

Marginal Women in the Cinema of Ritwik Ghatak: The Aesthetic Politics of Socio-Economic Struggles of Neeta, Sita, and Anasuya

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Abstract:

This paper explores the representation of marginal women in the films of Ritwik Ghatak, focusing on three central characters—Neeta, Sita, and Anasuya—from *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Subarnarekha* (1962/1965), and *Komal Gandhar* (1961). It argues that Ghatak's female protagonists function as embodiments of socio-economic struggle, displacement, and historical trauma in post-Partition India. Using feminist film theory, postcolonial feminism, and Marxist analysis, the paper demonstrates how these characters reveal layered marginality shaped by patriarchy, class exploitation, and state violence. Through cinematic techniques such as sound, landscape, and performance, Ghatak transforms personal suffering into political discourse. The study concludes that these women symbolize the fractured consciousness of a nation while remaining relevant to contemporary issues of gender and displacement.

Keyword: Marginal Women, Post-Partition Indian Cinema, Feminist Film Theory, Socio-Economic Displacement, Aesthetic Politics

Introduction

The films of Ritwik Ghatak occupy a unique position in Indian cinema due to their deep engagement with history, politics, and personal experience. His work is profoundly shaped by the trauma of the Partition of India, an event that redefined national identity and displaced millions. Unlike mainstream narratives that often reduce women to passive figures, Ghatak places female characters at the center of socio-political discourse.

Neeta, Sita, and Anasuya are not merely fictional individuals but symbolic representations of marginalized women in postcolonial India. Their lives reflect the intersection of gender, class, and displacement, revealing how systemic forces shape women's experiences. This paper argues that Ghatak constructs an "aesthetic politics" where cinematic form becomes a tool for articulating socio-economic realities.

Ghatak's cinema must also be understood as an intervention against dominant narrative traditions that prioritize linear storytelling and individual resolution. His fragmented narrative style reflects the disjointed reality of post-Partition existence, where continuity is disrupted and identities are constantly renegotiated. In this context, female characters emerge not merely as participants in the narrative but as sites where historical contradictions are most visibly inscribed. Their bodies and emotions carry the burden of displacement, making them central to the articulation of national trauma. This approach situates Ghatak's work within a broader discourse of political modernism in cinema, where form itself becomes a vehicle of critique.

Historical and Socio-Political Context

The Partition of India in 1947 resulted in widespread displacement, particularly in Bengal. Refugee populations faced economic hardship, social dislocation, and identity crises. Women were disproportionately affected, as they were expected to sustain families while adhering to traditional gender roles.

As Partha Chatterjee (1993) argues, the nation is often constructed through cultural and gendered narratives, where women symbolize both tradition and loss. In post-Partition Bengal, this symbolic role translated into real socio-economic burdens. Women entered the workforce in increasing numbers, yet their labor remained undervalued.

Ghatak's films capture this historical moment with remarkable intensity. His female characters embody the contradictions of a society struggling to reconcile modernity with entrenched patriarchy.

The gendered impact of Partition has been widely discussed in historical and cultural studies, particularly in relation to violence, displacement, and the reconfiguration of domestic roles. Women often became symbolic bearers of community honor, yet their own experiences were marginalized in official narratives. As Partha Chatterjee (1993) suggests, the nationalist project frequently positioned women within the "inner domain" of culture, thereby obscuring their material struggles. Ghatak's films challenge this ideological separation by foregrounding the economic and emotional labor performed by women, thus exposing the contradictions within nationalist discourse.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory provides a critical lens to analyze how women are represented in cinema. Laura Mulvey (1975) introduces the concept of the "male gaze," arguing that women in mainstream cinema are often objectified and positioned as passive subjects of visual pleasure. Ghatak's films challenge this paradigm by presenting women as active agents whose struggles drive the narrative.

Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism emphasizes the intersection of gender with colonial history and socio-economic conditions. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990) argues that subaltern women are often silenced within dominant discourses. This silencing is evident in Sita's narrative, where her voice is marginalized by both societal norms and state structures.

Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) critiques the homogenization of Third World women, emphasizing the need to consider specific historical contexts. Ghatak's films align with this perspective by portraying women shaped by the unique conditions of Partition.

Marxist Perspective

Ghatak's work also reflects a Marxist understanding of class struggle. He asserts that "class struggle begins inside the family" (Ghatak, 1971), highlighting how economic exploitation operates within domestic spaces. This perspective is particularly relevant in analyzing Neeta's role as a laboring woman.

In addition to these frameworks, it is useful to consider the role of affect in Ghatak's cinema. His films evoke intense emotional responses through melodrama, yet this melodrama is not merely sentimental; it is **রাজনৈতিক** in its intent. By amplifying suffering, Ghatak compels the audience to confront uncomfortable truths about social inequality and historical injustice. This aligns with the idea that emotion can function as a mode of political knowledge, enabling viewers to engage with structural violence on a visceral level. Such an approach complicates traditional distinctions between art and activism.

To further deepen the analysis, the concept of intersectionality becomes crucial in understanding the layered marginality of Ghatak's female characters. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality explains how systems of oppression such as gender, class, and socio-political displacement interact rather than operate independently. In the Indian context, these intersections are particularly visible, where caste, class, religion, and regional identity compound women's experiences of marginalization. Neeta, Sita, and Anasuya embody such intersecting vulnerabilities, as their struggles cannot be reduced to gender alone. This framework allows us to read Ghatak's cinema not just as a reflection of Partition but as an enduring commentary on structural inequality that continues to shape the lives of contemporary Indian women.

Neeta in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: The Politics of Labor

Neeta's character represents the economic backbone of a displaced middle-class family. As Tapan Sen (1998) observes, she becomes "the economic engine" of her household. Her labor sustains the family, yet she receives little recognition or autonomy.

Her famous line, “I want to live,” encapsulates the emotional and psychological toll of her exploitation. This statement transcends individual suffering, symbolizing the collective anguish of displaced women.

Ghatak uses natural elements—wind, mountains, and open spaces—to visually represent Neeta’s isolation. These aesthetic choices reinforce the connection between personal experience and broader socio-political realities. Her eventual breakdown highlights the unsustainable nature of her burden, reflecting the broader exploitation of women’s labor in postcolonial society.

Neeta’s condition can also be interpreted through the lens of unpaid and gendered labor, a concept central to feminist economic theory. Her contributions extend beyond monetary earnings to include emotional care and familial stability, yet these forms of labor remain unrecognized. This invisibility reflects broader societal tendencies to devalue women’s work, particularly within domestic spaces. As a result, Neeta’s identity becomes inseparable from her utility, reducing her to what Marxist theory would describe as a “reproductive labor unit.” Her eventual breakdown thus signifies not only personal tragedy but also the collapse of a system built on exploitation.

Neeta’s exploitation resonates strongly with feminist political economy, which examines how women’s labor is systematically undervalued within both capitalist and domestic structures. Scholars such as Silvia Federici (2004) argue that unpaid reproductive labor forms the backbone of economic systems while remaining invisible. In contemporary India, this dynamic persists, as women continue to shoulder disproportionate responsibilities for household labor alongside paid employment. The phenomenon of the “double burden” is particularly evident among urban middle-class women, who, like Neeta, are expected to contribute financially without relinquishing traditional caregiving roles. Thus, Neeta’s narrative extends beyond its historical context, reflecting ongoing debates about gendered labor, economic justice, and recognition.

Sita in *Subarnarekha*: Displacement and Erasure

Sita’s narrative shifts the focus from familial exploitation to systemic violence. Her life is shaped by displacement, poverty, and social stigma. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990) suggests, subaltern women are often “erased” within dominant structures, a concept vividly illustrated through Sita’s character.

Arunima Ghose (2004) argues that Sita is “destroyed not by desire, but by societal refusal to recognize her humanity.” Her marginalization reflects the failures of both the state and society to address the needs of displaced individuals.

The Subarnarekha River functions as a powerful metaphor for her fractured identity. Its shifting course mirrors the instability of her life and the nation itself.

Through visual symbolism, Ghatak transforms Sita's personal tragedy into a critique of postcolonial structures.

Sita's trajectory also raises questions about agency and representation. While she appears to lack control over her circumstances, her silence can be read as a form of imposed muteness rather than absence of subjectivity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990) famously asks whether the subaltern can speak, suggesting that systemic structures often prevent marginalized individuals from being heard. In Sita's case, her inability to articulate her suffering reflects the broader silencing of displaced women within both state and cultural narratives. Her story, therefore, becomes a critique of representational politics itself.

Sita's condition can also be examined through the lens of the postcolonial state's failure to ensure equitable citizenship. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990) suggests, the subaltern is often excluded from institutional frameworks of representation and justice. In contemporary India, similar patterns can be observed in the experiences of internally displaced populations, migrant workers, and refugee communities. Women within these groups face heightened vulnerability due to limited access to resources, legal protection, and social support. Sita's narrative thus anticipates present-day realities, where displacement continues to produce gendered forms of marginalization that remain inadequately addressed by the state.

Anasuya in *Komal Gandhar*: Cultural Resistance

Anasuya represents a form of resistance rooted in cultural and political engagement. As a member of a theatre collective, she participates in artistic movements that challenge social inequalities. Sukanya Mukhopadhyay (2010) notes that she embodies the "fractured identity of post-partition progressive women." The fragmentation of the theatre group reflects the divisions caused by Partition. Within this context, Anasuya negotiates identity and belonging. Her involvement in cultural production highlights the role of art as a means of resistance. Ghatak's emphasis on music and performance underscores his belief that "art must protest" (Ghatak, 1970). Anasuya's character demonstrates that marginality can also be a site of agency and political expression.

Anasuya's engagement with theatre also highlights the collective dimension of resistance. Unlike the isolated struggles of Neeta and Sita, her participation in a cultural movement suggests the possibility of solidarity and shared agency. However, this collective is itself fractured, mirroring the divisions of the nation. The tensions within the group underscore the challenges of sustaining political unity in the aftermath of trauma. Nevertheless, Anasuya's persistence indicates that cultural production remains a vital space for negotiating identity and articulating dissent. Anasuya's engagement with cultural production can be linked to contemporary feminist movements in India, where art, performance, and digital media serve as

platforms for resistance. From protest poetry to independent theatre and online activism, women increasingly use creative expression to challenge patriarchal norms and state authority. Indian People's Theatre Association historically played a significant role in shaping politically engaged art, and its legacy continues in present-day cultural activism. Anasuya's character anticipates this trajectory, demonstrating how cultural spaces can function as sites of negotiation, dissent, and empowerment for women navigating complex socio-political realities.

Comparative Analysis of Marginality

Neeta, Sita, and Anasuya represent three distinct yet interconnected forms of marginality:

- **Neeta:** Economic and familial exploitation
- **Sita:** Displacement and systemic violence
- **Anasuya:** Cultural and political resistance

Their experiences reveal three layers of oppression:

1. The family exploits women's labor
2. The state produces identity crises
3. Society restricts women's autonomy

As Tapan Sen (2002) argues, these women function as "mirrors of a nation wounded by history." Their narratives illustrate how personal suffering is inseparable from broader socio-political conditions.

Taken together, these characters illustrate how marginality operates across multiple axes, including gender, class, and geography. Their experiences demonstrate that oppression is not a singular condition but a layered phenomenon shaped by intersecting forces. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) emphasizes the importance of analyzing such intersections to avoid oversimplification. Ghatak's films exemplify this approach by presenting nuanced portrayals that resist reduction to a single narrative of victimhood. Instead, they reveal the complexity of women's lives within specific historical contexts.

The experiences of Neeta, Sita, and Anasuya find striking parallels in the lives of contemporary Indian women, particularly those situated at the intersections of economic precarity and social marginalization. Whether in informal labor sectors, migrant communities, or creative industries, women continue to navigate structures that limit their autonomy while relying on their labor. The persistence of gender-based wage gaps, unequal access to education, and societal expectations surrounding marriage and caregiving underscores the continuity of these challenges. Ghatak's characters, therefore, should not be viewed as confined to a specific historical moment but as representative of enduring structural conditions that continue to shape women's lives in India.

Aesthetic Politics in Ghatak's Cinema

Ghatak's films are characterized by a distinctive cinematic language that combines realism with symbolism. His use of sound, music, and landscape creates an emotional and political resonance that extends beyond the narrative.

Music serves as a repository of cultural memory, while landscapes reflect the inner states of characters. These aesthetic elements transform individual experiences into collective expressions of trauma and resistance.

This approach aligns with Ghatak's belief that cinema should represent "a people's sorrow and struggle" (Ghatak, 1970). By integrating aesthetics with politics, he creates a powerful medium for social critique.

Another crucial aspect of Ghatak's aesthetic is his use of sound as a disruptive element. Sudden auditory cues, such as sharp musical notes or environmental noises, interrupt the narrative flow and create a sense of unease. These techniques draw attention to the constructed nature of the film while simultaneously intensifying its emotional impact. By breaking cinematic illusion, Ghatak encourages viewers to critically engage with the content rather than passively consume it. This aligns with Brechtian principles of alienation, which seek to transform spectators into active participants in meaning-making.

The emotional intensity of Ghatak's cinema can also be understood through affect theory, which examines how feelings and bodily experiences shape social and political understanding. Scholars like Sara Ahmed (2004) argue that emotions are not merely personal but circulate within cultural and political frameworks, reinforcing or challenging power structures. In Ghatak's films, the suffering of women is not isolated but shared, creating a collective emotional experience that implicates the viewer. This affective dimension enhances the political impact of his work, making the struggles of characters like Neeta and Sita resonate deeply with audiences, including those in contemporary contexts.

Contemporary Relevance

The themes explored in Ghatak's films remain highly relevant today. Issues such as displacement, migration, and gendered labor continue to shape global societies. Women, particularly in marginalized communities, still face exploitation and invisibility.

Neeta's struggle reflects ongoing debates about unpaid labor. Sita's narrative resonates with contemporary refugee crises. Anasuya's story highlights the importance of cultural resistance in addressing social inequalities.

These parallels demonstrate the enduring significance of Ghatak's work in understanding contemporary socio-political challenges.

In the contemporary global context, the issues depicted in Ghatak's films have acquired renewed urgency. Large-scale migration, refugee crises, and economic precarity continue to shape the lives of marginalized populations. Women remain disproportionately affected, often bearing the dual burden of economic survival and caregiving responsibilities. The persistence of these conditions underscores the relevance of Ghatak's insights, suggesting that his work transcends its historical moment to offer a critical lens for understanding present-day inequalities.

In the era of neoliberal globalization, the conditions depicted in Ghatak's films have evolved but not disappeared. Economic liberalization has created new opportunities for women, yet it has also intensified inequalities, particularly for those in precarious employment. The rise of informal labor markets, contract work, and gig economies has disproportionately affected women, who often lack job security and social protection. At the same time, cultural expectations regarding family and caregiving remain largely unchanged. This contradiction mirrors the tensions experienced by Ghatak's characters, suggesting that the structural dynamics of marginalization continue to persist in new forms.

Conclusion

The films of Ritwik Ghatak offer a profound exploration of marginality through the experiences of Neeta, Sita, and Anasuya. These characters reveal the complex interplay of gender, class, and history in shaping women's lives. By transforming personal suffering into political discourse, Ghatak creates a cinematic language that challenges conventional representations of women. His work demonstrates that cinema can serve as a powerful tool for social critique and historical reflection.

Furthermore, Ghatak's emphasis on women as carriers of historical memory challenges conventional historiography, which often privileges official narratives over lived experiences. By centering female subjectivity, he redefines the boundaries of historical representation, demonstrating that personal stories are integral to understanding broader social processes. This perspective invites a re-evaluation of how history is constructed and whose voices are included within it.

By integrating feminist, postcolonial, and Marxist perspectives with contemporary frameworks such as intersectionality and affect theory, Ghatak's cinema can be understood as both historically specific and universally relevant. His portrayal of women transcends representation, offering a critical lens through which to examine the ongoing negotiation of identity, labor, and agency in modern India.

The enduring relevance of Neeta, Sita, and Anasuya lies in their ability to illuminate the structural continuities that link past and present forms of marginalization.

Ultimately, Neeta, Sita, and Anasuya are not merely characters but symbols of resilience, resistance, and the enduring impact of historical trauma. Their stories continue to offer valuable insights into the ongoing struggles of marginalized women.

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