

Eating Loss: Hunger and Displacement through Ritwik Ghatak's Lens

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Abstract: *This paper examines the East Bengali refugee narratives after the 1947 partition through the lens of hunger, everyday survival and pangs of domestic life. Focussing on Ritwik Ghatak's Meghe Dhaka Tara and Subarnarekha, it argues that food appears less as cultural continuity and more as an absence. Hunger becomes a lived experience of displacement, shaping the lives and identities of refugees through economic precarity and economic exploitation. The paper highlights how everyday survival replaces stability and how the loss of home disrupts family food cultures. A particular attention is also paid to the gendered nature of survival, where women's bodies and labour absorb the impact of displacement through self-sacrifice and silent endurance. By reading hunger as an effective narrative force, this paper tries to suggest that refugee narratives preserve intimate histories of partition that largely remain unrecorded in official documents.*

Keywords: partition, refugees, hunger, food, memory, displacement

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1. Introduction

Since the inception of mankind, human beings have been in a continuous process of movement. Leaving homelands, searching for new lives, and reconstruction of identities have been widely linked to the process of migration. Technically, this process of migration and dispersion is termed 'Diaspora'. As Robin Cohen defines 'Diaspora' as communities living together in one country who 'acknowledge' that, "The old country"- a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore- always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions... a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background" (Cohen 17). With the evolution of the studies of Diaspora, the recent studies encompass the discourse of diaspora as an ever-changing phenomenon.

The objective of this paper is to focus on some of the migrants who have been forced to leave their own country on political grounds, based on religious identities. The focus of this study is on the history of the exodus that happened across the borders of the Indian subcontinent with the partition as the backdrop, and thereby on the plight of the refugees who were compelled to leave their homelands. It will trace their diasporic sensibilities through a critical appreciation of the works of notable film directors working in the same genre.

‘Bangladesh’ (the land of Bengal) literally means the nation of the Bengalis. It is officially the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, a country in South Asia, which is located on the fertile Bengal delta. The following narrative illustrates the history of this region, tracing back to 1905 and the events trailing through 1947 with the independence of India and finally to 1971, when an independent nation state called Bangladesh was created. Bengal witnessed the advent of the Mughals and subsequently, the British. History has preserved the event which occurred in June 1757, when thousands of men were fighting in a small village in ‘Plassey’ (Situated on the banks of Bhagirathi River, about 150 km north of Calcutta and south of Murshidabad, then capital of Bengal. The battle here established the British rule in Bengal, which spread all over India and continued for the next 200 years. This war had been marked as the turning point in Indian history, and it has been well claimed as the first war of Indian Independence against the British. This war had brought an end to the pattern of government that the Mughals had introduced about 150 years back. This has been marked as a marker of ‘South Asian ignominy’, when foreigners took control of a state and British rule came into effect. With the end of European colonialism in 1947, the region of present-day Bangladesh witnessed the Pakistani rule (1947-71), and finally, it gained its own freedom and along came the emergence of an independent state.

Ritwik Ghatak, one of the eminent personalities of Indian cinema, crafted a way to create representations of the stories of the migrants who were ‘forced to leave their homelands and communities while still holding on to their cultural and linguistic identities’ (Baral 21). The raw aftermaths of the partition are almost responsible for crafting their ways to shape the modern society and ‘the complex nations that tend to bind it and splinter it’ (Rajyadhaksh 42). Being one of the survivors of the partition and mass exodus that happened across the borders, Ghatak bore the ideology of being the ‘Other’ in a foreign land, and that was represented very significantly in his works.

2. Theoretical Framework

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 produced a refugee crisis whose effects unfolded slowly and unevenly, particularly for East Bengali refugees settling in West Bengal. Unlike the more visible rehabilitation of refugees in the western borderlands, East Bengali displacement became a prolonged condition marked by unemployment, fragile housing, and chronic food insecurity. Refugee colonies on the fringes of Calcutta emerged as spaces of endurance rather than recovery, where survival replaced stability as the central condition of everyday life.

The partition trilogy (*Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar*, *Subarnarekha*) by Ritwik Ghatak explores the trauma and the displacement after the partition of India and the forced migration in post-partition Bengal.

With the displacement and the search for an exclusive identity, the divided Bengal witnessed the ravages of hunger and poverty. I have effectively tried to utilise the different themes, drawing on Ghatak's strong Marxist voice and focus on marginalised voices.

Based on the theories of Foucault on biopolitics that specify viewing hunger as determined by governance to control population control mechanisms, the plight of the migrants has been overemphasised and highlighted.

Scholars further try to illuminate how such everyday trauma is materialistically and sensitively experienced. I have tried to incorporate some of the scholars Sidney Mintz's insistence on food as a historical and political substance foregrounds hunger as an effect of structural displacement rather than individual failure. David Sutton's work on food and memory highlights how eating—and its absence—becomes a powerful mnemonic, binding taste, loss, and belonging. In displaced communities, the inability to access familiar foodways intensifies the experience of rupture, turning meals into sites of longing. (Sutton)

3. Cinematic Analysis of Hunger as Gendered Survival in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*

With the context of the partition of the Indian sub-continent, this paper talks about the representation of partition and its aftermaths that have been documented and represented in various films and forms of literature. In this paper, I have attempted to explore Ritwik Ghatak's films and how food is an important part of his films and characters. In this paper, I have selected some of his major works that are *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) and *Subarnarekha* (1965). Talking about food and nourishment in the times of partition, food does not come across as a form of nourishment, but it appears as something that is a need for the families or slightly withheld. The increasing number of refugees in the context of partition has only landed millions of human beings on both sides of the border, with families who are forced to separate, and disaster in and around everywhere. One of the remarkable features that has been noticed in this film is the repeated reference to the showcasing of childhood and the nostalgia associated with it. Neeta's memories of childhood, when she had wandered among the hills, are stored within her mind as an almost obsolete memory. Ritwik Ghatak moves on from his childhood to the experience of childhood in general. The instances only hinted at a larger statement of the loss of innocence and subsequently a state of exile.

Ritwik Ghatak's cinema powerfully captures this prolonged aftermath of displacement. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), hunger is not staged through dramatic scenes of starvation but through silences, postponed meals, and the quiet erosion of domestic comfort. Food appears largely as an absence—meals are delayed, shared unevenly, or sacrificed entirely—particularly by women like Nita, whose self-denial sustains the family's survival. Hunger thus becomes gendered, embodied through female sacrifice rather than collective crisis.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, hunger is never dramatised through images of famine or starvation. Instead, it unfolds quietly through deferred meals, uneven distribution of food, and repeated acts of self-denial. Nita, the film's central figure, becomes the primary wage earner for her refugee family, sacrificing her own nourishment

to sustain others. Nita has been portrayed as the woman who is expected to suffer and provide the essentials for her starving family. As soon as her salary gets credited, she is constantly reminded of the needs and wants of her family members that she is bound to fulfil, leaving her lonely and deprived of the basic needs. Food here becomes a form of labour—an ethical economy in which women absorb scarcity on behalf of the household. Nita represented a lot of refugee women who became the sole breadwinners of their families during that particular stage. Through Mintz's framework, Nita's hunger is not an individual tragedy but a consequence of structural displacement and economic marginalisation (45). Her body becomes the site where historical violence is negotiated daily. Sutton's emphasis on food and memory helps us see how the absence of adequate meals signals the loss of agrarian foodways and communal eating practices associated with pre-Partition life. Rice, fish, and shared domestic abundance are replaced by rationing, postponement, and silence.

Nita's daily suffering exemplifies what Das describes as everyday trauma. (Das). There is no moment of narrative resolution, and deprivation becomes normalised. Her eventual illness and death are not exceptional events but the cumulative result of sustained sacrifice. Hunger thus operates as an affective register of loss—felt, endured, but rarely spoken. As Cathy Caruth notes, trauma is belated and repetitive, and her everyday suffering unfolds not as one moment but through a series of events that follow in the portrayal of the film. Veena Das' concept of trauma's 'descent into the ordinary' is appropriate here when the pain that Nita endures is folded within the daily routines of her life to the extent that she has to sacrifice her love only for the well-being of her family. (Das). Nita's tragic end is not personal, but it is very structural in its form. Her desperate urge to live longer by the end of the film only depicts how displacement reorganised kinship around sacrifice. Through Nita, Ghatak foregrounds a form of gendered trauma that is sustained through care rather than violence—where love, duty, and hunger converge. Her body becomes the site where history is endured, rather than resolved, marking hunger as one of Partition's most intimate and enduring legacies.

4. Conclusion

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) and *Subarnarekha* (1965), hunger becomes one of the essential ways through which partition is lived through for many years. It shapes and represents partition and its aftereffects not as a daily condition but as something that shapes people's lives. By focusing on food as absence, Ghatak preserves the unofficial histories of Partition—those carried in exhausted bodies, unfinished meals, and women's unacknowledged sacrifices. In both films, hunger is portrayed as something that is gendered. The refugee households in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* survive through who eats and when they eat. The various aspects of gendered hunger are shown vividly through the characters of the protagonists. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Nita's hunger is never shown explicitly, but it is something that can be felt through her fatigue, her silent gestures and how finally it wears down the body without ever announcing itself. In *Subarnarekha*, hunger becomes more openly catastrophic. As Ishwar and Sita move across landscapes marked by promises of rehabilitation and progress, food remains elusive. Hunger here is not only about lack of food but about the absence of ethical shelter—no system intervenes before loss becomes irreversible.

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