

Tribute to Ritwik Ghatak: Article

Shoma A. Chatterji

**The Women in Ghatak's
Nagarik, Meghe Dhaka Tara, Subarnarekha,
And The Subjectivity of Women**



Madhabi Mukherjee in *Subarnarekha*

Ghatak defined *Nagarik, Meghe Dhaka Tara, and Subarnarekha* as his “trilogy.” The three films are bonded as much by the cultural elements of Bengal – theatre, music, poetry and song, as they are by the tragedies of the Partition that dislocated millions from their roots. *Nagarik* is not exactly about Partition. It is about the impact of forced displacement immediately following the end of the colonial rule in India. It could be interpreted as the long-term after-effect of the Partition and Independence on a middle-class, urban life in Calcutta forced by elements of unemployment, displacement in moving downwards in the socio-economic position of such families through the depiction of two such families in Calcutta.

Each family in the next two films offers a microcosm of the refugee family, truncated into segments – emotionally, geographically and socially. In this sense, it would be safe to conclude that the three films are autobiographical. The horrific spread of terror consequent to the Partition finds expression in Ghatak's statement, "we have all become refugees of our time, having lost the roots of life." This statement is expressed in three different ways in these three films. A press worker in *Subarnarekha* exclaims: "Refugee! Who is not a refugee?" Ghatak's dream of seeing the two 'Bengals' united comes across movingly through the chanting of the *panchali* of *Satyanarain Pooja*.¹

John Stuart Mill's Subjection of Women

In *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill¹ wrote, "... the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances of human improvement, and it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other." Mill had in mind the 19th Century readers of Victorian England who were content to regard women as prototypes rather than as individuals in their own right, with their own intellect and their own ideology of life and living. If we consider his thesis based on "a principle of perfect equality" in the present context in India through these three films, we discover that even when a woman is taking on the entire financial responsibility of running the family and is therefore, expected to have removed "hindrances" to "human improvement", she remains subordinated within the private domain of the family. The economic 'empowerment' she is supposed to experience through her capacity and power to earn does not bring any change in her social and cultural status of subordination and dependence. If there is any "human improvement", she, the Ghatak woman does not fall within its scope.

Mill likens the position of women in society and particularly their positions in the marital relationship in the 19th century to that of slaves subject to the will of their masters (i.e. Mill argues that marriage is the legal equivalent of slavery.)² Mill argues that numerous benefits will follow from allowing women the liberty to control their own destiny and the freedom to hold an equal position in society. Among these benefits are: (1) improved conditions for women in marital relationships so that they are no longer subject to the will of a cruel husband but are, instead, equal partners in the marriage;³ (2) the eradication of self-worship instilled in men who believe they are better than women merely because of their gender and not for any

¹ John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, in *On Liberty and Other Writings*, ed . Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). p.119. John Stuart Mill was an English philosopher, political economist, politician and civil servant. One of the most influential thinkers in the history of liberalism and social liberalism, he contributed widely to social theory, political theory, and political economy.

² Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, p.147.

³ Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 155,195.

substantive reason; (3) the creation of the family as a model of the ‘virtues of freedom’;⁴ (4) most importantly, the promotion of human progress and the greatest happiness of all through the addition to society of new and diverse intellectual forces which will result from improved and equal education and opportunities for women.⁵

Nagarik

For 25 long years after its completion, *Nagarik* (1952), lay in damp vaults, condemned, to all appearances, to perpetual obscurity. The Telengana Uprising along with the frustrations with



IPTA led Ghatak to make *Nagarik* in 1952. Its ‘resurrection’ long after its creator’s death changed the history of Indian cinema forever. A year after Ghatak's death in 1976, the print was restored at the initiative of the Left Front State government. When the film was screened, people realized that had it been released at the time of its making, the history of Indian cinema would perhaps, have been written differently because Ray’s debut film, *Pather Panchali* came only in 1955.

Ghatak insisted that *Nagarik* was a political statement that analyzed the agonies of a middle-class family in Calcutta engaged in a grim struggle for survival against oppressive social forces. It depicted the slow and tragic shift of the family several rungs down the hierarchical ladder of socio-economic class structure which, though geographic on the surface, reaches deeper into the lives of its members whose characters metamorphose into something quite different from what they were when the film began. Uma, the daughter of one family, turns into a commercial singer, forced into compromises all the way. In the closing shot of the film, strains of the *Communist Internationale* filled the soundtrack. Was Ghatak, the Marxist, suggesting a Marxist solution to this gross inequality between man and man, family and family? The young woman forced to become a cheap commercial singer (sex worker?) is a sterling example of how the poverty brought about by the Partition reduces the woman below the margins of a respectable identity.

The socio-economic base of the family changes over the unfolding of the film. Ghatak had the courage and the ability to face, interpret and present bitter truths with brutal frankness. Seen many years later, in 1982, *Nagarik* reminded this viewer of the whiplash Ghatak used in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. While *Meghe Dhaka Tara* used the whiplash on the soundtrack, *Nagarik* itself

⁴ Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 160.

⁵ Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 199.

was a whiplash inflicted on the audience, to shake it up and wake it from its dream-filled slumber of illusion.

An innovation in *Nagarik* that became a characteristic of his later style was the use of deep focus to place his characters firmly within their social environment. The first visual introduction of the central character in the film comes only after a panoramic sweep of Calcutta, the camera panning over shanties and shops, high-rise buildings and ghettos, electric wires cob webbing the skyline and streets crowded with common people going about their daily chores. This is followed by a long crane shot from a height of about 20 feet that introduces the character, one of the crowd, helping an old woman cross the street. He tracks the man to his house through narrow and dirty bylanes, passing street performers and beggars. The camera then closes up on the face of the hero. By then, the audience has accepted Ramu as a point of identification, as one of them, in no way extraordinary, heroic, rich, handsome or promising of adventures in a fantasy world.

This writer has reservations about one argument that is self-contradictory. The statement ‘*allowing women to control their own destiny and the freedom to hold an equal position in society*’ is structured on the assumption that women need to be ‘allowed’ to ‘**control** their own destiny and **the freedom** to hold an equal position in society. ‘Allowed’ by who or whom? By men who “believe they are better than women”? By state institutions defined, dominated and structured by men? By political systems created, sustained and ruled by men? Answers to these difficult questions will emerge through readings of these three films. Does Uma attain financial and socio-cultural independence? Does she step into her vocation by choice? Is she able to create a family of her own? The answer to all these questions is in the negative. And Ghatak points this out, though quite subtly and with restraint. In other words, one needs to read between the lines to get the message.

Meghe Dhaka Tara

“It (the Partition) does not affect me directly,” said Ritwik once.⁶ “It does, in a broader sense, in an indirect way. Filmmaking is a question of your subconscious, your feeling of reality. I have tackled the refugee ‘problem’, as you have used the term, not as a refugee problem. To me, it was a shocking splintering of culture. During the partition I hated pretentious people who clamoured about our Independence, our freedom. I kept watching what was happening, how the behaviour pattern was changing due to this great betrayal of national liberation. And probably gave vent to what I felt. Today, I am not happy and whatever I have seen comes out – consciously or unconsciously – in my films. My films may have been ridden with expressive slogan mongering or they may be remote. But the cardinal point remains – that I am frustrated by what I see around me; I am tired of it.”

⁶ Ritwik Ghatak: *Cinema and I*, Ritwik Memorial Trust, Calcutta, 1987, p.80.

Ghatak defined *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha* as "my trilogy." The three films are bonded as much by the cultural elements of Bengal – theatre, music, poetry and song, as they are by the tragedies of the Partition that dislocated millions from their roots. The family in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* offers a microcosm of the refugee family, truncated into segments – emotionally and socially.



Haimanti Banerjee in her monograph on Ghatak writes: "At the threshold of 20, Ghatak was witness to the eventfulness of a history which turned its pages virtually every six months. What Ghatak confronted and became aware of was a chronicle of unabashed display of domination and oppression of humanity at large by a handful of owners of power and technological means of suppression. In his perception of

such a reality, Ghatak realized that this phenomenon of control was spread all over the world. Nearer home at his doorstep, he saw the enormity of human suffering and privation, but he also witnessed the rise of essential human qualities of courage and heroism. The war of freedom transformed dignity to indignity and dependence to self-determination."⁷

Though a tragic victim of the 1947 Partition, Ghatak brought a positive and celebratory insight into both the personal and national dimensions of homelessness as reiterated constantly in his cinema. "Exile and homelessness can teach us the joy of living internally as well as externally without boundaries and without borders," said Ghatak. The reason for the growing posthumous critical acclaim and recognition for Ghatak is, for one, the courage, power and anger with which Ghatak dramatizes the urgent modern questions of 'nationality', 'borders' and 'exile.'

The first point about Nita's taking up a job is that she did not do it out of choice. She was forced into it by circumstances beyond her control. Therefore, it does not fit into Mill's argument that insists on "giving freedom to women." No one has 'given' her freedom. The compulsion of a job places her in a trap and a time-warp that entails a lot of sacrifice – (a) she gives up her studies, (b) she gives up practicing music which she is very good at, (c) she gives up all hopes of marriage to the man she loved and watches helplessly when after extorting her through emotional blackmail, he brazenly shifts his attentions to Nita's younger sister Gita who he eventually marries, (d) she sets her older brother 'free' from the responsibility of the family's upkeep and he happily goes away to Bombay to seek a career in music and (e) the little gold her mother had saved up for Nita's marriage is now given away to Gita.

⁷ Banerjee, Haimanti: Ritwik Kumar Ghatak – A Monograph, National Film Archive of India, Pune, 1985, p.9.

Mill argues that the subjection of women has been justified by the claim that it is natural for men to dominate women. Nita in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is *not* dominated by men. Nor does patriarchy rule her exploitation. The strongest exploiter of her situation is her own mother, herself a victim of her rootless refugee state, the poverty the family has been reduced to and the burden of bearing, delivering, bringing up and nurturing four children. Women, states the claim justifying the subjection is natural because women are *naturally* inferior to men. The traditional contention of the rule of the physically strong (men) over the physically weak (women) does not apply in this case.

Nita personifies tremendous courage. Yet, she is by no means an aggressive woman. Not once does one find her imposing herself either on her immediate family or on the man she is in love with. She has no complaints and harbours no hate towards her close ones. Nita embodies within herself, the traditional qualities of nurture, affection and protectiveness, qualities motherhood is vested with, qualities that her biological mother does not possess anymore. But these are “traditional qualities” nurtured by patriarchal norms. Their mother manipulates the circumstances to favour Gita but has to do it by exploiting Nita. When Nita asks Sanat to wait till Shankar establishes himself to take over the responsibilities of the family from Nita, her mother pushes Gita towards Sanat, because she wants Nita to continue with the economic burden of running the family. She backs younger son Montu when he wishes to go away and live in the factory 'mess' after he recovers from the accident. When Gita informs Nita about her impending marriage to Sanat, Gita adds, - “you should have known that not everyone has the patience of waiting.” Nita remains silent.

Nita's courage is defined by her quiet submission and surrender to the wishes of the very people who 'consume' her as fatally as her tuberculosis does. One is not sure in the end about whether it is TB that takes her life or whether her family and her boyfriend are responsible. The line between the family's brutal cruelty towards her and the spread of tuberculosis within her body gets increasingly blurred as the narrative moves towards its dramatic climax. The family as 'consumer' of the very member who holds it together marks the uniqueness of Ghatak's presentation of decaying values in the impoverished scenario of the refugee family. Nita presents a classic example of power exercised in reverse – with her financial command in running the family as the sole earning member, she symbolizes weakness instead of power, and succumbs, almost willingly to the power her family wields over her. One is not sure whether this surrender to the wishes of her family both to protect it and to sacrifice herself is *her* way of silent rebellion against life itself.

Nita's realization of her position within the family – or rather, the lack of it – emotionally and politically, leads to an unpredictably tragic climax though, all the time, one could see it coming. Nita holds the family together. She also holds the film together. There cannot be any film left after Nita's death. Nita's nature goes against Mill's argument that we cannot claim to

know the true nature of women based on their behaviour because this behaviour is a product of social forces that have conditioned women to behave in a certain way and have thus lead them to hide and suppress their true natural inclinations.⁸

Nita's nature, both in the novel and in Ghatak's film is transparent. This is evident in her behaviour, her attitude towards her family and her boyfriend, her speech pattern and body language and her general disposition when she voluntarily goes into seclusion within her small room in the refugee home because suffering from what was then considered a fatal affliction, she does not want to infect the others in the family and wants to keep them from learning about her condition. Though it is true that Nita hides and suppresses the facts about her killing disease, this does not absolve her parents of the criminal neglect of their dying daughter.

Nita is the family's sacrificial goat. She realizes this through the small twists and turns in her life – the younger brother Montu's accident, older brother Shankar leaving to seek fresh pastures in Bombsy younger sister Gita's seduction of Sanat, Sanat's betrayal, her mother's brazen manipulation of the relationship between and among Nita, Gita and Sanat – and slowly finds herself surrendering to these.

Mill argues that marriage is the legal equivalent of slavery.⁹ But Nita is not married. She is an ordinary woman who wanted to marry her long-time boyfriend Sanat but is forced by the circumstances to give up the simplest of dreams of getting married and having a family. She learns to accept that she will never get married. Nita is a microcosm of hundreds of women pushed to the brink of a precarious existence by their own family.

The young woman, whose slipper tears in the end, is Ghatak's way of completing his argument carried over from Saktipada Rajguru's original story. Mill argues that numerous benefits will follow from allowing women the liberty to control their own destiny and the freedom to hold an equal position in society.¹⁰ The same argument is echoed in Rabindranath Tagore's famous poem *Sabala* (The Strong Woman). No benefits accrue to Nita though the family members benefit from her sacrifice. No one has 'allowed' her 'the liberty to control' her 'own destiny.' She is *pushed* to an ordinary job to keep the home fires burning, to give up her education, her music, her dreams of marrying Sanat and finally, even her life. She has no 'freedom'. Her job places her in greater captivity than she had lived in before. She has no 'equal position' within her own family.

⁸ Elizabeth S. Smith, Furman University, *John Stuart Mill's The Subjection of Women, A Re-examination*; *Polity*, Volume XXXIV, No.2, Winter 2001, pp. 182. This author is deeply indebted to Smith's critique of Mill as a major source for the present paper.

⁹ Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 147, quoted in Elizabeth S. Smith's paper cited above.

¹⁰ Stone, P.181.

The change in Nita is discernible in her slow and sure retreat into the shell she creates for herself and in the quality of her smile – it is no longer as broad as it was during the opening frames of the film when one catches her in moments of gay camaraderie with her older brother. It is a sad and quiet smile; head bent, and face wistful. The shell she creates is also an extension of her protectiveness towards the family. Her father seems to understand but does not do anything beyond grumbling and mumbling about the tragic destiny of his elder daughter.

Subarnarekha

The film zeroes in on the theme of uprooting – geographical, emotional, moral and for Sita, even political. The storyline is deceptively simple on appearance. Maybe, when one reads it, it may also seem melodramatic. For example, the discovery of Abhiram's (the boy Sita marries) caste from the way he identifies his dying mother at the station is pure cinematic coincidence. Ghatak defended the element of melodrama almost with a vengeance. As the film comes across over its 132 minutes of screening time, it sends a series of electric shocks down the spine of a growingly disturbed audience. "Disturbance" is a word that aptly describes one's reactions to Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*.

The time setting and progress are established through historical milestones. The film opens on 28th January 1948 with a small group of refugees hoisting the national flag as a tribute to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre led by the idealist and rebel school teacher Haraprasad, a close friend of Ishwar. A few days later, we hear of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Soon after Sita and Abhiram have eloped, the foreman Mukherjee brings a newspaper that carries the news of Yuri Gagarin's first flight into space. A very angry and frustrated Ishwar tears off the pages and consigns them into the foundry fire.

Ishwar Chakrabarty along with his friend Haraprasad and his family, arrive in Calcutta from East Pakistan, their homeland, when the Partition happens. His little sister, Sita is with him. The place they are marked to reside in happens to be a fallow land the local zamindars have no use for. His very satiric friend claims to name this new area "Naba Jiban Colony", earmarked for the hordes of arriving refugees. Ishwar Chakravarty moves on when he is offered a job by his old college friend Rambilas, as cashier in the latter's foundry in Chhatimpur within Ghatshila along the river Subarnarekha. But just before that, he discovers that while transporting people in trucks to different places, a small boy is separated from his mother by goons of the zamindar who is hell-bent on evicting the refugees. Ishwar takes this little boy along with his sister Sita.

Abhiram, the little boy, is soon packed off to a hostel in Jharkhand. When he returns after his college exams are over, Sita has grown into a pretty young woman trained in Hindustani classical music. The two fall in love. But when Ishwar suddenly discovers that Abhiram belongs to a low caste, he turns against the marriage. The two elope when Sita, dressed up in

bridal costume is about to be wed. This is the only choice Sita makes in her brief life to be betrayed by destiny.

Ishwar's world collapses around him. He even tries to commit suicide but cannot. His friend Haraprasad who had cut off ties calling him a "deserter" and has spawned his offer of a job in Ghatshila, returns suddenly in his life. After being thrown off eight jobs as teacher and his wife having committed suicide out of hunger, Haraprasad, reduced to beggary, suggest that they move on to Calcutta to enjoy the "deadly fun" the city holds for those who wish to be a part of it. Sita and Abhiram, now parents of a five-year-old Binu, are struggling to keep body and soul together. Abhiram's sudden death following a mob attack by crowds for having run over a young woman who dies, places her further in danger.

Haraprasad and Ishwar move to Calcutta. The quest for "bizarre fun" leads them to the race course, the Windsor Bar and finally, to what *they* think is a brothel. "This is a woman from a decent family," says the agent while Sita's well-wishing neighbour persuades her to step into the 'business' with her gift for music. Sita steps out hesitantly and finds that her first 'client' is none other than her brother, Ishwar. She picks up her kitchen *bonti* (an indigenous blade used to chop vegetables and fish in Bengali homes) and kills herself. Ishwar is released as he is found innocent in the death of Sita. He has no one now except the little Binu, the only one he can call his own. When he reaches Ghatshila, he discovers that he has lost his job but it is Binu who gives him the hope to live.

Sita has no choice, neither can she explore any point of exit from her widowed life where she is coerced into using her gift of music to attract male customers. The tragedy is shocking as her first 'customer' turns out to be her own brother, old enough to be her father. If her bizarre suicide can be considered as 'choice', this writer would beg to differ. It is an exit point which marks her out as an 'object' of circumstances which forces her to end her life. Ishwar, a man, exercises the freedom to go back to his home near the Subarnarekha river with Sita's small boy, also a male who becomes the 'subject' of Ishwar's life.

The time leaps within the narrative come across through black title cards with white calligraphic writing, as if a story is being narrated through the visuals between the title cards. The credits are beautifully designed against a 'dated scroll' on parchment paper in beautiful calligraphic writing with the edges of the scroll torn, denoting that the events belong to a time long past. The music is like visual poetry expressed through songs and melodies. There is a *baul* number in the beginning, a pointer to *bauls* who are secular and live and sing beyond borders.

Conclusion

Time has shown that across the world, paid employment of women as seen in *Nagarik*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha* do not necessarily lead to the economic independence of women much less to equality between men and women. Structural changes in the economy have caused the displacement of many women into occupational sectors that are gender-specific, low-wage, and low-benefit employment. The shift into a knowledge-based economy has meant that females with the least educational attainment and the least work skills will be least likely to access work that can effectively and permanently take them and their families out of poverty. Men find these occupations less attractive and leave the field open to women. The downward pressure on wages in occupations invaded by women would not happen if women stopped flocking a few occupations and were trained for an entire range of economic activities open to men, writes Esther Boserup.¹¹

The main difference between women's struggles during the freedom movement and today is that earlier, the struggle was for the democratic and political rights of women. This included the right to education and employment and the right to own property. In other words, earlier feminists fought for legal reforms to gain legal equality in society.¹² Today, women have moved beyond the framework of legal reforms to work towards their emancipation. This includes the fight against women's subordination to men within the home, against their exploitation by the family, against their continuing low status at work, in society and within cultural and religious practices.

Feminism also challenges the notions of femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive and biologically determined categories. Feminism may be a foreign term but the concept of feminism is universal, standing for a transformational process. It is a foreign term but not a foreign ideology. Feminism and feminist struggles arose in Asia when women developed a consciousness about democratic rights and about the injustice of depriving half the population of its basic rights.

Woman has always been misled by the imposed ideal of womanhood. Be it her gentle manners and natural tenderness, or her lack of physical strength, she has found herself hidden behind illusions, fenced in from all sides and forced away from the real world into the seclusion of a helpless and dispossessed life. It is the unfair system that fostered the absurd notion that she has no place in the world of work outside her home. Man is the maker of that world, and woman's duty is to make him a home.¹³

¹¹ Boserup, Esther: *Women's Role in Economic Development*, London. George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1975.

¹² Bhasin, Kamla and Nighat Said Khan: *Some questions on Feminism and its Relevance in Southeast Asia*, Kali for Women, 1986.

¹³ Devi, Ashapura: *Indian Women – Myth and Reality*, *Indian Women: Myth and Reality* (Ed.) Jasodhara Bagchi, Sangam Books, Delhi, 1995, p.19.

Women in general, are challenged by the elements of exclusion, devaluation and misogyny in their personal interactions and institutional experiences. Ideas and images of femininity in the media, science and politics, education, health, social and employment systems dictate parameters for ‘normal’ females. When women begin to question the ‘truth,’ ‘universality’ and ‘normality’ of these assumptions and images, insisting that their authentic experiences and equality of rights be taken into account, their behaviour, both assertive and atypical for their assigned sex role, serves as a processing mechanism vis-à-vis the reality with which they must cope, a paradoxical reality embodying potential for change.

They then no longer observe the rules that sustain feminine ‘normality.’ Making their own rules is often equated with breaking the prescribed ones. This is frequently opposed by demonstrations of force or coercion – direct or indirect, active or passive creating power struggles that sometimes become difficult to cope with. Such oppositions are basically an attempt to maintain the existing dichotomy between male and female power, the cultural meanings and values that describe the mechanism locking women into subordinate positions through the imposition of a gender-specific catalogue of structures.

Ritwik Ghatak’s *Nagarik*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha* bring across, both through the *story* and through the *telling of the story* in the *language of cinema* these truths. While Uma is most likely to be labelled “immoral” for stepping into a vocation labelled so, Nita of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) is a normal woman who might be labelled ‘abnormal’ according to mandatory double-standards ordained by the patriarchal framework. Feminists of all schools will label her a ‘defeatist’ or, a ‘regressive woman.’ Sita in *Subarnarekha* goes one step further. Pushed against a wall of financial penury with a little boy to take care of, she is forced to step into an occupation she would never have considered had circumstances been different. Patriarchy will perhaps deify her sacrifice and place her on a pedestal, rendering criticisms and questions redundant. Ritwik Ghatak points out how the changing profiles of Uma, Nita and Sita have not changed their vulnerable and subordinate *status quo* within the family they were committed to. This disproves everything Mill propounded in *The Subjection of Women* within its contradictions and paradoxical ‘realities’ to this day.

Dr Shoma A. Chatterji is a film scholar, an author, and a former member of FIPRESCI.
