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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 52 - REFUGEE WOMAN AND PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

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Refugee Women

- Refugee women have been typically viewed as inferior to their male counterpart. Portrayed as mere objects of desire and pity, women in partition literature have appeared as “marginal, secondary, and in their affiliations to male as mothers, wives, sisters, or mistress and rarely they have been viewed as independent agents” (Sharma 2019).
- Women’s absence as subjects of history is due to the fact that “they are presumed to be outside history because they are outside the public and the political, where history is made. Consequently, they have no part in it” (Menon 2017, 3).
- The identity of a refugee woman got suppressed within the larger “identity of refugees” (Ghoshal 2021).

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- Within patriarchal structures, women are often believed as the embodiment of the honour of the community to which they belong. Accordingly, in times of ethnic, religious or other violent conflicts, they become major targets as attacking a woman's body signifies an assault on the family and the community.
- In nationalist imagination, the nation is seen as a feminine entity. This gendering of nation legitimizes the idea that nation as mother/woman needs to be protected by its (male) citizens from outsiders, thereby sanctioning communal wars (Dey 2018).
- The discourse of women's chastity was deployed to counter issues of foreign domination during the Swadeshi period. Historically, the Indian state was identified as *Bharat-Mata* (Mother India), and the role of the men was to protect the honor of their mother – a metaphor implying protection of 'their' women from the alien.

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- Deniz Kandiyoti (1991, 429) in her essay *Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation* states – [w]omen bear the burden of being ‘mother of the nation’ . . . as well as being those who reproduce the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, who transmit the culture and who are the privileged signifiers of national difference.
- Paulomi Chakraborty’s *The Refugee Woman: Partition of Bengal, Gender, and the Political* - explores the connection between the ordinary, banal, political world and an extraordinary violence, such as the Partition.”
- Chakraborty – the interface between “everyday world” (Dorothy E. Smith) and the “extraordinary historical times” of the Partition that can be profitably traced through the lives of refugee women.

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- In addition to the challenges women face in zones of conflict, there are numerous obstacles that come about in the refugee camps they flee to.
- Rather than finding solace in a refugee camp, many women face continued victimization both within the community and amongst their family.
- Their experiences remain overshadowed by the more salient issues of the conflict itself, the lack of humanitarian aid needed to efficiently run the refugee camp, and the relationship between the camp and the country in which it resides.

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- Udit Sen - “.....even a history of ordinary people tend to become a socio-economic and political history of ordinary men, where the voices of women are totally marginalized.”
- Prafulla K Chakrabarti's *The Marginal Men* - explores the link between the struggle for survival and rights waged by the refugees from East Pakistan and the rise of Left political power in West Bengal. **It has very little to portray about the role of refugee women.**
- Historians of gender have demonstrated how the cultural values and mores of a community are more often than not inscribed upon the bodies and lives of women.

Mahanagar by Satyajit Ray

- Amaresh Misra - *Mahanagar* defines Satyajit Ray's liberal classical bourgeois affiliation, criticizing the capitalist, anti-humanist and pro-technological biases of the social system.
- Misra - while Ghatak referred frequently to the traditional myths and symbols, and emphasized the instinctual non-rational aspects, bringing in a fragmented “modernist” experience, Ray, rooted in the Indian reality, demanded reconstruction of conventional situations and relations.
- *Mahanagar* was released on 27th September in 1963. In presenting the multi-layered human saga, Ray dissolved the Westernized divisions and aesthetical parameters between physical and psychological realism, mise-en-scene and montage, form and content.

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- By departing from the patriarchal-paternalistic traditionalist models, Ray focused instead on the more overbearing but less humane male features.

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- *Mahanagar* is based on *Abataranika*, a novel by **Narendranath Mitra** narrating the story of a housewife who sheds her traditionalist familial boundaries by getting a job as a saleswoman and breaking a number of gender roles.
- The film is completely set in Calcutta and Ray through his lens portrays the daily rituals and habits of a '*moddhyobitto*' or middle-class, upper-caste Bengali family, for whom honour is the trophy that they hold close to their heart.

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- It marks the transformation of the middle-class “house wife” to a working woman.
- The economic boom that followed the end of the Second World War provided the stimulus for one of the greatest social upheavals of the 1950s, the movement towards gender equality.

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- Mahanagar (a.k.a *The Big City*) shows that female empowerment, driven by economic necessity, was as much a phenomenon in India as it was in other modern capitalist democracies across the world.



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- In India, the prevailing gender roles were rigidly delineated, and so the mismatch between one's personal aspirations and one's expected role in society was much more pronounced, as this film powerfully demonstrates.



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- *Mahanagar* is concerned with a young married woman who, through financial need, is driven to find paid work.
- Arati has an uphill struggle trying to overcome her own low self-esteem and the traditional notions of a woman's place in society, but ultimately she wins the self-confidence and economic independence that sets her free and allows her to live a fulfilled life.
- Her ordeal not only enriches her own life, but she emerges stronger, and better equipped to deal with future calamities.

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- Satyajit Ray was influenced by the Italian neo-realists (notably Vittorio De Sica) in crafting the film's striking visual design, which emphasizes the massive gulf that existed between the lower and upper middle classes in India in the 1950s.
- Whilst it may lack the searing poetic touch of many of Ray's other films, *Mahanagar* (The Big City) with a near-documentary feel imbues the story with a harrowing reality.

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- Critics also spurn Ray's sanguine message in Mahanagar, which he made against the backdrop of the Indo-China War (1962) and in the aftermath of Partition, showing the steep infiltration of refugees into West Bengal, high statistics of unemployment and breakdown of urban economies (Banerjee 259).
- In this film Ray projects Calcutta in light of infinite possibilities. Many critics find it objectionable that the film ends optimistically with the couple aspiring, after all, to make a living for themselves in the Calcuttan metropolis.

Arati in *Mahanagar*

- In *Mahanagar*, Arati's Eurasian colleague Edith asks a vital question— why red on the lip should be considered derogatory for a Hindu woman, if the same “red-ness” is obligatory on her hair-parting and forehead, and in fact inscribes her “pureness”
- It throws a deep ironic statement about the Hindu *bhadralok* and the way he has reduced the social meaning of *bhadramahila*.
- Misra - “...an apparently inconsequential act of a traditional woman applying lipstick took the contours of a social event interlaced with a variety of meanings.”
- Lipstick as a symbol brings instabilities into Arati's life, with respect to her poise as a Hindu housewife.

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- Having moved from their earlier base in Pabna, the post-Partition economic rearrangement in Arati's in-laws' family calls for a change in the traditional family relations.
- As a revered teacher and a reigning patriarch, the audience can imagine the power that Arati's father-in-law used to command prior to Partition. In the post-Partition overpopulated milieu of Calcutta, he suffers from an identity crisis that widely marked the jobless older generation migrants.

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- Arati's husband Subrata is a direct product of such male-dominated household, as reflected in his remark about Arati's professional success: "Exit husband, enter wife."
- Subrata is an "over-educated under-paid" male (Callenbach 48), who is in the process of receiving newer cultural jolts in a Calcutta demographically bursting at its seams.
- His insecurity is explicit when his younger sister Bani encourages Arati to take up a film-star's job in Bombay, and imagines the latter as a sunglasses and lipstick-decked glamorous, rich woman. Subrata reflexively slights Bani after this comment for being a student of home-science, a field of study designed for grooming ideal housewives and mothers.

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- After Edith gifts a lipstick and sunglasses to Arati, she, as a saleswoman, momentarily meets Bani's fantasy about her as a "film star."
- Chakraborty - for Arati's husband Subrata, this lipstick is "a metonym of his wife's unrestrained sexuality, her unsuitable, inappropriate and disruptive modernity" ("The Refugee Woman and the New Woman" 82).
- His feeling becomes more obvious, as he discovers the lipstick at a moment of gender-reverse performance – while opening Arati's purse and taking out money to pay the maidservant – a task conventionally associated with the non-earning housewife.



Thank You

