

NOTES

THREE WOMEN LOST TO TIME: A BRIEF NOTE ON GHATAK'S HEROINES

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Nita, Anasua and Sita, Ritwik Ghatak's three heroines are characters whose circumstances, on a superficial level are not similar, but a closer look reveals several very strong resemblances that they share with each other. These are women who are in a way completely trapped within their time. They are all ensnared in a mesh of conflicts that have been generated by forces that are much larger than the crises plaguing their immediate surroundings. *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*, even as they begin, give the audience a sense of impending doom, of a larger destiny waiting to strike these women with a ruthlessness that is almost incomprehensible in its intensity.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara* Nita is as much a victim of historical and political upheavals as she is of the parasitic tendencies of her own family. The partition of Bengal is one of the larger forces ultimately responsible for her destruction. Her tragedy is in a certain sense inevitable from the very beginning, since it is the result of the instability of her position in an irrevocably splintered society.¹ Nita's escape from the stifling pressure of her time is possible only by escaping into the oblivion of death. Her final journey to the hills has to be of necessity a journey towards death. Shankar, her brother, recognizes the futility of her tragic endeavors to stay afloat and leaves the house in protest against the injustice of their fate. This inevitability of her destruction remains true even if one does not take into account the essentially mythic level of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. Nita as Uma does finally escape to become one with what Ghatak calls 'Mahakaal'² but even without taking this dimension of her character into consideration one can say that death is her only salvation from the claustrophobic grip of her time.

Despite the fact that Anasua's situation in *Komal Gandhar* is apparently very different from that of Nita's, she is also completely shackled within the compulsions and limits that her circumstances impose upon her life. Loyalty towards an absentee fiancé wages a constant battle with her commitment to Bhrigu and the cause of the theatre that they believe in. This split inside Anasua evokes the larger chasm between the two Bengals that lives on like a festering sore within Bhrigu's as well as her own mind. Anasua's dilemma tortures her throughout the narrative and the pain of her not knowing where she belongs is echoed in the allegory of 'Shakuntala', a character she plays in the production of Kalidasa's text in the film. Finally, Anasua makes one last desperate attempt to leave the country, but this attempt to abscond from her extremely unstable and disturbing situation is doomed to fail. Anasua's search throughout *Komal Gandhar* has been a quest for faith, for articulation, for an ideological stand. She finds an echo of this yearning in Bhrigu's passionate search for a more meaningful theatre, in his dissatisfaction with the existing modes of communication.

Bhrigu and Anasua share a common passion. Both of them dream of a radiant future when theatre as well as their contemporary society will change for the better. It is the possibility of such a radical change that Anasua fights for and therefore, she cannot escape to an alien country, comfortably distant from the contradictions rupturing her own. But the narrative does not allow her to do this, instead it shows Anasua abandoning her long awaited dream of a life with 'Ferdinand' out of her own choice. But it seems that it is also the force of a larger destiny that compels her to embark on an extremely precarious journey with her own faith and Bhrigu's rather dubious support as her only companions. Ghatak writes that the central theme of *Komal Gandhar* is one of unification, of marriage.³ The bond between Bhrigu and Anasua and the way in which it reflects the possibility of an union between the two Bengals is corroborated by the constant use of ritualistic women's songs of marriage like 'Amer tolay jamur jumur kola tolay biya' on the sound track. Therefore, Anasua's inability to abdicate is not simply an imprisonment, it is also the price she pays for choosing to participate, for her conscious intervention in the dynamics of history.

In *Subarnarekha*, Iswar recognizes the futility of struggling against forces that he can never overcome and, in a bid to spare his little sister Sita and also Abhiram a life of constant drudgery, escapes to a small town called Chhatimpur on the banks of the river Subarnarekha. His friend, Haraprasad labels him as a 'deserter' for this move. But finally Iswar is unable to protect Sita from the circumstances that operate beyond the realm of his desires. Sita eventually elopes with Abhiram to return to a life very similar to that from which her brother had rescued her several years ago. Sita, like Nita and Anasua is governed by a destiny that Iswar might have defiantly attempted to thwart, but finally has no control over.

The narrative, in a way, at this juncture, turns a full circle. Sita is restored to the time and space that the larger forces of destiny have designated for her. From the very beginning of the film, Sita has been searching for a 'new home', looking for an anchor and it is ironical that she does not find it on the banks of Subarnarekha in Chhatimpur against a tranquil landscape; but instead feels at home with Abhiram in an extremely squalid colony in Calcutta . In this context, Iswar's home in Chhatimpur and Sita's life there takes on an aura of the unreal, like a dream that Sita was inhabiting before she finally enters the reality that she is meant to live in. This is why Iswar's final horrifying encounter with Sita takes place not in Chhatimpur but in the colony where poverty and Abhiram's accidental death has finally driven her to prostitution. This sequence is not only a violation of their relationship but through this encounter, Iswar is once again forced to confront a reality that he had escaped from. His bewilderment is akin to Sita's when as a little girl, she had been jolted out of her reverie, seeing a frightening figure of Goddess Kali in front of her on the deserted airstrip. The time that confronts Ghatak with its hydrogen bombs and genocides, in fact invokes as much panic in him as did the figure of Kali in little Sita, but unfortunately there is no assurance of the existence of a harmless Bahurupi behind the facade of this very real nightmare. Ghatak writes in an essay that human civilization itself is in a certain way face to face with the archetypal image of the 'terrible mother' and its very existence is dependant upon this confrontation.⁴

The interesting point in all this is that, despite the fact that these three women are in a sense deeply anchored in a specific socio-political context, they affect and disturb audiences who are situated far beyond the parameters of that context. Nita, Anasua and Sita reach out to us, talk to us even though we have very little in common with the age that works as the catalyst behind their lines. For instance, it is rather difficult to visualize being caught in exactly the same situation that Nita is today. The socio—political configurations have undergone several changes since then and the particular nature of the rupture with one's country or one's past that was the primary reason behind her tragedy is only a dim memory. Yet, her dying cry, as she collapses in the hills resonates through this distance and strikes us with a force that takes our breath away. Similarly, we have hardly anything to share with Anasua and Sita. Someone from my generation might not even understand the dialect they speak in. Several decades of time and changing history have intervened between their lives and ours. In *Subarnarekha*, in the sequence where Iswar and Haraprasad are travelling in a taxi after drinking heavily at the Windsor Bar, Haraprasad looking at a nonchalantly revelling and brightly lit Calcutta remarks through a drunken haze—'They have not seen atom Bombs,...Never ...they have not seen war, they have not seen famine, they have not seen poverty...they have not experienced the partition'. And all this is interspersed with incantations from the Upanishads. Haraprasad here is obviously talking about the people of the fifties who are intent on celebrations, completely oblivious to the pain and destruction around them. But it is interesting to note that these words seem to be almost prophetic. Haraprasad could easily have been referring to the present generation. His words sum up our situation with an accuracy that is uncanny.

Yet the pain of these women is as palpable today as it was to the audience who first saw the films in the sixties, who had participated in this history and for whom the partition and the subsequent trauma associated with it was still a fresh wound. Ghatak writes that it is this wound, this scar that he weaves his narratives around. This is his way of remembering not to forget. In doing so he has invested his heroines with something, a special quality that reaches out across a distance in time and history to touch even those lives which have almost nothing in common with theirs. Why does this happen? Are Nita,

Anasua and Sita characters who are beyond history and therefore beyond time? Is there a shared essence between these three women that is largely unaffected by the passage of time?

I do not have any definite answer to the question. I have simply tried to think of possibilities that might explain this contradiction. One possibility is that perhaps these women address something within the collective unconscious,⁵ a drive that is essentially perennial and unchanging. Perhaps it is the archetypal dimension of these characters that touches the timeless part of our beings. This has been offered as an explanation but it is not a completely acceptable one. Certain images circulate only within specific societies to generate meaning. Therefore it would probably be incorrect to claim that the iconic extension of Nita's character or the song 'Aye go Uma Kole loi' affects people in all corners of the world exactly in the same way. On the other hand, the reverse of this, Nita's very ordinariness at one level, might account for the immediacy with which she reaches out to us. All of us have somewhere or the other come across a person like her. Ghatak himself writes in his diaries that he had often seen a girl on the street on whose tired face he could see the traces left behind by the ravages of time. This was his inspiration behind the creation of Nita. In his essays he speaks of her with a great deal of tenderness and affection, almost as if she is someone he knows very well. Perhaps it is this sense of having known somebody like her, this familiarity that we as an audience identify with. Nita's dying cry as she asserts her will to live is echoed by the vast indifference of nature. At this point we feel her pain strike us with an intensity that is almost physical, similar to the whiplash that has been incorporated into the sound track earlier in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. Is this response born out of simple recognition? Or is it something more complex? Perhaps it is the large collective nature of their experience that affects us? We realize that Nita, Anasua and Sita are not the only ones who had to be sacrificed as part of historical necessity. This is not their individual predicament. This tragedy is not theirs only. They are just a part of a very large group of people who have struggled and finally lost when pitted against the larger power of their times. These heroines somehow evoke those faces that have been lost in the crowd forever. Another possibility is that these women take us back into a time that we have left behind

unresolved. We suddenly realize that in a certain sense we have not participated in this history. Some of us have not done so as a matter of choice and the rest of us have just missed this historical moment. This gives us a feeling of having left an unfinished and in some ways unresolved past behind us, somewhere along the line. *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha* and these heroines in particular, make us look back in nostalgia, not in the romantic sense of the term but as a desire for participation in a history that is largely responsible for that part of ourselves that we do not really understand. We somehow feel guilty for the absence of this history in our lives. In one sense we have not confronted this time and therefore have not been able to come to terms with it, reconcile ourselves to it, either. It is like an unfinished task, a responsibility we have not fulfilled. Is this why we feel so acutely disturbed and almost disoriented after watching these films?

Nita, Sita and Anasua are definitely constrained by the limits that their time, their circumstances impose upon their lives. But they make us aware of our own inadequacies, our own incompleteness. They make us realize that we have not really been able to cherish and nurture them and thousands of others like them who have simply disappeared without a trace. Perhaps this is why Nita's cry of pain keeps on living, like a constant lament within our hearts.

Notes :

1. See Kumar Shahani, 'Violence and Responsibility', *Ritwik Ghatak Argument / Stories*, Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Amit Gangar eds. Bombay, 1987.
2. Ghatak, 'Chalachitrachinta', *Chitrabikshan, Ritwik Sankhya*, Calcutta, January-April 1976.
3. Ghatak, 'Manabsamaj, Amader Aitijhya, Chabi Kora o Amar Pracheshta'. *Chalachitra Manush Ebang Aro Kichhu*, Calcutta 1976. See also, Ghatak, 'Amar Chabi,' *Chitrabikshan, Ritwik Sankhya*. See also, Ghatak, 'Chalachitra Parichaloker Baktabya', *Chitrabikshan Ritwik Sankhya*.
4. Ghatak, 'Manab Samaj, Amader Aitijhya, Chabi Kora o Amar Pracheshta'. *Chalachitra, Manush Ebang Aro Kichhu*, Calcutta 1976.
5. Ghatak, 'Chalachitrachinta', *Chitrabikshan, Ritwik Sankhya*.