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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 53 - REFUGEE WOMAN AND PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

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Arati as a professional persona in *Mahanagar*

- Edith gives the red lipstick to Arati because according to her that lipstick is “good for business.”
- Afterwards, the former is seen reading the “Indian Book of Sex, the Famous One,” the semiotics of the film connects a woman’s sexuality with business. Apart from lipstick, this increased sexual vulnerability, as Chakraborty notes, is also revealed in Arati’s light cotton sari and sheer blouse.
- Notwithstanding how others perceive her, Arati herself utilizes this lipstick to maintain her “professional persona,” as is understood in her gestures of wiping it off before entering home, or putting it on before negotiating a pay raise with her boss. While there is a duality associated with these acts that resonate with the *bhadra* class, there is also a flighty treatment towards the moral foundations of *bhadramahila*-hood (Banerjee 2015, 269).

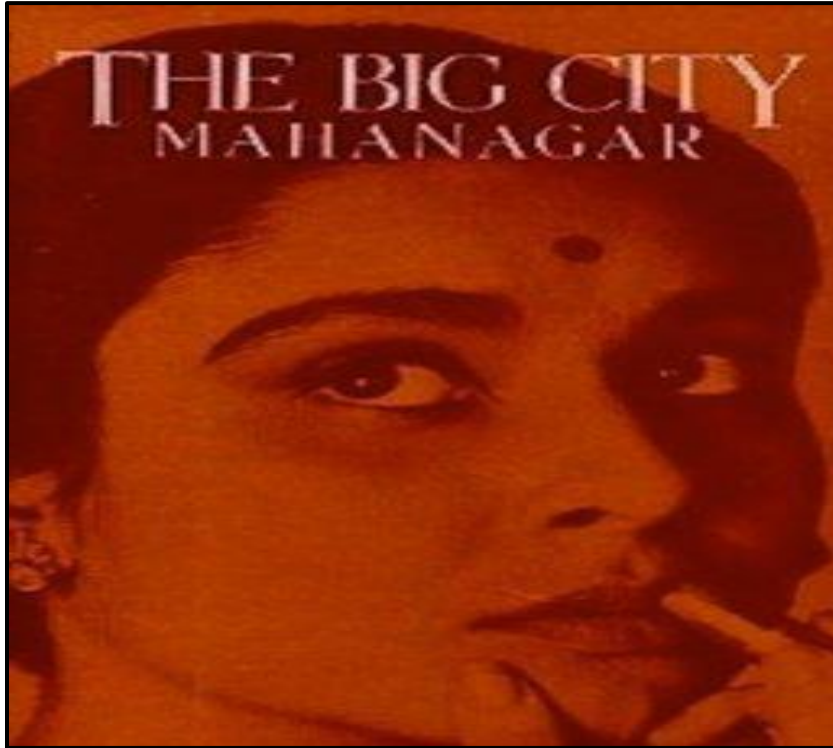
Mahanagar and the Refugee experience

- Ray's achievement in outliving '**The Refugee Experience**' lies in the fact that the crossing point of Arati's sexuality and profession neither brings out her agency nor her guilt, but instead shows the different facets of her shy self-experimentations"(Banerjee 269).
- The portrayal of women in *Mahanagar* cannot be considered as entirely positive or clearly negative, because apart from family ties, each is bound to another by her own requirements.
- The mother-in-law, for example, is both affronted at Arati's taking up a job and also relieved when she brings home the essentials with her salary; Bani loves her sister-in-law but a tinge of obligation and awe outlines her feelings, especially after Arati becomes the only earning member of the family. The inter-relational aspects among the females reflect economic clout.

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- Arati is caring and dutiful to each member, but **not an icon of sacrifice**. Her sense of guilt is very clearly articulated, in scenes where she recompenses her son with different kinds of allurements and tries to normalize her “working woman’s” persona at home.
- Her guilt is amplified when she throws away her lipstick to prove that she is indeed the former Arati. In doing so, she proves to operate from within the given yardsticks of **an androcentric society**.
- At the end of *Mahanagar*, Arati’s quitting of her job has a particular ethical basis, where her gender consciousness goes above her middle-class, upper-caste, economically stressed and immigrant aspects of identity. When her boss, an immigrant Bengali himself, tries to overrate her by insulting Edith, Arati is keen enough to see a flirtatious intimation underlying his professed desire of establishing nationalistic and provincial kinship with her (Banerjee 272).

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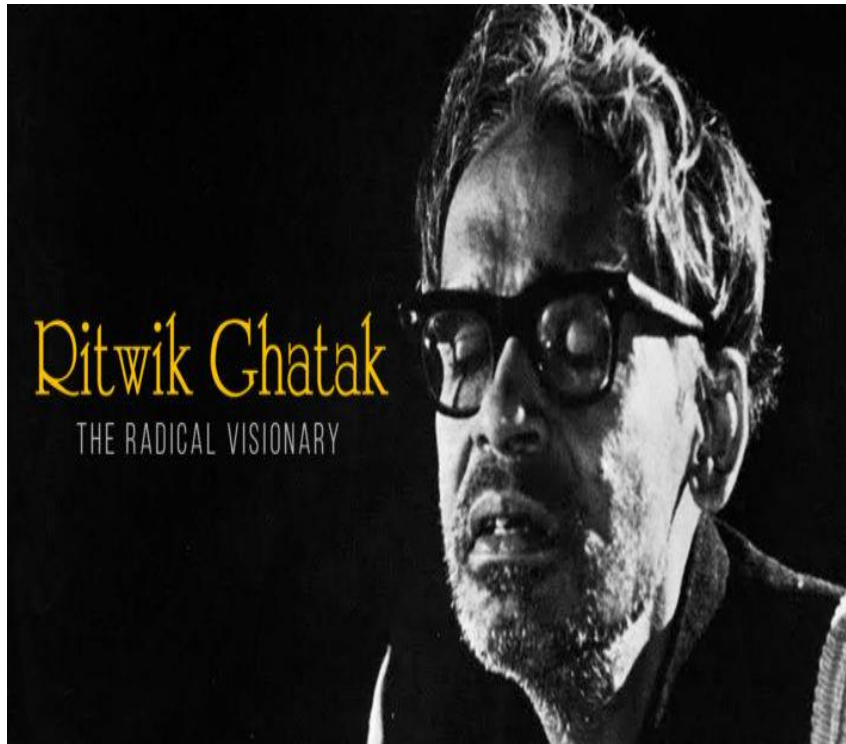
- The “**optimism**” that critics commonly disapprove in *Mahanagar*’s ending, can be revisited. In the end, the conjugal resolution does not happen either through the wife’s submission or through her messianic support.
- Even as the couple walk together in search for a new future, Arati by this time has acquired a **distinct public Self** apart from her husband and her family, as she is not only capable of applying for a job, but also brave enough to resign it, if deemed objectionable.

Meghe Dhaka Tara by Ritwik Ghatak

- *Meghe Dhaka Tara* revolves around a lower middle-class *bhadra* Bengali refugee family, which is cast against the excruciating framework of the 1950s post-Partition Calcutta setting. The female protagonist Nita epitomizes the highly prevalent figure of the unmarried female breadwinners from middle-class Bengali refugee families.



Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*



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- *Meghe Dhaka Tara* - depicts protagonist Nita as a symbol of sacrifice, who becomes a scapegoat for future improvement of her kin. By deciding not to pursue her Master's degree but instead support the family with her income, by giving up her fiancé to her younger sister Gita for marriage, and ultimately contracting the syndromes of tuberculosis, Nita becomes the unforgettable and universal epitome of the moribund nourishing Mother.

“Those who suffer for others, suffer forever.”

- Shoma Chaudhury – “[T]he female protagonist [in *Cloud-Capped Star*] is one of the rarest characters in cinema history as she works not with the intention of becoming independent or to be liberated from a patriarchal society, but to sustain her extended family.”

Brief Overview of *The Cloud Capped Star*

- *Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud Capped Star)* traces the exploitation of women through the life story of Nita, the refugee main character who is trying to take care of her family. The film locates Nita's exploitation as part of the social, gendered class-structure to which Nita belongs. This powerful, melodramatic film depicts the mundane, everyday world for women, not only in a post-Partition refugee camp, but also in a patriarchal society in ordinary everyday life.
- Nita does not fight back and throughout the movie no matter how bad it gets for her she continues to allow others to exploit her. Nita says, “**I have never protested against [any] injustice. That [indeed] is my sin.**”

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- Nita's eventual death could be seen as a punishment, for her unquestioning fulfillment to her family's exploitation and abuse of her. The film critiques the way the family has treated Nita, but also the ways in which Nita has allowed herself to be treated.



Gender and Class in Ghatak's 'Meghe Dhaka Tara'

- The film is a commentary and critique of the class (caste) and gender dynamics that existed pre- and post-Partition. There are many parts of the film where gender violence, exploitation, and mentality of the bourgeois class are apparent.
- Nita's father is the most obvious example of **bourgeois attitude**. There are scenes where he quotes Yeats, valuing the intellectual class as higher than the working class. This is evident when he reprimands his son for taking up job in a factory. He is furious and disgusted by the embarrassment that his son is now a “**labourer**”, which is below their “civilized intellectual bourgeois class”.

Ghatak's 'Meghe Dhaka Tara'

- Ashis Rajadhyaksha - women are but fragments of the unified powerful figure of the **Great Mother**. Of the three female characters, the mistress of the household embodies the destructive potential of **Goddess Kali**, the elder daughter Nita of the sustaining Mother-giver **Jagaddhatri** and the younger daughter Gita of **the sensuous female**, who is imaged as a metaphor of marriage, sexuality and reproduction.
- Tragedy occurs in the film with the impossibility to reconcile these three traditionally demarcated feminine qualities of **nurture, sensuality and cruelty**. Each of the females is limited in not being able to switch into another's role even once, which could have given shape to a comprehensive feudalist social anima (Rajadhyaksha 53-54).

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- Just as Goddess *Kali*'s destruction becomes a prequel to a new creation, the mother, it seems, becomes the announcer of an impassive natural law, which selects the blossoming spirit of Gita over the fading presence of Nita. This portent is visible almost throughout the film – in Nita's attachment towards her childhood photograph and thereby the past – compared to Gita's looking ahead to a fresh future.
- As the future is reaped and ripens in the form of a male child in Gita's womb, Nita clings more often to her prized photo. Once it falls and breaks from her hand, her only confidence seems to have been fractured forever. The immediate scene that follows is her imprisonment as a micro-entity within the panoramic scape of the Shillong mountains (Banerjee 218).

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- Nita as a member of the modern post-Partition Bengali society is principally an exploited female, whose oppressed position is sanctimoniously covered with glorious goddess-like virtues.
- Sarbani Banerjee in her doctoral thesis has agreed with Paulomi Chakraborty that Nita is a “complete suppression, a forceful erasure of the body that is present, corporeal, and labouring for the metaphor. The stronger the metaphor grows, the greater is the erasure of the body on which the metaphor locates itself” (“A Critique of Metaphor-Making” 245).

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- Gita and Nita's infirm and mentally unstable father scorns the cruel economic compulsions that they have to undergo as refugees, where one daughter's future can be secured only by sacrificing the other. He tells Nita to leave her room and make space for Gita, who would then use her dying sister's bed as her post-partum retreat. Such a comment not only refers to the stiff competition for shelter that most immigrants faced in West Bengal, but also repeats the Darwinian and Eugenic notions of Survival of the Fittest.
- Gita, the younger sister and the “selected one” in the post-Partition-generated struggle for resources, is not the protagonist of Ghatak's storyline. She is a hedonist by nature, who does not refrain from her regular desire for new clothes and other similar indulgences that might be otherwise considered excesses, given the family's economic plight.

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- Different socio-political variables shape up Nita and her youngest brother Montu within the same *bhadralok* family. The two earning members are located dissimilarly to the questions of power, space, opportunity and hierarchy.
- Even as both of them hold some degrees of economic facility, Nita as the female earning member is looked upon as the source of shared familial expenses, whereas Montu uses his income to improve his own status.
- Montu can choose to live his life in segregation from the rest of the family members and nourish his personal dreams of becoming a sportsperson. In contrast, Nita's premature entry into the world of earning occurs at the cost of giving up her aspirations for higher studies and conjugal fulfillment.

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- Read through the primeval model of Hindu archetypes, Nita is the symbol of Goddess *Jagaddhatri* (the Mother Giver) and the domestic courtyard is a site of collective yearnings, which materialize to the detriment of her well-being
- However, none of the corresponding male characters – her elder brother Shankar, her father, her fiancé Sanat or her younger brother Montu – are shown in similar mythological shades. It is a bigoted vision to define only the female characters' possible field of actions according to Hindu mythology, while locating the males within the contemporary modern socio-historical milieu.
- In most cases, the *bhadramahila* refugees' acquiescence with and assistance to the fundamentally patriarchal nature of refugee struggles conjure her image in terms of mythic perfection, rather than grounding her within her current reality (Banerjee 222).

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- *Cloud-Capped Star* mutes and disavows Nita's voice, then her existential scream represents the affect that this action brings in its fold. Through every spoken word, sounds and silence, the film moves towards this paroxysm that the scream represents. The scream becomes the fatal identity of Nita, her hybridization of the mythic, the historical and the individual.
- The audience's identification with Shankar becomes fraught with doubts and guilt, while Nita's excessive cry shatters the mastery that it enjoyed through controlling her. The continued celebration of Nita's scream in Bengali cinephilia is therefore a celebration of one's stagnation. A path towards the future can only be charted through a cognizance of this collective disavowal.

Thank You

