

FROM MARGINS TO SCREEN: WOMEN'S TESTIMONY AND ETHICAL REPRESENTATION IN BENGALI CINEMA AFTER PARTITION OF 1947 WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON RITWIK GHATAK'S TRILOGY

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Abstract:

The Bengal Partition of 1947 created a significant rupture in the lives of countless women, leaving behind silences, fragmented memories, and contested accounts. While much scholarship has focused on official histories, nationalist narratives, and heroic stories, the intimate and lived experiences of women have often been neglected, misinterpreted, or silenced. According to Erica L. Weiberg, it is essential to understand the ethical dimensions of witnessing. This involves acknowledging the trauma experienced by female characters, as seen in classic Greek tragedies, where female trauma was often contested or silenced, thereby challenging societal hierarchies and power structures.

In an era marked by rising communalism and renewed border anxieties, the ethical witnessing of the Partition has become a moral imperative. This approach demands a responsible mode of listening, transforming Partition history from a stock narrative into a more profound meta-narration. Ethical witnessing reframes women not only as victims of violence but also as agents whose stories can reshape collective memory and cultural identity.

Bengali cinema plays a crucial role in this ethical witnessing of women's fragmented pain, emphasizing the importance of avoiding sensationalism in representations. Instead, it creates a space for empathy, reflection, and accountability. Dipesh Chakrabarty challenges the notion that the incongruous

combination of a "sentiment of nostalgia" with a "sense of trauma" merely replicates patterns found in Bengali nationalist writings. Bengali cinema has re-engaged with these testimonies, reimagining the trauma of Partition through visual storytelling, ethical witnessing, and aesthetic strategies that challenge conventional linear historiography.

This study aims to deeply understand the emotional and ethical dimensions of women's trauma and testimonies related to Partition as depicted in Bengali cinema since the 1950s. By engaging with theories of testimony, trauma, and ethics, it seeks to illuminate the delicate balance that films must maintain between historical truths and embracing creative interpretation. The central question guiding this article is: How can cinematic expressions give voice to marginalized histories while avoiding the potential risk of trivializing their suffering? In this journey, the article will explore historical and cinematic narratives from the post-Partition era, guided by feminist theory, in an effort to foster empathy and awareness around these poignant experiences.

Keywords: Bengal Partition (1947), Women's Trauma, Testimony, Ethical Witnessing, Bengali Cinema after Partition, Collective Memory, Cultural Identity, Feminist Theory, Meta-narration.

Introduction:

Beginning in the 1940s, Bengal grappled with immense hardship, marked by 1943's famine, the upheaval of World War II in 1945, and the political chaos typified by the horrific Noakhali and Calcutta riots of 1946. The partition intensified the anguish of the Bengali people, with Dipesh Chakrabarty noting the catastrophic erosion of Bengali culture due to the violence of partition. Women and children emerged as central victims during this turbulent period, confronting violence, displacement, and uncertainty as they navigated rehabilitation centers. Such extreme conditions have fostered enduring trauma and intricate memories and testimonies (Chakrabarty, 1995, p. 323). Bhaskar Sarkar aptly characterizes the 1947 partition of golden Bengal as a 'fragmented dystopia,' severing the region into two distinct entities: East Bengal and West Bengal. While both faced significant post-partition challenges, this study redefined the post-partition experience in Bengal (Sarkar, 2010, p. 134).

This article is explicitly framed as an example of how the trauma of 1947 laid the groundwork for the violence of 1971. My family's history is deeply marked by the silences of post-partition pain and one-story haunts us still. A beloved 14-year-old relative was taken by the Razakars during the tumultuous days of 1971, during the Bangladesh war. On that fateful night, as chaos engulfed the village, the abductors were taken aback by the sight of the village's Kali idol. In a moment of sheer courage, our young relative managed to escape, seeking refuge in a nearby thorny jungle.

As the night wore on, the abductors searched in vain, firing shots into the darkness, yet remarkably, they could not find her. By dawn, she emerged from the jungle and returned home, but the trauma of her ordeal was evident. With her clothes torn and tattered, whispers spread through the village that she must have been sexually violated. The harsh reality was that she had fought for her life, and the scars of that night were deeply misunderstood.

In the days that followed, her family made the heart-wrenching decision to send her to her eldest sister's in-laws house in West Bengal, hoping to find some solace and safety. Eventually, she was married off by her sister and her new family (sister's in-laws family), yet she never felt able to return to her village. In a poignant moment, she expressed, "I never went back to my 'desh'. Her story is a poignant reminder of the pain and resilience woven into the fabric of our history.

Bhaskar Sarkar argues that these testimonies emphasize two critical themes: the wrenching dislocation and the shocking violence. The province's bifurcation along religious lines, driven by fears of persecution against religious minorities, led to mass migrations between the two Bengals. As noted by Dipesh Chakrabarty, the violence is as prominent in survivor testimonies as the bifurcation itself, yet remains tragically incomprehensible (Chakrabarty, 1995, p. 324). This article probes the ethical and epistemic dimensions of witnessing, asserting that acts of narration are pivotal in transforming trauma into resilience and silencing into historical agency. In this context, cinema stands out as a powerful medium for understanding the female condition in the post-partition landscape. Sheila Rowbotham (Bandyopadhyay, 2015, p. 64) contends, "women were hidden from history." Gerald James Larson asserts that "partition was the defining event of modern independent India and Pakistan," and it is not an exaggeration to claim that partition continues to shape modern India and Pakistan (Larson, 1997, pp. 182-183). The traditional historiography of partitions, dominated by the ruling class to establish their

hegemony, is increasingly contested by historical memory. This research leverages cinematic narratives to bridge the historical experiences of women with the trauma of partition. Connecting the history of partition with the traumatic memories it leaves behind is profoundly challenging. History aims to explain the event logically, but the pain felt by those affected often refuses such explanations, perceiving the event as a deeply irrational and heartbreaking aberration. Drawing on Judith Butler's insights regarding the social construction and historical contingency of sex and gender, this study emphasizes the importance of cinema as a medium for illustrating and synthesizing these social constructs (Bandyopadhyay, 2015, P. 69).

Objective of The Study:

This research seeks to examine how Bengali cinema represents the gendered trauma of Partition and its aftermath, particularly through the experiences of women who endured displacement, violence, social stigma, and silence. The study aims to investigate cinema not merely as a cultural text, but as an ethical medium of witnessing that preserves marginalized memories often absent from official historiography.

The major objectives of this research are:

- To analyze the representation of women's Partition trauma in Bengali cinema by focusing on themes such as displacement, sexual violence, loss of homeland (desh), rehabilitation, memory, and emotional rupture.
- To explore how Bengali cinema functions as an ethical witness to traumatic histories without sensationalizing or trivializing women's suffering, especially in relation to silence, testimony, and the limits of representation.
- To examine the intersection of gender, trauma, and historical memory through the theoretical lenses of postcolonial feminism, trauma studies, and feminist historiography.
- To investigate how cinematic narratives challenge dominant nationalist and patriarchal historiography by foregrounding subaltern women's voices, memories of Partition and post-Partition Bengal.
- To study the transformation of personal and collective trauma into historical agency through acts of narration, remembrance, and visual storytelling in Bengali cinema.
- To understand the ethical and epistemic dimensions of witnessing trauma by analyzing how films negotiate the tension between representing violence and respecting the dignity of survivors.

- To evaluate the continuing relevance of Partition memories in shaping Bengali cultural consciousness in both West Bengal and East Bengal.

Through these objectives, the study ultimately addresses the central research question: How can Bengali cinema ethically witness women's Partition trauma without reducing it to spectacle, victimhood, or historical abstraction?

Literature Review:

On the eve of partition, many women who were compelled to flee did so with the hope of returning once the situation stabilized. However, this elusive stabilization never allowed them to return home.

According to Gyanendra Pandey, during the violence of Partition, women were not treated as independent individuals with personal rights and identities. Instead, they were viewed as symbols of community honor and national property (Pandey, 2001, p. 65). It is heartbreaking to consider that thousands of women are believed to have lost their lives, while countless others were forcibly converted, and many millions were uprooted and displaced, becoming refugees as a tragic consequence of what is known as the partition riots. Families and communities often silenced the experiences of these women because acknowledging them was seen as a source of shame. Many recovered women were rejected by their families or forced to suppress their traumatic memories. As a result, countless survivors lived isolated lives, emotionally invisible and socially marginalized within society. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin argue that during the Partition of 1947, 'abducted women became symbolic to cross borders and become violating social, cultural and political boundaries' (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 20).

The 1947 partition of Bengal and the subsequent mass migration fundamentally transformed the lives of Bengali women, forcing them from domestic seclusion into a public world of grueling labor and rapid social change. According to the sources, their condition was marked by extreme vulnerability, economic necessity, and a radical shift in cultural norms.

According to Jaya Chatterjee during the 1950s to 1970s, many people were leaving East Bengal and migrating to West Bengal, a period marked by significant hardship and upheaval (Chatterji, 2007, p. 127). Between 1951 and 1956, refugee families experienced a much higher birth rate than the local population, increasing nearly 60 percent faster. As families became larger, their economic hardships also deepened. Most refugee households were already struggling with

unemployment, low wages, and inadequate living conditions. The growth in family size placed additional pressure on limited household incomes, food supplies, housing, and healthcare. As a result, many refugee families fell below the poverty line and faced severe poverty and deprivation. By 1956, around two-thirds of refugee households were officially considered to be living in conditions of extreme need, distress, and social insecurity (Chatterji, 2007, pp.149-150). The passage ethically represents Partition by foregrounding the everyday hardships of refugee life, while also revealing the gendered dimensions of displacement in which women silently carried the burdens of reproduction, caregiving, and survival amid poverty and insecurity.

The tragic condition of refugee women after the 1947 Partition. Many arrived with nothing except torn clothes, having lost homes, property, and family members. Widowed or abandoned, they were forced to lead and support displaced families despite extreme poverty, insecurity, and the social trauma caused by Partition. After the Partition of India, many refugee women faced extreme poverty and had very limited opportunities for survival. Only a small number could obtain socially respected jobs such as teaching or clerical work. Most women worked as domestic servants, performing hard household labour for very low wages. Others became pieceworkers in small garment industries, sewing clothes for meagre earnings under poor working conditions. Their difficult lives also affected children. Young girls were forced to care for siblings and assist with household duties instead of attending school.

According to Chakraborty and Chakraborty, the feminization of domestic service in post-Partition Calcutta emerged from the severe socio-economic crisis faced by refugee women arriving from East Pakistan between 1951 and 1981. Destitute, widowed, or separated from male family members, many women entered domestic work as a survival strategy, often accepting only “bed and board” instead of proper wages. This enabled them to displace the traditionally male domestic workforce from Bihar, Orissa, and Uttar Pradesh, who required cash incomes to support families back home. Employers increasingly preferred refugee women because they were willing to work for lower wages and could perform multiple household duties such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and housekeeping. Their literacy and perceived “respectability” further increased demand for their labor. By the 1970s, migrant girl children from rural West Bengal also entered domestic service in large numbers, exposing the growth

of child labor and the patriarchal exploitation of economically vulnerable women and children in urban households (Chakravarty & Chakrabarty, 2010, p. 11, pp. 13- 14).

According to Udit Sen, in post-Partition West Bengal's vision of “productive citizenship” was deeply gendered and largely excluded women, especially widows and single women, from full participation in nation-building. The ideal citizen was imagined as a masculine, physically productive worker capable of agricultural labor and economic development. Since many refugee women lacked male guardians or breadwinners, the state categorized them as “unattached women” and eventually labeled them “permanent liabilities” (Sen, 2018, p. 222). Rather than being viewed as active citizens, they were seen as economic burdens dependent on state charity. This perception shaped rehabilitation policies. Male-headed refugee families received land, loans, and business grants, while female-headed families were denied such opportunities because women were considered incapable of “pioneering” labor in resettlement colonies like Dandakaranya. Instead, many women were confined to Permanent Liability camps or widows’ homes, surviving on small government doles.

Although vocational training programs were introduced, they often aimed merely to keep women occupied rather than economically independent. At the same time, state policies disrupted extended family networks by separating widows from relatives to classify them as “unattached” (Sen, 2018, p. 237). Yet refugee women also resisted these structures through protests, hunger strikes, and negotiations for entitlements. Ultimately, citizenship remained defined as a male privilege, limiting women’s access to dignity, autonomy, and national belonging.

Udit Sen’s analysis demonstrates that post-Partition citizenship in India was deeply gendered. Refugee women were denied dignity, autonomy, and equal belonging because the state defined citizenship through masculine productivity. However, through survival and resistance, refugee women challenged these exclusions and transformed their suffering into historical testimony. Sen’s work is therefore important for understanding women’s trauma, gendered displacement, and the ethical representation of Partition history.

According to Larry Ray, in other words, nations remember certain events of women (like victories, heroes, or sacrifices) to create pride and unity, but they also suppress or erase painful, divisive, or shameful pasts—such as violence, partition, or internal conflict—that could

threaten that unity. Thus, national memory is selective: it chooses and constructs a usable past to sustain the idea of the nation. When the past carries trauma or contradiction that might fracture national harmony, forgetting becomes a political act, serving to protect the imagined coherence of the nation. He also explained that a nation is built through collective acts of memory—it is a mnemonic community, meaning a community bound by shared remembrance. However, the formation of national identity depends not only on what is remembered, but also on what is deliberately forgotten (Ray, 2018, p. 181).

Although Partition historiography has extensively documented violence, displacement, refugee rehabilitation, and the gendered suffering of women, a major gap remains in the absence of oral histories, particularly those of marginalized refugee women belonging to the marginalized communities. Most existing studies rely heavily on state archives, official rehabilitation records, literary texts, and elite narratives, which often silence the personal memories, emotions, and lived experiences of refugee women. As a result, the voices of ordinary women who endured displacement, loss, social stigma, labour exploitation, and cultural uprooting remain largely absent from mainstream historical discourse.

The personal testimony included in the introduction is used as a form of oral history and memory fragment rather than as archival evidence. Passed down through familial narration, the story reflects the gendered trauma, silence, and displacement that accompanied Partition and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Its inclusion helps situate the article within the broader framework of memory studies and ethical witnessing, foregrounding experiences that often remain absent from official historical records.

Scholars such as Gyanendra Pandey, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin have highlighted the silencing of women's experiences during Partition, yet there is still insufficient attention to how refugee women themselves remember, narrate, and transmit trauma across generations. At the same time, Bengali cinema has emerged as an important cultural medium through which memories of Partition and refugee life are preserved and narrated. Films by directors such as Ritwik Ghatak often portray displacement, loss of homeland, fractured identities, women's suffering, and refugee struggles in ways that resemble oral testimony and collective memory. However, existing scholarship has not sufficiently explored Bengali cinema as a form of oral history or mnemonic archive that gives symbolic voice to silenced refugee experiences. The

connection between cinematic narratives and the lived memories of refugee communities, particularly women from marginalized caste backgrounds, remains inadequately studied. Furthermore, there is limited interdisciplinary research combining oral history, memory studies, and film analysis to understand how Partition memories survive through storytelling, intergenerational recollection, and cinematic representation. The emotional and cultural memories embedded in Bengali films have rarely been compared with the oral narratives of refugee women themselves. Therefore, the present study seeks to address how Bengali cinema reflects, reconstructs, and preserves these silenced memories of Partition, displacement, trauma, and survival.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology:

This study is rooted in postcolonial feminism, which thoughtfully explores the gendered experiences shaped by colonialism, nationalism, and collective memory. This approach questions both Western feminist universality and male-dominated narratives in postcolonial theory, highlighting the unique stories and cultural backgrounds of women in formerly colonized regions. Scholar Sara Suleri notes that these new perspectives have fostered meaningful alliances between postcolonial and feminist ideas. As a result, postcolonial feminism has created opportunities for comprehensive understanding of women's diverse lives around the world.

Postcolonial feminist theories provide essential analytic tools to address structural inequalities faced by groups that have historically been marginalized, creating an intellectual discourse that accurately reflects the struggles of women outside the Western context. Notable scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty reveal how colonial and nationalist discourses have often portrayed women as symbols of cultural purity and agents of collective identity, effectively silencing their lived experiences of displacement and violence.

In the specific context of post-partition Bengal, women's trauma should be understood not merely as individual suffering, but as indicative of the broader historical disruptions caused by colonial legacies and patriarchal structures in postcolonial nation-states. Drawing on Spivak's notion of the "subaltern," this framework acknowledges that the voices of women -particularly those of refugee and lower-caste backgrounds -- are frequently marginalized within official narratives of nation-building. These women's testimonies emerge as critical counter-narratives,

challenging dominant historiographies of Partition that tend to prioritize territorial and political alignments over the personal, embodied histories of women (Spivak, 2010, pp. 67-111).

Additionally, it is important to note that women in this context navigate a dual system of representation—struggling against both colonial power and the patriarchal structures within Indian society. Spivak succinctly captures this dynamic by stating that “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 2010, pp. 67-111). While the colonial state justified its intervention in India by claiming to protect women, the actual voices of these women were often excluded from the discourse. The “native woman” thus becomes a discursive construct rather than a real speaking subject, with both colonial and nationalist narratives utilizing her body as a symbol of moral superiority or national pride.

Sara Suleri insightfully remarks that men inhabit homes while women inhabit their bodies. This distinction is further illustrated by Spivak’s poignant recounting of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, a young revolutionary who committed suicide in 1926. Her death, politically motivated as she wished to avoid a violent act for the Indian independence movement, was ultimately misinterpreted as a romantic tragedy by her family (Spivak, 2010, pp. 67-111).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty emphasizes the crucial distinction between the constructed representations of women and their real, material existence in history. She critiques the homogenization of “third world women” found in Western feminist discourse, which often overlooks the diversity and complexity of their experiences. Mohanty argues against the monolithic representation of third world women, advocating for an understanding that recognizes the intersection of discrimination articulated by both male and female patriarchies (Mohanty, 1988, pp. 66-88).

Furthermore, the phenomenon of women's suicides during the Partition is often framed within narratives of self-sacrifice and heroism. Scholars like Urvashi Butalia-Poornima Mannekar highlight this discourse, pointing to representations such as in Govind Nihal’s television series, which portrayed women heroically attempting to fulfill communal obligations at the cost of their lives (Butalia, 1998, p-164). This evokes a historical narrative of jauhar, particularly for upper-caste Hindu women, illustrating the complex intersections of gender, culture, and history in the context of Partition (Mannekar, 1999, p. 313). According to Kansteiner, Collective

memory is not history, though it is sometimes made from similar materials. It's a collective phenomenon but only manifests itself in the actions and statements of individuals. Collective memory is a socio-political construct (Kansteiner, 2002, p-180).

This study employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, integrating textual analysis, feminist historiography, and postcolonial film critique to explore how women, trauma, and memory are portrayed in post-partition Bengal through Bengali cinema and historical accounts. The research primarily focuses on detailed textual and visual examination of selected films—Meghe Daki Tara (1960), Komal Gandhar (1961), and Subarnarekha (1965)—known as Ritwik Ghatak's Partition Trilogy. Through cinematic narratives, dialogues, visual symbolism, and character construction, the study investigates how women's trauma and embodied experiences are represented, silenced, or mediated within cultural memory.

The methodological approach is informed by postcolonial feminist theory, particularly the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Sara Suleri. Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" is used to interrogate the absence or marginalization of refugee women's voices within dominant nationalist historiographies, while Mohanty's critique of the homogenization of "third world women" helps situate women's experiences within intersecting structures of caste, class, gender, and nation.

In addition, the study employs feminist historiography to recover women lived experiences from the margins of official historical narratives. Rather than treating Partition solely as a political event, the research approaches it as a gendered historical rupture that reshaped women's identities, bodies, and social roles. The analysis further draws upon theories of collective memory, particularly the work of Wulf Kansteiner, to understand how cinema functions as a site of remembering, reconstructing, and transmitting traumatic histories across generations. The study therefore reads Bengali cinema not merely as artistic representation, but as a cultural archive that negotiates trauma, gendered violence, displacement, and ethical witnessing in post-partition Bengal.

Bengali Cinema and Partition Representation:

Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960):

Meghe Dhaka Tara (Cloud-Capped Star) poignantly tells the story of Neeta, the eldest daughter of a Bengali family torn apart by the Partition. In a suburban refugee colony, Neeta grapples not only with the weight of supporting her family but also with the deep emotional strain of each family member's struggles. As her father's health declines and her brother Shankar pursues his dreams of becoming a singer, Neeta selflessly takes on exhausting work to keep them afloat. Her mother, hardened by their collective suffering and fearful for their survival, often turns a blind eye to Neeta's personal aspirations, channeling her own frustrations into her daughter's labor.

Neeta's younger brother, Montu, hopes to help by leveraging his soccer skills for a factory job, only to have his dreams dashed by a tragic accident that leaves him disabled. Meanwhile, Geeta, the spirited younger sister, dismisses Neeta's needs and takes her love interest, Sanat, believing that Neeta will always choose family over happiness. When Shankar finally achieves success as a singer and returns home, it is bittersweet; Neeta's relentless sacrifices have taken a toll on her health, leading to a devastating tuberculosis diagnosis. Even as their mother dreams of a new home, Neeta is sent to a sanatorium in the serene Shillong hills, leaving a haunting reminder of the sacrifices made for the family.

Directed by Ritwik Ghatak, Meghe Dhaka Tara serves as a powerful exploration of the heartbreaking consequences of the Partition on a refugee family. Neeta's portrayal as a sacrificial figure challenges our societal norms and invites a deep contemplation about the female experience in a patriarchal society, showcasing her desire for connection and clarity during turmoil.

Komal Gandhar (1961):

In Komal Gandhar (Ghatak, 1961) Ritwik Ghatak weaves a tale that beautifully encapsulates the essence of post-partition Bengali society, revealing the complexities of cultural identity and the yearning for unity amidst fragments of existence. Central to this narrative is a protagonist (Anasuya) who, in the face of personal isolation and societal turmoil, seeks solace and belonging within the vibrant world of a theater troupe.

As she confronts the challenges of interpersonal conflicts and the often-harsh realities of artistic collaboration, we see her resilience and passion shine through. Ghatak's film resonates with anyone who has ever sought connection and fulfillment in the face of adversity, reminding us all the shared human desire to find one's place in an ever-changing world.

Komal Gandhar transforms post-partition women from passive historical subjects into living witnesses of displacement, using cinema, music, and fragmented narration to ethically represent trauma beyond state archives and nationalist rhetoric. The female protagonist, Bhrigu's counterpart Anasuya, embodies the emotional and psychological scars of displacement. Unlike official nationalist narratives that focused on rehabilitation and productivity, the film foregrounds women's inner grief, loneliness, and fractured belonging. Her memories, silences, and emotional instability function as a form of testimony — not always spoken directly, but expressed through gestures, pauses, songs, and fragmented relationships. Ghatak shows that Partition trauma cannot always be narrated through linear historical language. Instead, women's suffering appears through emotional fragmentation and everyday dislocation.

The refugee theatre group in the film symbolizes displaced Bengali society itself. The film also reflects how Partition disrupted women's sense of home, kinship, and identity. Anasuya's fractured personal relationships mirror the fractured geography of Bengal itself. East and West Bengal become emotional as well as territorial divisions.

Subarnarekha (1965):

In *Subarnarekha* Ghatak presents a darker reflection of the post-Partition experience. Following the tragic loss of their parents in East Bengal, Ishwar Chakraborty migrates to the West with his younger sister, Seeta, and takes in the orphan Abhiram, whose childhood trauma looms large in their lives. As Ishwar confronts the responsibilities of raising his sister and Abhiram, he makes sacrifices that lead to tension with his idealist friend, Haraprasad. Seeking a stable life, they move to the picturesque banks of the river Subarnarekha, but the challenges they face in this new world only deepen.

As Abhiram yearns for education and Seeta blossoms into a talented young woman, the dynamics of their relationships grow increasingly complex, bordering on the taboo. Ishwar's jealousy and protective instincts clash painfully as Seeta and Abhiram, raised as siblings, fall in love. When their backgrounds collide—Abhiram's low-caste heritage is revealed in a moment of vulnerability, it threatens Ishwar's standing in their tight-knit community. The ensuing struggle leads Seeta and Abhiram to marriage in Calcutta, but tragedy strikes when Abhiram

dies in an accident, leaving Seeta to navigate a world where desperation seems to overshadow hope.

In a heartbreaking twist of fate, Ishwar, in a moment of despair, becomes Seeta's first customer in her spiral towards the brink; her tragic end amplifies the deep scars of their shared history. Yet even in this unravelling of familial bonds, Ghatak resonates with an enduring hope—Ishwar returns to the riverbanks with Seeta and Abhiram's infant son, symbolizing the persistent quest for belonging amidst the chaos of life.

In *Subarnarekha*, Ghatak masterfully intertwines themes of identity and the relentless search for meaning in a shifting world. The characters face the heavy burden of their past while grappling with the idea that love and desire often feel inconsequential in the grand struggle for survival.

Analysis & Discussion:

Ritwik Ghatak's cinematic universe resonates deeply with the pain and turmoil stemming from the Partition, capturing the profound impact it had on Bengali society and its people. His female characters—Neeta, Geeta, Seeta, Anasuya, and many others—serve as poignant representations of this complex historical experience post-partition trauma, testimony and ethical representation. Ghatak's incorporation of archetypes, influenced by both Jungian psychology and writing of Joseph Campbell, allows him to channel personal suffering into a broader collective narrative. His work highlights the unique struggles faced by women, who bore the brunt of the social upheavals and existential crises that the Partition unleashed (Sarkar, 2010, p. 212).

For Ghatak, these archetype images are not mere abstract symbols, but rather deeply rooted expressions of cultural memory shaped by shared historical experiences. They embody the unconscious anguish of displacement and the resilience inherent in a community's journey. Drawing from the Jungian notion of the collective unconscious and Joseph Campbell's insights into mythology, Ghatak sees archetypes as vital cultural vessels that reflect humanity's profound emotions (Ghatak, 1982, pp. 14-15).

What sets Ghatak apart from Jung is his focus on situating these archetypes within the tangible lives of individuals. His characters emerge from the lived realities of a community forged

through shared suffering, hard work, and enduring spirit. In his film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star), for instance, the archetype of the Jagaddhatri (the mother giver) becomes a powerful lens through which he reinterprets post-Partition Bengal, a society struggling to navigate the delicate balance between loss and renewal. Through his empathetic storytelling, Ghatak offers a voice to the silent sorrows and resilient hopes of his people.

In Ghatak's films, the women embody archetypes that resonate on a deeply human level, conveying their pain and resilience in a way that allows the trauma of Partition to be felt emotionally and visually. Neeta's tragic self-effacement in '*Meghe Dhaka Tara*' reflects the devastating collapse of the refugee middle class, with her struggle with tuberculosis symbolizing the deep-seated social illness of displacement. Similarly, Seeta in '*Subarnarekha*', once a loving and nurturing figure, spirals into prostitution and self-destruction to ensure her child's survival. Her heartbreaking transformation echoes the destructive nature of Kali, illustrating how her turmoil manifests in self-inflicted pain instead of outward vengeance. Through these compelling visuals, Ghatak artfully conveys the brutal emotional cost of nation-building and the psychological toll of displacement.

The strength of Ghatak's archetypes lies in their ability to intertwine personal and collective experiences, bridging the gaps between the mythic and the material. His films beautifully blur the lines between individual struggles and broader social realities. As Paul Willemen notes, Ghatak captures social existence in a way that reveals the inseparable connection between the lives of individuals and the currents of history. In this light, the Mother Goddess archetype becomes a moving vehicle for exploring the complex interplay between history and emotion, and the nuances of social and psychological landscapes (Sarkar, 2010, p. 213).

Ghatak redefines the archetype as a historical and cultural construct rather than an abstract metaphysical concept. He argues that archetypes are not housed in a collective unconscious but are materially inscribed in social practices, rituals, and gestures. In post-Partition Bengal, these archetypes maintain their power because they resonate with the collective trauma of dislocation.

Ghatak's portrayal of the Mother Goddess across his trilogy—*Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar*, and *Subarnarekha*—functions as both a 'critique' and 'an elegy'. Through these figures, he highlights the historical burden imposed on women, presenting them as the moral

and emotional anchors of a fractured nation. Neeta's sacrifice, Seeta's despair, and Anasuya's alienation collectively articulate the gendered dimensions of Partition's aftermath: women emerge as the bearers of survival and the silent repositories of loss (Sarkar, 2010, p. 214-215).

Ultimately, Ghatak's approach to archetypes is not an exercise in essentialism but rather a political and aesthetic strategy. By invoking myth within the context of modern history, he reveals how the sacred and the profane intertwine in the lives of the displaced. His female characters are neither mere victims nor divine abstractions; they are living embodiments of a collective catastrophe. By confronting these archetypes, Ghatak compels his audience to acknowledge their own complicity in a long catastrophic history- a history that continues to haunt the nation's consciousness. Through the archetype of the Great Mother, Ghatak transforms the story of Partition into an allegory of human endurance, finding the universal within the painfully specific experiences of Bengal's women.

Conclusion:

Two significant impulses emerge prominently in the discourse surrounding Bengali cinema. First, there is widespread recognition of a national imperative to cultivate a vibrant cultural sector, including a representative cinema, as part of broader efforts to solidify nationhood. Second, the cultural healing of the collective wounds suffered during the 1940s—often channeled through generic fantasies of love, unity, and abundance—has become a central concern (Sarkar, 2010, p. 134). The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was significantly shaped by the intellectual and radical traditions of Bengal, particularly its progressive political currents and the trauma of the 1943 Bengal famine, which prompted the creation of impactful, realistic plays and street performances. Bengali artists, including writers like Bijon Bhattacharya and directors like Ritwik Ghatak and Bimal Ray utilized the IPTA platform to produce politically charged works that addressed the grim realities of the famine while drawing on both Indian and global cultural influences to enhance social awareness and confront commercialized theater. The editorial in the inaugural issue of the Bengali cinema journal 'Chitrabani' (October 1948) articulated the aspiration to create a public forum that actively participates in fostering a robust cultural industry, promoting collaboration among audiences, producers, and the government. Bengali cinema frequently employs melodrama to articulate the trauma, testimony, and moral witness associated with the displacements and violence of partition. As Ritwik Ghatak expressed, "Melodrama is a birthright; it is a form" (Sarkar, 2010, p. 220).

Dipesh Chakraborty articulates a profound reflection on the Partition, emphasizing its impact beyond mere political implications. He highlights the significance of cultural narratives that emerge in the wake of this historical event, depicting it as a crucial point of rupture within Bengali consciousness. These narratives, found in literature, film, and personal memories, illustrate the Partition as a cultural catastrophe that shattered the essence of Bengali life, ‘native village’ which is rooted in harmony, aesthetics, and community (Chakraborty, 1995, p. 324). Chakraborty describes the native village as both sacred and beautiful, embodying an ideal moral and emotional world for many displaced Bengalis. This village represents a place of purity and belonging, especially in Hindu Bengali tradition, where the natural landscape—soil, rivers, and homes—are seen as sacred extensions of divine order.

The violence that occurred during Partition was portrayed not just as physical destruction but as a deep violation of this sacred space. It transformed familiar landscapes of peace into sites of fear and loss, marking a profound shift in the cultural memory. Chakraborty suggests that this violence constitutes a sacrilege against the values that define the Bengali understanding of home, which is intertwined with beauty, devotion, and memory. The partition differentiates between the “home” and “Desh”.

Ultimately, Chakraborty's insights lead us to recognize that the memory of Partition encompasses more than just displacement; it signifies a moral and cultural loss. It serves as a reminder of the need to preserve and honor the values of peace, beauty, and sanctity that shape Bengali identity, urging us to reflect on the importance of these ideals in the face of communal tensions.

Through Bengali cinema, it becomes possible to understand the gendered dimensions of cultural and moral rupture produced by Partition. From a women’s perspective, cinema reveals how the values of peace, beauty, domesticity, and sanctity that shaped Bengali identity were profoundly destabilised by the cultural miscarriage of 1947. Partition did not merely fracture territory; it disrupted women’s everyday worlds—home, kinship, labour, and bodily security—producing layered historical trauma. This trauma extends beyond physical violence or psychological suffering to encompass women lived experiences of displacement, loss of home, silenced grief, and forced renegotiation of social roles. The cultural miscarriage of 1947 redefined women’s understanding of *ghar* and *desh*, collapsing the distinction between private

and public spaces and rendering the home itself a site of vulnerability. Bengali cinema captures this transformation by foregrounding women's testimonies—often unspoken yet deeply embodied—of survival, sacrifice, and resilience. As a mass cultural medium, cinema enables ethical witnessing by translating women's trauma from intellectual discourse into socio-cultural memory. In doing so, it reveals that the socio-cultural consequences of 1947 extended far beyond political borders, embedding gendered histories of trauma, displacement, and endurance within the everyday lives of women.

Early nationalist historiography in India largely failed to construct a women-centred historical narrative that captured women's experiences and agency in their own terms. As Sumit Sarkar, demonstrates, nationalism did not dismantle existing hierarchies of gender and caste but instead reconfigured them through the ideology of *adhikāri bheda*. Within nationalist discourse, women were symbolically elevated as mothers of the nation and entrusted with preserving national purity through gendered rituals such as *jhawar*. However, this symbolic glorification rarely translated into substantive political authority or equal citizenship (Sarkar, 1997, pp. 369 -370). In contrast, Bengali cinema has played a critical role in representing women's pain and everyday struggles, effectively challenging the stereotypical and idealised constructions perpetuated by nationalist historians. By foregrounding women lived realities—marked by displacement, economic precarity, and emotional labour—cinema disrupts the moralised imagery of womanhood and brings gendered experiences into the public imagination. As a mass cultural medium, Bengali cinema translates women's histories from elite intellectual discourse into accessible narratives, enabling broader social recognition of women's realities that extend beyond nationalist ideals and historiographical silences.

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