norms, in other words, the prevalent patriarchal ethos. It has to be specially emphasised that the women of the refugee families did not, all of sudden, come out of the confines of their homes to earn a living, driven by the notion of women's emancipation or liberty. The fact was otherwise. It was because of crushing poverty that the uprooted families relaxed the traditional social restrictions on their womenfolk and allowed them to go out and earn a living. This little space of freedom granted to women was to ensure security and comfort in life, a purely necessity-driven act on the part of the uprooted families. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Ghatak juxtaposed a young woman's

sacrifice for her family with her exploitation and deprivation by the family, in other words, by the society. Life was sacrificed at the altar of death, and the rehabilitation of a refugee family was attained at the cost of life. Nita's struggle for life – her dreams, her thwarted dreams and her death – becomes emblematic of thousands of refugee women struggling to find a means of livelihood in post-Partition Bengal.

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