



Reading Bhadrakok Cultural Memory, Kitsch and Culture Industry In Ritwik Ghatak's Films

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Abstract

The paper problematizes Ghatak's Marxist treatment of the Bengali as well as the Brahmanical repertoire of cultural knowledge, for the purpose of carving out a Communist significance of the period. Rather than a recontextualization of traditional myths, the paper reads in this attitude a nostalgic particularistic abstraction of a rich array of aesthetic ideas, which are best appreciated in their diverse cultural context. The paper argues that Ghatak utilizes creative opuses of vast potential to serve political goals, with an aim of strengthening the East Bengali immigrant population in post-Partition West Bengal. The paper criticizes how Ghatak breaks down the traditions from different spatial and temporal coordinates for serving the representation of the plights of the Bengali Refugee – making a powerful integrated identity of the traumatized subject at the expense of erasing class, caste, communal and gender distinctions. In this, there is an effort to fashion an imaginary unified East Bengali sub-national entity, which is politically evened out for realization of unique identity and clout.

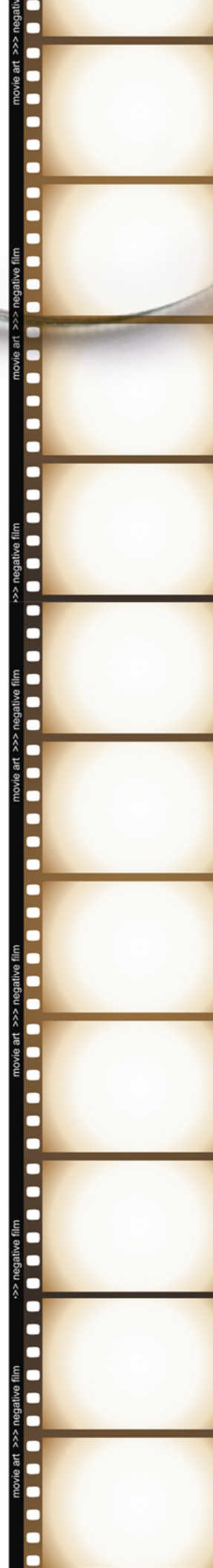
Keywords: Ritwik Ghatak; bhadrakok; memory; kitsch; culture industry; film



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Reading Bhadrakok Cultural Memory, Kitsch and Culture Industry In Ritwik Ghatak's Films

Sarbani Banerjee

Introduction

Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976) is an immigrant Bengali filmmaker and scriptwriter from Dhaka, best known for his cinematic oeuvres on Bengal Partition. He received Padma Shri for Arts (1970) and Raj Kamal Award for best story for his film *Jukti, Tokko aar Goppo* (1974). Ghatak was born in an upper middle-class family in Dhaka (currently the capital of Bangladesh). His father Suresh Chandra Ghatak was a district magistrate, poet and playwright, and his elder brother Manish Ghatak was a radical writer of his time, an English professor and an IPTA theatre activist, who also headed the Tebhaga Andolan in North Bengal. Manish Ghatak's daughter is the renowned author and social activist Mahasweta Devi. The Ghatak family had migrated to Calcutta prior to the Bengal famine (1943) and the country's Partition (1947), which merges their identity with the wealthiest and the most facilitated displaced sections from East Bengal. Additionally, Ghatak's marriage to the Communist Party member Sadhana Roychowdhury's niece Surama Devi insinuates political connections that had strengthened his position as an intellectual within Calcutta.

The paper problematizes Ghatak's Marxist treatment of the Bengali as well as the Brahmanical repertoire of cultural knowledge, for the purpose of carving out a Communist significance of the period. Rather than a recontextualization of traditional myths, the paper reads in this attitude a nostalgic particularistic abstraction of a rich array of aesthetic ideas, which are best appreciated in their diverse cultural context. The paper argues that Ghatak utilizes creative opuses of vast potential to serve political goals, with an aim of strengthening the East Bengali immigrant population in post-Partition West Bengal. The paper criticizes how Ghatak breaks down the traditions from different spatial and temporal coordinates for serving the representation of the plights of the Bengali Refugee – making a powerful integrated identity of the traumatized subject at the expense of erasing class, caste, communal and gender distinctions. In this, there is an effort to fashion an imaginary unified East Bengali sub-national entity, which is politically evened out for realization of unique identity and clout. Although Ghatak claims the entire East Bengali refugee populace as 'my people,' no economic or cultural oneness can be identified between the artist and his subjects. Ghatak belongs to an elite pedigree, therefore it is essential to consider the inherent differences between his own familial standing and the destitute Bengali refugees that he portrays in his works.

While studying Ghatak's films, the paper's approach affirms Ananya Jahanara Kabir's position that the past has been treated in a questionable way by the artists. In the context of the

Partition films, Kabir suggests a more productive dialogue with the past through “using artwork and analysis not merely to continue valorizing some sites of memory – such as the [east] Bengali village – but to unravel how those processes shape the present, even by marginalizing other modes of remembering...” She points to the necessity of a “complicated memory” that irresolutely struggles against naturalized omissions and selections, “in order to reach a more searing level of honesty within ourselves as compromised subjects of a still-traumatic rupture” (ibid).

In the case of Ghatak’s Partition films, the memories, to begin with, bring up alternative perspectives that intervene the mainstream nationalistic narratives in important ways. However, his works have a homogenizing tendency, as they bank only on conservative immigrant *bhadralok* ideologies, obscuring the non-*bhadralok* refugee’s subjectivity. Such memory formation looks back at the Partition-induced tragedy in terms of a shared resentment that engulfed men’s ‘possessions,’ which include their women and territorial ownership.¹ Although women play the central characters in Ghatak’s films, their choice is overstrained by mythological and historico-political symbolisms.

When discussing Ghatak’s audience, the paper points to those scholars who invest *bhadralok* immigrant’s perspectives in comprehending the post-Partition period to read his films. Their analyses accentuate the likelihood of celebrating ‘kitsch’ formations in Ghatak’s works. The

paper's understanding of the term 'kitsch' is informed by Milan Kundera's analysis of the uninventive, politically over-sentimental yet dictatorial culture of communist Czechoslovakia under Soviet invasion. 'Kitsch' helps to explain the refugee *bhadralok*'s sentimentalized memory and its use in Ghatak's films, which has similar relation to power and politics as the wave of 'cultural communism' in Czechoslovakia. It discusses how Adorno's perceptions on Culture Industry can be applied to understand Ghatak's desire of boiling down an entire cultural pool into the Communist movement.

Centrality of the *Bhadralok* Cultural Memory in Ghatak's Films

What Ghatak remembers as his 'Rural Bengal' of boyhood, is "...revelling in [its] fairy tales, *panchalis*, and [its] thirteen festivals in twelve months...." (2010 n.pag.). In his film *Komal Gandhar* (1961), the female protagonist Anasua states that the loss of this 'Rural Bengal' amounts to the loss of *nischindi*. Banerjee describes *nischindi* as "an almost prelapsarian peace and contentment that comes of unruptured belonging". She states that in *Subarnarekha* (1965), Ishwar's tragic error begins with his coming out of the Natun Jiban Colony and desiring for *nischindi* in a reconstructed home. She, however, does not elaborate what the nature of this *nischindi* is and why it is difficult to seek peace outside the colony life. In the film, just as in reality, colony life is dominated by the *bhadralok* refugees, whereas outside the power structure of colony,

the East Bengali *bhadralok* Self is threatened by the presence of the non-*bhadra* ‘Other.’ As *Subarnarekha* delineates, this ‘Other’ comprises Dalit refugees and Marwari business-class people. Hence, the *nischindi* that could only be found in East Bengal villages and afterwards in the refugee colonies of West Bengal, and which was disrupted outside these settings is characterized by a homogeneous identity and class-caste status-quo, and its true color is *bhadralok* Bengali Hindu-ness. Such a *nischindi* therefore dwells on hierarchy and nourishes a sentiment of parochialism.

There is a tendency by Ghatak to build on the same structure of feelings of the middle-class *bhadralok* audience that he aims to censure in his films. Rather than challenging the romantic, the sentimental, the nostalgic and the archetypal,² his strategy is close to the program of *Jugendstil* (German) as described by Adorno: “By choosing objects presumably cleansed of subjective meaning, these films infuse the object with *exactly that meaning which they are trying to resist*” (1991, 182). Putting together ingredients that touch the core of the collective *bhadralok* cultural memory, Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) draws its feat, not so much by criticizing the popular tropes, as because of containing them. Ranging from Tagore’s songs to *baul* and Federico Fellini, the montages and sound effects create a dialogue between individual and nature (O’Donnell 2009, 211). Together these tropes resonate with the prized intellectual assets of the Bengalis, which,

when placed against Partition, commands an overwhelming and catchy emotional excess. In the words of Megan Carrigy, Ghatak links “the refugee experience – the experience of exile – to folk and epic forms which together expand into an investigation of film form. They are the key elements of Ghatak’s originality in the cinema – *a potent mix*” (2003 n.pag., emphasis mine). His filmic technique is also based on the principle of shock, and borders on Adorno’s definition of pseudo-revolutionary films. Referring to *Anything Goes* from the 1930s, Adorno defines the traits of pseudo-revolutionary films as propagating a formal movement beneath the external veneer of indeterminacy.

According to popular audience response, Ghatak’s frequent applications of *baul*³ songs in his films are meant to focus on the lower-middle-class and the grassroots. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), the *baul* song refers to the female protagonist Nita’s impasse, and by alluding to a forlorn boat without a boatman, material anxieties expose the spiritual crises of Nita’s lower middle-class family. In *Subarnarekha* (1965), where the *baul* takes on a poetic serenity amid the chaotic Natun Jiban colony life, the audience is made to believe that Ghatak’s camera incorporates even those who do not belong to the *bhadra* Hindu refugee fold. Priyanka Shah points out that Ghatak’s film *Jukti, Tokkoar Goppo* (1974) forms the apotheosis, which tends to chart “a shift to the marginalized domain of the *Santhals*, the subalterns whose culture and specific historicity has bypassed the politico-cultural ethics of the self-conscious middle-class Bengalis...” (2014, 132).

Revealing how the vision for a “classless society” had actually set apart a group of people in terms of highbrow practices, *Jukti, Tokko aar Goppo* (1974) pits the ideologies, cultural dilemmas and socio-political beliefs against one another, and inverts them.

Notwithstanding Ghatak’s incorporating the hitherto disregarded non-Hindu non-*bhadralok* parallel communities in some minor parts of his films, they never feature as the protagonists. Besides, the non-*bhadra* characters exclusively present homosocial bondings. For example, the *baul* and the ferryman’s songs, which invoke marginal practices, are conspicuously lacking the female figure. Even though the concerted outcry of “Dohai Ali” in *Komal Gandhar* (1961) includes both male and female voices, it is indicative of a tradition of routine prayer made by Muslim boatmen to supplicate God's blessings against natural disasters. In the film, its poignancy is meant to decry the status-quo caused by the social crack-up due to Partition. Women have customary ties with the spirit of domesticity, be they as cruel apathetic mothers or as housewives turned into prostitutes, as coquettes or as bread-earning nourishers, and their range of actions can be simplistically divided up according to the primordial compartments of Hindu womanhood. Because it is the abstract idea of a Hindu Bengali motherland that Ghatak ruminates, his imagination fails to account for the Dalit refugee men and women, or the Muslim subalterns. He construes the Partition of Bengal entirely as an East Bengali upper-caste middle- or lower

middle-class Hindu affair.⁴ In deifying and demonizing the females in terms of Hindu Brahminical justifications, and through the soundtracks of folklorist wedding songs that remind of the traditional practice of *Gauridaan* (child-bride's home-leaving ceremony in Hindu marriage), Ghatak is assuming a shared knowledge that roots back to mainstream Hindu Bengali culture. The absence of the Dalit or the Muslim Bengali spirit is tantamount to excluding these audiences from his cinematic project.

Baul songs apart, Ghatak's 'radical' cinemas draw on Tagorean songs, whereas the entire Tagorean school of thought has time and again faced criticism for its aristocratic and patriarchal ideas.⁵ There is a populist observation that Ghatak appropriates the Tagorean songs from their allegedly patrician foundation, and re-positions them as signifiers of a unified humble Bengali cultural life. Conversely, his appropriation can be read as a means of manipulating the Tagorean era with the much urgent context of politics. His films' musical-cultural ambience has a dogmatic ambition similar to the misused values of Communism under Soviet invasion. Post-1948, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, corroborating with Stalin's "Socialist content in national form," had started to espouse folk art with open-arms, turning even a traditional marriage into an emblem of popular art. Being in search of a "genuine culture" (Greenberg 1973, 10), the universal (and originally urban) culture of communist kitsch would engulf the folk culture, allowing no creative conception to thrive in isolation from "The Movement."⁶

Ghatak, Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and Kitsch

Ghatak mentions that he had abandoned his initial writing career because he found literature as a slow and inadequate medium that attracted a very small readership. The fame of Bijan Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* drew him to the powerful medium of dramatic literature. Subsequently, he started writing, directing and acting in plays, in the process becoming an active member of the IPTA (Ghatak 1987, 19). Although Ghatak had to leave the IPTA with the label of a "Trotskyite", the thesis that he submits to the Communist Party of India posits his complex position with respect to the cultural kitsch that his contemporary comrades widely practiced in art. The theatre group shown in *Komal Gandhar*, which is inspired by Ghatak's own experience of working in IPTA: "...both mirrors and rejects a network of dominant political relationships always figured in *familial* terms." He perceives a cultural kitsch in theatre in the habits of unproductive, stock imitations of art work, philistine attitude towards art and culture, and overt utilitarian approach towards and political usurpation of artists by the communist party.⁷ According to him, the Party would treat the Cultural Front as a "money-earning machine" and "a mobilizer of meetings to keep the crowd (and not masses)⁸ engaged with whatever the artists can offer" (Ghatak 2000,n.pag.). It is, however, another question, if he himself is completely extricated from the problems, which he identifies as inhibitive towards full realization of the party's cultural

potential. For instance, while he condemns the party's interest in "taking things from Culture" without caring to connect the cultural roots to the common people, he himself urges selective arrogation of forms, techniques and philosophic content from bourgeois cultural products. In his words:

We know that just to express all that we hold dear and to present that expression to the masses, with quality, is our task as Communists. We also know that the moment we start to do this, the other side [Bourgeois culture] becomes immediately important, because we may lose balance and defeat our own purpose by becoming isolated... We must proceed by admitting that in relation to Bourgeois culture we are, indeed, in a very bad taste. Then we have to *reshape* that culture *to achieve our goals, and to harness it to our purpose* (emphasis mine).

In this way, he is a part of the artistic manipulation that he criticizes, which "tends to compress reality into an artistic whole with limits imposed by time and space" (Ghatak 1987, 63). Additionally, in this cultural-political revolution, he reckons a vital role for the non-Party sympathizers or "Amateurs," who are not entirely aligned with the core Communist Cause. He describes them as available human materials, a breeding ground and source of new cadres that need to be positioned in the most effective manner, which betrays his intention of publicizing the communist canon, rather than serving the cause of literature and aesthetics. Through an affected sentiment, which has precise political goals to meet, Ghatak reduces the vast potential of creative arts into a medium for realization of "The Revolution." Tagorean poetics, the rich collection of

Indian classical music, the folklore traditions and the archetypes, are all punched together and made to lose their immeasurable significations, in the process of pandering to the communist mission. This meta-language and meta-practice that shapes a people's responding quality is similar to Milan Kundera's explanation of the Leftist actor in Soviet invasion: "...What makes a leftist a leftist is not this or that theory but his ability to integrate any theory into the kitsch called the Grand March" (*Unbearable Lightness* 1984, 256-57). Even while encouraging an "Amateur" artist to individually cultivate his own art, Ghatak emphasizes the highest importance of theory in the Academy, such that through a marked stress on "pattern," "we can inculcate Marxist thought in a much more interesting manner than is otherwise possible."⁹ In Ghatak's apparently unorthodox attitude, where even an amateur's shifted perspective finds its place in "The Movement," everything is exposed to become an extension of "The Movement," with the desire of manipulating and collapsing the non-revolutionary within the *a priori* category of "The Revolutionary." In the same tone, he says: "There is no such occupation as an Art-organizer; it is a monstrous tautology...This is not a mass-organization where problems are of a general nature. This way of thinking is shallow and a dangerously wrong approach to organization building." Then again, on discussing ways for the Democratic Front to succeed, he states: "...Continually, systematically, thoroughly watch and account and *control* on all levels; these are the *weapons* to be used"

(emphasis mine). His proposition contains both the problem and its antidote, with his one view undercutting the other.

Ghatak and the Culture Industry

Ghatak understood Partition solely as a Congressite bourgeois outcome, which could pool middle-class support only through misguiding them. In spite of admitting that the narrow class values and desires of the middle-class had resulted in this misfortune, and calling Partition as a “joint treachery committed by the colonial power and the nationalist leadership” (Biswas 2004 n.pag.), never for once does he clarify that many amongst the immigrant Bengalis were, in fact, the key enactors of this historical decision. He states, “Many *like me* were uprooted when *they* partitioned Bengal for *their own benefits*” (Dasgupta et al 33, quoted in Harrington 2011 4, emphasis mine). As his bitterness is apparent towards the government and the host society, he, like most immigrant creative artists, makes a simplistic divide of ‘refugee victims,’ as if it were a collective sign with every possible Other. In doing so, Ghatak’s position is similar to Lipsitz, who: “By making marginality and authenticity virtually coterminous...often lapses into a well-intentioned essentialism, in which the “aggrieved populations” by necessity enjoy a more authentic consciousness” (Collins 1991, 834). In Chantal Mouffe’s words: “the problem is with the very idea of the unitary subject...[We] are in fact always multiple and contradictory subjects, inhabitants of

a diversity of communities...constructed by a variety of discourses and precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those subject-positions.”

Ghatak generalizes all West Bengalis as an elite class in opposition to the ‘simple folks’ from East Bengal. An impartial representation would instead have marked off the *bhadralok* from both sides of Bengal from the huge non-*bhadralok* population, as the latter were the greater sufferers of Partition. While artists like Ghatak continually highlight only the predicament of the displaced masses, many among whom were in fact genuinely victimized, they neglect a similar set of native grassroots Bengalis, who did not want or influence the Partition in any way, but suffered from increasing joblessness and otherwise more difficult standards of living in a post-Partition West Bengal. A conscious East Bengali sub-nationalism roots itself in West Bengal through these cultural oeuvres, by rendering a very limited and narcissistic definition of suffering and oppression. These artworks flippantly rule out all those casualties occurring in the wake of Partition, which do not serve their master commemorative project.

While Priyanka Shah upholds Ghatak’s views about the East Bengali refugees’ sufferings in West Bengal, she also questions the possible typecasting in Ghatak’s films. She observes:

East Pakistan has been portrayed in Ghatak’s films as an idyllic place breeding prelapsarian innocence and purity. On the other hand, Calcutta has been time and again portrayed as a dumping ground of debris. Calcutta to Ghatak, is a place which he loved to hate and hated to love. If East Pakistan

is portrayed in the shadow of the Emile Bronte's Yorkshire moors, vibrant and innocent, then Calcutta resembles Dickens' London, a dark world of apocalyptic stupor.

To this effect, she problematizes the validity of Ghatak's puritan convictions, as he deprecates the Calcuttan urban setting and projects it against an amiable picture of Bangladesh (ibid 135). On the other hand, there could not have been the almost-surreal ideological entity of the folklorist, pristine East Bengal, without a blown up pejorative image of the Calcuttan metropolis. The two opposite categories – of the extremely dark picture of Calcutta and the buoyant vision of the Golden East Bengal village – are equally non-existing exaggerated states of mind, which do not resemble real geographical locations. Deconstructing the 'aura' of the pre-Partition Calcutta required the creation of an alternate 'aura,' a utopian sensibility, which, as Latif (2013) studies, is the key to a refugee mind's foregrounding a sense of Self.

Edward Said's description of exiles is also useful in understanding Ghatak's standpoint:

...Clutching difference like a weapon to be used with stiffened will, the exile jealously insists on his or her right to refuse to belong...Willfulness, exaggeration, overstatement: these are characteristic styles of being an exile, methods for compelling the world to accept your vision – which you make more unacceptable because you are in fact unwilling to have it accepted (Said2000, 182).

Further, Carrigy notes that Ghatak recognizes and embodies “*the truth* of his experience of Partition in the cinema, forge[d] connections that were *profoundly true to the experience of Indian*

people...” *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* describes his film *Ajantrik* as “a new investigation into film form, *expanding the refugee experience in a universalized leitmotiv* of cultural dismemberment and exile evoking an epic tradition drawing on tribal, folk and classical forms (Buddhist sculpture, Baul music, the *khayal*)” (ibid). These observations reveal certain attitudes on Ghatak’s part – of isolating himself in order to maintain distinctiveness,¹⁰ of cogently mixing genres with the aim of heightening the impact of refugee affliction in cinema, and of universalizing a particular meaning of “Refugee Experience” – which dangerously border on Adorno’s concept of “culture industry.” Especially in the way Ghatak blends the old with the new, there is a very deterministic tailoring and manufacturing of the nature of the end-product, for consumption by the masses. His criticizing refugee women’s exploitation without suggesting a solution to the *bhadralok*-sponsored hypocritical gendered relations can be explained through GeetaKapur’s observation about the “self-conscious intelligentsia.” Such intelligentsia, as Kapur states, holds at bay the inhibiting, camouflaging and liberating aspects of modernism, posing “the issues of their own identity even when they cannot so easily resolve problematic that fetters the process of their own liberation” (Kapur 1990, 53). By repeatedly staging the dilemma without offering a possible answer, Ghatak politically seizes and dramatizes the theme of Partition, and capitalizes it for instilling a particular kind of social insight among the post-Partition Bengali middle-class

audience. Like Adorno's notion of culture industry, such appropriation cannot survive without adapting to and using the masses as its ideology:

The culture industry misuses its concern for the masses in order to duplicate, reinforce and strengthen their mentality, which it presumes is given and unchangeable. How this mentality can be changed is excluded throughout (Adorno 1991, 99).

Ghatak's judging Ray as "painstakingly trying to build up a realistic space-time" is identical to the culture industry's accusing its critics as "snobs" and "taking refuge in esoterica" (ibid 102).¹¹As Ghatak connects Ray's supposed apathy towards Partition to the latter's "never having experienced it," he makes two misleading points – that only the refugees suffered the repercussions of this event, as if the inflation had not touched the natives; and by pointing to Ray's aristocratic background, as though Ghatak himself belonged to the grassroots.

Ghatak plays a self-proclaimed role as a propagandist, with clear objectives of spreading out political messages through cinema. He states that his shift to the medium of film was because the IPTA's open-air performance could attract only a few thousand audiences, whereas through films, he could reach out to the wider masses. In this, he shares an exploitative rather than an aesthetic relationship with the cinematic medium of art.¹² Shah observes how Ghatak would bring into play the artistic tropes of tragedy, music and melodrama in film-making, in order to serve the Marxist propaganda, and thereby abandon the theory of "Arts for Arts Sake:"

For him, every mode of art must have a specific purpose behind it. Ghatak's was a melancholic mind which never really could cope with the Partition. The nostalgia for the lost motherland turned into an obsession with him. It is this obsession which can be sensed in the song "Come and Liberate" (EshoMukto Koro) (ibid 129).

His position resembles Mao-Tse-Tung's idea about literature's role in communist revolution:

Revolutionary literature and art are part of the whole revolutionary cause, they are *cogs and wheels* in it, and though in comparison with certain other and more important parts they may be *less significant and less urgent and may occupy a secondary position*, nevertheless, they are *indispensable cogs and wheels in the whole machine*, and an indispensable part of the entire revolutionary cause (Khan et al. 1978, 114, emphasis mine).

Thus, Ghatak uses the power of affect very strategically, in order to emotionally touch his audience and get across his own account of Partition. The overriding popular impression that all his cinematic messages are radical flourishes at the expense of undervaluing the audience's independent imaginations. Like the culture industry that invests towards "making [the masses] into masses," Ghatak's films' emerging as radical possibly succeeds through the assumption that the audience's sense of creativity is unalterably hackneyed.

What Adorno sees as a part of the upshot of culture industry "...individualistic residues, sentimentality and an already *rationaly disposed and adapted romanticism...*" (ibid. 101, emphasis mine) form the bases of Ghatak's characterizations of Nita in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960).

The components with which the character of Nita is fashioned may have been undertaken with the intent of criticizing exactly what it projects. This, however, does not, in any way, lessen its exhortative value to follow a specific trajectory of thought which is married to the idea of power interests. The anticlimax of Nita's death frames her perfectly as a godlike martyr, who lacks human imperfections. Had she lived longer, got married, continued with her education or refused to run the expenses of her family, she would no longer be 'The Refugee Woman' through whom Ghatak's socio-political message may be conveyed. What is known as the cultural side of the communist revolution functions here by the same logic as any other patriarchal machine. The message of the greatest form of pathos is best carried in the figure of the fatigued, star-crossed, attractive and virtuous woman, who is unsurprisingly dead by the time the narrative ends and the crisis is somewhat over. Viewed carefully, in the very combination of a poverty-afflicted refugee home with the presence of a 'good, messiah'-type refugee woman, exists the seed of premature death.

Trina Nileena Banerjee observes:

Thus, like the readers of epics, Ghatak's audience often knows the end of his narratives. The end is predetermined, the Oracle already uttered, the hero/heroine always-already doomed. Yet the narrative moves forward as if driven forward by a passion for inevitable suffering – it is a spiraling descent into an eternal, inescapable in-betweenness and non-belonging, one that is nonetheless compelling to watch.

Ghatak's films are also analogous to Adorno's description of representational cinema. As abstract as the elements of these films may be, they always recall a figurative significance and are "never purely aesthetic values" (Adorno 1991, 182). The object's irreducibility in these films point to the social concern and intention, compared to which, the aesthetic realization is secondary. Michael Rothberg sees in such representational art "...the possibility for sadistic identification in members of the audience because it contains a surplus of pleasure" (Rothberg 1997, 63), and in Adorno's words: "The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butt contains ...the power to elicit enjoyment out of it."

Nita's seclusion from the household to the sanatorium is followed by a hope in the family, with her elder brother Shankar rising to great eminence, the house being renovated and her sister Gita's son growing up into a lively child. However, the story ends at a point where Nita, the epitome of struggle and sacrifice, is removed from this newly found joy and almost forgotten by her kin. While there is undoubtedly an extreme tragedy embedded in Nita's marginalization who was once the most vital member of her family, the film qualifies as a pessimistic reminiscing exercise by Ghatak, as he focuses only on the negative aspects of *bhadra* refugee's experiences instead of portraying them in a more nuanced light. Limiting the post-immigration experiences

only in terms of adversity tends to shroud the stories of opportunism, success and even domination, that parallely explained the refugees' contact with West Bengal, especially with Calcutta.

Even though Ghatak is primarily known as an artist and not a political figure, it is inadequate to associate the creative ideas in his films only to his stance on art. In his own words:

Being a Bengali from East Bengal, I have seen the untold miseries inflicted on *my people* in the name of independence – which is a fake and a sham. I have reacted violently towards this and I have tried to portray different aspects of this in my films (Mandal 2011 178, emphasis mine).

The presentation of human ordeal in his films is significantly inclined to his role as a social and political ideologue than an aesthete, who aims at voicing about *hispeople*, rather than the overall state of affairs of post-Partition West Bengal. The artworks are, thus, cultivated and invested towards a certain biased theory that deploys a wide range of Bengali cultural repository towards feeding a one-sided meaning. The easiest means of preserving this meaning about Self is through constantly criminalizing everything that does not belong to the director's perception of "*my people*."¹³

Conclusion

Over the years, Ghatak's efforts have accumulated a glib route to the sign of Bengal Partition. Cinematic celebration of a particular kind of memory amounts to parading of liberalism

through continuous uprooting of whatever is its opposite, in other words “Bourgeois,” or that which does not limit itself to such a memory’s chosen summative system of remembering.

Such a memory, as generated by Ghatak’s films, submits to Adorno’s analysis, which Rothberg interprets as follows:

In these writers – one who proleptically internalized the disaster, the other who retrospectively maintains its absent presence – the notion of art’s barbarity is not refuted but enacted in order to present the barbarity of the age. This allows them to avoid the more chilling paradox present in “the so-called artistic representation” of historical terror: “When genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder” (Rothberg 1997, 63).

As refugee-ness in West Bengal keeps mutating and spotlighting newer problems and demands in the succeeding decades of the post-Partition period, artists like Ghatak’s preoccupation with definitive meanings of Partition betrays their adamant desire to hold on to a cherished vacuum. This can certainly be the consequence of a profound melancholy and homesickness. Yet, there is also every chance that in the later stages, these artists have been continuing to build on the melancholic, from a composed and, what is worse, political position. Talking about sentimental issues in retrospect and pointing out only the tragic chapters from a narrative, whose other versions are also known to them leads to a kitsch organized very skillfully. When an otherwise great thinker such as Ghatak attempts to settle for such mediocrity, apparently to keep paying service to

‘Partition,’ he is answerable to art for the artistic delusion he bestows to his posterity. In this way, he himself flinches from the Upanishadic philosophy that had motivated the ending of his film

Subarnarekha:

Charana Vai Madhuvindute Charana Hrimadhuswaram. Suryasya Pashya Premanam Yotendrayete Charana. Charaiveti Charaiveti (Mobility is immortality, mobility is religion, just look at the treasures (light) of the sun, they have never slept...since the inception of creation. So strive forward, strive forward (translation from Sanskrit).

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ENDNOTES:

- ¹Hamid Naficy notes that the typified symbol formation in mainstream refugee memory consciously feminizes the home and hearth: “Significantly, the discourse of memory feminized the house as an enclosure of femininity and domesticity, associated with motherland and

reproduction. This is how many exiles feminize the homeland...In the accented cinema, the house is an intensely charged place and a signifying trope” (Naficy 2001, 169). Ghatak’s Partition films predominantly bear these tropes.

² Bhaskar Sarkar points out to the problematic side of Ghatak’s representation: “He tries to resolve this tension between the social and the personal through the invocation of fundamental commonalities that transcend spatial and temporal differences: if the subjective realm consists of elements shared by all humans and represented by similar symbologies, then it turns out to be socially determined” (Sarkar 1999, 317). This difficulty can be connected to the specific religious overtone colouring Ghatak’s projection of archetypes, whose recurrent usage tend to heighten the probability of a specific cultural-political strategy.

³ Dalrymple understands Baul as: “Mixing elements of Sufism, Tantra, Vaishnavism and Buddhism, they revere the Gods and visit temples, mosques and wayside shrines, but only as a road of enlightenment, never as end in itself. The goal is to discover the ‘Man of the Heart’ – Moner Manush – the ideal that lives within every man, but that may take a lifetime to discover” (quoted in O’Donnell 2009, 205).

⁴ The Heideggerian term traumatic Dasein that LaCapra uses, which refers to “anxiously reliving in its immediacy something that was a shattering experience for which one was not prepared – for which one did not have, in Freud’s term, *Angstbereitschaft* (the readiness to feel anxiety)” (LaCapra 2001, 89-90), can be applied to the temporal stagnation and relentless retrospection in Ghatak’s narratives. There is “an exclusive...fixation on unrepresentable excess,” and hence a withdrawal from what can be restored of the “traumatizing limit events” (92). Such an excess in his films lead to a conversion of the traumatic into sublime and “transvaluing it and making it the basis for an elevating, supraethical, even elated or quasi-transcendental test of the self or the group” (93).

⁵ According to Geeta Kapur, as landed gentry from the nineteenth century, pastoral nostalgia is a part of the Tagore family. Their romantic viewpoint would combine noble learning with experimental dilettantism, within the framework of the Indian renaissance. While folk art would also be incorporated, the entire project is seen as highly pedagogic (Kapur 1990, 52).

⁶ In *The Joke*, Ludvik describes the most hideous passing of the Rides of Kings in Brno. With drinks, a volatile mob and the actual king missing from the procession, the scene is like an apparition haunted by the absence of its own body. The kitsch that Dorfles describes as “being vulgarly reproduced and known not for their real value but for a sentimental or technical substitute of these values” (19) is precisely the situation of Rides of Kings in the modern-day. Fattening itself on the corpse of a fully matured tradition, it signals an esoteric code no one has the patience to understand. As Ludvik says: “For many centuries young men have been riding forth in Moravian villages . . . with strange messages whose writ in some unknown language they pronounce with a moving loyalty and a lack of comprehension” (274).

⁷ Following the banning of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1948, the vital strength of the IPTA was sapped. By the time CPI became a legal party again, and participated in the First General Election, IPTA had been corroded with the departure of several intellectuals to form

independent parties, such as Bohurupee, Little Theatre Group, etc. Misperceptions within CPI, such as recorded in Ajoy Ghose's statement: "Whatever is not reactionary is progressive," indicates IPTA's degeneration. Moreover, the 1962 Indo-China War raised nation-wide chauvinistic emotions, leading to a significant section among IPTA enthusiasts to break away and support anti-communist propaganda. The split within the IPTA involved clash between two prominent ideologies, arguing whether technical perfection and skill were more important or the popular demand. The first group, led by figures like Sambhu Mitra and Bijon Bhattacharjee, stressed on the 'form' and demanded absolute freedom in developing their talent, thereby rejecting the party's deterministic control on art; the second, steered by comrades like Sudhi Pradhan, emphasized on spreading a mass cultural movement through art and literature, and developing art through live contact with the people. To the latter group, form was a bourgeoisie concern and ought to be rendered a secondary position (Khan et al. 1978, 116). In the absence of either of these two aspects, however, a lapse started to show in the revolutionary works of art.

⁸ By following Mary Parker Follett's definition of crowd as "an undifferentiated mass" (87), it can be surmised that by "masses," Ghatak is implying certain distinguished qualities that a crowd lacks.

⁹ According to Kundera: "The identity of kitsch comes not from a political strategy but from images, metaphors, and vocabulary. It is therefore possible to break the habit and march against the interests of a Communist country. What is impossible, however, is to substitute one word for others" (*Unbearable* 261).

¹⁰ Comparing Ghatak to Bimal, the taxi driver and protagonist in *Ajantrik*(1958), Carrigy notes: "...Like Bimal, [Ghatak] resisted the fashions of his day to respond in a certain way to his means of livelihood. The parallel between Ghatak and Bimal, then, lies not in their relationship to the machine age but rather to a sense of being isolated by a personal vision that goes against the grain. Further, both refugees of Partition, their sense of being out of place is magnified as individuals whose vision of the world differs strongly to many of those surrounding them" (Carrigy2003, n.p.).

¹¹ Time and again, Ray has been associated with the school of the Indian bourgeoisie-elite-patriarchs. Here, 'esoteric' is not in the sense of 'mysterious,' but carries the denotation of 'impenetrable.' This is because many critics think that Ray's works, being based on the Tagorean and other Western philosophical grounds, entail a certain educated appraisal on the part of the audience.

¹² What Kumar Shahani, Ghatak's student, comments in this regard, goes against Ghatak's purpose as a filmmaker: "...art which proposes itself either as purely political or as 'mass-communication' can neither achieve its own purpose, declared or otherwise, nor perform that function which it has acquired (through history) by its autonomy, its judgment upon itself inherent in the individual work of art...Culture cannot be put to use by

intention, except for short-term goals, either of an immediate nature (as in ritual-based mythology) or in such configurations as arise out of an epic context” (Shahani 1990, 35-36).

¹³ Ghatak embodies the Marxian notion of the proletariat, who abstractly erects a “particular interest” as “general interest” (Balibar 1991, 94). Paradoxically, the avatar of ‘Refugee Proletariat’ that he strives for is a class of its own and selectively draws on the old bourgeois ideologies that it opposes. Although like the proletariat of the Manifesto, he does not abide by nationality or religion, Ghatak has his familial, moral and political illusions. Ghatak’s contradictory position is understood in that, while as a materialist he questions the idealization of history, unlike a materialist, he is not anti-ideology/idealism; he is not a negation of politics or ideological abstraction (95).