

The Fluid Frame in Cinema:

Collected Essays

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Pradipta Mukherjee

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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By Pradipta Mukherjee

This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-6790-7

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6790-0

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is dedicated to my late mother-in-law, Ila Mukherjee. Her consistent encouragement and understanding through all these years made everything I did possible. My heartfelt gratitude to the late Prof. Subhabrata Bhattacharyya who initiated me into cinema studies early in my career.

This book is the result of several years of research, writing, reading, viewing, and importantly, constant dialogue with mentors and friends, to whom I owe a great deal of thanks for their insights. My heartfelt indebtedness and appreciation to Prof. Douglas Lanier for his excellent suggestions and constant encouragement, particularly on the section on Shakespearean cinema.

Special thanks to Prof. Mark Thornton Burnett for inspiring me to develop a project on Shakespearean cinema for future years. My exchanges with Prof. Lanier and Prof. Burnett helped create the kind of stimulating academic ambience that makes good work possible.

Love and heartfelt thanks to my family—their solicitude and kindness made the years before I wrote this book easier to bear. Ananda, Atreyo, and Asmi supported all my endeavours and offered much needed humour through the long process of researching, writing, and publishing. Without the technical expertise of Atreyo, this book would never have seen the light of day.

Additional thanks to Debasish for conceptualising and making this a better book than it would otherwise have been. Gracious enough to read rough drafts of chapters, he offered good editorial suggestions that helped strengthen key portions of the book.

Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to my publisher, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, and its editors and support staff, for their invaluable assistance. My heartfelt thanks to Edward Crooks for going through rough drafts of this project and giving the book its final shape.

INTRODUCTION

The essays in this collection inhabit a fluid frame of critical inquiry. These essays are the milestones of my journey with cinema over the last ten years. They chart my progress from being fascinated by the medium to striving to make sense of that fascination. The collection may thus be best described as reflections, explorations, and meditations on cinema. In the writing of this book, which has lasted for over a decade, I tried to begin by recording my impressions of motion pictures, a sequence of individual pictures, but I experience it quite differently—as a steady stream of sensations.

The desire to write a book on cinema, the most collaborative of art forms, came with the realisation that films are a highly complex act of communication. As one takes a closer look into the very strategies of film-making, the primary purpose is to understand the language of cinema, the codes and signs through which this dynamic art form interacts with and engages its audience. The success of a film depends on how effectively the images projected on screen allow its audience to make meaning.

When we talk about films we usually refer to characters, action, and dialogue. Yet a film is also a vast outpouring of signs and signs are the most fundamental units of meaning in cinema. My critical manner has been to “read” films as advocated by the critical practice that emerged out of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. From language, semiotics, and the study of cinematic signs to gender, subjectivity and discourse—they have been my zones of inquiry in every essay.

Of singular interest is the encoding and decoding of the film text, the nuances that necessitate elaboration. I remain firmly in awe of the artwork’s independence and it remains my first and final point of reference. My experience of a film remains empirical to me. I am as interested in what is left “in frame” as I am interested in what is left out. Diegetic sound, the music of the frame, frame-making to frame-breaking, and freeze frame to fluid frame intrigue me. I embark upon processes of decoding such artistic signatures in several of my essays.

Not limited by genre, technique, or film history, my essays in the first section are dedicated to Indian cinema. Critical rigour, arising out of my passionate engagement with Indian cinema of every genre—both Hindi cinema emanating from Bollywood and vernacular Bangla films—

attempts to revamp any critical hierarchy that may exist in academic readings of Indian cinema. The worldview of directors like Ritwik Ghatak and M. S. Sathyu exists besides those of Mira Nair or Aparna Sen. Popular cinema can be a formidable tool of empowerment in the hands of intelligent film-makers. This book is an inquiry into the uneasy relationship between art and entertainment. The book also challenges the idea that popular cinema, whose reach is phenomenal, only entertains. Rather I look at how commercial cinema has gradually become more accommodating of a wider range of ideas and harbours new imaginations. My inquiry aims to see whether commercial cinema—the films I have read closely—also realises its potential of transformation. Whether the producers and financiers of cinema have taken the responsibility of being agents of emancipation. That has been the nature of my inquiry.

Issues like the role of the media in constructions of gender in modern Indian society are highlighted in the unearthing of such films as *Fashion* and *Iti Mrinalini*, which were given short shrift by the critical establishment. I include an essay on the role and new artistic provenance of the work of women directors in recent times where I look in depth at several films and try to, perhaps, read the emergence of a new film aesthetics. This essay is expected to fill the void of a major critical omission in this regard.

Of particular interest to me has been the area of adaptation studies and the interface between literature and cinema. The book has an entire section dedicated to this subject. The section, I hope, will offer fresh approaches to the art, theory, and cultural politics of film adaptations. Cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare in the West, and in India, have always fascinated me. This section includes two essays on Shakespearean cinematic appropriations and an essay on John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. An essay each on turning fiction into film in adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* and *The Great Gatsby* round off this section.

The essays in the final section are passionate recalibrations of the oeuvres of Alfred Hitchcock and Stanley Kubrick. The essays explore the auteur directors as master manipulators and as great craftsmen. This section hopefully will help readers understand how films communicate by considering the stories they tell, the sign systems they deploy, the interpretive contexts the viewer is invited to place them in, and the range of aesthetic elements that contribute to the cinematic image. This final section concludes with a case study of *The Shining*.

Several of the essays in the collection germinated at various international conference presentations in India and abroad. Certain earlier

drafts have been published in leading dailies. Coupled with some unpublished material, they make up a representative palimpsest of my inquiries in cinema. I hope my readers will find walking down the trails I have taken pleasurable and perhaps instructive.

PART I

RUMINATIONS ON INDIAN CINEMA

CHAPTER 1

FRAMING PARTITION IN THE FILMS OF RITWIK GHATAK AND M. S. SATHYU

In the weeks leading up to the apocalyptic event of Partition, both on the Eastern and Western frontiers, massive populations of Hindus and Sikhs moved into India, as Muslims moved in the other direction, into Pakistan in search of a home. The birth of two sovereign states, India and Pakistan, out of the flames of unprecedented violence and trauma in 1947 etched itself, in indelible character, upon the psyche of Ritwik Ghatak, an individualist genius film-maker from Bengal. A refugee from East Bengal, which had become East Pakistan, Ghatak, like innumerable other traumatised souls, relocated to Calcutta in West Bengal from East Pakistan as Partition unexpectedly turned him into a foreigner in his homeland.

The Partition that tore “Mother Bengal” apart, with unspeakable barbarity lacerating both sides of the border, forced twelve million people to embark upon hazardous and perilous journeys to find a home and shelter elsewhere. While Jean-Luc Godard was obsessed by the events in Paris in May 1968 and the Vietnam War, Ritwik Ghatak found the cataclysmic event of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent equally compelling.

The pioneer of the experimental and avant-garde in Indian film-making, Ghatak was indeed himself a migrant out of erstwhile East Pakistan. Such agonisingly traumatic historical circumstances shaped his preoccupation with Partition on the eastern frontier: its searing pain and unbearable wound blazed in his work. As the revolutionary chronicler of postcolonial South-Asian national disintegration and individual displacement, Ghatak’s position remains unique and unparalleled.

Among directors who concentrated on social and political conflict to reveal dystopian tendencies in the postcolonial nation-state whilst also rekindling hopes of a different future, Ritwik Ghatak was a pioneer. With his strident authorial voice and positioning as an iconoclast, Ghatak emerged as the great contemporary of Satyajit Ray. Both Ray and Ghatak were torchbearers for Indian alternative cinema. They were the lifeblood of what may be called the parallel art cinema movement in India.

Both Ghatak and Ray set themselves apart from commercial, mainstream cinema and inspired other innovative talents from India like Adoor Gopalkrishnan, Mrinal Sen, Girish Kasarvalli, Kumar Shahani, and Mani Kaul. These film-makers were either inspired by Ghatak or emboldened by him. Ghatak's Partition trilogy, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar*, and *Subarnarekha*, which voices the saga of the refugee community from East Bengal, migrating across the border from Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) to West Bengal in search of shelter, has sealed his reputation as perhaps the most emphatic narrator of rootlessness. Ghatak, so much beyond parochialism, so much at home in the world, under the duress of Partition carved out a new uncharted trajectory for Indian parallel cinema.

In *Subarnarekha*, the refugee searching for an identity or home is the focus of the narration, while in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* it is the tale of the economically deprived middle class with bourgeois aspirations that comes to the fore. Ghatak's plots effectively render the cultural and historical memory of Partition. They are driven by a nostalgia and yearning that many Bengalis had for their pre-Partition way of life.

Brecht-inspired epic narratives blend with Tagorean romanticism, modernist expressionism co-exists with traditional or new archetypes and myths. They constitute the hallmarks of Ghatak's discursive approach to film-making, as Rajadhyaksha notes, where "competing epistemologies intertwine" (56). Replete with Indian classical music—the *ragas* and *aalaps*—and Tagore songs, Ghatak's soundscape did not preclude the use of folk music. These varied aural signatures allowed him to meld popular Indian aesthetics with Jungian psychology in his films in order to explore the human subconscious through Soviet style sound-image montage. This was the inception of a new semantics of cinema. The evolution of a discursive film aesthetics through Ghatak's innovative reworking of Hindu mythology, archetypes, and epic structures led to a new dawn.

1

Neeta, Geeta, and their mother in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*The Cloud-Capped Star*, 1960), Ghatak's seminal work on Partition, represent archetypal symbols embodying three traditional but contrasting aspects of femininity. The symbology of ruthlessness or outrage surrounding the Hindu goddess Kali, or the malevolence and destructive demeanour of another of her female avatars, Chandi, inheres in the figure of the mother, whereas Neeta, the breadwinner, assumes the role of a provider or nourisher deriving from the munificence of a Mother Goddess (Rajadhyaksha 53–54; Bhaskar 36).

The sensual woman Geeta, with her seductive wiles, finds a parallel in the *femme fatale* of Western cinema, of which she may be seen as an Eastern counterpart. Such archetypes come to the fore right from the beginning of the film.

Ghatak is rather careful in his construction of the *mise en scène* in the opening shot of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. A train in the background becomes pivotal, signifying motion without direction or any particular arrival or departure. This train that seemingly journeys to a proverbial nowhere is very unlike the train in Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) where it represents the call of the unknown and the possibilities of reaching out to a wider world. The train in Ghatak's film becomes an artefact, a symbol of machine-made culture—characterless, fashioned out of the mechanical forge of modernity: signifying the mundane.

In the opening sequence of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Neeta is introduced as the human incarnation of natural forces or as an archetype. Shankar, Neeta's brother, an aspiring classical singer, is framed on the left rendering *Raga Hansadhwani* in an unstinting, untrained voice. A pond in the mid-ground reinforces the provider image. Neeta is seen in profile in the foreground of the same frame, with a warm smile of satisfaction and understanding of her brother's clumsy but earnest efforts, fortifying the idea of a tolerant, benignant female godhead. The tall, exfoliating tree presides over the scene, suggesting abundance and security. The relationship between the compassion and grace of the female protagonist and the motherly nurture of the sylvan scenes from Bengal is stitched together by Ghatak, inimitably, by his use of Indian classical music. Combined, they set the undertone for a new utopian and/or dystopian homeland.

The characters in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and the precarious nature of their existence in a refugee colony are all captured by Ghatak's camera, while the last notes of the song die out and Neeta enters her neighbourhood. Gradually Neeta's image comes to be invested with the characteristics of an idealised Bengal, the nation as mother—the benevolent nurturer and universal sustainer. As Ghatak gives concrete shape to the self-effacing character of Neeta, he builds on the iconic and archetypal possibilities contained in it. Neeta is gradually magnified into a larger-than-life figure in her family courtyard. She is almost deified as the Great Mother who is tranquil, caring, and succulent. However, in a complex matrix of human portraiture, Ghatak also frames the calm, affectionate, and self-sacrificing Neeta as the eternally unwed bride.

The post-Partition female subject and especially the iconic figure of Neeta are framed innovatively by Ghatak's camera through ideal

representations of the woman—as compassionate, caring, and all-giving—against the grain of brutality, discord, and inhumanity that gather like a storm around a poverty-stricken refugee family. Neeta is also the sole breadwinner of this displaced family. In Ghatak’s film, Neeta gradually comes to signify the goddesses Jagadhatri (The Bearer of the World) and Uma (Tranquility), the other name for the goddess Durga in Hindu mythology. With Neeta’s birthday coinciding with the day set apart for the worship of the goddess Jagadhatri, she is made to stand symbolically as the Mother Goddess walking the earth. As Ghatak turns on the magic lantern with his cinematic eye, the shades of the divine are subtly superimposed on Neeta’s persona.¹

The poise of a powerful female deity is compared with the ragged bewilderment of her exhausted and distraught alter ego; this great act of juxtaposition of archetypal images and the inversion of gender roles within the family are brought into sharp focus in the character of Neeta. This coming together of contrasting socio-cultural registers is also testament to the contradictory demands placed on women in everyday life. The tallying of the sacred and secular in terms of themes by Ghatak can thus be taken as a telling commentary on the unifying potential of Partition sagas.

With the Bengal Famine of the 1940s, the communal riots of Noakhali, and Partition itself as the three foundation stones of his attempts to make sense of these tempestuous times in film, Ghatak fortified his women protagonists with the powerful archetype of the Great Mother. It was his way of instilling in his female protagonist—educated, working, yet repressed—some measure of agency in a feudal-capitalist world.

Social dislocation produced in the wake of Partition enabled women to emerge into the public sphere as breadwinners. We are aware of how the trauma and violence of a divided Bengal destroyed the lives of a whole generation of women. However, as working women who were the principal source of income for their families, they came to occupy spaces in the public arena denied to them in more secure and sheltered times.

Post-1990s Indian Partition films, like *Train to Pakistan*, *Earth*, *Hey Ram*, and *Pinjar*, portray tropes of rape, abduction, and murder as the bodies of women become prized possessions of their captors and violators. These films demonstrate insistently how the conflict between communities is played over the bodies of women. *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, in turn, questions this univocal language of Partition by focusing on the idea that there are

¹ For Ghatak’s ideas on Neeta as Jagadhatri or Uma see Ritwik Ghatak, “Manab Samar, Amader Aitihya, Chabi kora o Amar Prachesta,” in *Chalachitra Manush Ebong Aro Kichu*. Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2007, 19–20.

other realities of which one needs to be cognisant beyond the tragic consequences of mindless violence, the sufferance of Bengal, or just the victimhood of women. The evolving nature of female roles—the emergence of women as part of the new labour force—became a symptom of a world turned upside down. This was a genuine blow to the social feudalism of patriarchy although this essentially conservative male worldview was in part shared by a certain class of women.

Here the power and provenance of Ghatak's non-representational aural register, its burgeoning influence, must give us pause. Throughout the film, classical ragas, Rabindrasangeet, Baul songs, and several forms of folk music fuse together to strengthen the dramaturgy of the visuals. Together, they function as building blocks of a visual register carefully used by the film-maker in the construction of the *mise en scène* of individual film sequences.

Rabindranath Tagore's lyrical oeuvre provides Ghatak with the grist for his creative mill as he crucially uses the song *Je raate mor duwaar guli bhanglo jhore* (That night when the storm beat down my doors) as the soundscape of protest made by Shankar, Neeta's brother, against her blatant exploitation by the family. The bond between the twin Bengals and the bond between the two siblings are analogous (Rajadhyaksha 72) here. Ghatak borrows the repertoire of images from Tagore's song that stands for the reassertion of hope amidst despair, thus suturing together romantic and religious imagery. In Ghatak's film, the song becomes the voice of Neeta's perturbation, her turmoil, and the violence she has suffered: not overt sexual violence but the predictable violation of the private by public life, in making public the disgrace of "the private."

The harmonious closure of Tagore's song is disrupted, however, by the discordance of a whiplash. This extra-diegetic aural refrain in the soundtrack insistently subverts any association with romanticism. The sonic disruption or whiplash here insistently subverts the narrative's systematised termination. Any hopeful suggestions of *Mukti* (salvation) made by the Tagore song are permanently erased as Neeta cries her heart out with the tragic strains of a bewailing sarod. Neeta's body, psyche, and consciousness being the embodiment of Bengal, the whiplash returns as historic memory and trauma bearing down upon her as an individual and as the symbolic motherland. Ghatak's film aesthetic is defined in this song by the positioning of the camera at high and low angles and the dramatic lighting composition. The adoption of an expressionist acting style, the camera angles, innovative but minimal lighting techniques, and the *gestus* further illustrate Ghatak's artistic principles.

On several occasions, Ghatak makes extra-diegetic use of Bangla folk songs that lament the departure of Uma (another name for the goddess Durga) from her familial home to the abode of her husband, the lord Shiva, on Mount Kailash in the Himalayas: “Come my daughter Uma, to me/ Let me garland you with flowers,” the song longingly intones. Used contrapuntally, the song also suggests how Neeta, the Mother Goddess, although unwed, is symbolically sacrificed and allowed to leave like the goddess of myth. Such reworking of Indian cultural myths and archetypes within a melodramatic context allows Ghatak, for whom the Partition was mishandled and ill conceived, to explore the degradation of post-Independence Bengal.

There is a play of forms in Ghatak’s assemblage of modernist subjective expression and distinct Hindu archetypal myths. In his *Komal Gandhar* (1961), the camera comes to a halt with the jerk and jolt of a train grinding to a stop, confronted with the prospect of a railway track that has been abruptly cut off at the border between two nations. The gaze of the camera is petrified at the point where the road trails off into East Bengal signalling a journey that has now become a taboo. This was a sight meant to raise a “searing cry in Anasuya’s heart” (Ghatak 50). Ghatak’s search for an idyllic and mythic homeland continues in *Subarnarekha* (1962). The spatial outsider remains the quintessential melodramatic trope in Ghatak’s films as he fuses two antithetical practices—“realist art cinema and the melodramatic popular tradition” (Biswas 48)—from the 1950s and carries the fusion forward in his films of the sixties.²

Ritwik Ghatak’s timeless historicity did not move away from the legacy of his cultural roots, although it never cloistered his international, almost planetary, humanism and sensitivity. Old and new archetypes are at violent odds with each other in *Subarnarekha* as they push to the limit the tenuous boundary of the epic structure employed to keep them in. Despite this, the film ends, as it began, in a utopian vein, searching for and creating the idyll of a mythic homeland. Ghatak fuses two antagonistic practices from 1955—“realist art cinema and the melodramatic popular tradition”² (Biswas 48)—and carries them forward in his films of the sixties.

In *Subarnarekha*, a dark film on the post-Partition scenario, Iswar Chakraborty, a refugee from East Bengal, migrates to the west with his young sister Sita. Victims of Partition, compelled to leave their native land, East Bengali refugees set up squatters’ colonies in West Bengal.

² Biswas regards Nimai Ghosh’s *Chinnamul*, the first Partition film, as seminal for its Italian neo-realist influences. It is a film, he corroborates, that foregrounds the “country-city dualism . . . unknown to Indian cinema till then” (40).

Ghatak's film opens with homeless migrants uprooted from the district of Pabna, in erstwhile East Pakistan, collectively building a colony on marshland owned by a *zamindar* (feudal landowner) on the outskirts of the city.

Ghatak explained his methodology in *Subarnarekha* thus: "What I have tried to say in this film is about the present socio-economic and political crisis in Bengal, the demonic form it has assumed from 1942 to 1962." This is exactly what he stated: "By the word refugee or uprooted I don't mean only the uprooted people from East Bengal. I have tried to give it another dimension, a different nuance to lift it a bit from its geographical constraints" ("*Subarnarekha* Prasange" 152–54).

Uprooted and driven from his home, Iswar takes upon himself the responsibility of looking after an orphan boy, Abhiram, hailing from Dhaka (erstwhile East Pakistan) whose mother was abducted while both were searching for shelter in West Bengal. This boy is later, crucially, revealed to be a low-caste person in the film. Iswar takes a job at the local foundry and moves to the scenic banks of the river Subarnarekha as he manfully tries to shoulder the responsibility of bringing up both Abhiram and Sita. The significance of this move in Ghatak's semiotic universe is not lost upon us, as Iswar, representative of a people who have lost almost everything, moves tentatively forward towards the river called Subarnarekha, meaning the line drawn in gold, the ray or beacon of hope in the dun smoke of the realities of Partition.

Now settled by the scenic river, Abhiram and Sita on one of their childish jaunts come across an abandoned airstrip and the decrepit remains of an aeroplane. Ghatak brilliantly triggers a spatio-temporal ferment in this sequence as the realities of the Second World War and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are made to collide with the innocent, guiltless childhood wonder that permeates the frame. Quite unaware of the momentous nature of the ground on which they play, the children tread on space interdicted by the violent history and horrors of war.

Interestingly, it is on this abandoned airstrip that Sita later, transfixed with fear, encounters the Kali impersonator or *bohurupi*, whose masquerade is a form of folk entertainment. According to Ghatak:

this is one archetypal image that has been haunting us from [the] remote past, [and] is today confronting us all over the world. You may call it by many names: The Hydrogen Bomb, or Strategic Air Command, or De Gaulle, or Adenauer, or some other name you would not like to mention. It is the power of annihilation, the ability to destroy, and perhaps like little

Sita we have suddenly found ourselves confronted by it. (“Chalachitra Chinta” 33)

In the epic *Ramayana*, Sita is the very epitome of self-sacrifice. Plumbng the depths of our religious consciousness, Ghatak visualised the terrible aspect of the “Primordial Mother Image” confronting Sita to bring into focus the decadence of post-Independence partitioned Bengal. For Ghatak it was an encounter with the “Mahakaal” or the great circle of Time (“Chalachitra Chinta” 32–33). As a concept it leads back to the destroyer of the universe in the trinity of Hindu divinity, the lord Shiva. It refers to the end of time, a vortex into which everything is sucked and which is thus beyond the realms of mortal living.

In a dramatic reversal of the archetypal image later in the film, Iswar encounters his own sister, Sita, driven to prostitution out of poverty, in a brothel. Ghatak’s grip on our sensibilities allows us no escape from the realisation that the decaying, fractured Bengal we are getting to see daily is like our Sita who has descended into the dark abyss of modern society, stripped of all her emblematic value as a paragon of virtue and sacrifice, devoid of its rich tradition of Puranic portraiture. Iswar’s progress, from being a liberal-minded refugee who would have denounced casteism to being one of the new bourgeoisie, is closely documented in the film.

To better appreciate Ghatak’s work one needs to delve deeper into his mental conditioning in a Marxist socio-cultural and political milieu during his upbringing. To reveal the decadence of post-Partition Bengal, Ghatak successfully fused Stanislavski and Brecht—an epic approach and the alienation effect—with the cinematic influence of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Godard, and Buñuel. Sergei Eisenstein’s use of landscape and the collision of montage and musical abstraction in his work and Federico Fellini’s use of music in *La Dolce Vita*—which Ghatak borrowed for *Subarnarekha*’s nightclub sequence—had a deep impact on his films.

The archetypes drawn from Indian mythology, traditional images from the epics and the symbolism of belief structures have their origins in the *shastras* and *puranas*. Such allegorical associations, embedded deep in people’s psyches and inside India’s collective unconscious for centuries, were deployed in the making of Ghatak’s film aesthetics. The complex symbology deployed by him in his experimental films stems from and absorbs the influence of such sources. Thus, working in tandem with his iconoclastic views, Ghatak’s cinematic practice had a huge impact on the growth of the art cinema movement in India. The process of appropriation

for Ghatak was a process of reinvention: even when he was appropriating the music of Fellini in *Subarnarekha*.

2

Ghatak was a member of the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association), the cultural wing of the communist party of India. Ismat Chughtai, the Urdu writer, Kaifi Azmi, Balraj Sahni, the veteran actor, and M. S. Sathyu were all Marxist intellectuals who came to cultural prominence in the 1950s as members of the Progressive Writers Association. M. S. Sathyu, the director of *Garam Hawa*, was involved with the IPTA. These film-makers and writers were united by their desire to see the emergence of a new nation in India that would move beyond sectarian divisions and focus on economic, political, and social justice.

Partition was a repressed issue in society as the wounds and scars of Partition were still strongly felt in the Indian psycho-social matrix, as noted by the Indian director Gulzar. Hindi films of the 1970s gave vent to these concealed emotions by dealing with repressed issues in society.

Garam Hawa (1973), based on an unpublished short story by Ismat Chughtai, narrates the plight of the minority community in India, to be more specific a Muslim family in Agra who decide to stay back in India after Partition. In terms of Indian new wave Cinema, or what one may term as the Indian *nouvelle vague*, *Garam Hawa* is quite exemplary. Like Shyam Benegal's *Mammo* (1994), which problematises notions of nationality, and Govind Nihalani's *Tamas* (1987), Sathyu's work foregrounded a revolutionary consciousness. Along with M. S. Sathyu's *Garam Hawa* (1973), *Tamas*, the television miniseries, is the most trenchant and sustained rumination on this cataclysmic event in Indian history.

When Govind Nihalani graduated from his long apprenticeship as the cinematographer to Shyam Benegal and set about making his mark in the world as a director in his own right, *Tamas* was his first magnum opus. A graphic, searing, unromantic, brutally honest, and tenebrous account of what man did to his fellow human and to what humanity descended to during the days and weeks of Partition in Punjab—*Tamas* leaves us gasping and reeling for light and air. It seemed all vices in the nation's collective subconscious and its memories have been vivified in the flesh, afresh. There are no convenient escape routes to Utopian or ivory tower reflection. All the paths reek of human fear, confusion, and suffering. Every imaginative exit is scored in the blood and guts, mire and detritus of inhumanity, opportunism, and political expediency. The long nightmare opening sequence of the killing of a pig remains a dark refrain that returns

to haunt and terrify, like Vanraj Bhatia's insidiously dark music that returns like swelling nausea or creeping apprehension in the *mise en scène* of each of Nihalani's frames. That cracked, tuneless death rattle to a deaf, unaiding divinity that starts off the television series ("Hai Rabba!" or O Almighty!) signals the futility of any escape from the viciousness of the darkness descended upon man that was Partition.

Controversy has necessarily dogged *Tamas* from its very first screening on the national government-owned television channel, Doordarshan. The fact that the entire series was produced by Doordarshan shows that the courage and artistic foresight of those in decision-making roles had not been affected by political short-sightedness or mindless religious hysteria. This would be unthinkable in a modern day scenario. *Tamas* was at the heart of a culture war, interrogating concepts like civility, humanity, religion, communal hostility, and legitimacy, and articulating discourses of community honour, sexuality, and gendered violence during the Partition era. No wonder, then, that it rekindled sectarian passion and reopened old wounds. The complexities of mass-scale mediations of social trauma are foregrounded in the representation of a mass suicide of women in the series and its several interpretations.

Spatial cartographies of belonging become the very signifiers of displacement in *Garam Hawa* as space emerges as a significant discursive motif. The film's portrayal of the essentially Muslim character of the cultural space of the city of Agra is informed by the spatial politics and aestheticisation of space that reflect contemporary politics in post-Partition India. The film's focus also brings to the fore postcolonial histories of national fragmentation.

The emotional world of Salim Mirza, one of the film's protagonists, the owner of a shoe factory, played by Balraj Sahni, is the initial focus of Sathyu's work. Despite India being his country, post-Partition, Mirza is ostracised as banks and moneylenders refuse him business loans believing that he too like his friends and family will migrate to Pakistan. The municipal authorities evict his family from their ancestral *haveli* (mansion) in the wake of the sudden departure of his brother, the politician Halim Mirza, to Pakistan.

Salim's son Sikander fails to secure a job in a climate of growing unemployment in society. Salim Mirza's tale of woe does not end there, however. He is harassed on false charges of espionage and his factory is set on fire. Mirza's perfectly ordered life unravels before his eyes as his daughter Amina, in love with Kasim, is left in India with promises of Kasim's return from Pakistan to wed her. Disastrously, however, Kasim on arrival is caught and deported to Pakistan. The litany of misfortune and

faithlessness reaches the proportions of a saga as Amina succumbs to the romantic overtures of Shamsad, who too migrates to Pakistan realising his bleak future in India. Amina keeps waiting for Shamsad, hoping he will come to fetch her.

More mishaps stalk the Mirza family, however. Amina is devastated by the news of Shamsad's engagement in Pakistan and unable to bear the betrayal commits suicide. This tragedy shatters Salim's resolve and he decides to migrate to Pakistan. In a rousing reversal in the final sequence of the film, however, he and Sikander, realising they are not alone in their struggle for existence in India, decide to stay back.

Amina's grandmother vehemently refuses to leave the family's ancestral *haveli*. It is symptomatic of an emotional and familial attachment to place "downplayed by official narratives, while concerns about property rights, political gain, potential spouses, college degrees and Salim Mirza's business foreground the (im)practicalities of leaving India" (Rijneveld 18).

After the departure of Kasim and his family to Pakistan, Amina, alone on the porch, is shown knitting for her beloved Kasim, with a pensive look in her eyes. The close-up image of the locked door appears on screen at this point, an effective use of *mise en scène* in the shot. The iconography of the locked door raises a cry in the heart of Amina, who now has to wait for Kasim's arrival.

The camera's movement and pace is handled in the sequence to parallel the movement of a train pulling out of a station. The inexorable sound of a train departing in the soundtrack and its juxtaposition with the final still image of the lonely Amina, almost static with grief in the foreground, is effectively constructed to highlight the fragmentation of a family: the impossibility of an uncomplicated return. The threat of historical separation in the aftermath of Partition is localised in the pain of the separation of lovers.

The splendour of Mughal architecture and the grandeur of Mughal lore fill the scenes of courtship between Shamsad and Amina. Islamic cultural markers are foregrounded in the music, with the qawwali song sequences harking back to the glory of Mughal heritage. However, a syncretic Indianness permeates the iconography of these scenes and invests the religious and cultural signifiers with a wider range of acceptance.

The romantic scenes in the film are shot at famous historical sites associated with the Mughal empire, namely the Taj Mahal and Fatehpur Sikri, with specific references to Dargah Salim Chisti. In fact, the Taj Mahal is foregrounded as a site where the legend of eternal love may find its true abode. These lovingly undertaken shots are an ironic reminder of Sathyu's own personal religious identity, which is incongruous with the

city that he is so passionate about as the city is decorated with Islamic monuments, art, and artefacts. However, such secular and humanistic approaches to art and life uphold the glory of India and its national pride.

In the suicide sequence of *Amina*, the scenes of courtship are revisited in flashback. Inside the monument, the lovers walk on a floor with precise shapes and geometric patterns etched on it while a rapturous qawwali song resonates the diegetic frame. The camera takes in everything with a high-angle shot. The possible violence of historic rupture looms large over this scene of the consummation of Shamsad and Amina's love.

In the microcosmic reflection of larger tensions and contradictory movements in the discursive categories of nation or state, in its daily minutiae, the private world brings the real complexity and violence of the issues home to us. Amina's private despair has its social parallel. The nexus between the see-saw of union and separation in the private realm of the lovers, and even a fatal estrangement, and the trauma that attends the sundering of nations are brilliantly upheld in *Garam Hawa* through its visuality, aural landscape, and iconography. Truly, in Sathyu's film, the invasion of the private by the political is complete.

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CHAPTER 2

ROMANCING TRANSGRESSION: REPRESENTATION OF GENDER BY POST- MILLENNIAL WOMEN FILM-MAKERS

Two decades into the new millennium, women directors in India are still few in number. Quite surprisingly, the number of women who have been able to advance into positions of power and decision-making is minuscule compared to the number of men. The percentage of women in influential, decision-making roles in India is still appalling.

This article tries to revisit certain controversial issues, such as, does representation always reflect the point of view of creators? Or, shall we ever be in a position to claim that the film-maker's female gender produces a different genre of film, or different perspective on a film genre? Is it that women directors always want to produce films on themes that are different from the content produced by men? Or, is it that if there are greater numbers of women directors they will not be able to challenge prevailing practices and ideologies? Time and again, these issues have resurfaced and undoubtedly they elicit further elaboration.

We have often seen how media images make women invisible, something that results in a "symbolic annihilation of women" (Tuchman 150). However, some post-millennial Indian women film-makers have chosen not to portray women in the stereotypical roles of victims and/or consumers. Nor are female characters in their films defined in terms of their relationships with men—suggesting that women are capable of leading their own lives without male "guidance" and are, in the end, independent. It is interesting to review therefore how women film-makers are moving beyond dominant stereotypical bodily figurations or representing bodies that are challenging stereotypes. It is necessary to ascertain whether these films are challenging normative spectator–screen relations in their entirety.

The 1980s was a significant decade for the development of pioneering women film-makers in India and the decade witnessed the development of a disciplined feminist historiography. Women directors

who challenged and resisted dominant male cultures had evolved. Women pioneers of Indian cinema in the eighties include Sai Paranjape (Hindi cinema), Arundhati Devi, Aparna Sen (Bangla cinema), Prema Karanth (new wave Kannada cinema), Vijaya Mehta (Maratha cinema), and Vijaya Nirmala (Telegu cinema).

As far as regional cinema is concerned, the availability of resources is limited. Often, translation and subtitles for regional literature and cinema are unavailable, but any larger study of Indian cinema should refocus the history and development of regional cinema in India. The cultural context of Indian cinema demands pluralistic approaches to film historiography and the absence of these would have serious consequences for comprehending women's cinema.

When we think of women film-makers in Indian cinema, film-makers like Aparna Sen, Zoya Akhtar, Reema Kagti, Farah Khan, Nandita Das, Meghna Gulzar, and Tanuja Chandra and diasporic Indian film-makers such as Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta immediately come to mind.

Acting's gendered impact on women

In order to understand women's cinema in India, it is imperative to also look beyond Mumbai cinema and rearticulate this history via the multiple flows between region and nation, including questions of language and regional cultures. I begin my reading of films with a film-maker from Bengal, Aparna Sen, who achieved critical acclaim for directing films such as *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *Sati*. *Sati* (1989) speaks of gender reforms in colonial Bengal and *Iti Mrinalini: An Unfinished Letter* (2010) looks at acting's gendered impact on women's careers. The film is a meditation on a star's public recognition, fame, and glamour, and also personal failures. It is about the crisis that confronts ageing actresses like Mrinalini when they are replaced by younger rivals.

Growing old negatively affects the careers of both men and women, but age affects the careers of actresses far more than their male counterparts. Given acting's gendered impact on women's careers, women face a double jeopardy in sustaining acting careers relative to men. The woman "actor" is often valued most for her youthful looks, so roles disappear particularly in middle age, until old age, when looks are of less concern. It is interesting to watch how Aparna Sen performs ageing, compared with her youthful counterpart Konkona Sen Sharma in *Iti Mrinalini*. In a recent interview in *The Telegraph* T2 (Screen Bollywood) of 24 September 2020, Konkona Sen Sharma in her interview, following the release of her film *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte Sitare*, states:

It's true that I don't get so many parts, primarily because there aren't many interesting characters being written for women who are older. The bulk of women characters on screen are in their 20s, aren't unmarried [*sic*] . . . and the funniest thing is that such decisions are being taken by producers and directors who are men in their 40s and 50s (laughs), because that's what they want to see! (T2, Screen 8)

Few women manage to survive this gendered impact on their careers. From the world of Western cinema, we have witnessed how Meryl Streep's career dipped. Very few women actors have achieved fame later in their lives like Dame Judi Dench; in Bengali cinema, Suchitra Sen's phenomenal decision to fade into oblivion from the public eye, on the verge of ageing, is a case that may be cited. In *Iti Mrinalini*, the ageing actor, unable to cope with the crisis of ageing decides to end her life. In real life, Aparna Sen's position as a woman director and as an ageing actor who decides to engage and end a socially transgressive relationship (in the film) contributes to the woman auteur's vision. Sen's musical *Arshi Nagar* (2015) foregrounds communal rivalry, revisiting Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Performativity of gender in women's cinema

This essay will now look at the performativity of gender in relation to cinema. I take Joan Scott's definition of gender as a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and as a primary way of signifying relations of power, to capture the inclusive nature of this concept. The significance of gender, therefore, hinges on this very basic idea of imposing definitive disciplinary categories on the sexed body. This perception naturalises and governs gender identities.

As I look at the performativity of gender in cinema, I further argue how I would consider the ways "performance" has been appropriated to describe gender identities, which includes Judith Butler's notion of "performativity." By closely looking at cinema's construction of the performativity of gender, through which I seek to approach a greater understanding of the relationship between gender identities and performance, in terms of gender as both an act and a social construction, which thereby analyses representations of roles played by film actors in the construction and circulation of such acts, I seek to examine the specific signs that comprise such performances.

It is necessary to take into account, for instance, codes that constitute manliness, that valorise certain qualities while stigmatising

others, and the contextual meanings of difference between femininity and masculinity, or how patterns of social relationships are determined based on this imposed identity. One may look at performance as a socially embedded experience, not just as a series of actions performed in isolation.

Firstly, I would begin with how such films reconstruct gender and how the performativity of gender is foregrounded in Hindi popular cinema. In the present article, I explore the director's construction of femininity and masculinity, studying the representation of transgressive sexuality and reading how such acts of transgression lead to the subversion of societal norms.

In the process, I attempt to tease out the nexus of tropes around visibility, femininity, and desire to examine the problematic relationship between women and desire. The objective is to see the central representational tropes in the figuring of the woman and how women film-makers adopt several representational tropes for the expression of female desire. I shall explore how the camera in the hands of the woman film-maker looks at the woman's desiring gaze, and how desire in society is problematised because of the conflict between societal and cultural restraints due to the normativity of society that finds female desire a disquieting phenomenon.

Case study 1: Reema Kagti's *Talaash* (2012)

Performing masculinity

Masculinity represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way men position themselves through discursive practices. Since what constitutes "masculinity" is always already constructed (masculinity is constructed in discourse), normative masculinity is itself an image and only conceptions or representations of normative masculinity exist. Thus, the concept of performance examines its usefulness as a term in considering masculinity as a social and cinematic construct.

Masculinity is something to have or to lack. Certain films foreground that to "be a man" is a performance, something to be proved and acted out, and also depict the varying ways male identity is defined and performed. It would therefore be interesting to read films that do not reinforce traditional notions of masculinity but concurrently underscore the notion of masculinity as performance—how in Reema Kagti's *Talaash* (2012) the role of Surjan Singh Shekhawat (Aamir Khan) as a tough cop with a hard exterior is actually a mask to hide his profound sense of melancholy and regret.

Surjan is a lone and distressed hero/figure in crisis, who exists within the larger discourse of “masculinity in crisis”; in the psychological thriller *Talaash*, such crises and male angst are performed. The term “crisis” here includes male insecurity, instability, and uncertainty in a broader sense, while “angst” relates to the specific manifestations, performances, and presentations of such masculinity.

My concern in this essay is not the defining of male crisis or arguing for its existence, but in considering the performativity of this male angst that is projected by such heroes. Three identifiable shades of performing masculinity become evident: firstly, by specific analysis of the performance of masculinity on screen; secondly, reading the performance of masculinity in relation to specific social and historical contexts; and, thirdly, the relationships fostered in the performance of masculinity off screen (social roles, gender discourse, and popular culture). This would entail multiple iconicities that are performed both on and off screen.

The distressed male hero, the central protagonist of *Talaash*, leads us to the conclusion that visual texts offer emotionally powerful portraits of men that often complicate the view that representations of masculinity in cinema are overwhelmingly about men’s violence and power over others. Kagti’s film complicates the frequently heard claim that the performance of masculinity reinforces traditional notions of patriarchy and men’s power over women, because the film refuses to set up an ideal type of masculinity.

Given the hero’s role in the film as an inspector having to deal with criminals and local thugs, Surjan’s performance of masculinity does not have recourse to performing male codes of violent masculinity or its manifestation in violent action. Nor does the film’s narrative trajectory lead us to a depiction of the binary of violent masculinity as opposed to passive rescued femininity.

We see Surjan performing paternity in *Talaash* as a guilt-ridden father who suffers from the guilt of killing his own son. Interesting here is the lone male as a figure of crisis or distress. However, the presence of such distressed males is not necessarily new. Hollywood cinema is littered with “wild” male figures that women wish to “tame” (the brooding heroes of film noir, the mythology of the cowboy, James Bond, who may get shaken but are never stirred). What characterises these figures is their silence, rarely speaking of some unknown trauma they have suffered. Their emotional reticence somehow makes them all the more alluring.

My interest in Kagti’s film is to see whether such depictions are now shifting in a more nuanced, narcissistic, and complex direction. Surjan’s passive subjective world—because he is very active professionally—

becomes all the more mysterious. Gradually *Talaash* showcases the repressed semiotic *chora* that disrupts the rational order of the paternal-symbolic and challenges the masculine subject's apparent stability.

The construction of the *femme fatale* or the troubled gender

Gender in cinema is always relational when we see patterns of masculinity emerging that are socially defined in contradistinction to certain models of femininity (real/imaginary): for example, the idea that women are non-violent and peaceful has long been used by patriarchal ideology to control women.

Talaash belongs to a genre that appeals to the audience's repressed fears and desires. As such, women directors are less likely to direct films in the horror or thriller genre. The abject in Kagti's film, the desiring woman (Rosie), later revealed to be a member of the living dead, does not terrify us, but her appeal fascinates us all the same. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, I define the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva). The abject both fascinates and horrifies: it thrives on ambiguity and transgression of taboos and boundaries.

My interest in Kagti's film lies in the depiction of the abject: firstly, it allows the spectator to indulge vicariously in taboo forms of behaviour; secondly, in the hands of a woman director, there is innovation in the treatment of the trope of the fallen woman. In a way, the film challenges stereotypical feminine images. She is not the monstrous "other" but a highly sexualised object: the reinvented *femme fatale*. She reminds us of Kim Novak in *Vertigo*, Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* and *Dangerous Liaisons*, and Eva Marie Saint in *North by Northwest*.

The *femme fatale* of Hollywood cinema is the sexual seductress; *femmes fatales* have a very long international lineage and the alterations in her representation continue in Bollywood cinema to the present day. We have seen how the "Westernised vamp" existed as a contrary image to the virtuous, virginal Indian woman in Hindi cinema of the 1970s and 80s. By the time we reach the 1990s, the vamp disappears making way for more blurred feminine identities in cinema.

Neither the deadly dame nor entirely the lethal seductress, Rosie's positioning in *Talaash* continues to serve as a barometer of cultural repression, desire, victimisation, and reification. She is a disruptive temptress who has a destabilising effect on the hero. The woman director's camera, though, captures the visual objectification of the woman that concurrently problematises the male gaze. There is no sexual greed that