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Lost Home, Shattered Hope, and the Dynamics of Gender Discourse in Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komol Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*

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Abstract

The trauma and suffering people were subjected to during the partition of India were immense and unforgettable. Several narratives of partition hinted at the politicised role of the divide and quit, which made it look like a successful attempt to avoid war. But the devastation remains a horror to numerous people who have witnessed the trauma of leaving one's land. Cinema has always been an effective way to capture the different discourses in the course of history. The present paper aims to trace the complicated cultural conflicts in the context of the partition of Bengal and their inevitable effect on displacement and identity crisis among those who are the worst victims of this power division. Though partition has been presented through various cinematic representations, the partition of Bengal is a much ignorant phenomenon, as only a few Bengali filmmakers have demonstrated it through their films. Ritwik Ghatak is one such filmmaker whose *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komol Gandhar*, and *Subarnarekhan* have represented how, in the aftermath of partition, it is not only physical abuse that the gendered bodies are subjected to. Rather, after partition, gender discourse takes a completely new turn. Exploring the women characters, this paper intends to investigate an entirely new dynamics of gender discourse in the said films.

Keywords: Ritwik Ghatak, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Subarnarekha*, *Komol Gandhar*, Partition, Displacement, Home, Gender, Identity Crisis, Victimization.

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Language is the mouthpiece of a culture. India has several cultures and sub-cultures existing side by side and expressed through the medium of different languages. Though several cultures and sub-cultures are not free from hierarchy, they have been managing diversity and ethnic conflict very well for a long time. The major blow comes to this 'unity in diversity' in the form of partition, which caused such turbulence and upheaval in the lives of the Indians as was unseen and unfelt till that time. As identity is one's identification with and departure from a particular culture, society, religion, region, gender, etc., an individual is comprised of several social identities. Because of the differences in language and culture, the exodus reality of partition of each region was not the same. The trauma of the people of Punjab during partition and the suffering of the people of Bengal during the same turbulent period are not identical. However, they have sameness with difference. The suffering is region-specific as well as gender specific. Partition of India is a step towards the safety of a particular religious community or a permanent cause of devastation on the collective consciousness of a group of people, which is a topic of much dispute. If religious identity remains the basis of partition, then what about one's regional identity, which appears most challenging for the refugees to change into another after partition? The religious difference comes to nought when one becomes familiar with the fact that the National anthem of Bangladesh is the first ten lines of a poem written by Rabindranath Tagore, who is Indian and whose religion is different from the majority of Bangladeshi people- the uniqueness of the trauma of Bengal partition is evident from this very fact. As Bashabi Fraser has said about this:

What is unique about the Bengal partition is that...the influx of refugees across the border has not stopped, to date...this unending people remains an everyday reality on West Bengal's 'porous' border and has made the stories of partition on the eastern front unending and different. (5)

In 1911 the proposal of Bengal partition was repealed based on the cultural unity of the Bengalis irrespective of their religious differences. But in 1947 the idea of cultural homogeneity remained unable to protect unified Bengal. Suffering, trauma, displacement, and identity crisis follow as the immediate results of this holocaust. The importance of the official sources to throw light on the partition holocaust cannot be denied. Rejecting the single centre of official sources and providing us with several points of view, other sources of partition can be beneficial for a holistic approach. In that sense, cinema can be said to have an enormous power to capture and represent the complex cultural conflicts, taking its material from archived or unarchived sources. It is a medium of representing collective memory effectively to a collective audience, resulting in an almost homogenous reaction, which might be due to their collective consciousness. It provides the audiences with the necessary gap to produce their own opinions. While the partition of Punjab has acquired much notice because of its cinematic representation, the cinematic representation of the partition trauma of Bengal is limited only to regional Bengali films. Ritwik Ghatak is one such name whose opus has partition as its theme. The objective of the present paper is to study the three films of Ghatak, namely, *Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud Capped Star)*, *Subarnarekha (The*

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Golden Line) and *Komol Gandhar* (*E Flat*), in order to acquire some idea of the refugees in general who are gradually succumbing to displacement and identity crisis while giving emphasis on the condition of women which has gone through a drastic change in the aftermath of partition and whose experience is much different from her male counterparts.

Partition is not merely the change of place or environment, but it is a traumatic separation from the numerous bonds that we call relationships and an exodus experience of entering into an undecided, unsettled territory of identity, leaving the settled one behind. Starting life again from the beginning while one has already passed the midway through life is not only traumatic but also challenging. Ritwik Ghatak, through all these three films, takes us to a world which is torn by partition atrocities, which is struggling every moment to survive in a new place and in a new atmosphere, which is being haunted by the idea of 'home'. But even in such a world where nobody can spare a minute without thinking about their unfortunate displacement, there also exists marginalisation on the basis of caste as well as gender, stereotyping ideas regarding women and beauty. In the above-mentioned three films, women are not the victims of defilement or molestation, which were the immediate consequences of partition, but Ghatak has captured the time when the refugees have crossed the border and are trying to transform into their new identity. Ghatak has presented the suffering of the women from uprooted families and struggling for survival in the newly founded colonies of a new country. In Ghatak's representation, the victimisation of women is shown due to society's internal ideologies, where a woman like Neeta has abundance of internal beauty and is carrying the responsibility of her family but even then, she is a matter of much worry to her mother as she has dark complexion (*Meghe Dhaka Tara*), a woman like Anushuya who desires to spread the exodus reality of partition among people, if she meets a man with smile on her face she is called a flirt on her back (*Komol Gandhar*); where a woman like Sita is not allowed to have formal education and remains dependent on men for her living and when she is left alone with her son, prostitution remains her only way of saving her son from starvation. But the humiliation, the agony, proves to be heavier on her and compels her to commit suicide.

Ghatak's films are unique in the way that they have captured a completely different discourse of gender prevalent in the post-partition society. Women are not the victims of physical abuse anymore. Now, the course of the oppression has been changed. Behind the apparently independent image of working women like Neeta and Anushuya, there exists a deeply embedded patriarchal ideology which uses female members when the necessity for their support arises. Still, the female members can never be treated as equals. The victimisation continued even then.

Along with emphasising the contradictory status of the experiences of male and female sexes, Ghatak's films have shown the suffering that the word 'home' can cause among men, women and children generation after generation. While in several other sources of partition, collective suffering has been presented to surmise individual suffering, but in Ghatak's cinematic representation, it is the individual suffering that portrays the collective suffering by binding them

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in a bond of unification. Along with having unifying common features among themselves, each character has an individual identity that is unique in contrast to others. In Ghatak's representation, the suffering is individual as well as collective, always similar but never identical. In all the above-mentioned three films, the incidents focus from individual to collective. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the film starts with Neeta's torn sandal and ends with the torn sandal of another girl who is not exactly similar to Neeta but is not totally different from Neeta either. This simply emphasises the fact that how several girls like Neeta sacrifice their existence to support their families and cope with the economic and societal crisis, which is the immediate consequence of partition. While in *Komol Gandhar*, the protagonist, Anushuya leaves her fiancée to fulfil her dreams as an individual. The film ends with robust optimism, portraying the rekindling of the spark of female identity, which women did not have earlier. In *Subarnarekha*, the protagonist, Sita, carries on her shoulder the evil of the separatism policy and the sin of such policymakers, which finally results in her suicide. The pre-partition status of women was only restricted to the indoors of their houses. They hardly had any outdoor existence. But partition brings a robust change in their status. As Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin have said, "...it released a very large number of women who had never before stepped out of their homes joined the workforce after the partition (20)". Their hostile circumstances, severe financial necessity, and dire need for resettlement compel them to leave their homes and take part in the survival struggle, just as men do. In other words, the atrocities of partition give women a chance to exercise their abilities without being restricted by their gender. It can be said that partition has dual effects on women. On the one hand, partition leads to their victimisation as patriarchal society exercises its power by sexually abusing women; on the other hand, those women who are spared of sexual harassment have the chance to prove themselves by equally sharing the burden of their family expenditure with the male members of their family. So, it can be said that post-partition atrocities have forced women to come out of their conventional household expert roles to prove themselves equally expert in every way. This led to a surprising growth in the number of women enrolled in schools and colleges. Those women who did not have formal education engage themselves in making paper bags to cope with the financial crisis, as Sita does in the film *Subarnarekha*. Several women joined several jobs in the post-partition Bengal. As Rachel Weber notes, "the working woman with broken sandals became a presence on the crowded streets of central Calcutta, and of various forms of public transportation" (Menon and Bhasin 207). Ghatak's film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* also ends and starts with a woman with her broken sandal. The broken sandal of Neeta in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* becomes the metaphor for women's struggle and victimisation in the aftermath of partition.

The film *Subarnarekha* starts with land acquisition and the problem of eviction. A group of refugees are struggling to accept their new identity while another group of Zamindar's people are trying to evict them in order to occupy the land. The expression of the worker at the newspaper office becomes symbolical of the attitude of most of the people at that time towards the refugees. The refugees were sometimes accepted with irritation as if they were forcefully sharing those rights

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which belonged to the original inhabitants. The endeavour of a brother to get his younger sister settled in a new land makes for the central part of the story. Separation, not only from one's motherland but also from one's near and dear ones, is another theme of both the films *Subarnarekha* and *Komal Gandhar*. Few are taken away by death, while few others are lost or abducted. Ishwar Prasad's parents die in the partition hurdles while Abhiram, as a child, loses his mother. In *Komol Gandhar*, Bhrigu's mother dies of hunger and poverty. The metaphor 'home' is repeated again and again, voicing the displacement and trauma of the refugees in *Subarnarekha*. As Ishwar Prasad says in the film, "It's all lost to me, all of a sudden. I left everything behind. I must build a home again." This quest for home continues generation after generation with Ishwar Prasad, Sita, and Sita's son Binu. They dream of a home, are knocked down to the ground, and then again stand up and struggle to accomplish their dream. All refugees have a common dream, and they all encounter hurdles that create solidarity among them. As can be seen in *Komol Gandhar*, the friendship between Bhrigu and Anushuya is formed on the basis of their memory of their past suffering. Another homeless person, Gagan Babu, joins the Bhrigu theatre group because of the solidarity formed by their lost home and shattered hope. This same solidarity creates a bond between the old lady who has lost her son in the hazardous of partition and Bhrigu, who has lost his mother in the same holocaust, by trying to make his sister the object of his protection Ishwar Prasad in *Subarnarekha* makes her the victim of his excessive protection.

Partition seems like a holocaust, devouring everybody standing in its way irrespective of their sex and gender, but due to being in a privileged condition, a particular sect remains in an advantageous position over others. In all three films, as mentioned earlier, the women characters like Neeta, Geeta and their mother in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*; Sita, Haraprasad's wife and Ramvilas's wife in *Subarnarekha* while Anushuya and Joya in *Komol Gandhar*, although belong to same gender but are different from each other and it can be said that these characters are an attempt on Ghatak's part to capture the different sides of women's world in the aftermath of partition. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the atrocities Neeta was subjected to annihilate her power of language, and she is rendered voiceless. She accepts everything as a punishment for not protesting the wrongs practised against her. But when this voiceless object, Neeta, gains her voice, the shrieking sound of it annihilates the foundation of our society with a single sentence, "but I wanted to survive" (*Meghe Dhaka Tara*). This single sentence remains the unvoiced tale of the survival struggle of several others like Neeta. Earlier, women used to be burdened by their parents. They were married off to dying men. In the aftermath of partition, women played a vital role in earning bread for their families, and even at this time, they were victims. During and prior to partition, women were the victims of the patriarchal ideology of our society, while in the post-partition period, they are the victims of collective petty and selfish ideology where others try to build their own dreams on the shattered pieces of women's own wishes and dreams as unprotected silence becomes the usual reaction of several women who are like *Meghe Dhaka Tara*'s Neeta.

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Conflict constitutes an integral part of all three films mentioned above. The conflict between inward and outward beauty, the traditional sacrificing woman/ the demanding, self self-centred, real/ideal; middle-class struggle/ higher class aristocracy. In *Subarnarekha*, there is a contrast between the well-settled aristocratic families who are fond of their luxurious hobbies and spend millions on that, like Ramvilas and his wife, and the other hand, people like Haraprasad who are educated but jobless and homeless. Haraprasad's wife commits suicide as she could not bear her children's cry for food. Ramvilas and his wife's aristocracy is a contrast to the refugees' homeless, half-fed life. The upper-class people like Ramvilas make rules and propagate ideologies that people from the middle class, like Ishwar Prasad and Mukherjee, follow, as their jobs are totally dependent on the satisfaction of their owners. Marginalisation does not exist only for women; it exists equally for those who belong to lower castes, as Abhiram does. Suddenly, in his youth, Abhiram learns about his lower caste belonging, and his whole world changes with his caste identity. At once, society starts looking at him hatefully. Even at the time of utter struggle brought by partition, the caste system exists with its poisonous tentacles. In the post-partition haphazard and absurd world, both the person who is selfishly realistic and sacrifices his ideology for the sake of survival like Ishwar Prasad, and the one who sacrifices his family for the sake of his unsuitable ideology in the rupture of partition like Haraprasad (*Subarnarekha*), both are victims. As Haraprasad says:

I am defeated. I move around. I exist—a mere blasted palm tree. I have protested—what protest? Protest against what? Now I've knocked against a wall, got caught in a trap, and now I'm tied hand and foot... Whether you protest or run away, it makes no difference. It's all blank. We're bodiless, ethereal. We have been wiped out. (*Subarnarekha*)

This speech of Haraprasad becomes the collective expression of all those uprooted people who have come to a new land with both fear and hope in their hearts but ultimately fail to transform into their new identities and disappear into oblivion. Their past becomes their refuge from the present upheavals. What Bhriku says in *Komol Gandhar*, standing at the bank of the river Padma, “so near is my motherland, but I won't ever be able to reach there as that is a foreign country now”, epitomises the collective longing and suffering of all those who are forced to leave their motherland and move towards an undecided destiny.

Thus, partition as a cataclysm engrosses the lives of all those who are uprooted from their motherland and subjects them to displacement and identity crisis, which they try to cope with one generation after another. Jason Francisco has said about the literature on partition that it “rightly forces us to reckon sides and to choose between partition and co-existence”. (Hasan, 373) The same thing can also be said about Ghatak's three films mentioned above as the films, by portraying the devastation caused by the impregnable antagonism, have compelled us to rethink whether religious differences were enough to be the basis of such a holocaust and whether or not the creation of another border has diminished all other differences. By focusing on the world of

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individuals, *Meghe Dhaka Tarasubarnarekha* provides a gateway to the macro world of post-partition Bengal, and Komol Gandharand Subarnarekha delivers a gateway to the macro world of post-partition Bengal.

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