Woman and homeland in Ritwik Ghatak’s films: Constructing post-Independence Bengali cultural identity

by **Erin O'Donnell**

The Bengali filmmaker, Ritwik Ghatak, was born in Dhaka in 1925, and lived in East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) throughout his adolescence.[1] The Bengal Famine of 1943-44, World War II and finally, the Partition of 1947 compelled Ghatak to move to Calcutta[2] where he became actively involved in the Indian People’s Theater Association (IPTA) and the Communist Party of India (CPI).[3] Formed in 1943, IPTA was the first organized national theater movement in India that developed and performed plays addressing social injustice and British imperialism. Ghatak began working with West Bengal’s IPTA wing in Calcutta in 1948, writing, directing and acting in his own plays, such as *Jwala* ("Flame," 1951) and *Dalil* ("Document," 1952). He acted in other plays, such as revivals of Bijan Bhattacharya’s *Nabanna* ("New Harvest," 1944) and Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Neeldarpan* ("Indigo Mirror," 1860), and adaptations of Gogol’s *The Government Inspector* and Gorky’s *The Lower Depths.*[4]

In 1951, Ghatak was commissioned by the Provincial Draft Preparatory Committee of IPTA to draft a document that would articulate the political and cultural ideology of IPTA in West Bengal. In his 1954 thesis *On The Cultural Front*, Ghatak outlined a cultural future (in ideological and organizational terms) for West Bengal’s IPTA and the CPI in general.[5] In 1996, I edited this document. It had been stored in the Communist Party office in Calcutta until that year, when it was given to the Ritwik Memorial Trust, which has been systematically restoring Ghatak’s films and republishing his writings and screenplays over the last two decades.

Because of many of the views Ghatak articulates in this document, and due to a “smear” campaign initiated against him by certain members of the CPI and documented in *On The Cultural Front*, he was forced to leave IPTA in 1954. He was removed from the membership rolls of the Communist Party in 1955. His dismissal letter is reprinted in *On The Cultural Front*. However, Ghatak has claimed that he willingly left IPTA and that he was never a CPI “card-carrying” member. As early as 1944 with the initial staging of *Nabanna*, the Bengal IPTA members disagreed about the organization’s political and cultural trajectory, which echoed dissension in the CPI at large.[6]

Besides working with IPTA in the 1950s, Ghatak became active in filmmaking. Beginning in 1948, Ghatak and other aspiring Bengali filmmakers, like Mrinal Sen, began to meet to discuss films and filmmaking at a teashop in Calcutta called Paradise Cafe.[7] Ghatak led members of the group to organize a trade union for the underpaid studio workers and technicians in Calcutta.[8] One of Ghatak’s first intensive involvements with cinema was as an actor in Nemai Ghosh’s 1950 Bengali film, *Chinnamul* ("The Uprooted"). This film is pivotal in the development of Bengali cinematic realism and relates the story of a group of farmers from East Bengal who are forced to migrate to Calcutta because of Partition. Supported by IPTA, *Chinnamul* used Calcutta’s Sealdah railway station as a location and actual refugees as characters and extras. That station had political importance as a site where thousands of refugees entered the city during and after Partition.

In 1952, a catalytic cinematic event for all of the emerging Bengali filmmakers, including Ghatak, Ray and Sen, occurred when the first International Film Festival was held in four Indian cities, including Calcutta. At this festival, Indian audiences first viewed Italian neo-realist films like De Sica’s "Bicycle Thieves" and Japanese films such as Kurosawa’s "Rashomon." Also in 1952, Ghatak produced and directed his first feature film entitled, *Nagarik* ("The Citizen"). He completed eight feature films and ten documentaries before his death in 1976.[9]

In his films, Ghatak constructs detailed visual and aural commentaries of Bengal (located in northeast India) in the socially and politically tumultuous period from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. Twice during his lifetime Bengal was physically rent apart—in 1947 by the Partition engendered by the departing British colonizers and in 1971 by the Bangladeshi War of Independence.[10] In his work, Ghatak critically addresses and questions—from the personal to the national level—the identity of post-Independence Bengal. The formation of East Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971 motivated Ghatak to seek through his films the cultural identity of Bengal in the midst of these new political divisions and physical boundaries.

Ghatak was an important actor in and commentator upon Bengali culture. His films represent an influential and decidedly unique viewpoint of post-Independence Bengal. Unique, because in his films he pointedly explored the fallout of the 1947 Partition of India on Bengal society, and influential, because his films set a standard for newly-emerging "alternative" or "parallel" cinema directors — in contrast to those directors who opted for the hegemonic “Bollywood” or Bombay style(s) of Indian cinema.[11] The majority of Ghatak’s films are narratives that focus on the post-Independence Bengal family and community, with a sustained critique of the emerging petite-bourgeoisie in Bengal, specifically in the urban environment of Calcutta. In this context, Ghatak utilizes a melodramatic style and mode novel to Indian cinema. His melodrama combines popular and classical idioms of performance from Bengal and India that are merged with Stanislavskian acting and Brechtian theatrical techniques.

In this paper, I will examine the relations between three interconnected elements in Ghatak’s film narratives:
In his films, Ghatak consistently layers these three components to convey both utopian and dystopian visions of “Homeland” in an independent Bengal. He employs Bengali folk music and frames Bengali landscapes to inform, both aurally and visually, his representations of Bengali women as symbolic images of the joy, sorrow and nostalgia that he associates with the birth of the Indian state. I will analyze scenes from two of Ghatak’s films, Meghe Dhaka Tara (A Cloud-Covered Star, 1960), and Subarnarekha (The Golden Line, 1962; also the name of a river in what is now Bangladesh) to illustrate this critical relationship between women, landscape, and sound and music which is fundamental to his construction of a “resistant” narrative of the new Indian nation.[12] First, some brief background information about the 1947 Partition of India and Ghatak’s melodramatic style is necessary in order to contextualize Ghatak’s representations of “Woman” and “Homeland” and begin to understand how these representations are linked together in his films Meghe Dhaka Tara and Subarnarekha.

1947: Partition of India

In August 1947, after over a year of tortuous negotiations in the midst of communal (religious) riots and killings throughout India, leaders and representatives of the departing British colonial government, the predominantly Hindu Indian Indian Congress Party and the Muslim League decided to divide India into the Indian Union, with a Hindu majority, and Pakistan, with a Muslim majority. Furthermore, Pakistan was composed of two geographically separate (more than 1,250 miles apart) and culturally, linguistically different parts: West Pakistan (now known as simply Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now known as Bangladesh). [See map.] Consequently, Bengal was also geographically and culturally divided into two parts: East Bengal became Pakistani East Bengal or East Pakistan and West Bengal became Indian West Bengal. [See map.]

An estimated ten million people, primarily Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, were forced over the next months to abandon the homes that they had lived in for generations and to migrate. Muslims fled to West and East Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs to India. Families were divided, friends and neighbors were left behind, and an immense mass confusion developed as to where to go and what to expect when they got there. All of these factors created tremendous tension which led to the religious hatred, riots and murders that ushered in India’s independence from Britain and the birth of Pakistan. Ghatak viewed the division of his native Bengal as mishandled and ill-conceived. Government officials, he believed, gave barely a thought to the devastating impact that such a division would (and did) have on millions of people. Ghatak spent his entire artistic life wrestling with the consequences of Partition: particularly the insecurity and anxiety engendered by the homelessness of the refugees of Bengal.[13] In his films, he tries to convey how Partition struck at the roots of Bengali culture. He seeks to express the nostalgia and yearning that many Bengalis’ have for their pre-Partition way of life.[14]

Ghatak was outspoken concerning India’s Independence and Partition. In response to an interviewer’s question regarding what personal truth had inspired his films, stories and plays, Ghatak replied:

“Being a Bengali from East Bengal, I have seen the untold miseries inflicted on my people in the name of independence—which is a fake and a sham. I have reacted violently towards this and I have tried to portray different aspects of this [in my films].”[15]

In another interview, Ghatak discussed the common thread of union in his films, Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960), Komal Gandhar (The Gandhar Sublime, 1961; in the Indian classical musical system, an E-flat or flatted third), and Subarnarekha (1962). He stated:

“Against my intention the films Meghe Dhaka Tara, Komal Gandhar, and Subarnarekha formed my trilogy. When I started Meghe Dhaka Tara, I never spoke of political unification. Even now I don’t think of it because history will not alter and I won’t venture to do this impossible task. The cultural segregation caused by politics and economics was a thing to which I never reconciled myself as I always thought in terms of cultural integration. This very theme of cultural integration forms the theme in all three films.”[16]

In his films, Ghatak often situates his preoccupation with the union of East Pakistan and West Bengal within the heart of Bengali society: the family. And through the post-Independence Bengali “family,” Ghatak expresses the radical transformations that occurred within Bengali culture. Ghatak’s “families” are often not the traditional extended Bengali family, but “alternative,” “surrogate” families, like the theatrical troupe in Komal Gandhar or the wandering group of misfits in Jukti Takko Ar Gappo (Arguments and a Story, 1974), who are displaced, urban, lower middle class refugees searching for a home. By utilizing a melodramatic style comprised of Bengali, Indian, European and Russian elements, Ghatak visually and aurally articulates a new Bengali homeland.

Indian melodrama:
Ghatak’s melodramatic style

Tracing the development of melodrama as a mode, genre and/or style in Indian, specifically Bengali, literature, theater and cinema is obviously beyond the scope of this paper.[17] Ghatak utilizes melodrama primarily as a style or mode rather than a coherently developed genre. He constructs his melodramatic style within the general Indian popular cinematic context of the 1940s and 1950s Hindi “social” films of directors like Guru Dutt and Raj Kapoor and the specific, regional context of 1950s and 1960s Bengali neo-realist “art” films of directors like Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen.[18] In an attempt to refine the definition of “melodrama” in relation to “realism” in the context of Indian cinema, the Indian film scholar Ravi Vasudevan explains:
The conceptual separation of melodrama from realism which occurred through the formation of bourgeois canons of high art in late nineteenth century Europe and America was echoed in the discourses on popular commercial cinema of late 1940s and 1950s India. This strand of criticism, associated with the formation of the art cinema in Bengal, could not comprehend the peculiarities of a form (i.e., melodrama) which had its own complex mechanisms of articulation. In the process, the critics contributed to an obfuscating hierarchization of culture with which we are still contending.\[19\]

Vausdevan’s observation is significant for Ghatak’s work because as a filmmaker who unabashedly employs a melodrama modality that combined maudlin and Marxist elements, Ghatak often stands in a cinematic space in between the popular cinema of Bombay and the art cinema of Bengal.

The Indian cinema scholar Ashish Rajadhyaksha helps to further situate Ghatak’s films within melodrama in the Bengali cinematic context:

“In Bengal, where a cinema had developed which was economically strong but culturally subservient to the novel, melodrama acquired an oppositional force, e.g. in Barua’s work which subverted the literary, and in the Kallol filmmakers where it later found new alignments with the IPTA’s formal emphasis on the folk theatre.”\[20\]

For Rajadhyaksha, after the nihilist love stories of Bengali-Hindi director and actor P.C. Barua in the 1930s-40s, and the socially conscious, folk-infused plots of the Kallol and IPTA filmmakers in the 1930s-50s, Ghatak’s narratives are a next step in the evolution of melodrama in Bengali cinema.\[21\] As we will see later, scholars who have written on Ghatak, like Geeta Kapur, the Indian cultural critic, and Kumar Shahani, an Indian filmmaker and former Ghatak student, perceive Ghatak’s films as daring to push the boundaries of melodramatic modality.\[22\]

Throughout his essays and interviews, Ghatak discusses how he interweaves material from Indian mythology and Upanishadic, Marxist and Jungian philosophy into a melodramatic narrative form.\[23\] He deliberately uses coincidence and repetition to educate an audience and to express ideas. In Ghatak’s 1963 article, “Film and I,” he writes that melodrama is a “much abused genre,” from which a “truly national cinema” will emerge when “truly serious and considerate artists bring the pressure of their entire intellect upon it.”\[24\] In a 1974 interview, he states:

“I am not afraid of melodrama. To use melodrama is one’s birthright, it is a form.”\[25\]

Ghatak largely developed his melodramatic style of cinema when he was a playwright, actor and director during the 1940s and 1950s in IPTA. The variety of both indigenous and foreign theatrical styles that IPTA incorporated — such as the Bengali folk form, jatra, and Brecht’s “epic” form — greatly contributed to the theatrical shape of Ghatak’s melodramatic style.\[26\] His films are frequently characterized as “epic”; he often inverts and recontextualizes Indian traditions and myths.\[27\] He described Indians as an “epic-minded people” who liked to be told the same myths and legends again and again, and he viewed this “epic attitude” as a “living tradition.”\[28\] In the following sections on Meghe Dhaka Tara and Subarnarekha, I will give examples of Ghatak’s deconstruction of traditional mythologies surrounding the Bengali woman, and his insertion of reconstructed representations into a modern context to critique his present historical moment.\[29\]

In the 1960s, Ghatak translated Brecht’s The Life of Galileo and Caucasian Chalk Circle from English to Bengali. In numerous essays and interviews, he discusses the impact on his work of Brecht’s epic approach, alienation effect and use of coincidence.\[30\] Ghatak draws upon the diverse theatrical traditions of IPTA, Brecht and Stanislavski, and the various cinematic visions of Eisenstein, Godard and Bunuel to come up with use own melodramatic vision.\[31\] The technical details of Ghatak’s melodramatic style include the following stylistic traits: frequent use of a wide angle lens, placement of the camera at very high, low and irregular angles, dramatic lighting composition, expressionistic acting style and experimentation with songs and sound effects. With this combination of cinematic devices, Ghatak creates a melodramatic post-Partition world in which he constructs his vision of “Woman” and “Homeland” in post-Independence Bengal.

In cinema, the family, the home, with women — mothers, wives, daughters and sisters as the key players — is the primary site of domestic melodrama.\[32\] In Bengali culture, the home houses the heart of Bengali society: the family. And at the core of the Bengali family is ma, the mother.\[33\] Within the homes of Ghatak’s post-Independence Bengal lies the site of both ananda (joy) and dukkho (sorrow), emotions intensely expressed by his female characters, frequently through song. These songs and music distill the essence or rasa of the joy and sorrow that Ghatak’s characters experience, and the music track enables these emotions’ full force and weight to be communicated to the audience.\[34\] The ability of music and song to express powerful emotions beyond the visual dimension of a film, even beyond the film text itself, is particularly evident in Ghatak’s Meghe Dhaka Tara, and Subarnarekha. The film sound scholar Caryl Flinn relates in her book Strains of Utopia: “Melodrama critics assert that the non-representational register (i.e., music) reveals elements which cannot be conveyed through representational means alone, a fundamental split that seems to guarantee the genre’s potentially ‘subversive’ effects.”\[35\]

In these two films, Ghatak uses songs and music, from Bengali folksongs to a Nino Rota film score, and sound effects, such as Nita’s sonically matched whiplash and Sita’s amplified breathing, as a counterpoint to and comment on the narrative action. Ghatak is one of the first Indian filmmakers to explore the power and diversity of a film’s non-representational register. In these two films, Ghatak specifically focuses on the interrelations between his female characters, the Bengali landscape and Bengali music to visualize a new, often utopic and dystopic, Bengali homeland. In the remainder of this paper, employing theoretical concepts from Geeta Kapur, Kumar Shahani and Hamid Naficy, I will detail scenes from Meghe Dhaka Tara and Subarnarekha in order to illustrate this point. After providing...
a brief synopsis of Meghe Dhaka Tara, I will provide an analysis of the film’s primary female character, Nita, in the context of soundscape and landscape.

Brief synopsis of Meghe Dhaka Tara

Meghe Dhaka Tara is set in the late 1950s in Calcutta. The story revolves around a Bengali lower-middle class, refugee family who were victims of Partition and who are now struggling for survival in a bustee (“slum”) on the outskirts of the city. The eldest daughter, Nita (“Knowledge”), has given up her college studies in order to work. She is the breadwinner of the family. Her elder brother Shankar, who would normally be the head of the household, is eccentric and irresponsible. He spends his days singing, practicing scales and classical Indian khayals,[36] and dreaming of becoming a great singer. Nita’s old father teaches in a small school nearby and her mother maintains the house. Nita’s selfish younger siblings, Gita and Montu, are still in school. In her bleak life, Nita has only one thing to look forward to: the return of Sanat, a young scientist she hopes one day to marry.

Through many twists and turns of the plot, Nita’s family becomes increasingly dependent on her earnings. Nita’s father and Montu both have debilitating accidents and Shankar leaves home for Bombay to become a singing star. Sanat does return, but falls in love with and marries Nita’s sister, Gita. The stresses and strains of Nita’s life take their toll. She develops tuberculosis and, although she is desperately ill, continues to work to support her family. Shankar returns from Bombay, now an accomplished classical singer, to find Nita wasting away with a terminal illness. Shankar takes her to a sanatorium in the hills where she remains, uncertain whether she will live or die, and forgotten by her family.

Nita as goddess: Durga/Uma/Gauri

The two main female characters of Meghe Dhaka Tara and Subarnarekha — Nita and Sita — are not only emotionally and physically sacrificed by their families but are also symbolically sacrificed as goddesses. As symbolic goddesses, Nita and Sita represent the Motherland of Bengal and it is Bengali society who sacrifices Her with division and greed.[37] First, I will examine Ghatak’s portrayal of Nita, then his construction of Sita, as “Woman,” “Goddess,” and “Bengal, the Motherland” through the use of various songs and sound effects in the context of the Bengali landscape.

The theoretical work of the Iranian and exilic film scholar Hamid Naficy elucidates what is at stake for Ghatak in these two films and as a filmmaker, particularly as an “accented” or “exilic” filmmaker.[38] Naficy defines “accented” filmmakers as “situated but universal figures who work in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices.”[39]

Characterizing Ghatak as an “accented” or “exilic” filmmaker is appropriate not only because he endured the trauma of the partition of his beloved Bengal, but also because the director cinematically commented on subsequent political and cultural fallout from that tragic separation throughout his career. Ghatak is “interstitial” because he had to struggle constantly to obtain funding and equipment to create the kind of films he wanted, largely outside of the Calcutta and Bombay film studio systems. And he is also interstitial because his films’ subject matter and style were often astride that of Indian popular cinema and Bengali art cinema.

The stylistic components of “accented cinema” that I will focus on when detailing scenes with Nita and Sita from Meghe Dhaka Tara and Subarnarekha are the open-form, natural exteriors and closed-form, claustrophobic interiors used in the mise-en-scene and setting, and the films’ way of eliciting dysphoric, euphoric, or nostalgic structures of feeling, specifically through song, music, and sound effects. These stylistic components shape Meghe Dhaka Tara and Subarnarekha, and resonate with the technical characteristics of Ghatak’s melodramatic style detailed above. In these two films, Ghatak emphasizes themes of home, homeland, displacement, rupture, utopia, dystopia, urban vs. rural, city vs. village, etc. In his work, Ghatak agonized over the fact that he and multitudes like him were compulsory exiles, refugees in their own homeland due to the artificial, arbitrary division of Bengal into West Bengal and East Pakistan. Ghatak attempts to illustrate the end result of Partition’s forced migration of millions as political, cultural, and geographical deterritorialization and stasis through depicting the entrapment of the female characters of Nita and Sita in their houses and in their fragmented homeland.

In Meghe Dhaka Tara, the character Nita is actually the manifestation of multiple goddesses: Durga as Jagadhatari, the benevolent image of the eternal giver and universal sustainer, and Uma/Gauri, the Mother Goddess.[40] In her essay “Myth and Ritual: Ghatak’s Meghe Dhaka Tara,” Ira Bhaskar points out how Nita represents the benign manifestation of Durga:

“A prevalent story about the genesis of Durga is the concept of Havyagni (oblation to the sacrificial fire). In the ritual of the Havan (the act of consigning the mortal offering to the sacrificial flames) is symbolized the surrender of human desires and aspirations which are carried to the heavens with the smoke. It is believed that Durga was born out of this smoke as a transmutation of human desires, taking the form of Jagadhatari, the universal sustainer. One of the central images associated with Nita is the courtyard wherein are centered the ambitions of the rest of the family... These selfish ambitions pour into the courtyard, the symbolic yagna mandapa, from which manifests Nita in the role of the Provider and Creator.”[41]

The sight and sound of the fire that Nita’s mother uses symbolically to sacrifice her daughter adds to the construction of the Jagadhatari image in the family courtyard. Traditionally, the courtyard of a Bengali or Indian home is the heart of the household. In Meghe Dhaka Tara, the courtyard is an oppressive, suffocating space, particularly for Nita. Significant here is Naficy’s articulation of the outside, external and domestic, internal spaces of accented cinema as feminized and his perception of all accented films as feminine texts. He explains:
Throughout *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the courtyard is “an intensely charged place” that does not signify Nita’s potential motherhood. Rather it serves as the site of her tragic deterioration at the hands of her overly dependent family members. Ghatak often cuts or pans from the mother (as the destructive Kali and parasitic Chandi, both malevolent manifestations of Durga), surrounded by the smoke of the hearth, to Nita. With the exaggerated sound of boiling rice serving as the transition, the camera moves from the mother to medium close-ups of Nita as Jagadhnathi, the nourishing force who has to be immolated. The pronounced sound of the boiling rice kettle that Nita’s mother is always watching over accentuates her insatiable greed. Whenever the conversation in the courtyard turns to the possibility of Nita, the sole breadwinner of the family, getting married, the sound of the boiling kettle is amplified on the soundtrack, usually in conjunction with a close-up of Nita’s mother’s panic-stricken face.

In his 1976 article, “Nature, in the End, is Grandly Indifferent,” Ghatak’s former student Kumar Shahani addresses the manifestation of what he calls “the femininity principle in the Indian tradition” in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. Shahani believes that one of Ghatak’s greatest contributions to Indian films was reinvigorating and restoring this femininity principle to its pre-Brahmanical, agrarian roots. Shahani writes:

> “The triangular division taken from Tantric abstraction is the key to the understanding of this complex film. The inverted triangle represents, in the Indian tradition, fertility and the femininity principle. The breaking up of society is visualized as a three-way division of womanhood. The three principle woman characters embody the traditional aspects of feminine power. The heroine, Nita, has the preserving and nurturing quality; her sister, Gita, is the sensual woman; their mother represents the cruel aspect. The incapacity for Nita to combine and contain all these qualities, to retain only the nurturing quality to the exclusion of others, is the source of her tragedy.”[43]

Nita’s blind sustaining of her family at the cost of her health and life is also reflected in her representation as Uma. Ghatak states,

> “Uma has been the archetype of all daughters and brides of all Bengali households for centuries.”[44]

Ghatak’s identification of Nita with Uma is ironic because her family sacrifices her wifehood and motherhood. Throughout *Meghe Dhaka Tara*’s soundtrack, Ghatak uses refrains from Bengali folk songs that lament Uma’s departure from her familial home to go to her husband’s home.[45] One song, mourning Uma’s leaving, Ghatak uses extra-diegetically several times in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, specifically when Nita’s senile father casts her out of the family house when she is dying from tuberculosis. The lyrics go as follows:

> Come, my daughter Uma, to me.
> Let me garland you with flowers.
> You are the soul of my sad self, Mother, the deliverer.
> Let me bid you farewell now, my daughter!
> You are leaving my home desolate, for your husband’s place.
> How do I endure your leaving, my daughter?

Ghatak utilizes this traditional Bengali folk song to counterpoint Nita’s reality; Nita is not the new bride heading for her husband’s home: she is the sickly, unwed daughter who is being banished from her home because she has become a liability rather than an asset. She has been forced into exile. Mirroring her deteriorating condition, Nita’s home has become claustrophobic and ill — strangled by the fears and anxieties of her family. This song ironically comments on Nita’s fate after she has been cast out of her family’s house. For in her role as Uma and the consort of Shiva — Lord of Destruction and Eternal Time who resides in the Himalayan mountains, Nita goes to a sanatorium in the Shillong hills of Bengal to die, as if in Shiva’s lap. In traditional Hindu mythology, the Himalayan mountains are the site of the happy reunion of Uma and her husband, Shiva[46]; but in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, poignantly, a hill station in the mountains is where Nita is cast out to die alone. Thus, Ghatak inverts the traditional Bengali myth where Shiva and Uma share a joyous reunion in the Himalayas to emphasize the tragedy of Nita’s impending death. While discussing the multi-faceted Bengali artist Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian cultural historian Geeta Kapur elaborates upon Ghatak’s reconstruction of Indian myths:

> “But even fewer artists can achieve, simultaneously, the reconstruction of an archetype that turns into a device to speak about the ‘type’ within a class; to present the problem of a class-constructed psyche which so quickly appropriates mythic elements to serve vested interests. I am thinking of Ritwik Ghatak, for whom too [along with Ray] Tagore is a mentor. Certainly in the cinema only this one man, Ghatak, dares to put his stakes so high, and expectedly the cinematic means he uses are bold and hybrid: he does not subscribe to the sacred as such, nor to the revelatory. But nor does he rest content with doubt that declares itself proof of the rational, and an automatic representation, therefore, of the secular. He places rationality within a melodramatic genre and examines the status of doubt there, in that fraught schema, where tragedy is made to give itself over in favour of praxis.” (My italics.)[47]

Thus, Ghatak is making use of Indian myths and archetypes within a melodramatic context as an exercise in exploring the degradation of post-Independence Bengali society.

**Nita, Sita and Rabindra Sangeet**

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, Ghatak uses songs by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Bengal’s creative genius, who was
As previously mentioned, in his films Ghatak utilizes a variety of musical forms, both Indian and non-Indian, and commonly uses Tagore’s music. As Ghatak stated in an interview just before his death:

“I cannot speak without Tagore. That man has culled all of my feelings from long before my birth. He has understood what I am and he has put in all the words. I read him and I find that all has been said and I have nothing new to say.”[51]

Ghatak, like most Bengalis, considers Tagore as the embodiment of all that is great in Bengali culture, as the pinnacle of artistic expression in Bengal. When Ghatak uses a Tagore song in a film, it often evokes among Bengalis nostalgia and longing for an undivided, pre-Partition Bengal. Ghatak situates Tagore songs within the painful context of the struggle for survival of post-Independence Bengali families, and the songs serve to shape and give dimension to the characters of Nita and Sita. In both Meghe Dhaka Tara and Subarnarekha, Ghatak uses Tagore songs at climatic moments to express the joy and sorrow of the post-Independence Bengali woman, who must bear the burden of rebuilding the family in the aftermath of Partition.

Nita’s Rabindra Sangeet

The only time that Nita sings in the film is just before her sister Gita’s wedding to her [Nita’s] former suitor, Sanat, and before her brother Shankar’s departure to Bombay to launch his singing career. Traditionally, Shankar as the eldest son should have assumed responsibility for the household when his father became incapacitated, but that burden fell to Nita. In the dark and flimsy thatched hut, Nita and Shankar sit feeling melancholy as they look at a photograph of themselves as children in the hills. The sounds of muted raindrops and frogs croaking drift in from the outside.

The claustrophobic interior reflects the suffocation of Nita as her tuberculosis advances. Her home crumbles around her as she herself withers away. Throughout the scene, the heads and profiles of Nita and Shankar are strongly lit from the front and back, often against almost total blackness, giving the composition a disembodied feel. Shankar declares that he is leaving their home in protest against her suffering and smothering at the hands of the family. She asks him to teach her a Tagore song, as she will be expected to sing at Gita’s wedding. As Shankar starts the song and Nita joins in, the camera slowly dollies at a low angle away from them, to a long shot of the pair from across the stifling, dim room. The chasm widens between brother and sister as they sing. The song is about a visitation by God:

I didn’t realize that You had come to my room,
the night when my doors broke down in the raging storm.
Darkness had encompassed everything,
my oil lamp blew out.
I stretched out my hand to the sky,
though I knew not towards whom.
I lay forlorn in the darkness thinking the storm a dream,
ignorant that the storm was actually a symbol of Your victory flag.
Opening my eyes in the morning I am amazed to behold You,
standing [there], filling the room, [filling] my heart’s void.

Because Nita sings this song at a critical moment in the narrative, when her family is abandoning her and she is becoming increasingly sick, the song appears to be a metaphor for her coming death. This Tagore piece also portends of the sequence to come where Nita’s ailing father orders her to leave the house in the middle of the night when a storm is raging outside.

By the end of the song, the camera has dollied back to the pair; in the remaining shots they are now separately framed. The singular composition of the last few shots of the scene signal Nita’s isolation and estrangement from even Shankar. The climatic shot is a low angle, medium close-up of Nita’s frightened face. Her eyes widen as she clutches her neck with her hands and silently gasps for air, while the faint sound of a whiplash comes up on the soundtrack. A cut follows to Nita alone in the blackness, collapsed in a heap on the floor. Her sobs meld into a solitary sarod strain on the soundtrack. Thus, the sound of the whiplash undercuts the deliverance that the Tagore song promises. Salvation and redemption are not in Nita’s future — not even as a symbolic goddess. Ghatak utilizes the extra-diegetic sound of the whip to represent the weight of social and historical forces bearing down upon Nita, as an individual and as symbolic Motherland, and, by extension, to convey an awareness of these forces to his audience. Ashish Rajadhyaksha has remarked when analyzing Meghe Dhaka Tara,

“In the film, there is a constant attempt to bring out the romantic through various conventions and violently negate them, reverse them into an indictment of the romantic sensibility.”[52]

The specific “romantic sensibility” that Ghatak is critiquing here has its modern origins in the so-called “Bengali renaissance” of the 19th
The sacrifice of Nita

The penultimate scene of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* focuses on Nita and takes place in a sanatorium among the Shillong hills of Bengal. In the previous scene, Nita was trapped in a decrepit hut; now she resides in a hospital for the sick and dying in the middle of ostensibly boundless nature. However, the spatial significance of the Shillong hills as the site of Nita’s demise is that here nature is not represented as idyllic and timeless, but is suffocating, indifferent and indicative of Nita’s mortality. Shankar (Nita’s brother who has become a well-known classical Indian singer) is visiting her and they are sitting outside on a vast lawn surrounded by the hills. Nita is framed against the encircling landscape, which reinforces the feminization of the space. However, Nita is not immortalized as a goddess in this space, but is pictured as small, insignificant – as a human who will suffer an agonizing death. Ghatak undermines any, in Natcy’s words, “nostalgic longing to the homeland’s natural landscape,” for Nita is now hostage to this land, held in permanent exile.[54]

Shankar relates news of the antics of Gita’s (Nita’s younger sister’s) new son (a motherhood Nita will never experience), when suddenly she gets up, grabs his shirt and frantically cries,

“Brother, you know I really want to live. I love so much to be alive. Brother, tell me once that I will live. Brother, I want to go home. I want to live!”

These last three words are amplified and reverberated on the soundtrack and joined with a droning sound and a whip cracking (two reoccurring sound effects that are always matched with Nita) as the camera pans in dizzying 180 degree panoramic shots of the surrounding hills of Bengal. Nita’s violent cry, her unrelenting affirmation of life, counterpoints the claustrophobic confinement in which she will spend her final days. In juxtaposition to Ghatak’s expansive and fluid camerawork, Nita’s entrapment in this natural space conveys stasis and rigidity. The immense landscape appears to collapse around her as she gasps and struggles to find her voice on the soundtrack – for her visual image is now absent and we are left with the sound of her disembodied utterances. Yet Nita, as diseased “Woman,” fallen “Goddess” and dystopian “Bengal” (i.e., “Motherland”), is determined to live on even as she is dying. Ultimately, however, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* illustrates Ghatak’s skepticism about the future of the Bengali family and the Bengali homeland. After the following description of Subarnarekha’s narrative, I will examine the character Sita, as woman and as mythological goddess, shaped by music and landscape.

A brief synopsis of Subarnarekha

*Subarnarekha* begins in a setting similar to that of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: a lower middle-class family living in a bustee on the outskirts of Calcutta immediately following Partition. This bustee is a camp, called “New Life Colony,” for refugees from East Bengal. The narrative of *Subarnarekha* focuses on Sita, whose mother and father were killed during Partition, and who is being raised by her elder brother, Ishwar. Ishwar has also taken in a poor, low-caste boy named Abhiram. They move to the Bengali countryside for a fresh start when Ishwar gets a job as an assistant manager in an iron foundry. Sita spends her life caring for her unmarried brother, until she grows into a young woman and falls in love with Abhiram. Ishwar is determined to find a proper high-caste Hindu husband for Sita and demands that she never see Abhiram again. Ishwar proceeds to arrange Sita’s marriage, yet Sita, resolved to marry Abhiram, escapes with him to Calcutta on her wedding night.

Once again living in a bustee, the newly married couple has a child, Binu, and Abhiram finds work as a bus driver. One day, he accidentally runs over a child and an angry mob kills him. Sita is forced to earn money for her and Binu. She begins to sing for paying customers, and thus unwittingly becomes a prostitute. One night, Ishwar, on a business trip to Calcutta, visits Sita in a drunken stupor to avail himself of her services, not realizing that this prostitute is his sister. In shock at seeing her brother in these circumstances, Sita kills herself. At the conclusion of the film, Binu is placed in the care of Ishwar, who although devastated, attempts to move on for the sake of his nephew.

Sita as goddess: Sita/Sati/Radha

Through song, Ghatak portrays Sita as both mother and lover—as the goddess Sita and the mythical lover of Krishna, Radha.[55] One day, in Chhatimpur in the Bengali countryside, Sita, as a young girl, is idly walking along an abandoned airstrip singing a Bengali folk song when she encounters Ishwar’s senile old boss. He asks Sita her name and then proceeds to tell her the story of her birth and death. The old man tells Sita how her mythical namesake was found as a baby in the furrow of a field by King Janak and how she returned to her mother, Earth, when scorned by her husband, Rama, who believed that she had cheated on him with the evil demon, Ravana. Ghatak reworks this mythological tale in *Subarnarekha* to climax with the female character Sita’s committing suicide with a kitchen knife in response to the horror of seeing Ravana. Ishwar gets a job as an assistant manager in an iron foundry. Sita spends her

In this film, yet another layer to the reconstruction of the goddess archetype in the character of Sita can be found in the Puranic tale of Sati, another manifestation of the goddess Durga, who burns herself through the fire of her concentration (yogagni) in order to satisfy the ethics of good womanhood (satidharma) because her father, Daksha, while under the influence of a magic garland had engaged in unseemly sexual behavior towards her.[56] Daksha is greatly opposed to Sati’s marriage to the god, Shiva. In *Subarnarekha*, Ishwar represents Daksha, for he is a surrogate father to Sita. As a symbolic father, Ishwar, like Daksha has an incestuous attachment to Sita (Sati) and an intense dislike for her husband Abhiram (Shiva). As Sati immolates herself, similarly Sita sacrifices herself when confronted with the shame of the sexual advances of her drunken brother Ishwar.
Sita as a young woman continually sings melancholy Krishna kirtan (songs in praise of Lord Krishna) while sitting among the hills and by the river, Subarnarekha. The spaciousness of Sita’s homescape as an adolescent contrasts with her claustrophobic confines in Calcutta as a young adult. Sita’s rootedness to the surrounding geography of her youth is illustrated in her song and in Ghatak’s framing of her in the rocky, riverine landscape. In one scene Sita is sitting on a sandbank and there is a close-up of sand sifting through her hands. The sifting sand symbolizes the time passed since Sita has last seen Abhiram, and evokes the image of Sita as one with the earth, her symbolic mother. Ghatak then pulls back to a medium close-up and then a long shot of Sita so that we see her on the sandbank by the river with the hills in the background. She begins to sing the following Krishna kirtan:

“See the dawn is coming. 
The people wake up. 
The breeze wakes up. 
The birds wake up. 
The sky appears. 
Oh Shyam [Krishna, the Dark One], why do you still lie asleep? 
Where were you, awake all night? 
See the dawn is breaking.”

Ghatak frames Sita as part of the surrounding expanse of landscape and nature while she sings this song of longing so as to identify Sita, as Sita her namesake, with her mother, Earth, and to depict Sita, as Radha, singing her song of love in separation to Abhiram, as Krishna. Ghatak’s use of a wide angle lens serves to fuse together the vast, open vista and the image of Sita as iconic motherland. The use of a Krishna kirtan, which portrays the Krishna/Radha dilemma of love in separation, is also a metaphor for the division of Bengal and the nostalgia and longing that geographical separation has engendered. Ghatak’s constant use of Krishna kirtan throughout Subarnarekha serves to permeate the film with a feel of yearning for a united Bengal.

Sita’s Rabindra Sangeet

Sita’s growth as a woman is told through song, particularly a song by Tagore. The song personifies Sita and follows her life’s trajectory. As a small girl, Sita sings the song, which describes and revels in the surrounding nature of the rural Bengal landscape. After she runs away to marry Abhiram against Ishwar’s wishes, her brother is so haunted by the song that he attempts to hang himself. As a wife and mother, Sita sings this same song from her childhood to her son, Binu. And after her death, Binu suddenly breaks into the song, offering a glimmer of hope at the conclusion of the film. Ghatak uses the song to illustrate the innocence and openness of the world of Sita and Binu as children and to serve as a counterpoint to the degradation and boundedness of the environment of Sita and Ishwar as adults. The song goes:

The sun and shade play hide and seek over the paddy field today; 
someone has floated rafts of white clouds on the blue sky.  
Today the bumblebees forgot to draw nectar from the flowers;  
instead they gleefully flit around in the [morning] light.  
Today the birds swarm the riverbed, no one knows why.  
We will not go home today,  
we will stay out and absorb nature as much as we can....  
The day will be spent (idly), only by playing the flute.

In the final shot sequence of Subarnarekha, Sita’s son, Binu, is sitting at a train station with Sita’s brother, Ishwar. Binu is staring blankly into space while remembering how Sita, now dead, used to sing this Tagore song from her childhood to him, as the song slowly comes up on the soundtrack. In close-up, Binu begins singing the song, which greatly surprises and saddens Ishwar. Here, Ghatak interweaves history, memory and nature. This Rabindra sangeet represents Sita’s voice as it echoes across the riverine countryside, like Nita’s voice resonates against the Shillong hills at the end of Meghe Dhaka Tara. The feminized homeland remains, but the women endure only as fractured, disembodied memories.

In the next and final scene, Binu and Ishwar are seen in a wide angle, long shot, trudging along the banks of the Subarnarekha river in West Bengal, surrounded by hills and trees. Binu leads the dazed, plodding Ishwar by the hand and incites him to move along into the seemingly endless, daunting landscape. The pair is attempting to go home. It is a home they will now have to recreate after Sita’s suicide. The film’s opening classical Indian raga and women’s chorus rise up on the soundtrack to join with the sound of rushing water and Binu’s childish voice. The women’s chorus fades to a single, female voice as the final shot reveals the Bengali inscription, “Victory to man, to this new born child, ever-living.” Thus, Ghatak leaves us with the sound and image of children as the only hope for the survival of post-Independence Bengal.

The sacrifice of Sita

At the end of Subarnarekha, Sita is truly in exile. She now resides alone in a rented room with her son because she has had to flee her home in the countryside due to her brother’s irrational jealousy towards her husband, Abhiram, and now the husband is dead. While Sita’s youth was spent in “the idyllic open structures of home (that) emphasize continuity,” her adulthood devolves in the urban slums of Calcutta – “those paranoid structures of exile (that) underscore rupture.”[57] In the sequence where Sita commits suicide, Ghatak’s ingenious employment of sound is fully realized. Sita’s sacrificial final scene is related entirely through song, sound effects and silence. It has no dialogue. When the completely inebriated Ishwar arrives at Sita’s house, he has no idea that Sita is the prostitute whom he is visiting. Ishwar is not only drunk but also almost blind because earlier in a bar he dropped his glasses and stepped on them. He is
Exiting a taxi, Ishwar stumbles towards Sita's house; a point of view shot illustrates his blurry and distorted vision. As Ishwar stands weeping back and forth on the threshold of the door to Sita's suffocatingly small, dark room, the faint strains of Nino Rota's *La Dolce Vita* theme are heard as we see an out-of-focus long shot of Sita. In his article, “Sound in Cinema,” Ghatak states:

“There are times when a tune used in a film by someone else is used to make an observation, the way I myself have done. The music that accompanies the scene of orgy at the end of *La Dolce Vita*, where Fellini lashes out at the whole of Western civilization, is known as *Patricia*. I sought to make a similar statement in my *Subarnarekha* about my own land, this Bengal, so sparkling with intellect. So I have used the same music in the bar scene [and in Sita’s suicide scene], to make a suggestion. Was I influenced? Not at all. The music merely helped me say a lot of things.”[59]

“Helped me say a lot of things” for Ghatak refers to his commentary on the senselessness of the dissolution of post-Independence Bengali culture and society. As Kumar Shahani has explained while discussing Ghatak’s evolution of an “epic” cinematic form:

“In *Subarnarekha*, the dramatic element disintegrates, its clichés are turned against itself; the traumatic prostitution of our culture is exemplified as Sanskrit becomes part of *La Dolce Vita* in one of the world’s poorest cities. We are made to face our self-destructive incestuous longings which are otherwise so delicately camouflaged by both our sophisticated and vulgar filmmakers.”[60]

The Rota theme becomes a loud drone as Ghatak cuts to a medium close-up of Ishwar drenched in sweat. The drone fades into the sound of Sita’s rapid, terrified breathing. There is a cut to a blurred close-up of Sita’s petrified face and frozen doe-like eyes. Visually and aurally the feeling of Sita’s claustrophobia and confinement is accelerated.

In the final seconds of the scene, Ghatak constructs a powerful montage of sound and visuals. With Sita’s exaggerated breathing serving as an audio transition, Ghatak cuts to a large kitchen knife, then to an extreme close-up of Sita’s unblinking eye filling the frame. Her body is now completely fragmented; her identity reduced to an omniscient eye, in contrast to Ishwar’s physical and metaphorical blindness. Sita is trapped, inert with fear; her goddess stature diminished to a distorted and disembodied representation. Then there is a very quick cut to Sita’s picking up the knife accompanied by the fleeting sound of a knife being sharpened. We hear a crash of cymbals and a dull thud as a cut to a confused, reeling Ishwar reveals a few bloodstains on his white kurta. With the drone of strings, more blood spurts on to Ishwar’s clothes. We see the table with Sita’s *tambora* (a traditional Indian string instrument) on it shaking, joined by the sound of Sita’s bangles and body in her death throes. The camera swiftly pans around the room and lands upon a shot of Ishwar’s face reflected in a small mirror on a bed – also on the bed are a comb, some hair clips, and Sita’s arm and hand, her fingers clutching, desperately clawing, the white sheet as she dies.

Then there is a cut to a close-up of Ishwar’s blood-spattered face followed by the first in-focus shot of Sita’s face — as a death masque — and absolute silence. The sonic and visual impact of Sita’s self-sacrifice is shocking. The dramatic construction of the scene underscores the epic tragedy of Sita’s death — the sacrifice of Bengal — caused by the decadence of Ishwar, the excesses of Bengali society.

**Conclusion**

In Ritwik Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, representations of “Woman” and “Homeland” are inextricably intertwined in setting, sound, and song. Mixing and layering traditions with innovations infused with socio-historical observations and critiques, Ghatak creates a cinema that offers a complex vision of post-Independence Bengal, where both dystopian and utopian futures are envisioned for his Bengali homeland. Hamid Naficy has observed:

“But exile must not be thought of as a generalized condition of alienation and difference, or as one of the items on the diversity-chic menu. All displaced people do not experience exile equally or uniformly. Exile discourse thrives on detail, specificity and locality. There is a there *there* in exile.”[61]

As an exilic filmmaker, Ghatak attempts to portray the ambivalence and contradictions of Bengali society in post-Partition Bengal. And as a refugee, Ghatak is compelled in his work to interrogate and continually reassess Bengal’s cultural memory, identity, and history. In his 1970s essay, “Society, Our Traditions, Filmmaking and My Effort,” Ghatak states:

“Child’s play with film is no longer fitting. The huge formative nation-building role of films in this country will be here soon.”[62]

In his films, Ghatak not only constructs varying visions of his Bengali homeland, but also consciously attempts to activate film’s political and cultural role in newly independent India.

**Endnotes**

1. This article is part of a chapter in my forthcoming dissertation on the films of Ritwik Ghatak for the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. I would like to thank the editors at *Jump Cut* for their invaluable comments that have enhanced this article and my work in general. I would like to particularly thank Jyotiki Virdi for her assistance and persistence.
To avoid reader confusion, I must note here the West Bengal Government’s passage of a constitutional amendment declaring from January 1, 2001, the beginning of the new millennium, that Calcutta was officially renamed Kolkata. A variety of reasons for the name change were given, ranging from the argument that “the new name would reflect the pronunciation of the city’s name in Bengali and would protect the state’s linguistic identity,” to the contention that the new name “suggests a compromise between acknowledging the city’s colonial past and the need to restore its threatened identity as a Bengali city.” For more on the history of the city’s name, see Krishna Dutta, Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2003), pp. 1-4. Given the historical context I am discussing, I will use “Calcutta” throughout this paper.


4. Bijan Bhattacharya’s Nabanna is about the millions of peasants who died during the Bengal famine of 1943-1944. The inflationary market for rice, heavily demanded by India’s army during World War II, led grain merchants and moneylenders in Calcutta to buy up peasant stocks that should have been kept in villages for food and seed. Bijan Bhattacharya was an actor, writer and founding member of IPTA, who starred in many of Ghatak’s films and was a lifelong friend. Dinabandhu Mitra’s Neeladarpan is about the plight of a Bengali landlord’s family and its tenants at the hands of the British indigo planters in the late 19th century. Both plays were social-political landmarks in both Bengali and Indian theater.


7. See “Paradise Café” in Mrinal Sen, Montage: Life. Politics. Cinema. (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002), pp. 105-109. In 1947, Chidananda Das Gupta (the noted Indian film critic) and Satyajit Ray (India’s first internationally recognized filmmaker) formed the Calcutta Film Society, which for the first time introduced many novice Bengali filmmakers, such as Ghatak and Sen, to European and Soviet films.


9. For more details of Ghatak’s life and work in English, including a comprehensive filmography, see Rows and Rows of Fences: Ghatak on Cinema (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000). Some of the essays and interviews included in this collection were originally in English, and some have been translated into English from Bengali. Much of the material from Cinema and I has been reprinted in Rows and Rows of Fences.

10. The Partition of India in 1947 is commonly referred to as simply “Partition”. It should be noted that in addition to the 1947 Partition and the Bangladesh War of Independence’s 1971 partition of East Pakistan and West Pakistan into Bangladesh and Pakistan, Bengal suffered another wrenching “partition” in the twentieth century—Lord Curzon’s 1905 partition of Bengal (then a British province) into East Bengal and West Bengal. Britain reunified Bengal in 1911, but the provinces of Bihar and Orissa were created out of Bengali land and the central government’s capital was moved from Calcutta to Delhi, to be renamed New Delhi.

11. Ghatak instructed “alternative” directors such as John Abraham, Mani Kaul, and Kumar Shahani during his brief but influential time as an instructor and Vice-Principal at the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune from 1964-1965. Beginning in the early 1960s, Ghatak suffered from alcoholism and mental illness. He was hospitalized for the first time in late 1965. For the rest of his life he was in and out of mental hospitals and psychiatric treatment.

12. From 1992-1997, I resided in Calcutta for extended periods of time for language study and dissertation fieldwork. During my various stays, I saw Meghe Dhaka Tara and Subarnarekha, which are in black and white, multiple times in 35 mm. For this paper I worked from excellent, unsubtitle video copies. To assist in translating the films’ dialogue and songs, I have copies of Ghatak’s subtitling spotting sheets (pages that correlate the dialogue with the footage of the film) that are in Bengali and English. The Ritwik Memorial Trust recently reprinted the complete film script of Meghe Dhaka Tara in Bengali, which I am also utilizing. In 2002, the British Film Institute came out with a finely restored Meghe Dhaka Tara on video and DVD.

13. In Bengali, several words exist that have the connotation of “refugee”: chinnamul or “uprooted”; bastuchara or “displaced person”;
Both of these essays are in “Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of Partition,” Economic and Political Weekly (August 10, 1996), pp. 2143-2151, Dipesh Chakrabarty does an excellent job of detailing the significance of udvastu as one who has been placed outside of his ancestral, foundational home.

14. To illustrate the intense love and attachment that Bengalis had for pre-Partition Bengal, the subsequent tremendous sense of loss and nostalgia they experienced for their ancestral homes and motherland as a result of Partition, and Ghatak’s ability to tap into those emotions, I offer the following quote:

“There was a wound in the heart of my father, a raw wound. Many physicians were consulted—to no effect; consequently, the wound did not heal. He carried this wound with him until the eve of his death. Toward the end of his life, he used to sit quietly. He saw Ritwik’s Meghe Dhaka Tara ten times, Subarnarekha eight times — and until the end of his life he carried with him Ritwik’s Titas Ekti Nadir Nam. [“A River Called Titas”]. . . Father had no further opportunities to go to Bangladesh [formerly East Bengal]. This sorrow of not being able to return ate into him for the rest of his life. Father intentionally built his house close to the border [between West Bengal and Bangladesh]. He used to say that if I inhaled [the air] here, I would be able to smell the earth of Satkhira, Bagura and Jessore. And just to be able to smell this earth, Father would repeatedly watch [Ritwik’s] Meghe Dhaka Tara, Subarnarekha and Komal Gandhar.”

From Loken Ray’s, “Madhokhane bera” (“A Fence in Between”), in Pratidin, (September 1997). See also, Ranabir Samaddar, ed. Reflections on Partition in the East (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1997) and Chakrabarty, “Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of Partition.” It is important to emphasize here that in his films, Ghatak does not often directly address the plight of Bengali Muslims in post-Partition Bengal. The narratives and main characters of his films primarily focus on Bengal Hindu. In his “Remembered Villages,” Chakrabarty succinctly articulates this “fundamental problem in the history of modern Bengali nationality, the fact that the nationalist construction of ‘home’ was a Hindu home.” p. 2150.


18. The even larger Indian cinematic context includes other regional cinemas, such as Madrasi (now called Chennai) or Tamil film of south India. Stephen Hughes and Sara Dickey have conducted work in this area. For more on Satyajit Ray, see Satyajit Ray, Our Films, Their Films (Calcutta: Orient Longman Limited, 1976), Andrew Robinson, Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), and Darius Cooper, The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000).


19. Vasudevan, “Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities: The Hindi Social Film of the 1950s as Popular Culture,” in Making Meaning in Indian Cinema, pp. 99-121. One of the main critiques of popular Indian commercial cinema that Vasudevan is referring to emanates from members of the Calcutta Film Society, particularly the writings of film critic Chidananda Das Gupta.


21. In 1950s and 1960s Bengali commercial cinema, the melodramatic films of the star duo Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen also greatly added to the genre’s popularity. See Moinak Biswas’ “The Couple and Their Spaces: Harano Sur as Melodrama Now,” in Vasudevan, Making Meaning in Indian Cinema, pp. 122-142.

23. The *Upanishads* are philosophical and mystical texts of India, believed to have been composed from around 700 B.C.E. onwards. From Carl Jung, Ghatak derived the idea of the archetype. As Pravina Cooper has observed: "The individual, Ghatak felt, needed "archetypes" or collective frameworks by which his unconscious could project into the conscious.", p. 99, in "Ritwik Ghatak between the Messianic and the Material," *Asian Cinema*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1999), pp. 96-106.


26. The Bengali folk dramatic form known as *jatra* (literally "going" or "journey"), combines acting, songs, music, and dance, and is characterized by a stylized delivery and exaggerated gestures and oration. Scholars believe *jatra* to have originated in the 16th century with the *Krishna Jatra* of Chaitanya and his devotees. After World War I, nationalistic and patriotic themes were incorporated into *jatra*. Mukanda Das (1878-1934) and his troupe, the Swadeshi Jatra Party, performed *jatras* about colonial exploitation, the nationalist struggle, and the oppression of the feudal and caste system. See "*jatra*" at [http://banglapedia.com](http://banglapedia.com).


29. Significant to Ghatak’s use of “tradition” or the “traditional” in the context of the “modern” or “modernity” is Geeta Kapur’s contextualization of the terms in “Detours from the Contemporary” (in *When Was Modernism: Essays in Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, p. 267):

   “The persistence of the terms ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ as they figure in third-world debates are best appreciated if we see them as notations within the cultural polemic of decolonization. They may be used in all earnestness as essential categories and real options, but in fact they are largely pragmatic features of nation-building and mark the double (or multiple) register of a persuasive nationalist discourse. Sufficiently historicized, both tradition and modernity can notate a radical purpose in the cultural politics of the third world. Certainly the term tradition as we use it in the present equation for India and the third world is not what is given or received as a disinterested civilizational legacy, if ever there should be such a thing. This tradition is what is invented in the course of a struggle. It marks off the territories/identities of a named people. In this sense it is a signifier drawing energy from an imaginary resource – the ideal tradition. Yet it always remains, by virtue of its strongly ideological import, an ambivalent and often culpable sign in need of constant historical interpretation so that we know which way it is pointing.”


31. Throughout the essays and interviews in *Rows and Rows of Fences* Ghatak discusses the impact of these theatrical and cinematic forms and styles on his work. Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* and Bunuel’s *Nazarin* were two of Ghatak’s favorite films.

32. See Christine Gledhill’s excellent anthology, *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987).

33. The worship of Ma, the Mother Goddess (in the form of Durga), is a daily practice for many Bengalis. The Durga-Puja festival is the most important Hindu religious festival in Bengal.


36. A *khayal* combines the classicism of *dhrupada* (where the lyrics are lofty and are strictly developed without flippant embellishments) and the romanticism of *thumri* (light songs influenced by Urdu-Persian poetry and sung in Hindi). *Khayals* may be in praise of gods or royal patrons; they may center on divine or human love; and they may be devotional, philosophical or seasonal. For more on *khayals*, see Sumati Mutatkar, *Aspects of Indian Music* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1987): 84-89.


42. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, p. 169. Earlier in this chapter, Naficy states:

“The space that exile creates in the accented cinema is gendered, but not in the binary fashion of the classical (i.e., Hollywood) cinema. And if gender is coded dyadically, the poles may be reversed. For example, the outside, public spaces of the homeland’s nature and landscape are largely represented as feminine and maternal. The inside, enclosed spaces—particularly those in the domestic sphere—are also predominantly coded as feminine. In that sense, all accented films, regardless of the genre of their directors or protagonists, are feminine texts. These films destabilize the traditional binary schema gender and spatiality because, in the liminality of deterritorialization, the boundaries of gender, genre, and sexuality are blurred and continually negotiated.” (pp. 154-155).


45. These songs are called *vijaya* songs and express a mother’s sorrow at the departure of her daughter for the home of her husband. In *vijaya* songs, the goddess Durga/Uma is represented as a typical young Bengali bride. *Vijaya* songs are usually sung at Uma’s departure on the tenth and concluding day of Durga Puja which occurs during the month of Asvin in September/October. For more on Kali and Uma in the devotional poetry of Bengal, see Rachel McDermott’s nuanced research and translation work in her *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Also see Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalization of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal,” in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University: 1990), pp. 132-134.

46. I must point out here that “the mighty Shiva of Aryan mythology” is often depicted as “a corpulent and indolent hemp-smoker in Bengali folklore,” thus adding another layer of meaning to Nita’s banishment and symbolic return to Shiva. See, Ibid, p. 133.


56. In her dense and provocative piece, “Moving Devi,” Gayatri Spivak recounts the various deaths of Sati, in *Cultural Critique*, vol. 47 (Winter 2001), pp. 120-163. The *Puranas* are epic, mythological and devotional texts sacred to Hinduism and are believed to have originated during the first millennium C.E.

57. An Accented Cinema, p. 188.

