

Article

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Haunted Kitchens: Food, Scarcity, And Ghostly Women in Bengali Cinema



Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960)

Abstract: This article explores the frequent trope of the haunted kitchen in Bengali cinema as a space in which gender, labor, and memory are merged into ghostly forms. Through close analyses of Satyajit Ray's *Monihara* (1961), Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), and Abhijit Chowdhury's *Patalghar* (2003), the article asserts that the domestic kitchen is never a neutral environment but a space laden with anxieties of patriarchy, displacement, and inheritance. In *Monihara*, haunting occurs through the negation of domestic work, where a woman's failure to appear in the kitchen makes her a restless ghost. The kitchen of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is considered a space of post-partition trauma, where the ghost-like state of the protagonist is caused by too much and too much work at home. In *Patalghar*, that kitchen becomes an archive of memories, where the utensils become ghostly traces of survival through generations. These films really uncover how in Bengali cinema kitchens act as hauntological spaces, inscribing repressed histories of hunger, migration, and invisible women's harsh labor. This article suggests that by foregrounding the kitchen as cinematic and symbolic site, it will serve a fresh avenue for examining the gendered hauntologies of Indian cinema, arguing that the domestic has been engaged in articulating historical traumas and the ghostly endurance of women's labor.

Keywords: Bengali cinema; gender and labor; domestic hauntology; Satyajit Ray; Ritwik Ghatak; Partition trauma; Indian film studies.

1. Introduction

Since decades, the kitchen has played a low-key but central role in Indian cinema. It is said to be a place for everyday nourishment, ritualistic control, and women's hidden labor. But then again, in film narratives, the kitchen is hardly ever shown; it is more often presented as a utilitarian backdrop relegated to domesticity. Whereas, when there is hauntology in the kitchen or it tables the absence there of, or exaggerated sounds take over, an unresolved social anxiety about hunger, lack, purity, and female labour is being suggested. Thus, within films, the kitchen setting is transformed into the arena where sustenance is provided, while the enactment of class, caste, and gender-based hierarchies also occurs in tandem.

1.1. Gender, Class, and the Domestic Labor of Food

Food in South Asian cultural imagination is inseparably tied to gendered and caste-patriarchal codes. Food preparation and serving has been coded as women's work, and as some scholars like Uma Chakravarti have pointed out, this is tied to the Brahmanical ideology of purity and pollution. The kitchen is where caste rules are the most palpable: who cooks, who serves, who eats together, and what ingredients are acceptable. In Bengali middle-class households, the kitchen is the invisible space where *bhadralok* respectability is reproduced. In films, women are first introduced as cooks, feeders, or keepers of domestic chastity. When this function is disrupted — be it through lack, refusal, or death — the household is disrupted. The "haunted kitchen" thus encapsulates these anxieties: it is the film set

in which gendered expectations are unmade and remade through apparition.

1.2. Haunting as Feminine Condition

In Bengali cinema, women who reject or fail at being good, effective homemakers appear to return as ghosts, ranging from the jewel-hungry wife in Satyajit Ray's *Monihara* (1961) to any number of subsequent versions of female spirit, bound to food, cooking implements, or abandonment. Haunting is feminized here, and when it does so, it typically reveals some culturally sedimented patriarchal anxiety (guilt): when a woman has been suppressed, disregarded, or denied voice, desire, or agency in her lifetime, she returns as a ghost, stuck in those very sites of entrapment. The kitchen is one such preferred site of entrapment. Clattering dishes in an otherwise empty kitchen, or footsteps during dinner, takes on the cinematic shorthand for an unignorable absence. Hauntedness here is less to do with supernatural horror, and more the persistence of gendered exploitation - the ghost woman keeps working, wanting, or beckoning for attention, even in death.

1.3. Bengali Cinema and the Politics of Food

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, Bengali cinema, particularly, repeatedly inscribes itself within the histories of famine, partition, and displacement. In films like Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), poverty and domestic strife are firmly placed at the centre of the narrative. However, kitchens often cease to be mere backdrops in these films because they are the location of life-sustaining struggle. In kitchens, women are negotiating their bodies and desires to

hold things together as 'the house' is something rooted in patriarchal home making. Cinema, on the other hand, tends to elide the hard politics of food shortage by displacing it into melodrama, myth, or the supernatural. This is also where haunting becomes a paramount trope; a starving, exploited woman becomes a ghost because her body cannot be overwhelmed: she is the cook, the mother, the sacrificer, but never a subject in and for herself. Once that labour disappears, cinema resounds her as a ghost.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Research on Indian cinema and domesticity has considered for some time how kitchens and houses are both ideologically unique and gendered spaces. Early radical feminist film theory, such as Mulvey's (1975) critique of "visual pleasure," established how films treat women as objects of the male gaze; this is important as we think about how Bengali cinema places feminine characters within spaces of the house. Sarkar (2009) puts forth this perspective of history in relation to Indian film, and considers melodrama's historical response to trauma in partitions, namely women's bodies as symbols for a broken nation. This creates resonance with Chakrabarty (2002), who argues for the totalizing influence of colonial modernity and subjectivity of the subaltern in the everyday lives of South Asian domesticity. In this context, Gordon (2008) has proposed haunt as a theoretical framework in which haunting is a "social figure" where unrequited violence returns to haunt the present. Derrida (1994) also theorizes hauntology as meaning ghosts, which he sees as signs of absence and loss in

history. These theories help describe the spectral aesthetic of Bengali cinema which often uses ghosts to represent memory, trauma, and silenced feminine voices. In South Asian cinema, the domestic melodrama is a dominant narrative form. Referencing Uberoi's (1996) work on reformist discourse and family ideology, she situates the Indian cinema in what can only be described as a patriarchal cultural economy that invests morals and social authority into the domestic sphere for the female population while restricting any autonomy these women might have. Ray (2015) then builds upon this reading, analyzing kitchens as manifestations of caste identity and class identity in colonial Bengal, where the labor of cooking became a way of codifying social hierarchy. The scholarly work on food in image, described in the SARE special issue on kitchen narratives (2022), exemplifies how Indian film kitchens function as both literal and figurative spaces of women's agency and containment. Research on specific films supports these theoretical trajectories. Dass (2020) provides a thorough exegesis of Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) by reading the visual aesthetics and melodrama as a transportation of the response to displacement caused by partition, while Natarajan (2018) draws attention to the gendered suffering shown in the protagonist Neeta. Maitra's (2022) readings of Satyajit Ray's *Monihara* (1961) traces the haunted wife motif as an example of materialist critique, and Dutta's (2021) reading of the film connects it to the original narrative by Tagore in an example of how the ghost story can present dramatic anxiety about accumulation and alienation. Together these texts put *Monihara* into a

broader Bengali gothic tradition that is concerned with the interlacing with gender and material culture. While it hasn't been researched as heavily, Abhijit Chowdhury's *Patalghar* (2003) has been discussed in regard to Bengali science fiction. Panja's (2019) dissertation and Chattopadhyay's (2019) encyclopedic entry track the way the film engages in adapting Premendra Mitra's tale, positing that Bengali speculative cinema combines scientific imagery with local folklore. Such analyses demonstrate that, by using technology and history instead of merely supernatural themes, *Patalghar* reinterprets haunting, expanding the ways viewers can read domestic and spectral spaces in cinema.

Broadly speaking, this literature emphasizes that domestic interiors and kitchens in Bengali cinema are not passive settings but active spaces of ideological struggle, where ghosts, masculinity and femininity, and historical trauma meet. Building on Derrida's (1994) hauntology and Gordon's (2008) sociology of haunting, this research places Bengali ghost films in the context of wider debates on partition, patriarchy, and memory, while also engaging with the comparatively underdeveloped body of work on science fiction in Indian cinema.

3. Research Gap & Problem Statement

Scholarship on Indian cinema has been very much concerned with gender representation, melodrama, and the female body, but little direct analysis of the kitchen as a site of cinema has been forthcoming.

Feminist film theory has addressed the gaze, spectatorship, and control of narrative, but seldom domestic spatiality in South Asia.

Additionally, though there is scholarship on food and famine in literary and cultural studies, this particular confluence of food, women's work, and haunting in Bengali cinema has not been examined. This paper fills that gap by inquiring: How does the haunted kitchen in Bengali cinema image gendered, class, and caste fears around food, lack, and women's work?

In response to this, the paper centers on three films at various points in Bengali cinema:

Satyajit Ray's *Monihara*, 1961: where the ghostly wife haunts the absent domestic space, her refusal of wifely duty displaced into possession of jewels.

Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, 1960: where the protagonist Nita is spectralized not through literal haunting but through the suffocating over-presence of her labor in the kitchen.

Abhijit Chowdhury's *Patalghar* (2003) – where echoes and sounds of kitchens and hunger extend haunting into science fiction, showing the persistence of feminine domesticity even in futuristic imaginaries.

Together, these films allow us to trace how kitchens — as haunted, overworked, or empty — become cinematic shorthand for anxieties around women's place in classed and caste-marked domesticity.

4. Case Studies & Analysis

4.1. *Monihara* (Satyajit Ray, 1961)

Monihara by Ray does not directly set the kitchen but stages its absence as a haunting presence. In most middle-class Bengali homes of the 1950s–60s, the kitchen was the locus of women's work and indicator of their

moral value. Monimalika's refusal to engage with cooking and domestic work places her as deviant in this discourse. Phanibhushan's repeated assertions regarding her failure to cook at home serve as narrative signals that equate femininity with food-labor, so that the non-cooking itself becomes monstrous. In terms of content analysis, the lack of cooking scenes serves as a discursive strategy: the film never has to depict unsuccessful cooking, since the lack of food already signals Monimalika's ghostliness.



The ornaments that she keeps symbolically replace rice and cutlery — she stockpiles decorations rather than provisioning the household. It is therefore understandable that when she appears as a ghost, the haunting takes material form in the form of patriarchal fear about women who refuse domesticity. Punishment is not greed per se, but a refusal to replicate the moral economy of food. The film thus spectralizes the kitchen through absence: a hungry silence that takes the place of the missing wife's labor.

4.2. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1960)

In contrast to Ray, Ghatak overloads his film with the visibility of the kitchen and food

work. Nita's character is built up through a relentless repetition of household work: grocery shopping, cooking, serving meals, cleaning.

A visual analysis of these scenes shows that Ghatak employs visual redundancy — redundant, nearly monotonous repeated framing of Nita in the kitchen — to create a visual aesthetic of depletion. The kitchen in this instance is not lacking but overwhelming, a site where want and survival become indistinguishable. Symbolically, the kitchen is a site of haunting because of its relationship to partition trauma. Nita's tuberculosis literalizes body consumption by domestic needs: she is consumed by the very work of maintaining others. Here, the spectrality is not otherworldly but historical.

Her ghostliness appears while she is still alive, her voice sounding at the end ("Dada, I want to live") as already disembodied. A *mise-en-scène* content analysis reveals the home discourse of sacrifice is enacted by framing Nita in crowded, dark interior spaces, full of cook pots and half-finished meals. The refugee kitchen in the film becomes a haunted space, in which lack constitutes femininity as a sacrificial specter.



4.3. *Patalghar* (Abhijit Chowdhury, 2003)

Despite being a children's science-fiction fantasy, *Patalghar* still maintains domestic kitchens as narrative focal points. As opposed to the previous films, these kitchens are not ones of lack or refusal, but of memory and inheritance.

Content analysis confirms that jars, cutlery, and pantries are visually over-presented: the camera lingers on containers of grain, pickle jars, and inherited cutlery.

This visual language encodes the kitchen as an archive of household continuity, yet one that is also strange — objects intended to feed us are instead signs of an enduring, spectral past.

The spirits in the movie literally make this uncanny, but crucially, they are continually channelled through domestic interiors. Even science-fiction set in the future cannot avoid the haunted domestic space. The argument being made here is that Bengali identity- especially middle-class domesticity- is bound up in kitchens and food-storing practices. The uncanny in the latter is not the result of lack (as in *Ghatak*) or negation (as in *Ray*), but memory: the persistence of the past in the present through retained butter and inherited household items.



4.4. Cross-Comparative Reading

Together, the three films illustrate the ways in which Bengali film develops kitchen discourse to frame a ghostly femininity across histories. In *Monihara*, the pulsing absence of the kitchen represents patriarchal punishment for female refusal; in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the diminished kitchen presents history as trauma and gendered self-sacrifice; in *Patalghar*, a backward-looking kitchen situates haunting in intergenerational memory. Content analysis demonstrates that in all three, even missing, the kitchen is overdetermined because, as oppressive or strange, it serves as the master metaphor for women's social place. Discourse analysis reveals that kitchens are not merely places for preparing food but symbolic sites inscribed with anxieties about femininity, labour, and survival. Thus, the "haunted kitchen" is more than a minor motif, but constitutes a re-occupying cultural discourse making the domestic itself the site of ghostliness in Bengali visual culture.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

As mapped through *Monihara*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, and *Patalghar*, the haunted kitchen in Bengali cinema exemplifies that the domestic space is never without valences. The domestic space is rather infused with anxieties involving class, history, and gender that continue to reemerge in spectral forms. Although these films disclose that they are situated in very different times, they ultimately share the idea that the kitchen serves as a site of a spectral femininity, or site of haunting when women's domestic labor, or refusal of it, creates supernatural hauntings. In *Monihara*, the haunting is through absence — an absence of a woman who chooses not to

cook or serve becomes a vengeance ghosting being and a patriarchal reiteration of men's anxiety over women and domesticity. Because *Monihara* appears to be untouched by the ravages of time or space, after *Monihara*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* abjects haunting through overwork: Nita's body becomes ghost-like long before she dies, worn down by the wastrel of lack and exploitations of the kitchen in a refugee camp. By the time we arrive at *Patalghar*, the kitchen transforms from a site of lack to a site of memory, where jars, the action of spoons, and storerooms bear the spectral weight of inheritance as they connect the shape of domesticity into trans-generational fears of survival. What is important here is how the shape of the ghostly woman is entangled with the kitchen as a gendered site of work and memory. The haunted kitchen thus becomes a kind of cinematic short-hand for social discomfort: it codes for patriarchal oppression (Ray), post-partition trauma (Ghatak), and middle-class nostalgia (Chowdhury). In all cases, women's bodies are related to kitchens not just as sites of provisioning supervision but as betraying sites of haunting, where absence, exhaustion, and memory fold into the ghost. This study

contends that in order to understand how Indian/Bengali cinema disrupts gender, we must look beyond overt images of women and consider sites such as the kitchen that organize the presence and absence of women. By interpreting kitchens as haunted places, we access the unconscious economies of food, labor, and memory inscribed by cinema.

More generally, this offers a way into reimagining film studies by way of domestic hauntologies — examining how kitchens, kitchenspaces, and dining tables become sites of staging for ungathered histories of famine, displacement, patriarchy, and class. If haunting, as Avery Gordon proposes, 'is a way of knowing what has been suppressed,' then the kitchens in Bengali cinema are indeed such haunted spaces, where ungathered histories of women's toil and suffering return as ghostly apparitions. The haunted kitchen is not a minor trope but a vital cinematic tool by which Bengali cinema engages with gendered labor, traumatic history, and intergenerational memory. To examine kitchens on screen is to examine the ghostly presence of women — always present, frequently hidden, and sometimes returning as specters.

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