

Ritwik Kumar Ghatak: Subaltern *Auteur* of Bengali Cinema

by

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MSS, University of Dhaka, 2015

Extended Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in the

School of Communication (Dual Degree Program in Global Communication)
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Summer 2017

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Abstract

In 1947, as the British colonial rulers left, the local leaders chose to have the entire South-Asian subcontinent partitioned into two countries basing on a sectarian ground: India and Pakistan. Pakistan was born into two slices apart from each other by sixteen hundred kilometers of Indian territory to home the Muslims of the area and human history experienced the largest exodus ever. The border between the then East Pakistan and India remains the “ most porous border” till today (Ghosh, 2016). This border divided the people of Bengali ethnicity into two in the name of religion; riots broke out, trauma lingered. Usually, such significant historical events get wide coverage in film and literature. But, that did not happen to Bengal as the people of both the countries chose national/religious identity over ethnic identity. The uprooted and migrated people who were looking for 'home' in exile become the subalterns who could not speak out their trauma. Gayatri Charkarvorty Spivak suggests in her 1988 piece titled “ Can the Subaltern Speak?” that subaltern-ness is a position without identity (University of California Television [UCTV], 2008). And even they managed to speak, they were often overlooked and silenced. Ritwik Kumar Ghatak, being a refugee himself, wanted to communicate his trauma and identity crisis caused by the Partition'47 through his films; all his films failed to reach the audience of his time. After decades of his demise, his films remain as indictment of a time the people of Bengal wanted to overlook. This paper attempts to read Ghatak as a subaltern filmmaker who tried to pen down what his people i.e. the refugees wanted to speak out, by providing a close reading of his Partition trilogy, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1962).

Keywords: Partition, Ritwik Kumar Ghatak, Subaltern, Bengal, Film.

Dedication

To all those people who strove for a home in exile.

Acknowledgements

This capstone paper is indebted to a number of people who helped, guided, influenced and challenged during the writing phase when it often changed its trajectory. The first and foremost person to be thanked is my supervisor Dr. Zoë Druick for her utmost support throughout the entire year. Then, I would like to thank Dr. Yuezhi Zhao, who not only brought me to the Double Degree program but also opened up the door to intellectual possibilities I could not have imagined otherwise. I must thank Dr. Adel Iskandar for his constant support and guidance. I also want to thank Dr. Katherine Reilly and Dr. Kirsten McAllister who had always been very supportive. I want to give thanks to Dora Lau, our program coordinator, for being always so patient, positive and prompt in dealing with all our administrative questions and personal mishaps during our first year of graduate studies. I am also thankful to DOXA where I had amazing experience as an Intern. I am also grateful to our program TA, Xiaoxing Zhang and colleagues Anis Rahman, Sara Sagaii and Xueqi Wang who were always there to hear out whenever I was confused. I want to thank my entire amazing cohort. Outside of this program, I want to thank Dr. Davina Bhandar, Dr. AJM Shafiul Alam Bhuiyan, Dr. Swapan Kumar Bala without whose academic advices my first year of graduation might not be as much meaningful as it is now. Outside of this program, I want to thank Dr. Davina Bhandar and Dr. AJM Shafiul Alam Bhuiyan; without their academic advices my first year of graduation might not be as meaningful as it is now.

I had never stayed away from home for this long, but I survived because my friends Antara Roy, Afsarina Runi, Neelima Biswas and their family was always a phone

call away whenever I needed them. And last but not the least, I thank my family. It is a very tough journey that my mother and my siblings are making. Finally, it is needless to say whatever I do, they are always infinitely indebted to my father, Gopal Chandra Biswas.

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Introduction

As a member of the minority Hindu community of Bangladesh, I am part of a group that made a conscious choice not to leave the land they were born in during the Partition, 1947. Either my family/community was too brave to reject the notorious Two Nation Theory expounded by Muhammad Ali Jinnah,¹ or they were too afraid to start anew in “exile”. Either way, I feel they had a strong notion about what “home” is. But in the present time, when I look into the ever- declining percentage of Hindu population in a Muslim land and when one of our most renowned scholars, Dr. Abul Barakat, predicts that “[n]o Hindus will be left after thirty years” (Hasan, 2016, n.p.). I am reminded that I am part of a minority group that is still trickling out through “ the most porous border” to find the “promised” home for Hindus (Ghosh, 2016). Maybe that is the reason why Ritwik Kumar Ghatak was a household name for me; the elders of the family spoke fondly of his films and references from his films were often made. We, as a community, felt thankful to this filmmaker as he was the one who tried communicating all our doubts, trauma and crises in a most beautiful way. But my friends and neighbors representing the Muslim majority often thought otherwise. For them the national identity of being Bangladeshi presided over their ethnic identity of being Bengali. By the time I had started working with Jahangirnagar University Film Society as an undergraduate student, I knew

¹ Jinnah called for a separate land for Muslims when the British Raj finally ended and proclaimed, "Islam and Hinduism ... are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but are, in fact, different and distinct social orders, and it is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality, and this misconception of one Indian nation has troubles and will lead India to destruction if we fail to revise our notions in time. The Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, literatures. They neither intermarry nor inter-dine together and, indeed, they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their aspect on life and of life are different ... To yoke together two such nations under a single state, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing discontent and final destruction of any fabric that may be so built for the government of such a state." (Panigrahi, 2004, p. 151-2)

Ghatak was “our” (i.e. Hindus and other minority communities) only voice in the last seventy years of Alternative Films.² But, at the same time, I have also known that most of my classmates from schools in Bangladesh did not know much about Ghatak and those who did often thought his works were too complex to comprehend. Many more would reject his films by calling them simply boring. It is difficult to figure out whether they pretended or truly believed that only film activists ought to understand and value his films. There was this awkward unease in every regular conversation whenever Ghatak and his films were mentioned. Many of the regular cinema goers recommended that we concentrate on Bangladeshi films only, emphasizing that Ghatak was not one of us, even though he was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh’s capital city.

I came to learn that Ghatak’s works do not conform to the established national identity which most of us proudly bear. And as his works keep questioning the dominant concepts of nationalism in the South Asian subcontinent and its history, there is and perhaps always will be an aura of discomfort around his films. Ghatak passed away in 1976 knowing that his films had all failed and the next year he was posthumously granted the only national award he ever received for a film he had released a couple of years before. He was reinvented decades after he passed away when his daughter Shamita Ghatak founded Ritwik Memorial Trust in 1982. Growing up, I tried to make sense of the negligence towards this great filmmaker and his works, most of which were on the theme

² The Alternative Film Movement (or Parallel Film Movement) originated in the state of West Bengal, India immediately after the Partition and reached its heyday during the early 1950s. The films emerged as an alternative to mainstream commercial Indian cinema. It is often said that this movement was inspired by Italian Neo-realism. The movement was initially led by Bengali cinema with filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Kumar Ghatak, Tapan Sinha and others. It later gained prominence in other film industries of India and Bangladesh. The films are heavily based on the socio-political climate of the time (Ray, 1976; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004).

of Partition. Ghatak started his career in Kolkata (then Calcutta) as a refugee when his family moved to West Bengal from Dhaka. As a refugee himself, he noticed how the cries of the refugees were not reaching those in decision-making power. To communicate his trauma he moved from one form of art to another while trying to express the crises caused by Partition. This paper sees the refugees as subalterns because they were socially, politically and geographically outside of the power structure, as are the minority communities of Bangladesh; they represent the group of people about whom Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak has posed the seminal question, “ Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988). In a 2004 keynote talk hosted by University of California, Santa Barbara titled “ The Trajectory of Subaltern in My Work” she stated that, “ I see subalternity as a position without identity” (University of California Television [UCTV], 2008). Almost all of Ghatak’s films deal with the identity crises of the refugees in a post-Partition Bengal. Even though all his contemporaries had praised him highly and consider him a master, he was not paid much heed. He did not share the same vision about a free and liberated India whose conception had made him rootless and homeless and he did not adopt the dominant language and grammar of film to communicate. He stood out as an *auteur*³ with his unique style and agenda to fight the hegemonic structures of power which wished the history to forget the sufferings of the “unimportant” people who had no home in order to celebrate independence and sovereignty of the new nation.

³ Auteur Theory is one of the cinematic theories of Cahiers du Cinema founders Andre Bazin and Alexandre Astruc, according to which “An auteur (literally, an author) is a director who is considered the most important figure in the art of filmmaking, a creative person equivalent to the author of a novel or a play” and “a film can be seen as the product of a single creator, one artist—the filmmaker.” Thus, “an auteur is any director whose distinct style has left a recognizable mark on his work” (Santas, 1992, p. 18).

This paper explores the manifold layers of Ghatak's struggle through three of his major works on the theme of rootlessness caused by Partition, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961), and *Subarnarekha* (1962). This Partition trilogy is immensely important as social indictment of the post-Partition Bengal. During the Partition of 1947, both Bengal and Punjab were affected and comparisons are often made between the two. Most often Punjab is considered to have coped much better as people rehabilitated fully in a one-time exchange of population. Also, "the massive influx of refugees and uprootedness was not reflected in Bengali literature to that extent as the Punjab experience was in Hindi and Urdu literature" (Mandal, 2008, n.p.). The film scenario is no exception. There are numerous films on the Partition of Punjab, many of which were commercially successful, while Bengal has only a handful. Somdatta Mandal lists six such films in her 2008 essay "Constructing Post-Partition Bengali Cultural Identity through Films" and Ghatak figures prominently in all of them, acting in one (*Chinnamul*, 1950); directing three (the Partition trilogy); and as the subject of another (*Ekti Nadir Naam*, 2003) (Mandal, 2008, n.p.). Thus, Ghatak, like a one-man-army, tirelessly chronicled a most important phase of South Asian history through his works as the subaltern *auteur* of Bengali Cinema. Ghatak himself stated that, "In my films, I have tried to portray my country and the sorrows and sufferings of my people to the best of my ability" (Ghatak, 1987, p. 34). Within its limited scope, this paper attempts to read Ghatak's Partition trilogy films in the light of *auteur* theory and subaltern studies. Even after seventy years, the Partition of Bengal still matters as it is the most significant historical event that has shaped the present day geo-political crises between the two Bengals i.e. West Bengal and Bangladesh. Even though the homeless generation has

already withered with deep trauma hidden under their wrinkling skins and the second-generation refugees have almost undergone assimilation, the exodus of the neo-subalterns did not stop. And, somewhere in Ghatak's films, they could be heard.

I grew up watching Ghatak's films and even my earliest experiences of them were overwhelming. Each screening brought new meanings to me. To accept that such a filmmaker was not well-comprehended by the audience was difficult. I find it extremely confounding that the present Bengali audience flocks to Hollywood films like *Inception* (2010) and *Interstellar* (2014) but fails to assess what Ghatak wanted to communicate. The voice that never reaches its destiny is the voice of a subaltern. Therefore, this paper tries to read Ghatak's Partition trilogy in the light of subaltern studies. Besides, as each of Ghatak's films has an uncanny resemblance, they seem to all be signature pieces by Ghatak. So, the paper also attempts to see Ghatak as an *auteur*. To reach the goal, I read Ghatak and his films along with the historical background of Partition that subtends them. After delving into the history, I provide a literature review exploring the existing works on Ghatak. I then establish my theoretical framework and undertake my analysis of the trilogy. I conclude that Ghatak's failure to have more of an impact on the Bengali movie-going audience says more about the historical context than it does about his films.

The Partition According to Ghatak

In 1947, mid-August, when the South Asian sub-continent earned its independence from British rule, the political leaders were divided as to their respective goals and opinions about how to rule this huge land. It seemed that the age-old “divide and conquer” tactics deployed by the British Raj had finally achieved their logical end with the Muslims of the land considering themselves as “other” from Hindus. Muslims feared that if the British just pulled out, they would surely suffer at the hands of overwhelming Hindu majority. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the president of All-India Muslim League, was the representative of the Muslim demographic. He rejected the notion of a united India, and emphasized that religious communities were more basic than an artificial nationalism. He proclaimed the notorious Two-Nation Theory in Lahore on 22 March 1940, on the basis of which two new nations were born in 1947: India, also known as Bharat (in Bengali) and Hindustan (in Hindi, meaning the land of Hindus); and Pakistan (meaning the land of purity, as Muslims consider their religion as the purest) which led to the Great Calcutta Killings.⁴ Following from this, the British Raj announced plans to leave in August of 1947, a year earlier than planned. Overnight, East Bengal became East Pakistan, and West Bengal became a part of India and both saw their fair

⁴ The Indian National Congress, which was the largest political party, rejected Jinnah’s proposal to tear up the country outright. The Muslim League called a general strike on 16 August, 1946. They termed it as the Direct Action Day, to protest Congress’ rejection and to assert the strength of Muslim feelings both to the British and to Congress. Riots broke out mainly in Bengal province. Muslims represented the majority of the population (56%, as against 42% of Hindus), mainly concentrated in the eastern part, the only province in which a Muslim League government was in power. On that day, four thousand Hindus were killed in Calcutta alone, which earned it the name “Great Calcutta Killings,” and later the whole week with its abundance of killings, forced conversions, arson, abductions, rape and ethnic cleansing, became known as “The Week of the Long Knives” (Jalal, 1994).

share of violence; people started fleeing, not much in search of home in “exile” but more to escape ethnic cleansing (Hasan, 1995).

The forced migration or exodus, whatever we may call it, came with a lot of trauma and tales of unbearable pain of being uprooted. Moreover, people in both parts of Bengal started overlooking the trauma the uprooted people were going through and concentrated more on the glory of “earned” independence which reminds us of what French historian Ernest Renan had stated in his 1882 lecture titled “ What is a nation?” : “ nations are based as much on what the people jointly forget, as what they remember” (cited in Gronstad, 2016, p. 175).

But within decades, both the parts of Bengal learnt that (according to one of Ghatak’s characters from *Subarnarekha*, Figure 1; see Appendix) “ We’ve been cheated. Somewhere we’ve been cheated.” West Bengal faced severe negligence from the central government in India, even though it needed more attention than at any other time. Streams of refugees led to job crises, price hikes, supply shortages, accommodation crises and the like. While in the eastern part of Bengal a brewing agitation had already started which eventually compelled East Pakistan to break free from Pakistan as a new nation called Bangladesh in 1971. And then both the Bengals got busy in undergoing a collective amnesia, in much the way Renan described. But Ghatak denied withstanding this politically motivated oblivion.

Bengal's Political Filmmaker

We must note that Ghatak was not the only prominent filmmaker to make films about the politics of the sub-continent. Two other contemporary maestros, Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, were scathingly political too. But while Ray and Sen were flooded with national awards and often with funds too, Ghatak never received a national award during his lifetime. Ghatak finished his first film *Nagarik* in 1952, but could not find a distributor for it. The film was finally released in 1977, a year after Ghatak passed away. It was ready to be released one year prior to Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1953) and as such it could easily have been the first Bengali art film. Instead it had to wait twenty five years to get released. Yet nothing could stop Ghatak's pursuit of reaching out to people to communicate his thoughts. In his 1967 essay "My Coming into Films" he disclosed that he had primarily began his struggle as a writer and wrote "a hundred short stories and two novels." He noticed that "though literature is a terrific medium, it works slowly...there is an inadequacy in the medium" (Ghatak, 1967, p. 1). For Ghatak literature as a medium was remote and was "limited to a very small readership" therefore, he joined "a new wave of dramatic literature" led by Bijan Bhattacharya, an actor whom we find in all his films. For a while he thought of theatre as a more potent medium and he became an active member of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) but when it struck to him that he could communicate with more people "at one go" through films, he adopted filmmaking as his medium of choice. He wrote, "My coming to film has nothing to do with making money. Rather it is out of a need to express my pangs and agonies about my suffering people" (Ghatak, 1967, pp. 1-2).

When after both *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1962) failed miserably to find an audience and no one was ready to produce his next film, Ghatak did not stop. He went back to theatre, worked professionally for ten years till his true “motherland” finally heard his plea. It was called Bangladesh then, and a Bangladeshi producer, Habibur Rahman Khan, funded his new film *Titash Ekti Nadir Nam* which was released in 1973 and proved to be the last film he would complete during his lifetime (Khan, 1973). The reason behind this sheer negligence to such a promising filmmaker is his defiance to share the same vision that the Nehru government had. For example, in the very first shot in *Subarnarekha*, through cross-cut edits, he shows how on one side the refugees are hoisting the Indian national flag and chanting words of praise for India, while on the other “agents of India” (i.e. landowners) are forcibly loading refugees into trucks like so much garbage to be transported to a dump elsewhere. Ray and Sen both were critical and political, but neither of them pushed the limits so vividly. Studying Ghatak is also important because in comparison to the works on Punjab Partition, there are only a handful of films on Bengal Partition: *Chinnamul* (1950), *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961), *Subarnarekha* (1962), *Tahader Katha* (1992), *Chitra Nodir Pare* (1999), *Ekti Nadir Naam* (2003), *Rajkahini* (2015) and *Shankhachil* (2016). Three of these nine films are made by Ghatak, which are also his most notable works, the Partition trilogy: *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1962); he acted in *Chinnamul* (1950); and *Ekti Nadir Naam* (2003) is based on his struggles. Thus, Ghatak almost single-handedly kept the history of the unbearable sufferings and sighs of Partition alive.

Literature Review

There is an extensive literature dedicated to Ghatak, especially considering that he made only eight films in his lifetime and was never commercially successful or popular. The primary reason for such overwhelming number of works may stem from the self-enforced collective guilt that we, as a nation, have terribly wronged this beautiful mind. And, as a Bengali cineaste, if you are considering topics such as Partition, theatre movements in Bengal and India, Alternative/Parallel Film Movement, Indian political films, Third Cinema from the Global South, Marxism or Maoism in Bengal, or the Naxalite intelligentsia, you simply cannot avoid Ghatak. From prominent film scholars such as Manishita Dass (2017), Fahmidul Haque (2010), Naadir Junaid (2013), Geeta Kapur (2000), Somdatta Mandal (2008), Sanjay Mukhopadhyay (2014), Ashish Nandy (2007) and Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1982) to acclaimed fiction writers such as Nabarun Bhattacharya (2014), Sunil Ganguli (1989), Samaresh Majumder (1980)—many notables have turned their attention to Ghatak. Political scientists and historiographers like Christiane Hartnack (2012), could relate to his works while acclaimed filmmakers like John Abraham, Mani Kaul, Kumar Sahani, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Saeed Akhter Mirza, Kamallesh Mukherjee, and Sumon Mukhopadhyay have all asserted Ghatak's influence on their works through different pieces. A quote by Satyajit Ray, from the foreword of Ghatak's *Cinema and I* could justify this wide array of intellectuals writing or working on Ghatak:

In a career that spanned over twenty-five years until his death in 1976 at the age of fifty, Ritwik Ghatak left behind him eight feature films and a handful of unfinished fragments. Not a large output if one considers him only a filmmaker. But, Ritwik

was much more than just that. He was a film teacher ... he was a playwright and producer ... he was also a writer of short stories ... As a creator of powerful images in an epic style he was virtually unsurpassed in Indian Cinema.” (Ray, 1987. p. 11)

Ghatak was also known for his alcohol addiction and Marxist leaders of Bengal often called him a representative of “Lumpen” culture. Nabarun Bhattachaya notes that his critics mostly refer to his alcohol addiction only when they talk about his political films, as a means to disregard his views and work (Aniruddha Nath, 2015).

It is not very difficult to assess that the lion’s share of this literature is overridden with a collective guilt and most of the writers try to unveil the manifold layers of Ghatak’s films. This paper does not intend to merely recapitulate those works, but offers to read Ghatak’s Partition trilogy as subaltern texts in the light of *auteur* theory. To do so, it will provide a close reading of the films. It will then explain and substantiate the poetic *auteurship* of Ghatak in the three films, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1960) and *Subarnarekha* (1961), i.e. the Partition trilogy. In so doing, I hope to illuminate his films through their importance as records of traumatic political events.

As mentioned, one of Ghatak’s contemporaries was Satyajit Ray, who is the most internationally famous and celebrated Bengali filmmaker. After Ghatak’s demise, Ray himself remarked that “ Ritwik was the most “Bengali” amongst us” (Raychaudhuri, 2000, p. ix), which acutely denotes that to even try to critique Ghatak’s films one needs to have a proper and deep inclination to comprehend the socio-economic situation in pre- and post-Partition Bengal. Many film-enthusiasts have later turned Ghatak into a demigod or prophet whose vision was beyond the grasp of his fellow Bengalis in his lifetime, including the enlightened intelligentsia. Thus, Bengal has actually allowed

“outsiders” to be the first to theorize Ghatak’s works. At times, some of this literature has added useful insights, but in most of the cases they just added useless and confusing “subjective” distortions and, strangely enough, readers have accepted them without much criticism. Souvik Raychaudhuri, in his doctoral dissertation which later came out as *Partition Trauma, The Oedipal Rupture, Dreaming: The Cinematic Will of Ritwik Kumar Ghatak* (2000), fueled his write up with an urge to understand the Bengali context that drove most of Ghatak’s work. According to Raychaudhuri, becoming severed from the motherland generates a trauma which in Sigmund Freud’s terms is “ Oedipal.”

According to this reading, Ghatak is Oedipus while East Bengal is the mother. The politicians represents the father figure, which had severed the bond between the son and the mother. He collected particular details from Rabi Chatterjee, Ghatak’s art director and one of his closest associates which certainly gives the reader insights into Ghatak’s trauma/obsession about Partition and a lost homeland. But, this piece lacked Ghatak’s political visions as it focused more on Ritwik’s agony for a lost land, an obsession he shared many other writers (Raychaudhuri, 2000).

Among the very few pieces that actually addresses the transition that takes place in Ghatak’s work of the portrayal of East-Bengal refugees, popularly called “Bangals” with a ridiculed intonation in West Bengal. One such piece is Priyanka Shah’s “ Of Roots and Rootlessness: Music, Partition and Ghatak” (2014). In this article Shah discusses how the lower middle class of the West Bengal society is formed by a Western discourse. She reveals how the “natives” of West Bengal had labeled the homeless population who had migrated from East Bengal as “ refugees,” which both intensifies their longing for an utopian homeland that was lost and then stupefies them with an identity crisis. Whenever

ridiculed, maybe the first few times there are instances of fighting back, but gradually the protests grow feebler like a tree without roots. They pacified themselves with a lot of examples of what might have happened if they had not left their ancestral land to settle in Kolkata. Shah focuses on uses of music in Ghatak's Partition trilogy to illustrate her claims (Shah, 2014).

Manishita Dass's essay "*The Cloud-Capped Star: Ritwik Ghatak on the Horizon of the Global Art Cinema*" is one of those pieces which sound very "guilt-ridden" and full of sympathies to a tragic soul whose works were not celebrated during his lifetime. It starts by recounting how the writer first gets to see the original prints of Ghatak's films, which were almost totally destroyed by neglect. Then, Dass elaborates that these shabby film reels work magic on their audience, which many modern art films fail to do. Next, she gives accounts of his years in the Pune Film and Television Institute in India and how he has encouraged a number of present filmmakers. Dass views him as one of the brightest stars who almost never earned admiration from on-lookers because he was metaphorically "cloud-capped"; once the star is gone, everyone laments about its disappearance. Dass then also comments on how a number of his works could be called masterpieces and deserving of serious readings and analyses. This essay describes how Ghatak's films were neglected and it resonates Nabarun Bhattacharya's claims that this negligence was a deliberate attempt to silence Ghatak's voice (Dass, 2010). In a second essay by Dass, "Unsettling Images: Cinematic Theatricality in the Cinema of Ritwik Ghatak," which elaborates the conflation of filmic and theatrical techniques in Ghatak's films and eventually explains the Brechtian techniques that Ghatak has used to rouse the alienation effect, Ghatak's use of melodrama, co-incidences and music is analyzed. Dass

wants to explain that Ghatak's use of Brechtian method provides "a powerful mode of affective engagement" with which we cannot disagree, but her analysis fails to explain why such powerful mode was not warmly received. In some ways, it is the aim of this paper to begin where Dass has left off (Dass, 2017).

In "Tracking Partition Discourse in the Films of Ritwik Ghatak," Kaifia Ancer Lasker argues that the "polysemic interpretation of frontier" is often associated with the dialectic of a nation's frame and thus any rearrangement with respect to it is a popular subject among the intelligentsia. Lasker tries to outline the influential discourse in the films of Ghatak from the feelings of those dispossessed and displaced from everyday life in post-Partition West Bengal. According to her, "Partition remains a wound in the collective psyche of South Asia and ... its representation on screen enables forms of historical engagement that are largely opaque to standard historiography" (p. 43). Lasker argues that Ghatak's works provide historical engagement to stop the collective amnesia that would make us pretend that Partition was a minor byproduct of our struggle for independence (Lasker, 2014).

Erin O'Donnell's "“Woman” and “homeland” in Ritwik Ghatak's Films: Constructing post-Independence Bengali cultural identity," which was published in *Jump Cut* in 2005, is one of the most frequently cited works in English language academic pieces written on Ritwik Ghatak and his films. O'Donnell's work provides considerable historical content ranging from Ritwik's film spirit being sparked while acting in Nemai Ghosh's *Chinnamul* to providing the approximate number of the refugees that came to Calcutta in 1947; from explaining the symbolic whiplash of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* to the failure of the Muslim League. She elaborates how Ghatak has introduced melodrama in a

very theatrical manner by being influenced by German playwright Bertolt Brecht. But, we already know these things in detail from Ghatak's own writing, masterfully collected and edited by the Ritwik Memorial Trust in the volumes *Cinema and I* (1987) and *Rows and Rows of Fences* (2000).

Apart from the aforementioned works, I also find Anindya Raychaudhuri's 2009 essay "Resisting the Resistible: Re-writing myths of Partition in the works of Ritwik Ghatak" immensely helpful because it is the only piece that has focused on unveiling the methods of making history and describes how both the Bengals are heading towards the "state-sanctioned" versions of the countries and their pasts (Raychaudhuri, 2009, p. 469).

In addition to the works cited above, this present paper largely relies on noted film scholar Ashish Rajadhyaksha's *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic*, the first extended criticism of Ghatak's work in English, which explores Ghatak's trauma, vision and cause with a deep understanding of Ghatak's use of myth, music and metaphors; Ghatak's own compilations, *Cinema and I* (1987) and *Rows and Rows of Fences* (2000); Sandipan Bhattacharya and Sibaditya Dasgupta's book of interviews with Ghatak (2003); the lecture series of Naadir Junaid on Brechtian Methods and Third Cinema (2013) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (2010).

In order to read and analyze Ritwik Ghatak's Partition trilogy, this paper has adopted a close reading methodology, using the films to understand the filmmaker's political and philosophical view-point as well as to explain his passion to communicate the trauma of Partition which has dominated most of his works. This paper then attempts

to read Ghatak's works as subaltern texts and to elaborate this great chronicler's efforts to save the memory of a most important time of Bengali history.

Ritwik as an *Auteur*

An *auteur* is a singular artist who controls all aspects of a collaborative creative piece, equivalent to the author of a novel or a play. The term is commonly used to refer to filmmakers or directors with a recognizable style. André Bazin, noted film scholar and editor of *Cahiers du Cinéma* along with Alexandre Astruc came up with this concept during the French New Wave film movement. Francois Truffaut was a regular contributor to *Cahiers* and had provided savage criticisms of commercial films. While working with *Cahiers* he decided to make films that would be different than the films he was reviewing and, in 1959, his first film *400 Blows* was released marking the beginning of the French New Wave. Truffaut and his compatriots, such as Jean-Luc Godard, were making films with unprecedented methods of expression. They were using unusually long tracking shots, jump cuts, location filming with non-professional actors; featuring existential themes filled with irony and sarcasm; and leaving intertextual⁵ clues for their baffled audience which became a recognizable style (Thompson & Bordwell, 2010). In the same decade, miles away, Ghatak was also making similar experiments on a shoe string budget (Santas, 1992, p. 18). Ritwik Kumar Ghatak was an out and out *auteur* and way ahead of his time. Therefore the Bengali middle class could not understand his magic and aura during his lifetime. That is the reason why noted scholar Nabarun Bhattacharya has said that “ when he shot films from unusual camera angles, fierce criticism rose that he was breaking the film grammar in a drunkard state, but in reality, the morons did not know he was making a new grammar” (Aniruddha Nath, 2015, n.p.).

⁵ Intertextuality is a literary device that creates an 'interrelationship between texts' and generates related understanding in separate works (Macksey, 1987, p. xviii).

Maybe he owed his *auteur*ship to a number of artists who had closely worked with him all their life with utmost dedication, such as Bijan Bhattacharya who brought the best kind of melodrama in his films with his acting skills; Jyotirindra Moitra who did the music arrangement in most of Ghatak's films⁶; Bimal Ray, from whom Ghatak had learnt the technicalities of camera; and his crew who were always ready to take on any improvisation or last minute changes Ghatak would ask for. And there lay his ultimate *auteur*-ship. We should note that Truffaut's *400 Blows* (1959) and Ghatak's *Bari Theke Paliye* i.e. *Runaway* (1958) shared resemblances as far as the narrative goes, but while *400 Blows* was sweeping away national and international film festivals, Ghatak's film was neither awarded nationally, nor promoted internationally. He was entirely out of favor. The West Bengal provincial government was already overwhelmed with the refugee issues and Ghatak's films and theatre pieces bearing scathing criticism were no help to them. But, on the other hand, even after producing "unintelligible" films that flopped one after another, the Bengali intelligentsia still adored him. He was straightforward and defiant and his words could mortally wound and still his film had the most impact on the filmmaking generation that followed. He could complete only eight feature length films and all of them are made in his signature style. He brought theatre into his films; his films were overloaded with unusual camera angles, novel edits, melodrama, epic theatre techniques and so on, which not only made him an *auteur* but also made him a precursor of another film movement: Third Cinema.

⁶ It is rumoured that when Ghatak had no budget to pay a proper singer for his film *E-flat*, Moitra managed to make an orchestra out of slum-children from Kolkata (Aniruddha Nath, 2015, n.p.).

Third Cinema evolved from a famous quote by Frantz Fanon, “ we must discuss, we must invent” (1969, p. 33), and it questions the structures of power, aims to liberate the oppressed, engages questions of identity, opens a dialogue with history to challenge established narratives, facilitates interaction among intellectuals, and jolts an otherwise passive audience with challenges to reflect on experiences of subordination. The term was coined by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their manifesto text “ Towards a Third Cinema” (1969). Third Cinema is “third” because geopolitically Third Cinema represents the “third world,” i.e. the global south. Aesthetically, these films create a “third” style of cinema, with commercial cinema being the first and “art” cinema being the second. Third Cinema sees films as a means to fight against oppression and creates a site for struggle for the voiceless. The movement criticizes social and economic inequalities as well as both external and internal forces of oppression. It borrows the desire to provoke political thoughts from theories of Soviet montage; implements hand-held shots with non-professional actors in unusually long takes in natural light and often with ambient sounds from shooting locations as with Italian Neo-Realism and the French New Wave. It offers spatial and temporal leaps like jump cuts and cross cuts with genuine ambiguity; blends myths with history and dreams with documentary-like realism (Solanas & Getino, 1969). And, whenever we refer to Third Cinema from Bengal the first and almost the only name that comes forward is that of Mrinal Sen. Sen is undoubtedly devoted to making films that would jolt the audience and compel them to think and question. Yet, strangely, no one refers to Ghatak’s films as being part of the category of Third Cinema. This cannot be because Ghatak’s works predate the category, because even though Ghatak’s films from the 1950s have showed

early signs of Third Cinema, he was still active when Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino were writing “Towards Third Cinema.” One could hardly find a director more devoted to questioning the dominant hegemonic power by opening up a dialogue between the audience and the screen in Bengal. And if the aforementioned qualities according to Solanas and Getino are applicable to Third Cinema films, then Ghatak had made them almost a decade before they came up with the movement and, alas, they had run an entire film movement without knowing they had a precursor. All this happened because Bengal was not listening to one of the greatest communicators of all time, because he was speaking from the margins, as a subaltern.

Ghatak Speaks of the Subalterns as a Subaltern

When in 1983 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was formulating her ground-breaking essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” which came out in 1988, she was immensely influenced by the works of Mahashweta Devi, from whom she drew many examples. Devi, Ghatak’s niece, had written extensively about the class struggle of the marginalized Indigenous Shantal people of India. In an interview with Joshy Joseph, Devi stated that she had been often accused of turning a blind eye to the urban marginalized class (MS Banesh, August 1, 2016). But her uncle had not—he was portraying both struggles. For example, his *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo (Reason, Debate and a Story)* (1977) captures Indigenous people in villages about whom Devi was vocal, while *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) and *Komal Gandhar* (1961) portrayed the struggles of marginalized people in cities. Even though Spivak never mentioned Ghatak’s works in her essays, I think Ghatak makes sense in the trajectory of Subaltern studies.

“Subaltern” is an identity which has no possibility of social mobility, no possibility to speak or to be heard and eventually accepts wretchedness as a usual affliction. As a post-colonial theorist, Spivak developed her ideas to explore how post-colonialism had been able to understand and give voice to the colonized, especially the “least powerful group,” i.e. the subalterns. Her essay points out that it is difficult for anyone looking in from outside a colonized group to grant them speech for two main reasons. First, as the evidence is collected by someone outside those groups that are based on words, not real experiences it leads to “logocentric assumptions.” These assumptions are inherently restricted, often misleading and built on the study of only part of the total

experience. Second, there are intellectuals who attempt to ““speak for” the subalterns, rather than allowing them to speak for themselves” (Spivak, 2010, p.43)

Altogether the concept of subalternity calls for a more complex and nuanced reading of Ghatak’s films. Not only did Ghatak speak as a subaltern, but a number of intellectuals emerge to “speak for” Ghatak after his demise. Ghatak showed us that subaltern is not a homogenous group. For example, in his film *Subarnarekha* (1962), we see that in a refugee colony, the long- practiced *caste* system was useless as refugees were dragged into a garbage van irrespective of their gender, caste and origin. Thus, Spivak and Ghatak seem to share a similar concept about subalternity; the subalterns are a heterogenous group of people occupying the margins of the society who have been denied access to networks of communication. Ghatak himself strove to speak through different media and was repeatedly silenced.

In a post-Partition Kolkata with an influx of millions of people, the ration from the central government was inadequate and prices of regular consumer goods were inflated. Recession hit the employment sectors and food became scarce. The people who migrated from East Pakistan to West Kolkata for a new home learnt there was no home; yet they could not return because what used to be their forefathers’ property now belonged to the Muslims. They got a new name, “refugee,” one who floats without a home, commits petty crimes to survive, cannot raise a voice because no one listens to them and survives like a parasite. They were growing fast in number and had no roots. They were the subaltern whom Ghatak represented. He was born in Dhaka, then East Bengal, now Bangladesh. His father, Suresh Chandra Ghatak, was a district magistrate, a poet and playwright while his mother, Indubala Devi, was a housewife.

Ghatak and his twin sister Prateeti were the youngest of their family's nine children. By the time they had to leave Dhaka due to the Partition, his twin sister was already married to a local businessman and her in-laws chose to stay back. Ghatak and his family had to move to Calcutta (now Kolkata) in that "exodus" leaving the youngest of the family in a perilous land which happened to be their home. Ghatak did not see her for the next twenty-five years. The severe agony stemming from this rootlessness made him a true representative of the subalterns.

As a representative of the refugees Ghatak was socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure. In order to be heard he needed an "elite" nationalist vision," which he did not conform to. Therefore, according to Bijan Bhattacharya, Ghatak became the victim of "epistemic violence" of "hegemonic discourse" which often renders the subaltern mute. According to Bhattacharya, Ghatak was murdered because he was the voice of the refugee and the dominant hegemonic power was not ready to hear him out; he was silenced with continuous negligence, he was made exhausted as a part of a greater scheme. Just as P. B. Shelly, in *Adonais*, claims that John Keats' "savage critics are to be blamed for Keats' death, similarly Bhattacharya enforced the view that "Ritwik was murdered!" (Morris, 2010; Aniruddha Nath, 2015).

Ghatak figured that he must reach out to his audience before he could be heard by the decision-making structures of power. And, he always believed in turning a passive audience into a thinking one, just like German playwright Bertolt Brecht. As a theatre artist, Ghatak was amazed at Brecht's methods and techniques. Brecht would, at times, flood the audience with lights, often had his characters freeze to create a tableau effect, and made his characters address the audience directly to break the fourth wall. And, this

new form of theatre earned a new name, Epic Theatre. Brecht's Epic Theatre was designed to make the audience question and critique by interrupting the rhythm of the act. These sudden jolts—also known as the alienation effect—are meant to compel the audience to think. All these techniques intend to make it clear to the audience that they are watching a play, an act, and reality could be far different. The primary goal of Epic Theatre was to banish escapism. The story-line of the play should not be a pastime accommodating a short-term refuge from harsh realities. Ghatak explored all these techniques in abundance. In an essay written in 1987 titled “ Experimental Cinema and I” he wrote:

In my humble opinion, *Komal Gandhar* probably tried to break the shackles that strait-jacket our cinema. It has a pattern and an approach which may be tentatively called “experimental”. *Subarnarekha*. Here is a film in which I tried to deal a straight knock-out blow to the nose. It pulls no punches. It has been called melodramatic, and probably rightly so. But critics should remember the name of a gentleman called Bertolt Brecht, who dealt with coincidences and who developed a thing called the “alienation effect”. (Ghatak, 1987, p. 34)

It has already been mentioned a couple of times that Ghatak was a theatre person first and foremost who adopted filmmaking only to communicate to a larger potential audience. And, evidently he did not forget the charms theatre could bring to films. All his films are successful examples of how Brechtian methods can work in films and *Subarnarekha* along with *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo* should top the list. And, we must not forget, Ghatak started using Brechtian techniques a decade before Solanas and Getino

started promoting them as Third Cinema component and way before *Screen* theorist⁷, Colin MacCabe, in his “ Realism in the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses,” put forward a critique of realism in films which provided escapist fodder for uncritical audiences and tried to theorize modes of cinema that could foster critical audiences (MacCabe, 1974).

Like Brecht, Ghatak also conflated the alienation techniques with melodrama. Implementing melodrama was important for Ghatak. Ghatak belonged to East Bengal and spontaneity, loud expressions, and even louder gestures are definitive features of those who live in that region. Melodrama also fascinated him because it usually contradicts the sense of reality and therefore can be used as a technique to dismantle the fourth wall between the audience and the stage/screen. These modes of excess are common features of Bengali folklore as well. Bengal has very rich oral literature and performative art forms. The Sanskrit word for drama, *natya*, which derived from *nrit* (dance) with its highly stylized nature and emphasis on spectacle, where music, dance and gesture combined “ to create a vibrant artistic unit with dance and mime being central to the dramatic experience,” are at the core of all Bengali performative art forms. These regional traditions include the *Yatra* (or *Jatra*) which elaborates mythical and legendary tales of local gods and goddesses as well as heroes and legends, and *Ramlila*, which

⁷ The British film journal *Screen* laid out many of the central tenets in the field of film studies. Primarily its authors sought out to find a way of theorizing a politics of freedom through cinema which emphasized diversity over unity. *Screen* had been in existence since 1958 and was run by the Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT). Young scholars Colin MacCabe and Stephen Heath joined the editorial board of *Screen* in 1973. The most outrageous, energetic, controversial and optimistic write ups came into being between 1974 and 1976, from different scholars and theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Raymond Bellour, David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, Edward Branigan and many others. Though *Screen* theory focused a lot on analyzing films mainly from the perspectives of psychoanalysis and Marxism, arguably the most enduring influence on *Screen* theory was of the German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht (Junaid, 2013).

portrays the tales of the *Ramayana*. Besides, *punthi*-reading where one performer sings and narrates the local tales was a daily source of entertainment before electricity had reached the villages of Bengal. And, for special occasions, people still hire several singing groups who relay tunes to one another; music does not stop for days as a part of *yachna* (prayer). Ghatak grew up within these heavy doses of melodrama and music. Therefore, his use of melodrama and folk songs is not only a technique to create an alienation effect but also a tribute to Bengali Indigenous art forms. In addition to that, Ghatak used melodrama as an exhibition of defiance and denial of the “elite” forms of imported art forms that conform to Hollywood genres. I now turn to his Partition trilogy to see how Ghatak was striving to come up with a subaltern language of cinematic expressions.

Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud-Capped Star) (1960): Neeta's Long Days' Journey into Night

As the title suggests, this film charts the story of Neeta, a young woman who lives in a refugee colony in Kolkata with her family. The family moved in due to the Partition and since then it has been difficult to make ends meet. Neeta has the potential of a bright future but, like many others of her time and circumstance, she has been withering behind the clouds of poverty, selfishness and injustice. Her family lost everything during the Partition and now lives in a refugee colony. Neeta's elder brother is a free soul who wants to be a singer and therefore has no intentions to spoil his future by taking a clerical job to support his family. Her father is elderly and another younger brother became disabled while working in a mill that did not provide a safe working environment. Thus, Neeta becomes the sole bread-winner for the refugee family, not only supporting the family, but also supporting her fiancée Sanat with his educational expenses (Figure 2). After Partition, survival became so tough that Neeta's mother did not want to lose Neeta to Sanat. She convinces Neeta to choose her family over her fiancée. Sanat grows impatient, dropping out of his PhD programme to take up a well-paid job. He grows attracted to Neeta's younger sister as Neeta sacrificed her gracefulness to a heavy workload. Meanwhile, Neeta's mother allowed her younger daughter to seduce the elder's fiancé to make sure that Neeta would be staying home to support the family. Within a few months, Sanat realizes he chose the wrong woman, but there is no way to fix it now as his wife is expecting a baby. Neeta's father remains a silent observer till the very end of the film when Neeta's eldest brother—now a successful singer—finds out that she has been suffering from severe tuberculosis. She is sent to a sanatorium as TB

could be harmful for her sister and Sanat's expected baby (Figure 3). Her anguished wish to survive echoes as the screen darkens immediately after a scene where her old father points directly towards the audience saying "I accuse" (Figure 4). His accusation could not be more appropriate as it is the silent, un-protesting audience who had by then become accustomed to suffering and to see others suffering as well. It captured a "waste" land and time through the recurrent folk wedding song that refers to Neeta as the mother deliverer who goes by many names, such as Jagaddhatri, Uma, Gauri, and Parvati. According to Hindu mythology, it is a holy duty of parents to marry off their daughters in time. Violation of this duty is considered a sin. To avoid being sinners, parents often used to marry off their daughters to even dying old men. Ghatak here criticizes both. On one hand, he chides that sort of marriage and on the other refers to a time when even parents are too helpless to allow the sole bread-winner to have a family of her own. To underscore this idea, Ghatak shows us another girl struggling toward an ill-paid office job with a broken sandal, just like Neeta. We drown in a deep silence as he indicates that this is going to be a cycle of shame that will not stop until everyone takes action.

Komal Gandhar (E-Flat) (1961): Tale of Trauma Told in Music

Komal Gandhar's story line starts at a theatre where the protagonist Bhrigu (in reference to the mythological character who is known to have left his footprints on the chest of God) plays the role of an elderly refugee. He believes in radical theatre and the name of his theatre group is Niriksha (experiment). Bhrigu meets Anushua, the lead actor of rival theatre group Dakshinapath (meaning the right path, but also connoting the right wing and elite class). Even a few years back the members of the two groups were members of one single group and they parted ways as the leading lady of Dakshinapath, Shanta, thought Dakshinapath's presence was not valued by Niriksha and they were not getting enough of a role in decision-making. But when Anushua (meaning "the lady who cannot hate and be jealous") joins Dakshinapath and meets the members of Niriksha, she feels the motto of both the teams are the same and therefore suggests that together they make a stronger team and collaborate on grander projects. The lead actors decide to collaborate on a mythological play, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, which centers around Shakuntala who is leaving her home to go to a different land in search of love but finds that her beloved does not remember her anymore and denies the child they had together. Her beloved, King Dyushwant, could not remember her because his memory was erased by some evil charms. While doing this play it was again sabotaged by the same group of people whom Shanta leads. After the failure Anushua sees that Shanta and the rest are bursting out in laughter thinking that they had won the war by humiliating the art form they claim to serve. In the end, Anushua leaves Dakshinapath knowing that re-unification

of these two groups is not possible. Bhriгу and Anushua eventually decide to get married and the film ends with a touch of happiness.

The title *Komal Gandhar* or *E-Flat* denotes the softest note of the sharpest scale (Bhaskaran, 2010, p. 63). So does the film: it communicates in manifold layers of metaphors. In one hand, it talks about the Partition and its trauma in similar way, soft yet sharper. The two theatre groups symbolize the two slices of Bengal. The way they talk about their philosophy about theatre symbolizes the common culture and ethnicity the two Bengals share. The “sabotage” indicates how the partition happened to satisfy the gloating greed for secure political careers of “nation-builders” (Ghosh, 2016). Shanta apes the way Jinnah talked about Muslim rights. And, Ghatak had already learnt how to muzzle his hopes of re-unification. Through the sabotage during the collaboration signifies the fact that even though the two pieces of Bengal try to unite, they will not be able to. There will always be forces like Shanta to interrupt the union. In a different context, this splitting of the two theatre groups also refers to the rift within IPTA, which was an association of leftist theatre-artists of India. It was split into several teams under the leadership of Ahindra Chowdhury, Sombhu Mitra and others. Then comes the layer of Shakuntala who is leaving the place where she was born and grew up, symbolizing the refugees’ exodus. The feeling of nostalgia is heightened by the theatre groups’ visit to Lalgola, a city near Padma river where each of the characters express their deep love for a lost land which used to be their home. We see Bhriгу and Anushua trying to figure out where exactly their homes were on the other side of the river Padma (Figure 5). Bhriгу adds, “ So near ... I’ll never be able to go back again” —because it had become a foreign land to him after the Partition (Figure 6). In addition, Ghatak also shares his visions and

philosophy of a film or play, by being highly self-relexive. Ghatak has always questioned his own methods, only to find a better one. In the opening scene we see a “drama within a drama” format and that drama, called *Dalil* (document), was actually written by Ghatak during his IPTA days. After Anushua meets Bhrigu she asks why he uses melodrama and big gestures and reflects that she deems acting best when it looks natural and has softer gestures.

Finally, when Ghatak shows that Anushua and Bhrigu are committing to each other, we see that Ghatak is still hopeful that the status of refugees might change, exhibiting Ghatak’s lifelong desire to go back home to the other side of the Indo-Pak border. This film is most appreciated by scholars such as Rajadhyakhshya and O’Donnell for Ghatak’s use of a folk wedding song that relates to the concept of *naiyor* (the bride’s visit to her father’s place by boat) as well as for his intricate inclusion of theatre. The most iconic scene from this film takes place beside an abandoned railway line which previously connected the two Bengals and now symbolizes separation (Figures 5 and 6). This film is heavily loaded with symbols which denotes one of Ghatak’s many efforts to communicate the political situation in post-Partition Bengal.

Subarnarekha (The Golden Line) (1962): A Scathing Criticism of Post-Partition Bengal

Ghatak began his political and cultural activism with a hope that the two slices of Bengal will someday unite. He belonged to the generation that had known greater Bengal's cultural identity but also its history of togetherness dating back to time immemorial. The people from both Bengals (West Bengal and Bangladesh) not only spoke the same language, but also had the same food, dress, and superstitions. Yet, as time passed, geopolitics became messier, and Ghatak started seeing things in a different way, as expressed by the character Haraprasad who boldly claims that “ We’ve been cheated. Somewhere we’ve been cheated” (Figure 1). His characters call the Radcliffe line an “ absurd border” which had taught the peaceful Bengali people what riots are and what partition of a country means.

Subarnarekha is the last film of the Partition trilogy and it indexes the failure of post- colonial/post-Partition nationalism through a grand narrative while exploring the concept of “home in exile”. The film opens with a national flag hoisting scene in a refugee colony where the refugees have inaugurated a school for the kids on the Jalliwanwala Bagh Massacre Day. The children are chanting ‘*bharat mantra*’ praising their new nation, India. Haraprasad (God’s offering) has named the refugee colony Nabajiban (new life) and will be teaching the children Bengali and Sanskrit while his friend Ishwar (God) will teach English and History, implying that in a post-colonial India, even God is required to bear the legacy of colonialism. Meanwhile Ishwar’s sister Sita expresses her doubts to Haraprasad about their “ new home” ; according to Robert Frost’s “ Death of a Hired Man” , “ Home is the place where, when you have to go there,

“They have to take you in.” But, what was happening in reality was far from this Frostian “home”. In the next shot we see a low-born *dalit* woman named Kaushalya and her son Abhiram looking for some shelter and most ironically being rebuked by another refugee who is trying to maintain differences based on caste and place of origin. In the same continuous shot the woman and the man she was seeking help from were both taken away by guards of the landowner in charge of illegal occupation of land. Like the subalterns they are, both of them remain unheard. Here, Ghatak again proves that subalternity does not denote a homogenous group. Somehow the son Abhiram flees and Ishwar saves him. In a cross-cutting edit, we see how, on one hand, the state-favored landowners are picking up refugees in a truck as if they were garbage to be dumped elsewhere, and on the other the same refugees are trying to cope with their new “home”, nationality and “motherland”. The detail of the truck shows that despite their own perceptions, everyone who had come from East Bengal is melted down into one caste and origin: that of a refugee.

In a similar way, the city of Kolkata was also choked with an overwhelming influx of migrating people, which made accommodation impossible, depressed the job market and exhausted limited rations, including food. Therefore, when Ishwar goes to a newspaper headquarters to seek help to find Abhiram’s mother, we see a newspaper sub-editor poses a seminal question, asking “who isn’t a refugee in Kolkata?” (Figure 7). Thus, within minutes, Ghatak puts forward an array of questions that need to be answered in order to justify the new Indian nationalism. Almost all his works have centred around such questions and, by the time *Subarnarekha* was released, he had learnt by heart that they will never be answered; he will have to pay a price for what he has been doing so

far, as Haraprasad ends up doing. Ishwar finds a job in a remote village of West Bengal, Chhatimpur, and leaves the colony with Sita and Abhiram; Haraprasad calls him “deserter” but Ishwar succumbs, only to find the home they were promised when they were leaving their own land in the name of nationalism. Haraprasad exclaims that he will continue his fight: “ He who limits himself to his family is not even living” (Figure 8). Thus the entire film is a heartbreaking pendulum between hope and hopelessness.

Later, we learn that Haraprasad’s wife has committed suicide because she can no longer tolerate the semi-starvation of the kids and Haraprasad comes back to meet Ishwar as a ghost. Here, we are given a hint that this is Ghatak’s allusion that revolution, which was God’s offering (i.e. Haraprasad), is not meant to have an easy trajectory. As Mahashweta Devi, who was the real-life partner of the actor Bijan Bhattacharya who portrayed the role, once said in an interview, “ we thought revolution was just behind the lamp post, but it wasn’t” (Seagullbooks, 2016, n.p.).

And in the end, the God i.e. Ishwar is deemed as an extremely helpless figure who somehow managed to find a home after his caste-conscious employer offered him a job at a rural district (Figure 9). In this home, his sister Sita and Abhiram grew up to fall in love with each other. Even though Ishwar is very fond of Abhiram, he disapproves of their marriage when it was revealed that Abhiram belongs to the lower caste. Ishwar contemplates that if the employer comes to know about the inter-caste relationship between his sister and Abhiram, he might lose his job. Losing the job would again make him homeless. Ishwar does not want to be a refugee again, so he opts to save his job by conforming to the caste system. Eventually, Seeta and Abhi elope and Ishwar loses his family due to his conformity towards social structures of powers. At one point when

Ishwar plans to commit suicide, Haraprasad appears in the scene like a ghost from the past. He, then, takes Ishwar on a tour to explore what Haraprasad calls the “ neo-liberal means to gratify senses.” Here, we get to see a different Kolkata: race horses to gamble on and night- clubs with fountains of alcohol playing soft tracks from Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*. This Kolkata is utterly different from the Kolkata’s depressed refugee colonies. It is no wonder that with all this going on Kolkata does not have time for the needy refugees who have arrived in droves demanding shelter and rights. During this phase Ghatak uses a unique arrangement to explore intertextuality: quotes from *Upanishads* and Eliot with the striptease number from Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* offering a thick amalgamation of political comments and poetic truths. They gamble, get drunk and submit themselves to a pimp. Coincidentally, Ishwar ends up at the door of his own sister, Sita, who is now widowed with a son; she had eloped with low-born Abhiram who had chosen the career of a writer over the secure life of an engineer. Abhiram had to become a bus-driver at the very end as people do not want to read miseries in books and was burnt alive by an angry mob when his faulty bus hits a school-girl. Ghatak here draws our attention to the severely unsafe working environments for the working class as well as introducing us to the violent mob which expresses its suppressed anger by burning another human being alive as a part of post-Partition “catharsis”. And all this could have been avoided if only there were a casteless society. Seeing her drunk brother as her first “client” Sita decides to end her life. After two years of this case, Ishwar was finally found “not guilty” but when a reporter asked for his comments, in another classic direct address scene, we see Ishwar directly blaming the audience for all the tragic ends in post-Partition Bengal, “ You’re guilty: you, me, all of us” (Figure 10).

After that, Ishwar starts a new journey with his nephew as now Binu is also enquiring about a new home. This ceaseless search for a home and every refugee's struggle to cope up with a new identity is what comes with all the horror, hate, pain and yearning for a familiarity and foregone love. *Subarnarekha* feels like a beautiful pastoral elegy written to mourn the death of greater Bengal that ends with elegy's signature hope. Ishwar, portrayed as an epitome of God, never lies and years back when the clown-like slapstick Mukherjee was giving false hopes to Sita about a beautiful home near the golden line, he rebuked him for lying to children. Therefore, when in reply to Binu's incessant queries, Ishwar says he will take Binu to their new home, it seems soothing and comforting. It is Ghatak's symbolic suggestion that there is still a lot left in him; he had more tales to tell and his search for "home" is not over yet. We never see Haraprasad again. He is the most melodramatic character; he supplies the role of the Shakespearean clown who presents the most savage criticism in a way which made the audience chuckle. Nobody takes a clown seriously, but they address the most important issues, social anomalies and overbearing injustices. Haraprasad, in his final scenes comes back to say the most dreadful words for those who, like Ghatak, believed either in a "new home" in a new land or dreamt of an unified Bengal. When, reflecting on rootlessness and a failed struggle, he says "we've been wiped out ... See, we're totally defeated" it seems to be the words of a lamenting artiste foreshadowing the defeat that awaits. After this film, as Ghatak could not manage to find a producer, he went back to professional theatre.

Within seven years from *Subarnarekha*'s release Ghatak was separated from his family and sent to a mental asylum to cure his alcoholism. Paradoxically, during this period when nobody was funding Ghatak's films, the then-prime minister came to his

family's aid immensely. Ghatak was not only offered a job at the Film and Television Institute of India in 1966 as per the strong reference of Mrs. Gandhi but also, when he fell mortally ill while wrapping up the shooting of his last film *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*, he was brought back to Kolkata in a private helicopter. Nabarun Bhattacharya has often been skeptical about the motive behind this sudden attention towards Ghatak who could never finish a film within its expected time due to unmanageable financial crises. His films were never promoted to an international level nor did he receive any significant award till his career was sure to end (Aniruddha Nath, 2015).

Conclusion

As I have argued in this paper, Ghatak matters because he is one of the very few Bengali filmmakers who not only adopted film as a weapon to fight the socio-political crises as a subaltern *auteur* but also believed that films can bring changes and solutions. He showed unyielding defiance as a communicator and strongly prevented the erasure of the trauma that Partition caused. He almost single handedly preserved historical memory in his fictional works through what Salman Rushdie has termed *chutnification*.⁸ In each of his movies he maintained a strict historical timeline. In addition, I have argued that Ghatak was an auteur, showing the earliest signs of innovations associated with various film movements. Take his *Bari Theke Paliye* which was released in 1958, one year prior to the release of *400 Blows* by Truffaut considered the earliest example of French New Wave Cinema. But both these films have similar narrative and treatment. He also showed the filmmaking world how being poetic can come to your aid when you deal with politics, an approach later taken up by Iranian New Wave filmmakers.

Ghatak also implemented many Epic Theatre techniques to create the “thinking audience” that Solanas and Getino’s Third Cinema movement promoted a decade later. And *Nagarik* was certainly a pioneer film of Art Cinema. Ghatak was perhaps the most critical soul in Bengal who had tried every idea of social change and eventually rejected

⁸ The word “*chutnification*” was coined by Salman Rushdie in his novel, *Midnight’s Children*; *chutni* is an ancient way of preserving seasonal fruits and vegetables so that they could be tasted all year round. But, the spices and minerals that are used in preserving it eventually kills the actual taste of the preserved vegetable or fruit. It starts having its own smell/taste and ends up in our daily meals either as inevitable side-dish or as mouth-watering dessert. Similarly, when a piece of fiction (it could be either film or novel) attempts to preserve history with storyline it may not qualify as a documentation, but can turn out to be extra-ordinary slice-of-life indictment of a particular time. Thus history could be pickled in fiction.

them all. His identification with that tide of refugees defined his philosophy and practice. He was engrossed with an overriding metaphor for cultural dismemberment and exile that eventually unified his subsequent creative work. The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, which led to more refugees fleeing to India, had a similar impact on his work. At that time he, along with many others, suffered from a different anguish. The “if”s kept travelling the alleys and galleys from Calcutta to Dhaka; long sighs for a bereaved land grew heavier. “If” this were to happen, “if” East Bengal was not meant to belong to Pakistan, “if” it was only for twenty-four years, why would Bengal go through the sectarian violence of riots? Thus, in these and doubtless many other ways, Ghatak mattered as a politically aware artist and activist who protested the active scheme of surrendering the ethnic identity of being a “Bengali” to an emerging nationalism and earned in return a segregated homeland, based on sectarian grounds. He died knowing his entire life was a failure; but whether he failed us or we failed him is the ultimate question.

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Appendix: Figures



Figure 1: “ We’ve been cheated. Somewhere we’ve been cheated” , says Haraprasad in *Subarnarekha* (1962) while reading the news of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Indian nation being shot by Nathuram Godse implying that there must have been something acutely wrong which got Gandhi killed by an Indian. Could it possibly be Partition? Still from *Subarnarekha* (Rajshri Pictures Private Ltd., 1965) .



Figures 2: Neeta stopped her MA studies to take up a job to support her family and fiancé. Still from *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Chitrakalpa, 1960).



Figure 3: Neeta is asked to leave the house because she suffers from TB which could potentially be infectious. Still from *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Chitrakalpa, 1960).



Figure 4: Neeta's father directly accuses the audience for their complete silence. Still from *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Chitrakalpa, 1960).



Figure 5: Bhriku and Anushua go to visit Lalgola, a city near Padma and became nostalgic about the home they have left behind. Bhriku expresses his helplessness in the face of a political border that had compelled him to accept his own home as a foreign land. Still from *Komal Gandhar* (Chitrakalpa, 1961).



Figure 6: Anushua is also trying to locate a place on the other side of the Padma River. Still from *Komal Gandhar* (Chitrakalpa, 1961).



Figure 7: The newspaper sub-editor retorts “Refugee— who isn’t!” Still from *Subarnarekha* (Rajshri Pictures Private Ltd., 1965).

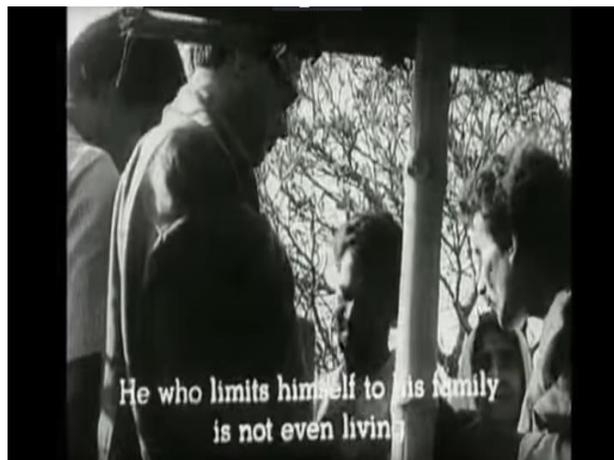


Figure 8: Haraprasad says, “He who limits himself to his family is not even living.” Still from *Subarnarekha* (Rajshri Pictures Private Ltd., 1965).



Figure 9: Ishwar's employer chides him for giving shelter to Abhiram without knowing his caste and whereabouts and says "Caste is everything". Still from *Subarnarekha* (Rajshri Pictures Private Ltd., 1965).

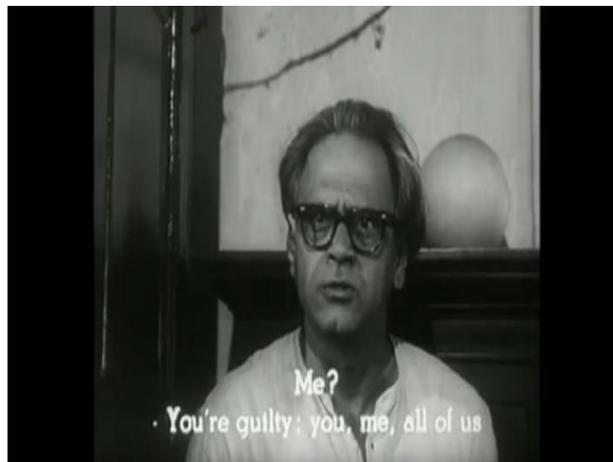


Figure 10: Ishwar's iconic direct address where he gives the verdict that the audience and their passivity is to be blamed for whatever is happening in the post-partition Bengal. Still from *Subarnarekha* (Rajshri Pictures Private Ltd., 1965).