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Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: A Feminist Reading of the Film's Vocal Structure

ABSTRACT. Ritwik Ghatak in his influential film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*Cloud-Capped Star*, 1960) foregrounds the Mother archetype in the figure of Nita and through an affective bonding with her 'children' helps to create an identification in the minds of the Bengali male audience. The identification is as much with the 'children' as in the relationship of care giver-taker in which they are bound, thereby constructing an archetypal Mother image for Nita. When through a progressively pathetic turn in her relationship with her 'children' she finds herself abandoned, the audience alternately feels pity and is shrouded with guilt. A critical examination reveals that Ghatak's construction of the archetypal figure paves way for both identification and transference of guilt that culminates through her existential scream in the very end: "Brother, I too wanted to live". This essay analyses the vocal elements of the film to show, firstly, that the dialogues are teleologically designed to elicit the scream, and secondly how the dialogues reveal the existing social structure.

KEYWORDS:

archetype, subjecthood,
motherhood,
children, disavowal,
castration complex,
voice, acoustic mirror.

The decade of the 1940s in the Indian subcontinent was a tumultuous one that saw its citizenry plunged into a mammoth man-made-famine, an amputated Independence that saw large scale transportation of masses and Hindu-Muslim riots that tore apart for ever a strong social fabric. It was also the decade of an unprecedented resurgence of the working class and peasants in the form of industrial strikes and the Tebhaga (share of thirds) movement, a convergence of writers and theatre activists and the anti-colonial Quit India movement that involved students and the common Indian. The vapours of this tumult did condense in the films of Ritwik Ghatak through a myriad of processes that offer, deceptively, straight-forward reading and hence the need for a closer examination to unravel the rich subtext of possibilities. His films abound in broken individuals, licking their wounds in the shadow of history and lamenting over a lost land that was bountiful enough to nurture and replenish the child. Ghatak, instead of patronising the broken individual, turns his gaze on the wounds as a site of cruelty and violence, simul-



Screen shot 1

taneously, usurping the consciousness to rupture the continuum of history. History, for Ghatak, is the moment of making the film, of recording the discursive voices that are taking shape giving time a renewed agency. If Ghatak distances himself from historical time, then it is most palpable in his method and cinematic form that manages to tame melodrama in realism, or vice versa, thereby rejecting the binary that demarcated the dual celebration of modernity by art house films (realism) and popular cinema (melodrama). Film scholar and teacher Mainakh Biswas writes in his essay, *Her Mother's Son: Kinship and History in Ritwik Ghatak*,

In displacing historical tragedy into upheavals in kinship relations, Ghatak was following a well-worn logic of melodrama, but let us remember how in its bourgeois articulation, the contemporary melodrama was seeking a compromise between the shelter of the old family and community on one hand and the dream of individualism and industrial progress on the other (Biswas 2004).

Biswas observes that by inserting the individual into the bonds of the family, Ghatak is able to interrogate the historical processes of modernity as fault-lines enlarge and activate themselves. Much scholarship has already gone into looking at the nature of kinship that the siblings share in Ghatak's films, one that is modelled on a celestial couple. Biswas has these observations about kinship in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*:

Let us recall the mythical allusions in the story. Nita was born on the day the goddess Jagaddhatri (Durga) is worshipped, the wailing choric voice in the soundtrack impersonates Durga's mother Menaka, calling her back to her bosom, to her parental home in the hills. She will set out on that journey, as if abandoning the shelter on earth where no one recognised her. Shankar (Nita's elder brother) is another name for Shiva, Durga's husband (Biswas 2004).

The body of Ghatak's work opens itself up to several readings of relationships within and outside of the family.

This paper wishes to look, with the help of a widely established archetypal Mother figure in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, at a problematic relationship with her children that mirrors lingering conventions of social structure, paradigms and a nascent castration through partition by probing the hidden gestures in spoken language and their nature of modulation through a robust framework of psychoanalysis and feminist film theory. Spoken language in the form of dialogues is often designated a marginal space in film sound theories, as they have a tendency to communicate directly and their import in the diegetic space is understood by one and all in a broadly homogeneous manner. Lack of complication is their want. What catches the eye (ear) in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is not a complication but a well thought-out design that leads towards a fatal paroxysm of a scream... *Brother, I too wanted to live!* Just what are the mechanisms at play that lead us to the scream and it's continued celebration in Bengali cinephilia is a question that this paper seeks to answer.

About the story

Set in the late 1950s in a settlement colony in Calcutta, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* charts the trajectory of a poor refugee family's slow movement towards prosperity. At the centre of the household is Nita, a young girl, who discontinues her education in order to be a bread-earner for the family. Her elder brother Shankar is immersed in his practice of classical music and dreams of becoming a singer. The two other siblings, a brother and a sister also pursue their own life. Nita's father is a school teacher and his mother is a house wife who keeps the hearth together. Nita looks forward to the return of Sanat, a young scientist, and hopes to build a home together.

Sanat returns but only to marry Nita's sensuous sister Gita. Shankar leaves the house on the day of the marriage, in protest, and goes away to Bombay to pursue his dreams. The younger brother too leaves home for a better life. Nita carries on with her responsibilities alone and finally succumbs to tuberculosis.

Much later, Shankar comes back from Bombay with the reputation of a successful singer to find out the serious nature of Nita's illness. He puts her in a sanatorium in a remote hill station, thereby abandoning her to a future of uncertainty and loneliness. On one of his visits to Nita, Shankar shares with her the new-found plenitude of their home and liveliness of Gita's little son. This information is like the last nail on her coffin, as Nita bursts forth in an existential scream, *Brother, I too wanted to live!*

The three women in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* give a triangularity to the feminine principle, representing in turn a cruel mother, a sensuous daughter and the nurturing mother. Nita's image as the nurturer is stabilised in the very first shot of the film as she emerges as a speck from the broad, wide canopy of a tree that fills up the space of the frame. The voice of Shankar practising *alap* (a melodic improvisation that introduces a *raga*) envelops the space as an invocation to the Mother and the first shot cuts into a foreground upright image of Nita, while Shankar is sitting in the background in obeisance. Mother is bound to the elements through the watery landscape in the background, the tree and the wind to complete the symbol of fertility. Later on in the film, we come to know that Nita was born on the day of the *Jagatdhatri* ritual celebration. *Jagatdhatri* is an incarnation of Goddess Durga, where *Jagat* means Earth and *dhatri* is its bearer. Again, a vast watery landscape forms the backdrop against which we see her. Ghatak constructs an iconography for Nita that resembles the Goddess, sometimes framing her face in a grazing angle to evoke the enduring image of Durga in a state of immersion or elsewhere framing her with a halo.

This archotyping of the Mother figure in Nita helps to deify her status thereby rendering her sexuality to obscurity and also taming the individual. She is invested in turn with the agency of the male, of being the breadwinner for the family. In an elaborately constructed scene, the family doctor after examining the wounds of her father exclaims that the responsibility of the family is now entirely hers, while the family watches the nuances of her face in utter helplessness. In a flash, the nurturing mother is given a dual responsibility. As Nita walks through the streets, between office and home, in a low angle projection that makes her tall and upright, we hear orchestrated choric voices that underline a historical moment in the lives of the refugee family, the moment of the woman's crossing of the threshold. Nita's usurpation from an individual woman to a mythical and historical figure is witnessed by many in the family and the city. It takes however another woman to offer her dismay at Nita's plight. Ghatak himself crosses a threshold as he invests Nita not merely with a narrative agency, but also a subjectivity that comes with the look. The much-acknowledged division of labour around looking that Laura Mulvey speaks of in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* is

reversed in favour of Nita. She watches the family assemble and celebrate the return of Shankar from the safe confines of her room, through the square slits that her thatched walls provide. Ghatak hybridises the representation of Nita from mythic to historical to the individual, balancing many identities all at once. Should we look at this as a breach for which Nita has to pay? The centrality that Ghatak gives Nita in the regime of the scopic is systematically withdrawn in the aural, reducing her to a state of muteness as if her subjectivity is completely vampirised. It is this differentiality that begets reading and towards which the rest of the paper is dedicated by arguing that this vampirising is indeed the disavowal of her children as they progressively attain subjecthood.

The question of subjecthood and disavowal is problematised in the writing of Kaja Silverman through an influential mediation on the acoustic mirror.



Screen shot 2



Screen shot 3

On the formation of subjecthood: a feminist discourse

From the imaginary to the symbolic world, a child passes through a complex process of subject formation. The significant revelation that dawns on the child at the lacanian mirror phase, at the moment of its mis-recognition of itself in the mirror image, is a process of differentiation with the mother's body. The wholeness of the dyadic state with the mother is now breached as it discovers a new centre in the self. What was so far an essential part of the child's world is now dismembered and objectified. Psychoanalysts argue that the subject formation is accompanied by such senses of loss associated with faeces, breast and the mother's voice. Feminist readings of Freudian psychoanalysis however note that such loss, although acknowledged as akin to castration, is not accommodated within the understanding of the castration complex; by Freud's own admission, he states that: the term "castration complex" ought to be confined to those excitations and consequences which are bound up with the loss of the penis (Silverman 1988: 15).

Kaja Silverman suggests that:

this refusal to identify castration with any of the divisions which occur prior to the registration of sexual difference reveals Freud's desire to place a maximum distance between the male subject and the notion of lack. To admit that the loss of the object is also a castration would be to acknowledge that the male subject is already structured by absence prior to the moment at which he registers woman's anatomical difference – to concede that he, like the female subject, has already been deprived of being, and already been marked by the language and desires of the Other (Silverman 1988: 15).

An estimate of the disavowal of Nita's (as mother figure) voice can begin by an understanding of the nature of deprivation of being that her children have undergone and which informs their psychic world. This psychic world trains them to create an Other within their own fold in the figure of a mother. Ghatak's milieu comprises of people who have been mass-transported, at the moment of India's freedom, from their origins in Bangladesh to an uncertain address in an unknown landscape of hostility. This works as a violent dismemberment of the collective from one's connection with land and its affective values. The withdrawal of the affective world is accompanied by loss of identity and taking up of an uncomfortable identity of a *refugee* under the gaze of a new nation-state. The plenitude of motherland is replaced by the shortages in refugee-colonies and its new ordering. In the film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the father articulates this dismemberment through a general tone of loss, although Nita's siblings do not acknowledge this loss and would rather make the most out of the new situation. It may also be argued

that the magnitude and intensity of loss defies articulation in the regime of language but merely leaves deposits in the mind, which engenders a culturally disruptive confrontation with one's own insufficiency. The idea of lack then becomes an endemic lack for Nita's children, who progressively discover further castrations of a physical order in the movement of the narrative, no longer able to look away from it. The father and younger brother are permanently impaired by chance accidents on the road and inside a factory, which take away their status as bread-earners and self-sufficient males. The severity of such loss forces her children to placate Nita as the nurturer and the bread-earner, while continuing to mark her as the Other. It is through a successful formation of the Other in Nita that the subject can disavow their insufficiency and align everything that is unpleasurable and disempowering with that of the feminine Other.

This formation of the subjecthood is contingent upon the existence of a stable pre-subjecthood, a state of bliss experienced in pre-consciousness. Silverman argues in the chapter *Fantasy of Maternal Voice*:

Rosalato, for instance, regards the "pleasurable milieu" of the maternal voice as "the first model of auditory pleasure", whereas Chion associates it with the terror of an "umbilical night". These contradictory views of the same image point to the profoundly ambivalent nature of the fantasy which is my present concern, an ambivalence which attests to the divided nature of subjectivity, and which underscores the fact that pleasure for one psychic system almost invariably means unpleasure for another psychic system. The fantasy of the maternal-voice-as-sonorous-envelope takes on a different meaning depending upon the psychic "lookout point"; viewed from the site of the unconscious, the image of the infant held within the environment or sphere of the mother's voice is an emblem of infantile plenitude and bliss. Viewed from the site of the preconscious/conscious system, it is an emblem of impotence and entrapment (Silverman 1988: 72–73).

Nita's changing function towards her children (also siblings), if mapped through the contradictory frameworks that Silverman identifies in Rosalato and Chion, dovetails into one harmonised progression that the film's narrative represents. Early in the film, Nita spends her earnings to secure the emotional needs of her siblings. We see Nita and her children in a park, a happy mother that keeps her flock together while the children wallow in the all-round bliss. On her birthday we see her with a different set of children (father and elder brother Shankar), this time enveloped by bountiful nature and abundance. Auditory pleasure of the mother's world is represented through the sensory pleasure. But as things turn progressively ugly, the children encounter their moment of subjecthood through successive flights away from the mother's world, first the younger brother followed by her sister and finally the elder brother Shankar. It is in Shankar's

escape that Ghatak realises Chion's terror in the umbilical night. On the night of departure, Shankar gives a music lesson to Nita, enveloped in a dark space, its sonorosity not reaching the outer world, but merely reverberating within a seemingly vast space that the *mise-en-scène* can not articulate adequately. The scene represents for this author the traumatic moment of the end of *gestalt* and release from the entrapment of the womb. Shankar leaves for Bombay into the ordering world of the father, representing a one-way journey and securing his subjecthood in the bargain.

Shankar's immersion in this mother's world prolongs much beyond that of the other siblings for whom needs do not extend into desire. But for Shankar, the necessity of a good shave of his facial hairs is like a desire around which he circumvents ceaselessly and gets satiated only by the bountiful Nita. Yet another moment of pre-subjecthood in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* that comes with its affective association is Nita's teasing of Shankar via the incantation of a childhood rhyme. Shankar is prone to repeat this rhyme for an equal and opposite effect. Shankar internalises this rhyme as much as he objectifies it, suggesting the blissful world that he shares with Nita. In the words of Kaja Silverman:

The notion of an "acoustic mirror" can be applied with remarkable precision to the function which the female voice is called upon to perform for the male subject. Within the traditional familial paradigm, the maternal voice introduces the child to its mirror reflection, "lubricating", as it were, the "fit". The child also learns to speak by imitating the sounds made by the mother, fashioning its voice after hers. However, even before the mirror stage and the entry into language, the maternal voice plays a major role in the infant's perceptual development. It is generally the first object not only to be isolated, but to be introjected (Silverman 1988: 80).

Silverman explains with the help of psychoanalysis that the mother's voice is usually the first to be isolated by the infant from other noises, and that it is by imitating the sounds she makes that it produces its own initial articulations and also hears itself. The function of the mother as narrator of lullabies, bed-time stories and rhymes is something shared by numerous cultures. The child recognises this voice long before it identifies her body, and hence it remains mostly unlocalised during the formative moments of subjectivity. Also, the maternal voice has a role to play in the mirror stage when it defines and interprets the image and fits it to the child.

Disavowal of the maternal voice

What is of importance is the subject's relation to the maternal voice once it has been securely inserted in the world of symbolism and attempts to achieve a discursive mastery. Language not only helps the subject to transcend its insufficiency, but also provides a strong tool of disavowal of the mother's voice that is considered as semiotically insufficient and equivalent to the cry of the child. The subject goes through a process of refinement of his voice and deposits everything that is unfit into the voice of the mother. There are sufficient instances of this deposit in Hollywood cinema through disembodiment and muting the female voice.

Silverman elaborates:

In both the cinematic and theoretical paradigms, the discursive potency of the male voice is established by stripping the female voice of all claim to verbal authority. And in both instances that divestiture most pointedly negates the mother's earlier role as language teacher, commentator, and narrator (Silverman 1988: 77).

This paper intends to highlight that in muting the voice of Nita in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the maternal figure absorbs the lack of the male child. While Nita's iconic centrality is unmistakable, it is her relative insignificance in the aural track that appears to be structured by conventional social norms and history. For Ghatak, this lack is both conventional and historical. While the latter provides the overarching ambience for the narrative, it is the conventional norms that are activated repeatedly only to violently rupture them in the end. On the other side of placating Nita as the mother figure, Ghatak creates an identification with Shankar, the most sympathetic of her children. In the end this identification proves disastrous for the male viewer as we see Shankar, proverbially, drive the last nail in her coffin by leading her into a state of paranoia and extracting a scream. He is the last of her children to desert her. But how did they arrive here?

It is through a network of voices and a subliminal aural track that Ghatak creates a strong affective identification with Nita, while concurrently feeding a subterranean lack that lurks in the shadow waiting to pounce. In the film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, our opinion of Nita is continuously formed by what other people *like* to talk about her, what other subjects like to *imagine* about her, what other individuals *want* of her. Such *liking*, *imagining* and *wanting* comes from a lack that is endemic to these characters, the nature of which I have already discussed. Cloud-Clapped Star – the title of the film, is one such epithet into which Nita has to fit in. The epithet far precedes her subjectivity and is tamed by it. She does everything possible within her means to be a perfect cloud-clapped star. The epithet comes from a letter written to her by her lover Sanat and is



Screen shot 4

read out aloud to us by Shankar, her brother. Besides her performance of coyness, we are not led into any interrogation about Nita's thoughts on the epithet. It is a silence that tacitly forges a false consent garbed by her own admission of the relationship. It is a trap that she not only falls into but nurtures too, failing to realise that every step renders her subjectivity ineffective.

Such silences mark Nita's progress into oblivion and are most conspicuous at her moments of deprivation. She not only discontinues her education and forgoes her relationship with Sanat and buries all her personal dreams, but actively participates in her own deprivation. Her consent to deprivation needs no manufacturing. A silent nod, hidden tears or a digression into babble is what she could muster at such moments. At that rare instance when she is critical of Sanat, she needs to borrow phrases (*Don't fall...*) from the father and duly cites him too. Discursive mastery is not granted to her on the aural plane. A dialogue is never initiated in which she could perform herself. As the narrative progresses to internalise Nita in closed, dark spaces, she becomes afflicted with tuberculosis and her voice is marked with coughing. Consequences, decisions and remarks are posted to her and she becomes the repository of the unsaid violence that is contained in those postings. Such a repository is conditioned to absorb the violence without reflectance. In the case of Nita, such conditioning is the result of a systemic disavowal of her voice by her children. One can easily surmise that such violence is the result of an endemic sense of lacking in her children and her community, partly conventional and partly historical, which I have already discussed.

Conclusion

The idea that every action has an equal and opposite reaction has a long-outlived rationale, rather, an action is completed by the affection that it engenders. The action and affection are tied together to form a whole that defies causal explanation but has the potential to complicate the terms in which they are bound. If the film *Cloud-Capped Star* represents one unified action – that of muting Nita and disavowing her voice, then her existential scream represents the affect that this action brings in its fold. Through every spoken word, sounds and silence, the film moves towards this paroxysm that the scream represents. The scream becomes the fatal identity of Nita, her hybridisation (of the mythic, the historical and the individual) paves way for pure effect. But quite unlike the films that Kaja Silverman discusses in her book *Acoustic Mirror*, Ghatak has a much more radical use for this scream. He mobilises the scream to rupture the subjecthood in which the audience is made to fit in throughout the film. The audience's identification with Shankar becomes fraught with doubts and guilt, while Nita's excessive cry shatters the mastery that it enjoyed through controlling her. The meticulous construction of subjecthood now stands dismantled as the troubled conscience of the male child realises the inadequacy of the Real in which he had reposed faith. From here, Nita's children can neither move forward nor turn back, as millions of screams continue to mark Bengali history. The continued celebration of Nita's scream in Bengali cinophilia is therefore a celebration of one's stagnation. A path towards the future can only be charted through a cognisance of this collective disavowal.

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Ritwiko Ghatako „Meghe Dhaka Tara“: feministinis požiūris į filmo garsinę struktūrą

SANTRAUKA. Menotyrininkė Kaja Silverman teigia, kad Holivudo filmų kūrėjai linkę sistemingai menkinti moterų vaidmenį kine tam, kad neatstumtų vyriškosios auditorijos dalies. Ritwiko Ghatako filme „Meghe Dhaka Tara“ („Debesimis nuklotas dangus“) yra kelios tokios linijos. Viena iš svarbesnių – vyras išsižada motinos įtakos jo tapatybės formavimuisi ir neigia ją kaip kalbos šaltinį. Vaikas pradeda vartoti kalbą bendraudamas su mama vaizduotės lygmeniu, ir tai K. Silverman vadina „choro situacija“. Tokia kalba formuoja emociinę vaiko psichiką ir žadina jo savastį (analogiškai kaip Jacques'o Lacano „veidrodžio lygmuo“, arba „akustinis veidrodis“). Gimstantis subjektyvumas ir vėlesnis jo neigimas išryškėja per Nitos santykių su vaikais (broliais, seserimis, mokiniais) įvairovę. Filme susitapatinimą su vaikais lydi ir kaltės jausmo perkėlimas motinai, kurį ji užgniaužia tylėjimu. Jos rauda – riksmas „broli, aš irgi norėjau gyventi!“ – filmo pabaigoje tampa ilgai slopintų emocijų proveržiu, kuris patenkina žiūrovų vyrų ego: brolis, paskutinis jos „vaikas“, ją galutinai palaužia, pareikšdamas, kad kuria savo šeimą.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI:

archetipas, subjektyvumas, motinystė, vaikas, išsižadėjimas, kastracijos kompleksas, balsas, „akustinis veidrodis“.