

Article

Darius Cooper

**Ghatak's Devouring (And) Being Devoured (by) Mothers**

Since Ghatak was often accused “of devouring the Mother” in his films, the idea of this Mother needs a closer examination, especially beyond the familiar archetype of its Durga/Kali binary. A similar paradigm of Motherhood was offered in the western tradition as well. The all nurturing, self-sacrificing Mother was presented as ‘the Angel in the House’ and its most popular representation was the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus. The sadistic and powerful and jealous Mother was the other Mary Magdalene, the ex-whore and unacknowledged thirteenth disciple of Jesus. Both mothers were portrayed in art and literature in their paradigmatic versions of the Madonna (the Good) mother and the Whore (the Bad) mother.

Rousseau’s *Emile* (1732) was chosen to emphasize the ‘good’ Mother especially in the nineteenth century. It introduced a new Mother discourse. The child’s physical and mental health, its intellectual and emotional development, was put

solely in the hands of this good mother. While Rousseau insisted that it was the good Mother who would instill in his daughter, especially, the important ironic qualities of piety, poverty, domesticity, and submissiveness, especially in the family, Freud, in the twentieth century upset this paradigm completely. Freud was more focused on the threat that the Mother assumed for her daughter. This created a turning away from the Mother and established a debilitating power struggle between the predatory Mother and the suffering Daughter.

If the nineteenth century chose to personify Rousseau’s ‘good’ mother, the twentieth century, following Freud, chose to focus on her polar opposite, the ‘monstrous’ mother. In cinema, especially starting from the 1950s, the Mothers were portrayed as being overtly and blatantly monstrous, deliberately victimizing their children, especially their daughters for sadistic and narcissistic ends. Ghatak’s mother of MDT (*Meghe Dhaka Tara*) falls

exclusively in this category, and I shall compare her, from time to time, to the evil mothers that feature so regularly in Alfred Hitchcock's films like *Notorious*, *Marnie*, *The Birds*, and the most malevolent mother of them all in *Psycho*.

Far from being relegated to the margins of the story, MDT's Mother becomes Ghatak's central focus in his narrative. Shots of her tired, complaining, and depressed-looking appearance are intercut with what she sees around her in her poverty stricken family courtyard. Underneath the tap, are the piles of her family members clothes that need to be washed. On the kitchen floor are spread rows of vegetables that have to be cut, sliced, and spiced. The kitchen stove needs coals to be fired before cooking. The bottles bearing cooking oils are bare and their woeful drops need to be multiplied. Surrounded literally by this daily landscape of ruins, she is forced to impose on herself the disturbing roles of the taker and the devourer. And once she has chosen Nita as the proverbial scapegoated daughter, she will take everything that Nita offers to her for her family's survival. She will grab all that is left from Nita's monthly salary; she will spirit away Nita's fiancé and her dowry and hand them over to her other daughter for future family safekeeping. She will force Nita to go to work even when she is running a high temperature. She is determined to swallow her up entirely. Ghatak always shows her over-mothering everyone to such a degree that her husband can't stand her and chooses the twin salvations of silence and lunacy. Her eldest son Shankar leaves the home "in protest" and her younger one Montu is reduced to living with her as a vegetable after his accident. Her excessive energy suffocates everyone and her tyranny repeatedly offers her most disturbing vindication that she is doing all this, not for herself, but for her family, so how is she and why is she to blame?

When we first encounter Nita in MDT, she is naturally attractive, energetic, and confident. She is as strong as the tree we see her emerging from. Adored by her father and her elder brother Shankar, she is shown as not being, in any way, dependent on their patriarchal presences in the family. She doesn't need a new sari like her younger sister Gita in order to look attractive. She has more energy than her

younger brother Montu's sporting exercises and her confidence is endorsed by her fiancé Sanat in his love letter to her where he calls her "a consistent star" whose "beauty cannot be overshadowed by clouds."

But once her Mother encroaches on her life, we see Nita lose, one by one, all her positive attributes. Forced by her father's accident, she has to give up her studies and take on a nine to five job in the city. Exhausted by these daily commutes to and from the city, her calm and composed beauty is gradually reduced to sweaty ordinariness. There is no time left for romance and dreams of marriage with her fiancé anymore. Her sexuality is not only repressed but gets eaten away by her mother's daily barbed taunts and incessant survival demands. Since her father and elder brother are unable to help her, or the family, she does not know what to do or who to turn to. She feels unhappy and incomplete from that whole person she once was. Used and abused by her mother, she obediently surrenders and allows her mother to dictate terms. Once Nita's mother senses this, she is determined to dispossess her of everything and everyone. She sets about creating a massive daily leakage in her daughter that can only end with Nita's tubercular death.

We see a similar instance in Hitchcock's *Marnie*. Marnie visits her mother and tries to buy her love by offering her valuable gifts as presents. During one of her visits, Marnie notices that her mother has displayed on the dining table a valuable vase bearing a beautiful bouquet of red flowers given to her by Jessie, their neighbor's daughter. Stung by jealousy, Marnie hurries to replace that gift by replacing it with her own offering of white gladioli. When she is in the process of replacing the flowers, her mother rudely intervenes and complains to Marnie that is she is not careful she will cause massive "leakage" on the table that will interfere with the "pecan pie" she is preparing for Jessie. This leads to a violent argument earning Marnie a vicious "slap" from her mother when Marnie tries to physically "touch" her. As we can see here, both Mothers are hell bent on creating those "leakages" for their daughters. The leakages are necessary to keep their daughters drowning in them while they can stand back with their arms folded, refusing to

help them in any way to free themselves from their individual leaks.



In *Subarnarekha*, it is the complete absence of the mother that makes Sita more desirable and capable of desiring her brother and then Abhiram when he returns after finishing his studies in boarding school. The irony here is that Sita becomes more feminine when Ishwar forces her to behave like the mother that Sita had never seen. However, when she allows the non-maternal part of her femininity to announce its desires for Abhiram, Ishwar intervenes and tries to put an end to it. In this conflict, Sita has to summon the destructive mother to separate herself from her brother and elope with Abhiram. But his sudden death in the city and saddled with a child and no elder brother now “to mother,” she is stripped of all her positive attributes and is soon reduced to her new status as the singing whore. Her “leakage” begins with her elopement, her estrangement from her brother, her sudden widowhood, and continues to water her survival as a whore. It ends tragically with her suicide when her drunken brother suddenly appears before her as the evening’s first customer.

While the mother, in traditional patriarchy, was relegated to silence, absence, and marginality, in MDT, the reverse happens. In a family deposed of all traces and positions of patriarchy, Ghatak’s mother offers us diatribes instead of silences, commands a formidable centrality in her household, and makes her presence felt everywhere and on everyone. Since all the men have rendered themselves as her passive victims and have been overcome by impotence, she becomes the terrifying phallus who engineers the daily doses of castration to keep the home fires burning in the courtyard. Ghatak cruelly reminds us that the Mother is forced to act in this way because as a refugee, the adopted

culture within which she has to think and feel and act is not hers to begin with. It forces her therefore to embrace motherhood as a sphinx who constantly challenges the replaced culture of her displaced family in which women were traditionally assigned a subordinate place. As a sphinx, she will decide which daughter has to be subordinated and which daughter has to be used as the agent of that subordination. She invents this riddle and since she meets no patriarchal opposition to it, she successively carries it through. When Nita sees this, she fears becoming like her mother. There are times when we see her snapping at her mother and telling her harshly to quit complaining. What she fears most is inheriting her mother’s bitterness in making others suffer more than her.

In *Subarnarekha*, Ghatak turns Sita into a tragic mother icon of the perfect all-giving presence at the service of and under the domination of her brother Ishwar. She becomes, as his mother, an object for Ishwar rather than a subject in herself. As a mother object, she embodies meaning only for Ishwar as a comforting source of safety, security and constant nourishment. As a subject she functions like a signifier emptied of the maternal and the feminine

Of all the innumerable reasons that Nita might conceive as rationalizations for her hostility to her mother, the one that Ghatak singles out pertains to her ambivalence. The primacy and intensity of this relationship contains hate as well as love. If her hatred for her mother occurs, when the mother strips her of her lover and her dowry, it is her love for her mother that prompts her to take over all the arrangements for her sister’s marriage from her overburdened mother. If her tubercular blood, coughed in her handkerchief, expels her hatred for her mother, it is her love for her that makes her arrange all the blood transfusions at the hospital for her injured younger brother.

Nita’s anxieties are crippling because Ghatak relates them to her devouring mother’s superego which creates for Nita her initial fears, rising from her loss of love, and gradually intensifies them to her ultimate punishment, a fear for life itself that can only culminate in her death when tuberculosis takes



permanent residence in her as the new diseased superego of a mother.

In existential terms, instead of the Good Mother developing in her daughter, the beginning of a being-for-herself, Nita's devouring Mother, as a being-in-herself, is bent on relinquishing everything and everyone that her daughter has to offer her. In doing so, she literally transforms Nita into an inanimate being left completely alone, friendless, and terminally diseased.

The mother's misfortune is that in spite of all her bad faith, she is always aware of her own nothingness. Her assumption as Kali or the Evil Mother constantly feeds her insatiable narcissism. But her narcissism suffers a radical failure. She cannot grasp herself as a totality or experience that plenitude that she craves for, no matter how hard she tries; she cannot maintain that illusion of being-in-itself. The paradox that Ghatak makes us discern lies in her attitude. She demands to be valued by her family to which she denies all value since she alone counts in her own eyes.

In spite of her overwhelming arrogance, her vanity is never satisfied. Lost and obsessed, she sinks deeper and deeper into the darkness of bad faith provided by her family courtyard. She ends up building a paranoid delirium that she will once again tragically repeat and unleash when the newly built staircase will lead her to the newly added first floor of her renovated family home.

Nurturing mothers have always evoked the songs of birds, while ferocious fathers have always announced howling winds and thunderous rainstorms. Ghatak, like Hitchcock, reverses these familiar parental categories. It is the mother, and not the father, who is the source of fear in MDT. No birds sing when her angry face suddenly appears and dominates the frame. Only the sounds of boiling rice accompany her harsh complaints. The father is present. But he is totally absorbed either in silence or sunk into lunacy. And when thunder and rain pelt his home, he pleads with his sad daughter "to run away" from this cursed and poisoned matriarchal abode. When this Mother is informed by her son that her sick daughter is in the final stages of tuberculosis, she responds by visualizing a new floor rising from her broken down courtyard exactly in the

same way as Hitchcock's sexually jealous mother, who sits up in bed, lights a cigarette, and plans with her timid son the extinction of her drugged daughter-in-law in Notorious.

In *Psycho*, when Marion informs Sam that she will meet him in the future only over respectable dinners, Sam's retort that they might be able to make love only after they have turned mother's portrait to the wall indicates very powerfully the fear that this kind of mother's presence threatens them with. Later at work, Marion's colleague offers her "tranquilizers" for her headache. "My mother gave them to me on my wedding day," she assures Marion. Nita's mother only offers taunts when Nita's daily headaches overwhelm her. Norman's mother may have scolded Norman for allowing a strange woman into the motel at two o'clock in the morning, but she had allowed her son to offer her a glass of cold refrigerated milk along with the sandwiches Nita's mother only offers her exhausted daughter boiling or burnt rice that has been left over after everyone else has eaten and gone to bed.

What Ghatak often makes us realize is how Nita herself contributes to her own extinction. When Shankar upbraids her for recklessly fetching presents for members of the family every month, Nita tells him that she does not mind because she is "madly in love" with each one of them. This exaggerated need for affection, unfortunately, makes her embrace an ideal of asexual love. It conceals her libido behind her generous affection for her parents, her sister, and her two brothers. But this exaggerated need for love is cruelly reinforced (like the clouds concealing her star) by an equally exaggerated horror of the exhausting demands made on her by her rapacious family spearheaded by her mother. The only two family members who genuinely love her are her father and Shankar. But they are useless in their reciprocal expressions of love. The father can only recite his favorite poets to her on her birthday and her brother can only teach her a Tagore song to sing when her lover is getting married to her younger sister. In her conflict between her desires and her sense of duty, she can only take refuge in the neuroses that is subsequently generated and nothing seems to protect her virtue as securely as the fated illness of tuberculosis that will finally annihilate her.

Sunk into the morass of the maternal, Nita's response conducts in secret a repetitive ritual of defilement which is to cough her poisonous blood into her handkerchief and hide it from her family, till Shankar discovers it and decides to take her to the sanatorium. In Sita's case, her matrophobia breaks up her tender relationship with her brother. But when widowhood imposes itself on her, then all alone with her child, in the city, she conducts her own ritual of defilement by choosing to survive like a whore. And when her estranged brother, one day, suddenly stands before her like any other customer to actually defile her, she kills herself.

There is a scene in MDT when the devouring Mother has a temporary change of heart and confesses to Nita that she was not always like this and it is the grinding poverty of her family that has forced her to become cold, hard, heartless, nagging, and complaining. This scene reminds me of a similar one between Melanie and Lydia, the harsh mother of Mitch (the man Melanie is falling love with) in Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

This scene occurs after the stern and unwelcoming Lydia rushes home after witnessing the violent death of her farmer neighbor to the birds. Invalidating herself in her bedroom, she is surprised by Melanie who has brought her a kindly kettle of tea and some sandwiches. As she sits in bed drinking tea, she apologizes to Melanie for her rudeness and confesses to her dread of a solitary sterile existence after the death of her husband. She lets Melanie know that her fear of her is not because of her involvement with her son, but of facing a life of loneliness and futility. "I don't want to be left alone. I don't think I could bear to be left alone." These words are very important because with them she accepts Melanie as a daughter and calls her, for the first time, by her Christian name. They give her a certain kind of prestige as a Mother.

Earlier, when Melanie jokes of her plan to scandalize her prim and proper aunt with her gift of a trash talking mynah bird, Mitch reminds her, "you definitely need a mother's care." This brings out an angry retort from Melanie. "My mother? She ditched us when I was eleven and ran off with some hotel man in the East. I don't know where she is." Later, when Melanie is ruthlessly attacked by the

birds, this inner conflict of hers needing to replace her philandering mother is brought out into the open when Mitch and Lydia and the eleven year old Cathy rush to her aid. Lydia rouses herself from her ruins of teacups and saucers and rushes to help Melanie. Melanie's fears and hysteria awaken in Lydia that good mother who has lain dormant for so long. Her newly awakened compassion cradles Melanie in her arms with a determined maternal possessiveness. The mother that Melanie lost as an eleven year old is found again and Lydia becomes that Mother Melanie has always wanted since she was eleven years old like Cathy.

In MDT, this never happens when the mother has a change of heart, because unlike Lydia, Nita's mother is shown as a woman who has lost all her prestige. She appears always as the one who waits to empty Nita's salary; as the one who endures the daily emptiness of her cooking vessels; as the one who complains endlessly of her husband's uselessness and her son's hopelessness; as the one who loves to cry and make angry scenes to dramatize her poverty. As a victim she delights in showing her family how she is scorned. As a shrew, she celebrates and indulges in all her cruelties. Since her destiny makes her deliberately repeat them all the time, she abandons all and any kind of prestige that she could have ever acquired as a Mother.

Every daughter wants to affirm her autonomy from her mother. But in the mother's eyes, this becomes a sign of ingratitude and leads to the "taming" of this determination. The mother cannot accept that her daughter will become a "double" or the "other mother." In MDT, this happens when Nita threatens to become the refugee's family new mother. Her independence as the family's main bread winner creates jealousy in her mother. She is doubly jealous, first of the city world that Nita successfully negotiates with, and of Nita, who by conquering that city world, seems to rob the mother of it. The mother wants to rule over her feminine universe without competition. She does not want to be replaced by her eldest daughter in it.

She resents Nita enjoying advantages that she has been refused, especially her romance with Sanat. She envies all the amusements, especially in relation to love, that wrench her daughter from the

predictable boredom of her loveless household. The rosy future opening up for her daughter seems to be stolen from the mother. Nita's attractive femininity reminds the mother of her own sad decline toward old age. Nita's readiness for marriage and child-bearing makes the mother resentful of her own disastrous marriage and ungrateful children. She feels she is the only one who is daily being diminished by the grinding repetition and routine which are a part of her suffering destiny. She cannot dismiss or suppress her anger and so she decides to tyrannize her daughter and imposes all her suffering on her, especially when she becomes her "double" or the "second" mother.

Expelled by the Mother from all her familiar shelters within the family, and torn away from all her projects like her romance and impending marriage, Nita finds herself without resources and comes face-to-face with herself in a terrifying way. Faced with her sad and disappointing destiny she is forced to deny her finitude. She withdraws from the surroundings and shuts herself up, first with the secret of her passivity as "a sin," and then with the secrecy of her deathly disease.

Nita's Mother, subjected to the rituals of her daily tasks, especially related to the cooking and washing of clothes, has discovered a tragic alchemy

that she wants to pass on to her daughter as the new mother. Daily cooking involves waiting for the rice to boil, waiting for the oil to melt and sizzle, and daily washing involves waiting for the clothes to dry. And everywhere things can either "revive" or "breakdown." Rice can get burnt and some spots on the clothes can refuse to come out. Ruled by such a calculated routine, life has no novelty for her. It is not creative because it is doomed to only endless repetition. She is absorbed only in producing or maintaining things, like food and clothes. It is this painful inheritance that she imposes on Nita as the family's new mother.

In her daily functioning as a mother, Nita's mother is not recognized by her family in her singularity. It is because she is made to feel that she is a "nothing," that she becomes hypertrophied as the mother who wants to be acknowledged as what she would like to be by "all." In trying to save her life, not only does she lose it, but what is worse is that she is instrumental in making her eldest daughter lose her life as well, so that in her declining years, as she sits, on the first floor of her house, she can acknowledge, if she dares to herself, that she was not her family's only victim as the traditional proverbial marginalized mother.

■ *Prof. Darius Cooper has a PhD in Literature and Film from The University of Southern California. He taught at San Diego Mesa College courses in Humanities and Critical Thinking since 1989. He resides in Los Angeles.*