

## **Tracking Partition Discourses in the Films of Ritwik Ghatak**

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**Abstract:** *The polysemic interpretation of frontier is associated with the dialectic of a nation's frame and hence any rearrangement with respect to it is a popular subject among thinkers and artists. This research paper is an attempt to delineate the dominant discourse disseminated in the films of Ritwik Ghatak who churned out a series of great films in which the feelings of those dispossessed and displaced by Partition was represented. Identification with the tide of refugees from East Bengal fleeing from the catastrophic Bengal famine of 1943 and the partition of Bengal in 1947 defined his practice thereby providing a domination of those imagery of dislocation and exile in his creative works. The paper will include a detailed review of literature that attempted a dissection of the films of Ghatak applauding their role in constructing "nostalgic" or "partition" discourse based on the melodramatic and realist perspective of the geo-politically displaced.*

**Keywords:** *Cinematic Representation, Claustrophobitiation, Geo-political Dispossession, Partition Discourse, Territorial Alienation.*

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### **I. Introduction: Geo-political Dispossession**

The uncertain border around a country, like the frame of a painting, is a fundamental entity in the process of ascertaining the notion and existence of the country; but at the same time it may jeopardise and alienate the inhabitants, forcing many to become rootless and displaced via transposition to an alien land. According to Christine Hartnack (2010)<sup>[1]</sup>, by conservative estimates, between half a million and one million South Asian men, women and children lost their lives as a result of the partition of British India in 1947, over 70,000 women were raped and about 12 million people fled their homes. This contribution explores the relational entanglements between the countries India and Pakistan (Hartnack, 2010). The threads between a shared past weaves a range of different "social memories" among the inhabitants of India and Bangladesh. These social memories, especially those recurring to the themes of the partition of British India are constructed to serve political, social or psychological functions. While these (social memories) are invoked either to legitimize or delegitimize the dominant power structure in the public sphere and thereby distinguish and construct one collective identity from another. In the private sphere, they (social memories) might help people cope with individually experienced trauma.

### **II. Cinematic Representation: partition, migration and relocation**

The ubiquity of the term "border" often associated with of a nation's abundance and scarcity has made it a popular subject among thinkers and artists. Cinema, one of the most powerful art forms, has been generous with its attention to border-related issues. This concern, needless to say, has often churned out obtuse and highly commercialised films based on such themes, which commonly exploit the sentiment and involvement of viewers, incited by the melodramatic spectacle of unfortunate events taking place in the lives of people living near the frontier. Sayan Chottopadhy (2007)<sup>[2]</sup> points out that almost all the notable film industries around the world have taken interest in border crisis. The composition of films centered on border and frontier themes although not very large but produced a fine language for the construction of "cinematic representation" of border themes. From the mid-20th century according to Chottopadhy (2007), a few Indian directors have tried to capture this topic on screen but few have succeeded in this expedition. While Chottopadhy (2007) considers borders and frontiers to provide a comfortable periphery for the demarcation of nation, but construct the identity of its inhabitants which is meticulously contained and defined within the scrupulous framework of the nation.

One of the catalytic moments in the history of Indian cinematic realism was the release of the films produced by Ritwik Ghatak which is marked as an early attempt to use the border crisis and refugee issue as major themes with a distinctly artistic yet realistic mode of cinematic expression. The visual construction of the reality of a geo-political border reaches an iconic status. In 1951, Ritwik Ghatak made his debut film 'Nagarik' (The Citizen, 1951). The formation of East Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971 motivated Ghatak to explore, through his films, the cultural identity of Bengal in the midst of these new political divisions and physical boundaries. The film 'Nagarik' (1951) does not isolate and examine the border crisis, since it is intended as a cinematic critique of the bourgeois-centric transformation of urban Bengali community during the post-Partition era. Ghatak's 1962 film 'Subarnarekha' (lit. Golden Line, the name of a river now in Bangladesh) reiterates the violence of diasporas in a more direct manner. According to Erin O' Donnell<sup>[3]</sup>, in the series of films churned out on Partition Discourse, Ritwik Ghatak tries to convey how partition struck at the roots of Bengali culture and made them yearn for their pre-Partition way of life. While examining the border crisis of the immigrants, these films try to delve into a cinematic critique of the bourgeois-centric transformation of urban Bengali community during the post-Partition era. In 1947, after a year-long spate of communitarian riots, representatives of the British colonial government, the leaders of Indian National Congress and the Muslim League agreed to divide India on the basis of religion. One outcome of this political formula was the division of Bengal into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and an unprecedented migration of millions of people from their home territories, to resettle in a new land often without a definite and permanent address.

### **III. Partition Discourse: Ritwik Ghatak and nostalgia**

Nostalgia, according to Dipesh Chakraborty<sup>[4]</sup>, has two aspects which are the sentiment of nostalgia and the sense of trauma, and their contradictory relationship to the question of the past. A traumatized memory has a narrative structure which works on a principle opposite to that of any historical narrative. Partition remains a wound in the collective psyche of South Asia and that its representation on screen enables forms of historical engagement that are largely opaque to standard historiography. In order to uncover some deeper sense in which these films themselves take on the experience of the refugee, Thomas Stubblefield (2006)<sup>[5]</sup> discusses in his essay "Ritwik Ghatak and "The Role of Sound in Representing Post-Partition Bengal" the attempts made Ghatak to create an myth of pre- partition Bengal juxtaposed with the post-partition Bengal. Stubblefield (2006) in his essay focuses on two interrelated components or behaviors of sound within Ghatak's films. According to Stubblefield (2006) the first component involves the use of sound as a means of "Brechtian distancing" which departs from the naturalistic soundtrack personifying the refugee experience. Hence this personification of dislocation in sound track becomes the basis for the second component in which this "sonorous body" suggested by the sound interacts with the image allowing "the formal structure of the film to take on a nomadship of its own" (Stubblefield, 2006). According to Stubblefield (2006) conflicts between image and sound provides a crucial subtext in Ghatak's film. In the film 'Nagarik' (1954) the protagonist, "Ramu finds escape in a picture on the family's calendar that shows an idyllic scene of a red tiled house in a meadow" Stubblefield (2006). Throughout the film, Stubblefield dissects the textual construction of sounds of a broken down automobile as a source of "claustrophobia" for the protagonist's father. Therefore, the engine according to Stubblefield (2006), is used as motif depicting its capacity to drive out the inhabitants of the house relocating the migrant family. Gopalan Mullik (2010)<sup>[6]</sup> states that Ritwik Ghatak's films are 'ideal' examples of a "claustrophobic situation", with repressed desires and the consequent bottling-up of emotions. It is argued by many including Mullik (2010) that Ghatak's separation from his own land, left a traumatic effect on his psyche. It is in this context that "Ghatak fully identified with the multitude of unhappy refugees coming from the other side of Bengal" while displacement forms a depressing backdrop for most of Ghatak's films. Erin O'Donnell examines the relations between three interconnected elements in Ghatak's film narratives which are: women, landscape (exterior and interior) and sound and music. Donnell argues that Ghatak consistently layers these three components to convey to narrate the "geo-political dispossession" and "territorial alienation" through "cinematic representation.

Ritwik Ghatak tries to delve into the "partition discourse" to bring out the utopian and dystopian visions of "Homeland" in an independent Bengal. People like Erin O'Donnell, Gopalan Mullik and Thomas Stubblefield noted that Ghatak employs Bengali folk music and frames Bengal's landscapes to construct his visual imagery of the claustrophobic situation being witnessed by his contemporary displaced people struck by

Partition of India in 1947. This ‘claustrophobitiation’ (the claustrophobic situation being witnessed by his contemporary displaced people struck by Partition of India in 1947) was also the thematic crux of other films churned out from Indian Film Industry. Many socio-cultural scholars believe that such a border is not merely a “geopolitical demarcation” but an epitome of authority enforcing inclusion and exclusion. While most of the commercial films conforming this style of filmmaking reinforces the postcolonial critique of cultural/political hegemony but Ritwik Ghatak attempts to portray the ambivalence and contradictions of Bengali society in post-Partition Bengal (Pandey, 2005)<sup>[7]</sup>. According to O’Donnell, Ghatak himself being a migrated Bengali, is compelled in his work to interrogate and continually reassess Bengal’s cultural memory, identity, and history. Ghatak according to Gyanendra Pandey (2005) presented a “partition discourse” through unparalleled filmic statements about the ‘pain, despair and hopes’ of those displaced during partition rather than ‘violence’ (Pandey, 2005) as the central motif of his films. The characters of his films, (O’Donnell; Stubblefield, 2006; Mullik, 2010) depict the trauma of “Claustrophobitiation” – the despair of being imprisoned in an alien land dislocated from their homeland and under a continuous struggle to route a mental escape to their roots. This “Claustrophobitiation” is used as the central motif of the partition discourse being churned out by Ritwik Ghatak. It bears a mark of “nostalgia” of the “homeland” left behind by the migrant Bengalis of East Bengal in their new found refuge in West Bengal.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Partition as Contemporaneity for Ritwik:**

Ritwik was never able to live beyond partition. It is unimportant to say that he was living with it, rather it constituted the bedrock of his philosophical creed where his constantly recurring theme was rootlessness and dislocation. His enigmatic silence about the beauties of an urban existence forced him to focus entirely on the ennui and dreariness of an urban life. The use of the archetypes in his films and all of them drawn from his memories turning into nostalgia turned his films and the entire discussion around him a most important referral points for an India that existed in the pre-independence days of erstwhile East Pakistan. Ritwik knew that myths are only collective unconsciousness but his recurrent occupation with nostalgic existence forced him to draw sustenance from the archetypes and immediately turns him into the most potent filmmaker of rural lives in India just after independence. In ‘Subarnarekha’, when the brother comes back home along with his nephew, the son of his estranged sister who had become a prostitute in the city for earning bread after the death of her husband, the shot of the child running into the paddy field full of ripe paddy trees frees us from the tyrannies of claustrophobic situation and also forces to go frozen and stand before the larger truth of migration-dislocation-and search for a new not to be found roots that ran recurrently through all the films of Ghatak. Ghatak constantly kept on searching for one truth, the truth of living with the roots and into the very place where someone was born in, howsoever the place of living is away from the blessings of an urban existence. In his passionate search for archetypes, he became a worshipper of the lost world and turned into the most potent voice in recent memory against the partition and converted partition discourse into a long drawn cinematic narrative with episodic presentation through different films yearning the tale of dislocation-relocation and lost.

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