

REMAPPING THE CONTOUR: WOMEN IN THE PARTITION TRILOGY OF RITWIK KUMAR GHATAK

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Abstract: The last two lines of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poem 'The Dawn of Freedom' (August 1947) "Friends, come away from this false light. Come, We must/ searched for that promised dawn" speak volume in favor of a real freedom, a freedom free from the trauma and shackle of a painful partition. The resounding creed of "ye azadi jhuta hai" (This freedom is a sham), going like an undercurrent through millions of mind, not only moved the literary arena but also innumerable artists in this part of the world. Since the partition of India, the displacement and trauma of millions of people has been the immensely important subject of substantial historical research. The partition of 1947 has been depicted by historians and artists from different perspectives. One close look at this genre somewhat suggests that partition has always been dealt with the religious paradigm in mind. However, there are other dark alleys of this painful split that deserve critical attention. One of such areas is the deplorable condition of women after the partition.

My paper aims to throw light on the representation of women in the 'partition trilogy' (Meghe Dhaka Tara [The Cloud-Clapped Star], Komal Gandher [E-Flat] & Subarnarekha [Golden Line]) of the prominent Bengali filmmaker Ritwik Kumar Ghatak. Its primary focus will be on the negotiating identity of the refugees of East-Bengal with a lot of problems in a somewhat new land, as seen through the eyes of the women characters in such films. While doing this, the paper also attempts to deal with some other films that essentially represent the women characters as the worst victims of this painful event.

Keywords: Gender, partition, refugee, woman

"I am not wife, for my husband has abandoned me. I am not widow, for he still lives. I am not mother, for the son he gave me is taken away. I am not sister, for I have no brother. With no father, I am but daughter of my Bebeji. And so I am no one..." (*What the Body Remembers*)

The narrative trope of a Woman's identity as the locus classicus of partition violence after 1947, which undoubtedly witnessed one of the great human paroxysms in the world, significantly problematizes the notion of womanhood emphasizing the much needed discourse of looking at the aftermath of partition from the gender nuances. This split of 1947 created millions of homeless and uprooted people on either side of the newly formed 'border'. Within a span of few months a great number of people had to undergo the heart-rending process of leaving their homes and consequently, this gave birth to a newly formed class called 'refugees'. The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees has defined a refugee in the following manner (in Article 1.A.2): "Any person who: owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." (Wikipedia Contributors) As we talk about the mass killing and religious jingoism on either side of the newly formed border, one must not forget the sexual savagery perpetrated on women signifying not just cutting apart the

uniform nation but also the uniform woman body. Urvashi Butalia offers a striking example from the rhetoric of one newspaper: "One issue of the Organizer (August 14, 1947) [Pakistan's Independence Day] had a front page illustration of Mother India, the map of the country, with a woman lying on it, one limb cutoff and severed with Nehru holding the bloody knife" (*Other Side of Silence* 186)

If we leave the political blame-game aside and specifically concentrate on the post-partition violence witnessed and faced by women, it speaks volume in favor of the fact that gender and subjugation were integral parts of each other. The spectacle of the violence during partition is unquestionably horrendous but the actual number of fatalities is always an issue of debate. More than the number of fatalities, what is even more striking and problematic is to analyze the impact of this event on those who somehow managed to save themselves. However, my paper doesn't directly delve into the question of partition violence on women but rather it intends to show a somewhat candid and apparently placid side to this tale of passive suffering. It aims to throw light on the representation of women in the 'partition trilogy' (Meghe Dhaka Tara [The Cloud-Clapped Star], Komal Gandher [E-Flat] & Subarnarekha [Golden Line]) of the prominent Bengali filmmaker Ritwik Kumar Ghatak. Its primary focus will be on the negotiating identity of the refugees of East-Bengal with a lot of problems in a somewhat new land, as seen through the eyes of the women characters in such films.

As the literary works of Khuswant Singh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Sunil Ganguly, Jyotirmoyee Devi or Prafulla Ray literally and metaphorically represent the aftermath of partition, the cinematic perspective of Ritwik Ghatak adds some heart-felt dark pictographic elements to it. Ritwik Kumar Ghatak was one of those refugees who had to run off their 'homeland' with a view to settle in a somewhat alien place for survival. His cinema is a burning testament that bears the scars of partition. Ghatak himself says: "In our boyhood we have seen a Bengal, whole and glorious. [...] Our dreams faded away. We crashed on our faces, clinging to the crumbling Bengal, divested of all its glory."³ As Ghatak intends to represent the uniform Bengal transforming into a crumbling Bengal, he situates his women characters in such a way as they represent the 'homeland'. His women characters figure prominently in his partition trilogy and their deplorable state stands as a signifier of the state of a divided Bengal. For a man like Ritwik Ghatak, a film is a space of different forms that can let him give vent to his social and political messages.

Meghe Dhaka Tara is a film set in one of the colonies of the 1950s Kolkata. It depicts a family of refugees from the time of the Partition of Bengal surviving on the earnings of the eldest daughter Neeta. They are all looking to settle down in an alien land to be endowed with an identity and livelihood. At the very outset of the film Ghatak shows a huge python like tree and the tree is very likely a representation of Neeta who stands to deliver everything that the family needs. Through many twists and turns in the film, Nita's family becomes increasingly dependent on her earnings. In the film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Nita (Knowledge) manifests multiple goddesses: on one hand, she represents Durga as Jagadhatri, the ideal compassionate image of eternal giver and sustainer and on the other hand, she represents Uma/Gauri, the ideal mother figure sacrificing everything for others. While commenting on the representation of women in the films of Ritwik Ghatak, Ira Vaskar in her essay 'Myth and Ritual: Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* points out:

"The 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 Jagadhatri, 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." (Vaskar)

Nita seems to be a fragmented character benignly accepting everything bestowed upon her and eventually divested of all her happiness like the homeland that Ghatak tries to portray. Near the end of the film, when Nita has to leave her 'home' in quest of a new space, both topographically and psychologically, Ghatak ironically uses a traditional Bengali folk song lamenting Uma's departure from her ancestral home to go to her husband's home. This even becomes more ironic and pertinent as it is used at the time 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...

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

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

How do I endure your leaving, my daughter?"

So, within the narrative thread of a melodrama, Ghatak is remapping the degraded condition of women in the post-independence Bengali society which also exposes the entrapment of women in the vicious cycle of sacrifice, tradition and honor. In *What the Body Remembers*, when a character utters "Papaji thinks that for good women, death should be preferable to dishonor", it reminds one that Kusum is killed by her father-in-law so that a man of the other religious community can't violate her body. What often goes overlooked and unheard is that the women in post-partition era were uprooted twice, once from their ancestral homeland and then from their self.

Subarnarekha, another masterpiece of Ghatak is set in a somewhat similar place like *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: a lower middle-class family living in a slum area on the outskirts of Calcutta immediately after Partition. This bustee is actually a camp, known as the "New Life Colony," for refugees from East Bengal. The narrative of *Subarnarekha* throws light on the life Sita, who lost her parents during Partition, and who is being raised by her elder brother, Ishwar. Sita seems to be another manifestation of the mythical Sita/Sati. Like Nita in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Sita plays a pivotal role in earning her livelihood after Abhiram's death and she unwittingly becomes a prostitute. The film reminds one of the Puranic tale of Sati, who burns herself through the fire of her concentration (yogagni) to live up to the ethics of good womanhood (satidharma). In *Subarnarekha*, Sita sacrifices herself when she met with the shame of the sexual advances of her drunken brother Ishwar.

The film seems to resound the psychological complexity of a question raised by the refugees- is this our home? Primarily, it looks like that the answer is 'no'. Even, some of the refugee characters described

Calcutta as the City Of Terrible Pleasures. The film ends with Sita committing suicide as she feels dejected in a new place and Ishwar once again commences his journey for a new home. So, it needs to be asserted that for Ghatak, women and homeland are inextricably linked up. The entire gamut of literary works, referred to as partition literature, reflect on partition from either a political or social standpoint almost always neglecting the narrative voices of women. The subjective experiences of such women who suffered or witnessed suffering can produce another side of partition that needs to come to the mainstream. Ritwik Ghatak does this consciously in his partition trilogy. In *Komal Gandher*, when Anusuya is looking through the river Padma, her crisis becomes even more pertinent as she mourns also for the personal divide since just beyond the river lies Noakhali where her mother met her death. The scene juxtaposes memory of death and sad

realization of present, but the border remains and remains strongly.

Ritwik Ghatak critically addresses the post-partition Bengal with all its crisis and darkness. The compulsory exiles like him were being relentlessly disturbed by the negotiating identity or its crisis so to say, in time of the breaking of the nation. The exiles were in quest of the motherland; they were in quest of the mother figure who could act like a root in giving them the uniform identity, the uniform nation and the uniform language. To quote Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "the sharply-etched character of the old Harijan woman in *Komal Gandhar...* recalls the dimensions of the character of Sujata in Mahasweta Devi's *Ek Hajaar Chauraswe ki Maa* in the way the mother of an individual who dies in the struggle becomes the Mother figure of the entire youth who are still struggling.

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