

Melodramatic Imagination in Ritwik Ghatak's Cinema

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'To begin with, I didn't think of entering the world of cinema. I used to write poems. Later I came into the world of stories and novels. But, the loud protests against mischiefs all around were stored in my mind, and I thought these could be presented directly to people by means of theatre. I was fascinated by the theatre which creates an immediate reaction. But, sometime later, this too seemed inadequate. Theatre is, in a sense, limited in scope. Only cinema, I realised then, can simultaneously move lakhs of people and express one's realisations in a more articulate way. And this realisation led me to the cinema, not for the sake of making films, for that matter' (Ghatak: 1973).¹

Ritwik Ghatak considered the medium of cinema as an important medium of mass communication. From the above interview, it is clear that he did not come into the world of cinema driven by emotion. Rather, he wanted to project cinema as a powerful medium which would be a commentary on contemporary history and a document of human sufferings instead of being a narrow window to the lives of people, or the camera being a mere tool of taking photographs. At the end of the 1940s, Ritwik considered cinema as an indispensable medium to express the filmmaker's view, when Bengali popular cinema was in its infancy. There is no denying the fact that from the mid-1940s there were manifestations of nationalistic and patriotic feelings in such films as 'Udayer Pathe' (1944, 1 September), 'Bandemataram' (1946, 20 September), 'Shrinkhal' (1947, 28 March), 'Desh Dabi' (1947, 27 June), 'Muktir Bandhan' (1947, 1 August), 'Aamar Desh' (1947, 26 September), 'Bhuli Nai' (1948, 15 August), '42' (1951, 9 August) and others. But these endeavours lost their relevance, undermined by the overwhelming dominance of traditional cinema with its static frames and excess of stage-based acting, such as we find in films like 'Chander Kalanka' (1944, 19 May), 'Grihalakshmi' (1945, 14 December), 'Dotana' (1945, 6 April), 'Ray Chaudhuri' (1947, 2 May), 'Gharoa' (1947, 12 December), 'Swarna Sita' (1948, 11 June), 'Bidushi Bharja'

(1949, 14 April), 'Bhakta Raghunath' (1951, 25 January), 'Prahlad' (1952, 16 January) and so many others. Two films of this period are worth nothing: 'Udayer Pathe' (1944, Bimal Roy) and 'Chhinnamul' (1951, 16 February) directed by Nimai Ghosh. Both films tried to come out of the conventional stereotypes of contemporary Bengali cinema. 'Chhinnamul' is a depiction of the crisis of refugees and a heart-rending account of the lives of the uprooted people. Despite these efforts, Bengali cinema was yet to attain the status of cinema as a pure art form.

Towards the end of the 1940s, when Bengali cinema was yet to mature as a social-realist document, Ritwik and some of his comrades were getting interested in making films. In an article by filmmaker Mrinal Sen, we see how Mrinal and Salil Chandhuri were eager to depict the struggle for existence of common people caught in the twists and turns of socio-economic and political turmoil towards the end of the 1940s, when the tide of mass movement was sweeping across Bengal: 'Mass movement was then at its peak in West Bengal. On one side was the uncompromising fight of the struggling masses — peasants, workers and the middle class, and on the other, the rulers with *lathis* and bullets. Kakdwip became a red zone. Our own police murdered Ahalya, the peasant woman, who was carrying a baby. Salil composed a great poem in remembrance of Ahalya, the martyr, as a mark of respect to the revolutionary spirit of common people. In fact, the poem was more in the form of a pledge. Among us the most desperate was Ritwik. The small group of ours decided to flee to Kakdwip and took the vow to make 16 mm silent films and show them in the villages clandestinely. I wrote the screenplay, Salil gave the name 'Jamir Larai' (Struggle for land) and Ritwik acquired a decrepit camera. Ritwik was the leader of our group. Ultimately we didn't go to Kakdwip, but Ritwik availed himself of that occasion to handle the camera (old or decrepit though it was) and learn the techniques of cinematography to a considerable extent. Thereafter, Ritwik didn't have to look back' (Sen Mrinal: 2001).²

In 1929, in a letter to Murari Bhaduri, Rabindranath Tagore wrote in favour of establishing cinema as an art form, as opposed to an industry or market. He advocated rejection of slavish imitation of literature and pleaded in favour of cinema based on reality. He was of the view that if the cinema does not bear the imprints of contemporary reality and create its own language, it can never attain the prestige of a distinct medium of art, and it will turn into a mere photographic reproduction of a written story or a play. Ritwik was in favour of the camera engaging directly with reality as a register of man's daily struggle for existence in order to project cinema as a mirror of social reality. In this Ritwik was profoundly inspired by the neo-realist Italian cinema which had its genesis during the Second World War. This calls for discussion as it bears upon Ritwik's films.

Ritwik Ghatak was a contemporary of Satyajit Ray, and both of them were socially conscious filmmakers. But Ritwik's treatment of reality is radically different from that of Ray, which has left its distinct imprint on Bengali cinema. In Ray's films reality is refracted through the prism of poetic grace, whereas, in each of Ritwik's films, on the one hand, depiction of human sufferings entails interrogation of life itself and, on the other, they are characterized by a surfeit of emotions, a deep passion for life and of going back to the roots of ancient myths finding a new form as a philosophy of life. But, at the same time, his films are criticized on several accounts: melodrama, lack of a sense of proportion and plethora of sound and coincidences. Therefore, it is eminently relevant to discuss the trends of Ritwik's films in the context of Bengali cinema. Marie Seton, the Western film critic, called Ritwik the 'infant terrible' of Bengali cinema, for she thought his films were inordinately daring, intellect enriched and, to a large extent, logical and argumentative. She was of the view that if he had cared to preserve his creativity till the end, Bengali cinema would have seen the birth of a Bergman.

Creators like Michael Madhusudan Dutt or Manik Bandyopadhyay left the signature of their genius in the field of literature, their self-destructive tendencies notwithstanding. Likewise, Ritwik too added a different language to Bengali cinema, ignoring the stereotyped methods of filmmaking prevalent in Bengali cinema from the 1950s to the 1970s. Cinema-pundits or, for that matter, cineastes have put Ritwik's films on the dock for being, in many cases, melodramatic, too much idealistic, with a plethora of coincidences. When he was at the Film and Television Institute, Pune, as Vice-Principal in 1965, one of his students summoned up the courage to ask him, 'Don't you think, Dada, you create melodrama by indulging a bit in excesses?' Ritwik candidly replied, 'What else will you think, a greenhorn like you? Only an

artist has the right to proceed from the grotesque to the world of the subtle. That is what I've done and I know for sure I've succeeded.'³ Ritwik used melodrama to depict middle-class life in the complex vortex of socio-economic and political life in post-Independence divided Bengal that left its imprint on the filmmakers of the period from the 1940s to the 1960s such as Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor and Hrishikesh Mukherjee, and also, in terms of originality, the neo-realist filmmakers of Bengal from the 1950s to the 1970s, such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Tapan Sinha. The unique style by which Ritwik fused such disparate elements as Marxism and melodrama⁴ gives his films a special place in the space between 'Popular Cinema' and 'Art Film' in India. Ritwik believed that melodrama was his birth right. He dared to use melodrama through the device of coincidences, 'the lyric' and other such elements. In this regard, Ritwik spelt out his views in an interview with 'Chitrabikshan': 'I believe film form or any other form is primarily make-believe. What I want to do is to educate spectators. And if it needs a lot of coincidences to do this, I'll use them. I'm not afraid of using melodrama. Melodrama is a birth right, a form.'⁵ In the majority of Indian films, starting from the 1930s and 1940s to the 1970s and 1980s, melodrama was used to narrate a 'nihilistic love story', and sometimes as an adjunct to express social consciousness in a garbled manner. It was through Ritwik that the evolution of melodrama in Indian cinema found a new dimension.⁶ 'On the other hand, the Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen pair was one of the most successful pairs in Bengali commercial and melodramatic cinema from 1960 till the Seventies. Their expressions of romantic emotions, essentially melodramatic in nature, are those of individuals, whereas in Ritwik's films melodrama goes beyond individual articulations and takes on a global form as a means of exposing the real face of society.'⁷ Ritwik's specimen of melodrama is not that of the Victorian theatre, rather he freed it from the confines of the stage and daringly used it as an association of the social system in Bengal during the period between the 1950s and the 1970s. Peter Brooks identified melodrama as a tendency of a historical exaggeration, in which lies the possibility of rediscovering the language of the masses. In 'The melodramatic Imagination', he said, 'considering mainly the classical melodrama as it was first established in France at the dawn of the nineteenth century, we find a fully realized coherent theatrical mode whose structures and characteristics, in their very purity and even crudity, can teach us to read a whole body of modern literature with a finer perception of its project. In considering melodrama we are in a sense talking about a form of theatricality which will underline novelistic efforts at representation which will provide a model for the making of meaning in fictional dramatizations of existence.'⁸ As

a follower of the Brechtian tradition, Ritwik held the view: 'The reality in terms of deep emotions has to be presented in such a way that at every moment people will be intensely aware of their humanity and encouraged to build resistance against social decay.' (Ghatak: 2005)⁹ Ritwik adopted 'sentimental melodrama' as a form when he started his career as a theatre activist. He adopted as well the concept of Brechtian epic theatre, which impacted the making of his films. About Brecht's play, 'Trommeln in der Nacht', he said, 'I'm captivated by the presence of the characters as social beings juxtaposed with their human qualities as individuals... Brecht is very precious to me.' (Ghatak: 2005)¹⁰

Since Ritwik came into the world of cinema from theatre, his films were not free from loud dialogue, theatrical emotions or expressions and other theatrical conventions. And since he held the view that melodrama is an indispensable form for every artist in his vocation as creator, he very consciously used melodrama as a form in *Komal Gandhar* (1961). In his introduction to *Komal Gandhar*, he said, 'Theatre-crazy young men and women come together from various places and form a theatre group, which is like a family in which are played out many emotions: attachment, love, jealousy and violence. Generally speaking, they have no family life. This film tries to portray a chapter of the story of their family.' (Komal Gandhar: 1961)¹¹ *Komal Gandhar*, in fact, is an analysis of disintegration refracted through these theatre activists: their sorrows and joys, emotions, euphoria, in other words, a whole gamut of feelings. These feelings are played out in terms of Partition or ideological differences within the group. From the very outset, Ritwik was aware that the theme of alienation was being analysed on the level of feelings among the intellectuals or the artists. That is why he portrayed the characters of the film in a different way. Since they are theatre activists, he did not hesitate to give free play to their emotions, expressed in different forms. In fact, this follower of Brecht wanted the film to go beyond the dramatic conflicts and individual articulations of emotions and feelings to attain a much broader canvass, a full-bodied discourse, retaining all the elements of melodrama and theatre. In *Komal Gandhar*, Ritwik successfully utilised the conventions of a proscenium theatre. There are three theatre scenes in the film, which bear testimony to his skill at producing plays insofar as it involves all the conventions of proscenium theatre: stagecraft, lighting, planning of scenes, background music and style of acting. In the first theatre scene, the face of an old man of the village emerges out of the darkness as the stage lights focus on his face. As soon as it is fully illuminated, he cries out, addressing the audience, 'Why shall I go? Why shall I go leaving the lap of my mother the Padma? Tell me why?'

On the screen in the background are shown the scenes of refugees leaving their land. On the other hand, Ritwik recreated the platform of the Sealdah station by means of stagecraft, light and sound, in which we hear the wailing of the people who had to leave their motherland. This scene is part of the play 'Dalil'. In the first scene of *Komal Gandhar*, Ritwik depicted the despair and resentment of the uprooted people on the eve of their leaving their native soil by all the theatrical conventions, such as high-pitch dialogue, an overt display of emotions and typical acting style. We see the application of the conventions of proscenium theatre in another scene of *Komal Gandhar*. In a one-act play, the sole character is a village woman, played by Anasua, who loses her husband and family by protesting the torture of her daughter. In the backstage, there is the structure of a factory whose outline becomes gradually more prominent as all the lights on the stage become dimmer with the cries of the woman, 'My candle has been extinguished,' as a conventional symbol of the void in her heart. *Komal Gandhar* is an experimental film insofar as Ritwik applied the conventions of proscenium theatre to depict the harsh reality of Kolkata in the process of socio-economic decay hastened by the complex vortex of politics. Though *Komal Gandhar* is about theatre movement and its trends in its external features, it is basically about introspection about the past and the present, disintegration and union, about dreams and disillusionment, there is ultimately a hope and a dream of the possibility of union, which is reinforced by the joint production of 'Abhijnam Sakuntalam' by two theatre groups.

In terms of cinematic language, melodrama is derided as a 'tearjerker' in these terms: 'The contempt implied in terms like sob stuff and tear-jerker is not more interesting than the very wide appeal of the thing despised.' But Ritwik, like Eric Bentley or John Lafarque, felt the application of melodrama is very relevant in certain conventions of art. Adoor Gopalakrishnan, the famous filmmaker of Kerala and one of Ritwik's students, said in a personal interview that if he had to choose one among the eight films made by Ritwik in the form of melodrama, he would opt for *Komal Gandhar*, for melodrama as a form has been appropriately used in the film.¹² The Iranian cineaste, Hamid Nafishe, called Ritwik an 'accented' and 'exilic' filmmaker¹³ in view of 'Komal Gandhar'. 'However, cinema-pundits think 'Komal Gandhar' is overburdened with dialogue and music.'¹⁴ But Ritwik held the view that when Partition of Bengal or break-up of the theatre group is expressed in terms of the feelings of the artistes or the theatre activists, the surging emotions of the artistes should not be set aside. That is why Ritwik took recourse to exaggerated gestures like twisting one's body, bending one's shoulders and

throwing one's hands to give relevance to the high-pitch dialogue and consequently, to high-pitch melodrama. At the same time, the acting style enriches the visual aspect of *Komal Gandhar* to a great extent. Just as the plays of light and shade on Anasua's leaning face (in the role of Sakuntala) reminds us of Botticelli's paintings, the close-ups of Bhriгу's face evoke the association of Greek sculpture. The village in Birbhum in full moon reminds us of the artistic excellence of the impressionist painters, or, for that matter, Bhriгу standing in the rugged terrain 'Khoai', suffering from loneliness and feeling an intense yearning to reach hearts, elevates *Komal Gandhar* from the dramatic conventions or rich visual form to the level of poetry. The song of Nabajiban (new life) in the background becomes the association of the emotions, struggle and lives of the characters of *Komal Gandhar* as well as that of Ritwik himself. Peter Brooks held the view, 'Melodrama might be best seen as a dialectical interaction between moral significance and an excess aimed precisely at non-cognitive effects, thrills, sensations and strong affective attractions. The very longevity of melodrama as a form demands a historical treatment in which the proportions of this combination as well as the specific nature of the significances and thrills it offers must be specified for each period and each dramatic form'. Ritwik, known as a socially conscious artist, proceeded towards making films from his commitment to revealing the real face of society in terms of cinema. But he preferred delving deep into reality instead of revealing its external manifestation. And, in melodramatic terms, he essayed to probe the depths of the erosion of values and loss of human sensibilities. In the history of cinematic style, it is an unrealistic notion that the realistic conventions of cinema refuse any space for emotions. Pudovkin, one of the pioneers of Soviet social realist cinema, made 'Mother' based on Gorky's novel of the same name in 1926, in which he strikes a fine balance between depicting social reality and dramatic expressions of feelings and emotions. On the other hand, in 'October' Eisenstein, apart from stringing together a series of events to design a story, was much more interested in probing what lies underneath the external manifestations of life and society. In the period from 1920 to 1940, Soviet cinema tried to strike a balance between the depiction of the social system and a stage-based acting style, with some doses of theatrical emotions. In Yuri Zizliauskas's film *Station Master* (1927), Abram Room's film 'Deathray' (1926) or the well-known Abram Room-directed *Bed and Sofa* (1927), which are based on housing problems in Moscow, the complexities of society blend with expressions of human appeal. One of the premises of Marxist thoughts on art and literature is realism. Both Marx and Engels identified realism as the most important contribution to world literature. However, though they

favoured giving a faithful form to a particular character on the basis of meticulous analysis of facts in particular situations and under particular circumstances, they never advocated rejection of emotions in realist literature or any other art form based on reality. Thus, though they were devoted to the works of Shakespeare, Goethe and Pushkin, they were especially respectful towards Balzac's creativity. In 1888, in a letter to Margaret Harness, Marx wrote that Balzac's novel *The Human Comedy* enlightened him about the real history of French society much more than the writings of contemporary historians, economists and scientists.

To strengthen melodrama in his film, Ritwik introduced 'co-incidence' in his films. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, the way Ritwik has used coincidences, theatrical emotions, cries and lamentations to express the struggle of the uprooted against overall adverse circumstances highlight the crisis of the self and human feeling and its erosion. The schema has not only touched the deepest chords in the spectators' hearts but has also paved the way towards realizing the true nature of the anguish of these people of divided Bengal. This manner of representation asks for analysis. In a number of Bengali novels and stories, we find the narrative of the hard struggle of the refugees coming from East Bengal to the suburbs of West Bengal in search of socio-economic security. Nita's family in Shaktipada Rajguru's novel, *Chenamukh*, or, for that matter, Ritwik's film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, was no exception. The film centres on the struggle for existence of a refugee family in a colony against adverse circumstances. Nita is the central character of the film, who dreams of saving her family despite many constraints and takes upon herself the whole financial burden of the family. She dreams of her suitor living amidst his works as a researcher, and her brother Mantu building a career as a player. She also wants her younger sister Gita to live up to her dreams. And, as for her elder brother Sankar, she has a different dream. She wants him to be deeply immersed in his austere practice of music and keep away from middle-class greed and narrowness born of the uncertainty of refugee life. Ultimately, it is her own existence that she puts at stake, overburdened by the demand for fulfilling the aspirations of every member of the family. When he adapted Shaktipada Rajguru's *Chenamukh* for his film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Ritwik came to the conclusion that it was relevant to use melodramatic dialogue and exaggerated acting style and portray the emotions of the hero and the heroine in an oblique way to underscore in realist terms the tendencies of selfishness, betrayal, lack of humanity inherent in the daily struggle for existence of an uprooted family. In fact, Ritwik used melodrama in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* from the intense urge to express the overall crisis in life in refugee colonies.

In his analysis of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, poet Bishnu Dey recognized its excellence, though he discerned elements of melodrama in the acting style, excess of dialogue and oblique expressions of the emotions of the hero and heroine.¹⁵ However, whatever might the film critics or film-pundits say, Ritwik was very much conscious of presenting the feelings of the uprooted people under real circumstances. Though the presentation of the character or throwing of dialogue creates melodramatic moments in many cases, the real nature of the problems of mutual relationships between the members of a refugee family, family feuds, internal strife, manifestations of selfishness or degradation of humanity is depicted in a robust and analytical manner. Here are a few scenes of the film to facilitate discussion to underscore this point:

Scene 1:

Nita's father is seated alone in a darkened room. Nita goes to inform her mother about the good news of Mantu getting a job. Not being able to get what Nita is saying, she reprimands her:

'Mother: You might as well not give me the bad news. Everybody knows that. And they also know you're the happiest when some misfortune befalls the family. The boy has failed, and you're going around with that young man.'

Nita: Mantu has got a job in the factory over there on sports quota. I hesitated to give you the news. Today he has come home with the salary.

Mother: Everything in this family is secret, and I seem to be an enemy here. Sons and daughters take after their father. I won't touch this money.' (*Meghe Dhaka Tara*: 1960)¹⁶

The theatrical style in which the resentment of Nita's mother is expressed through this conversation in the light and shade of the room with walls made of bamboo slices is undoubtedly melodramatic. But, at the same time, it is an authentic representation of reality in the perspective of a refugee family's uncertain and insecure life. We realize to what extent the women of the household can become rude, suspicious and neurotic amidst their daily struggle against poverty for the mere existence of the family.

Scene 2:

Nita's mother feels alarmed when she sees Nita and Sanat talking to each other. Setting aside all hesitations, she candidly puts forth her feelings. There are elements of melodrama in her words, no doubt, but the choice of every word she utters is well conceived to register her anxiety. Nita is getting married to Sanat and leaving the family without any source of income. This anxiety for mere survival robs the mother of feelings of affection for her daughter, who has become a mere money-earning machine. Thus, melodrama transcends its conventional function to give relevance to the harsh reality of the life of a refugee family in which selflessness becomes predominant in the face of abject poverty:

Nita: Don't worry, mother. I'm here with you.

Mother: Could I help but worry? You too have got your own life and desires. It seems something is wrong with your father's brain. He is incapable of earning money any longer. I knew him since I was seven-year-old.

Nita: Forget it. You are all I have.

Mother: Maybe, but I am afraid lest you leave us. (*Meghe Dhaka Tara*: 1960)¹⁷

When Nita suddenly discovers the love between Gita and Sanat, the way Ritwik uses her close-up and the sound of whiplash on the soundtrack to express the anguish of her broken dreams seems to be exaggerated. But it occurred to Ritwik that it was not possible for the spectators to identify with Nita's sufferings without this specific articulation. When tuberculosis-afflicted Nita's life moves inexorably towards her end, Ritwik endeavoured to invest the last moment of her life with a completely different significance. The heart-rending cry, 'Dada, I want to live, I'll live!' is the intense desire of a dying young woman to negate death. She has got nothing in life, yet feels an intense desire for life. It is a death-defying cry, a poignant assertion of life against death, and thus, though melodramatic, is eminently justified in the context. If Ritwik had tried to exercise restraint in the penultimate scene, which is the scene of Nita's death and used the notes of *shehnai* to express Nita's intense desire for life, this scene would have been spared the criticism of being melodramatic. But that would have lacked the power to evoke the emotions of the audience, or they would have failed to realize what selfishness, sufferings and crookedness lay behind the rehabilitation of a refugee family. Ritwik did not only elevate the melodrama, through the dying Nita's intense yearning for life, to the level of art but also presented before society the helpless predicament of others like Nita, who are crushed and tired by the burden of the family. Thus it becomes a general commentary, and Ritwik used melodrama as a tragic form to portray in realistic terms the sufferings of the uprooted people caught in the vortex socio-economic travails.

On 12 February 1965, film-critic Georges Sadoul wrote to Ritwik about *Subarnarekha*: Dear Sir, I have seen your film *Subarnarekha* with great attention, I think it is your most successful film after *Ajantrik*. The film is of a high standard and will lend greater prestige to Indian cinema. But, about one thing, I want to be very candid with you. If you do not delete the scene in which the elder brother goes to visit as a client, his sister, turned prostitute, and the sister consequently committing suicide, you will lose the opportunity of participating in prestigious film festivals in Europe and be criticized by film critics. I

know very well the reactions of European people. They will mistakenly label your film as a 'panic-creating melodrama'.¹⁸ It is noteworthy that Indian film-pundits too, like their Western counterparts like Georges Sadoul, think that *Subarnarekha* is overburdened with melodrama and excess of coincidences. Ritwik, in many cases, created theatrical emotions by the application of coincidences in order to analyse the true nature of reality. Contrary to such accusations, Ritwik clearly spelt out in more than one interview or article that the use of coincidences is, in many cases, essential to portray the real face of society. He said, 'I have had to often hear that there are many coincidences in *Subarnarekha*. I have to admit that there are too many coincidences. That the elder brother goes to visit her sister as a client is itself a big coincidence. I have used this incident as a form. I have tried to make the audience figure out the global sense of the incident. In order to make the audience think, I have tried to make these coincidences nuanced, in other words, pregnant with suggestiveness.'¹⁹ *Subarnarekha* is about the story of straying away from values and ideals in order to fulfil one's personal dreams and desires and the disillusionment with the false promise of a new life. In *Subarnarekha*, Ritwik tried to reiterate the fact that the failures of Ishwar, Haraprasad, Sita and Abhiram are not merely those of being rehabilitated in life, rather these failures lie deep within the alienated existence of the uprooted people and the loss of human values in the backdrop of Independence. Ritwik employed the technique of coincidences as a tool of analysis. He wanted to probe the nature of the obsession of imposing, despite adverse economic circumstances, familial hegemony and caste-based prejudices, and pursuing one's selfish interests. The moribund values of the petty-bourgeois class are also a subject of his analysis. The employment of coincidences on several occasions marks the film as a melodramatic exercise, it accentuates, albeit, the anguish of alienation of the uprooted middle class from human beings in general. Ritwik employed coincidences in *Subarnarekha* for the first time when little Sita, engaged in song and dance in the abandoned aerodrome beside the river Subarnarekha, confronts a 'bahurupi' attired as Goddess Kali. To little Sita, dreaming of paddy fields, blue hills and the play of sunlight and shadow or her new home, it is a sudden encounter. What Ritwik implied by this sudden irruption of the terrible image of Mother Kali is that people could not be engrossed in the dream of having a simple, placid and beautiful life when one is carrying in one's mind the memories of the terrible destruction of the Second World War or blood-soaked Partition of our country. We refer to another instance of coincidence in the film which needs to be addressed. Kaushalya, the married woman of Bagdi (low caste) community has been estranged from her son

Abhiram, having been taken away by the *lathi*-wielding goons of the zamindar. She remains untraced for a long time. Ritwik brings Abhiram face to face with his mother on a railway platform, where she is dying. For others, she is only a Bagdi woman. But for Abhiram she is his long-lost mother who dies the moment she rests her eyes on her son. Abhiram is ostracized because his identity as a member of a low caste has been revealed. The encounter between Abhiram and his long-lost mother on the railway platform is patently a case of coincidence, obviously melodramatic in essence. But what Ritwik intended by way of this coincidence was to strike hard at the feudal tendencies of society in post-Independence Bengal. What he reiterated is that despite disintegration and being rendered paupers, the confused people of Bengal could not rid themselves of the superstitions and caste discrimination, which led them down the path of decay. In order to bring to the fore the tragic social reality, Ritwik used coincidences as a conceptual form rather than as a structural form. In his book, 'The Necessity of Art', Ernst Fischer said, 'in a decaying society art, if it is truthful, must always reflect decay.' Ritwik hit hard at the middle class engaged in an unbridled pursuit of consumerism, which he achieved by throwing Ishwar and Haraprasad, who chanced to meet each other after a long separation, into the life of wild and unrestrained orgy of consumerism in Kolkata. The use of 'Patricia'²⁰ in the background serves to reinforce Ritwik's severe indictment of the petty-bourgeois class addicted to consumerism in the post-Independence era. On the other hand, the sudden encounter between Ishwar and Sita in the latter's room in a slum, and her subsequent suicide, as conceived by Ritwik, brings the demise of hope of two generations into the same focal point. 'The presence of the elder brother in the room of his prostitute sister' — the use of this coincidence bears testimony to the brother's spiritual death. In this scene, besides the use of coincidence, the use of the camera plays a significant role. From various angles, it catches the shifting emotions of Ishwar, takes it in close-up and focuses on Sita's immobile eyes dominating the whole screen. The image built by these shots does not only create a dramatic moment but also makes Ishwar, already devastated by the crisis of human values and hence rendered 'homeless', stand face to face with the loss of his own humanity. It also hits hard at the values of the middle class. Ghatak explained that 'for an instance, a brother going as a client to his sister's room. The story revolves around this theme. If you take cognisance of this fact, this brother could have gone into the room of any other woman but she too would have been his sister anyway. The only thing, you might say, is that the whole thing has been shown in a mechanistic way. Here also is the suggestiveness of the general within

the particular. That was my avowed intention.²¹ In Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatari*, when the power-hungry army general, after winning the ultimate battle, goes to a brothel to indulge in pleasures of the flesh, he gets to meet his wife there. In *Subarnarekha* too, Ishwar, revelling in the orgy of consumerism, is led to his sister's room. Through this scene, Ritwik underscored the degradation of values and ideals of the middle class in the unbridled pursuit of consumerism. Thus the scene turns into a realistic presentation of the tragic dimension of social decadence. However, Ritwik not only portrayed the tragic dimension of social decadence by the use of coincidences, but also his films did not end on a pessimistic note, nor, for that matter, he foregrounded decay as their overriding theme. Though he dealt with the theme of exploitation, struggle, death and defeat he perceived the future through the eyes of the new-born, the never-ending saga of triumphant life, which transcends the boundaries of melodrama or dramatic idealism and elevates the film to the realm of optimism.

Ritwik realized from the depths of his heart that the surging expressions of emotions, cries and lamentations are indispensable to depict the sufferings of a man caught in the whirlpool of socio-economic and political travails, for they highlight the disintegration of contemporary society or, for that matter, the overall degradation of human life. At the same time, it foregrounds the dream of life as a vision. Eric Bentley, in his article 'Melodrama', said in relation to melodrama, 'grandiose self-pity is a fact of life.'²² Ritwik used melodrama in this spirit to give a tragic form to the crisis of human life. Just as he did not restrict the problem of the 'refugee' within geographical confines, so he did not confine melodrama to the traps of too much idealism. Instead, he gave a new form to melodrama as a means of portraying the real face of sufferings in the perspective of decay in post-Partition Bengal.

Notes

1. 'Chitrabikshan' (August-September 1973) Kolkata,
2. Sen Mrinal, (2001) 'Ritwik O Aamra', in Rajat Roy (ed), 'Ritwik Ghatak', Kolkata, Srishti Prakashan, 2001, pp. 25-26; and Sen Mrinal, (2002), 'Paradise Café', in 'Montage: Life Politics Cinema', Kolkata, Seagull Books, p-34
3. Bhaskar Chandrabhaskar (2001) 'Ritwik Ghatak: Chalachitra Sangit', 'Ritwik' edited by Rajat Roy, 'Shristi Prakashan', Kolkata, India
4. Vasudevan – 'Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities': The Hindi Social Film of the 1950's As Popular Culture In Making Meaning in Indian Cinema', pp. 99 – 121. Vasudevan wrote, 'The conceptual separation of melodrama from realism which occurred through the formation of bourgeois canons of high art in late nineteenth century Europe and America was echoed in the discourses on popular commercial cinema of late 1940's and 1950's India. This stand of criticism, associated with the formation of art cinema in Bengal, could not comprehend the peculiarities of a form (i.e. melodrama) which had its own complex mechanism of articulation. In the process the critics contributed to an obfuscating hierarchization of culture with which we are still contending.'
5. 'Chitrabikshan' (1974 Aug.-Sept), Kolkata
6. Rajadhyaksha Ashish and Paul Willemsen (1999) *Encyclopadia of Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p. 147
7. Biswas Mainak, 'The Couple and Their Spaces: Haranosur as Melodrama' – <https://www.tib.eu/en/search/id/BLCP%3ACN034909945/The-Couple-and-Their-Spaces-Harano-Sur-as-Melodrama/>
8. Brooks Peter (1976) *The Melodramatic Imagination*, New Heaven and London: Yale University Press. p. 34
9. Ghatak Ritwik (2005), 'Brecht O Aamra' (Brecht and we), an article in 'Chalachitra Manush Ebong Aaro Kichu' – Dey's Publishing House, Kolkata, India, p. 20.
10. Ibid.
11. The beginning part of *Komal Gandhar* (1961) directed by Ritwik Ghatak – first released on 31 March, 1961 at 'Purna Cinema Hall'.
12. Interview with Adoor Gopal Krishnan at his residence – 10/01/2019
13. Nafise, H. 2001. *An Accented Cinema, Exile and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton University Press. The Iranian Cinema specialist, Hamid Nafise, commented about 'Komal Gandhar' and 'Subarnarekha' in these words – 'What is at stake for Ghatak in these two films and as a filmmaker particularly as an accented or exilic filmmaker. pp. 79-82
14. Roy Mriganka Sekhar, 'Parikshamulak Chabi O Komal Gandhar'; Gupta Dhruva, 'Komal Gandhar: Jiban O Shilpa' (Komal Gandhar : Life and Art' – these two articles are included in *Ritwik*, edited by Rajat Roy.
15. Dey Bishnu – 2001 'Bangla filmer Parinata Roop, Aamader Jiban O Meghe Dhaka Tara' – an article in 'Ritwik Ghatak' edited by Rajat Roy – Shristi Prakashan, Kolkata, India – P. 158
16. Ghatak Ritwik, 1960, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*
17. Ibid.
18. Ray Ranjit, 2001, 'Ritwik' 'Shristi Prakashan', Kolkata, India, p. 99
19. Ghatak Ritwik – 2005 'Subarnarekha Prasange', an article in 'Chalachitra Manush Ebong Aaro Kichu' – Dey's Publishing House, Kolkata, India
20. In 'La Dolce Vita', Fellini used 'Patricia' to attack the distortion in Western Civilization
21. Ghatak Ritwik Kumar, (Aashar 1382 Bengali calendar) 'Subarnarekha Prasange' – 'Chalachitra Manush Ebong Aaro Kichu' – Dey's Publishing House, Kolkata, pp. 153–154
22. Eric Bentley (1965) 'Melodrama' – 'Tragedy, Vision and Form', a collection edited by R.W. Corrigan, published by Chandler, San Francisco, p. 229.