

Paper

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**Structural Analysis of Ritwik Ghatak's Cinema:
Special Reference To 'Subarnarekha'**

Abstract

Ritwik Kumar Ghatak, the maverick Bengali filmmaker remains one of the most celebrated cinematic auteurs of Indian cinema. Dismantling the conventional constructs of commercial cinema, Ghatak along with Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen laid the foundation of the 'alternative' or 'parallel' cinema in Bengal during the 60s and 70s. This paper attempts to semiologically study the multiple layers of meanings and functions in Ghatak's seminal film, *Subarnarekha* (1962) and explore the impact of Partition and the tragic predicament of the innumerable immigrants which has been portrayed through the skillful cinematic technique in which Ghatak has blended melodrama with social realism. In addition, it is also aimed at discussing the linkage between communication and semiotics and is expected to generate positive contributions in underlining the significance of semiotic theory and further researches in related fields or specific areas.

Keywords: Ritwik Ghatak, *Subarnarekha*, Semiotics, Indian new wave, Cinematic Auteur, Partition Narratives, Parallel Cinema.

"It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call the maverick Bengali filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak (1925–1976) one of the most neglected major filmmakers in the world," film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote in November 2008 (Rosenbaum, 2008). Less than two years after Ghatak's untimely death at the age of fifty-one, British critic Derek Malcolm described the thrill experienced by Western critics on discovering a major unsung talent at a film festival:

The prints were tattered, the subtitles virtually unreadable when they were there at all. But the impact of the films on all present was considerable. Here, we all felt, was a passionate and intensely national filmmaker who seemed to have found his way without much access to the work of others but who was most certainly of international calibre (Malcolm, 1982).

Ghatak continuously struggled with market forces, institutional indifference, political opposition, and personal demons in order to finance and complete films throughout his filmmaking career of over twenty-five years, and left behind eight feature films and a few documentaries, a slew of unfinished projects, and the public image of a man with a prodigious talent for both filmmaking and self-destruction. His films are characterised, in part, by their eclectic mix of neorealist strategies and melodramatic clichés, leftist critique and creative appropriation of Indian folklore/mythology, sentimental excess and avant-garde formalism (e.g., Eisensteinian editing techniques, Brechtian alienation effects, an intricate and often contrapuntal layering of images and sounds), internationalist impulses and local nuances—a blend that cannot

be easily accommodated even within the conventional paradigms of “art cinema.” This paper is targeted towards giving a brief idea about his filmmaking style and semiotic analysis on one of his major films, before that it’s important to have a lucid idea about what semiotics is and also about some key concepts.

I. An Introduction to Structuralism and Semiotics

The structuralist school emerges from theories of language and linguistics, and it looks for underlying elements in culture and literature that can be connected so that critics can develop general conclusions about the individual works and the systems from which they emerge. Structuralists believe that these language symbols extend far beyond written or oral communication. The discipline of semiotics plays an important role in structuralist literary theory and cultural studies. Semioticians apply structuralist insights to the study of sign systems, a non-linguistic object or behaviour that can be analysed as if it were a language. Specifically, semiotics examines the ways non-linguistic objects and behaviours ‘tell’ us something.

The word Semiology is derived from the Greek word semeion means 'sign'. Semiotics is the science of the sign: anything that functions in communication. Semiotics can be applied to anything, which can be seen as signifying something - in other words, to everything that has meaning within a culture. As Umberto Eco claims that, "semiotic studies all cultural products as product of communication. Therefore each of these products would seem to be permitted by an underlying system of significations" (Eco, 1979). Even within the context of the mass media one can apply semiotic analysis to any media texts (including television and radio programmes, films, cartoons, newspaper and magazine articles, posters and other ads) and to the practices involved in producing and interpreting such texts.

Semiotics is important because it can help us not to take 'reality' for granted as something having a purely objective existence, which is independent of human interpretation. It teaches us that reality is a system of signs. Studying semiotics can assist us to become more aware of reality as a construction and of the roles played by others and ourselves in constructing it. It can help us to realize that information or meaning is not 'contained' in the world or in books, computers or audio-visual media. Meaning is not 'transmitted' to us but we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we normally ignore. We learn from semiotics that we live in a world of signs and we have no way of understanding anything except through signs and the codes into which they are organized. Through the study of semiotics we become aware that these signs and codes are normally transparent and disguise our task in 'reading' them. In defining realities signs serve ideological functions. Deconstructing and contesting the realities of signs can reveal whose realities are privileged and whose are suppressed. So, the study of signs is the study of the construction and maintenance of reality.

Saussure’s theory of sign:

The gist and primary focus of Saussure’s theory is the principle that emphasized language as a system of sign. The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified. Signified and Signifier are both psychological (form rather than substance). Same signifier can stand for different signifieds depending on the context, the link between signified and signifier is arbitrary (nothing ‘treeish’ about word ‘tree’) no specific signifier is ‘naturally’ more suited to a signified than another. In a nutshell, Saussure’s theory of sign gives more emphasis to internal structure devoted to cognitive thought process or activity of human minds in structuring the physical (material) or intangible (abstract) signs of their environments or

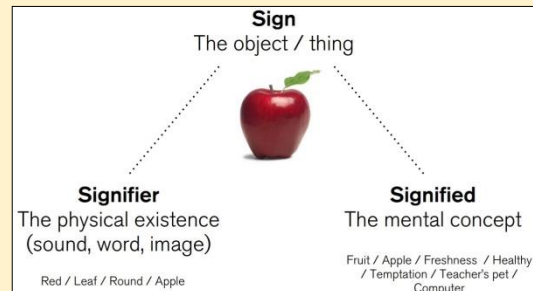
surroundings, and among them is the structure of linguistic signs in the language system that allows them to function as human beings and communicate with each other.

Signs: The basic unit of meaning, at least in Saussure's version of semiotics, is the Sign. A sign is anything that makes meaning. Or in Umberto Eco's clever formulation, a sign is anything that can be used to tell a lie. Saussure offered a 'dyadic' or two-part model of the sign. He defined a sign as being composed of:

a) a '**signifier**' (signifiant) - **the form** which the sign takes,

b) and the '**signified**' (signifie)- **the concept** it represents.

The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as 'signification'. The signifier is any material thing that signifies, e.g., words on a page, a facial expression, a picture, etc. The signified is the concept that a signifier refers to. For example, the letters on the page spelling "rose" would be the signifier, and the signified would be the concept of the particular flower (not the image always, but the concept in our mind).



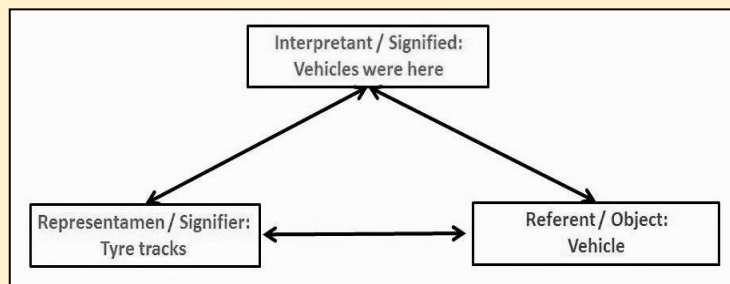
Peirce's theory of sign: The main principles containing Peirce's theory are the human mind and sign boundaries, the three-dimensional system and the relativity regarding the three typologies or taxonomies of signs (icon, index and symbol). Peirce defined it to mean an "action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant" (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). The importance of the interpretant for Peirce is that signification is not a simple dyadic relationship between sign and object: a sign signifies only in being interpreted. This makes the interpretant central to the content of the sign, in that, the meaning of a sign

is manifest in the interpretation that it generates in sign users and the form which the sign takes (not necessarily material) Object – to which the sign refers Interpretant–idea, interpretation in mind. Peirce gave structuralism three important ideas for analysing the sign systems that permeate and define our experiences:

1. **Symbol/symbolic:** A mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional – so that the relationship must be learnt: like - language in general, numbers, traffic lights, national flags.

2. **Icon/iconic:** A mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified (recognizably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it) - being similar in possessing some of its qualities: e.g. a portrait, a cartoon, metaphors, 'realistic' sounds in 'programmed music', sound effects in radio drama, a dubbed film sound track, imitative gestures.

3. **Index/indexical:** Index is a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified. This link can be observed or inferred. For example, natural signs like smoke, footprints, medical symptoms like pain, pulse rate are various indices. Iconic and indexical signs are more likely to be read as 'natural' than



symbolic signs when making the connection between signifier and signified has become habitual. Iconic signifiers can be highly evocative.

Semiotics of Cinema: In the development of film theory, Christian Metz is regarded as the most important contributor of semiotics method when applied to film. Metz's work revolves around the notion that film is not language, and even though linguistics concepts can be applied to film, care must be exercised. He examined the Langue system and how it differs from language. Metz subsequently offered his 'grand syntagmatique' (Metz, 1974) concept and how it can be applied to cinema studies. Through various types of signs, everything in this world entails and imparts a certain meaning of its own in the eyes of the receivers. To analyse semiotics in his approach, two important aspects of semiotics are syntagm and paradigm. The organization of signs by chain is referred to as syntagm, while by choice it is referred to as paradigm. Daniel Chandler maintained that the difference between paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures is vital in Structuralists semiotics analysis.

These two distinct concepts are often labelled as 'axes.' The horizontal axis is the syntagm and the vertical is the paradigm. These terms were coined by Roman Jakobson (Chandler, 2000). Syntagm is an orderly combination of signs that make meaning together. Such combinations are made within a framework of rules and conventions. On the other hand, paradigm is a set of associated signs that all belong to a defining category, but in which each sign is significantly different. Hill and Church argued that, the overall consequences of semiotics attention to cinema were to weaken concern with the issue of realism and strengthen attention to the cinema as a particular kind of textuality. Moreover, with regard to what concept of semiotics is appropriate for cinema studies, Metz contrasted Hill and Church's viewpoint restricted to only signifier/signified and syntagm/paradigm concepts. In film the interpretations of individual shots depend on both paradigmatic analysis (comparing it, not necessarily, with the use of alternative kinds of shots) and syntagmatic analysis (comparing it with preceding and following shots).

II. Ritwik Ghatak: The 'Flawed Genius'

Ritwik Kumar Ghatak was born in 1925 into an upper-middle-class Bengali family in Dhaka in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and moved to Calcutta as a young student in the early 1940s. There he would witness thousands of refugees from the countryside and especially from East Bengal—uprooted by the manmade famine of 1943, the ravages of World War II, and then by the communal violence preceding the Partition of India in 1947, and the Partition itself—pour into the city, irrevocably changing both the urban landscape and the fabric of Bengali society. The political turmoil of these years radicalized Ghatak, who became a Marxist activist by 1946, gravitating toward the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA), the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI). He worked within IPTA as an actor, playwright, and director until ideological conflicts and party orthodoxies led him to leave the organization in 1954.

Ghatak's interest in film dates back to the late 1940s, when he started frequenting the now mythic Paradise Café in south Calcutta. The emerging alternative film culture of Calcutta in the 1940s and 1950s, shaped by a cosmopolitan outlook and a desire to bring about fundamental changes in Bengali and Indian cinema, provided a common context for Ghatak's as well Satyajit Ray's initial forays in filmmaking, even though their stylistic paths would soon diverge. Ghatak's direct involvement with cinema began in 1949–1950, when he assisted director Manoj Bhattacharya on his film 'Tathapi' (1950) and acted in and assisted in the making of Nema Ghosh's 'Chinnamul'(1950).

Ghatak's first completed film, 'Nagarik', signalled his thematic preoccupation with the Partition's aftermath; shot in 1952–1953 on an inadequate budget, it traced the downwardly mobile trajectory and growing politicization of a lower-middleclass Bengali family uprooted by the Partition and was acclaimed as a bold experiment in social realism by his contemporaries such as Ray. However, 'Nagarik' failed to find commercial distribution during Ghatak's lifetime and was released for the first time in 1977, twenty-four years after its completion, and almost two years after Ghatak's death. In the six years that elapsed before Ghatak made his second film, he worked briefly in the Bombay film industry as a scriptwriter and assistant director, even scripting a major box-office hit, 'Madhumati'. On his return to Calcutta, Ghatak directed 'Ajantrik'(1957), which focused on a cab driver's emotional attachment to his dilapidated old car; 'Bari Theke Paliye'(1958), which explores post-independence, post-Partition Calcutta from the perspective of a young runaway; 'Meghe Dhaka Tara'(1960), which traces the sacrifices of the eldest daughter of a refugee family from East Bengal; 'Komal Gandhar'(1961), a quasi-autobiographical, backstage drama about the travails of a leftist theatre group that also functions as an allegorical commentary on the division of Bengal; and Subarnarekha (completed in 1962, released in 1965), which narrates the story of two siblings whose lives are disrupted by the Partition and warped by a haunting sense of loss, irrational prejudices, and tragic coincidences.

All but Meghe Dhaka Tara were commercial failures, and their critical reception was mixed, at best. Critics were, for the most part, baffled by Ghatak's cinematic idiom, at once fiercely formalist and excessively melodramatic, conforming neither to the hegemonic styles of Bombay cinema and mainstream Bengali cinema nor to the emerging modernist-realist aesthetic of restraint pioneered by Ray that was setting the parameters of art cinema in India. Alcoholism and nervous breakdowns also had plagued him since the early 1960s, contributing further to his predicament. As a result, Ghatak found it increasingly difficult to find financing for his projects, or to complete the ones that he had started.

He joined the newly established Film and Television Institute of India in 1964 and during his short presence there (1964–1965), first as a lecturer and then as the assistant director, left a lasting impact on a group of students who would go on to become key figures in the "New Indian Cinema" of the 1970s and the 1980s, to name a few - Mani Kaul, John Abraham, Kumar Shahani, Mira Nair and others. While he made a number of government-funded short and documentary films between 1967 and 1971, he would complete only two more feature-length films: 'Titash Ekti Nadir Nam' (shot in 1971–1973 in Ghatak's beloved East Bengal), a lyrical evocation of the lifestyle and ultimate dissolution of a fishing community in Bangladesh, and the essayistic, explicitly autobiographical 'Jukti Takko Aar Gappo' (shot in 1974, posthumously released in 1977), in which Ghatak casts himself as a frustrated, alcoholic intellectual and tries to articulate his politics of dissent and artistic beliefs against the volatile political backdrop of Bengal in the early 1970s. It turned out to be Ghatak's last testament to what he often described as his "troubled times."

His health ravaged by years of alcoholism, emotional pain, and a bout of tuberculosis, Ghatak died in Calcutta at the age of fifty-one on February 6, 1976, before the film could be released. True to his ironic predictions, Ghatak's critical reputation has soared in India in the years since his death. Ghatak's shadow now looms large over the landscape of India's alternative film culture. He has become a legendary figure, mythologized as a cinematic prophet and tortured genius, revered among Indian cineastes as one of the few truly radical figures in the history of South Asian cinema for his attempt to reinvent film language from a uniquely Bengali standpoint and embraced as a mascot by a younger generation of leftist and experimental

filmmakers in their rebellion against Satyajit Ray's aesthetic of restraint, seamless realism, and liberal humanism.

Against the Mandate of Separation – The Partition Trilogy: The post-independence plight of a “divided, debilitated Bengal” haunted Ghatak. In almost all of his films, and especially in the three films that came to be seen as constituting his Partition trilogy—‘Meghe Dhaka Tara’, ‘Komal Gandhar, and ‘Subarnarekha’, the foundational national trauma of the Indian subcontinent is seen through the lens of a specific regional reality: his preoccupation with the corrosive impact of the Partition on the intimate and quotidian aspects of middle-class life in post-independence Bengal. He took it upon himself to present to the public eye the crumbling appearance of a divided Bengal, to awaken the Bengalis to an awareness of their state and a concern for their past and the future.

He was trying, thus, to forge a cinematic idiom capable of not only registering the devastating emotional impact and continuing aftershocks of a historical trauma often assumed to be beyond the scope of conventional codes of representation, but also of jolting Bengali viewers (his primary target audience) into a critical engagement with their contemporary reality. This dual objective partly accounts for the stylistic hybridity and perplexing and at times frustrating also, nature of his films, which ultimately veer away from the representational logic of humanist realism on the one hand and the purely affective transactions of melodrama on the other, while drawing on both. This dynamic oscillation marks the Partition trilogy, in which Ghatak most intensely articulated his anger and anguish over the disintegration of Bengal. The political critique and emotional charge of these films are refracted through the generic conventions of domestic melodrama and centred around the figure of a young woman— quiet, sensitive, yet strong, resilient, and infinitely patient—who becomes, in these films, a melancholic embodiment of contemporary Bengal and of all that was lost through the Partition. All three films share a sombre storyline (Meghe Dhaka Tara and Subarnarekha more than Komal Gandhar, which is probably Ghatak's most optimistic film) and a neorealist concern with evoking the minute, everyday details of displaced lives, but their realist surface is visually and aurally inscribed with a range of regionally specific mythic and cultural references, and repeatedly torn apart by a striking use of melodramatic excess, a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation, and an insistent self-reflexivity.

III. Film Synopsis – Subarnarekha (1965)

Direction and Screenplay by: Ritwik Ghatak; **Story:** Ritwik Ghatak, Radheshyam Jhunjhunwala; **Cinematography:** Dilip Rajan Mukherjee; **Editing:** Ramesh Joshi; **Music:** Ustad Bahadur Khan

Cast: Abhi Bhattacharya as Ishwar Chakraborty; Indrani Chakraborty as Little Sita; Mater Tarun as Little Abhiram; Bijon Bhattacharya as Haraprasad; Madhabi Mukhopadhyay as Sita; Satindra Bhattacharya as Abhiram

Summary: The film ‘Subarnarekha’ is set in a post-independence refugee colony in Calcutta – ‘Naba Jiban Colony’, and centred around Ishwar, a young man and Sita, his sister whose parents were killed during the Partition. In the 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, courtsey his college friend Rambilas. Abhiram is sent to Jhargram for education and Sita becomes lonely. Completing his study successfully Abhiram

comes back on the very day Ishwar was appointed as the new manager. Abhiram finds that Ishwar had already arranged for his application in a German University to pursue his career further in engineering, but to his foster-brother's surprise, he refuses and decides to become a writer instead. Soon after, 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, she and Abhiram elope and go to Calcutta. Abhiram gets a new job there 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. Meanwhile, Ishwar contemplates suicide but is dissuaded from doing so by his old friend Harprasad who persuades him to sample the life in Calcutta; they finally end up in a brothel, both completely drunk. The devastated Sita discovers that her first client is her brother and immediately kills herself. At the end of the film, the completely broken Ishwar meets Sita's little son Binu, who is now his closest relative. Ishwar, at first, feels lost but as he seeing Binu he brightens up and decides to him boy into his clutches. The film ends with the two approaching the quarter along the banks of Subarnarekha, while Ishwar pants but still does not reveal the truth in order not to spoil his little nephew's dream.

Analysing the Film 'Subarnarekha' using Semiotics: The study is based on the semiotic analysis of a few selected frames from the movie 'Subarnarekha'. All the data collected here is completely primary in nature as most of them are taken directly from the movie and by the author himself. The photographs are used here before each respective paragraph as supplement to the analysis.



Ghatak's classic masterpiece Subarnarekha points to the backlog of Bengal Partition in 1947. Starting with the life inside a refugee camp where two teachers, Harprasad and Ishwar, are setting up a school for the camp's children and another immigrant family of mother and her tender son Abiram arrives at one of these makeshift locales in the new city of Calcutta, they are not allowed inside. When the landlord's goons take her away, Ishwar and Harprasad and in-fact the whole Nabajibon Colony is unresponsive. Ghatak counterpoints images of Abhiram's mother forced into a truck and another of Ishwar and Harprasad. The clips are from two different points in the film. Juxtaposed, the images comments that speak what they may, the socially conscious, the literati are just sound bags. They see but cannot act, happy that they are safe.



The contrasting space of Naba Jiban Colony and Rambilas' mansion amplifies and organizes geometry of complex narrative patters. The motifs of overhanging stairs, continuous dark corridors, a white building, projected like a fantastic cardboard made indistinct in the blazing backlight almost inscribe a function of hazy optical conundrums. The cinematography insinuates through angular shots and reverse shots, Rambilas' cunning projection of valued moral signposts in the gullible Ishwar, whose face is again captured from a low angel. Such shots apparently heighten the status of an individual. Here, it looks deceptive.



Ishwar takes Sita and Abhiram to Chhatimpur in search of a new life. Young Sita's repeated enquiry, 'Dadamoni, amader notun bari kothay?' ('Brother, where is our new home?') seem to establish every refugee's eternal craving for a sense of belonging and rootedness. Ishwar, Nita and Abhiram arrive at Chatimpur negotiating parallel railway lines. Mukherjee, the foreman, points to their new home while the camera stands still. The implications of playacting in his descriptions are carried further both in Ishwar's objection to them as lies or concoctions as also in Mukherjee's Chaplinesque jerks.



The British during WWI burnt farm soil, destroyed crops and isolated all border areas. On the bank of Subarnarekha, such an isolated aerodrome is shown, where two children search for their forgotten past unaware of how many such aerodromes were there behind the calamity hanging over them. Abhiram's straight run mimic the flight of the war plane without the latter's destructive consequence. Abhiram misses the point. He is adolescent. But so are the audience embedded in the narrative.



Sita encounters with a terrifying Bahurupi (chameleon) in the mother image of Kali. The external image concretizes the unmanageable flux of socially oppressive habits. The camera which had then followed her captures the Bahurupi. The shift in focus is sudden. Sita is alarmed. So are the audiences. When confronted by the existing manager, the Bahurupi confesses that it is not his intention to frighten people. Ghatak described the 'Bahurupi' both as Goddess Kali and as the eschatological figure of Time ('Mahakala'). In either way, the 'Bahurupi' represents the trauma of history.



In above image the hands are indexical; suggest each character's mental shape. The left one quantifies protection. Sita's is reclining on Abhiram's hand. Her presence is subdued and docile. Ghatak develops more insinuating results in cinematic usage-image as deception and metonymy. In the second shot, Sita and Abhiram, standing by the well works at multiple levels – the wooden frame primarily separates them. Abhiram's gaze at her looking at him in the reflection fulfils the sexual trope of conjugal love and his extreme white shawl is set against a more white background, which is contrasted against the despairing grey grids that lock Sita.

As the director keeps playing with his favourite low-angle shots the impending destruction comes to be signalled through the image. Ishwar draws Sita close to him, asks her how she could exactly be like the mother she has never seen. Sita leans forward, caresses his forehead and whispers in his ear that she is his mother. We see the two of them in an extreme low-angle shot that takes in part of the fan whirling on the ceiling. The strain on the limits of the frame begins to point to the breaching of the borders of named relations. Later, after Sita's desertion, the frame will be repeated: Ishwar would try to hang himself from the hook where the fan was hanging in the earlier scene.



After Sita's marriage with Abhiram, Ishwar has been on his own, guilt-ridden and sombre. One night, he decides life isn't worth living any more. But he's interrupted by his old pal Harapasad; he brings him to Kolkata to experience the terrifying fun of the big city. As the two weary middle-aged men drown their sorrows in liquor at a cabaret; Harapasad launches into a

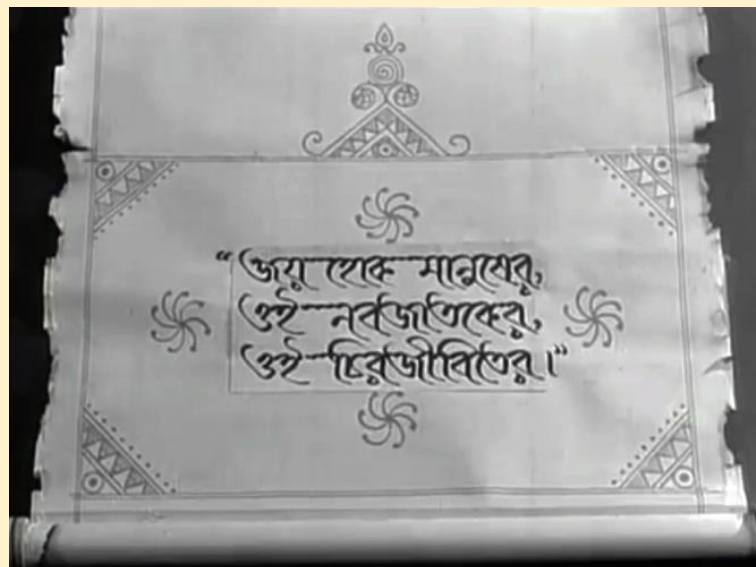
diatribe against the decadent apathy of an entire generation. He makes a recollection of history by referring to the famine, the war, the atom bomb, the riots and the Partition. He quotes from ancient Vedic texts, butchering the original Sanskrit with his typical 'bengal' intonation, mocking all forms of high idealism and simultaneously accentuating a sense of contagion.



Iswar will end up at Sita's quarter as her first client. Seeing her brother, she immediately kills herself with a huge kitchen knife. The camera frames parts of Sita's musical instruments, as her body trembles and wheezes against the 'tanpura' off-screen, producing a terrifying drone and clatter for several seconds. In an extreme close-up shot, Sita's face, eyes wide open, floats in the dense darkness. Sita had killed herself but Ishwar blames himself for this disaster. The use of coincidence disturbed the viewers, but Ghatak did not think it was much of a coincidence, so far as he was concerned 'whichever woman he visited would have been his sister'.



After a legal struggle has proven Ishwar innocent of his sister's death, he gets back to Chatimpur to look after his nephew Binu. Even if he learns en route that he has been dismissed, he nevertheless continues onwards towards the new home that he has promised to give little Binu, and where the boy hopes to be reunited with his mother and father. After documenting the calamity of displacement and exile, final sequence of 'Subarnarekha' touches because this



historical account rises to a universal and beautiful portrayal of men exiled on Earth and forced to live the violence of birth, love and death. There is little freedom in such a life; one quickly thirsts for the eternal home which was lost long ago, and there is barely enough time to see all the beauty of life before it shuts your eyes once again. The winner in the cyclical movement of birth and rebirth is Life itself, and humanity in its essence, more than the fragile individual: “Victory to man, to this new-born, ever living.”

IV. Summing Up

Ghatak’s *Subarnarekha* interrogates history at multiple levels. If we define art cinema, as a quintessentially impure mode of practice, shaped by an oscillation between realist and modernist tendencies, auteurist impulses and constructions, and a desire for a hybrid spectator “both intellectually engaged and emotionally affected,” his films would definitely qualify. However, what do we do with the fact that much of the emotional affect and intellectual impact of these films depend on very specific cultural knowledge, for instance, knowledge of the specificities of Bengal’s regional history, Partition’s impact on Bengali society, the Bengali middle-class habitus, the folk music of East Bengal, the songs of Rabindranath Tagore, or the nuances of the Bengali language? Paradoxically enough, many of the leitmotifs and allusions (verbal, visual, historical, mythic, and musical) that make a film such as ‘*Subarnarekha*’ an extremely powerful exploration of displacement, betrayal, social disintegration, and historical trauma, and thus endow it with the potential to resonate across cultural or temporal boundaries, are precisely the elements that can get lost, or at the very least obscured, in translation. It invites us to reflect on opening up a space for revising our spectatorial habits and understanding of global art cinema, and for reconceptualising the “local” and the “cosmopolitan” as heterogeneous and intertwined, rather than as homogeneous and antithetical formations. To conclude with, we can say there is enormous scope for further studies regarding these codes, as it is multi-faceted and very versatile in nature so further semiotic accounts are necessary too.

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