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Analyzing Life, Feminism and Melodrama in Ritwik Ghatak's Cinema: Meghe Dhaka Taara and Subarnarekha

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Abstract:

What takes a clapped star to peep out within the society? An obsession, a must-defy to the uncontrollable surroundings and someone known as Nilkontho, who had been canopied by natural proximities in his life span, yet the better of them were the effects of life and its action. Does it seem typically unstructured for the first paragraph? Or, unable to mention the existence of Nilkontho, isn't the unpolished sculpture of an aspiring Raphael? Let's term out the co-relation between life and its action. Life on one hand is driven by Hegel's logics and the logic has been explained to be concerned with cognition, which is life; this raises an obvious posture towards the dilemma- does life really work on logic or not? Remember the 1943 Bengal famine? Or, the nuclear fission of that part, later in 1947(metaphorically)? Where does logic apply to those events? It is action (logical or not) that destines life in a relative manner and this co-relation defines Nilkontho, better known as Ritwik Ghatak. The appreciation of his films through the analysis of Life, Feminism and Melodrama present in his form of Cinema shall be stated in this paper to get a closer revelation of his filmmaking mannerism.

Key words: imperialism; Bourgeoisie; melodrama; diegesis

1. Introduction

Ritwik Ghatak was born in Dhaka in 1925 and gradually began staffing up an adolescence full of tragedies and e human-sufferings; human sufferings were those that aroused a certain sense of 'action against inhumanity' and sensitivity in him. Although he left the dilapidated home-ground after East Bengal (now Bangladesh) was struck by natural, supernatural and unnatural events in the 1940s, accounting to World War, Bengal Famine (1943-44) and the Partition of 1947 respectively, he barely forgot his initial roots.

He and his family destined themselves to Calcutta (now Kolkata) just before millions of other refugees from East Bengal began to flood into the city. Identification with this tide of refugees was to define his practice, providing an over-riding metaphor for cultural dismemberment and exile that unified his subsequent creative work. The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, which led to more refugees fleeing to India, was to have a similar impact on his work.

He became actively involved in the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and the Communist Party of India (CPI). Formed in 1943, IPTA was the first organized national theatre movement in India that developed and performed plays addressing social injustice and British imperialism. Ghatak began working with West Bengal's IPTA wing in Calcutta in 1948, writing, directing and acting in his own plays, such as *Jwala* ("Flame," 1951) and *Dalil* ("Document," 1952). He acted in other plays, such as revivals of Bijan Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* ("New Harvest," 1944) and Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neeldarpan* ("Indigo Mirror," 1860), and adaptations of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* and Gorky's *The Lower Depths*.

In 1951, Ghatak was commissioned by the Provincial Draft Preparatory Committee of IPTA to draft a document that would articulate the political and cultural ideology of IPTA in West Bengal. In his 1954 thesis *On The Cultural Front*, Ghatak outlined a cultural future (in ideological and organizational terms) for West Bengal's IPTA in particular and the CPI in general.

1.1. *The Stage Leaves Ghatak*

Soon, he believed that theatre was not enough to reach his voice to the audience, to the people. That's what People's Theatre was meant for.

He felt (quite rationally) that a peninsular stage was lacking from the much needed whisper into the commons' ears. Therefore, the need for a better medium arises.

It's not that his lungs eroded by repeated non-acceptances, he was afraid of the consequences that the people had to suffer due to this communication hassle.

A camera, some cables, lights, some manpower, some skills and an idiot box, to deliver a well-rehearsed drama had been considered much more convenient than the stage. Look into the camera! And the lens would serve as a simultaneous point of views of the viewers. He leaves the theatre and reaches the panoramic world of Cinema.

2. At 1 (e) ast, it's Cinema

His first intensive involvements with cinema came as an actor in Nemai Ghosh's Chinnamool (1950) and the film proved pivotal in establishing the development of Bengali Cinematic Realism. Once again, although not directly, Ghatak got involved with IPTA as with their support the film was in the mode for fixing shooting locations, including some of the extra actors cum sufferers (most of them were actual refugees).

"In his films, Ghatak constructs detailed visual and aural commentaries of Bengal (located in northeast India) in the socially and politically tumultuous period from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. Twice during his lifetime Bengal was physically rent apart—in 1947 by the Partition engendered by the departing British colonizers and in 1971 by the Bangladeshi War of Independence."

Erin O' Donell.

The mythical power of return will fascinate Ghatak; he was not satisfied with a form that enacts the historical flow but sought to turn history itself into an object of investigation. That one important task seemed to be to give expression to the sense of violation brought on by the historical transportation of his people into the scene of the contemporary nation. He could not do this by positing a wholesome tradition and the past, over and against modernity, a road taken by much of popular cinema since the 1970s, but he had to remain strangely solitary in his choices. For him, Hollywood might not have existed at all. The occasional echo of classical Soviet school is there, but this does not prevent him from being in a class. (4) It was as much a matter of choice as of training, his cinema was 'intellectual' (5) in the sense that there was a conscious attempt to make cinema itself a tool in the search for what, rephrasing Bertolt Brecht's words, one can call a 'fighting conception of the modern'. Ghatak's solitude should be a challenge to the critic, not least because it cautions us against using his example as one of questioning modern modes from the side of tradition as is sometimes done. In his work, Ghatak critically addresses and questions—from the personal to the national level—the identity of post-Independence Bengal. The formation of East Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971 has motivated him to seek through his films the cultural identity of Bengal in the midst of the stated (politically) geographic issues.

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, especially in the urban environment of Calcutta. In the next section, I will be focusing on two primary characteristics that define a 'Ritwik Ghatak' film (taking the example of *Meghe Dhaka Taara*)-

- Representation of women
- Melodrama and melody

3. Representation of Women

3.1. *Meghe Dhaka Taara*

'*Meghe Dhaka Taara*' is set in the late 1950s in Calcutta. The story revolves around a Bengali lower-middle class, refugee family who were victims of Partition and who are now struggling for survival in a *bustee* ("slum") on the outskirts of the city. The eldest daughter, Nita ("Knowledge"), has given up her college studies in order to work. She is the breadwinner of the family. Her elder brother Shankar, who would normally be the head of the household, is eccentric and irresponsible. He spends his days singing, practicing scales and classical Indian khayals and dreaming of becoming a great singer. Nita's old father teaches in a small school nearby and her mother maintains the house. Nita's selfish younger siblings, Gita and Montu, are still in school. In her bleak life, Nita has only one thing to look forward to: the return of Sanat, a young scientist she hopes one day to marry.

Through many twists and turns of the plot, Nita's family becomes increasingly dependent on her earnings. Nita's father and Montu both have debilitating accidents and Shankar leaves home for Bombay to become a singing star. Sanat does return, but falls in love with and marries Nita's sister, Gita. The stresses and strains of Nita's life take their toll. She develops tuberculosis and, although she is desperately ill, continues to work to support her family. Shankar returns from Bombay, now an accomplished classical singer, to find Nita wasting away with a terminal illness. Shankar takes her to a sanatorium in the hills where she remains, uncertain whether she will live or die, and forgotten by her family.

Ah! A breathtaking summarization of a classic, isn't it?

3.1.1. Representation of Nita in the Film

In *Meghe Dhaka Taara*, Nita is as a stencil cut apart from a bunch of stray newspapers and impressed upon unfitted surroundings. It seems as if, she is good, ever to be compatible to her ongoing situations yet she leads a remorseful fight.

By probing deeper into her character, she is in actuality the manifestation of multiple goddesses- Durga as Jagadhatri, the benevolent image of the eternal giver and universal Sustainer, and Uma/Gauri, the Mother Goddess.

In her essay "Myth and Ritual: Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*," Ira Bhaskar points out how Nita represents the benign manifestation of Durga:

A prevalent story about the genesis of Durga is the concept of Havyagni (oblation to the sacrificial fire). In the ritual of the Havan (the act of consigning the mortal offering to the sacrificial flames) is symbolized the surrender of human desires and aspirations which are carried to the heavens with the smoke. It is believed that Durga was born out of this smoke as a transmutation of human desires, taking the form of Jagadhatari, the universal Sustainer. One of the central images associated with Nita is the courtyard wherein are centered the ambitions of the rest of the family... These selfish ambitions pour into the courtyard, the symbolic *Yagna mandapa*, from which manifests Nita in the role of the Provider and Creator.

In other words, can't it be depicted about the element of the feminism present in his films were the results of his future visions? Or, he was definitely influenced by the 'triangular re-incarnation' of the mother, who has taken the sole responsibility of cherishing the earth. The sight and sound of the fire that Nita's mother uses symbolically to sacrifice her daughter adds to the construction of the Jagadhatari image in the family courtyard. Traditionally, the courtyard of a Bengali or Indian home is the heart of the household. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the courtyard is an oppressive, suffocating space, particularly for Nita. Significant here is Naficy's articulation of the outside, external and domestic, internal spaces of accented cinema as feminized and his perception of all accented films as feminine texts.

3.2 Subarnarekha

The film tells the story of Ishwar Chakraborty, a Hindu refugee from East Pakistan after the 1947 partition of India. He goes to West Bengal with his little sister Sita where he tries to start a new life. In a refugee camp, they see the abduction of a low-caste woman and Ishwar takes her little son Abhiram with him. He gets a job at a factory in the province, near the river Subarnarekha.

After completing his study when Abhiram is asked to go to Germany for his studies, he and Sita discover that they are in love. But at this moment, Ishwar's fear of prejudice emerges, as he does not want his sister, a Brahmin, to marry a lower caste boy. During Sita's wedding with another man, the girl and Abhiram elope and go to Calcutta. Ishwar is angry and heartbroken.

Sita and Abhiram live in the slums of Calcutta and try to make ends meet. They have a little son (Sriman Ashok Bhattacharya). One day, Abhiram gets a new job as a bus driver, but this leads to tragedy: when he accidentally hits and kills a little girl, he is lynched by the crowd. In her desperate situation, Sita is forced to think about taking up prostitution.

In the meantime, Ishwar is living a lonely and sad life in the province. When his old time friend Haraprasad comes to visit him, they decide to go to Calcutta on a binge-drinking tour. They finally end up in a brothel, both completely drunk. When Ishwar staggers into one of the bedchambers, he is faced... with his own sister, whose first "client" he should become. Sita immediately recognizes him and rather cuts her own throat than submit to incest. She dies. When Ishwar realizes what has happened, he breaks down.

At the end of the film, the now completely broken Ishwar meets Sita's little son, who is now his closest relative. He brightens up and decides to take the little boy into his house.

3.2.1. Representation of Sita in the Film

The character itself inherits the divine and mother archetype from the name it has been given- Sita.

Through song, Ghatak portrays Sita as both mother and lover—as the goddess Sita and the mythical lover of Krishna, Radha. One day, in Chhatimpur in the Bengali countryside, Sita, as a young girl, is idly walking along an abandoned airstrip singing a Bengali folk song when she encounters Ishwar's senile old boss. He asks Sita her name and then proceeds to tell her the story of her birth and death. The old man tells Sita how her mythical namesake was found as a baby in the furrow of a field by King Janak and how she returned to her mother, Earth, when scorned by her husband, Rama, who believed that she had cheated on him with the evil demon, Ravana. Ghatak reworks this mythological tale in *Subarnarekha* to climax with the female character Sita's committing suicide with a kitchen knife in response to the horror of seeing her brother, Ishwar ("God" in Hindi), at her doorstep to solicit her services as a prostitute.

"In 'Subarnarekha', a layer to the reconstruction of the goddess archetype in the character of Sita can be found in the Puranic tale of Sati another manifestation of the goddess Durga, who burns herself through the fire of her concentration (yogagni) in order to satisfy the ethics of good womanhood (satidharma) because her father, Daksha, while under the influence of a magic garland had engaged in unseemly sexual behavior towards her."

Daksha is greatly opposed to Sati's marriage to the god, Shiva. In *Subarnarekha*, Ishwar represents Daksha, for he is a surrogate father of Sita. As a symbolic father, Ishwar, like Daksha has an incestuous attachment to Sita (Sati) and an intense dislike for her husband Abhiram (Shiva). As Sati immolates herself, similarly Sita sacrifices herself when confronted with the shame of the sexual advances of her drunken brother Ishwar.

The film's only real moments of sustained tonal clarity come in the songs sung by the adult Sita, which amount to arias in this historical opera. One of her most beautiful and mournful songs comes right after Ishwar has been awarded a promotion; he searches for her to share the news, finding her along the desolate banks of the river.

She is illustrated, singing a Krishna Kirtan:

She begins to sing the following Krishna Kirtan :

"See the dawn is coming.

The people wake up.

The breeze wakes up.

The birds wake up.

The sky appears.

Oh Shyam [Krishna, the Dark One], why do you still lie asleep?

Where were you, awake all night?

See the dawn is breaking.”

She has been depicted as Radha, singing her song of love in separation to Abhiram, as Krishna. The use of a Krishna Kirtan, which portrays the Krishna/Radha dilemma of love in separation, is also a metaphor for the division of Bengal and the nostalgia and longing that geographical separation has engendered.

While Sita is still yearning for Abhiram with whom she has gradually grown a romantic linkage, she has to abandon such notions to console Ishwar's success or usually they don't get acknowledged.

3.2.2. Sacrifice of Sita

At the end, Sita is truly in exile. This is now a complete contrast (the living conditions) to what was the idyllic open structures in the countryside house and now are the confined, paranoid surroundings in the urban slums. Sita had to run away with Abhiram due to her brother's irrational jealousy from him and hence, their conditions post-marriage continued to strive.

Exiting a taxi, Ishwar stumbles towards Sita's house; a point of view shot illustrates his blurry and distorted vision. When the completely inebriated Ishwar arrives at Sita's house, he has no idea that Sita is the prostitute whom he is visiting. Ishwar is not only drunk but also almost blind because earlier in a bar he dropped his glasses and stepped on them.

He is both, literally and metaphorically blind that did not let him see beyond Abhiram's lower status leading Sita into these ominous circumstances.

When Sita realizes it to be her brother, her goddess stature gets diminished into a disembodied representation. We hear a crash and bloodstains spurts onto Ishwar's white kurta. The visual and sonic impact of Sita's self-sacrifice is shocking.

“The dramatic construction of the scene underscores the epic tragedy of Sita's death — the sacrifice of Bengal — caused by the decadence of Ishwar, the excesses of Bengali society.”

4. Melodrama and the Melodious Portraits

“When I started ‘Meghe Dhaka Tara’, I never spoke of political unification. Even now I don't think of it because history will not alter and I won't venture to do this impossible task. The cultural segregation caused by politics and economics was a thing to which I never reconciled myself as I always thought in terms of cultural integration.” - Ritwik Ghatak.

His films, including this one had been portrayed following his deep grown sentiments, already discussed above. With his technical susceptibility, Ghatak creates a melodramatic post-Partition world in which he constructs his vision of “Woman” and “Homeland” in the de-structured Bengal.

Within the homes of Ghatak's post-Independence Bengal lies the site of both ananda (joy) and dukkho (sorrow), emotions intensely expressed by his female characters, frequently through song. These songs distilled the lucidity in the narrative structure of his kind of cinema, as well as the character growth in his films.

“The ability of music and song to express powerful emotions beyond the visual dimension of a film, even beyond the film text itself, is particularly evident in Ghatak's Meghe Dhaka Taara.” - Donnell quotes.

One song, mourning Uma's (Nita's figurative role) leaving, Ghatak uses extra-diegetically several times in Meghe Dhaka Tara, specifically when Nita's senile father casts her out of the family house when she is dying from tuberculosis. The lyrics go as follows:

Come, my daughter Uma, to me.

Let me garland you with flowers.

You are the soul of my sad self, Mother, the deliverer.

Let me bid you farewell now, my daughter!

You are leaving my home desolate, for your husband's place.

How do I endure your leaving, my daughter?

Ghatak utilizes this traditional Bengali folk song to counterpoint Nita's reality. In this song, the female addressee has been characterized as a liability to her parental links. Being sick, unwed and not being able to bring any asset to her family, she has been considered as impotent (in a respectable manner).

For in her role as Uma and the consort of Shiva-Nita goes to a sanatorium in the Shillong hills of Bengal to die, as if in Shiva's lap-Himalayas(being the residing place of Shiva). In Hindu mythology, the Himalayas are the spot of reunion of Uma and her husband, Shiva; but, in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Nita is cast to die out alone. In a way, Ghatak rotates the traditional Hindu myth to emphasize the tragedy of Nita's death.

Thus, Ghatak is making use of Indian myths and archetypes within a melodramatic context as an exercise in exploring the degradation of post-Independence Bengali society.

“Brother, you know I really want to live. I love so much to be alive. Brother, tell me once that I will live. Brother, I want to go home. I want to live!”

These last lines express her unyielding affirmation of life as she struggles to fit her voice into the soundtrack and the landscape is consequently left with her disembodied utterances. The whole event (apparently) is driven by Life and its action, but, not as Hegel defined. The events are continually expressing Ghatak’s dilemma once again regarding the logics governing Nita’s life. The cognition often can be seen surpassed by emotions and hence is senseless to accept the destined truth. This, in turn, proves that one’s affirmations might provide a temporal relief but the additive psychological well-being (provided) through the crafts perception of reality is the true one that drives LIFE.

4.1. The Touch of Tagore

While discussing the multi-faceted Bengali artist Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian cultural historian Geeta Kapur elaborates upon Ghatak’s reconstruction of Indian myths:

“But even fewer artists can achieve, simultaneously, the reconstruction of an archetype that turns into a device to speak about the ‘type’ within a class; to present the problem of a class-constructed psyche which so quickly appropriates mythic elements to serve vested interests. I am thinking of Ritwik Ghatak, for whom too [along with Ray] Tagore is a mentor. Certainly in the cinema only this one man, Ghatak, dares to put his stakes so high, and expectedly the cinematic means he uses are bold and hybrid: he does not subscribe to the sacred as such, or to the revelatory. But nor does he rest content with doubt that declares itself proof of the rational, and an automatic representation, therefore, of the secular. He places rationality within a melodramatic genre and examines the status of doubt there, in that fraught schema, where tragedy is made to give itself over in favour of praxis.”

As previously mentioned, in his films Ghatak utilizes a variety of musical forms, both Indian and non-Indian, and commonly uses Tagore’s music. As Ghatak stated in an interview just before his death:

“I cannot speak without Tagore. That man has culled all of my feelings from long before my birth. He has understood what I am and he has put in all the words. I read him and I find that all has been said and I have nothing new to say.”

His songs can find a dwelling in varied aspects of a person’s mood; just as a baby curls himself into the mother’s chest, quite similarly, a human can find an escape from his undulation of sorrow or a refuge in his joyous verbes through Tagore’s songs.

Such an embracing routine they have been for Ghatak, not much to anyone’s surprise!

“Ghatak, like most Bengalis, considers Tagore as the embodiment of all that is great in Bengali culture, as the pinnacle of artistic expression in Bengal. When Ghatak uses a Tagore song in a film, it often evokes among Bengalis nostalgia and longing for an undivided, pre-Partition Bengal. Ghatak situates Tagore songs within the painful context of the struggle for survival of post-Independence Bengali families, and the songs serve to shape and give dimension to the characters.”- ERIC DONNEL

4.2. Non-Diegesis

Coming back to *Subarnarekha*, the scene of the sacrifice of Sita is complemented by music, sounds and silence; no dialogue has been used. This ingenious employment of sound by Ghatak is observed to be somewhat similar to *La Dolce Vita* by Federico Fellini.

In its defence, Ghatak stated in “Sound in Cinema”:

“There are times when a tune used in a film by someone else is used to make an observation, the way I myself have done. The music that accompanies the scene of orgy at the end of La Dolce Vita, where Fellini lashes out at the whole of Western civilization, is known as Patricia. I sought to make a similar statement in my Subarnarekha about my own land, this Bengal, so sparkling with intellect. So I have used the same music in the bar scene [and in Sita’s suicide scene], to make a suggestion. Was I influenced? Not at all. The music merely helped me say a lot of things.”

“Helped me say a lot of things” for Ghatak refers to his commentary on the senselessness of the dissolution of post-Independence Bengali culture and society. As Kumar Shahani has explained while discussing Ghatak’s evolution of an “epic” cinematic form:

“In Subarnarekha, the dramatic element disintegrates, its cliches are turned against itself; the traumatic prostitution of our culture is exemplified as Sanskrit becomes part of La Dolce Vita in one of the world’s poorest cities. We are made to face our self-destructive incestuous longings which are otherwise so delicately camouflaged by both our sophisticated and vulgar filmmakers.”

5. Conclusion

Ritwik Ghatak’s films including *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, representations of “Woman” and “Melodrama” are inextricably intertwined in setting, sound, and song. Mixing and layering traditions with the innovations infused with social-historical observations and critiques. Hamid Naficy has observed:

“But exile must not be thought of as a generalized condition of alienation and difference, or as one of the items on the diversity-chic menu. All displaced people do not experience exile equally or uniformly. Exile discourse thrives on detail, specificity and locality. There is a there there in exile.”

He has done it continually; through his films by presenting a utopian and dystopian view of Bengal he has been on a trial to portray the contradictions of Bengali society in post-Partition Bengal. And as a refugee, Ghatak is compelled in his work to interrogate and continually reassess Bengal's cultural memory, identity, and history. Say it the prolific process of understanding films or, the mannerism to find answers to his sufferings in the past, his contribution has been worth appealing.

In his 1970s essay, "Society, Our Traditions, Filmmaking and My Effort," Ghatak states:

"Child's play with film is no longer fitting. The huge formative nation-building role of films in this country will be here soon."

In his films, Ghatak not only constructs varying visions of his Bengali homeland, but also consciously attempts to activate film's political and cultural role in one's life (that is hypothetically governed by logic).

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