

THE FACE OF THE MOTHER: WOMAN AS IMAGE AND BEARER OF THE
LOOK IN RITWIK GHATAK'S FILMS

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In probably the most influential contribution to psychoanalytic and feminist film theory Laura Mulvey, in her 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', discussed how in classical Hollywood cinema the contradictory functions of the conventional narrative drive and spectacularization of the static image are uneasily resolved by rendering the subject and object of the 'look' gender specific. Thus the pleasures provided by mainstream narrative cinema — primarily voyeuristic and narcissistic — are criticized as being specifically masculine (a positioning of the subject which even a woman viewer has to assume). Mulvey elaborates how the spectacle of the woman initially triggers 'anxiety of castration' in the male viewer, which is subsequently disavowed through 'fetishism': the female character on screen is rendered a passive spectacle — object of the desire of the on-screen male character, relayed to the viewer before the screen.

Though Laura Mulvey's theorization has been questioned and problematized in subsequent studies (including Mulvey's own responses) one cannot reduce the value of the basic premises of her arguments in the essay (and in the following 'Afterthoughts' published in 1981) as being merely archival. It is important to recall that Mulvey's pathbreaking essay was not only meant to be only an academic observation, the polemical stance actually professed 'a political use of psychoanalysis' (as she titles the first section of the essay), the essay becoming a manifesto of sorts for a feminist cinema. The 'Afterthoughts', instead, was more or less an academic exercise. Mulvey was writing in an era when Film Studies — armed with semiotics, Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis — was trying to critically probe into the hegemonic model of the classic narrative cinema exemplified primarily by Hollywood. One of the impulses behind much of the contemporary writings — now influenced by Brechtian aesthetics — was also to fashion the premises of a politically critical counter-cinema.

Therefore, it can be particularly rewarding if the theoretical framework of the essay is applied to other cinemas (other, primarily because they arise from a Non-Western context) in order to probe into similar issues. The idea is not to judge the applicability of Mulvey's theorizations in different contexts; rather, one can observe what a different, but radical cinema can offer regarding the issues which Mulvey's essay raises. If anomalies arise, one can ponder the reasons behind it and most probably the difference of cultural contexts can provide answers for them. This essay does not claim to provide an exhaustive explanation; rather it tries to take the initial steps to such a comparative approach in Film Studies. My essay is an attempt to apply Mulvey's theorisations to films of Ritwik Kumar Ghatak in order to unearth questions which may prove to be useful for further researches.

Ritwik Ghatak's films consciously used the melodramatic mode — prevalent in the Bengali Cinema of the 1950s and '60s — in order to forge an artistic practice which was inherently political. Presenting cinematic accounts of the partition of India in 1947, Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar*(1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1962, released in '65) — often clubbed together as the 'Partition-trilogy' — used the melodramatic mode to expand the scope of representation beyond mere realism. Intertextuality, a complex soundtrack and a particular use of the mythic mode turned his films into multilayered theses on Indian history. His films transcended narrative limits; often these narratives are primarily centred upon the woman. His films are not only considered examples of a powerful political commentary, his representations of women are also considered politically powerful.

I

For our convenience, we can recall the issues elaborated by Mulvey in the following way. A previous application of Lacanian psychoanalysis in Cinema Studies by Christian Metz — in his 'Story/ Discourse: Notes on Two Kinds of Voyeurism' — led to the enumeration of spectatorial identifications during the viewing of a (conventional) film:

... [T]he spectator's identification with the characters of the film (which is secondary) ... his preliminary identification with the (invisible) seeing agency of the film itself as discourse... the traditional film succeeds in giving the spectator the impression that he is himself the subject... (Metz, 1985, 548)

Mulvey's views can be seen to be indicating that both of these 'identifications' — the primary and the secondary — are gender-specific, i.e. predominantly male. She enumerates the three looks associated with cinema:

...[T]hat of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience. (Mulvey, 1985, 314)

One can deduce that the 'primary identification' takes place with the interaction (and the subsequent privileging) of the third of the looks. The 'secondary identification' — logically — will be relayed through the male characters' looks fixated on the fetishized female body or body-parts. The spectacle of the woman sutures the three looks, rendering them predominantly male.

Thus Mulvey comments upon the cinematic apparatus and its ideological effects' from a feminist perspective. Such an account was bound to generate interest primarily because she rendered concrete what was previously — in Metz's (1985) or Baudry's (1985) accounts — an abstraction, a disembodied faculty of vision. The regression and powerlessness of the spectator, compensated by the voyeuristic omnipotence rendered by

the screen is now qualified to be specifically male. Thus the spectator can be socially and historically located within the practices of the patriarchy. We should again recall that Mulvey proposed a dismantling of conventional narrative cinema in order to emancipate the look.

Keeping in mind Laura Mulvey's theorizations, Ritwik Ghatak's films complicate the scenario at the first instance. Mulvey has explained in the section titled *Woman as Image, Man as the bearer of the Look*' :

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split in between active/male and passive/ female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.

...

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. (Mulvey, 1985, 309) .

Ghatak's films, on the other hand, produce a powerful articulation of the woman by turning her into a spectacle. Even a commonplace knowledge of his films — not necessarily limited to the Bengalis to whom the films are primarily addressed — register that in flashes of evocative moments, the female protagonists of his films are framed in culturally familiar poises. She is often frontally presented, either in close-up or in mid-shot; the duration of the image is sufficiently sustained for its full impact; the editing does not allow the image to be conventionally narrativized, i.e. continuity editing does

not precede or follow the shot(s). The questions which are bound to arise: does Ghatak unwittingly fall into the trap of the conventionally gendered patterns of representations? In other words, is the spectator-positioning in these cases pruriently male? Is the woman rendered passive through such elaborately stylized framings?

II

In Indian Film Studies, the theoretical framework of Mulvey's essay has often been used or commented upon — directly or indirectly — in order to study spectator-subjectivity, the nature of the image, the melodramatic mode or the scopic regime on the Indian screen.

Ashish Rajadhyaksha's 'Viewership and Democracy in the Cinema' actually proceeds from Mulvey's enumerations of the three looks in the cinema. Maintaining that he is not working out "an 'Indian' film theory (as against, typically, a 'western' one) but rather presenting the outlines of a theory of the cinema that can account for the Indian cinema" (Rajadhyaksha, 2000, 269) Rajadhyaksha argues that the privileging of the third look, as codified in Hollywood, is not the obvious mode in all cinemas. The first look, according to him, is always qualified by the inevitable second look, it 'endorses' the other two. The framing of the image is qualified by another frame of intelligibility which renders the film meaningful to somebody.¹ Thus, this latter frame is posited in respect to the actual — not the abstract or the inscribed — spectator to whom the image is addressed. Thus, the second look "is that of empowered viewer deriving considerable authority through that look" (Rajadhyaksha, 288), thus attributing to the viewer her rights to the view, respecting the 'contract' that is made once she purchases the ticket. Rajadhyaksha's arguments are much larger in scope; one can say that he further specifies that abstract spectator whom Mulvey has specified in gender. Stressing more the filmic image as a presentation to an actual viewer than a representation of the world his theorization suggests that the third look is always a negotiation between the agency presenting the narrative and the spectator.

Ravi Vasudevan's (2000a, 2000b) and Moinak Biswas' (2000) essays — which appeared in the same collection where Rajadhyaksha's essay appeared — do not discard the importance of the third look altogether. Commenting on the new melodrama which developed in the 1950s, Biswas showed how these films were producing a notion of interiority, of personhood, of a sense of identity not always figured out within the coordinates of the nation-state but still articulating a strong desire of modernity. Considering that such attempts of 'psychologizing' was not a common feature in Indian popular melodrama with its externalized, flat personas and types, what becomes relevant in our discussion is the mobilization of the third look to produce such a sense of inner self, and often the subject of the look is woman and the object, an ignorant male. Biswas observes: "[In these melodramas] the world is feminine and also now; historically 'feminized'... [w]e shall suggest that the film produces a feminine subjectivity independent of the female subject of the story." (Biswas, 2000, 131) Summarizing Mulvey's Afterthoughts', he continues

"[I]n a 'male' genre like the Western, the female spectator can derive pleasure from the possibility of a rediscovery of the forgotten masculine phase within her. Our argument, in a sense, runs in an opposite direction to Mulvey's: it is possible — when we keep in focus not only the text but its cultural repositioning — to activate a feminization of both the male and the female spectator by films like *Harano Sur*." (Biswas,132)

Ravi Vasudevan's (2000a, 2000b) examples also reinforce the idea that even if the third look is used, it is not always articulating the male gaze, fixing the female in a formulated frame, in the melodramas of the period, but many a time, powerfully, works the other way round. But here, we must point out subtle differences in the observations of these theorists: while Biswas may be suggesting a contingent articulation of an ethos alternative — if not oppositional — to patriarchy, made possible due to a simultaneous desire for modernity, Vasudevan observes a mobilization of a pre-modern mode.

While in Vasudevan's example (*Devdas*, Bimal Roy, 1955) point-of-view codes are mobilized to represent the subjectivity of the woman; this is done in such a way as to constrain the field of her look by focusing on the beloved within a discourse of divinity. This setting of certain limiting coordinates for the woman's look also significantly institutes a division between the incipient formation of a new domesticity and the wider external world, restricting the woman to domestic space (Vasudevan, 2000a, 147).

The above mentioned 'discourse of divinity' needs further explanation. In a different context, Madhava Prasad has elaborated on a structure of spectation prevalent in popular Indian cinema through the employment of the term *darsana* (literally, having a look), a pre-modern practice "within the public traditions of Hindu worship, especially in temples, but also in public appearances of monarchs and other elevated figures (typically structured by) the divine image, the worshipper and the mediating priest" (Prasad, 1998, 75). Instead of the modern investment of power in the looking subject, this process inverts it by subordinating the bearer of the look to the spectacular authoritative icon. The priestly mediation is also important in this tiered hierarchy of ranks and scopic regimes. Vasudevan explains that this sort of visual circuit has its roots in the bhakti movements:

[W/]ithin the bhakti, or devotional tradition, while the female devotee's energy is channelled directly into the worship of the deity, without the mediation of the priest, the Lord still remains a remote figure. The devotional act thus becomes a somewhat excessive one, concentrating greater attention on the devotee than the devotional object...

Here the audience is invited to participate in a culturally familiar idiom that reinvents itself by providing a supportive frame to the cultivation of new techniques for the representation of an individuated feminine subjectivity (Vasudevan, 2000a, 147, 148)

Citing some of the key theorists of Indian cinema, probably we have been able to indicate an arena of spectatorship where possibilities are multiplied. The popular Indian melodrama is often marked with the subordination of individualized point-of-view to a spectacle addressed to a historically specific community of viewers. In a way, the exhibitionism of the screen is more powerful than the voyeurism of the spectator. This does not lead to a negation of the spectation as observed by Laura Mulvey in her essays) on classical narrative cinema, but the circuit of spectatorial exchange is somehow different.

Historical conditions often lead to possibilities of articulation of the feminine subjectivity within the ambits of patriarchy. Certainly, the dominant mode of melodrama and its creative negotiation with realism was the principal reason for such possibilities in the case of Bengali cinema, the colonial experience and other factors leading to a relative loosening of the feudal patriarchal grip. As the former patriarchy gave way to the new, more 'bourgeois' one, feminine articulations became powerful, if contingent, not only in cinema but also in the novel with which Bengali melodrama had a symbiotic relationship during this period. Somehow this articulation signified a desire for modernity, triggering new subjectivities, alternative to, sometimes critical of, prevalent identities. These subjectivities were often articulated through a use of the 'third look'. Even beyond or within Bengal, alternative or subaltern religious / devotional practices too gave way to such articulations, the modes of which were mobilized by Indian melodramas even for secular purposes of representation. Here we can discuss certain issues relevant for an understanding of Ritwik Ghatak's films where these possibilities are used for a radical exercise in cinema.

III

In Ritwik Ghatak's Films — particularly at the 'Partition-trilogy' — the narratives are articulated broadly on two levels. Firstly, on the level of narrative proper and secondly on the visual level of iconization and on the archetypal overtures of feminine characterizations as 'cultural-spaces',². A feminine face signifying 'Bengal' was

a common artistic trope in Ghatak's days, both within the nationalistic discourse and beyond it. Ghatak, as it is known, explained the images in terms:

The idea of this Great Mother image... with both its benevolent and terrible aspects has been in our civilization since antiquity, intermingled with our myths, our epics, our folklore and our scriptures... The Great Mother image in its duality exists in every fibre of our being.³

With all respect to Ghatak's explanation, we want to attempt a different mode of explanation of the images. Jungian psychoanalysis seems to lack historicity. One can assume that Ghatak took resort to Jung as a strategic ploy to find a theoretical framework, which can explain the workings of the psyche behind or beyond the apparent and the experiential, which can grasp the civilizational impulse beyond the empirical. One can presume too that the monolithic Marxist discourse of his times could not provide adequate answers to such ambitious inquiries.

Firstly, we will try to understand the cultural semiotics of the Mother-images. These images have often been described as the 'Great Mother' archetypes, visually recalling the Mother-goddess iconography of Bengali culture. The cult of Mother-goddesses is an intrinsic part of the popular religion of Bengal, one can say that nowadays it has turned into a secular popular culture; the month of October turns into a spectacular festive season. Scholars have commented how the Mother-goddesses have its roots in the pre-Aryan fertility cults, celebrating the fecundity of the earth in a predominantly agricultural society. It is also noted that the origins of such cults lie in a pre-Aryan matriarchal society, which was either destroyed or marginalized by the non-agricultural Aryans, though they appropriated the goddesses as a second order of deities subordinated to their masculine ones. The Mother-goddesses thus lost their primary significations of fertility-cults, which are still retained in lower and popular religious practices. During the days of anti-colonial nationalism, the images again gathered importance as they were used to symbolize the Motherland, race, language, nation, etc.

Ghatak's use of the images differs largely from the nationalist use by opening up the hitherto closed significations. He was using the images somewhat against the official nationalist discourse, commenting on the 'betrayal' of the promise of anti-colonial struggle of Independence in the subsequent transfer of power in 1947, a betrayal evident in the simultaneous Partition of Bengal into portions of two separate nations. Thus, the images of the women in Ghatak's films — along with a host of other connotations — would signify a past glory of a land betrayed, the present state of humiliation and predicament and a future redemption which could be only attained through a popular revolution. Thus the images invest the narratives with an allegorical charge, i.e. the story of the 'Mother' becomes the story of the 'Land'.⁴ To understand the rich and complex process of signification, we will now briefly study the iconography of the Mother-goddesses.

A brief analysis of the Mother-Goddess iconography as practiced in Bengali Durga-pujas reveals a duality in signification. The traditional *ekchala* icon (i.e. icons presented under a framing arc) depicts the goddess gazing frontally, the features often resembling *pat* paintings. Surrounded by her offspring, she is on a visit to her father's abode coming from (and after live days of staying will return to) her husband's. But in spite of this domestic context, she is always represented in a 'frozen moment'⁵ of killing the Arum. Thus, two narratives overlap here: the frozen moment depicting her as *Mahisasuramardini* (literally; the slayer of the forces of evil, the *Asuras* or the demons), and the overarching moment of the pujas depicting her as Uma, the married daughter. Thus the connotation of the demon-slayer is actually denoted within the 'Uma' paradigm, but her frontal gaze also dissociates her face from the action the body is involved in. The face and the triad of eyes (a deity in Hindu culture is often endowed with an extra eye in her/ his forehead, symbolizing a divine vision) become the centre to which the body attributes supplementary meaning. Often a dissociated face (which often adorns the Bengali household) would be a repository of the same values even if the battling body is not depicted. The face becomes autonomous.

We propose that Ghatak's Mother-images function in the same way. The face and the eyes — magnified and separated from the body in big close-ups or mid-close-ups — become an autonomous sign to which the body, i.e. the character posited in the narrative, attributes supplementary meaning. Thus, the autonomy of the iconic face and the eyes would be presented, often, as an excess, as a release from the body's narrative, as a simultaneous signification of contemporary struggle and residue of a lost past. The past is the memory of the face of the Mother, when one was in a plenitudinal relation with the land, disrupted by subsequent turns of history.

Here we can recall Ghatak's own words about the making of an archetypal-image:

When some images develop as an inevitable consequence and again become inconsequential in the process of turning into symbols, it is only then that the archetypal force is born.⁶

In my films I keep the characters in touch with this materialistic world, but gradually they assume some personality on the imaginative level.⁷

To elaborate, the archetypes are released in flashes of iconizations. It is evident in particular ways of framing, figuration, figure-ground relation and the use of mid or big close ups. These images are not always results of characterization, something which the narrative always builds up, the frames are always presented frontally. It is an address to a historical spectator-subject and the images are imbued with extra-textual meaning.

One of the important aspects of the Indian melodrama is its frontality of presentation of certain images and the iconicity attained by certain personae. Geeta Kapur (1987), Ashish Raiadhyaksha (1987) and Ravi Vasudevan (2000) have discussed it in detail, from which we can define such iconicity as a condensation of meanings in the image, which is addressed to a specific community of viewers. The meaning of the image

or the knowledge of it is not textually formed, rather it is something determined prior to the formation of the text, i.e. the signification is both before and beyond the text, something which can be re-circulated, repeated inter- and intra-media. Here we can recall Rajadhyaksha's theorizations on the second look and Madhava Prasad's use of the *darsana*. The iconic image is frontally presented, displaying characteristics of a direct address, often in a tableau-like orientation of the space. Its use depends upon a spectatorial exchange where "the position of knowledge is not one which relays the spectator through a hermeneutic play, the enigma of what is to come, ... the function of this spatial figure is to encode a socially and communally defined address to the spectator" (Vasudevan, 2000; 138).

It is a larger project to study the moments of close-ups in Ghatak's Films.⁸ But a question may arise: isn't the spectation quasi-religious? Since we have already witnessed them figured in the modular form available from religious iconography, it would appear to be so.⁹ We can refer here to the concept of *darsana*, the spectatorial structure of Indian films previously discussed. Ghatak, obviously, frees the icon of its religious undertones and discourses of political and social authority. The feminine characters are always rooted within quotidian struggle, never 'heroic' in the usual sense, but the spectatorial exchange do involve a reverential affection characterizing the Bengali culture of pratima-darsana (literally, taking a look at the deity), where the Mother is a domestic, intimate and loved entity, having more of a regional charge than a nationalist one, having more of a matriarchal, devotional warmth than a patriarchal, Brahminical grandeur.¹⁰ The face is never reduced to an object of the look. It is a culturally defined address which evokes a known affect, the latent emotions of one's involvement with / alienation from one's Motherland.

Let us proceed to illustrations from the one of the films of Partition-trilogy.

IV

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the narrative is simple and sentimental as any other conventional tearjerker, but Ghatak enriches it through mythic subtexts, a subversive

reworking of the denouement, a rich soundtrack, etc. It tells the story of a family uprooted from East Bengal during the Partition and presently struggling to survive in one of the refugee-colonies which virtually expanded the southern part of Calcutta into a subcity during those decades. The central character is Nita, the eldest daughter of the family on whose earnings the family survives. Struggle and privation render the family members insensitive to her toil as she defers her marriage to a budding scientist in order to support her family and pay for her younger siblings' studies. The dependence of the family on Nita increases as a younger brother, just employed, and her father, who was a teacher, suffers accidents. Meanwhile, the elder brother Shankar, to whom Nita is particularly close, leaves for Bombay after Nita's lover, probably being impatient with Nita's deferrals of marriage, marries her younger sister. Nita becomes afflicted with tuberculosis but desperately hides it from the family. In a sudden turn of fortunes Shankar returns, established as a successful singer, and mood turns upbeat in the family. At this moment, Nita's disease is discovered and she is transferred to a sanatorium. The climactic scene of the film remains a classic moment in the history of Indian cinema when, in an obvious metaphor of dying, we hear Nita screaming out to Shankar amidst the indifference of the hill resort that she wanted to live, she loved living her life.

Ghatak counterpoints Nita with mythic resonances of Mother-goddesses. He makes a couple of references to Mother-goddesses: Nita is born on the day of Jagatdhatri puja (Jagatdhatri literally means 'the nurse of the earth') and she is compared to Uma in the latter half of the film, a goddess standing for the 'exemplary daughter' in Bengali culture. That she is the sustainer of the family and she is iconized as the Mother (of the family) is well established at the beginning of the film. One may read allegorically the subsequent disavowal of Nita by her family as the disavowal of the trauma of partition by the historical spectator-subject and his acceptance of a new order born out of the balkanization; Ghatak's films were indictments of such disavowals, as we have mentioned earlier.

In a couple of Bengali essays Sanjoy Mukhopadhyay (1998, 2000) has explained that Nita's penultimate scream for life has expressionistic qualities comparable to Edvard

Munk's famous painting. He also observes that while Nita says that she has sinned for not protesting against her humiliations, her actual sin was that of acquiring another point-of-view piercing the veils of patriarchy and inverting the uneven order of power. Dire straits actually made her too responsible, too powerful as the sole earning member of the family and she had to pay her price by, firstly, being 'iconized' as a Mother figure, then being left with no other choice but to disavow her desire, her sexuality. Then her coughed up blood proving contagious, this Mother had to be discarded, disavowed. The incubated turns out to be the incubus.¹¹

Here, we can ponder whether money takes the role of the Phallus and Nita becomes the phallic Mother. But, we can limit our attention to some of Mukhopadhyay's observations that draws our attention to a specific aspect of Ghatak's mise-en-scene: in many iconographic compositions Nita is framed in low angles; the confident presence of the erect, upright body either occupying the centre or the upper half of the frame, rendering the presence of the males in the frames redundant, peripheral, vulnerable or marginalized. Her iconic presence invokes awe.

There are suggestions in the film that when Nita was confident enough about the role of her as a 'sustainer' of the family, she was unable to watch many a thing happening around her, e.g. her lover's falling prey to her sister's seduction, her mother's silence and family's approval to their flirtation so that they don't lose their sole earning member. But after she gets jilted, and as her health degenerates, subjective shots start to frame the world. Mukhopadhyay also observes that after Nita retires to another room in the house, the room is spatially positioned in such a place from where the entire household, the courtyard where the family assembles on occasion of celebrations can be watched. One can say that the room is oriented like an inverted Panopticon: the discarded, partially insane and outcast has achieved a point-of-view to watch and observe the world which has banished her. In the sequence where her disease is discovered her subjective shots prevail. Firstly, we have the aural clue of Shankar arriving: the vocal recital of a raga reminds us that only Nita registers his presence when she hears the song (as in the introductory sequence which we will discuss below). Then the gathering of the family is

shown in a subjective shot of Nita's. In a strikingly bizarre point-of-view shot, the brother's face — startled at the revelation of her sister's contagious illness — is captured from the position of Nita's blood—drenched handkerchief. The sequence climaxes in an extreme wide-angled shot of the father directly addressing the camera saying: "I accuse!" In the following sequence, much like the father in Kafka's 'The Judgment' she sentences her dearest daughter to banishment.

Finally, I would like to mention the introductory and the concluding sequences of the film. It can be argued that in these the 'look' of the spectator is rendered analogous to that of Shankar's in an interesting way. To illustrate, we can cite a visual trope used twice: the snapping of the sandal-straps of Nita and that of another local working woman, shown in the beginning and in the end of the film respectively. When Shankar watches the latter, he (and the spectator) is engulfed with remorseful grief as the memory of Nita rushes back. But a closer look will reveal that Shankar was not witness to Nita's sandals getting torn in the introducing sequence, only the spectator was. Therefore as far as plausibility is concerned, Shankar cannot remember Nita in a similar poise. Though instances are there in the film where Shankar often confuses the local girl with Nita, we are here interested in the particular visual trope. It can only be explained if we consider the spectatorial point-of-view as sutured (if one can allow the use of the term) to that of Shankar. It is the point-of-view of a devotee/ child looking at the Mother. The opening shot present the invocation of the Mother through Shankar's recital of Raga *Hamshadhwani*, sung in praise of the Mother. In the second recital sequence the camera actually frames them once in the iconic composition of Nita as the Mother-deity standing upright and Shankar as the devotee, sitting on the ground and singing.

These moments appear at crossroads: the vertical paradigmatic of the Mother's face meets the horizontal syntagmatic of the narrative of the heroine. Ghatak's political use of the icon would then, often, set the double-articulation of significations clashing: the mythic face of Uma / Jagatdhatri would contradict the tubercular body of corporeal Nita. Often the face would be a premonition of the body's narrative: Anasuya's face in *Komal Gandhar* pre-figuring her future attainment of the inheritance of the idealized

Mother — something which is turned into a discursive ‘idea’ in these films she will be while the body struggles through a historical dynamics towards the narrative resolution. The face would be presented as the counterpoint to the body’s humiliation: the widowhood, commodified corporeality and suicide in the case of Sita of *Subarnarekha*, while her face signifies a pristine, struggling glory (refer to her close-ups — eyes wide open — after her suicide, almost resembling an idol immersed in the water after the festive season).

Thus, in the hands of auteurs like Ghatak, even the spectacle of the woman inverts conventional circuits of scopical regimes of power. While presenting woman-centric narratives he devised a feminine iconography with broader cultural resonances. In conventional melodramas patriarchal figures, images of feudal aristocracy or figures placed higher in social hierarchy would elicit a *darsanic* gaze, where the object of the look would be rendered more authoritative than the subject of the look, reproducing dominant power-relations. Ghatak mobilized such a spectation to subordinate the probable male subject of the look to the maternal object. In the process, a lost or forgotten subjectivity is triggered off — that of the dyadic relationship between the child and the mother; or a pre-modern one, that between the devotee and the deity. A latent affect is generated which is channelled beyond the conventional economies of eroticism and power. The ‘Great Mother’ archetype culturally defines the spectatorial structure in the films. The Mother-images position the community of viewers as ‘devotees’ at critical junctures of the narrative, eliciting strong emotional responses which are discursively politicized. Here also, Ghatak is intuitively exploiting the features of Indian melodrama: its iconicity, frontal address of certain images, tableau formations and a resultant spectatorship which does not render the viewer ‘atomized’ but embodies him as a unit of a larger collective.

Ghatak’s radical vision stretching beyond the contemporary orthodox Marxist tenets, made these exercises possible. He could mobilize pre-modern sensibilities of the viewer, and iconographies of popular religious practices for a more political (and secular)

purpose. In this respect, his cinematic practice in India is comparable to the cinematic practices of another deviant Marxist, Pier Paolo Pasolini.

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- 1. The concept of the 'frame of intelligibility' was elaborated by Rajadhyaksha in the seminar at Jadavpur University on 18th September, 2003.

2. Paul Willemsen says that in contrast to Western filmmaking and their 'rounded' characterizations "In Ghatak's cinema...characters are conceived as spaces where a multiplicity of social forces and discourses intersect and condense into temporary unstable unities determined by the force that constitute and move them. As the social forces get rearranged into different patterns —as it inevitably does since the social is always in process - so the characters evolve along with that dynamic learning, resisting, submitting, trying to live" (Quoted in Raiadhyaksha and Gangar, 1987,p. 65)
3. Ritwik Ghatak's Bengali writings are collected in *Chitrabikshan*, Oct-Nov 1984. Erich Newmann in his *The Great Mother*(1955) says: "When analytical psychology speaks of the primordial image or archetype of the Great Mother, it is referring not to any concrete image existing in space and time, but to an inward image at work in the human psyche. The symbolic expression of this psychic phenomenon is to be found in the figures of the Great Goddess rep resented in the myths and artistic creations of mankind". (Quoted in the entry of '*Meghe Dhaka Tara*' in *Film India: Looking Back* (1981)
4. I have used the term 'allegory' in the sense Fredric Jameson elaborates it throughout many of his works. It is difficult to sum up in a quotation of few lines, but one may cite a few lines from his controversial 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism': "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (Jameson,1986, 69). Elsewhere he has said that " the problem (of allegorization) would scarcely be solved by suppressing the mediation: the narrative cannot but remain allegorical, since the object it attempts to represent — namely social totality itself — is not an empirical entity and cannot be made to materialize as such in front of the individual viewer" (Jameson, 1992, 45-46). In Ghatak's case the question of the 'totality' of history is also relevant.
5. I borrow the term from Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1993); he used it quite differently although.
6. Quoted in Rajadhyaksha (1982), p. 50.
7. Excerpt from Ghatak's interview with *Chitrabikshan*. Translated in Rajadhyaksha (1987), p. 102.
8. See Geeta Kapur (1987) for discussions on Ghatak's use of his own close-ups. Also see Biswas (1995) for discussions particularly relevant to this essay.

9. In *Titas Ekti Naadir Naam* (1973) Ghatak directly uses religious iconography to depict a diegetic character in a scene.
10. Apart from the 19th century poet Ramprasad's songs and popular religious figure Rarnakrishna's vision of the Mother as an intimate entity I am also reminded of the traditional (and still hugely popular) social-ritual of *Debibaran* in Bengal: the practice where married Bengali women, on the last day of the Durga-puja, feed the icon with sweets, applies sindoor on her face and whispers to her ears to come back after a year. This moving ritual where the tactile intimacy with the icon is celebrated is an essentially feminine practice. One can observe the dissolution of all patriarchal-brahminical discourses as the 'essence' of the pujas — The Uma/ 'exemplary daughter' paradigm - dominates over the 'demon slayer' paradigm, a feminine domain asserts itself.
11. One may recall that while incubate as a verb means "to hatch, to subject the nourished to warmth," incubation means "the early phase of disease between infection and appearance of symptoms" where the nourished are the micro organisms which will later infect the body.