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The Refugee Woman: Partition of Bengal, Women, and the Everyday of the
Nation

by

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I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of
Rani Chattopadhyay and Birendra Chattopadhyay,
my grandparents

Abstract

In this dissertation I analyze the figure of the East-Bengali refugee woman in Indian literature on the Partition of Bengal of 1947. I read the figure as one who makes visible, and thus opens up for critique, the conditions that constitute the category 'women' in the discursive terrain of post-Partition/post-Independence India. The figure of the refugee woman, thereby, allows us to map the relationship between the category women and the collective imaginary, specifically the nation. I argue that the figure of the refugee woman explicates, interrupts, and critiques the relationship of 'women' to the nation in the normative patriarchal nationalist discourse, which constructs women as a sign of the nation. The representational import of the refugee woman pushes the signification of 'women' in relation to the collective from a sign to that of a subject. My analysis of the refugee woman is, thus, a critical engagement with the tension between 'women' as figurative and 'women' as historical-material categories, although both are imagined within the field of discursive signification.

I develop my argument by analyzing three major texts from West Bengal, India that respond to the Partition to critically apprehend the radical charge inherent in the figure of the refugee woman. These texts are the film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*Cloud-Capped Star*; 1960) by Ritwik Ghatak, and the novels *Epar Ganga*, *Opar Ganga* (*The River Churning*; 1967) by Jyotirmoyee Devi and *Swaralipi* (*The Notations*; 1952) by Sabitri Roy.

The larger argument of the dissertation is that the Partition, as a historical event, lies in contiguity and continuity with the normative regime of the gendered

‘everyday world.’ Therefore, the Partition allows us to examine the historical configurations of power that make the gendered everyday but that cannot be easily discerned from within the ‘everyday.’ Within the rubric of this larger argument lies my contention that the figure of the refugee woman has the radical potential to make visible the traumatic relationship between the extraordinary violence of the Partition and the gendered, ordinary, everyday life.

Preface

I could not imagine one ideal reader when writing this dissertation. My imagined audience comprised both global readers and readers who will identify this topic as local. I wished to be comprehensible as well as interesting to both groups, neither appearing parochial and obscure to one section, nor sounding unduly preambular and obvious to the other. Practically implementing this goal turned out to be far more difficult than it first appeared. Especially when providing the historical background and context for each text and argument, the pragmatic decisions about how much was enough but not excessive became particularly challenging. While I took consolation from the fact that this problem cannot be mine alone and many others before me in comparable situations must have faced the same predicament, misgivings of saying both too much and too little at the same time nevertheless haunted me.

My response to this quandary was to fall back upon myself as an implicit benchmark about what was relevant and to what degree the background-story needed to be told. Born into a Bengali family that traces its ancestry to East Bengal on both maternal and paternal sides, and growing up in Calcutta in the 1980s and the 1990s, I have been submerged in a Partition culture and have always been interested in the Partition. However, this keen interest in the Partition did not at first seem to warrant an actual search of its histories and stories, outside what was immediately available. Taking the Partition as a dissertation topic changed my knowledge of, relationship to, and position about the Partition to the degree that I had not anticipated. When providing overviews of histories, debates,

texts, and contexts, and faced with the question of how much detail was necessary, I have prioritized emphasizing what I myself would not have necessarily known unless I had taken up this project. Occasionally, I have left traces of my own biographical relationship to the texts and contexts in the footnotes as a way of clarifying when I was drawing from it to make methodological decisions or to arrive at insights.

Indeed, I have taken to footnoting as another solution—and perhaps it is more a symptom than a solution—to speaking to a diverse audience. If the number of footnotes appears as excessive, they speak to the challenge of addressing an audience located at, and in-between, the global and local poles. Some of the footnotes offer explicatory or background information that I imagined a global reader unfamiliar with historical-geographic-cultural specifics will need, whereas others offer extra information and qualifications that I wanted to share with readers whom I imagined as already invested in these very specifics. Unfortunately, I could not distinguish the two kinds of footnotes from each other, and it is for the readers to encounter them and decide for themselves whether or not the content of the footnote is of interest to them.

Beyond this somewhat unorthodox footnoting, I have also, of course, used footnotes more conventionally. Many footnotes contain the usual bibliographic information and citations that all dissertating students, I am told, feel compelled to write. Among these, occasionally, I have referred to scholarship in the field of Holocaust Studies. I am cognizant of the problem of using a set of theories that were formulated to understand a very specific event to analyze another and of the

bigger problem if we presume that the Holocaust is a necessary referent for any discussion of collective trauma. Thus, except for occasional references to Adorno, Benjamin, and Lyotard—philosophers who cannot, surely, be reduced to a field—, these references are *citations* rather than tools of analysis in my dissertation. Therefore, these references are in the footnotes rather than in the main text. The reason they are at all there is because much useful work has been done in this field; in instances where I knew of resonances or parallels between my discussion and this field, it seemed counterproductive to not note them.

Before the readers get to the dissertation, I would also like to explain the conventions I have followed in my handling of bilingual texts for this dissertation and translations and transcriptions where necessary. Where I have cited a text from the original Bengali, I have mentioned ‘Bengali’ inside the parenthesis where the in-text citation appears. This should inform the reader that the author being quoted appears in the slim “Bengali” section appearing at the end of the Bibliography. When the translation of a quote is mine, I have usually mentioned this in the same parenthesis unless otherwise obvious. However, I have tried to use existing English translations of acceptable quality wherever I could find them.

About proper names of authors and their citation: for Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, who wrote his last name anglicized as Chatterji when writing in English, the reader will notice that I have referred to the author by his first name. This is in keeping with idiomatic conventions within criticism in Bengali. I opt to go this way because there is a sound practical purpose to this convention. In contrast to western Judeo-Christian traditions, the same surnames are far more

common among Bengalis than given names. Given that a few surnames (invariably caste-Hindu) keep recurring in a given discussion, each of them common among several different discussants, the purpose of naming as reference is defeated. When my discussion in Chapter 1 details a debate between Partha Chatterjee and Joya Chatterji, the reader will encounter this first hand. Referring to these contemporary scholars by their first names would have been bewilderingly out of chord for a current academic discussion in English, therefore I have avoided taking such recourse. However, with Bankimchandra, I have allowed myself the luxury of referring to the author as conventional in Bankim scholarship. I have made a similar indulgence for Aurobindo Ghose, who later become the spiritual guru Sri Aurobindo, and have referred to him as Aurobindo.

For Rabindranath Thakur, who wrote his last name anglicized as Tagore when writing in English, I have used Tagore for the most part but also, occasionally, Rabindranath, especially when other members of the Tagore family entered the discussion. The reader will note other commentators on Tagore, whom I quote, also move between Tagore and Rabindranath, depending on which literary tradition they are idiomatically affiliating with. For Ritwik Ghatak, keeping with the conventions of Ghatak scholarship, much of which is in English, I have used the last name except the occasional instances where I also refer to other members of the Ghatak family. I have referred to Jyotirmoyee Devi by her full name, because Devi is an honorific and not her last name. This is also in keeping with the fact that the author is known and referred to as Jyotirmoyee Devi

by both her Bengali and national/international readership. Since Devi is not a last name, Jyotirmoyee Devi is listed under ‘J’ in the bibliography.

For Bengali words, I have used a simplified transcription, avoiding strict Devanagari-Roman script conversion rules that come with diacritical marks. However, the transcription is not phonetic either. For example, I have written Sita instead of Sītā, but nor have I written Sheetaa. The Bengali pronunciation of the name Sītā, would entail pronouncing the ‘s’ sound as ‘sh,’ while the soft ‘t’ is not approximated by any letter of the Roman script. Therefore, opting for a Bengali phonetic yielded entertainingly creative possibilities but did not necessarily provide a particularly efficient solution; accordingly, I have not ventured that way. I have, of course, not interfered where a translator has used a different approach to transcription. For instance, Enakshi Chatterjee, in *The River Churning*, writes ‘Ram,’ according to Bengali phonetic, rather than as ‘Rama’ as I have done. The reader will thus, unfortunately, encounter both versions of the name. All this is just to explain the convention followed here. Readers of Bengali can easily read the Bengali from the simplified Devanagari-Roman transcription, while those who do not read Bengali need not worry about the exact pronunciation of each Bengali word.

Lastly, the name of the city of Calcutta was changed by legislation in January 2001 to Kolkata. I name the city many times in this dissertation, sometimes referring to a time after 2001, but mostly not. To keep matters simple, I have stuck to the older name Calcutta throughout.

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Although I alone remain responsible for the shortcomings of this dissertation, I must thank the many people who made this work possible. This is a long dissertation, and it took a long time to complete it. Naturally, therefore, the debts I accumulated are many and this acknowledgement will be long.

First and foremost, I thank my supervisor, Stephen Slemon, for his astute guidance through this intellectual and institutional journey, for his unfailing generosity, for showing me with his characteristic brilliance where this dissertation could go, for pushing me to take it there, but for trusting me to choose my own path forward. I also thank him for unequivocally expressing his faith in my academic capabilities; it made a significant difference at times when I myself harboured grave doubt about them. I thank Heather Zwicker and Onookome Okome, members of my supervisory committee, for always being supportive of me and my work. Thanks are also due to Daphne Read and Sourayan Mookerjee for asking, along with my supervisory committee, useful, provocative questions and making valuable suggestions during my candidacy examination. My conscious academic journey into fields called, for good or for bad, postcolonial studies and cultural studies started with a full-year course Heather Zwicker taught during my first year at University of Alberta. I learned a lot more from the course than I realized at the time. My belated thanks to Heather for teaching a great course.

Less immediate, but no less important, and certainly durable has been what my teachers in the past taught me. At Dolna Day School, my teachers not

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In a critical, early stage of writing, when I had hit rock bottom of confidence, Madhuparna Sanyal responded to my call of crisis in ways that defy imagination. By appointing herself a cheerleader, a ‘surviving-dissertation coach,’ and an editor combined, she willingly read, occasionally re-read, thoughtfully commented upon, and suggested editorial improvements for this entire long dissertation. Without this intervention by her, I may not have ever finished. Whatever be the limitations of this document now, it would be intellectually poorer work if Mridula Nath Chakraborty had not read with keen interest each chapter as it got written, excitedly waited for the next, shared a sense of importance in the intellectual queries and finds of this project, and provided thoughtful and thought-provoking comments and questions for this dissertation in entirety.

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INTRODUCTION

I

All nations and all nationalisms are gendered. Gender is integral to a nation's conception as an "imagined community."¹ The people who imagine the nation and the people who are imagined as the nation are both gendered. Although women are instrumental to the process of nation-founding and nation-making, historically they have seldom been included in the imagined community as subject-agents. Indeed, Anne McClintock has famously argued in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* that "all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented and all are dangerous—dangerous not in Eric Hobsbawm's sense of having to be opposed, but in the sense that they represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence" (352).² As *Imperial Leather* has so richly textured, this warning comes to bear even in the context of anti-colonial nationalisms where a disavowal of nationalism is far from easy. In the projects of both imperialism and anti-colonial nation founding, 'women' become a critically important ingredient but remain a liminal category. McClintock is not alone; the problem is centrally recognized in the scholarship on woman and nation/nationalism.³ In the context of India, this observation of disjuncture

¹ Benedict Anderson's famous phrase in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

² This argument is also indicated in the title of McClintock's second book, co-edited with Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat, *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*.

³ For scholarship not focussed on the West, see Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi's *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India* and Kumari Jayawardena's *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, and *Women, Islam, and the State*, edited by Deniz Kandiyoti.

between women and the nation leads the feminist Partition scholar Ritu Menon to ask “Do women have a country?”⁴ and to name her edited collection of Partition-writing by women *No-Woman’s Land*.

This dissertation is an attempt to understand the Partition of Bengal, 1947, in context of the relationship of women and the nation. It analyzes the figure of the refugee woman as a figure who occupies the intersection of a three-way relationship between women, the nation, and the Partition. It reads the figure of the refugee woman in three major Hindu-Bengali texts of Partition of Bengal as a figure that is directed towards critiquing the foundational tenets of nationhood and history—the institutions of modernity—that normative nationalism normalized and naturalized. It locates the refugee woman as a figure that both *is* and *challenges* the legacy of the dominant cultural nationalism that takes a specific shape in late nineteenth century Bengal and continues through early twentieth

Otherwise, see the extensive scholarship of Nira Yuval-Davis and her two co-edited volumes with Floya Anthias and Pnina Werbner respectively. Also relevant are *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation* by Tamar Mayer; *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalism, Transnational Feminism, and the State*, edited by Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Minoó Moallem; and *From Gender to Nation*, edited by Rada Ivekovic and Julie Mostov. The last listed volume includes essays that address the relationship between women and the nation in context of a partitioned community/country. Scholarship on gender and nation often, quite understandably, focuses on violence and women; such scholarship is highly insightful. In this latter category, see the seminal volume *Embodied Violence Communalising Women’s Sexuality in South Asia*, edited by Kumari, Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis and *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones* edited by Wenona Giles, and Jennifer Hyndman.

For the gender blindness of the canonical scholarship on nationalism, see Anne McClintock’s critique of Benedict Anderson and other discussants, whose work is foundational to scholarship on the nation. McClintock shows that in the post-colonial context, even Frantz Fanon, who is so enabling otherwise, shows this gender bias (352-368).

For a critical apprehension of the relationship between women and the state, see Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s *Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial India*. Sunder Rajan provides a succinct overview of the available scholarship on the topic in the “Introduction” (1-37).

⁴ Title of her essay.

century into the post-Independence/post-Partition nation. There is, of course, not one homogenous kind of nationalism; the cultural nationalism that I refer to is patriarchal, class-privileged, and caste-Hindu in character and was dominant and deeply influential in the later course of all nationalisms not only in Bengal but elsewhere in India as well. A salient feature of this nationalism was that, within its imaginary, women were constructed as signs of the nation, erasing women's agential subjectivity and women's claims to the nation.

The figure of the refugee woman allows us to examine the tense interface between women as figurative (signs of the nation) and women as historical-material categories in relation to the nation. This dissertation shows that the figure of the refugee woman can interrupt the economy of representation where women are signs of the nation, historicize it, and push the concept of women's relationship to the nation (or otherwise conceptualized political collective) to a different mode. It also posits the refugee woman as a figure who allows us to read what constitute the category 'women' in the discourse of the nation as it transitioned from the colonial to the postcolonial state. On the one hand, the figure points out the continuities between the two forms of nationhood in perpetuation of the gendered everyday world. On the other hand, she interrupts and intervenes into the colonial 'legacy' and forms a location of political praxis in the newly formed postcolonial nation. Further, this dissertation shows that, in constituting women as a historical category, the figure of the refugee woman throws into acute critical relief the conditions that hold the 'normal' historical relationship between woman and the nation in place, and it disrupts the hegemony of gender that is

foundational in the perpetuation of ‘the everyday’ of the nation. Therefore, the analysis of the refugee woman this dissertation offers is also an exploration of the gendered, historical ‘everyday’ of the nation in relation to the Partition and illuminates the links between the Partition and nationalism, and the process of nation-formation in the Indian context.

The Partition of Bengal was part of the larger Partition of British India in 1947 at the moment of its independence from British rule. The Partition split colonial India into two sovereign nation-states, India and Pakistan. Pakistan comprised two non-contiguous wings lying on either side of India. Most provinces of colonial India fell wholly into either Pakistan or India, except three: Punjab, Bengal and Assam. The province of Punjab in the west of colonial India was bifurcated with roughly one half going to Pakistan and the other to India. On the eastern front, a similar fate awaited the province of Bengal: the province was split vertically into two with the landmass lying on the west allotted as a border state to the newly formed India and named West Bengal. The eastern half of Bengal became East Pakistan. Sylhet, a relatively small part of the province of Assam, also went to East Pakistan. In Punjab and Bengal, the bifurcation literally cracked into two halves not only territory but also a shared history, culture, and polity. The next twenty-five years brought further complication to this already complex arrangement. In a civil war in 1971, which really is the Partition of Pakistan although it is seldom referred to in these terms, East Pakistan/East Bengal was to become the independent nation-state of Bangladesh.

The Partition claimed hundreds of thousands of human lives, reaching proportions of genocide in some parts of the subcontinent; the estimate of the dead varies from the official British figure of 200,000 to 2 million by later Indian estimates, but it is now widely believed that at least a million people died (Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence* 3). Till this day, the ‘population exchange’ between the newly formed India and Pakistan remains the largest instance of forced and coerced migration in global history. In eastern part alone, many millions of Hindus—no one knows exactly how many—crossed India’s eastern border with Pakistan into the new state of West Bengal and into states of Assam and Tripura. The “official, and improbably conservative, estimate for the period of eighteen years from 1946 to 1964 places the total at just under 5 million” (Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition* 105). In the same period, “a lesser number of about a million and a half Muslims left West Bengal, Bihar, Assam and Tripura to go to East Bengal” (ibid. 106).⁵

This dissertation examines three texts: Jyotirmoyee Devi’s novel *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* (*The River Churning: A Partition Novel*; 1967), Ritwik Ghatak’s film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*Cloud-Capped Star*; 1960) and Sabitri Roy’s novel *Swaralipi* (*The Notations*; 1952). These are Partition texts of and represent the Partition narratives of the bhadralok⁶ Hindu-Bengalis on West Bengal in the

⁵ For a history of the Partition in Bengal in context of West Bengal, see Joya Chatterji’s *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India 1947-67*. For an anthropological-history of the refugees, see Nilanjana Chatterjee’s unpublished dissertation, *Midnight's Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation*.

⁶ Literally, ‘the respectable people.’ In *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Partha Chatterjee explains the term ‘bhadralok’ as “the new middle class in colonial Bengal,” but prefers the term “middle class” to it (35). Chatterjee writes,

Indian side. The refugee characters in these texts are based on historical groups of the East Bengali, Hindu refugees who arrived in West Bengal and elsewhere in independent India from East Pakistan. While the rest of the nation got citizenship

The terms middle class, literati, and intelligentsia all have been used to describe it. Marxists have called it petty bourgeoisie, the English rendering of *petit* making its character with the unmistakable taint of historical insufficiency. A favourite target of colonizer's ridicule, it was once famously described as "an oligarchy of caste tempered by matriculation." More recently, historians inspired by the well-meaning dogmas of American cultural anthropology called it by the name the class had given to itself—the *bhadralok*, "respectable folk"; the latter interpreted the attempt as a sinister plot to malign its character. Whichever the name, the object of description has, however, rarely been misunderstood: in the curious context of colonial Bengal, all of these terms meant more or less the same thing. (35)

In her earlier book, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, Joya Chatterji expresses her dissatisfaction with "the middle classes" as an alternative term, because it is "capable of being misleading, [...] derived as it is from the study of western industrial societies" (4). Chatterji argues for the term 'bhadralok' as being more useful:

Middle class suggests essentially urban groups, consisting in the main of traders and entrepreneurs, and coming in due course in advanced industrial societies to include the salaried professionals. Members of the bhadralok often chose to describe themselves in just this way, taking as their model the prosperous and influential middle classes of Victorian England. But in so doing they, and the historians after them, were drawing false analogies between society in Bengal and Britain.

The basis of bhadralok prosperity was neither trade nor industry, but land. The Bengali bhadralok were essentially products of the system of property relations created by the Permanent Settlement. [...] There were many differences within the bhadralok, reflecting the variety in size and quality of their holdings in the land, and partly in the result of subinfeudation and the proliferation of intermediary tenures. But from the landed magnate down to the petty *talukdar*, this was a class that did not work its land but lived off rental income it generated. [...] Shunning manual labour, the 'Babu' saw this as the essence of the social distance between himself and his social inferiors. The title 'Babu' – a badge of bhadralok status – carried with it connotations of Hindu, frequently upper caste exclusiveness, of landed wealth, of being master (as opposed to servant), and latterly of possessing the goods of education, culture, and anglicisation. The vernacular term 'bhadralok' is useful not only because it expresses this sense of exclusiveness and the social relations that produced it, but also because it carries with it overtones of the colonial origins of this class and its overwhelming Hindu composition. Yet neither 'bhadralok' nor 'babu' describes straightforward communal or caste categories. These terms reflected, instead, the social realities of colonial Bengal, the peculiar configuration that excluded for a variety of historical reasons, the vast majority of Bengali Muslims and low-caste Hindus from the benefits of land ownership and the particular privileges it provided. (5-6)

Although the heterogeneous Hindu, middle-class Bengalis and their texts under discussion in this dissertation do not belong to the colonial period, I have preferred retaining the word 'bhadralok' as indeed the class-based identity of this group would correspond to the social category formed in the colonial times.

of a free country, these people were among the “midnight’s unwanted children,” in Nilanjana Chatterjee’s phrase.⁷ They found themselves on the ‘wrong side’ of the border when India awoke, in the famous phrase of the first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, “to her destiny.” Overall, the elite among them, who form the prototype in Bengali Partition literature from West Bengal,⁸ occupied a complex position lying at the intersection of privilege and powerlessness. On the one hand, they belonged to a stratum of the bhadralok section and had class and caste privilege. On the other, their status as refugees in West Bengal mocked this privilege. Many lived in abysmal conditions in refugee colonies and camps and faced problems in “resettlement, in finding employment, and in supporting large and growing families” (J. Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition* 296). In any case, even for those who eventually found a foothold and established themselves financially and materially, the cultural stigma of being refugees from East Bengal lingered. As it is, the Bengalis of East Bengal were thought to be culturally inferior, rural bumpkins with peculiar dialects, by the bhadralok population of Calcutta, and were referred to as ‘bangals,’ a pejorative term. This perception pre-dated the

⁷ Title of her unpublished dissertation, clearly playing upon Salman Rushdie’s famous novel *Midnight’s Children*.

⁸ We should note that the demographics of the refugees of the Partition of Bengal has always been more various than this prototype suggests. Historically, while “in the first wave of Hindu refugees to cross over into West Bengal [...] the overwhelming majority were drawn from the ranks of very well to do and the educated middle-classes,” the subsequent waves and trickles were progressively poorer down to the humble peasant, sharecroppers and landless labourers (J. Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition* 115-119). Indeed, “as time passed, it became increasingly the case that the middle-class refugees from East Bengal formed only a part of the refugee population as a whole, and an increasingly small fraction in the camps where the most powerful refugee movements came to be organized” (ibid. 271).

In Bengali refugee fiction, however, the subaltern refugees are rarely visible and, when visible, they are peripheral figures, not the protagonists of the story.

Partition, but if this was a product of cultural hegemony earlier, what changed after the Partition is that the evocation of the term ‘bangal’ now acquired an element of anger and hostility. The refugees, with their naked needs and seemingly insatiable demands, were unwanted in Calcutta and were thought to be dirtying its public space and polluting its bhadralok culture. In any case, the loss that constituted the refugees ontologically and haunted them cannot be reduced to just the material. The loss of ‘home, a polity, and a connection to the land, for not only those who found themselves on the wrong side of the new border after the Partition but also for those East Bengalis who were physically settled in Calcutta at the time of the Partition, remained inseparably intertwined with their lives and was passed on to their children and grandchildren.

The figure of the refugee woman, as both a refugee and a woman, is a doubly marginalized figure. Yet, in my given texts and context, she is not a subaltern figure; she is inscribed as a marginal, gendered other *within* an elite class and caste demography of the Bengali bhadralok. Given her historical profile, the figure of the refugee woman in my texts is at once within and without national imagination and both a marginal figure and a figure around whom discourse of belonging and rights within a national context can crystallize. That is to say, she is disenfranchised within a national discourse, but also remains crucially visible within that very discourse. Therefore, I read the refugee woman as a liminal in/outside figure who occupies the intersection of power and powerlessness in a national context, analyzing whom provokes insight into understandings of the

particularities of power—and lack of it—that define the relationship of women with the discourse and practices of normative nationalism.

The figure of *this* refugee woman is clearly not an exclusive location for probing the Partition and its connection to dominant nationalism. One could also argue, quite rightly, that the core body of ‘us’ which spearheaded the dominant cultural nationalism excluded, marginalized, and ‘othered’ other figures such as the Muslim, the peasant, and the subaltern classes and castes, to differing degrees; by that logic, we can take any of these figures and track its construction and usage through cultural nationalism preceding the Partition as well as later in the Partition discourse to gain insight into the Partition and the nation-making process. I prioritize the refugee woman as a key figure above the others by recognizing the foundationality of the bhadralok Bengali woman, the bhadramahila, to normative anti-colonial nationalism in Bengal, and the link between nationalism and the Partition. I argue that, although not exclusively so, the figure of the refugee woman provides a crucially necessary point of entry into an enquiry from *within* a certain discourse. It has all the limitations that come with a gendered enquiry from within: if its discussion comes to bear upon all women to some extent, the woman who forms the basis of the discussion is inscribed by class and caste and is not a universal figure. On the other hand, *because* she is both within and without power and otherwise an in-between figure as I described above, she allows a specific insight into the dominant processes of nation-making that cannot be found from other locations entirely outside.

II

I now attempt to anticipate the major arguments of this dissertation in more detail, outline the relevant methodology, and describe the critical vocabulary I use in this dissertation. To describe the two different concepts of the relationship between women and the nation, as signs and as subjects respectively, I draw from Roman Jakobson's distinction between the metaphor and the metonym in his famous essay in *Fundamentals of Language* (1956). Jakobson glossed the metaphor and the metonym as follows: metaphors are representative tropes that function on the principle of substitution, while metonymy, in contrast, functions on the basis of association, relation, membership, and constituency. In metaphoric tropes, there is a replacement of one figure with another; the absent, abstract figure is made available parasitically on the body that is present. Women imagined as signs are metaphors of the nation. The process freezes women in abject passivity and offers no subjecthood, let alone agency. In contrast, if the relationship to the nation is imagined as a metonymic one, women are recognized as members of the nation. Women then still represent the nation, but such representation is in the more political sense of representation, which recognizes subjectivity, participation, desire, and agency. In metonymic imagination of women, there is also room to imagine political collectives other than exclusively as the nation.

Using the metaphor and the metonym, I argue in this dissertation that the figure of the refugee woman contests the constitution of women as metaphors of the nation and signals or stages the struggle to push it towards a metonymic one. The direction of the shift from the metaphor to the metonym was already

historically signalled by women in the nationalist movement and gets taken up by the refugee woman in a different political context. With the figure of the refugee woman, the struggle becomes visible, more acute, and intertwined with the first few years of postcolonial nationhood. The figure of the refugee woman and, indeed, the material history of refugee women in political and civic life in post-Partition Bengal provokes us to imagine women as metonymic representatives of a collective; the figure of the refugee woman, thus, alerts us to the new ideas of political belonging to which they stake a claim. Partition texts that present the refugee woman as a radical figure show us the concomitant violence committed when politically, in a particular discourse of collectives, women turn from metonyms to pure metaphors. Women are then no longer a part of a whole, but constitute a pure substitution; they *are* the nation. The figure of the refugee woman makes visible the violence of metaphor making and provides an immanent critique of the process.

It is important to underscore that *both* the metaphor and the metonym are significations and belong to the realm of the discursive/cultural. They are, therefore, a different order of distinction than the one between discourse and the materiality (historical 'reality'). If the metaphor and the metonym belong to the same realm (of discourse), the discursive and the material belong to two different realms. Therefore, if we think of the metaphor-metonym distinction as a lateral or horizontal shift in meaning, the discursive-material distinction is a vertical one. This means the two sets of distinctions don't correspond with each other. That is, metaphor is to metonym is not equivalent to what discursive is to material. The

point I am making is aimed at avoiding what Gayatri Spivak has famously critiqued as a confusion between two meanings of “representation,” which she calls “proxy and portrait” respectively (“Can the Subaltern Speak? 276).”⁹ The metonym is not a case of proxy. The metonym is *a signification* of the material within discourse. In other words, “women” as metonyms are not ‘real’ women, or the figure of the refugee woman is not the same as the historical refugee women.

Nevertheless, underscoring the above point is not also to argue that the metonym is entirely removed from the historical-material. The metonym does gesture to not only the historical category of women, but also to a specific history of the refugee women in West Bengal.¹⁰ This is why I call the Partition texts ‘historical fiction’ below. In other words, there is a corresponding component of the metonym in the material-historical. The metonym is a fiction, but it is not entirely free, in this dissertation, from the historical. In my usage of the terms metaphor-metonym, as representations, therefore, I allow for some correspondence between the material and the discursive. We could not

⁹ Citing that the concept of ‘representation’ in Karl Marx’s work operates in two distinct senses and that there is a “play” between the two senses in a passage in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Spivak notes that these two senses of “representation” are expressed in two separate German words: “vertreten” and “darstellen” (276). She describes vertreten and darstellen as “proxy and portrait” respectively. The first has to do with representation as ‘proxy,’ or stand-in or politically “speaking for” (275) The second case of “re-presentation” (276) as “portrait” is mimesis. In her reading of Foucault and Deleuze, what Spivak critiques is the collapse of this distinction between the two. She argues that these intellectuals presume that “re-presentation” as mimesis is also “representation as “proxy” and that the latter can be adequately captured through the former category. She also reminds us that this is indeed an old problem that Plato had identified: an engagement with the figure “re-presented” (in the sense of mimesis) is not an engagement of the ‘real;’ the poet is not a sophist or the actor is not an orator (276). In Spivak’s essay, the concern is not a philosopher’s problem with the ontologically real as much as it is about political power. Her aim is to point out that a mimetic re-presentation of the subaltern cannot circumvent the problem of her political absence: that her “re-presentation” is an appropriation when she cannot politically stand-in or speak for herself.

¹⁰ For a history of the new social category of the refugee woman in West Bengal, see Gargi Chakravartty’s *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal*.

conceptualize the violence of metaphor if we did not comprehend how the discursive also intersects with material history. In this, my usage of metaphor-metonym as representations is closer to how Rajeswari Sunder Rajan describes “representation” in her book *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*. Sunder Rajan writes, “the concept of representation, it seems, is useful precisely and to the extent that it can serve a mediating function between the two positions, neither foundationalist (privileging ‘reality’) nor superstructural (privileging ‘culture’), not denying the category of the real, or essentializing it as some pre-given metaphysical ground for representation” (9). For analytical purposes, in my usage of the term women in most places, I will attempt to clarify whether the term refers to women as a symbolic/metaphoric category within discourse (women as sign of the nation), or women as signification of metonymic/historical-material women within discourse (women as subjects in a cultural text), or real, historical, flesh and blood women. The residual confusion, if any, however, indicates the very historical overlap of these separate usages of the term women in cultural-textual-linguistic discourses with which this dissertation engages.

Nation is the most central and normative collective in the given juncture in history; it is also central in this dissertation. I take the nation to lie sometimes in contiguity with the community and sometimes in concurrence. In the years before independence, when Indians are subjects of the Empire but not citizens of a sovereign nation-state, community, constituting civil society, is acutely political. The family, as the primary patriarchal unit, is also foundational to imaginaries and

power structures of both community and the nation. In that sense, the community-nation dyad is itself a part of the family-community-nation triad. Since my aim is to dwell on the question of the collective, the family as a category has not always remained visible in the discussion, but it has always remained central to my conceptualization of sociality. Community is the most immediate of collectives. When it comes to women, in my given context, I have not found any pressing opposition among family, community, and the nation in relationship to women; their interests seem to me to lie in a spectrum, distinct but largely overlapping.

Correspondingly, I do not find a radical charge in community as some have.¹¹ Rather, I concur with Jasodhara Bagchi when she critiques the “tendency [...] in current discussions on women’s rights and citizenship [...] to pit the community as a greater ally of women as against the nation-state posed as site of harsh surveillance[,]” and when she points to “the nation-community nexus” (“Freedom” 20). My understanding of the term community also shares ground with the critical vocabulary of several strands of feminist criticism that, problematizing the organicism and naturalness of ‘community,’ argue that “it is a vertical patriarchal construction claiming self-referential genealogy [...]. It is

¹¹ For instance, Partha Chatterjee argues,

“I am pointing to a different possibility. Looking at the relatively untheorized idea of “the nation” in Western social philosophy, one notices an inelegant braiding of an idea of community with the concept of the capital. . . . It is very much a part of here and now of modernity, and yet it is an idea that remains impoverished and limited to the singular form of nation-state because it is denied a legitimate life in the world of the modern knowledge of human society. This denial, in turn, is related to the fact that by its very nature, the idea of community marks a limit to the realm of disciplinary power.” (*Nation and Its Fragments* 237).

See Chapter 11 “Communities and the Nation” for the full discussion.

hierarchical and non-democratic and does not recognize time” and go on to locate the community “within the nation” (Ivekovic and Mostov 12). My understanding of community is also close to that of Gyanendra Pandey, who argues that communities are “constructed ... through a language of violence” (*Remembering Partition* 204).¹²

However, Veena Das’s anthropology-based distinction between “the community defined on basis of filiation and the community defined by affiliative interests” is useful as a qualification to my usage of community (*Critical Events* 114). Das explains the two types of communities through examples: “ethnic or religious minority” for the former, and “women’s groups” or “the community of women” for the latter (107). By thinking of women’s groups as “affiliative community,” Das wants to recuperate ‘community’ if and when the “possibility of interrogating male definitions of the community” by female members within the community arises (*ibid.*). Except in these exceptional conditions, I take the normative usage of the term ‘community’ to indicate a filiative one, that is to say one where the basis of the collective is myths of blood-ties and genealogy. A

¹² Pandey argues, “It is my argument that in the history of any society, narratives of particular experiences of violence go towards making the ‘community’ – and the subject of history” (*Remembering Partition* 4). Further, based on the interviews of Partitioned subjects, Pandey elaborates:

What is happening in all the above accounts, it seems to me, is a constitution of community through a discourse of ‘violence out there’. Violence happens—and can only happen—at the boundary of community. It marks those boundaries. It is the denial of violence ‘in our midst’, the attribution of harmony *within* and consignment of violence to the outside, that establishes ‘community’. Violence and community constitute each other, as it were. It is important to reiterate, however, that they do so in many different ways; that slippages occur in the very accounts that signal such a mutual constitution; and that the communities thus constructed are necessarily fragile and open to question, however much they come to be invoked in the wake of social and political turbulence. (*Remembering Partition* 188).

useful reminder that ‘women’ are best thought of as a “category” and not a community is Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s emphatic citation of Etienne Balibar’s formulation that “from an emancipatory stand point, *gender is not a community*” (emphasis in Balibar; Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas* 67; cited in Sunder Rajan, *Scandal of the State* 14). As Sunder Rajan writes, “actual collectives of women may be discovered, no doubt, in some historical and social contexts [...]. But beyond such contingent situations, it is not clear whether women have any associational tendencies with other women in any social setting, belonging instead more ‘naturally’ to mixed-gender (and hierarchical) families and communities” (14). Indeed, when we assess both community and nation as collectives from the perspective of women subjects, the patriarchal character of both becomes apparent.

In the given context, the state also shows this patriarchal structure. Nevertheless, the state cannot be dismissed off hand for a feminist project not only because the liberal promise of the state for women far exceeds that of the nation, but also because there is no alternative available to the state. The state is often, at least potentially, the only guarantor of women as right-bearing individuals. In *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial India* Rajeswari Sunder Rajan cautions, using Katherine MacKinnon’s words, “feminism has no theory of the State” (cited in Sunder Rajan 8). Sunder Rajan points out that feminist critiques of the state have not suggested political alternatives to “the institutions of nation-state, law, and citizenship, beyond their reform. [...] There is no equivalent in ‘sisterhood’ to

‘workers of the world, unite!’ (8). Like Sunder Rajan’s earlier book *Real and Imagined Women*, this dissertation is not, given its focus on the ‘cultural’ imaginaries and texts rather than on policy and law, a direct engagement with the issue of the state.¹³ However I would like to note that, if not immediately, this dissertation has tried to remain alive to the state as a larger context in its probing of the question of political collectives.

While nation is central in this dissertation as the historically normative imaginary of a political collective that validates the state, the concept of the nation has come in critical contact with and against other concepts of collectives in the discussion of Partition texts in the body chapters. A gendered collective of ‘women’ is the main *other* collective from which my reading of the Partition texts has taken up the nation. It is not a direct contender for the state for reasons explained above, but it has served as the privileged ‘standpoint’¹⁴ from which to read the nation. A collective of ‘the masses’ in a socialist imagination appears as another alternative to the collective imagined as the ‘nation’ in at least one major Partition text I read in this dissertation. The relationship between such feminist and socialist imaginaries of collectives respectively appear not necessarily in opposition to the nation but they provide locations from which to probe, assess, and critique the nation.

¹³ In this, this dissertation is closer to Sunder Rajan’s earlier book *Real and Imagined Women* than to *The Scandal of the State*. However, as in this earlier work by Sunder Rajan, in this dissertation as well, although remaining in the background, the question of the state has remained an open and relevant question. Indeed, this is also because the Partition is a moment of state-foundation, and it is imperative that we remember it as such.

¹⁴ Dorothy Smith’s phrase (*The Everyday World* 106-111).

While probing women's relationship to the nation is of primary interest to this dissertation, it has to account for the fact that women, even when constituted as subjects, do not have an unmediated relationship to either the nation or to the political. Women, being marginal to political power, do not have the same direct relation to the public, political world that men do. I, thus, use the concept of the gendered, historical 'everyday world' to signal at women's gendered experience of the nation. I borrow the concept of the 'everyday world' from Dorothy E. Smith's seminal feminist study, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*.¹⁵ Smith's 'everyday world' as a *mediating* concept helps us understand the relationship between women and the larger political world.

Smith's 'everyday world' suggestively points to the lived reality within the private sphere—the 'small events' and 'small histories' within the domestic space—that are effected and affected by the larger political world. Indeed, women's deeply gendered, embodied, individual lives within the domestic space of 'the everyday' are minutely governed by big events in the masculine, public, political sphere, perhaps even more so than men's lives. Therefore, women's experiences of realities are constituted by a "bifurcated consciousness" (Smith 6) of both the private and the public, the local and the global, the personal and the political. As Smith points out, it is, indeed, towards a critique of this constructed division that the feminist slogan "the personal is the political" was formulated:

¹⁵ Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta also cite Smith's concept of "the everyday world as a problematic" in their Introduction to *The Trauma and the Triumph* (5) as does Himani Bannerji in her review of the book.

Our major political discovery is expressed in the equation the personal *is* the political. The equation locates an oppression invading our most intimate relationships, the immediate particularities of our lives, the power relations between persons. [... The] intimate and personal experiences of oppression are anchored in and sustained by a patriarchal organization of ruling. (emphasis in original; 211)

The concept of ‘the everyday world’ does away with this division and allows us to examine how the political world percolates into and structures the gendered realities and experiences of women in the domestic world. Therefore, by examining the ‘everyday world,’ we can move towards understanding both the larger processes as well as the locally lived gendered realities of these processes.

Primarily, the concept of the ‘everyday world’ in Smith’s work is designed to connect domestic lives of women to the political world at a given historical instance. However, I use this concept of ‘the everyday world’ to take another step and insert a third term in this two-term relationship. The third term is the extraordinary political world at the time of a catastrophe such as the Partition. By keeping as constant the links between lives of women with *both* ‘ordinary times’ and extraordinary historical events respectively, I seek to explore the connection between the ordinary, banal, normal political-world and an instance of extraordinary violence, the Partition. The connection between ordinary and extraordinary historical times remains through the lives of women, thus providing a common ground between these two categories and also my point of critical entry into both.

This imperative to look for the ordinary in the extraordinary of the Partition is at one with the critical task taken on by critical commentary on the Partition in recent times.¹⁶ My central debt in this regard lies to the two books by Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nation, Fragments, Histories* (2006) and *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History* (2001). The argumentative agenda of the earlier book is to bring Partition within a historical discourse of ‘our’ nation. In common parlance, the Partition is usually talked about in terms of incomprehension and irrationality—‘madness’ is perhaps the commonest trope. As Pandey comments, while madness is certainly one way to understand the Partition and testifies to a traumatic incomprehension, the evocation of “madness” also suggests that the Partition was an aberration, beyond reasonable comprehension, and beyond history (Pandey *Remembering* 17). Such a strategic conceptualization of the Partition, congruent to the liberal discourse of the nation, allows us to posit the Partition outside logical relationships to systems and historical processes and to keep the Partition outside analytical and critical enquiries. I do not, for once, suggest that the Partition was inevitable or the only possible outcome of the process of history preceding the Partition. Nevertheless, I still argue that we recognize the Partition as *historical*, as Pandey has done. Being

¹⁶ The critical connection between violence and peace itself is not recent. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon had written of “a kind of complicit agreement, a sort of homogeneity” between “the violence of the colonies and that peaceful violence that the world is steeped in” (81). Here, Fanon had linked peace and violence spatially. The temporal linking between peaceful times and war/violent times has been made by feminists, too numerous to list, working in different locations.

Another early insistence on the ordinary and the banal in relation to a political catastrophe is Hannah Arendt’s formulation of the “banality of evil” in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Arendt draws attention to ordinary Germans—going about their everyday, banal, lives, fulfilling their perceived duties in carrying out orders—who make possible the Nazi genocide of the Jews.

a historian, and looking at two separate times and archives, Pandey has divided the extraordinary and the ordinary in two different books, *Remembering Partition* and *Routine Violence* respectively. However, my goal is to read the Partition in its very connection to the ordinary. In that vein, I take up the task of understanding the Partition within a historical paradigm signalled by the ‘everyday’ of the everyday world. How this historical paradigm is mediated through women as a figurative category, a sign, and how it has come to bear on women as subjects are what I wish to discuss in this dissertation. I also propose to read the refugee woman as a figure shuttling between the ordinary and the extraordinary to make visible how the extraordinary violence of the Partition lies in a continuum with the historical ‘everyday world’ of the nation.

Although this project is by definition a postcolonial project, the concepts of the colonial and the postcolonial need some clarification. The historical everyday of nation-making is constituted by the ‘colonial’ here, but ‘the colonial’ as a timeframe and as a context of power is not formed by British colonialism alone. A remark made by Sumit Sarkar is useful to cite here: he writes, “To invert an influential formulation of Lata Mani concerning sati, may be [anti-colonial] nationalism could sometimes become a ‘site’ for the refurbishing of patriarchal values” (“Nationalism and ‘Stree-Swadhinata’” 115). Indeed, the colonial is an amalgamation of *both* British colonial rule and indigenous hegemonic, patriarchal nationalism that was formed in response to it. Likewise, the colonized here is itself a variegated category—divided by gender, class, caste and so on. Indigenous patriarchy, in this sense, while cannot be read as colonizer or colonizing, straddles

both the colonial and the colonized. Later in the context of the postcolonial state, there is also a discernable tension between the regional (Bengal) and the national (India), which disallows a homogenous concept of the postcolonial. Accordingly, the oppositional politics of the Partition texts that this dissertation discusses is not obviously directed at ‘the colonial’ as a colonizing force as much as it is at the dominant idiom of nation-formation within indigenous nationalism, much of what was anti-colonial in character. Therefore, neither has the colonial-postcolonial binary corresponded to a binary of the colonizer-colonized, as is somewhat conventional within debates of postcolonialism in the western academy, nor has it been immediately pressing here as an analytical tool.

Three points need clarifying in this context, however. First, it is not as though this dissertation denies the difference between colonial rule and the regime of the indigenous patriarchy. Rather, in *context* of their mutual differences, it notes the collusion between the two in marginalization of women. Second, the dissertation’s emphasis on indigenous nationalism is also not an attempt to deny the foundational significance of the British colonial rule in the internal contours of power formations. Instead, the larger context for the particularities of nation formation within the indigenous patriarchy, it suggests, is determined by colonialism. Finally, this dissertation by no means attempts to disregard that there is a difference between the pre and post-colonial nationhoods and women’s experience of them. The difference, even if not necessarily celebratory, is in the *nature* of oppression and the forms of oppositional praxis possible.

III

The core chapters of this dissertation, Chapters 2-4, are designed around three major texts of the Partition of Bengal of 1947. Before these chapters, however, Chapter 1 sets up the central paradigm and idioms of this dissertation. To be more specific, it examines how women became constructed as metaphors for the nation in dominant, normative nationalist discourse since the late nineteenth century in Bengal. Using the arguments of Partha Chatterjee in *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* and Tanika Sarkar's *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* among others about the “women’s question” and the dependence of anti-colonial nationalism on the ‘figure’ of women, this chapter traces a historical discursive continuum, where the nation is reified as a corporal woman and, concomitantly, the gendered embodied women become both *signs* of the nation and the *sites* where nation building is negotiated. Tracing this continuum from the late nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century Bengal, I locate here the specific idioms of nation-imagination—first as the Hindu wife and then as the mother/mother goddess—that crystallize in the late nineteenth century and remain pervasive until and through the Partition. One of the key arguments that emerges from this exercise of tracing the continuum is that at the time of the Partition/Independence women’s bodies are particularly loaded sites of negotiation in the dominant nationalist discourse, in communal¹⁷ discourse, and as I demonstrate in this chapter, the normative Partition discourse. Against the supposed notion that the aims of

¹⁷ The term ‘communal’ in the Indian context signifies inter-religious intolerance and antagonism. The terms communal and communalism could translate to sectarian and sectarianism respectively.

nationalist and Partition discourse are oppositional, the continuum shows that the two converge on the question of women. I use the specific idiom of women as a metaphor for the nation as the normative, against which to strain the fabric of the texts of the Bengal Partition that I read in the subsequent chapters.

In each of Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I take up three long texts of the Bengal Partition, which I posit as *interventionist* texts. In my reading, these three texts intervene in the process of metaphor making and radicalize the signifier ‘women’ through their construction of the refugee woman. Their interventions also amount to reorienting the relationship of women with collectives to reflect a feminist critique of cultural nationalism. The three texts I examine in these chapters come to the same problematic—woman as a metaphor—in three different ways and illuminate different critical modes of intervention. They gesture towards or imagine alternative possibilities of women’s political belonging. These three texts allow me to read refugee women as the category through which, and the subject from whose “standpoint,” to examine the continuities between the ordinary “everyday world” of patriarchal nation formation and the extraordinary of the Partition.

In Chapter 2, I read the novel *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga (The River Churning; 1967)* as an intervention in the dominant hegemonic narrative that fixes women as a figurative category—and, by a slippage, also historical women—as a depository of national/communal honour. The novel assesses from the vantage point of a refugee woman protagonist the nature, texture, and experience of Partition violence and that of ‘the everyday world’ of nation making by

calibrating the experience of a refugee woman in a social/collective context. I argue that the novel identifies patriarchy as the source of Partition violence and critiques the fixation of the gendered female body as a site of this violence. Closely involving itself with the problem of silenced and omitted histories, specifically women's histories, the novel seeks to offer a strong feminist critique of patriarchal nationalism that governs the everyday world. The novel also points to a collusion of nation, community, and patriarchy against women.

In Chapter 3, I turn to the Partition film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*Cloud-Capped Star*; 1960) by Ritwik Ghatak as a text that lays bare the violence of the process of metaphor making. I argue that the film shows how a gendered metaphor is constructed and how it claims women as sacrificial victims. Specifically, the film offers for examination the process of reification of women into sacrificial motherhood in the culturally sanctioned mould of a mother-goddess that lies at the heart of normative and patriarchal cultural nationalism. In my reading, the film bursts open the seams of the interdependent relationship between nation and women by exposing the consequential converse process in which the women bear the burden of the immense weight of the metaphor and *labour* for it. Thus, in the reading I present here, while the film is just as intensely engaged in critiquing the process of gendered metaphor making as Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel, the economy shifts from honour to labour. If *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* dramatizes 'how' the violence of metaphor making plays out on women's bodies and goes beyond to the question 'what thereafter?' for the women

victimized by ethnic/nationalist violence, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* shows why gendered metaphor-making itself is a violent process.

In Chapter 4, the last chapter, I read Sabitri Roy's novel *Swaralipi* (The Notations; 1952) as a text that involves itself less with the critique of metaphor formation or with the violence of the metaphor than with an engagement with the possibilities where women are imagined as metonyms within political collectives. Against the backdrop of the Partition trauma, *Swaralipi* illuminates the complications of women's participation in and claim on both belonging to and shaping political collectives. *Swaralipi* positions itself as committed to socialism, which understands the limits of bourgeois nationalism, and engages with an alternative possible imaginary of belonging. However, even in this position, which allows for an immanent critique of nationalism and nation formation, the novel is bound by an idiom of disillusionment. The disillusionment stems from an experience of constantly rubbing against the rough edges of the always already gendered relationship of women with *all* collectives. Through the deeply felt understanding of gender-inequality, the novel also critiques the contemporary undivided¹⁸ Communist Party to which the novel is, albeit complicatedly, affiliated. It also critiques forms of political belonging for women imaginable within nationalism/nationalist politics. I suggest that *Swaralipi* alludes to Rabindranath Tagore's political novels *Ghare Baire* (1916; *The Home and the World*, 1919) and *Char Adhyay* (1934; *Four Chapters*, 1950) as texts in which to find the nationalist script *and* possible interventions within that script in regards to

¹⁸ Communist Party of India (CPI) was divided in 1964 into CPI and the CPI (Marxist).

the possibility and consequence of women's participation in politics. I read Roy's novel, however, as more than a critique; it is also an attempt to formulate a new idiom of political belonging for women. In *Swaralipi*, I locate a stake in imagining a form of female subjectivity in relation to the collective that also incorporates the political and imagining women as parts of the collective in such a way that women become metonyms as opposed to a metaphor.

As the reader will have noticed, I have neither sequenced the chapters either by chronology of the texts nor as a linear argument that suggests a trajectory from the metaphor to the metonym as a seamless historical progression. This is deliberate. My understanding of the history of women's relationships to the nation (or alternative political collectives) and to collective politics does not allow for a suggestion of a teleology. Even where my desire to find a feminist story of progress has been operational, the chosen methodology intervened against uncritically acting on that desire.

The Partition is an extreme event, a moment of crisis when the "centre cannot hold"¹⁹ and, thus, an acutely critical juncture. In this moment, the oppression of the old becomes all too visible and the possibility of the new, even if it is envisioned only as a critique of the old, is born. In a somewhat Benjaminian spirit, I have chosen these three texts as creative texts of three creative intellectuals contemporary to the Partition. The three selected texts are able, in differing degrees, to cut across the complacent, hegemonic, bourgeois and

¹⁹ To use the phrase from W. B. Yeats' "Second Coming," which was also so richly evoked by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*.

patriarchal presumptions of the dominant discourse of the time and offer rewarding critical insights into the problematics of the Partition and nation making and their relationships to women. In this way, each of the texts I have closely scrutinized are extra-ordinary texts: they are related to other writing and art of their milieu, but their potential to intervene marks them as different from the surrounding material.

I have treated these texts as relatively autonomous, singular, and artistically complex, instead of treating them as mere functions within a discourse system. When analyzing them, I have tried to ‘hear’ what these texts have had to say about the Partition and the critical commentary they have provided on that perceived reality. In that aim, I have prioritized close-reading the selected texts in as much detail as possible to give maximum space to the texts themselves. I have also paid attention to their textuality. My reading of the refugee woman in this dissertation is deeply embedded in my reading of these Partition texts. Indeed, it is within the interventionist politics of these texts that I am able to read the figure of the refugee woman as a radical figure. While it may seem as though there is a two-way pull between a focus on the figure of the refugee woman and a focus on the texts themselves, I suggest that in my reading methodology the two are so intermeshed with each other that one is not possible without the other.

My attempt is to read the selected partition texts in connection to *both* the traumatic (the Partition; the extraordinary) and the historical (the everyday world; the ordinary). What I call the historical is not necessarily documentation of a perceived history; rather, it is the social-political function of history. These

Partition texts I have chosen to analyze attempt to incorporate the historical even while they are also, at once, speaking to a foundational trauma. It is no easy task, but the texts I examine here at least take on this difficult task and enter the immense trauma of the Partition at its kernel, which is its relationship to the historical. They allow me to read the Partition in connection with the ‘everyday,’ and the relationship of women and the Partition within and against imaginations of collectives, especially the nation.

In order to incorporate the historical, I have made my text selection from long narrative texts: two novels and a film. In her essay “The Paradox of a Fleeting Presence: Partition and Bengali Literature,” Tapati Chakravarty observes that the presence of the Partition in Bengali poetry is significant; there are also many short stories related to the Partition. In contrast, however, novels and films of the Bengal Partition are relatively few in number. This is understandable because, being such a foundational trauma for the Bengali psyche, the Partition creates a radical disjunction in a linear sense of time and in a sense of progressive history. Thus, non-narrative poetry becomes the primary vehicle for expressing the affective and intensely fragmentary experience of the Partition. Even the form of the short story allows, to a great extent, for a non-historical narration. Novels and feature films responding to the Partition cannot entirely escape the historical. For these very reasons I have chosen long teleological narrative texts of the Partition over the poems and short stories.

Teleological narratives that seek to address the Partition have two options: either to embrace the task of locating the historical, or to displace/suppress the

historical. Since the first one is so much more difficult, it is also rare. It is far more common for narrative-texts to take the second recourse. If so, then they become either narratives of memory, where they project the suppressed-historical backward into the past, or they become a liberal tale of progress, where they project the suppressed-historical forward. A narrative of memory itself can be either a narrative of trauma or a narrative of nostalgia. However, in both these cases, the narrative dis-recognizes historical continuity between the banal life preceding the Partition and the Partition itself. I draw the twin possibilities of trauma and nostalgia and their relationship to suppression of history from Dipesh Chakrabarty's discussion of memory-writing of east Bengali refugees.²⁰ Building on Chakrabarty's thesis, Pradip Bose formulates that "memory begins where history ends" (73). Chakrabarty shows that the reverse to be also true: history ends where memory begins. In other words, the exercise of memory is in a selective amnesia of the past: nothing that the Partition narrative can remember warrants the Partition. However, I am interested in the historical. Therefore, I have chosen long narrative texts that do not evade or suppress history but face the difficulty of their immediate history.

The texts I have selected to read in the core chapters attempt to address not merely what is historical, but the very concept of the historical. In a more basic

²⁰ He writes:

A traumatized memory has a narrative structure which works on a principle opposite to that of any historical narrative. At the same time, however, this memory, in order to be plausible, has to place the Event—the case of the trauma, in this case, the partition violence—within shared mythic construction of the past that gives force to the claim of the victim.

Consider what makes a historical narrative of the Partition possible. A historical narrative would lead up to the event, explaining why it happened and why it happened at the time it did. (319-320)

sense, however, their setting is contemporary history and in some sense they can be read as historical fiction, albeit to differing degrees. They share common ground with history in the capacity of constructing a perception of a collective event in the past: in the context of the Partition in both eastern and western India, fictional representations take on dimensions of history in the absence of alternative sites of public commemoration—museums, archives, monuments, holidays, war trials—that have accompanied foundational traumas elsewhere in the world. When literature and cinema, based on a historical event and identifying themselves as works of fiction, come to play a critical role in constructing a collective testimonial, they acquire the force of history. However, we could not call these texts historiography because they are fictional and do not, as historiographies do, bear the burden of evidential empirical truth. Thus, it is best to think of them as lying at the intersection of fiction and history.

Rumina Sethi has probably made the most articulate and succinct case for the study of historical fiction, in her study of Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura*, as a viable and rewarding venue off which we can read the nation's relationships with its peoples. By "combin[ing] in itself both fiction and history," Sethi claims, historical fiction becomes a suitable "genre for examining the construction of nationalism, which, while being a subject of history, may, at the same time, be taken 'outside' into the framework of fiction" (1). Like Sethi, I treat literary and cinematic representations of the Bengal Partition as representations—narratives—of contemporary history that "slide into fiction" (1). In other words, the historical fictions I study do not constitute evidential histories by showing how things

‘really’ were. They do, however, as fiction, form instances of interpretation of the history.

Further, as Sethi assesses, by turning to fiction and not to history, we can afford “more room for imaginary speculation” without irking the “well-intentioned historian” (1-2). We can argue, as some have indeed argued, that the task I imagine for historical fiction is also fulfilled by history, which, if not fictional, is certainly hermeneutic as a narrative. It is now a commonplace understanding that the difference separating fiction and history—both being narratives—is fuzzier than has been supposed for ages. Since the linguistic turn within the discipline of History, much has been written on the constructedness of historiography as narratives.²¹ Thereby the two—history and fiction—have come much closer than they have ever been before. However, such breaking of boundaries has also occasioned caution from practitioners from both ends. From the historian’s side, there has been trouble over giving up of empiricism. From the textual scholar’s side, commentators, such as Jill Didur in her recent book *Unsettling Partition*, have critiqued reducing fiction to history by bypassing its deliberate *mediatedness* through language and textual strategies. As is to be expected, while I emphasize the relationship of my chosen texts with history, I also remind the reader, with Didur, of the mediatedness of these texts and suggest that the ‘meaning’ of these texts lies in this mediation. My treatment of the literary and cinematic texts in this dissertation is at one with how Jill Didur

²¹ A significant early example is Hayden White’s arguments about stylized narrativity of history in *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*.

understands them. I take these texts to be re-presentations; as such, as all narratives are, they are hermeneutic texts.

The suitability of reading fictional (thereby, imaginary) texts to comprehend the functioning of cultural nationalism is now canonized through Benedict Anderson's formulation of the nation itself as an "imagined community" and by Homi Bhabha's decisive work on the entrenchment of "nation" with "narration."²² In any case, closer to home turf, Partha Chatterjee has also persuasively and eloquently spoken of the significance of "inner aspects of culture, such as language or religion or the elements of personal and family life" (26) as a site of "anticolonial nationalism," (6) especially before nationalism in the domain of the state comes into being.²³ Building on Chatterjee, if one foot of nationalism is always in the "aspects of culture," then one hardly needs to belabour the importance of literature in analyzing a problematic that is inseparable from that of nationalism. When we imagine the Partition in relation to nation formation, as I propose here, the connection with literature becomes obvious.

While I argue for the importance of texts that retain the historical, the difficulty posed to historical representation by trauma is intense.²⁴ The Partition

²² See Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* and Homi Bhabha's edited volume *Nation and Narration*. In the latter, especially see, Bhabha's introduction to the volume, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation" (1-7).

²³ Chatterjee writes of "anticolonial nationalism" creating its "own domain within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power" (*Nation* 6). For the full discussion see the first two chapters of *Nation and Its Fragments*.

²⁴ Michael Rothberg has commented upon the oppositional demands of representation of the extraordinary and the ordinary—the traumatic and the historical—in an important study on the

is, without doubt, a traumatic event that touches both intimately personal as well as public aspects of human lives in the Indian subcontinent. As I discussed above, trauma narrative has a function that is antagonistic to the historical. It is the very nature of trauma to push towards non-representation. The attempt to retain the historical is further compounded by the fact that institutional history, being a patriarchal prerogative, elides women. In the gendered nature of the enquiries taken up by this dissertation, it is not possible to evoke the function of the historical without also taking into account the absence of gendered history and the absence of a history of women.²⁵ Therefore, my interest to dwell on the historical, while also retaining a simultaneous focus on gender, requires me to turn to texts that also embrace the double bind of this task. In other words, my interest is in texts that attempt to address the historical while also at least acknowledging the gendered violence of history itself.

Criticism attentive to trauma has been conducted in most instances by taking recourse to psychoanalysis. While much valuable scholarship has emerged out of this approach, and while some have succeeded in creatively bridging the disparity between theories of psychoanalysis that were formulated to explain individual psyche and what is needed to analyze collectives, the tension has not been entirely resolved. As a result, discussions of “collective trauma” very often steer the focus away from the questions of the social and the collective. This is not

issue of representation of the Jewish Holocaust in his book, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*.

²⁵ I will address the specifics of the problem of the absence of the ‘woman’s part’ in history/canonical literature in detail in Chapter 2.

of interest to my dissertation. Therefore, while remaining sensitive to and cognizant of the conditionality imposed by trauma, I am more invested in analytical approaches that cater to the dimensions of the social and the collective. This placement of focus is strategic: instead of thinking of the collective in terms of trauma-vocabulary, I try to think of individual trauma in a collective context. The latter is different from what the usage of ‘collective trauma’ often suggests. When we talk in terms of ‘collective trauma,’ we often take recourse to the image of a body politic. As will become clear in the course of the dissertation, I critique such anthropomorphism. For one thing, bodies are gendered, and this dissertation sees historical violence ensuing from the nation gendered as a woman. Therefore, in my readings of the refugee woman’s psychic trauma, I choose to stay more with a discussion of nation and other collective formations as a context and cause of the trauma, rather than enter the psychic space of the people or the nation as a unified body. I also address the question of trauma in my dissertation by exploring how the texts that I analyze register trauma of the event that they have to grapple with in the very textual apparatus and form.

The discoveries and the arguments of this dissertation, I hope, will resonate with and contribute to a broader theoretical concern with gender and collectives, especially in all partitioned societies, but the project is necessarily situated in a field of scholarship and deals with historical and geographical specifics. Therefore, in the following two sections, I outline the connection of this project with existing scholarship and sketch the relevant history.

IV

Since the mid 1990s, around the fiftieth anniversary of Indian Independence/Partition, a great deal of critical attention has been devoted to the Partition, resulting in the formation of the interdisciplinary field of Partition Studies in the South-Asian context, focussing on India for the most part. This corpus comprises of edited anthologies of literature, commentaries, and analyses.²⁶ Though Veena Das's *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (1995) was a forerunner, the foundation stones of this academic field was laid in 1998 with Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Border and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. These two volumes combined textual analyses of historical documents with oral history. These volumes were followed closely in 2001 by *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India* by Gyanendra Pandey, which made a persuasive and eloquent case for "remembering the Partition" and for the purpose, indeed need, of Partition Studies. In the same year, also appeared an influential anthology of critical debates titled *The Partition of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, edited by Suvir Kaul, situated as a scholar in a prestigious North American English department. This book also demonstrated the central role of literature and its analysis in Partition Studies. With this volume, Partition entered the

²⁶ See, for example, S. Settar and Indira Baptista Gupta's *Pangs of Partition* (2 volumes; 2002), S. R. Chakravarty and Mazhar Hussain's *Partition of India: Literary Responses* (1998), Muhammad Umar Memon's *An Epic Unwritten: The Penguin Book of Partition Stories from Urdu* (1998), Saros Cowasjee and K.S. Duggal's *Orphans in the Storm: Stories on the Partition of India* (1995), Mushirul Hasan's *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom* (2 volumes; 1995), and Alok Bhalla's *Stories about the Partition of India* (3 volumes; 1994).

imagination and curriculum of English Studies in its Postcolonial branch and also simultaneously made a strong home in North American academy.

Writing on the Partition did not start with these books. Plenty had been written on it, but not necessarily in an academic sense. A few academic interlocutors had taken up the topic before: Ashish Nandy is an example. Partition Studies, however, did not exist in academia as a field. It is fair to say that the scholarship constituted by the above-mentioned books, speaking to the renewed interest in the Partition starting around its fiftieth anniversary, and appearing alongside several new anthologies of Partition literature, inaugurated the field of Partition Studies as it exists today. Following the inauguration, there have been several more ventures in the field, so much so that some commentators even began to notice emergence of ‘a Partition industry’ though the term is misleading, rather “flippant” (Kaul 4) and more indicative of the “acute self-consciousness about its conditions of possibility” rather than an arguable reality (Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning The Nation* Chapter 7).

One of the most significant dimensions of this field is that it wants to understand the Partition as ‘a people’s history’ and it extends a sustained focus on women in the Partition and broadly on the function of gender. It recognizes that gender crime was constitutive of the Partition experience: about 750,000 women were raped and abducted by men of the ‘other’ community, and sometimes of their own, during the Partition. Some of them were later “recovered” by national pacts between India and Pakistan, in which the wishes of these adult women

themselves had no legal standing.²⁷ Overall, cumulatively and from its very inauguration, the field has emphatically underscored that the Partition was a gendered phenomenon. The strongest contribution of Butalia's work is not only to radically shake the understanding of what constitutes Partition history by introducing oral narratives and testimonies but also to use oral history as a feminist "methodological tool" (*The Other Side* 21).²⁸ Similarly, Menon and Bhasin note the absence of a feminist historiography of the Partition in keeping with the fact that "hardly ever, hardly anywhere, women have 'written histories'" (14). Following Butalia and Bhasin-Menon, there have been other oral history projects with significant focus on gender.²⁹

However, in spite of all these important developments, up until now, there has been a more or less a consistent silence in Indian national memory and in mainstream academia about the Partition in the east. In the Indian national memory, 'Partition' really has meant the Partition of Punjab and the overall Partition experience in the western region of India and Pakistan.³⁰ Even in

²⁷ Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin have discussed this aspect of the Partition's aftermath in their aforementioned *Border and Boundaries*.

²⁸ She has argued that "[l]ooking at women's narratives and testimonies and placing them alongside, or indeed against, the official discourses of history, has offered feminist historians a new and different way of looking at history," and has provoked them to ask, echoing Joan Kelly's "Did Women Have a Renaissance?," "[h]ow does 'history' look when seen through the eyes of women?" (21).

²⁹ Meenakshie Verma's *Aftermath: An Oral History of Violence* (2004) and Nonica Datta's "Partition Memories: A Daughter's Testimony" (2001), developed into the recently published *Violence, Martyrdom, and Partition: A Daughter's Testimony* (2009).

³⁰ This omission of Bengal from Partition Studies seems to lend itself to be construed as yet another proof of the marginalization of Bengal in India that Bengalis have often felt in post-Partition/Independence India. Curiously, this regional versus national power-play itself is part of the post-Partition history of West Bengal. For a historical analysis of the source of the Bengali *ressentiment*, see Joya Chatterji's *The Spoils of Partition*, especially the chapter "Swings and

Partition Studies, this one sidedness is duplicated: Bengal has entered, if at all, very marginally the academic discourse. In the field of history, for instance, for the longest time, Joya Chatterji was “a lone figure,” in Tanika Sarkar’s words, in the area of the Partition of Bengal (“Foreword,” *Coming Out* vii) although a few other commentators have arrived on the scene more recently.³¹ Even if we were to discount the scholarship in Bengali, what has been available in English has remained relatively obscure outside Bengal-centric area studies: for instance, *Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*, Ranabir Samaddar’s fine work on nationhood in India and Bangladesh. Likewise, Samaddar’s early edited volume, *Partition Experience of the East: the Second Partition of Bengal* (1997), which includes his own long essay “Still They Come: Migrants in the Post-Partition Bengal,” did not catch the attention of Partition Studies. Another example is the partisan but a thorough study of refugee lives in the various camps of West Bengal, and still the only one of its kind, Prafulla Chakravarti’s *Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal* (1990), which also did not get an audience except the local.³² For all practical purposes, Punjab has come to be both the foundational and the paradigmatic ‘Partition’ experience of India. Because the east spoke to a different

Roundabouts: West Bengal and New India” (61-102) and “Political Reconstruction and Change: Congress Government and Politics, 1947-67” (211-259).

³¹ Biduyt Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932-1947: Contours of Freedom* in 2004; Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal* in 2005.

³² See Joya Chatterji’s discussion and critique of this book in “Right or Charity?: the Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-50.”

kind of experience of the Partition that lies outside the paradigm of the Partition set early by Punjab, it has gotten omitted from the purview of Partition Studies.

We can mark the start of a change in the situation with the appearance of *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (2003) edited by Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta.³³ The first volume of a proposed 4 volume series, *The Trauma and the Triumph* contains literary criticism, translations and excerpts from novels and memoirs, interviews, and a bibliography, bringing together documents, research, and multidisciplinary critical commentary on Partition in the east based on an awareness of gender, class, and community. It aimed to “fill the serious gap” in Partition scholarship of whose existence Butalia, Menon and Bhasin, and Pandey had noted but to which they were unable to attend. In fulfilling this aim, in my mind, it very largely succeeded.

The Trauma and the Triumph quite ably pointed out to a national and international audience that considering the Partition of Bengal does more than simply fulfil a parochial interest and that the inclusion of Bengal in Partition Studies is more than just a matter of extending the canon or simply filling in existing gaps.³⁴ There are important aspects to the Partition of Bengal attending to which can alter our understanding of Partition and Partition narratives in Indian and South Asian contexts. Partition Studies has established the gendered nature of

³³ The same year, Debjani Sengupta’s edited volume *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengals* also appeared. More recently, we see another collection, *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter* (2006), edited and translated by Bashabi Fraser.

³⁴ Even if Bengal is included, given the pervasive impact of the Partition, there will still be geographical areas which are going to be outside the purview of Partition Studies: Assam, Tripura, and Chittagong Hill Tracts in the east, and Sindh in the west, to name a few. So, inclusion of Bengal does not complete the picture, so to speak.

the Partition experience and, hence, the feminist stake in understanding this chapter of history. The story of Bengal, in both its content and in the way it has been narrated, illuminates new entry points from a gendered perspective into the problematic of the Partition and indeed into the postcolonial nationhood to which India transitioned. The edited volume has already provocatively proposed and in some instances persuasively demonstrated that the Partition of Bengal allows the opportunity to tell a different story, with somewhat differently placed emphasis and nuances, about the relationship of women with the Partition and the nation, than has occasioned in the context of Partition Study's exclusive focus on the Partition of Punjab.

The editors of *The Trauma and the Triumph* recognize the shared concerns and historical common grounds with Punjab: in both Punjab and Bengal, "women (minors included) were targeted as the prime object of persecution" (3). And in both places, noteworthy from a feminist vantage point is the role of women in rebuilding life. The editorial design and selection of material also provokes us to grapple with multiple dimensions relating to the relationship of women with patriarchy, nationalism and other "areas of civil society" (6). In case of West Bengal, however, remind the editors, a "pronounced left impulse" has given "a very different flavour" (7) than the story of enablement developed in the context of Punjab. Yet, as long as Partition Studies stay focussed on the terms made relevant by the Punjab experience, this important aspect remains occluded from academic scrutiny. The editors point out that this difference in the experience of Bengal "deserves a much more nuanced scrutiny than is currently acceptable" (7).

This dissertation takes up this call for exploring the problem of the Partition as it played out in the case of Bengal. It takes *The Trauma and the Triumph* as a point of departure for exploration of the more subtle nuances in the Partition texts of Bengal.

Here it is best to clarify that, while I acknowledge and will continue to do so in no uncertain terms the intellectual debt of this dissertation to *The Trauma and the Triumph* and to the work of Jasodhara Bagchi, I seek to differ from the paradigm of the “trauma and the triumph” that the editors of this volume propose as a way of understanding the Bengal Partition or its texts. Given the centrality of this volume as a resource to this dissertation, and, as I anticipate, to future work on the Bengal Partition,³⁵ the difference between my dissertation and the volume is important to outline in some detail.

I understand that the editors of *The Trauma and the Triumph* set up this binary as a useful framework of opposition, a dialectic, to describe the changes that the Partition made possible, especially for women.³⁶ Through the term “triumph,” they clearly attempt to signal to the “agency of women” (5) that rebuilt quotidian life again in the face of duress and hardship in a new land by displaying “exemplary courage, resilience, fortitude, patience and strength” (6). They want to

³⁵ Indeed, the negative-positive opposition is becoming a persuasive mould in which to cast the story of the Bengal Partition. The oral history project in the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, edited by Tridib Chakrabarti, Nirupoma Ray Mandal and Poulomi Ghoshal, has been published under the title *Dhvangsha O Nirmaan: Bangiya Udvaastu Samaajer Swakathita Bibaran* (Destruction and Construction: Experience of the Refugees of Bengal in their Own Words).

³⁶ Reviews of the book by Himani Bannerji (titled “Partition and Its Meaning”) and Tanika Sarkar (untitled) read the title as reflecting a Marxist dialectic.

recognize “the historic assertion of the refugee woman as the tireless bread winner changed the digits of feminine aspirations of the Bengali Bhadramahila and changed the social landscape irrevocably” (7). I certainly do not dispute the courageous history of the refugee women, but overall, I find the conceptual binary set up by the two terms, trauma and the triumph, with implicit value judgements of negative-positive, reductive as a basis of understanding the experience of the Bengal Partition. The risk always is that the negative-positive binary slips into a liberal story of progress from negative to positive: ‘the trauma and the triumph’ too easily becomes the trauma *to* the triumph. My readings of the texts of the Bengal Partition, all of which *The Trauma and the Triumph* showcases, do not lend themselves to an understanding poised between the two terms, however sophisticatedly we try to interpret them. The texts I chose here, with publication/release dates ranging from 1952-67, even in their most feminist moments, do not suggest ‘a triumph’ or a teleology of progress as much as they form an engagement with the complexity underlying a certain notion of progress.

The risk of using “the trauma and the triumph” is also to promote an uncritically positivist idea of a ‘post-trauma recovery,’ where the traumatized is supposed to have entirely and permanently reached a point of having successfully ‘worked through the past.’ Traumas of that kind that I identify the Bengal Partition to be leave behind excesses that even future generations cannot have ‘worked through.’ I argue this keeping in mind Adorno’s famous critique in his essay “The Meaning of Working Through the Past.” As Adorno points out, the phrase ‘working-through the past’ “does not mean seriously working upon the

past, that is, through a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate”(3).

We could also consider David Lloyd’s reflection on the same problem in context of the Great Famine of Ireland in his important essay “Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?,” where he arrives at the phrase “living on” as opposed to a more misleadingly positivist term “recovery.”

If to some extent the Partition loosened the shackles of old-world patriarchy and ushered in a new way of life for women, within which we can read signs of progress and feminist enablement, it is not as though the Partition ceased to be also ‘a loss’ for these women. I am absolutely in agreement if one were to suggest that the experience of the Partition, in its dual texture of both loss and enablement, is more complex for women than for the men. However, I strongly disagree with any suggestion that the Partition becomes any less traumatic for the women due to the complexity brought in by its duality. Nor do I find an attachment of any positive import to the experience of Partition—even if positive ‘improvements’ caused by the Partition were suggested as incidental to the Partition itself—desirable as a basis for understanding the Bengal Partition.

Therefore, I propose in this dissertation a different set of oppositions to understand the tension at the heart of the Partition text: that between the traumatic and the historical, the ordinary and the extraordinary, everyday nation-making and the extreme event. And, I suggest that the duality of the Partition, the conceptual overlap between the two in *one instance* is what makes it traumatic. If the Bengal Partition is, indeed, an instance where both trauma and triumph need be accommodated, it makes the event necessarily traumatic. That is to say, if trauma

were to combine with its opposite extreme in one single instance, it would make the instance a moment of insurmountable trauma making it impossible to think in terms of “trauma and”

Other than on *The Trauma and the Triumph*, this dissertation builds on the feminist scholarship on the Partition that has been done by Das, Butalia, and Menon and Bhasin although opportunity for direct engagement has remained limited given the difference in geographical areas under discussion. I have already indicated above that my project’s approach to the Partition has been centrally influenced by Gyanendra Pandey’s work and arguments for historicizing the Partition. The project’s central agenda of reading Partition texts around the representation of the refugee woman, as a critique of patriarchal and bourgeois nationalism resonates with the recent book by Jill Didur, *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory*. Although we share author and text in one chapter, our areas of focus, mine being Bengal, are different. Other than within the field of Partition Studies, my attempt to trace an opposition between ‘woman’ as a sign and woman as a individual-subject is indebted to Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s engagement with the interface between “real and imagined women” in *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*. My project also shares ground with Sangeeta Ray’s engagement with “‘woman’ as both sign and subject” in her book *Engendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives*.

V

Since the Partition of Punjab is a known story, let me detail the Partition of Bengal in terms of the most pressing differences between Punjab and Bengal, while also noting the points where the two stories converge. If the Partition of Punjab was “a one-time event,” the Partition of Bengal was “a continuing process” (Bagchi and Dasgupta 2). No traumatic event of the nature of the Partition finds closure in the psyche of the people affected; so too is true for Punjab. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the genocidal violence and the forced migration that were part of the Punjab Partition were more or less restricted to the immediate three years after the Partition. However, unlike those from the west, the refugees from the east did not come all at once, but they trickled into India continuously for the decades after the Partition; the trickle sometimes becoming waves. The size of the inflow waxed and waned with fluctuations in India-Pakistan relationship, major riots, anti-Hindu violence in East Pakistan, anti-Muslim violence in eastern India, and so on. The border remained, and still remains, relatively porous.³⁷

It was as though, in Jasodhara Bagchi’s words, “the partition never really ended” for the Bengalis (Freedom 17).³⁸ The political developments in East

³⁷ See the study on the India-Bangladesh border by Ranabir Samaddar in *Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*. Also see the essay by Butalia “The Nowhere People” in *The Trauma and the Triumph*. On the discourse of “Bangladeshi infiltrators” in India, see Sujata Ramachandran’s essay “Of Boundaries and Border Crossings: Undocumented Bangladeshi ‘infiltrators’ and the hegemony of Hindu Nationalism in India.”

³⁸ In this context, the editors of *The Trauma and the Triumph* remind us that “the emergence of ‘secular’ and ‘democratic’ Bangladesh did not signal the end of history” and point to the rise of religious fundamentalism and right wing forces in Bangladesh and their electoral victory in 2001

Bengal/East Pakistan—with Bengali separatism starting almost immediately after the Partition with the rise of a Bengali linguistic nationalism and with East Pakistan’s transition to the independent state of Bangladesh—had a tremendous impact on Bengalis in West Bengal, especially the refugees. The formation of Bangladesh was, of course, a fundamental negation of the logic of religious nationalism that was supposed to have been the founding block of the Partition of 1947. After 1971, many in both Bengals, especially among the refugees, sensed a possibility that the two Bengals could be reunited and the Partition undone. When the events did not pan out in that direction, it was as though the refugees had to relive the Partition all over again.

While the extent of violence reached genocidal proportions in Punjab, Bengal did not witness the scale and the spread of violence that people in Punjab encountered. The riots in Bengal remained relatively geographically restricted and did not engulf the entire region. There were major riots, however, in Calcutta—the Great Calcutta Killing—and in Noakhali in 1946, in Dhaka and Narayanganj in 1962 (Bagchi and Dasgupta 2), in Barisal and Khulna in 1949 and 1950. We also know that riots took place in 1964 in both East Bengal and in Calcutta, including in the heart of refugee colonies in Jadavpur in South-Calcutta where Muslim families were forcefully evicted.³⁹

(2). Perhaps we need to juxtapose this with the electoral victory of the Hindu right in India in 1996.

³⁹These riots in January 1964 ostensibly originated from a report of a theft of a relic, believed to be prophet Muhammad’s hair, from an important Muslim shrine in Kashmir, the Hazratbal. *After* the relic was already found, ongoing protests of the theft by Muslim groups in Khulna in East Bengal turned violent. Ananadabazar Patrika, a leading daily in Calcutta, reported that these groups were making a terrible “attack on minorities” (Gargi Chakravarty 146). Soon after riots

As a constitutive part of Partition violence, women of all ages became and consistently remained specific targets. In this, although different in body count, there is a “compelling similarity between the experiences in Punjab and Bengal” (Bagchi and Dasgupta 3). There is, however, an important difference between Bengal and Punjab in this history: “there was no official programme of recovery of the abducted women in the Bengal Partition. In a recent interview Phulrenu Guha, who was in charge of the operation of recovery of women in the east, said that she did not agree with Mridula Sarabhai, though she was a close friend of hers, that women should be exchanged” (Bagchi “Freedom” 25).⁴⁰ In spite of the lack of an official recovery operation and the difference in number of cases, however, the violent psychological drama involved in the recovery and post-recovery was repeated in Bengal too. As the memoirs of the activist-workers Ashoka Gupta and Suhashini Das, who worked with Gandhi in riot-torn Noakhali,

spread all through Calcutta “like wildfire” (ibid.). See Gargi Chakravarty’s testimonial chapter “The 1964 Calcutta Riots Through the Eyes of a Teenager” in her book *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal* (145-162). The spread of the event from Kashmir, where there was no actual rioting, to Khulna and Calcutta thousands of mile away probably indicates the volatility of the situation in Bengal at the time.

We find a narrativization of these riots of 1964 in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and in Sabitri Roy’s Bengali novel *Ba-Dwip* (The Delta, 1972).

Meghna Guha Thakurata’s essay “Uprooted and Divided” in *The Trauma and the Triumph* uses family histories as an alternative form of research and includes a Muslim family displaced from Barasat, in outskirts of Calcutta, after the 1964 riots. We also have testimonials collected by the oral history project in School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University. See the edited volume by Tridib Chakrabarti, Nirupoma Ray Mandal and Poulomi Ghoshal, *Dhvangsha O Nirmaan: Bangiya Udvaastu Samaajer Swakathita Bibaran. (Destruction and Construction: Self-narrated Experience of the Refugees of Bengal; Bengali)*.

⁴⁰ The line is glossed in Bagchi’s essay with the following footnote:

Phulrenu Guha (1911-), a member of the Rajya Sabha and minister for social welfare in the union cabinet in 1969; in 1971 she chaired the Committee for the Status of Women that produced the landmark report (1975). Mridula Sarabhai (1911-78) was a Gandhian who fought for the rights of the working class, women, and minorities. She led the attempt to return abducted women to India. See Menon and Basin 1996. (“Freedom” 28)

indicate, the visiting team's relief work included "looking for abducted girls" (Gupta, *In the Path of Service* 91).⁴¹ Moreover, the refusal by most families to 'take back' abducted women when these women could be found and the treatment they offered to these women when they did take them back, made the gender dynamics of cases of 'recovery' no different in Bengal than in Punjab.

The difference in scale, spread, and trajectories of violence between Punjab and Bengal was used critically in the politics of refugee rehabilitation in the two regions in new India. Studies on the refugees of Bengal clearly indicate that the Indian government saw the refugees in the east in a very different light than those in the west.⁴² Joya Chatterji's essay "Right or Charity?: the Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-50" and her recent book *Spoils of Partition* outline the refugee experience of Bengal. The contrast of the refugees in Bengal with the refugees in Punjab is too sharp to be missed. Chatterji elaborates:

While the refugees in Punjab were received proactively by the government with alacrity befitting an event of national emergency, the central government's attitude to the east was altogether different. In Nehru and the Congress High Command's view, "conditions in east Bengal did not

⁴¹ The reference to Noakhali in 1946 can be found in Ashoka Gupta's memoir, in English translation, *In the Path of Service*, Chapters 15,16, and17. In Bengali, sources are Asoka Gupta, *Noakhali Durjoger Dine* ('In the Catastrophic Days of Noakhali') and Suhashini Das, *Noakhali: 1946*.

⁴² Prafulla Chakrabarti's *Marginal Men* for a comprehensive account of the various refugee camps. Also see Neelanjana Chatterjee's unpublished doctoral dissertation, "*Midnight's Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation*," and Joya Chatterji's chapter "Partition and Migration: Refugees in West Bengal, 1947-67" in *The Spoils of Partition*, 105-158.

constitute a grave and permanent danger to Hindu minorities.” [. . .] Their flight westward [was regarded] as the product of fears, mainly imaginary, and baseless rumours, rather than the consequence of palpable threats to life, limb, and property (Chatterji, “Right” 75).

Consequently, Jawaharlal Nehru led Indian government refused refugee-status, hence rehabilitation resources, to all refugees entering India outside the window of June 1, 1947 and June 25, 1948. The justification of such a narrow definition of a refugee—which excluded most refugees from East Bengal/East Pakistan because they did not make it to India or could not register within the above dates—was based on the perceived lack of violence in the lives of east Pakistanis. This became particularly problematic because it was the poorer and lower caste sections of the Hindu population in East Bengal, who had limited means of establishing themselves in West Bengal and needed government assistance more acutely, who arrived progressively later.⁴³

The lack of government responsibility towards the thousands of East Bengali refugees contributed vastly to the particularly pathetic conditions upon their arrival in West Bengal. Many of them lived amidst squalor in a few feet of space on the Sealdah railway-platform. Some later forcefully settled in vacant property in the outskirts of the city (by “jabardakhal’ or squatting) and, in many cases, eventually set up refugee camps and colonies. This is the setting and

⁴³ Chatterji, “Partition and Migration: Refugees in West Bengal, 1947-67” in *The Spoils of Partition* (105-158).

backdrop of the paradigmatic refugee tale that forms the emblematic Partition narrative in the east.

Perhaps because of the above situation, the history of the political left in the newly formed West Bengal is inseparable from the Partition tale of the East Bengali refugees in West Bengal.⁴⁴ The undivided Communist Party India (CPI) played a strong role in influencing the refugee movement, and the refugee culture got inextricably intertwined with that of that of the left; the “‘refugee’ population transformed Calcutta from a city of arm-chair babus devoted to genteel culture into a militant, angry, leftist city where middle class woman uprooted from their village homes came out to work” (Bagchi “Freedom” 27). This history, both material and discursive critically inflects the experience of the Partition in refugee fiction.

Having thus far outlined some of the significant aspects of the Partition of Bengal in comparison to Punjab, I will like to present events at two historical junctures that preceded the Bengal Partition and have profoundly influenced the latter and also how we understand the latter. While discussing these, I will also underscore how these events inflect my own critical comprehension of the Partition in the context of this project. First, it is inadequate to posit the Partition of Bengal in isolation from two other historical events that immediately preceded the Partition: the Bengal famine, now also called the ‘Man-made’ or ‘Artificial

⁴⁴ For a brief and succinct account of this relationship, see pages 275-290 in the last chapter, “The Revenge of the Periphery: The Rise of the Opposition in West Bengal” of Joya Chatterji’s *The Spoils of Partition* (260-310). Prafulla Chakrabarti’s *Marginal Men* makes a case that the left used the refugees to gain its foothold in state-politics in West Bengal. For a complication of Chakravarti’s claim, see Joya Chatterji’s essay “Right or Charity?: the Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-50.”

Famine of 1943;’ and the ‘Tebhaga,’ the peasant rebellion of 1946-47. In 1943, in an effort to feed stationed troops in South-East Asia, the colonial British government diverted food grain, especially rice, from Bengal giving rise to a man-made famine. Bengal was wrecked in this famine. Remembered as the “panchasher mannantar” in Bengali (the famine of the Bengali year 1350), it killed an estimated 3 million people. Soon after, and somewhat consequentially in 1946-47, the ‘Tebhaga Andolan,’ an agrarian rebellion, hit nineteen districts of East Bengal. In the prevailing arrangements prior to the Tebhaga, tenant farmers, or share-croppers, were required to give away half of their crops to the landowner. The new demand was to not give more than a third (“tebhaga”) of their produce to the landholder. I have already mentioned the involvement of the undivided Communist Party in the refugee movements in post-Partition West Bengal. However, the undivided Communist Party of India was already active before the Partition in Bengal through its role in Tebhaga. Kishan Sabha, its peasant front, gave organization and leadership to Tebhaga. These intertwined strands of histories in the early 1940s push us towards considering new modalities of understanding the Partition beyond those occasioned around the details of the Partition of Punjab. My dissertation, its goal lying elsewhere, does not do justice to the challenges of this complexity, but the novel I read in Chapter 4 attends to some of the textures of this intertwined history.

Second, the Partition of Bengal in 1947 was in reality the second Partition of Bengal. Bengal was first Partition in 1905 by the Viceroy of Bengal Lord Curzon, splitting the province vertically into two halves, not the same as the ones

of 1947 but comparable in scope. While administrative difficulties of overseeing a large province was the cited reason, the contemporary Bengalis understood, as later historians have also proved from existing letters and colonial documents, that the real reason was a colonial policy of divide—the Hindus and the Muslims—and rule. Local opposition to this partition was inspired by, and in turn heightened, anti-colonial nationalism. The rhetoric of this anti-colonial nationalism also took the shape of a regional Bengali nationalism, which imagined Bengal as the indivisible home of the Bengalis of all religions. Public outcry was so strong that the colonial government was forced to revoke the partition in 1911.⁴⁵

The anti-partition sentiment of 1905 is instructive and illustrative in many ways, but one of the most pressing commentaries it provides for this project is its contrast to the second Partition of Bengal.⁴⁶ Whereas in 1905, many, although not all, Muslims supported the division and almost all Hindu leaders—members of the anti-colonial movement at large and of the Indian National Congress—were tooth and nail against the partition of Bengal, in 1947 the picture was the roughly the reverse. The Hindu leadership demanded the 1947 Partition of the province of Bengal, in contrast to the earlier event and the contemporary Partition of the whole of India. Historian Joya Chatterji's persuasive accounts in *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (2002) and in her more recent *The*

⁴⁵ For this history, see the chapter "Partition and Bengal" in Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908*: 9-19.

⁴⁶ Partha Chatterjee's essay "The Second Partition of Bengal" also starts with the statement, "It is instructive to compare the first partition of Bengal in 1905 with the second in 1947" (35). This essay is an overview of the Partition of 1947 and its links with the intermittent decades since the first partition.

Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India 1947-67 (2007) leave little room for doubt that the Hindu-majority Bengal Congress was unambiguously for the Partition of Bengal and the Muslim-majority Muslim League was against it. In fact, Chatterji decisively demonstrates that the specific plan of the second Partition was far less of a botched job than is commonly believed. Not that Chatterji disputes that the map of the new border dividing Bengal into sections going to India and Pakistan was chalked up in tremendous haste, mismanaged, and met with non-cooperation from the Muslim-Leaguers in office at the time. Nevertheless, by studying in minute detail what each stakeholder group demanded in terms of the actual border and which wing of Bengal got which geographical areas down to the smallest police station, she argues that the final map which was executed was far from an accidental one as it is commonly believed. In contrast, she shows how much deliberation the Bengal Congress put behind its proposal.⁴⁷ The British magistrate Cyril Radcliffe's final awarding of the border was almost identical to what the Bengal Congress had, in fact, demanded.

Going by Chatterji's account, while the demand by the Hindu leadership within the Congress was undeniably in reaction to Muslim League's proposition

⁴⁷ There was no agreement within the Congress about the details of the map. The final map forwarded was one that was detailed after much in-fighting, party-level negotiation and strategizing. Joya Chatterji argues that the details of the proposed maps indicate that those who were in a position to inherit the governance of the new state of West Bengal, the Bengal Congress, were in fact not fighting for the largest share of land. In contrast, by the very reason they wanted to Partition Bengal, they were far more keen to get land with a dense-enough Hindu majority who would vote them into power. They were willing to bargain for Muslim majority land only if they included key natural resources crucial to the economic functioning of the new state and also if such Muslim areas could be an island in a surrounding sea of Hindu-majority areas. At the time, they had no apprehension that the demographic balance on which they were so religiously basing their calculations was going to change with the influx of vast number of Hindus from East Bengal to West Bengal after the Partition, giving them a Hindu majority in areas that did not have so in 1947. In hindsight, thus, they need not have been so conservative in their demand for land and could have bargained for a lot more than in what they showed interest.

of partitioning colonial India, the truth still remains that the Hindu leaders of the Indian National Congress opted for a divided Bengal and to side, with half of Bengal, with the Hindu-majority India. The idea of becoming part of a Muslim-majority Pakistan was anathema to this Hindu-Bengali leadership. Even the idea of a sovereign, united Bengal as a third independent nation-state, floated by Sarat Bose, the elder brother of revolutionary Subhash Bose, with the support of Kiran Shankar Roy and Muslim Leaguers such as Husein Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim, did not win any support from fellow Bengali-Hindu Congressmen; the proposition was, obviously, also not palatable to the Nehru-led Congress high command in Delhi. Although it was a last-minute proposal and “never more than a pipe dream” (J. Chatterji, *Bengal Divided* 260),⁴⁸ its utter unacceptability is noteworthy. All of this history indicates that the Partition of Bengal was seen as the lesser of the two evils by the Bengali Hindu leadership. They, thus, ‘chose’ it, even if such choice was a contingent one, in the face of a crisis posed by a proposed India-Partition and the formation of a Muslim state of Pakistan that they could not avert. Chatterji, thus, finds the Hindu-Bengali leadership and the Hindu Bengalis in general were “far from being a helpless pawn in the endgame of empire” (268), as Hindu-Bengalis like to believe.

I should note here that although the basic historical facts are not disputed by anyone, there is a debate about the interpretation. In his essay “The Second Partition of Bengal,” in Ranabir Samaddar edited *Partition Experience of the East*, Partha Chatterjee disagrees with the above view. He reminds us that it is not

⁴⁸ For details of the “The United Bengal” proposal, see Joya Chatterji’s *Bengal Divided* 259-265.

as though the proposal to partition Bengal for the second time “actually involved the participation of masses of people” (46). Instead, “as far as opinion within Bengal was concerned, the relevant decisions were made by members of the Bengal Assembly, elected on the basis of very restricted suffrage.” If there was “some campaigning on the issue of partition in 1947, both in favour and against,” Chatterjee argues, “by the standard of mass agitation of the time, they involved small numbers of people” (ibid.). However, in spite of these reservations, Chatterjee recognizes that once the proposal of India partition came through, in “near unanimity, at least within the domain of organized opinion, from the Hindu Mahasabha on the right to the Congress in the middle to the socialists and even the communists on the left,” the Hindus wanted Bengal partitioned “so that the Hindu minority should have a place outside Pakistan” (48). Overall, the corrective to Joya Chatterji’s view lies, in my reading of Partha Chatterjee’s essay, in the emphasis on “*extreme contingency* within which the question of partition” came up in Bengal (49; emphasis added). Partha Chatterjee is not the only one, however; recently Bidyut Chakrabarty has narrowly echoed this view, citing Chatterjee, to criticize Joya Chatterji’s “zeal to attribute partition only to communal Hindu Bhadraklok ” and her “miss[ing] the equally important role of Muslim communalism” (Chakrabarty 21).

Even if we take the points that Partha Chatterjee makes and qualify Joya Chatterji’s argument about the degree of influence Hindu communalism cast on events leading to the Partition, her point still stands, and neither Partha Chatterjee nor Bidyut Chakrabarty dispute it: that Hindu communalism, along with its

Muslim counterpart, had started to rise since the 1920s, was well formed in the 1930s and it had a significant role to play in the second Partition. There is also enough evidence that a powerful section of the West Bengal leadership lobbied for the second Partition. Sandip Bandyopadhyay's essay "The Riddle of the Partition: Memories of Bengali Hindus," which follows Partha Chatterjee's essay in the same volume, also anticipates the direction of some of Joya Chatterji's arguments. He writes about "the call for division received the support of a wide section of people" in Bengal and the role of the Calcutta press of the time (60-62). Thus, even while mindful of the rebuttal to Joya Chatterji, I understand that the contrast of 1947 with 1905 Bengal Partition is still quite stark. Partha Chatterjee himself starts his discussion by emphasizing this point. If 1905 produced a heightened sense of nationalism, with a feverish articulation of love for a beloved and a linguistically unified Bengal, with an explicit rhetoric of Hindu-Muslim unity, this was not so in 1947. As Sandip Bandyopadhyay argues, after the riots in Calcutta and Noakhali in 1946, partition was proposed as inevitable. In 1947, the loss of a part of Bengal was lamented but accepted as "*fait accompli*" (61).

Therefore, while at the all-India level, the Partition has been reduced to a crude narrative of Muslim separatism and betrayal, with the Hindus emerging as agency-less, tragic victims of the Partition, history intervenes far more strongly against such a one-dimensional story in the case of Bengal. The popular and acceptable narrative of the Partition in Bengal may follow the same trajectory as elsewhere in India, but the historical facts indicate a more complex reality. The most important ramification of these historical details is that it allows us to pry

open the commonly practised coupling of the Muslim community with the sole responsibility for the perpetration of the Bengal Partition, on the one hand, and of the Hindu community with unilateral victimhood, on the other.

This, thus, destabilizes the binary between Hindu and Muslims vis-à-vis the Partition as one between self and the other, the perpetrators and the victims. It opens up room to imagine social groupings other than the ones based exclusively on the Hindu-Muslim division. As feminist questioning of the Partition has also shown, in certain ways, women and children from both the warring communities were, in fact, *the* victims of the Partition. From the point of view of gender, even while gender is not a community, gender division was far more pressing in determining victimhood than the Hindu-Muslim divide in many instances. Further, importantly for the methodology of this dissertation, this history allows for a gender-based enquiry from *within* the bhadralok narrative of the Partition. It provides some rationale for attempting, as I have done in this dissertation, to understand the Partition through a sustained focus on the Bengal Partition *within* and *against* the Bengali bhadralok's negotiation with nationalism.

Chapter 1

The Problematic: 'Women' as a Metaphor of the Nation

Mother, I bow to thee!
 Rich with thy hurrying streams,
 Bright with thy orchard gleams,
 Cool with thy winds of delight,
 Dark fields waving, Mother of might,
 Mother free.¹

Mahendra cried, "But that's our land, not a mother!"
 Bhabananda replied, "'One's mother and
 birthland are greater than heaven itself.' But we say that our birthland is
 our
 mother." ²

Bankimchandra Chatterji, "Vande Mataram": "I Bow to Thee, Mother!"
 (1882)

A scimitar shines in your right hand,
 Your left hand quells our fears,
 Your eyes are tender and smiling,
 But your third eye scorches and sears.
 O Mother, we cannot turn our eye from you.
 Your temple of gold has opened its door to
 Ever enduring view.

Rabindranath Tagore, "Aji Bangladesher Hridoy Hote:" "Today From
 the Heart of Bengal (1905).³

This was the soil from my bhité, the 'Basuhouse', sacred from the blessing
 of my father and grandfather. This soil is my mother. The sacred memory
 of my forefathers is mixed with this soil. To me this was just not of high

¹ Translation by Aurobindo Ghose (Lipner 298).

² From *Ananadamath or The Sacred Brotherhood*, Julius J. Lipner's translation of Bankimchandra's *Ananadamath* (Lipner 144)

³ Translated by Chandreyee Niyogi (Quoted Bagchi, "Freedom in an Idiom of Loss" 18). The poem is from a collection titled *Baul* (1905).

value—it was invaluable. I touched this clod to my forehead. This is no ordinary dust. This clay is moist today with the blood that has been wrung out of Bengal’s heart.

Unknown author, “Bajrojogini village, Dhaka district, in *Chhere Asha Gram: The Abandoned Village* (1950).⁴

In this opening chapter, I formulate the problematic which forms the yardstick against which I read as interventional the chosen three Partition texts of this dissertation. I construct the problematic as a continuum from the cultural-nationalist discourse to the normative Partition discourse around the valence of the signifier ‘women.’ The most compellingly visible trope through which I trace the continuum is the gendered trope of the nation as a woman; or, to be even more specific, the trope of the nation in majoritarian imagination as a chaste caste-Hindu woman. As I show here, this trope contains within it a set of complex ideological power relationships that fix women’s role to a collective and the collective’s role to the women. As I have stated in the Introduction, the most pervasive imaginary of the collective, commanding the most compelling legitimization at this juncture in history, is the nation. Therefore, I would like to demonstrate the continuum I am suggesting by tracking a particular ideological charge of the signifier ‘women’ in imaginaries of collectives from cultural nationalism in the late nineteenth century to the Partition in 1947.⁵ The three brief

⁴ In Dipesh Chakrabarty’s translation in “Remembered Villages” (324).

⁵ I am not alone in the endeavour to chart a discursive link between the anti-colonial nationalism and the Partition. That there are overwhelming continuities between nationalist discourse, for instance in debates around ‘the women’s question’, and aspects of the Partition has struck other commentators working on the Partition. This is implicitly perceptible in foundational work of Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, and Veena Das. I know of at least two scholars

excerpts that serve as the epigraph to this chapter provide a map of the lineage I attempt to draw.

My reason for choosing the late nineteenth century as the starting point for the continuum is that from this time onwards we can notice a beginning to the historical context for the later developments leading to the Partition. It is at this time that a crucial shift starts from an early and mid-century atmosphere of liberal reform, the period called the ‘Bengal renaissance,’ towards conservative Hindu revivalism. Sumit Sarkar has argued that even the reform movements of the early and mid-nineteenth century, which campaigned for legal reforms to ban *sati*⁶ and allow widows to marry, were highly selective in what they borrowed from Western liberal notions and thought. The changes the reformers argued for were to a great extent nominal and symbolic over real concrete ones. The women, for whose betterment such changes were ostensibly being fought, remained largely

who explicitly make the link. Debali Mookerjee-Leonard has claimed, writing on one manifestation of the gendered violence of the Partition, “the rejection of the violated women experienced in the aftermath of the Partition riots seem less anomalous when viewed as the culmination of the development over the longue dureé. [...] I urge the necessity for situating the discussions in a historical continuum” (7). Similarly in the essay “Freedom in an Idiom of Loss,” Jasodhara Bagchi also explicitly draws the connection and writes, “what started off as an image of anti-colonial resistance helped to turn the women of the subcontinent into potential victims of communal riots” (19). Without explicitly making the claim, Sangeeta Ray’s methodology, that she starts her monograph *En-gendering India* with Bankimchandra’s novels of late nineteenth century and ends with two Partition novels Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*, also demonstrates the insights to be gained from constructing a continuum. In a comparable move, Tanika Sarkar ends her book *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, almost entirely focussed on the late nineteenth century, by including a chapter on the contemporary Right-wing Hindu movement, titled “Aspects of Hindutva Theology: The Voice of Sadhvi Rithamvara” (268-290), thereby linking the two. In this last chapter, Sarkar discusses circulation of Bankim’s Sanskrit hymn “Vande Mataram” in factions of the Hindu Right. She emphasizes, that while it is not that “Hindutva is the logical fulfilment” of the cultural politics she discusses in the late nineteenth century, or it has “vanquished or will oust other nationalist and Hindu imaginaries, [...] there are historical connections” between the themes of earlier chapters and the last (1).

⁶ *Sati* refers to both the practice of self-immolation by a widow and the woman who practices it.

marginal and a symbolic location (*Critique* 71-76).⁷ In any case, even this contingent liberalism changed to conservative revivalism toward the end of the nineteenth century, which opposed any kind of reform. Overall, the latter half of the nineteenth century was a formative historical juncture when the “women’s question” came to occupy the public debate at the centre of the stage. From this time onwards, arguments for women’s reform by the colonialists, by the indigenous reformists of Hindu traditions, reformist-liberal nationalists, and opposition to it by Hindu revivalist and nationalist-revivalists⁸ became the vehicle for articulations of all kinds of issues touching on collective lives and especially debates of tradition versus modernity. The ‘women’s question’ also emerged as the fulcrum of nationalist imagination, and women emerged as the ‘sign’ of the nation.

The trope of the nation as a woman—implicitly upper caste, upper class, Hindu, and chaste—crystallizes in the mid nineteenth century and more specifically the nation becomes a mother by turn of the century. The idea of the

⁷ Also cited in Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments* 117. Chatterjee uses this as a point of departure for his chapter on “The Nation and Its Women.” Discussion of this below.

⁸ Tanika Sarkar explains the different groups in these terms:

In the last four decades of the nineteenth century, a fairly distinct political formation had emerged [... who] used an explicitly nationalist rhetoric against any form of colonial intervention within the Hindu domestic sphere. Their rhetoric marked them off from the broader category of revivalist thinkers who did not necessarily oppose reformism in the name of resisting colonial knowledge. At the same time, the revivalist-nationalist group’s commitment to an unreformed Hindu way of life separated them from liberal nationalists of the Indian Association and the Indian National Congress variety. Needless to say, the groups spoken of here were not irrevocably distinct or mutually exclusive. Yet, despite their overlaps, there was a clearly distinctive political formation of nationalists who contributed to the emerging nationalism a highly militant agitational rhetoric and mobilizing techniques that were build around a defence of Hindu patriarchy” (*Hindu Wife* 192).

nation as a mother develops on cultural affects and images available to ‘Shakto’ (worshippers of ‘Shakti,’ “Strength’ as a feminine principle) Bengal for a much longer time. However, “whatever its source in classical religions of India or medieval religious practices,” Partha Chatterjee tells us in *Nation and Its Fragments*, “the specific ideological form in which we know the ‘Indian woman’ construct in the modern literature and arts of India is wholly and undeniably a product of the development of the dominant middle-class culture coeval with the era of nationalism” (131). The nascent form of this develops in the late nineteenth century, and it is here that I thought best to start.

Between the time span of late nineteenth century and the Partition in 1947, this discussion dwells on the decades of the early twentieth century. The first significant historical event in this bracket of time is the heightening of anti-colonial nationalism and the emergence of Swadeshi⁹ movement after the first partition of Bengal in 1905.¹⁰ The other significant development is the rise of communalism in the “turbulent period” in the 1920s, “oscillating between anti-colonial nationalism” and “the consolidation of separate and antagonistic communal identities which culminated in the unprecedented communal violence of the mid-twenties” (Datta 11).

The discussion of this chapter is divided into three sections: the first section focuses on the nineteenth century, the second on early twentieth century,

⁹ ‘Swadesh’ is literally ‘one’s own country’; Swadeshi is a nationalist movement calling on Indians to use indigenous goods and to boycott foreign (read British) ones.

¹⁰ I have written in the Introduction about the significance of the first partition of Bengal in 1905.

and the last on the Partition. The continuum the discussion traces from the late nineteenth century to the Partition is at best a cursory one. For the most part, I have depended heavily on research and writings by others. In fact, my task, which sounds daunting, is only made possible by the copious amount of scholarship available on the various historical junctures relevant to the discussion. I have not attempted to summarize the vast scholarship, but have restricted my discussion to a few key books that have been central to the historiography of the period and are widely acknowledged to be so.¹¹

Before proceeding further, though, three important caveats. First, by taking up the task of charting a continuous course based on similarity, this chapter has not attended to the many differences and the nuances, subtle and formidable changes that take place between the late nineteenth century and the Partition. This does not imply, however, that there is indeed a *seamless* genealogy in actual history. The similarities this chapter points out are also inevitably dissimilar in other ways: the sign of the nation as a woman underwent many mutations and changes through the many decades, intertwined with other interests and discourses. The understanding behind the claim of a continuum is that, despite these mutations, some core ideological continuities persisted. In other words,

¹¹ For late nineteenth century, I have primarily depended on, along with the much cited *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* by Partha Chatterjee, Tanika Sarkar's discussion of woman as both sign and subject in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*. For the first partition of Bengal, my primary historical source is Sumit Sarkar's *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908*. From Pradip Datta's seminal *Carving Blocs: Communal ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal*, I have taken the crucial importance of the 1920s in the historical genealogies that continue to and through the Partition. Sporadically, I have also referred to Radha Kumar's *History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990*. While I have restricted my discussion to these volumes, occasionally I have cited other important scholarship in footnotes.

there is a core ideological framing of ‘women’ that manifests through these diverse formations and their development through the decades. This chapter seeks to highlight these continuities as a contrast against the major changes that otherwise took place around and within the circulation of women as symbols of the nation. Since these symbols are hegemonic, sketching the continuity does not stem from a desire to deny history but from a desire to critique.

Second, in the attempt to construct a continuum of ‘women’ as a sign of the nation, the discussion has focused on dominant rhetorical traditions and epoch-making authors and their texts (for example, Bankimchandra Chatterji, Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghose). It has not probed into resistances and alternative concepts contemporary to these authors. The implication is not, again, that there were none. Indeed, even these authors themselves, through whom the discussion traces the dominant tradition, are themselves not reducible to the tradition. For example, women characters in Bankim’s novels do not always lend themselves to the dominant tradition that I cite issuing from his influential novel *Anandamath*. Similarly there is a certain unevenness and ambiguity in view of women in Rabindranath’s novels.¹² In any case, ‘women’ as a sign was not a stable concept and was always contested. A significant amount of the challenge came from women themselves, implicitly, formed by women just *being*—being corporeal, active, agential, and desiring individuals, whether or not their

¹² In Chapter 4 of this dissertation, I shall have occasion to dwell briefly on representation of women in two of Rabindranath’s novels and compare them to Bankim’s.

subjectivity was acknowledged. Some women, of course, went far beyond just being and disrupted the ‘sign’ in various degrees of deliberation and articulation.¹³

The third caveat relates to the fact that in the larger frame of the dissertation, this chapter focuses on women as *a sign* during the colonial time for the most part, while the following three chapters trace *disruptions* to the economy of women as a sign in the post-colonial (post-Independence/post-Partition) times. The suggestion, however, is not that women were signs in the colonial times and in the post-colonial period they become subjects or start to resist being reduced to signs. The progression was simply not this linear. It is rather to the design of the thesis, in the interest of focusing on texts of the Partition, that I owe this risk of inadvertent binary formation. In order to understand and demonstrate what constitutes interventional in a Partition text, I have had to ask what constitutes the normative at the time of the Partition. This in turn has brought me to the present task at hand: to look back at the dominant legacies that developed during the half century preceding the Partition. In this context, the discussion of the normative Partition discourse in the last section of *this* chapter though brief is crucially important. It highlights that the normative Partition discourse/texts/gendered idioms are in continuum, not in contrast, to the colonial discourse/texts of the

¹³ For the nineteenth century, see the chapter “A Book of Her Own, A Life of Her Own” (95-134) in Tanika Sarkar’s *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* and the chapter “Women and the Nation” (135-157) in Partha Chatterjee’s *Nation and Its Fragments*. For late nineteenth century to the decades in early twentieth century, see *Talking Of Power: Early Writings Of Bengali Women from the Mid-nineteenth Century to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Malini Bhattacharya and Abhijit Sen, and *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* by Malavika Karlekar. Early chapters in Radha Kumar’s *History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women’s Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990* succinctly provide some useful insights.

earlier time. Indeed, on the question of gender, the normative discourse of the Bengal Partition buckles and folds into the ideological usage of ‘women’ that is the signature of the very discourse of nation-formation they purport to critique. The examples of this normative discourse at the end of this chapter show that the Partition texts under analysis in the following three chapters are interventional and are exceptions to normative Partition texts. Therefore, there is not really a binary opposition between the earlier time that forms the bulk of this chapter and the texts I study in rest of the dissertation. Indeed, there are instances of disruptions in the colonial period as there are complicities in the postcolonial one; and, even if colonialism *is* a key factor in the cultural biography of the nation and its women, the story is not reducible to that of colonialism alone. So, I would wish to not put too much causative emphasis, *in this respect*, on the political distinction of colonial and postcolonial.

I am aware that, these caveats notwithstanding, the kind of historical continuum this chapter attempts to construct runs some risk of becoming reductive, simplistic and ‘constructed’ in the interest of telling a particular kind of narrative. This is why the reader must note that the suggestion of such a continuum here is both strategic and contingent. I have risked offering to sketch one at all because of two main reasons. The first is a pragmatic one: through this exercise this dissertation shall have sketched a few dominant idioms and tropes that will become points of reference, departure, intervention, critique and opposition for the Partition texts it shall examine in the following three chapters. These dominant tropes and idioms were, while borrowing from much older

historical, mythical and religious repertoires, concretized in the late nineteenth century. As we shall find, these images, tropes, and idioms going back to the late nineteenth century are in circulation in the Partition texts. In fact, it would be impossible to analyze the textual politics of the Partition texts in the following three chapters without this chapter.

The second reason exceeds the pragmatic. This contingent continuum attempts to show that, even accounting for complexities of each poetic¹⁴ usage of the central trope under discussion in this chapter—nation as a woman; ‘women’ as a sign of the nation—and knowing that the politics of each usage has to be decided on a case by case basis, it seems that the trope itself stems from a certain core patriarchal ideology. The usage of the trope entails a concomitant suppression of the possibility of women as agential, desiring, consuming, participatory subjects. Simply put, if the imagination of the collective was undertaken from a gynocentric position, these tropes would not be possible in the same way.

¹⁴ I am not arguing for a prescriptive prohibition on depiction of land in association with women as much as attempting to understand what conditions of power can be read from such depiction. The questions around representation always are: to what end, to what effect, what does the particular usage of trope make visible and what invisible?

I should also add here that the caution against a formulaic indictment against gender-metaphor also comes from the complexity of the prominent rhetorical tradition of imagining rivers of Bengal as mothers and the riverine Bengal as ‘nadi-matrik desh’ (a country mothered by rivers). I have not researched where and when this discourse starts, if this undoubtedly urban formulation also has a ‘folk’ origin, or what is the poetic and political relation to this discourse to the dominant trope I discuss here. I also have not researched musical traditions of rural East Bengal, say for instance the Bhatiyali song of the boatmen and fisherfolk, to argue with any certainty if and how they imagine the landscape/rivers in terms of gendered-metaphors and if they constitute an alternative rhetorical politics that illuminate the problem differently than what will be occasioned here.

Women as a metaphor of the collective was the legacy from late nineteenth century that could not be easily negated, and indeed was not always aimed to be negated during twentieth century. I would take this to be one of the most pressing idioms against which to situate Partition discourse and the Partition text. While I discuss the continuum at the level of discourse and idiom, it is not restricted to the discursive level. This particular discourse certainly intersects with the material domain and affects actual, historical, flesh and blood women. If anything, the slippage of the sign into the material is one way that we can assess the violence of the reified signification. In fact, the most pressing reason to critique the valences the signifier ‘women’ acquired in discourses of cultural nationalism is to be found in its continuum with the Partition. The material history of the Partition—an instance of the drawing of national boundaries around notions of ethnic/religious nations—is an indicator of the specific kind of violence, both discursive and material, of the process I have described as metaphor formation in the Introduction. The material history of the Partition violence and that of communalism from the turn of the century preceding it suggest that if the nation is located in female bodies, as in cultural nationalism, then female bodies become the nation. No wonder then that when that nation needs to be negotiated with violence these gendered bodies will indeed become the specific site of that violence. This slippage from the symbolic to the material is already scripted in the cultural nationalism. The material counterpart to this discursive violence becomes visible in the history of the Partition.

I hope to show in the discussion that follows that the discursive links between the gendered forms of anti-colonial nationalism and the Partition need to be read and emphasized in order to gain an insight into the Partition and to find an answer to the “vexed question: Why are women’s bodies subjected to gendered forms of communal hostility?” (Mookerjea-Leonard 1). The exercise will also show that the Partition violence is far less of an anomaly than its excesses suggest. In fact, as I shall claim all through this dissertation, the extraordinariness of the Partition itself needs necessarily to be posited in a continuum with the ordinary-everyday, which in this case is formed to a large extent by the preceding cultural nationalism from the late nineteenth century.

Writing about the Partition experience of north India, Gyanendra Pandey writes about “the misogynist north Indian proverb, ‘beeran ki kai jaat’ (‘what caste [or nationality] can a woman have?’) – for she ‘belongs’ to someone else, and therefore to his caste, nationality and religion” (*Remembering* 165). Pandey then goes on to point to the apparent paradox: “Yet, the evidence from 1947 seems at times to suggest almost the exact opposite: not that ‘women [had] no religion (or community or nation)’, but that they came for a moment to stand for nothing else” (*ibid.*). This apparent paradox gets to the heart of the problem that I am trying to lay down here. If we consider the gendered texture of the most mainstream Indian anti-colonial nationalism from the nineteenth century, be it the revivalist-nationalism or the liberal reformist group, this paradox would illuminate the duality of the condition for women—that they at once are ‘empty’

of caste/national marks and yet they, at times of nation making, come to stand for nothing else.

If I may step outside the specificity of the problem in the Bengal Partition for a moment, the problem I am suggesting is really an outcome of the way women are constructed as signs of national/ethnic/racial/linguistic collectives. I am sure the reader recognizes this has a much broader, even global, resonance. Therefore, it is of little surprise that no matter how different the Partition experiences of Bengal and Punjab, in one regard all Partition narratives in India converge at one point, which is on the question of violence on women, specifically on women's bodies: "in both these divided states, women (minors included) were targeted as the prime object of persecution" (Bagchi and Dasgupta 3). In case of Punjab, work of Butalia, Menon and Bhasin, and Das has also consistently showed that "women's bodies [are] territories to be conquered, claimed or marked by the assailants" (Menon and Bhasin 43-44).

This is also the case of the post-Babri riots in 1992 and in more recent anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat. Further, the framing of women as the location for conflict is not, as Bagchi and Dasgupta remind us as well, confined to the Indian subcontinent; it is true for many other parts of the world which have experienced genocidal and community violence provoked by race, religion, language and so on. In the context of South Asia, Partition scholarship aside, a range of feminist scholarship can be cited which responds to a similar ground reality and arrives at

congruent conclusions.¹⁵ Outside Asia, “confronted by the same reality in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the reality of mass rape of women, Stasa Zajovic concluded, ‘the female womb becomes the occupied territory’” (Bagchi and Dasgupta 3). Other scholarship on gender violence in Eastern Europe also echoes this.¹⁶ There was a similar playing out of gender violence in the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and more recently in Darfur. Ania Loomba’s comment that “national fantasies,” regardless of whether they are “colonial, anti-colonial or postcolonial, play upon and with the connections between women, land or nations” alerts us to ‘the universal’ resonance of the problem I am addressing here (215). The fact that rape is used as a war tactic is analogous to this phenomenon; the rape of thousands of Bengali East Pakistani women by the Pakistani army in the Bangladesh Liberation Movement in 1971 is an immediate historical event which needs special mention here, although there are hundreds of other instances. The more domestic violence of honour killings is another manifestation of the same, showing that the bigger political problem at the level of the collective is also part of the intimate

¹⁵ See *Embodied Violence: Communalizing Women’s Sexuality in South Asia*, edited by Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis; *Women and Right-wing Movements: Indian Experiences*, edited by Urvashi Butalia and Tanika Sarkar; and *Women, Islam and the State*, edited by Deniz Kandiyoti. Neluka Silva’s *The Gendered Nation: Contemporary Writings from South Asia* also traces the imbrications of gender and nation, and the violence of the relationship, taking exemplary writing from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan in each of her chapters.

¹⁶ For examples, see Rada Ivekovic’s essay “The New Democracy - With Women or Without Them?,” Slavenka Draculic’s “The Rape of Women in Bosnia,” Edith Klein’s “The Gendered Impact of Multilateralism in the post-Yugoslav States: Intervention, Reconstruction, and Globalization,” Maja Korac’s “War, Flight, and Exile: Gendered Violence among Refugee Women from post-Yugoslav States,” and Mirjana Morokvasic-Müller’s “From Pillars of Yugoslavism to Targets of Violence: Interethnic Marriages in the Former Yugoslavia and Thereafter.” Also see *From Gender to Nation*, edited by Rada Ivekovic and Julie Mostov for a more theoretical and an internationally comparative approach to the issue.

“everyday” life at the level of the family.¹⁷ The association of the nation/state/nation-state as body politic, imagined as a female body, is not restricted to colonized (southern or eastern) cultures alone. We only have to think of representations of England as Britannia. Indeed, such gendered imagination forms the bedrock of colonial conquering logic. It is ubiquitous and older still, as for instance in the notion of the ‘metro-polis,’ ‘mother-city’ in classical western culture. However, each of these discursive formations is, nevertheless, historical and local, so I will restrict myself to the place and time that is the focus of this dissertation.

I

“We recognise no other mother:” Late Nineteenth Century

To construct the valence of the signifier women in late nineteenth century Bengal, the best place to start, for its paradigm-setting contribution as much for its global fame, is with Partha Chatterjee’s thesis expounded in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1992).¹⁸ This seminal text by Chatterjee is so foundational to our comprehension of the late nineteenth century Bengal, I will like to treat it as an important part of the textual apparatus in this discussion. Chatterjee has been globally applauded, no doubt deservedly, for so

¹⁷ See *‘Honour’: Crimes, Paradigms, and Violence Against Women*, edited by Lynn Welchman and Sara Hossain.

¹⁸ A brief version of the thesis appeared as a very influential essay “Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” in the equally influential *Recasting Women* edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1990).

ably demonstrating the Eurocentric limit of Anderson's conceptualization of nation and for providing a much-needed corrective to the understanding of nationalisms in Asia and Africa. His two volumes of 1986 and 1993, especially the latter, are landmark publications in the international academic discourse on postcolonial nationalism. However, the gender dynamism on which he builds his case, and the gender bias of his discussion, has received relatively less attention.¹⁹ This particular bias is particularly troubling from the point of view of Partition scholarship and I would like to discuss this in some detail. Therefore, in the next few pages, I will not only briefly summarize Chatterjee's now-canonical thesis, but I will also discuss some implications of his work in terms of gender. The exercise would, I believe, not only clarify the linkage I am attempting to draw between the late nineteenth century Bengal, the milieu Chatterjee writes about, and the Partition, but also highlight the fact that the implications of that linkage are significant for both Partition scholarship *and* Chatterjee's discussion of the late nineteenth century Bengal. In other words, the examination from the point of view of the Partition will throw into relief some of the violent ramifications of what Chatterjee's thesis implies but are not addressed in Chatterjee's work.

¹⁹ Himani Bannerji has provided a trenchant critique of Partha Chatterjee in particular, and of the Subaltern School in general, from a declared "feminist-Marxist" position in "Pygmalion Nation: towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies and the 'Resolution of the Women's Question.'" In this essay, she makes a survey of the available feminist critique of Chatterjee, which are only a handful in her count (38-39).

My discussion here shares grounds with Bannerji's feminist critique, especially the section "Woman: the Sign of the Nation" (54-68). However, Bannerji has also critiqued Chatterjee's methodology as suspect from a Marxist point of view as much too focused on the culture than on the material. Here, my position differs from Bannerji's. I have found Chatterji's focus—Foucauldian we might say—on cultural nationalism enabling and useful because, in my understanding, the material and the discursive constantly interact with each other each contributing towards and inflecting the other.

Chatterjee argues that anti-colonialist cultural nationalism in late nineteenth century Bengal imagined itself not in a modular form derived from the European colonizers but in terms of difference. This it did by “separating into two domains—the material and the spiritual” (6). The spiritual-material binary corresponded to the inner and the outer, the home and the world, the private and the public. The native elite had no power in the outer domain, where they had to submit to the colonizer and the colonizing machinery. However, if they were subordinated by colonial governance in the public domain, in the outer world, they could retain autonomy in their private “inner lives” at “home.” Home then became the site of nascent nationalism imagined culturally. As custodian of the inner, the home, the middle class woman, ‘the bhadramahila,’ thus became a depository of “‘essential’ marks of cultural identity,” of tradition and purity, and thus of values which provided resources against the assault of British colonialism (6). The hegemony was “expressed most generally in the inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes; the adulation of women as goddess or as mother” (ibid.).

Situating his thesis in terms of broader implications in the introductory chapter of *The Nation and Its Fragments*, “Whose Imagined Community?,” Chatterjee writes:

I have one central problem with Anderson’s argument. If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain “modular” forms already made available to them by Europe and

the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? [...] Even our imagination must remain forever colonized.

I object to this argument not for any sentimental reason, I object because I cannot reconcile it with the evidence on anti-colonial nationalism. The most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but on a *difference* with the “modular” form of nationalist theory propagated by the modern West. (Emphasis in original; 5)

The tone here is surely problematic: the hegemony necessarily upon which, by his own account, the wheel of this creative autonomy must turn does not upset to any degree the frank and proud admiration with which he claims imaginative autonomy, indeed clever creative brilliance, on behalf of “us.” The hegemony is not restricted to gender: he also explicates his thesis in terms of the relationship of the nation with its “peasants” and its “outcasts” as well. However, women, as he expounds, is absolutely central, the lynchpin, for the functioning of the imaginative autonomy. In his model, the autonomy works only by an analogous split between the inner and the outer, the tradition and the modern, the home and the world, and men and women; the nation to be found in each of the first terms of these binaries, and in which, women have to embody all values associated with the inner, the traditional, the homely, and the national. The violence of a split between the home and the world as absolutely exclusive spaces is profound for women subjects because it predicates an analogous split between the private and

the public. This split, as many feminists will point out,²⁰ is critical to restricting women's movements, fracturing women's sense of selves and exercising patriarchal control over women. However, Chatterjee does not consider that such a constructed split by the nationalist "resolution" would be highly damaging to women's interests.

In Chatterjee's scheme of things, the nationalist "resolution of the women's question" is remarkably similar in the instrumentation of women in the colonization discourse. There is no ground to dispute Chatterjee's reading of the woeful condition of native women in the colonial discourse as "a central element in the ideological justification of the British colonial rule was the criticism of the 'degenerate and the barbaric' social customs of the Indian people," and "colonialism also saw itself as performing a 'civilizing mission'" (117-118). The argument here is the same as what Spivak had already famously described in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" as the fantasy of "white men rescuing brown women from brown men" (297). However, on the other hand, we need to question why there is no critique in Chatterjee of indigenous patriarchy, which is in fact congratulated for its autonomous imagination. As Himani Bannerji concludes in her discussion of this passage in her essay "Pygmalion Nation: towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies and the 'Resolution of the Women's Question,'" "patriarchies on both sides [the colonizers and the nationalists] are ignored, as

²⁰ Carol Pateman has, in fact, argued in *The Disorder of Women* that "the dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is all about" (118). Pateman is writing in context of Anglo-American feminism, but her claim does point to the stake feminism in general has in the dichotomy between the home and the world.

they convert women of colonized societies into their ideological signs of hegemony” (55). Bannerji argues, “under such circumstances, any social criticism or demand for reform for Indian women would spell submission to colonial discourse. Chatterjee’s own decolonization proposal does not permit any critique of Indian patriarchy” (55).²¹

Overall, Chatterjee’s own handling of “the Women’s Question” while illuminating in many ways, is also ultimately *about* women; there is little attempt to assess the implication of the unfolding of the “women’s question” for the women themselves. That there was no resolution of that question for the women does not warrant a comment from Chatterjee. Ultimately, if we pose the same question with which Chatterjee titles his chapter, “whose imagined community?,” it is hardly possible that the answer would include women as imagining agents. If anything, then, the somewhat jubilant passage in the introductory paragraph is incongruous with these processes, which, Chatterjee himself describes as “hegemonic forms of exercising dominance, [where] this patriarchy combined coercive authority with the subtle force of persuasion” (130) in the chapter “The Nation and Its Women.” In that chapter, Chatterjee states that “the discourse is *about* women; women do not speak here” (133, emphasis in original), but it is not as though the story gets more enabling in the following chapter titled “Women and the Nation,” where women *do* speak. This chapter, too, ends with the

²¹ For a fuller discussion of this passage from *The Nation and Its Fragment*, see Bannerji’s “Pygmalion Nation” 54-55.

conclusion “that the story of nationalist emancipation is necessarily a story of betrayal” (154) and “A Pessimistic Afterward.”

It is not that Chatterjee does not recognize the normative anti-colonial imagining process as hegemonic. The case is far from it; his very model recognizes that. However, even as he dwells on the problem for long, he does not quite underscore the scope of the violence of the gendered inner-outer split he discusses. Neither does he venture to assess the implication of this split for the women in terms of their ‘everyday’ life, nor does he consider what this would mean for women, custodians of the nation as they are, should the nation ever come to be contested. Chatterjee has occasionally reflected on the implication of the inner-outer split in post-Independence times, but he completely evades the issue of the Partition. The word Partition does not appear even once in his entire book although as an epigraph it includes a brief excerpt from Gyanendra Pandey’s “In Defence of the Fragment,” an essay about the Partition. I would argue, however, that although Chatterjee does not consider this himself, there are significant links between the “hegemonic forms of exercising dominance,” that he describes as “the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother,” and the specific gendered violence that manifested during the Partition in Bengal among other places (131). Indeed, the gendered violence visible as the excesses of the Partition is not the only time such violence plays into life of women. It touches the everyday under the regime of nation making. The Partition, however, makes *visible* that the gender dynamics that forms the foundation of the process of nation

formation is far less innocuous and benign than Chatterjee's introductory valediction of that nationalism suggests.

Tanika Sarkar's *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (2001)²² provides a more gender-nuanced historical analysis of the formation of cultural nationalism in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal than does Chatterjee. Drawing from Sarkar's study, I would like to continue the discussion on nineteenth century Bengal.²³ Perhaps the most significant shift from Chatterjee in Sarkar is to replace the binary divide in the former with a paradigm where the home is the "the embryonic nation" (39). Revising what she calls a "mechanical divide between the home and the world," as in Chatterjee's model, "derived from an untenable extension of a mid-nineteenth century Victorian situation into a very different socio-political context" (38), Sarkar suggests a somewhat different picture of the same time period by putting the emphasis on a different place. Sarkar, unlike Chatterjee, does not read formation of any kind of

²² The individual essays collected in this volume were previously published over a decade preceding the book.

²³ I shall keep to Sarkar's book for the rest of the discussion in this section. However, the time under discussion is one much researched and commented on. Debali Leonard-Mookerjee has a succinct overview on the topic in her essay "Disenfranchised Bodies: Jyotrimoyee Devi's writing on the Partition," paragraphs 7-22. Among other sources, see the extremely influential *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. Among monographs, Asish Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* is a classic on the time. Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, and Sumanta Banerjee's *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* are also relevant. Specifically on gender, books include *The Frail Hero and the Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal* by Indira Chowdhury and *Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century* by Mrinalini Sinha. Not Bengal-centric, but illuminating is Janaki Nair's *Women and Law in Colonial India: A Social History*.

“resolution” around the women’s question (23).²⁴ Sarkar shows that, although women became the sign of the nation and remained so since the mid-nineteenth century, there were subtle but decipherable and significant changes in management of the sign.

In middle of the nineteenth century, the nation was not already imagined as the mother or as the mother goddess. Instead, Sarkar argues, it was the Hindu wife who was the site of the nationalist negotiation. The subordination of the wife within the love of Hindu conjugality was supposed to provide a contrast to the loveless slavery that constituted the domination of the Hindu male in the outer colonial world. Thus, it was contentions of great, absolute love in non-consensual Hindu marriage, posited as superior to the contractual Western counterpart, which had selected conjugality as the most ideal relationship to constitute the nationalist project.

In this scheme, the sexual purity and chastity of the body of the wife was crucially important. The male body, “having passed through the grind of Western

²⁴ She starts the first chapter of her book thus:

In nineteenth century Bengal the intelligentsia was engaged in a convoluted critical exercise. This exercise involved interrogating power relationships within indigenous customs and traditions—especially gender norms within such customs—though there were definite patriarchal limits to the interrogation. The interrogation involved, simultaneously, questioning the connections established between the local and the metropolitan—in short Bengal’s overall colonial connection. The problems so interanimated and complicated one another that, far from reaching a resolution, Bengal’s intelligentsia was unable to set itself an agenda with any absolute certainty” (23)

Sumit Sarkar also makes a similar historian’s objection to Chatterjee’s argument about “resolution” and the division between “home and the world.” See his essay, “Nationalism and 'Stri-Swadhinata: The Contexts and Meanings of Rabindranath's *Ghare-Baire*,” especially pages 113-116.

education, office, routine and forced urbanization[,]” had been polluted by colonialism, but the female body “was still pure and unmarked, loyal to the rule of the shastras [scriptures]” (T. Sarkar 43). Therefore, “the autonomy of the Hindu man having been irrevocably colonized by alien culture and education, the Hindu woman’s body became a deeply politicized matter—it alone could signify past freedom and future autonomy” (228). If “it was not a free body by any means,” it was nevertheless “ruled by ‘our’ scriptures, by ‘our’ custom. The difference with the male body bestowed on it a redemptive healing strength for the community as a whole” (203).

The supposed strength legitimized utter violence on the female body because “a unique capacity to bearing pain” was one of the “precise sources of grace” for the Hindu (middle class) wife (203). Therefore, also befitting “was the discipline exercised upon her body by the iron laws of absolute chastity, extending beyond the death of her husband, through an indissoluble non-consensual infant marriage, through austere widowhood, and through her proven capacity for self-immolation” (ibid.). Not surprisingly, then, the *sati*²⁵ “was an adored nationalist symbol, her figure representing the moment of climax in exposition of Hindu nationalism. Bankimchandra saw in it the last hope of the

²⁵ Much has been written on *sati* in colonial India. Of course, Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and Lata Mani’s “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on *Sati* in Colonial India” are among the most famous. For a very brief historical overview, including the post-colonial revival of the cult of *sati* and Roop Kanwar’s immolation in 1987, see *History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women’s Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990* by Radha Kumar. In the latter context, equally important to cite here are Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s two influential essays on *sati* in her book *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, and Postcolonialism*: “The Subject of Sati” (15-39) and “Representing Sati” (40-63). These essays, written from a standpoint privileging feminist praxis, addresses *sati* in contemporary India in light of Roop Kanwar’s death and revisits the earlier debates aimed at the colonial times.

doomed nation” (42).²⁶ Indeed, by analysing popular and high literature alike, Sarkar shows that the “the politics of women’s monogamy” became “the condition of the possible Hindu nation; the one is often explicitly made to stand in for the other” (41). By easy degrees, we reach the situation wherein, writes Sarkar,

an implicit continuum is postulated between the hidden, inner-most private space, chastity, almost the sanctity of the vagina, to political independence at the state level: as if, through a steady process of regression, this independent selfhood has been folded back from the public domain to the interior space of the household, and then further pushed back into the hidden depths of an inviolate, chaste, pure female body. (265)

The chastity of the Hindu wife, then, became *the* prized location of imagining national purity from the contamination and corruption of colonial rule though the concept of women’s chastity as a political tool was, of course, not original. As Leonard-Mookerjea writes, the nationalists, be it of the reformist or the revivalist camp, “did not invent chastity. The discursive production of sexual purity as a part of political ideology goes back to at least the time of *Manavadharmasastra* [The Laws of Manu] (c. 100 C.E.)” (21). However, while this text served as “the ur-text on Hindu domesticity during the nineteenth century” (17), the discourse of chastity now was different. As she explains:

²⁶ Bankim also imagined the practice of *sati* in defined erotic terms. See Sarkar 158-159.

The newness was the political privilege—the immense prestige and visibility—chastity acquired in the shift from a principle of governance to a political prerequisite for belonging. It was the location for a struggle for the discourse of manhood, nationhood and ideal citizenship, the site on which Indian identity itself was poised” (21)

The fetishized chastity, however, would put insurmountable strain on the discourse of love that was the original impetus for imagining the nationalist project in terms of conjugality. Therefore, as Sarkar explains, the trope of the wife and the discourse of pain and chastity soon proved untenable; the discourse of conjugal love was now too close to pain and to the loveless slavery that the colonized male had to undergo in the colonial relationship. Moreover, claims of superior love of the Hindu conjugality could not be sustained in face of the reality that emerged in trenchant criticism of the situation of the woman in Hindu households in both the reformists and in women’s autobiographical writing, once they started appearing after the 1860s. Yet, as Sarkar points out, letting go of love would not have done:²⁷ “love had to re-enter the nationalist narrative” (51). It is with this aim, the nationalist narrative shifted away from the wife and “eventually located [itself] in the loving relationship between mother and son,” writes Sarkar (51). There was something very important to be gained by this arrangement: the mother lends herself to be deified more easily than the wife in the Hindu cultural context. The nation-mother, thus, “was no flesh-and-blood woman, all too easily

²⁷ To explain the importance of love, Sarkar cites Anderson’s discussion of political love which finds a language of kinship (Sarkar 253).

visible in the within an all-too-accountable household, but the new and supreme deity within the Hindu pantheon—the Motherland—the reified woman” (ibid.). It also serves the purpose to invoke the discourse of desire—nationalism as a desire for the nation-mother; desire to serve the nation-mother —while having managed the anxiety with sexuality. I will return to this below.

While no doubt built on a repertoire of older religious icons, images, and concepts that are already available to the Hindu mind, the form of the deified motherland is nevertheless *created* in a very specific shape in the late nineteenth century. “Through long and continuous usage” the concept of the nation as mother “has acquired such a seeming naturalness,” Sarkar comments, “that its disjunction as a cultural construct is worth emphasizing” (251). The hymn “Vande Mataram,” from which I quoted at the beginning of the chapter, became the first political slogan, even arguably the most powerful patriotic slogan there ever was in Bengali language, and gathered a life of its own in anti-colonial struggle all over India and especially in Bengal.²⁸ The hymn captures the icon of the nation, the land, as the mother. The deity of Motherland, *Deshmata* was to become the “most recent and most sacred deity in the Hindu pantheon” (T. Sarkar 251). The later stanzas of “Vande Mataram,” for example, are explicitly addressed to Durga.

²⁸ See Sabyasachi Bhattacharya’s *Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song*.

The anti-Muslim tenor of the novel *Anandamath*, from which the slogan is taken, and of Bankim’s later writing in general needs to be noted here. More on this below.

In Bankim's formulations, 'deshmata' has three distinct forms.²⁹ In fact, Bankim's iconography, "with variations, decisively influenced all later nationalist imaginings" (254).³⁰ Bankim "represented the past, present, and future states" of the nation "through three main iconographies of the mother," most of them strongly related to goddess Durga—an incarnation of Shakti and the main deity Hindu Bengalis worship—and her many avatars (255). The past, a period of peace, fertility and bounty is imagined as the maternal Jagadhatri (bearer and nurturer of the world) or as "Annapurna (giver of food)" (ibid.). The present, under colonial rule, is imagined as the fierce Kali, an image that is "universalised in Swadeshi times, due perhaps to a ... clearly and openly articulated sense of anger" for her "capacity to destroy evil and transcend death" (255-56). Bankim, however, "saw in [Kali], a measure of our shame and deprivation and exploitation. Kali is a have-not figure, a woman who has abandoned her femininity and even a basic sense of shame. [...] The woman on top signifies a total collapse of the ordered world, a violence directed basically at the self" (ibid.). Sarkar notes that these two opposing representations of the figure of nation as Kali "indicate, perhaps, an inner tension within nationalism about the principle of female strength and about the violence and destructiveness latent in it" (256).

²⁹ It is worth getting into the details here because we shall see all three in circulation in the Swadeshi period and in the Partition texts. We shall see how these are radicalized, for instance, in Ritwik Ghatak's film that I analyze in Chapter 3.

³⁰ I will keep to Tanika Sarkar for my discussion of Bankim. Other sources relevant to the discussion here include Jasodhara Bagchi, "Positivism and Nationalism: Womanhood and Crisis in Nationalist Fiction: Bankimchandra's *Anandamath*" and Sangeeta Ray's chapter "Gender and Nation: Woman Warriors in Chatterjee's *Devi Chaudhurani* and *Anandamath*" (23-50) in *Engendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial India*.

Other than as Kali, the present is also imagined, in contrast to the bountiful past, as the “archetypal helpless victim,” who in Jyotirindranath Tagore’s words, is “disease-ridden, skeletal, [with] a withered body” (255).

Finally, in the future, after the dance of destruction by Kali, the country becomes her own again, and the image is that of Durga in the form that the Bengali Hindus worship in their biggest annual festival, as Durgatinashini (destroyer of evil) and Mahishasuramardini (slayer of the demon Mahishasura). The armed goddess is at the triumphant moment of her victory, many of her ten arms still armed with assorted weapons and the slain demon still at her feet. The goddess is, nevertheless, a mother and smiles kindly at her worshippers. Moreover, she is imagined in a very domestic setting, a married woman returning to her natal home on earth with her children for only four days a year. Sarkar comments at this “curious mismatch between what she looks and what she does” in these terms: “in the juxtaposition of diverse images exists the hint of triumphant strength but is overlaid, and the overwhelming final impression is that of domesticated and gentle femininity” (256). And she goes on to write, “Bengali nationalists finally appropriated this by transforming the traces of militancy and sexuality into something more ‘innocent’—into the ideal mother figure, the presiding deity of Bengali kitchens and sickbeds” (256-57).

The deification of the nation as a mother goddess probably speaks to several cultural complexities. In Bankim, at least, according to Sarkar, the liberal guilt about both the ill-treatment of “concrete flesh and blood women” in Hindu households as well as in complicity with the British and inaction during the

mutiny of 1857 in accepting foreign rule “was displaced and concentrated into [the] abstract, feminine shape—the shape of the enslaved Motherland” (142). Sarkar suggests an even more interesting possible correlation in that the nation was not only sacralized but also feminized (251). The feminization of the nation provided “an oppositional ideology” to the slighting of the Bengalis as an effeminate race in contrast to the manly imperial, virile, “British public schoolboy-cum-administrator” as well as the other ‘martial races’ in India, such as the Sikh Punjabis.³¹ The Bengalis, thus, in response “defiantly worshipped and gloried in the female principle” (ibid.).

I would like to, however, specifically probe the deification of the nation as mother in terms of the management of female sexuality. The efficacy of the mother as the figure in this case is that her chastity can be constructed as an always-already. Sarkar does not explicitly discuss the discursive overlaps of the wife with the mother. The suggestion of the sexuality of the mother is, however, implicit in Sarkar.³² In any case, she writes, “the process of deification is essentially a process of self-estrangement, of fetishisation” (251). If the Motherland is a *fetish*, we can interpret the common ground between the two

³¹ See *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* by Asish Nandy, *The Frail Hero and the Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal* by Indira Chowdhury, and *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century* by Mrinalini Sinha.

³² Discussing a passage from Bankim’s novel *Sitaram*, Sarkar notes,

The spectacle of violence derives from the image of a passionate feminine body that metaphorically gives birth to violence. [...] The political passion [...] produced through feminine agency [...] is cast [...] in well-remembered classical convention to describe a woman at the moment of sexual climax. The superimposition of icons of Durga and Chandika, the goddess of war, on this body provides a sacred frame to the whole. (186)

tropes—nation as a wife and nation as a mother—to be the sexuality of the woman. In either case, be it the wife or the mother imagined as the nation, the relationships that are conceived share common grounds with each other: both are mediated by patriarchy, and both are expressed through a discourse of male desire. This aspect of the imagination of the nation, that it is not only feminized but also sexualized, is important to appreciate the ‘rationale’ operating behind gendered violence that accompanies processes of making or contesting the nation. In the interest of drawing the continuum from the late nineteenth century to the Partition, this sexuality provides a strong link.

There is no denying the covert but overwhelming presence of the sexuality of the mother. While the sexuality of the wife is overtly a site of anxiety, therefore, of interpellation, contestation, vigilance, and control, the mother’s sexuality, being a taboo, is an equally potent absent-presence. I would argue, developing the evidence provided by Sarkar, that even with ‘the nation as the mother,’ the discourse remained very much that of desire and corporeality. The mother as nation may not be in reality a flesh-and-blood woman, but her corporeality, especially in the anthropomorphic Hindu imagination, and her latent sexuality remains supreme. If the sexuality of the nation as the wife, and its immanent risk of pollution, was a source of utter anxiety to the male Bengali subjects, they had to shift the image from the wife to the mother where the question of sexuality can be repressed. After all, chastity of the mother has to be a given: uncertainty over it would tantamount to a crisis of male patrilineal ontology. The question over the mother’s chastity, therefore, can hardly ever be

raised. However, this does not mean that the anxiety about the nation as a woman goes away; if anything this superb management of the anxiety around female sexuality by evoking the mother suggests the existence of the anxiety in the first place. Although the discourse of chastity now gets hidden, it remains only too forcefully present. This is evident in the strong affect generated in almost all brands of nationalism in post-Swadeshi Bengal, aimed at arousal of the sons in defence of the mother. A fragment of a letter by Aurobindo Ghose is perhaps the best example I can think of; I will discuss it below. In fact, the beauty of this scheme of imagining the nation as a mother is that it can arouse the desiring subject (the son), still maintain uncontested sexual purity in the desired object (nation-mother), and never require the subject to acknowledge that his desire is fundamentally constituted by gender and sexuality as it is of the imagined-mother.

Other than Aurobindo's letter, the erotics of nationalism hidden behind mother-worship is made visible with utter clarity, and critiqued, in Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire* (1916; *The Home and the World*, 1919), a novel to whose title Partha Chatterjee's thesis may have owed something. Tagore's novel points out the overlaps between the wife, the mother, and the lover in nationalist imagination. Writing on the novel, Tanika Sarkar makes a significant observation:

Nationalism, in our country, is powerfully cast into the mould of Mother-worship and no one has ever suggested an alternative or deviant imaginary. Yet, the novel suggests discarding the posture of obedience and subjection which is far more resonant with the image of the woman who claims and flaunts her sexuality and independence over domestic

discipline. Nationalist energies—given this reading—could have far more of a sexual charge than allowed by the tropes of filial duty which *masks* their self-representation. (emphasis mine; “Many Faces” 35)³³

My point is: that which needs to be masked must be present. Nationalist energies do have, if hidden, erotic energies and Tagore’s novel shows precisely that.³⁴ In any case, even in post-Bankim burgeoning of the icon of the nation as mother, a feminised nation as a woman who is *not* a mother also thrives side-by-side. For example, in the discourse of the nation as a woman disrobed and raped by the colonizing foreigners. We shall see how in Aurobindo’s imagination (quoted below) the two—the mother and the raped/‘to be saved from rape’ woman—would in fact combine.

Partha Chatterjee argues post-deification of the nation as mother women also become mothers in the outer sphere and that “the image of the woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home” (131).³⁵ I find this claim somewhat misleading and a very partial explanation of a

³³ Tanika Sarkar adds following this long quote: “In even more explicit words, Sandip [the militant-nationalist of the story] “pulls lover and motherland together, and country and Bimala become one. The emotion that animates both and the emotions they both evoke are clearly erotic” (“Many Faces” 35).

³⁴ I shall have occasion to return to this novel in Chapter 4.

³⁵ Having stated a manifestation of his thesis that “the image of the woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home” (131), Chatterjee notes, “there are many important implications of this construct.” Then he goes on to give one example, which is apparent in the common observation about “the relative absence of gender discrimination in middle class occupations in India.” Chatterjee recognizes the observation belies many complexities and is superficial, but goes on, nevertheless, to reflect that “gender has never been an issue of public contention” in relation to workspace. He also adds here that “India gave women the vote without any major debate on the question and without there ever having been a movement for

more complex cultural phenomenon in light of my understanding of post 1947 public space. The Partition discourse and texts that we will encounter later in the chapter and in the dissertation will testify that the erasure is not final, absolute, or a given. Sexuality of women in “the outer sphere” is overwhelmingly present post-Independence/post-Partition when women entered or otherwise found themselves in the “world outside.” Women’s entry into nationalist politics as activists already displayed this.³⁶ Later, in communal discourse and in the Partition discourse, both sexuality and chastity would burst the cover and become the foremost and the most urgent issues concerning women. The reified woman as the nation would willy-nilly slip into the realm of the flesh-and-blood. If the nation is imagined as a woman, the nation too could just as easily be located on the sexualized body of flesh and blood women. I would like to underscore that this embodiment, which we shall see emphasized in communal and the Partition violence, is already written in nineteenth century domesticity as discussed by both Tanika Sarkar and Partha Chatterjee.

women’s suffrage.” He explains this supposedly curious phenomenon in terms of his model in these terms:

The fixing of nationalist ideology of masculine/feminine qualities in terms of the material/spiritual dichotomy does not make women who have entered professional occupation competitors to male job seekers, because in this construct there are no specific cultural signs that distinguish women from men in the material world. In fact, the distinctions that often become significant are those that operate *between* women in the world outside the home. (131).

Compare the above with the reasons Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi suggest in *Daughters of Independence* for women of India being ‘given’ the vote (34-35).

³⁶ For a brief overview of women’s activism within nationalism, see the chapter “Constructing the Image of a Woman Activist” in Radha Kumar’s *History of Doing* (74-95).

Another aspect of the nation-as-mother imaginary that is finally worth highlighting in this context is that if the nation is “personified as the Mother Goddess,” then its people are not the nation themselves, but are *sons* of the Mother (Sarkar 251; emphasis added). In this two-way relationship between mother and son, there is a disavowal of women as also claimants of the affection of the nation-mother. Sharing sexed female bodies with the nation, women had to embody the nation: the daughters are, then, primarily imagined as mothers themselves. While the concept of the women as daughters of the nation will come about later in the nationalist struggle, as we shall see below, such concept is immediately contained in an existing concept of motherhood. In other words, in this model of mother-son relationship, there is no space to account for women as either acting or desiring agents: women cannot imagine their relationships to the nation in the same terms as male nationalists.

While I have been conducting this discussion maintaining a focus on the women in the Hindu national imaginary, before I move on I would like to say a few words about ‘the Muslim’ in all of this. Hindu revivalism was not explicitly anti-Muslim during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Sarkar writes that Hindu revivalism was anti-reformist and anti-missionary in character. The resented British rule was distinguished from the coming of Islam to India, and the Muslims were thought of as “fellow-sufferers and victims of colonialism” (184). Revivalism nevertheless contributed toward formation of ‘Hindu’ as a hard identity and Hinduism as a unified religion although the cementing of these formations as concrete categories with well defined boundaries will not be

complete until the colonial administration and its censuses had played its part at the end of the century.³⁷ However, the seeds of alienation of the Muslims from the mainstream nationalist movement and anti-Muslim Hindutva movements in later decades were already planted at this time.

Bankim's single-handed contribution to this particular anti-Muslim history is rather remarkable. The hymn "Vande Mataram," "a cue-text for what eventually became the image of 'the motherland', and then 'Mother India', in the developing nationalist movement" (Lipner, "footnote" 145), is perhaps the most iconic example. As I stated above, the hymn starts as a prayer to Motherland, and in the later stanzas becomes explicitly addressed to Durga. When the slogan "Vande Mataram" became absolutely central to nationalism in Bengal during the Swadeshi period and later, during the rise of anti-colonial revolutionary terrorism, its affects clearly and explicitly excluded the Muslims. Idolization being explicitly prohibited in Islam, the centrality of the Hindu deity in this slogan must have plainly indicated to the Muslims that the address of the slogan was not only not designed to appeal to them, but also that the nationalist movement clearly could

³⁷ The censuses, perhaps more than any other identifiable single source, contributed towards the consolidation of a Hindu identity as exclusive and opposed to a Muslim one but inclusive of all lower castes. The relationship between an opposition with Islam, on the one hand, and the dynamics, manipulation, and management of lower castes within so called Hindu rubric and consolidation of Hindu identity, on the other, constitutes a very important topic. However, the details are not what I can get into here. See the chapter "Hindu Unity and the Communal Common Sense of the 'Dying Hindu'" (21-63) in Pradip Datta's *Carving Blocks*, where he shows that the "the possibility of low castes declassifying themselves as Hindus was a motivating anxiety behind the origins of Hindu communalism" (18). Also see Sumit Sarkar's essay "Identity and Difference: Caste in the formation of Ideologies of Nationalism and Hindutva" in *Writing Social Histories*. See also Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal* and *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947*.

not care less about risking their potential contribution. What is more, the novel *Anandamath* by Bankim, in which the hymn appears, imagines a virulent Hindu apocalyptic holy war to be waged against the Muslims. Bankim is such a foundational writer in Bengali modern prose that “his writing may be taken to express, more decisively than others of his period, the process by which intellectual opinions are made” (T. Sarkar 135). It is, therefore, all the more significant that he was the one that formulated “a powerful visual image of communal violence and giving this the status of an apocalyptic holy war” and, in this way, “served as a bridge between nineteenth century Hindu revivalism and later, anti-Muslim, violent politics” (185). “Vande Mataram” became “a rallying cry” in Hindu-Muslim violence after 1926” (163). Today, the hymn has reached iconic status in Rashtriya Sevak Sangh (RSS)—the spearhead of the ‘Hindutva,’ Hindu Right, movement—whose members consider this song, not Tagore’s “Jana Gana Mana,” as the Indian national anthem (ibid.). Even if there has been a fair degree of appropriation of Bankim by the later Hindutva movement, the latter showing none of the complexity that Bankim’s writing on Muslims and Islam expressed, Bankim’s role in anti-Muslim history is not to be argued away.

The hymn also demonstrates that the two discourses—about women and about the Muslim—overlap in distinct ways. This, too, should come as no surprise. Ann McClintock has, as have Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid in the Indian context and numerous other feminists working on an array of periods and locations, emphasized different historic conglomerations of power differences always work hand in hand to enforce each other: gender hegemony works with

other hegemonies marked by class, race, caste, and religious/sectarian hegemony.

³⁸ In the case of “Vande Mataram” and the novel *Anandamath*, and in other writing by Bankim, gender becomes instrumental in articulating the anti-Muslim violence, especially in the figure of the *sati*. The figure of the *sati*, as I have noted above, was of course central to the three-way debates between the Hindu revivalists, the reformists, and the colonial government; the body of the *sati*, thus, was a key location of investment and contestation. In Bankim, we see the vastly eroticized violent power of *sati* also becomes a “political resource” to be employed in imagining a Hindu nation (T. Sarkar 158, 185-186). This association gathered a robust afterlife in the Swadeshi period, thrived during the Partition, and extends up until now.

II

“O Mother, we cannot turn our eye from you:” Early Twentieth Century

In reaction to the first partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905, we see a feverish rise of Bengali patriotism alongside a heightened anti-colonial Swadeshi movement.³⁹ I have written in the Introduction about the significance of the first

³⁸ Ann McClintock specifically argues this in Chapter 1 of *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* and demonstrates it, through her methodology in the rest of her book. As do, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, in the “Introduction” to their co-edited volume *Recasting Women*.

³⁹ There were several camps and ideologies within the Swadeshi movement: on one end of the spectrum was constructive Swadeshi, which emphasized development of Indian educational and industrial sectors, with a full-blown non-cooperation with everything British in the middle, to, on the other end of the spectrum, a more extremist dissent quickly developing into armed ‘revolutionary terrorism.’ See Sumit Sarkar’s *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908*.

partition of 1905 and the contrast with the second partition of Bengal. Here, my aim is to flag some major instances of the circulation of ‘women’ as the sign of the nation and their rhetorical/ideological contours, such that they display the continuity of the idioms and tropes from late nineteenth century as I outlined above. The continuities are unmistakably visible if we focus on literature. Tanika Sarkar’s work, which I detailed above, provides the link too: “patriotic themes came to constitute a significant domain in Bengali literature from the 1880s, [*Anandamath* was published in 1882], and the corpus went through many developments and mutations down to Gandhian times” (250).

The nation as the mother is, of course, the foremost instance of the iconography. By the time of Swadeshi, the icon acquired a strong resonance and becomes ubiquitous in nationalist movements of all factions. “Vande Mataram,” in its Bengali rendition “Bande Mataram,” became a slogan that was at the heart of Swadeshi movement and continued to dominate nationalist movement in Bengal until independence. The anti-partition sentiment after 1905, animating a Bengali nationalism, and the anti-colonial sentiments, finding validation in a broader Indian nationalism, soon become at one at this juncture in history. Therefore, we find that the icon of Deshmata is now manifest as both Bangamata (Mother Bengal) and Bharatmata (Mother India), the two becoming interchangeable with each other. I will cite three examples here, each of them

Chapter II “Trends in Bengal’s Swadeshi Movement” (31-91) lays out the different groups within this heterodox movement.

widely well known and iconic in status, constituting different rhetorical traditions.⁴⁰

My first example is the very iconic painting of Bharatmata done in 1902 by Abinandranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore's nephew and the famous painter who created a new 'nationalist' trend in art, later named the Bengal School of Art. In this painting, Bharatmata is a solemn, almost sad, young woman. She is pale, teary eyed, frail, recalling the iconic description of the Bharatmata by Jyotirindranath above. There is no bountiful mother in this icon: she is clad in the saffron robes of a Hindu ascetic. The signification is in her poverty, but also in her spirit of self-sacrifice and asceticism, which she hopes to arouse in her children and have them emulate in the current, difficult times. As Tanika Sarkar has pointed out, "early nationalist poetry struck a note of deep gloom and mourning around this figure" (255). What is also significant is the Hindu-deification of the figure. She has four arms; in each hand, she holds an object that has gained significance during the Swadeshi movement just as objects in a Hindu deity's hands have a sacred significance.

Second, in contrast to the gloominess of the above, Rabindranath Tagore's abundant poetic evocation of the mother during this time, for instance in

⁴⁰ The list of such exemplary figures could, of course, be much longer than constituting the three I select here. The choice of these three as exemplary figures is partly based on my academic understanding of the history of this period. Partly, however, the choice is also based on my own personal experience of growing up in Calcutta in the 1980s and 1990s. These figures were among the most visible in received history of early twentieth century in my generation, and ones I encountered in my lived urban Bengali cultural life in the city, including in the school curriculum. Needless to say, this list could be much longer.

collections like *Swadesh* and in the booklet *Baul*,⁴¹ develops a robust image of a more bountiful mother. In 1905 alone, Tagore wrote twenty-two Swadeshi songs, most of them set to Baul melody. Many among these songs became vastly popular and widely circulated in Bengal at the time and continued to remain so, such as, to refer to them by their titles in *Baul*: “Swarthak Janam” (My Life is Fulfilled), “Sonar Bangla” (Golden Bengal), “Desher Mati” (Soil of My Country), “Habei Habe” (It shall happen), “Ban” (Tide), “Eka” (Alone) and so on.⁴² The mood is joyful, energetic, and frequently evoking the spirit of youth. There is also a turn to the ‘folk,’ as indicated by the title and the recurrent melodies, as a source of inspiration. The second excerpt from which I quoted in the beginning of this chapter is also a song appearing in *Baul*.

I should note here that although these songs were not particularly evoked during the second partition of Bengal in 1947, they again became extremely popular during the rise of Bengali nationalism in East Bengal after the Partition and played an important role in the Liberation War. The national anthem of Bangladesh is “Sonar Bangla” (‘Golden Bengal’), which starts with “O Amar

⁴¹ Charles Capwell in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, quoting, in translation, Santidev Ghosh’s *Rabindrasangeet*, states: “Prior to [1905], Tagore had written twenty-four nationalist songs, all but two of which have been in the Hindusthani classical style. But in 1905 alone he wrote twenty-two more, nearly half of which were set to tunes based on folk songs of the Bauls, a religious sect. [...] Tagore not only drew on the music of the Bauls, but used the sect’s name as the title of the book in which he published his new songs” (Ghosh 178; Bengali; Cited in Capwell 436).

⁴² Since these titles are not always repeated in *Gitabitan*, Tagore’s collection of songs, but cross listed by their first line, by which the songs are mostly referred to, here are the first lines for the readers of Bengali: “Swarthak Janam:” “Swarthak Janam Amar Janmechhi Ei Deshe;” “Sonar Bangla:” “O Amar Sonar Bangla, Ami Tomai Bhalobashi;” “Desher Mati:” “O Amar Desher Mati, Tomar Pare Thekai Matha;” “Habei Habe:” “Ore Man Habei Habe;” “Ban:” “Ebar Tor Mara Gange Ban Esheche;” “Eka:” “Jodi Tor Dak Shune Keu Na Ashe, Tobe Ekla Chalo Re.”

Sonar Bangla, Ami Tomai Bhalobashi” (‘O My Golden Bengal, I love you’), is from *Baul*. Children in West Bengal are told this fact, as I was, as an indicator of the genius of Rabindranath: that Rabindranath remains the only person in human history to have written and composed national anthems for two countries, India and Bangladesh. I have found little occasion in the rest of my life to doubt Rabindranath Tagore’s genius, but the profound providential irony that the national anthem of Bangladesh should be a song penned in protest of the first partition of Bengal struck me later in my adult life. It is not hard to imagine the kind of subtle negotiations that must have been behind the choice of this song for the national anthem of the newly independent Bangladesh. In “Sonar Bangla,” Bengal is addressed explicitly as mother, “O Ma,” four times. The lyrics speak to the bountiful, joyous landscape of Bengal. We hear of ‘your sky, your wind’ (“tomar akash, tomar batash”); ‘in mango groves’ (“aamer bane”); and ‘in paddy fields’ (“dhaner khete”). The song also strongly and unmistakably personifies the land as a Bengali mother: golden Bangla not only has ‘a smile at her lips’ (“mukher hashi”) and ‘words in her mouth (“mukher bani”), she also spreads her “anchol” (the end of the sari that hangs loose and often symbolizes maternal care and protection). However, any deification is evidently absent, in contrast to the lyrics of “From the Heart of Bengal” (“Bangladesher Hriday Hote”), which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. In “Bangladesher Hriday,” although the word Bangladesh appears, probably making it attractive to the newly formed country, the mother is unmistakably a Hindu deity, with a third eye, reminiscent of Durga in being both “tender and smiling” and “scorching and searing.” The

rhetoric in anti-Partition movement post-1905 of Hindu-Muslim unity in a united Bengal notwithstanding, it is not hard to imagine why Muslim Bengalis largely, although certainly not all, were alienated from mainstream Bengali nationalism and Swadeshi respectively. I shall return to this at the end of this section. I should also add here that although I add early Tagore in this historical continuum, as he was indeed a key link, he changed his position radically later.

The third example of the iconography is a brief excerpt from a letter by revolutionary-nationalist Aurobindo Ghose, later the spiritual guru Sri Aurobindo, addressed to his wife Mrinalini Devi, written from Baroda on August 30, 1905.⁴³ Before his turn to spiritualism, Aurobindo exemplified the revolutionary-terrorists fighting against British rule, a group that had started to grow at this time. He writes:

other people think of their country as an inert object, know it as a few fields, plains, forests, mountains and rivers; I know my country as my mother, respect her, worship her. If a demon sits on the chest of the mother to drink her blood, what does the son do? Does he sit down to a peaceful meal, engage in frivolities with his wife and children, or does he run to rescue his mother? (*Sri Aurobindo Volume 4: Writings in Bengali, Including Editorials from Dharma* 319; my translation from Bengali)

⁴³ I had first read this letter in my high school, which incidentally was a school run by an *ashram* founded in Sri Aurobindo's name in Calcutta. The letter had startled me then, but I did not know why. It is only now that I realize the astounding and profound implications of the central imagery in this letter.

Aurobindo is very likely offering a rationale for his own absence from the family and his engagement instead with nationalist work, but the image here is strikingly powerful, explicitly reminiscent of Bankim. The first line of the excerpt clearly echoes the lines spoken by Mahendra in *Anandamath* that I quoted in the beginning of the chapter. Given Aurobindo's fascination with Bankim and his *Anandamath*, there is no risk in making this presumption.⁴⁴

Here, the discourse is both corporeal and domestic. The nation is not just a metaphoric mother, but very much owns a female body. There is no explicit mention, but the imagery of the colonial power as a demon sitting on the breast of the Bengali mother does evoke sexual violence. The violence is of course at the

⁴⁴ “The early Aurobindo was much taken by Bankim” writes Julius Lipner in a footnote in his annotated translation *Anandamath or The Sacred Brotherhood* (77). Lipner elaborates,

Upon his return from England as a young man, he wrote seven eulogistic articles in English on Bankim (discussing his life, times and career) for the *Indu Prakash* (July—August, 1894). In 1905, Aurobindo wrote a patriotic pamphlet (published anonymously in Baroda, in western India), entitled *Bhawani Mandir* (The Temple of [the Goddess] Bhawani) which came to the attention of the district magistrate of Broach. *Bhawani Mandir* was clearly influenced by themes from *Anandamath*, especially the idea that India's strength for regeneration as a nation was to derive from a transcendent source conceived of as infinite power or *shakti*, described as the Mother (symbolised by the temple to Bhawani) and identified also with the land of India. It was not long after that Aurobindo began his English translation of *Anandamath*. (77-78)

This translation of *Anandamath* in English is the most famous in Indian and Bengali memory. Started in 1909 by Aurobindo and completed by his brother Barindrakumar Ghose, this translation was published in the 1940 by Basumati Sahitya Mandir in Calcutta, with the acknowledgement: “Translated by Sree Aurobindo and Barindra Kumar Ghosh,” and the note: “Up to 15th Chapter of Part I translated by Sree Aurobindo. Subsequent pages translated by Sree Barindra Kumar Ghosh” (Lipner 301). About this translation, Lipner further tells us,

Chapters 1—13 and the prologue of this translation were published in the Calcutta weekly *Karmayogin*, edited by Aurobindo between August 1909 and February 1910. They were published subsequently in the *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library* in 1972, and again in the *Complete Works* of Aurobindo in 1999. The latter edition also includes a translation of the first two numbered chapters of the standard edition of the novel (excluding the prologue), which were found among Aurobindo's papers; apparently he intended to revise his translation, begun after leaving Calcutta for Pondicherry in 1910, but did not finish. (44)

level of fantastical, of a demon drinking the mother's blood. What is striking is this fantastic image is situated in a banal domestic scene in Bengal, amidst the much rehearsed idea of antagonism between the wife and her mother-in-law. The call of patriotism is imagined in terms of a domestic rivalry between the mother of the man and his wife. The wife and the children are the cause of potential distraction from the urgent need the mother has of her son's attention. In fact, there is no ambiguity here that the nation is indeed the *mother-in-law* of the Bengali woman! The Bengali woman as the wife is not only not called by the mother-nation for her rescue; if anything, the wife along with her children is the possible antagonistic influence which keeps the Bengali man away from his sacred filial duty to the mother.

In briefly citing these three famous men and their works, I want to underscore three main points that have strong implications for the Partition and the Partition text. First, clearly, the imagination of the nation as a Mother flourishes at this time and, placed at the heart of anti-colonial struggle, actually cuts across different rhetorical traditions animating this period and dominating the early decades of the twentieth century. In this, the nation, is feminized and, if implicitly, sexualized. I should also note that the nation imagined as a woman is not restricted to the mother alone. The older fetish of chastity, explicitly on the agenda when the Hindu wife was the custodian of the nation, continues to have a robust life. Aurobindo's rhetoric hints at this, but the connection becomes more explicit in other instances. For instance, in later nationalist poetry, allusions to the disrobing of Draupadi in the Kaurava court, a scene in the epic *Mahabharata*,

“lies concealed behind persistent depictions of Gandhi as the saviour Krishna, who covers the shame of the country with an endless supply of cloth produced by his charkha [spinning wheel]—his version of Krishna’s ‘Sudarshanchakra’” (T. Sarkar 255). At other times, the allusions become even further explicit with references to the wicked Dushshashan disrobing Draupadi (ibid.). This is significant in also arousing and arranging political love, mixed with chivalric erotic appeal, in which the Bengali man is invited to be the desiring/rescuing agent.

Second, in this ordering of images and affects, women as colonized subjects –along with stakes they claim, their resistances, and desires—get suppressed or contained within a patriarchal rubric of relationships. In Aurobindo’s letter, the suggestion that the nation is the mother-in-law of the Bengali woman (as wife) is perhaps somewhat novel. However, when we think of it, this follows entirely logically from the mother and son relationship that nation and the male subject is supposed to have, and it captures the hegemonic absurdity of this scheme when looked at from the point of view of women. In all truthfulness though, Aurobindo’s imagery notwithstanding, to my knowledge, there is no explicit mention of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship pertaining to the nation and women. Instead, in this period, we hear powerful calls to Bengali women from the famous ‘charan kabi’ (minstrel) of Bengal, Mukunda Das: “Bangamata is summoning you, listen to her: Awake all my daughters” and “Arouse a ‘jati’ [race/ nationality] of mothers, Build up a nation of mothers” (T. Sarkar 258). The possibility of Bengali women being ‘daughters’ of the nation-

mother, in a one to one relationship, is acknowledged, but it is also immediately suppressed because the daughter herself is to awake as also the “mother.” Bengali women are to be “mayer jati” (‘race of mothers’). The thrust of the metaphor is that women are called, as mothers, to both produce and reproduce the nation. That they are also daughters to the imagined nation-mother is secondary to this articulation, and the mother-daughter relationship of desire essentially lying outside patriarchy does not prove sustainable. Therefore, if the agency of women is admitted here, it is only and only through association with motherhood; that is, it is done only when it is mediated through women’s relationship with patriarchy.

I should add, though, that the tension between the women as daughters of the nation, on one hand, and women as mothers and, thereby, the nation herself, on the other, is acute. Also, in the rhetoric of “mayer jati,” the allusion to the mother in ‘Shakto’ Bengal—where the mother has a strong connotation of power of the female principle—has an element of empowerment for the women who form this ‘race of mothers.’ As I have discussed, citing Tanika Sarkar above, this power is contained within motherhood to a large extent, but probably never entirely. This too, then, contributes to the tension between women as a sign and subjects, a tension which is not resolvable and haunts the collective imaginaries during Swadeshi and later in Gandhian nationalism with its directly appeal to the women for participation in the nationalist struggle.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ In context of Bengal, this is acutely anticipated in *Ghare Baire*, set against a heightened Swadeshi. In relation to Gandhian nationalism, we can notice the unevenness and the internal tension in Raja Rao’s novel *Kanthapura* (1938), set against the civil disobedience movement in

My third and last point is, as becomes explicit from the three examples I cited above, and a point unambiguously acknowledged by historians of the Swadeshi nationalist movements in the early twentieth century, mainstream anti-colonial nationalism had a clear Hindu, especially *bhadralok*, constituency.⁴⁶ The imageries, idioms, and affects that were meant to arouse nationalism were geared towards the Hindus. That is to say, nationalism of the Swadeshi variety at large and the nation imagined within it was Hindu in idiom and character.⁴⁷ Thus, the success of the anti-Partition movement in 1905, Partha Chatterjee writes,

barely concealed the faultlines in [the] unitary conception within the nation. The nationalist political leadership in Bengal at this time was overwhelmingly upper-caste Hindu [...] and naturalized a conception of the nation in history that was distinctly Hindu. And yet, it would be wrong to suppose that this Hindu-centred view was directed against the Muslims or that it even sought to exclude from the ambit of the nation” (37-38)

Thus, the movement even produced “an explicit rhetoric of Hindu-Muslim unity” (Chatterjee 38), articulated as ‘brotherhood.’ However, I doubt that that rhetoric camouflaged the Hindu-centric patronizing acceptance of the Muslims as part of the nation but not equal to the ‘self’ that made that nation. For the most part, the nationalism of the time neglected, excluded, and alienated the Muslim

the 1930s. See Rumina Sethi’s excellent discussion of *Kanthapura* in this respect in her chapter “Involvement and Resistance of Women” (131-150) in her book *Myths of the Nation*.

⁴⁶ For a comprehensive history, see Sumit Sarkar’s *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908*.

⁴⁷ See the chapter, “Hindu Muslim Relations,” in Sumit Sarkar’s *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908* (405-464)

intelligentsia in Bengal. I speak only of the intelligentsia because Swadeshi was a middle class movement; the peasant and the poor, the masses, were not even thought to be important at this stage. Overall, although for the most part it was not communal, the nationalist movement was not secular either. Even then, the slippage from non-secular to communal is already in sight.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Tagore, who was such a key figure early in the Swadeshi movement, was one of the first to sense the hidden seed of communalism in the extremist brand of nationalist politics which started as a part of this movement. After the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1906-07 in some places, including in his family-owned estates in Pabna, he started to have significant misgivings about the nature of extremist nationalism, especially that which borrowed its militant Hindu idiom from Bankim's *Anandamath* and "Bande Mataram." The misgivings and a critique of the legacy from Bankim is perceptible in his novel *Ghare Baire*, a novel which was vituperatively attacked by Tagore's contemporaries and identified as 'anti-Hindu.'

Tagore's politics about what constitutes the Indian nation and nationalism went through a radical change in the course of his life. Sumit Sarkar speaks of a "definite ascendancy" of Hindu revivalist ideas in his writing between 1882-85 and 1901-1906 (*The Swadeshi Movement* 53). Assessing Tagore's 1902 essay "Bharatbarsher Itihash" ('History of India'), Sarkar writes, "unity in diversity is implied to be something already achieved in India in and through Hinduism" (54). In this essay, Indian history is also marked as false because it focuses away from 'our' culture and throws light on the monuments and courtly cultures of the Muslim Sultans and emperors.

Soon after the riots of 1906-07, Tagore had sensed the possibility of the dangerous slippage of nationalist politics into a communal one. According to Sumit Sarkar, he "was to sharply modify" his earlier view, as expressed in "Bharatbarsher Itihash" for example, "in his post 1907 essays calling for patience and work to build a 'mahajati' [a great or super race; inclusive of different races] in our land" (54). Henceforth, we see a critique of caste and racial (Hindu) purity in his novel *Gora* (1910), a further critique of extremist nationalism in Swadeshi politics in *Ghare Baire* (1916), and a repudiation of nationalism itself in his essay "Nationalism" (1917).

On the shift in Tagore's position, Sangeeta Ray writes,

Tagore's refusal to compose a song at the request of [extremist nationalist leader] Bipin Pal to celebrate the motherland as a goddess, his reluctance to set in tune the militant slogan "Bande Mataram" to music for the Congress session to be held in Calcutta, and the use of the slogan by nationalists setting fire to Muslim homes in the novel *The Home and the World*—these actions testify to his mistrust of the deployment of a particularly inflected religious idiom for a nationalist movement. (95-96)

For a discussion of how Tagore repudiated his earlier position about Hindu superiority and the Swadeshi movement, see Sumit Sarkar's discussion of Tagore in *The Swadeshi Movement*, 47-63. Also see Sumit Sarkar's essay, "Nationalism and 'Stri-Swadhinata: The Contexts and Meanings of Rabindranath's *Ghare-Baire*." The "Introduction" by P.K. Datta to his edited *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World: A Critical Companion* is another excellent concise account of Tagore's rather remarkable trajectory. For an idiosyncratic, but nevertheless insightful, reading of Tagore's view on nationalism, see Ashis Nandy's *Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath*

The discourse of *sati* particularly shows the mutually constitutive relationship of (Hindu) nationalism of the time, located at the site of chastity of Hindu women, and a concomitant legitimization of anti-Muslim antagonism. During the early nationalist period, we find an “obsessive preoccupation with *sati*” (T. Sarkar 265). In numerous instances, the discourse of *sati* mingled with that of ‘*jawhar*’ (or ‘*jauhar*’) *vrat*’ (in Bengali, *broto*), mass-suicide by Hindu (Rajput) war-widows, or soon to be war-widows, in face of defeat of their husbands in battle against Muslims (specifically the Mughals) to save their ‘honour’ (read chastity). The tales of “heroic Rajput resistance to Muslim invasion became so popular [in early twentieth century] that a whole host of plays, novels, and songs were written on this theme” (Kumar 28). The primary source of the Rajput legends of *sati* in Bengal were two wildly popular volumes of *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan or The Central and Western Rajpoot States of India* by one Lieutenant-Colonel James Tod, volume 1 of which was first published in 1829 and volume two in 1834. Earlier, in his Hindu revivalist phase, even Rabindranath spoke approvingly of *sati*,⁴⁹ while Abanindranath wrote of heroic ‘*sati*’s in *Raj Kahini* (‘Stories of Royalty,’ 1909).⁵⁰ In this, mainstream

Tagore and the Politics of Self. Sumit Sarkar’s essay mentioned above discusses and critiques some aspects of Nandy’s book. For the controversies and criticism directed at *Ghare Baire*, see Jayanti Chattopadhyay’s essay, “*Ghare Baire* and Its Readings” in Datta’s edited volume mentioned above.

⁴⁹ In the essay “Manobi” (Woman) (Bengali; *Rabindrarachanabali* 14; cited in Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement* 54)

⁵⁰ The word ‘Raj’ in *Raj Kahini* is also a pun on the Rajputs of Rajasthan as it was on the legends of the Rajputs that the collection was based. This collection billed as juvenile literature is widely popular in Bengal. I first read *Raj Kahini* when I was six or seven and read it again within school curriculum in grade seven. I had also read the essay “Bharatbarsher Itihash” in grade nine. Although I had excellent teachers, I do not remember being made aware of the Hindu revivalist,

nationalism disconcertingly comes to share a common ground with Hindu nationalism and implicit and explicit anti-Muslim sentiments. Indeed, the allusion to *sati* and *jawhar broto* becomes a rhetorical trope running through the Swadeshi movement and later in other key locations, including speeches by the Congress leadership.

There are several ‘*sati*’s in Abanindranath’s *Raj Kahini*, however the most memorable is Padmini, the brave beautiful queen from Singhal (Ceylon) who had married a Rajput. Padmini, the story goes, committed *sati* along with twelve thousand women of Chittor to resist being captured by emperor Alauddin Khilji. Abanindranath almost certainly took Padmini from James Tod. Although Padmini is treated everywhere as a historical figure, she was more likely a mythical figure, as Radha Kumar writes, “appearing first in a sixteenth century Sufi poem, where Tod found her” (57). Kumar continues, “In his *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, [Tod] describes her as the most brave and beautiful of Rajput ‘*sati*’s; during the latter part of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she became a symbol of the heroic Hindu woman, especially in Bengal” (ibid.). Tod’s *Annals* indeed provided a model of “chaste women” in the Rajput ‘*sati*’s for the anti-colonial nationalist movement. Jasodhara Bagchi, too, cites the famous nationalist song, “Balo, Balo, Balo Sabe” by Atulprasad Sen, a younger contemporary of Rabindranath, as translated by Chandreyee Niyogi:

let alone the anti-Islamic, bias in either of these canonical texts. Nor do I remember being particularly critical of *sati* when I read the latter collection. I share this anecdotal information as an example that points to the absolute centrality of these discourses in the cultural life of Calcutta up until at least my youth and to their circulation without critical questioning.

Those who keep their honour by embracing the pyre,
 Give up their lives happily for their sons and children's sires,
 We are their children all.
 Sing, sing again with a hundred lutes and flutes,
 'India will reclaim the grandest place in the conference
 of nations. (Bagchi "Freedom" 19)

The allusion to *sati* was not restricted to male patriots alone. The first group of women to gain leadership in nationalist movement also used *sati* to promote women's activism and participation in the nationalist struggle. To Annie Besant, *sati* "was a source of strength," both enabling and sustaining" (Kumar 57). Sarojini Naidu addressed the Calcutta Congress session in 1917, and evoked Padmini to promote women's activism and leadership:

I am only a woman, and I would like to say to you all, when your hour strikes, when you need torch bearers in the darkness to lead you, when you need standard bearers to uphold your banner and when you die for want of faith, the womanhood of India will be with you as the holders of your banner, and the sustainers of your strength. And if you die, remember that the spirit of Padmini of Chittoor is enshrined with the manhood of India.
 (Sitaramayya 131, cited Kumar 57)

Naidu was also a leader known for her feminism and active commitment to Hindu-Muslim unity. The evocation of Padmini here is by no means simple, and several subtle negotiations with expectations of gender roles are at work. Nevertheless, evidently, Padmini as the *jawhar-sati* is a trope complicit with anti-

Muslim politics and makes the nationalism not only Hindu but also communal, whether not the usage recognizes that. Moreover, here the national honour once again attaches itself to a sacrificing, chaste, female body. Allusion to Padmini, on one level, has to do with sacrifice being the call of the hour, but also remains, on another level, trenchant in the symbolic power of chastity.

The point to emphasize here is that the discourses and rhetorical traditions I am citing, within which these repeated allusions to *sati* or *jawhar* occur, were mainstream nationalist in character. They are certainly distinct from the communal politics that developed since the 1920s. If anything, Hindu-Muslim unity was the explicit agenda of these discourses. The men and women who glorified *sati* and *jawhar* are liberal stalwarts of Bengali cultural life and national leaders, who thought of themselves and were thought of by others as utterly secular, and indeed *were* secular in their activist politics, whose commitment to anti-colonial nationalism were above questioning, and who gave leadership and direction to the community.

As we can see, with the insertion of *sati* and *jawhar* in the heart of mainstream nationalism, the discursive territory of the Partition has already been in the making. A territory, upon which none other than the great proponent of the philosophy of non-violence and the man who more than anyone else effected the involvement of non-elite women in large numbers in nationalist politics, Gandhi, will say in a speech at a prayer meeting in 1947:

I have heard that many women who did not want to lose their honour and chose to die. Many men killed their own wives. I think that it is really

great, because I know that such things make India great. [...] They [the women] have gone with courage. They have not sold away their honour. Not that their life was not that dear to them, but they felt that it was better to die than to be forcibly converted to Islam by the Muslims and allow them to assault their bodies. And so those women died. They were not just a handful, but quite a few. When I hear all these things, I dance with joy that there are such brave women in India. (Gandhi 202, cited Mookerjea-Leonard 46)⁵¹

After the 1946 riots in Noakhali in East Bengal, Gandhi also advised sexually assaulted women “to consume poison and end their lives rather than live with the shame of rape” (Leonard-Mookerjea 46). Leonard-Mookerjea is absolutely right when she highlights that Gandhi sanctions not only suicide but also murder of raped women in the 1947 prayer-meeting speech.⁵²

⁵¹ I owe this quote to Debali Leonard-Mookerjea’s essay “Disenfranchised Bodies: Jyotirmoyee Devi’s Writings on the Partition” (46) This speech is also quoted in Jill Didur’s *Unsettling Partition* (3). Even so, I think these lines are worth citing all over again.

⁵² I would like to note here, however, that although for emphasizing a particular rhetoric that connects the late nineteenth and early twentieth century nationalist politics to the Partition I went directly to Gandhi, there is a historical discontinuity here. There is, in many significant ways, a decisive break in the politics *about* women from Bankim’s time to Gandhi’s, effected by the brand of politics Gandhi practiced. So, while I do find the speeches by Gandhi pressing enough to quote above, I would like to alert the reader that this move also explicitly simplifies the relation of Gandhi and Gandhian ethics to women.

Gandhi was the first national politician who explicitly called out to women explicitly to participate in politics and come out in the public arena to do so. Women in large numbers did hear this call and entered nationalist politics. This should be remembered along with the deeply problematic notions Gandhi had with sexuality in general, including, specifically, women’s sexuality. In roughly the first half of her chapter “Constructing the Image of a Woman Activist” in *History of Doing*” (74-95), Radha Kumar outlines the gender dynamics in Gandhi’s view of women’s activism and in Gandhian nationalism in general. Radha Kumar’s discussion suggests that although Gandhi called women to enter the public realm, such call was contained within a rigid framework of propriety befitting the woman’s sex and gender. For instance, Kumar cites that Gandhi “was almost hysterical with rage” when a group of sex-workers joined “*his’ movement*”

Before we get to the Partition from post-Swadeshi nationalism in this historical continuum, however, we must also take into is the rise of communalism that begins to take shape from the 1920s and develops into full strength by the 1930s. Both Pradip Datta's *Carving Blocks: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal* and Joya Chatterji's *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* focus on the rise of communalism in the early decades of the twentieth century.⁵³ Joya Chatterji argues that there was "a shift from nationalism to communalism" in the 1930s when the energy of the mainstream (Hindu) nationalism was directed away from the British to aim at the Muslims (268). Partha Chatterjee takes this argument of Joya Chatterji's to task in his essay "The Second Partition of Bengal." He argues that thinking of a breakdown of 'Hindu-Muslim unity' and a transformation from nationalism to communalism is "much too simplistic" (43). Chatterjee argues:

It is not true that the new atmosphere of Hindu-Muslim conflict required any significant transformation of the internal elements of the nationalist consciousness as it had been constructed in the late 19th century. If it was generative of slogans of Hindu-Muslim fraternity in an earlier era, it could now generate with equal ease the spectre of Muslim tyranny." (45)

(83; emphasis in original). Kumar also adds, "Gandhi created the image of the mother as repository of spiritual and moral values as a preceptor for men" (82). Also see Jill Didur's discussion of the same issue in *Unsettling Partition* 32-34.

⁵³ Datta's study focuses in the 1920s and takes into account both Hindu and Muslim communalism, whereas Joya Chatterji's book, as indicated by the title, focuses on Hindu communalism and its career and contribution to the Bengal Partition. I shall base my discussion here on the former study because it directly addresses the question of gender.

Chatterjee also disagrees with the view that “organized opinion among Hindus became any less anti-British.” In fact, if anything, he contends, the view that the British were promoting Muslim interests strengthened the anti-British sentiments among nationalist Hindus (44). Having offered this corrective, Chatterjee concurs with Joya Chatterji that “religious identity as a demography became perhaps the single most crucial factor in determining the distribution of government power in Bengal under the constitutional reform of 1935,” and further that “Hindu communalism came strongly to the fore in Bengal’s provincial politics in the 1930s and 1940s can hardly be denied” (44).

Partha Chatterjee’s rejoinder, however, underscores an important point about the rise of Hindu communalism, which is not only relevant to this discussion, but also has some bearing on the connection I would like to emphasize in this dissertation between nationalism and communalism. Chatterjee draws attention to the “hegemonic power” of the “nationalist imagination”(45). This comment reinforces the argument that mainstream nationalism and communalism in India have not had separate domains and histories, as is often presumed.⁵⁴ In my examination of the Partition discourse, too, I notice the coexistence of nationalist and communal tropes. Adding to Chatterjee’s point, I would argue that the Partition is really the third term that manifests from this relationship between

⁵⁴ For this argument, see *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1885-1930* and *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India’s Muslims since Independence* by Mushirul Hasan and *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* by Gyanendra Pandey. Also see *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India*, edited by David Ludden; and *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, edited by Vasudha Dalmia and H von Stietencron.

nationalism and communalism. In the commonsensical Hindu imagination, Partition is linked to communalism but seldom to nationalism. However, when we look into the discourse of communalism, its discursive links with the majoritarian nationalism becomes noticeable. We not only see that nationalism and communalism, which are supposed to be oppositional, are uncomfortably locked in with other, but that the Partition is also linkable to the majoritarian nationalism. One way to trace these links from a gender-centric perspective, as I have done in this chapter, is through tracking the term common to all three discourses—of nationalism, communalism and the Partition—which is that of the trope of the Hindu woman's chastity.

Discussing "Communalism as an Ideological Process," in the 1920s, P. K. Datta gives discursive instances of "mainly mofussil [small town] Hindu women being abducted by Muslim goondas (hooligans)." Such incidents and their press reportage work "like a stereotype" in that "its spread of insinuation covers all Muslims, holding them responsible for constant criminality and rapaciousness, while conversely creating a picture of Hindu weakness" (15). Datta's analysis of press reportage shows that the press, utilizing "the monopoly of the newspapers over the representation of the everyday" (151), very largely created the commonsensical discourse that Muslim men were abducting Hindu women. As Datta writes, "it did not take long for these reports to become a commonsensical point of reference for Hindu communalists" (148). The abduction of Hindu women becomes very much tied up with the image of 'the weak Hindu' race, which goes back to the notion of 'the Dying Hindu,' which in turn arose from a

mis-reading of the census of 1891.⁵⁵ The concept of the ‘weak Hindu’ race, is easily also connected with a weak Hindu man. Individual Hindu men are weak, which is why they cannot protect their women. Congruently, the theft of its women, the members with reproductive possibilities, is weakening the Hindu community ‘emblematically’ and numerically.

Whereas there is no ground to doubt the violence experienced by the women whose abduction cases were reported or appropriated by the press, the agenda behind the reports discernibly exceeded a mere concern for the women. The circulation of these stories with a particular communal inflection suggests Hindu communal interests at work, even if it was ostensibly about justice for these women. The fascinating details of these cases, presented by Datta, are outside the parameters of this discussion, but suffice it to say that the primary markers of the discourse of the “abduction” of Hindu women were not really *for* these women as it was *about* a host of other interests and anxieties, which once again used the women’s bodies as the specific location for articulation. In fact, what was crucial to the functioning of this discourse was the erasure of actual women’s voices and agencies, because it worked as an objectifying discourse.

⁵⁵ Datta writes, “on the basis of slower growth rate of Hindus, O’Donnell, [the census commissioner for 1891,] leapfrogged across simple logic to deduce the number of years for Hindus to disappear altogether!” (23-24). See Datta’s discussion on the role of the colonial censuses in shaping communalism.

Datta’s study shows the pervasiveness of the life of the discourse of the “Dying Hindu” and its implicit link to Muslim population growth—because Muslims have four wives and they bred more—through the entire course of the twentieth century and its intense usage in the Hindutva campaign for Ram Janmabhoomi—Babri masjid demolition in early 1990s.

As we have been seeing in earlier discursive formations since the late nineteenth century, here too women's bodies come to be the location where assorted anxieties of the community's boundary negotiation are posited. Once again it is the threat of loss of the chastity of the Hindu woman that becomes the catchall logic, which is deployed to articulate and justify an assorted number of anxieties and actions. We are already within the discursive logic that shall prompt both the actions and their explanations during the Partition. Bagchi and Dasgupta commenting on Datta's *Carving Bloc*, point out how it has shown that "the fear of 'abduction' or 'rape' by the 'other' community had been played up in the communal divide of the Hindus and Muslims and had prepared the ground of the 'two-nation' theory" (4).

The communal discourse exemplified in Datta's work is, as I have shown, easily connected to the mainstream nationalist discourse; the two constituting the proverbial two sides of the same coin. There is a slight shift in *emphasis*—not in kind, however—from the discourse of nationalism to the discourse of communalism. If in nationalism the nation is emphatically imagined as a woman, in communalism it is exactly the reverse at work: women overwhelmingly become the embodiment of the nation. Of course, both these processes always work together and are thus integral to both nationalism and communalism. However, a different half of the process is predominantly visible over the other in either case.

III

“This soil is my mother:” The Second Partition of Bengal

There is a strong continuity of the trope of the nation as a woman from nationalism, along with its corollary trope of women as embodiment of the nation from communalism, through the common Partition discourses and many Hindu refugee texts of the Partition of Bengal. In these numerous cases, partition discourse colludes with cultural nationalism on the issue of ‘women.’ To exemplify the normative Hindu discourse of the Bengal Partition, I will cite two iconic texts written shortly after the Partition: a collection of essays called the *Chhere Asha Gram* (‘The Abandoned Village,’⁵⁶ 1950) and *Udbastu*⁵⁷ (‘Homeless;’ 1970), a memoir by Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, a civil servant. Both texts are literary and belong to the genre of the memoir or, what we today may call, ‘creative non-fiction.’ They are thus different from the texts analyzed in the rest of this dissertation, but I am not citing these texts in their capacity as testimonials here.⁵⁸ What interests me is that between these two texts, they

⁵⁶ The title in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s translation in his essay “Remembered Villages: Representations of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition.”

⁵⁷ Literally, the word *udbastu* means what is ‘ut’ or ‘outside’ of ‘bastu’ or ‘home’. It is only in the post-Partition usage that ‘*udbastu*’ becomes synonymous with ‘*bastuhara*’, (people who have lost their ‘*bastu*’ or home). I could translate *udbastu* as ‘refugee/s’ as well, but it is another Bengali word ‘*sharanarathi*’ (literally, refuge-seeker), which would be far more literal translation of refugee. ‘*Sharanarathi*’ is far less frequently used in the context of Bengal Partition although the English word refugee is often used. I have thus preferred to translate *Udbastu* as ‘Homeless’. In the English word ‘refugee’, the emphasis falls on the land of arrival. In contrast in *udbastu*/‘*bastuhara*’ the point of reference is the land left behind. To my mind, this is an important distinction. For further discussion of the Bengali translations of refugee as *udbastu* as well as *sharanarathi*, see 322-324 in Dipesh Chakrabarty above cited essay.

⁵⁸ Truth-claims, though explicitly mediated by a literary diction, are present in both these texts. Since my purpose here to chart a certain discursive circulation of the signifier ‘women’ in

exemplify the two aspects of Partition discourse of Bengal in framing women—the nation as a woman, and its reverse the women as the nation—that I have been discussing in this chapter, and they demonstrate how central they both were to Partition discourse. These two form the pillars that hold up the gendered Partition discourse.

Chhere Asha Gram (The Abandoned Village) is a compilation of essays that appeared serially, starting in 1950, in the Bengali newspaper *Jugantar*. It was compiled under the editorship⁵⁹ of Dakshinaranjan Basu, a well-known journalist. It first appeared in two volumes, in 1953 and 1958 respectively, and then as a combined, single volume in 1975.⁶⁰ The essays are grouped by districts of East Bengal and by the name of the villages; the authors of the essays are not named. These essays are narratives of memory and trauma, and in that way they are a-historical.⁶¹ It is the suppression of history in this essays that interests

articulations about the Partition, I have not needed to maintain a distinct difference between fiction and non-fiction in this case.

⁵⁹ The uniformity of diction and the similarity in structure among all the essays suggest very heavy editorial intervention if not ghostwriting itself. The latter possibility is also hinted at by Basu's untitled foreword to the volume, where he writes: "The stories here are composed out of information collected from various sources, from many people in the refugee camps. Thus, naturally, there are gaps and errors in information presented here. [...] Even so, I am grateful to the many colleagues and strangers who helped give this project shape by representing the identity and story of their native villages ["apon apon gram-porichoy diye"]" (my translation from Bengali; sixth page of non-paginated, untitled foreword).

⁶⁰ The two volumes were banned by the Pakistani government immediately after their publication, and could not be circulated to readers in East Pakistan. The new government lifted the ban after the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. There was a surge in demand for the book during the Liberation War and following the formation of Bangladesh (ibid. sixth-seventh page).

⁶¹ See the discussion of memory narrative as opposed to the historical in the Introduction.

Pradip Bose's essay "Memory Begins where History Ends" takes its title from the thesis of Chakrabarty's essay. However, Bose's reading of these essays as trauma narratives is more conventional and more sympathetic than Dipesh Chakrabarty's critical analysis.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay "Remembered Villages: Representations of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition."⁶² Chakrabarty argues, the essays in *Chhere Asha Gram* clearly cast their memories in clichéd tropes of "Bengali literary and nationalist writing" (319). The "idyllic picture" of the village that develops in *Chhere Asha Gram* goes back to "the time when nationalist writers such as Bankimchandra Chatterjee and later Rabindranath Tagore and a whole host of others drew upon new perceptions of the countryside to create, for and on behalf of the urban middle classes, a powerfully nostalgic and pastoral image of the generic Bengali village" (327). The essays were written "in the spirit of mourning, part of the collective and public grieving" (322), but the refugee writers were also trying to use these essays to lobby for a more sympathetic acceptance of their lot by the largely hostile bhadralok population from West Bengal. The style of writing, borrowing themes from canonical Bengali literature, becomes "hackneyed expressions derived from Tagore and other sources, short cultural clichés, pieces of literary kitsch, aimed at the shared nostalgia of the city bhadralok" (331).

These essays create "a sense of home that combined sacredness with beauty. This sacredness" Chakrabarty argues, "was not tolerant of the Muslim. The Muslim Bengali had a place created through the idea of kinship. But the home was Hindu [... and] its sense of sacred was constructed here through an idiom that was recognizably Hindu." Very significantly, inherent in this idiom is

⁶² The essay was first published in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 18:2 (1995): 109-129. I have used the reprint cited in the Bibliography.

the impossibility that “the Hindu might live in a home that embodied the Islamic sacred” (336). I fully concur with Chakrabarty’s argument. In my reading, it has also been evident that the liberal spirit of synchronic culture that the essays often envision is the kind that is always ‘they were or could be like us’ but never the converse that is ‘we were or could be like them.’

What Chakrabarty’s essay does not comment on, however, is that the memory narratives of the abandoned village is seeping with images that are based on the gendering of land/village and sometimes of the rivers as ‘mothers’: “this soil is my mother” (Basu, Dakshinaranjan 1), “the soil-mother of my dreams” (15), “birth-land village-mother’s soil” (16), “mother-nation” (34), “golden mother” (41), “country-mother” (“pollijononi,” “pollima”; 42, 46), and so on (all translations from this text are mine). This is fundamentally instrumental to the construction of the sacred and the beautiful that Chakrabarty discusses above, as is evident in the last excerpt in the epigraph with which I started this chapter, “the soil is the mother” (Basu 1). The excerpt also clearly demonstrates that the relationship is contained, however, within patriarchy: the soil “is sacred from the blessings of my father and grandfather ... the sacred memory of my forefathers is mixed with this soil” (1). As in the nationalist writing it models itself on, the women are under erasure when not contained within the patriarchal family relationship.

When the women do appear sporadically in these essays other than as the nation-mother, they appear as sisters. River Ichhamati is a daughter of the village and a sister (23, 24). The trope easily moves between the natural and the

human. Thus, in another essay, remembering the love of the sisters, the author laments the failure to protect “even the honour of these sisters from the assault of evildoers” (“durbrittoder hat theke bonder man-morjada projonto rokhhya korte parini;” 39). He adds, “it is this failure to remember that the honour of our sisters is more important than our lives that is the cause of shame for us Bengalis today” (39). This imagination has the same texture as the imagination of the nation as mother; in both, there is one kind of erasure of women as subjects. Here, women are reduced to “sisters” whose violation bring a crisis of masculinity for the brothers and, hence, a crisis for the very race (of the brothers). The discourse of perceived (and real) threats to a community, which is deployed to work up a fever of insecurity for a community, also locates itself on women’s bodies. It is the citation of the women’s bodies of one’s own community which allows mobilization of nationalist, and even communal fervour. From a patriarchal-communal point of view, the threat to women’s chastity is a point to be rehearsed over and over again.

Therefore, it is a small wonder that in common parlance there is absolutely no dearth of lurid, garish, or alarmist accounts of violence that women are subjected to at the time of ethnic conflict. The evocation of how the women of one’s own community have suffered or could have suffered is central to communalist narratives that the Partition not only occasioned but eventually justified. Thus, the enumeration of historical wrongs done to women during Partition riots is usually not done with some kind of proto-feminist interest at heart. Communalist discourse is also objectifying of women. Speaking *ad*

nauseam of the violated women and fixing the violated female body in a patriarchal gaze within a rubric of chastity, this discourse is deployed to a necessary communal separation of ‘us and them,’ and reproduces the violence. In the evocation of the honour of the sisters in *Chhere Asha Gram*, we see the tenet of the discourse where the signifier ‘women’ stands for the nation, and both violation and protection of women participate in that representative economy.

More than *Chhere Asha Gram*, the beginning of *Udbastu* (Homeless) demonstrates the function of this discourse. Hiranmay Bandopadhyay, the author of *Udbastu* was a District magistrate—a civil servant—in colonial Bengal, working in North Bengal at the time of the Partition. He documents his experience of the time and his involvement with and attempts to rehabilitate the refugees. In this book length memoir, drawing a contrast to Western India, he recounts:

In Eastern India, after independence, once the country has been partitioned, the incidents took a different turn. Here, no riots or other violence broke out. On the contrary, in all the places where there were continuation of earlier violence, stopped after the declaration of independence. [...] At least peace was ostensibly undisturbed in the early phase. If that be the case, why are people [Hindus] leaving East Pakistan? This question had risen in my mind. Is there a reasonable cause to voluntarily leave one’s country and embrace this hardship? (13; my translation from Bengali)

He voices the question in the barracks where middle-class caste-Hindu Bhadrakalok refugees had settled and provokes a very angry response.

The first speaker's raised voice attracts others. A crowd gathers. The second speaker answers: "Are you aware that it is no longer possible for Hindu women to go to the village ponds for their daily baths?" (15) The story that follows, the narrator calls "painful" and reports in brief. When Hindu women (note the plural) go to the ponds to bathe, men from the majority community (i.e. "Muslims"), young and old sing lurid songs addressed to the women. The reported lines of the song start with "Pak Pak Pakistan" and go on to make sexually charged invitation to the women to join them. When this shock immobilizes the women, these men obscenely suggest that perhaps some of the men should go in and help the women out of the pond (15-16). Having told this story, the speaker asks "How can one live there after this? So, we fled. It may be true that there is no bloodshed yet, but we left after this event." (16).

At the end of this visit, Bandyopadhyay concludes that these kinds of stories proved that "the people who were leaving East Pakistan were doing so because of mental torture" ("manoshik nipeeron"): "After the formation of Pakistan, due to the change in the point of view of the majority, it is no longer possible for these people to live there with respect [that they have been accustomed to] and honour ("maan ijgot")" (16). This discussion of "mental torture" quickly comes to a discussion of women: "over there, it is difficult for women to keep their honour" ("meyeder ijgot rakha sekhane dushkar" 16). However, from the shift in the mood of the sentence, it is no longer certain

whether Bandyopadhyay (or the refugees who have spoken to him) still means the kind of incident at the village pond which amounted to “mental” harassment specifically, or if there is an implication here that cases of rape and abduction are involved as well. For, when used for women, the word for honour (“*ijjot*”) can denote physical chastity. “Losing honour” is a standard euphemism for rape in Bengali and several other Indian languages.

What is fascinating is that Rachel Weber, interviewing refugees in colonies of Calcutta in 1991, heard this story again. She writes, “The image of the Hindu women bathing in the *pukur* or pond and being heckled by groups of Muslim boys is prevalent in the literature and was acknowledged frequently in the interviews” (66). Evident in the incident that Bandyopadhyay narrates is that the male refugees cite “women” as one of the primary reasons for their refugee status since protecting the women was their primary masculine duty. Weber draws the same conclusion, observing “the role of the defiled woman as the symbol for the loss of identity and homeland” (*ibid.*).

Nilanjana Chatterjee also echoes this view. She argues that the most commonly cited reason for Hindu refugees fleeing East Bengal was the “honour” of the women of their family (78). Her interviews with many male refugees from various stations in life also indicate this gendered dimension of refugee experience of *bhadralok* Hindus:

The ‘chastity’ of married and unmarried Hindu women seemed to symbolize most potently, the honour, the exclusivity and continuity of community—and to represent its site of transgression. Violence against

Hindu women featured widely in the minorities complaint of ill-treatment in Pakistan and as a topic of concern in West Bengal—the sexual possession of Hindu women by Muslim men being made to stand for Muslim domination, ‘miscegenation,’ the loss and humiliation of the male Hindu self. (77)

Nilanajana Chatterjee goes on to note that Suresh Chandra Banerjee,⁶³ the president of the West Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, told his party activists in West Bengal that, because he himself was from East Bengal, he was in the know of the conditions of Hindus in East Bengal although he had lived in Calcutta for twenty years. Indeed, “he could vouch they were leaving because they ‘prized their self respect and the honour of their women above everything else’” (78). Chatterjee goes on to argue that “the rhetoric of sexual assault had little correlation with the actual incidence of rape of Hindu women by Muslim men, and was not so much concerned with the plight of the women in question—who were usually abandoned if they returned to the Hindu community—as with the protection of patriarchal Hindu society” (78).

In the normative Hindu refugee discourse of the Partition exemplified by both *Chhere Asha Gram* and *Udbastu*, we, therefore, see the same trope of the chaste body of a Hindu woman as recurrent and as almost the lynchpin that holds the discourse together. In this, there is no disjunction with dominant nationalism

⁶³ *The Trauma and the Triumph* also quote this section from Chatterjee’s dissertation. The name of the president of the West Bengal Provincial Congress Committee appears as “Satish Chandra Banerjee,” however (Bagchi and Dasgupta 5).

or communalism. If preoccupation with the chaste, Hindu, female body—protecting its honour—becomes the *raison-d'être* of a refugee, such preoccupation gives only a different twist to the efficacy of the *same* logic by which at the time of the Partition, bodies of women had become concretely available as the locations for contesting and conquering claims of different kinds of “imagined communities” and, hence, as target of violence.

Where is the woman as an individual-subject in all this? When the nation is reified as a woman, women are abstracted; their agency, subjecthood and desire are erased. When women embody the nation, they are reduced to physical bodies, empty vessels, in order to hold the reified nation. We are back to Gyan Pandey’s observation of the paradox I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: that a woman has no religion (or community or nation) but at the same time she also stands for nothing else. In the normative Partition discourse, between the sign and the embodiment of the nation, woman as a subject is erased. Or, to imagine a different set of boundary markers, she is erased between patriarchal gender crimes, the violence targeted specifically at her during the Partition, on one end and the patriarchal articulation of that violence as ‘threat.’

It is at this point that I would like to end tracking the historical continuum and hazard a more explicit conclusion. By now, I am closer to an answer to the question with which I opened this chapter: why and how do women’s bodies become the location for ‘nationalist’-communal violence? Even if the answer is not available in a simple straightforward cause-effect manner, given the normative discourse of the Partition, we can still suggest that that women’s bodies

would have been targeted by ethnic violence during the Partition is already scripted by the many decades of patriarchal cultural nationalism preceding it. The victimization of women's bodies in ethnic violence is, I think, a universal phenomenon, a signature of patriarchy itself. Nevertheless, in each particular location it takes on concrete historical forms. In this case, in years leading up to and during the Partition, when conflicting claims of opposing ethnic nationalisms or collective identity politics were at war with each other, that *women's bodies* became the most readily available location for this contest is predictable. In other words, we can argue that the seed of the gendered quality of Partition violence was already planted in the most pervasive cultural nationalism of the three-quarter of a century preceding the Partition. This is only a 'logical' follow-up of the equation of women with land, and of the figurative imagination of a collective as a woman. Such figural imagination folds back on real, flesh and blood women, who then become the marker of a community. The editors of *The Trauma and the Triumph* also infer this logical connection: "Women, even in ordinary peaceful times, are seen as icons of the honour of the community. The easiest way to assail a community, therefore, is to defile the sexual purity of its women" (4).

Through the course of this chapter, I have detailed the tropes and idioms that are signatures of the dominant tradition crystallizing in the patriarchal cultural nationalism of late nineteenth century and developing into the mainstream nationalism in the early decades of the century. These tropes and idioms, I have shown, are also common to communal and Partition discourses. In each of the following three chapters, I will examine three Partition texts that

take these tropes and idioms as central points of reference for departure, radicalization, contestation, and critique. These three texts construct the refugee woman such that it intervenes in this hegemonic and violent trope of the chaste, Hindu, female body as a metaphor for the nation. They lay bare the violence of the dominant tropes and seek to radically alter the conditions under which we read 'women.'

Chapter 2

Violence of the Metaphor from the Standpoint of Women as Embodied-Subjects: Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga*

In this chapter, I read Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* as the first example of a textual intervention in the discursive process of metaphor formation. The novel interrupts the patriarchal *citing* of women as a sign, a symbol, a metaphor for the nation. It attempts to alter the codes of representation that are dominant in the regime of the metaphor by introducing the refugee woman as an embodied-subject to the centre of the narrative. It tries to assess the experience of the process of metaphor formation from the 'standpoint'¹ of an embodied refugee woman. In inserting the refugee woman, who straddles the traumatic extraordinary of the Partition and the ordinary of the everyday world, at the centre of the narrative, the novel addresses the gendered experience of the Partition as a violence of patriarchy and brings under critical scrutiny the historical-everyday of the nation.

Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga (literally: 'This Side of Ganga, That Side of Ganga') was first published in 1967 in Bengali as *Itihashe Stree Parva* (Women's Chapter in History) in the Autumn-Annual volume of the prestigious Bengali periodical *Prabashi*. A year later, it was published as a book with a changed title, on request of the publisher (Jyotirmoyee Devi "Author's Note" xxxvi). The new

¹ Dorothy Smith's phrase (*The Everyday World* 106-111).

title, *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga*, was taken from the title of another short story the author had written in 1966. It was translated into English by Enakshi Chatterjee in 1995 as *The River Churning: A Partition Novel*. I will read the translation *The River Churning* by Enakashi Chatterjee as the text for this chapter.²

The River Churning intervenes in the metaphor-making patriarchal nationalist and communal rhetoric that I have outlined in Chapter 1. With its narrative strategy, the novel radicalizes the discourse of ‘violence on women’ and, thereby, disrupts the representative-economy of ‘female chastity’ and the patriarchal values that lie at the bottom of such an economy. Essentially, the novel reorients the way we read ‘women.’ The ingredients of this novel are the same as those in the patriarchal narratives of female chastity/honour, but the novel becomes interventional by changing the signification of ‘women’ at the heart of such narratives. It inserts a violated woman herself at the psychological-social *centre* of the narrative in contrast to patriarchal narratives *about* female honour which function by reducing the wronged woman as a mere citation of other larger concerns, thereby silencing and displacing the woman herself. Entering the problematic from the perspective of the violated woman, the novel is able to posit women as subjects. Thus, the novel interrupts the fixation of ‘women’ as a sign and the disjuncture of women’s subjectivities from their bodies of the kind that takes place in patriarchal discourse. *The River Churning*’s female protagonist is an embodied subject for whom victimization registers at multiple levels of the

² Except a few instances where the original Bengali is significantly different. I have translated those instances myself and indicated so. The Bengali edition I have used is from *Jyotirmoyee Devi Rachana Sankalan* (Collected Works of Jyotirmoyee Devi): Volume 1, edited by Subir Raychaudhuri and Abhijit Sen.

body, mind, and sociality. I explore in my reading of the novel in this chapter what brings about this shift in signification of ‘women’ and what this shift accomplishes.

The River Churning constructs a critique that applies to not only refugee women but the historical condition of being women in its given social context; that is to say, its critique targets not only the violence of the Partition but also patriarchal violence. Nevertheless, that the novel is the story of a refugee woman is of crucial importance. The emphasis on the gendered refugee is created in the novel by gendering the category of the refugee itself: all refugees in this story and the surviving members of the Partition violence in this novel are women. As I argue in this dissertation, it is the gendered figure of the refugee woman that allows for bridging the violent gap between the ordinary and the extraordinary. By meditating on this figure, who is at once within and without power structures in ‘everyday’ life, the novel addresses a problematic that sits at the difficult intersection of the extreme event and banal life, and it speaks to the contradictory demands of a representation by both the historical and the traumatic.

Since *The River Churning* understands the Partition violence as violence perpetrated by patriarchy, *The River Churning* puts an emphasis on the commonality of all women. The novel is, indeed, dedicated to “all women of all ages, of all countries, who have been violated and humiliated” (Jyotirmoyee Devi “Dedication,” *Rachana Sankalan*; my translation from Bengali). Even while the category “all women” in this case does not pay attention to critical categories of class and caste, the emphasis on a collective of ‘women’ is strongly counter to the

logic of the Partition in that it disrupts the Hindu-Muslim binary that the Partition enforces. *Within* the logic of the Partition, which also deliberately erases class and caste distinctions, the emphasis of the novel on gender as a disruptive logic succeeds.

This chapter has five sections. In Section I, I will present some detail on the author and the text. I will also include here an overview of the novel to facilitate a close reading of this novel that will follow. In Section II, I attend to how the novel, in the task of representing gendered violence of Partition in continuum with the everyday, probes, questions, reflects on, and confronts the limits of the language accessible to a member (also gendered) of a certain linguistic community. I show that *The River Churning* relates women's marginality within a linguistic community to the absence of the women's chapter within collective memory and institutional history. The citation of history connects to not only the collective but also the notion of the everyday; and by complicating the everyday, the novel offers its critique of patriarchy. In Section III, I grapple with the question of absent history that the novel takes up and how it attempts to formulate a starting point of feminist praxis in face of this absence. To that aim, I read the use of myths in the novel. I show how *The River Churning* uses Hindu myths to launch a critique of the lack of a gender dimension in the public memory of the Partition. I argue that in the absence of a documented women's history, the novel constructs the mythical in a way that serves the purpose of the historical. Together in Sections II and III, I read the novel as both a critique of an unavailable language and an exercise and a struggle towards filling

the gap it critiques. I read the novel as a text that posits Partition as a problematic that is both an extreme event and connected to the everyday, that is both a traumatic *and* a historical event. If the discussion in Section II is designed to attend to the novel's commentary and performance of the difficulty of representing the traumatic, the discussion in Section III addresses its political commitment, even impulse, towards representation and thereby comprehends it in its connection to the historical 'everyday' world. In Section IV, I explore where the feminist resistance to the hegemony of metaphors in the process of nation-formation leads the novel. Towards that end, I assess the kinds of imaginations of female subjectivity and their relationships to collectives that lie at the heart of the novel. The brief, last section is the conclusion.

I

The Author and Her Text

Before presenting my reading of the novel, I would like to introduce the author and the text in some detail. I will repeat this procedure for the other two Partition texts and their authors in the following two chapters as well. This exercise should provide an insight into the location of the texts I have selected in their contemporary milieu, in context of the Partition, and their significance as Partition texts. The aim is also to underscore the relationship of the Bengali readership/audience, also constituted primary by the Bengali *bhadralok*, with these texts and their authors. The circulation and reception of these texts are intricately tied in with the authors/auteur as cultural figures, who are critical

components in determining how these texts circulated and circulate as Partition texts. Outlining the details of the authors/auteur and their relationship to the Partition is, thus, also necessary.

Jyotirmoyee Sen was born in 1894 in Jaipur in the state of Rajasthan in western India. Her grandfather was a minister to the King of Jaipur. She was married at ten, and came to live with her husband and his family in Bengal at twelve. Widowed at twenty-six, and having borne six children, she returned to her natal home in Jaipur. She died in 1988 at the age of 95.³ Although Jyotirmoyee Devi never received formal education, she had been taught at home until her marriage and had learnt English with the encouragement of her husband. She writes of finding hope in a trip to her extended paternal family in Calcutta in the bleak days following her widowhood. There she saw the scope to participate in a “different culture” comprised of “songs, stories and textbooks (and the discussion of English books)” (“Beginnings” *The River Churning* x). Eventually, she started writing, though with much hesitation, fearing disapproval of her contemporary society. Among the first few ‘scraps’ she wrote, she remembers responding to the depiction of women in traditional poetry and idiom and writing an angry essay asking the question ‘why.’ We see an explicitly feminist sensibility run through the entire corpus of her work.

Her first publications were a poem and an essay titled “Narir Katha” (“A Woman’s Words/Tales”) in 1921. As Jasodhara Bagchi comments, “At the age of

³ All biographical details are gathered from the author’s autobiographical account, “Beginnings,” with which *The River Churning* starts (vii-xxiv), and “A Note by the Author’s Family” included in the collection of her stories translated into English, *The Impermanence of Lies* (v-viii). For a more detailed biographical account, see these sources. An alternative source, readily available internationally in English is Jill Didur’s *Unsettling Partition*: 126-127.

twenty-eight, Jyotirmoyee, ostensibly a meek Hindu widow, burst into print in the pages of a reputed journal, *Bharatbarsha*.⁴ Those who believe that feminism is an import from America or France of the Seventies should listen to this angry Indian voice from the Twenties of this century” (“Introduction” xxvi). Jyotirmoyee Devi remained a copious writer. Her writing was published in some of the most reputed journals of Calcutta and then as books. Her published volumes include five novels, six collection of short stories, a collection of poetry, a collection of essays titled “The Eternal Women’s Question,” an autobiography, and travel and other writing (Raychaudhuri and Sen 333-368).

She became, if not widely known or a ‘popular’ figure, a familiar and respected writer in the Bengali literary circles. She received much appreciation as writer and critic from many including Rabindranath Tagore, and won several awards, including the prestigious Rabindra-Purashkar (The Rabindranath Tagore Memorial Prize) from the government of West Bengal in 1973 for her collection of stories *Shona Rupa Noi* (Not Gold or Silver). A volume of her selected works edited by Bani Ray, which did not include *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga*, was published in 1977 (Raychaudhuri and Sen 360; Bengali). Starting in 1991, after the author’s death, the School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University in partnership with a leading Calcutta publisher has published her complete collected works in five volumes. *The River Churning* (1995) and *The Impermanence of Lies* (1998) are the major instances of translations of her work into English.

⁴ According to “Beginnings” in *The River Churning*, the periodical is named as *Bharati* (xii). This appears an error or mistranslation. The original text, from which the excerpt is translated, as it appears in *Rachana Sankalan*, Volume 4, edited by Gourkishore Ghosh, also states *Bharatbarsha*, as do all other references.

Although it had been known and valued by a select Bengali readership earlier, *Epar Ganga*, *Opar Ganga* had, by no means, been a popularly known novel. The interest in it among a wider body of Partition scholars and feminist readers increased many fold with its availability of its English translation, *The River Churning*. The other important influential factor in its reception was the efforts of the editors of *The Trauma and the Triumph*, who strongly foregrounded *Epar Ganga*, *Opar Ganga* in their important volume. They have also individually written essays on the novel explicating its importance as a Partition text.⁵ *The River Churning* has, thus, entered the academic discussion on the Indian Partition in recent times.⁶ Indeed, it is perhaps the only novel from Bengal to do so.

Jyotirmoyee Devi based *Epar Ganga*, *Opar Ganga* on the historical riots in 1946 in Noakhali in pre-Partition East-Bengal and the post-Partition life for a ‘polluted’ refugee woman in Calcutta and Delhi in India. Jyotirmoyee Devi neither lived in Bengal during the Partition, nor was she from East Bengal to ever become a refugee or identify herself as with the refugee community. Indeed, although she had an active connection with Bengal—both through family ties and literary circles—and though she frequently visited, she lived outside Bengal for most of her life. During the Partition, she saw the Partition carnage as a bystander in North India, probably Delhi. What she saw there certainly influences her novel.

However, she was by no means unaware of the events in the eastern part of the

⁵ See Jasodhara Bagchi’s essay “Freedom in the Idiom of Loss” in *The Trauma and the Triumph* and Subhoranjan Dasgupta’s “Epar Ganga Opar Ganga—A Creative Statement on Displacement and Violence.”

⁶ Debali Mookerjea-Leonard and Cynthia Leenert have an essay each (both also in 2003). Jill Didur’s book *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory* (2006) has also argued emphatically for the importance of *The River Churning* as a Partition novel and has offered a reading of the novel in its last chapter.

country. Her daughter Ashoka Gupta, whose memoir I mentioned in the Introduction, worked alongside M. K. Gandhi for several months in communal-riot devastated Noakhali. Jyotirmoyee Devi, thus, must have had a very close sense of the ground-reality to base the start of her novel in Noakhali. She also had a lived experience of the bhadralok Bengali society in Bengal, of the culture of the caste-Hindu joint-families, and of women's place within it.

Yet, within Bengal, there is an ambiguity in reading *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* as a text of the Bengal Partition. It appears that her novel addresses a problem that is marginal to other texts/discourses of the Bengal Partition. Subir Raychaudhuri and Abhijit Sen, editors of *Jyotirmoyee Devir Rachana Sankalan Vol. 1* (Collected Work of Jyotirmoyee Devi), praise the “not only Bengali” but the pan-Indian outlook of Jyotirmoyee Devi's writing:

She came in contact with many people outside her native-place and lived in many places outside her home-state. Thus, we see in her writing an extraordinary mental scope and geographical span. In her writing, the ease and naturalness with which both Bengali and not-Bengali characters move in and out shock the provincial reader. Be it women's problems or political movements, Jyotirmoyee always sees it in an all-Indian context. Her language was Bengali, but she was an “Indian” writer. (5; my translation from original Bengali)

The unmitigated praise here, however, does not entirely conceal that Bengali readers and critics were weary of reading this diasporic ‘outsider’ Bengali writer as one of them: she is perceived as an ‘Indian’ not a ‘Bengali’ writer even though

she wrote in Bengali. The subtle subtext here, to my mind, is that, as a diasporic writer resident outside Bengal, Jyotirmoyee Devi was an inauthentic witness, or that the concerns expressed in her writing are tuned into the experience of Partition elsewhere than in Bengal. Her writing, therefore, becomes suspect in representing the case of Bengal. The felt discord here is that *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* does not attend to particularities of the Partition of Bengal and the novel is more resonant with Punjab's Partition. That its English translation, *The River Churning*, has been in circulation in nationally and internationally conducted Partition studies in English, which take Punjab to be the paradigm, is itself taken as a damning proof against the novel's orientation to Bengal, where the partition experience, after all, was very different than in Punjab. Jill Didur, for instance, argues that "while written in Bengali and set in part in West Bengal, it is not clear that Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel can be read as narrative exploring the unique qualities of the Eastern Indian experience of Partition" (129). Didur has, to counter the problem, embraced the very marginality of the novel in its address of the riots of Noakhali, as a mark of its exceptional strength. I concur with her; however, I do not agree with the path she takes to arrive at this argument.⁷

⁷ Jill Didur, citing Shelly Feldman's essay that critiques the absence of East Bengal from the Partition narrative, has argued for the importance of *The River Churning* especially for its location in Noakhali:

If the novel does represent a unique perspective on the Partition that links it with the East Bengal experience, ... it is through the narrative's persistent return to Sutara's incomplete memory of events in Noakhali in 1946. As Shelly Feldman has suggested, the experience of the 1947 Partition in "East Bengal serves as a metaphor for a place that, like women, is constructed as other, invisible, different, and silenced in the real politics of the time" (Feldman 169).

As in the case of women's Partition experience, "a perspective from East Bengal(is), or one that includes East Bengal as a particular site, adds to Partition analysis and appreciation of the contradictions posed by the events of 1947 and its aftermath" (Feldman 168). (129)

My position on the novel *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* is, in agreement with Dasgupta and Bagchi, that it is a deliberation on the gendered experience within Bengal partition that “remains silenced and is the most difficult one to address (4). The novel allows us to enter the area of the partition violence in which Bengal certainly holds a legacy. I do not agree with the suggestion that the ‘marginality’ of this dimension from the normative Partition discourse of Bengal, or that the scale of violence against women that is hallmark of Punjab Partition was not repeated in Bengal, are reasons for us to ignore it. The discourse of violence on women’s bodies is central to the Partition narrative of Bengal as well, even if not in the same direct way that it is in case of Punjab. Bagchi and Dasgupta remind us that, “Though there is a general belief that rape was less marked a presence in the Bengal Partition, the fear of rape was enough to marginalize women and to prevent them from being accepted by their own community” (4). In Bengal, compared to Punjab, we are much more likely to hear about “fear” of abduction than actual cases, but Bagchi and Dasgupta write that “this fear psychosis had free play in the Bengal Partition” (4). In the refugee discourses of why Bengali Hindus left East Pakistan, the fear of the defilement of their women’s honour or chastity *is* the central cited reason. The discursive circulation of violence against women as emblematic of other losses is current in Bengal, and functions on actual erasure

I think the point Didur makes by citing Feldman is an important one even though I am not entirely convinced that “includ[ing] East Bengal as a particular site” is an adequate method for including East Bengal. I think the gap that Feldman critiques is that of post-Partition East Bengal which later becomes Bangladesh. We might add the missing voice of the Muslim refugee of Bengal (who went to East Bengal from West Bengal in India) in this consideration. Otherwise, East Bengal is the very site of memory and nostalgia in Hindu refugee-experience emerging from West Bengal. In my reading of Feldman’s essay, she is specifically referring to voices emerging from East Bengal (and later, Bangladesh), which is not the same as narratives formed in West Bengal, to which *The River Churning* belongs.

of both women's agency and voice. The gender violence of this needs to be probed, assessed, and critiqued; *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* allows us to do so. Therefore, while I agree that Jyotirmoyee Devi is complexly situated in relation to the Partition of Bengal, unlike many others, I do not see that as a lack.

The River Churning is prefaced with an "Author's Note." It begins with a brief unmarked section of three pages. The rest is divided into three sections, each named after a book from the epic *Mahabharata*. Section I is brief; most of the novel is divided between sections II and III. Chronologically, Section I (as a flashback) is set in Noakhali, in pre-divided Bengal of 1946 during the riots to six months afterwards. Section II is set in Calcutta and sees the Partition in 1947. The third and last section is a time contemporary to the novel's publication.

The first 3 pages of the novel, opening in middle of a history lesson in a college for girls in Delhi, introduce us to the protagonist Sutara Dutta, whom we find teaching. This lesson is interrupted by a flashback as Sutara remembers her past. Section I, set as a flashback, narrates the onslaught on the family by Muslim hooligans on a certain night and her stay for six months in the shelter of the family of Tamij Saheb,⁸ the Muslim village school headmaster and her father's friend and colleague and their neighbour. Tamij Saheb's daughter Sakina is also her childhood friend. In that single night of assault, her father Gopal Babu is killed, her mother jumps into a pond, and her sister Sujata 'vanishes.' We get several details about the physical violence done to Sutara, but the narrative does not specify whether the violence done to her is sexual. We do not know if she is

⁸ 'Saheb' is an honorific and not a last name. It can be thought to be a loose equivalent of the Hindu 'Babu' when applied to a Muslim 'gentleman.'

raped. She is rescued and nursed back to life by Tamij Saheb and his family. Having regained her health somewhat, Sutara wants to be connected with the surviving members of her family—her two brothers, who live in Calcutta in West Bengal. Tamij Saheb dutifully writes to Sutara’s brothers, informing them of her safety and wait for some indication from them as to how to proceed in returning Sutara to her family. The brothers, however, do not show much interest in taking their sister back. Nevertheless, unable to ignore Sutara’s pleas to be united with the surviving members of her family, and disregarding the considerable danger to their own persons while accompanying the Hindu girl to Calcutta, Tamij Saheb and his sons return Sutara to her brothers.

Section II, also appearing as a flashback, tells the story of Sutara from the time of coming to Calcutta as a family-less refugee woman until the present moment of the opening three pages. Her brothers, given the bad times, are meanwhile temporarily staying in the household of the in-laws of one of them. In the joint-family in middle-class Calcutta, she is never accepted into the family-fold because she is now “pollute[d]” (32, 44). The female members of the joint family do not know what to make of a girl who has spent months in a Muslim family and eaten “god-knows what kind of forbidden food” (33). Although not made explicit, the stigma of a possible rape also remains part of her ‘pollution.’ The women of the joint-family consider her an ‘untouchable’ (120) and treat her like a pest or germ that can “pollute” (44) the household.⁹ She is especially excluded from the kitchen and stopped from touching drinking water. We also

⁹ The Bengali phrase in the original is “ghar nongra korbe”—‘will dirty the house’ (*Rachana Sankalan* 125).

clearly get a sense that, from the very moment Sutara arrives and especially as she grows up, the most pressing threat felt by the sheltering family, especially its women, is her sexuality—the sexuality of an outcast, unmarried and unmarriageable, family-less single woman. They are worried that a man or boy of their family would fall for her and bring ruin upon the family.¹⁰ The obsessive discussions of Sutara’s problems in the family soon slip into the “problem of Sutara” (47). In the Bengali original, the text actually uses the phrase ‘Sutara problem’ (“Sutara samasya” 127). She, like the ‘women’s question’ in the late nineteenth century, becomes *the* problem: the family starts to see Sutara as a source of “complication” (59), a predicament, and a nuisance.¹¹ ‘Sutara problem’ also echoes the rhetoric of the ‘refugee problem’ posed by East-Bengali refugees to Calcutta and West Bengal. The master of the household, Amulya Babu, is sympathetic to Sutara, but due to the restrictions imposed by his wife and other women, and clearly given the dictates of the time, he is not able to do much for her beside send her to a missionary-run boarding school. Although younger members of the family, Subha and Promode, are sympathetic to Sutara, they are powerless to change their family’s hostility at this time.

Eventually, in Section III, Sutara moves to Delhi as a professor of history and lives as an outcast from her larger community in Calcutta. She befriends her colleagues, especially Punjabi women, such as Kausalyavati, who also have a close relationship to the Partition. Sakina continues to keep touch with her.

¹⁰ Reminding one strongly of Bankim’s novel *Bishbrikshya* (Poison-Tree).

¹¹ In the Bengali original: “shamashya” (*Rachana Sankalan* 119), “jhonjhat,” “Pakistani refugee jhonjhat” (*Rachana Sankalan* 135).

Sutara's trip to Calcutta to attend a wedding at Amulya Babu's house ends in her utter humiliation; that she is not wanted is made clear to her. Towards the end of the novel, Sakina's mother proposes a match between her son Aziz and Sutara, which Sutara rejects. At the very end of the book, we see Promode proposing a marriage to her. Although the end does not explicitly state it, it is clear that Sutara accepts that proposal.

II

“The language for it has yet to be fashioned:” Silence in *The River Churning*

In a prefatory “Author's Note,” Jyotirmoyee Devi, referring to a Book appearing towards the end of the epic *Mahabharata*, the “Stree Parva” (The Book/Chapter of Women), writes: “The crux of the matter is that even the great Vedavyash could not write what is implied by the title. Only once, in some slokas, has he skimmed over the heartrending tale of the chapter” (xxiv). The chapter narrates events after the entire male population of the Yadu clan is wiped out. Arjun arrives at Dwaraka to protect the women, but finds that his strength has deserted him and he cannot lift up his bow. Before his very eyes, total anarchy prevails. Robbers attack, rape, and abduct women. Jyotirmoyee continues:

the chronicler has not been able to give us a complete account. But what happened afterwards? Vyasdev is silent about that. Which male poet could dare to write about that, and with what ink? No, such a pen, such ink and paper has not been produced in the world. [...].

History is not written by cowards, and there are no female epic poets. Even if there were, they could hardly write the stories of their own dishonour and shame. The language for it has yet to be fashioned, so naturally *Stree Parva* does not figure anywhere.

The king gets back his kingdom. Heroes of war are honoured. The world resounds in praise of male bravery, acts of heroism — but has nothing to say about the eternal *Stree Parva*, the humiliation of women, the endless exploitation of helpless women, which continues through the combined efforts of savage men, and lurks behind all heroic deeds. No history has recorded that tragic chapter of shame and humiliation that is forever controlled by the husband, the son, the father and their race [“jati”]. (xxxiv-xxxv)

The “Author’s Note,” thus, introduces concerns central to the novel *The River Churning*: the violence to which women are subjected because of their gender, the absence of “women’s” part in documented collective memory (for instance as History or canonical Literature), and the difficulty—even impossibility—and the struggle of filling the gap.

Explaining the absence of “*Stree Parva*,” the author cites a fundamental lack: she says a language in which such violence can be represented “is yet to be fashioned.” The failure of history is matched with a critique that belongs to ‘the everyday.’ Indeed, what *The River Churning* marks is not a failure of knowledge, but the failure of socially possible and permissible language. As the novel shows from the standpoint of the marginal refugee woman, this possibility or

permissibility of available language is sharply gendered. This possibility of available language intersects both the extraordinary trauma of the Partition and the historical-ordinary of the 'everyday world.' While I will address the absence of the women's part in history in the next section, my aim in this section is to explore the more fundamental absence that the novel addresses, of a possible "language" in which gendered experience can be spoken. I argue that *The River Churning* critiques the gendered limitations of the socially possible language. While this critique is formulated from the standpoint of the refugee woman, it is not directed only at the extraordinarily violent times of the Partition. It is equally directed at the violence that is integral to the regime of 'the everyday' under patriarchy.

The novel breaks its own realist-convention of story telling to accommodate this critique and registers a failure of language at the level of both content and form. *The River Churning* is a text saturated with silence. Even though all the moments of silence in the plot can be psychologically accounted for, and in many cases, imaginatively filled-in, the end result is that the novel itself is constantly interrupted by silences. The narrative pauses every few lines where words fail and in many instances the somatic excess of tears intervene. *The River Churning* thus reads like a sentence where periods have been inserted excessively and at places where a reader does not expect them, so much so, that there is always a sinister looming quality where speech (of the narrator as well as of characters) is constantly on the verge of breakdown.

Most overwhelming in the novel is the silence of the surviving victims and the silence of those dead. Even the ones who survive the trauma are engulfed by silence that we associate with the traumatized. At the hostel run by missionaries, where Sutara first lives after her stay with the in-laws of her brother, we see that there is an institutional prohibition on the victims about talking about their experiences. Even later in life, when such prohibition is lifted, silence continues to surround Sutara, who cannot put into words the pain she feels or the violence that is raw in her mind, even to other female victims of the Partition violence.

This failure to speak at the level of plot is matched by the silence of the author in the meta-textual, level. There is a large gap at the heart of the novel: the novel does not specify the exact nature of the violence that is inflicted on Sutara. It is possible that Sutara is raped, but we do not know this for sure. What the nature of the physical assault that Sutara suffers is not only not revealed to the audience but is not known by Sutara herself. This how the night and the attack on the women of the family is given to us:

Sutara stared after her [mother] when suddenly she heard her sister scream and fall to the ground. From near the shed where Mother was wrenching the flap door open she heard a shrill cry. "I'm coming," she called. But she could not make it. Dark shadowy figures surrounded her, some tried to grab her by the hand. Breaking free, she rushed to the pond at the back and jumped into the water. In the light of the spreading fire everything was now visible. One of the ruffians went after Mother but another stopped him, "leave her, it's their mother, let her go." But Didi did not stir. Was

she dead? What happened to Didi? Sutara couldn't tell. She wanted to reach mother and began to run, but stumbled and fell. Then everything went blank. (8).

Sutara herself remembers nothing between this moment of black out and her regaining consciousness several days later in the house of her rescuer Tamij Saheb. As a young girl deep in shock, she is revisited by the nightmarish fragmented memories, but most of the memory is lost to her. This is an important fact: what 'actually' happens to Sutara is cognitively unavailable not only to the readers and other characters, but even to Sutara herself.

Later, the readers hear from Tamij Saheb that neither her mother nor her elder sister could be found. About what happened to Sutara, there is a brief mention by the narrator that "she was so shattered physically and psychologically that she couldn't get up from her bed" (10). After regaining consciousness, Sutara herself keeps asking: "Did she fall to the ground or was she pushed down? What happened after that? Who rescued her and when? For how long had she been running a fever? (16). Only Moinu, the youngest son of Tamij Saheb, who is the only one in the family young enough to not understand the taboo on the topic, gives Sutara a few more details once:

Sutaradi, did they thrash you badly?" he asked, "it was a good thing Fakir came and told father. That is how Baba and Aziz bhaisaheb took our Habibullah and some other farm hands armed with cudgels and spears and carried you home. You were lying half-dead. Aziz bhai and others lifted

you on their shoulders and brought you here. Fakir told us that they had beaten you badly -” (17)

Sakina immediately interrupts this account by Moinu: “stop the nonsense,” she admonishes her brother. Their mother rushes in with a more soothing explanation: “The sight of the fire and all those ruffians was too much for you. You fainted. Then you had an attack of fever just from shock. But you are going to be all right now” (17). An adult Aziz later remembers this night and speaks of finding Sutara as “a bundle of clothes [...] lying in a pool of blood” (100).

Almost all critics, with the exception of Jill Didur, presume that sexual violence—very likely rape—took place, but have noted the deliberateness of the efforts of the narrator to keep the details ambiguous. Debali Mookerjea-Leonard has observed that Sutara’s possible experience of the “trauma of the sexual assault” is registered in the text “mostly as a confused, nebulous memory, with scattered references to her torn and dirty clothes, her friends’ suicides, drownings, and abductions” (41). Bagchi has written that the sexual violation Sutara suffers is the “unspoken” in the novel (“Freedom” 20). Meenakshi Mukherjee, on the other hand, writes that the novel “conjures up the claustrophobic ethos of stigma without ever mentioning the word ‘rape’ which lay at the core of the plot” (“Pawn” 16). Similarly, Andrew Whitehead also argues that the text is “deliberately ambiguous about the extent of the assault on Sutara” (19).

Commentators have also speculated on the reasons that animate this decision to make rape unrepresented/ unrepresentable in *The River Churning*.¹² Mookerjea-

¹² Although constituting a significantly different context than rape, perhaps it is worth noting that a debate on representation of trauma has played out in much detail in the field of Holocaust Studies.

Leonard argues that there is no scope for reading the “unspoken” by the author/narrator as an act of uncritical shame: the Bengali equivalent of the word rape occurs quite often in Jyotirmoyee Devi’s writing, especially in her essays. Thus, the gap in narrative cannot be accounted for as “residual prudery of a post-Victorian novelist” (41). Her argument is that the details of the assault on Sutara are omitted because the “veiling of a bodily trauma through language constitutes a counter-discourse to the economy of display of woman” (41). This conclusion is also to be found in Bagchi. Bagchi describes Sutara’s assault at the hand of her own community, the proverbial “second rape,” as “a prolonged and unbearable panoptical gaze by the community over Sutara’s body and mind” (“Introduction” xxxii). If the novel is a critique of the “panoptical gaze,” then it is pertinent that the narrative itself should refuse to allow the readers’ gaze to dwell on Sutara’s body. In a similar vein, describing the goal of her project, of which a reading on *The River Churning* is a part, Jill Didur has said that it sought to “redirect the gaze of the reader/researcher away from women’s bodies and sexuality,” that are sites always under surveillance of community and state anyway (13).

Theodor Adorno’s famous (widely quoted and just as often misquoted) line in the last page of the essay “Cultural Criticism and Society,” which states that “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (162), has come to stand for the truism of the obscenity/barbarism or impossibility of representation of a trauma, especially collective trauma. Adorno scholars dispute this reductive (and quoted out of context) truism, but this quote stands in for all the schools of thought who presume that it is impossible, or obscene when possible, to represent limit cases such as the Holocaust. The lyric prohibition has been used in vastly different contexts and taken to stand in for all kinds of representative prohibition. For a discussion of the after-life of Adorno’s dictum, see the chapter “After Adorno: Culture in the Wake of Catastrophe” in *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* by Michael Rothberg (25-58). On the other hand, again very famously, Hayden White has shown that vast trauma may escape realism, but follow a different logic/style of representation. Witness literature often uses a heightened style of realism that White calls “figural realism.” See Hayden White, “Figural Realism in Witness Literature.” Rothberg’s *Traumatic Realism*, which I cited in the Introduction, critically reviews this debate on representation of limit cases. Michael André Bernstein’s essay “Unrepresentable Identities: The Jew in Postwar European Literature” is also a thoughtful reflection on the issues of unrepresentability.

While Mukherjea-Leonard has argued that by keeping silent on the details of the assault the novel “recovers something of the private pain that women suffered” (41), in contrast, Jill Didur contends that we, the readers, should not imaginatively fill in the gap. Didur argues that our refusal to “recover” what is signalled by the omission is also analogous to this realization: we should accept the ambiguity as such and not take it for granted that the rape did, in fact, take place. “These silences and ambiguities in women’s stories,” she argues, “should not be resolved, accounted for, unveiled, or recovered, but, rather, understood as women’s inability to subsume their experience within projects of patriarchal modernity that has produced them in the first place” (11). She, thus, critiques any imperative to “recover,” and sees the silence in *The River Churning* as precisely the refusal to do so. Didur asks us not to draw conclusive, definitive interpretations about the gap in the narrative, not to fill these gaps “with our imagined accounts.” Instead we should treat, as Spivak has suggested, “loss as loss” (Spivak 217; cited in Didur 136). Thus, for Didur, the silence of the author is analogous to the “the novel’s refusal to ‘recover’ Sutara’s experience within the script dictated by patriarchal nationalism (19).¹³ Didur’s interpretation of the silence at the heart of the text is a critically sensitive and thoughtful intervention

¹³ Didur’s analysis, described in her own words, “meditates on the ‘absent-presence’ of details concerning sectarian violence at the core of the ‘abducted’ women’s narratives and offers a reading strategy that emphasizes the indirect, mediated, and fragmented representational practices that inform all testimony and literature” (19). Didur argues, “it is an attention to [Jyotirmoyee] Devi’s fragmented figuration of Sutara’s traumatic experience of the partition riots—not her realist representational strategies—that makes it possible to render visible the gendered conditions of ‘belonging’ in the modern nation-state” (19). Later she adds that “...by leaving the details of Sutara’s supposed sexual assault unverifiable to both Sutara and her relatives, *The River Churning* critiques the patriarchal logic of a ‘cultural system that dictates that rape signifies a woman’s shame and the dishonour of her male protectors’ (Hai 401)” (126).

on how we have to read this silence as a case of silences in narratives of Partition trauma. Her point of departure is useful for building a critically sensitive practice of reading trauma narratives in the context of the Partition, translating to an understanding that the trauma and ensuing silence of the Partition victim is gendered. This reading practice takes into cognisance the concept of gendered silence as well as silencing in the context of the Partition as developed in Partition studies: critics such as Butalia, Menon and Bhasin, Das, and Pandey have repeatedly and emphatically pointed to the fact that not only gender structured victimhood during the Partition, but that gender *also* plays a crucial role in the resultant silence that follows the trauma.

I would like to build on the existent commentary that I have outlined above on silence in *The River Churning* in two ways. First, by examining its attempt to problematize a normative ‘rape narrative’ and expose the patriarchal codes of representation that contains rape narratives; and second, by taking the discussion on gendered silence in the direction of the role of the audience in constituting that silence. Both these readings converge on my argument about the significance of the social in *The River Churning*. Together, they aim to show how the novel brings the traumatic story of an individual refugee woman to the realm of the historical everyday world and the collective.

The River Churning works in a readable relation to, but radicalises, classic rape narratives. In *The River Churning*, the experience of Sutara, the refugee woman, a possible victim of rape during the Partition, brings the critical scrutiny on rape not only as an extraordinary violence of the Partition, but also an ordinary

patriarchal violence belonging to the everyday world. The novel shows that the normative patriarchal understanding and definition of rape during both times remain incommensurable with the female experience of rape. Seen from a feminist perspective, Jean-François Lyotard's discussion of incommensurability in *The Différend: Phrases in Dispute* is especially useful to make this point. The central problem articulated by Lyotard is that of the incommensurability of facts with 'truth'—the latter is the one that is historically (or legally) verifiable. Thus, Lyotard talks about the incommensurability of an event like Auschwitz with "the rules of the knowledge" that history sets up (57).¹⁴ This is especially relevant for understanding 'rape' not just during the Partition, but also even under the regime of the 'everyday.' This is not only because the victim-witness may be dead, but also because there is an inherent incommensurability between the violence of rape that a woman feels and the legal definition of rape, let alone the definition by which a woman can 'prove' the wrong done to her as rape in a court of law. The legal definition of rape, which bases itself on the centrality of the phallus (literally), makes it not only difficult to prove rape in a court of law but constructs a basic incommensurability between female understanding of rape and the legal

¹⁴ In *The Différend: Phrases in Dispute*, Lyotard frames the problem: "how can we verify the existence of gas chambers used in Nazi concentration camps when the only "real" witness of the gas-chambers are the victims who died in it—yet, if "one is dead, one cannot testify" (3). The paradox, that we cannot 'know' historical truth when the historical evidence is lost with the victims, is what Lyotard points to as the incommensurability between 'facts' and 'truths.'

Didur has discussed *The Différend* as a seminal text that addresses "the problem of what kind of history can be told in the absence of an archive, progressive notions of time, and mimetic theories of representation" (134). Didur uses the paradox set up by Lyotard in the quote above—that we cannot 'know' historical truth when the historical evidence is lost with the victims—for the case of the dead victims of the Partition. She writes that "while there is much discussion of how the stigma attached to 'abducted' women's stories has created an obstacle for researchers who desire to 'compile' a 'more complete' history of partition, there has been little consideration given to the theoretical problem [formulated by Lyotard]" (134).

definition of it.¹⁵ Rape is, in this regard, incommensurable to patriarchal rules of representation unless those rules are radically altered.

Since my aim is to examine the novel's adherence to and radical differentiation from normative rape narratives, I have to ask how the meta-textual silence—the ambiguity about rape—fares in this consideration. As such and in itself, we cannot hail silence or ambiguity as the quintessential mark of feminist politics of representation. Writing on the issue of the raped woman as a subject of a narrative in the chapter “Life after Rape: Narrative, Rape and Feminism” in her book *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has shown that silence on rape in the heart of a narrative need not constitute, in fact can be strongly oppositional to, feminist politics (64-82). She argues that such narrative strategies can completely undercut the purported aim of the narrative to critique the gendered injustice a raped woman is subjected to. Sunder Rajan writes:

A feminist ‘thematics of liberation,’ as Teresa de Lauretis has cautioned, is insufficient to counter the forces of masculine desire that invests all narrative. This is why feminist texts of rape must also engage in textual strategies to counter narrative determinism. Such negotiations are achieved by and result in alternative structure of narrative. (73)

¹⁵ In the Indian context, Veena Das has an excellent essay, “Sexual Violence, Discursive Formations, and the State,” which examines law and legal cases in India and points to the disjuncture between rape as a violation of “boily integrity of the woman” and the legal definitions and interpretations of rape which are to do with “regulation of sexuality,” (397) especially such regulation “in accordance with rules of [patriarchal] alliance” (411).

Catharine A. MacKinnon's well known essay “Rape: On Coercion and Consent” also points to a similar disjuncture in the American context. MacKinnon argues that the legal definition of rape, in being constructed as ‘penetration,’ recognizes enforces the centrality of the male sexual organ rather than women's experience of violation.

Sunder Rajan takes *Clarissa* and *A Passage to India* to task because “at the centre of the narrative is only absence. Neither of the novels actually represent the scene of rape” (74). She then goes on to read how these “silence[s] at the heart of the text” (74-75) as a mystification of their actual occurrences:

In his essay on *Clarissa*, Terry Eagleton has argued that rape itself is unrepresentable because the “real” of the woman’s body marks “the outer limits of all language.” This, it appears to me, is part of the male mystique built around rape (as around childbirth). Such narrative theory fetishizes rape as a limit of narrative, to be tested over and over. (74)

The second reason Sunder Rajan suspects the narrative silence is that in the two canonical texts that she discusses, there is a “deep underlying male fear that rape could be a female lie, or fiction.” *Clarissa* may be “a great proto-feminist novel, and *A Passage to India* a major treatment of liberal humanism; one may expect them to be “unequivocal about an act of male sexual aggression on a woman” (75). Nevertheless, for Sunder Rajan, their silence about rape is a symptom of “their reliance upon, and doubt about, the woman’s unsupported word’ about her ordeal” and, thus, also “symptoms of a deep underlying male fear...” (75). Sunder Rajan’s reading of the feminist narrative of rape is, that in it, in contrast to the above, “the fact of rape—even if not its graphic representation—is acknowledged in stark, brute terms, as the very premise upon which the narrative is built” (76).

This is, of course, of critical importance for *The River Churning*. Is the narrative strategy of *The River Churning* normative when it refuses to articulate

what happened to Sutara? Is the mystery around whether Sutara was raped congruent to the mystification of “the fact of rape” in *A Passage to India*? Does it mystify rape by positing it as unrepresentable? I would argue that trying to represent the incident would have been far more normative for *The River Churning*. In denying that information, there is a critique of the lack of validity of precisely that category that Sunder Rajan cites as “a woman’s unsupported words.” In *The River Churning*, the situation is a dramatic reversal of the usual situation when a rape victims claims that she has been raped and is not believed. In the usual scenario, the trauma of this moment, “as raped women have again and again testified,” is intense (Sunder Rajan76). Here, in the reversal of the usual situation, a woman is ‘feared’ by the society, effectively accused, to have been raped. In the given Brahminical context, the fear of pollution of the purity-chastity of the woman incites an equally painful ordeal for the ‘feared-raped’ woman. Hindu myths have notions of, as Sunder Rajan writes, “trials like [those of] Ahalya and Sita that seem necessary to absolve the ‘raped’ subject of ‘guilt,’” to “mark her fitness for re-entry into social and moral domain” (76). Jyotirmoyee Devi has written over and over again about the injustice that Ahalya¹⁶ and Sita¹⁷ (and many other mythic women) suffer. Sita had to prove that she was not raped

¹⁶ Ahalya was the wife of a devout sage, Gautama. The god Indra once, disguised as her husband, made love to Ahalya. Although Ahalya had knowingly only participated in martial sex, Gautama turned her into stone as a punishment. Years later Rama lifted the spell by touching her and persuaded her husband to forgive her. If we read the myth from a feminist perspective, we will see that there is an instructive confusion between marital sex and rape.

¹⁷ Sita is the heroine of the epic *Ramayana* and chaste wife of the hero Rama – in Bengali, Ram. She accompanies her husband to a fourteen year exile. During their exile, she is abducted by the demon-king Ravan(a), manages to save her chastity during her imprisonment by her abductor, and at long last after a fierce battle, is rescued by her husband. She has to walk through fire unscathed to prove her chastity after she is rescued. After returning to Ayodhya, some people raise doubts about her chastity, and Ram asks her to repeat her walk through fire again, which she refuses. More on this below.

and Ahalya that she was ‘innocent’ when she is raped. The case of Sutara is akin to that of Sita if the silence of the text indicates that rape did not take place. If she *has* been raped, then the silence of the text indicates the impossibility of talking about it, and her case is like that of Ahalya. Sita chose self-banishment when she was asked to re-do her public performance of chastity—walking unscathed through fire—after Rama and Sita return to Rama’s kingdom in Ayodhya.

If Sutara had claimed to have not been raped, no one would have believed her because she had been at the centre of a Hindu-Muslim riot and had spent days in a Muslim household. In fact, what she might have said mattered very little. She could have neither prove nor disprove rape, and in any case, the ‘punishment’ she receives would have been just the same on either account. Thus, Jyotirmoyee Devi’s refusal to give that detail of Sutara’s assault should be read as a comment on and critique of the social Brahminical norms in treating their ‘soiled’ (raped or not) women. I will argue that *The River Churning*’s refusal to give details of the degree of molestation Sutara suffers (whether or not it can constitute “rape”) does not only foreground the double-bind of the either raped or ‘feared raped’ I described above, but also a further reflection on the audience’s in/ability to sensitively deal with a narrative such as hers. For us, the readers, therefore, critical judgement of this patriarchal violence should also function irrespective of the actual rape.¹⁸

¹⁸ Didur has also argued, that “by refusing to fill the gap in Sutara’s story, Jyotirmoyee Devi’s novel denies the reader ‘the evidence’ he or she needs to assess whether or not Sutara was sexually polluted and instead redirects ‘our’ attention to the patriarchal rationale that informs the construction of women’s sexuality as polluted or pure” (155).

I will further my point by making use of an example used by Sunder Rajan herself. Writing on Jonathan Kaplan's film *The Accused*, as a case where a feminist theme is undermined by a normative narrative, Sunder Rajan criticizes the film's use of the narrative device of the flashback to actually re-present the scene of rape:

In an attempt to replicate the court's search to know whether the rape 'really' happened, the film succumbs to the device of the flashback, a device available *only* to the narrative (and never to any court of law, however sedulously it may try to recreate the scene of crime). By replaying the scene of rape, it once again makes it central to the narrative, 'the climax' of the graph of its linear structure. If the absence of the scene of rape at the heart of a narrative (as in *Clarissa* or *A Passage to India*) serves to mystify its actual occurrence, the brutal naturalism of its cinematic representation in *The Accused* provides a confirmation that enforces the same conclusion: the 'unsupported word' of a raped woman cannot represent rape. (Emphasis in the original; 75)

Using the above example, I read the absence at the heart of Jyotirmoyee Devi's text as a decision to *not* take advantage of a device "available only to the narrative." The text tests the reception of women like Sutara by their society and simultaneously by the readers. Sutara's contemporary society and the modern society hardly ever trusts a woman's unsupported word.' The novel critiques this characteristic of patriarchal society by refusing to give evidence. Simultaneously, the novel critiques our—the readers'—desire to not trust a woman's silence, as

well as our desire to probe the details so that we can then judge her or assess the treatment she receives.

In any case, as I argued above, the question of whether Sutara is actually raped or not is a cognitive cul-de-sac for her society (and us), because of the profound irony that the facticity of her rape is of little consequence. Brahmin households would still reject her as it had rejected the mythical Sita or Ahalya. In the Brahminical worldview, 'rape' is not a male violence on a female body but a possible violation of sexual chastity of a caste-Hindu female body. Sutara, the refugee woman in the new India, is 'always-already' a rape victim because she has got caught in a Partition riot and, to make matters worse, has been rescued and given shelter by Muslims. In this regard, the truth of the rape is irrelevant. What is relevant, and under critique in *The River Churning*, is the way a woman is judged for being vulnerable to this rape.

On other occasions, if we judge *The River Churning's* narrative strategy along this line of arguments made by Sunder Rajan, we will find that it is "alternative" and at par with the intended "thematics of liberation" on several accounts (Sunder Rajan 73). For instance, in *The River Churning* the rape is not at the "climax" of the plot as in the classical masculinist rape-narratives (as for example in *Clarissa* and *A Passage to India*). *The River Churning* makes "the structural location of the rape incident at the beginning of a woman's story," which Sunder Rajan reads as a way to get to a liberated narrative structure: "the position of the rape scene at the beginning pre-empts expectation of its late(r) occurrence. Not only is the scene of rape diminished by this positioning but it is

also granted a more purely functional purpose in the narrative economy, and narrative interest becomes displaced upon what follows” (73). Sunder Rajan gives the examples of Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple* and Maya Angelou’s *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*, to point out that in these texts “[t]he development of the female subject’s ‘self’ begins after the rape and occupies the entire length of the narrative” (73). The readers will note that this is also the case with *The River Churning*. Here, too, there is a complete subversion of the “recognition that desire is built upon the prolongation of suspense and the postponement of climax” (Sunder Rajan 73).¹⁹ I therefore read the novel as one that problematizes a rape narrative. The most central political point to such narrative is that the critique of the reader or the audience of the narrative as well as of the society within which the victim is situated.

This brings me to the second objective of this section: to read the silence at the heart of the novel in relation to its audience, largely defined, and not just the silence of the protagonist/narrator. In this way, I wish to underscore silence as a relationship of power between the speaker—whose ‘absence’ of speech constitutes the silence—and the listener or reader—the audience whose ‘absence’ or refusal of listening can equally well constitute silence. My argument about the silence of the victim in *The River Churning* is that it is as much constituted by the impossibility of speech by the speaker as it is by suppression of speech by the community within which the speaker resides. In other words, the linguistic failure

¹⁹ Arriving at a comparable insight, Mookerjee-Leonard has argued that “the event of the assault that ruptures women’s “good” past lives from the tainted present and future is not [intended to be] central to the narrative and [thus] in the case of the novel is left slightly ambiguous (41).

of the victim is also equally a failure of the linguistic community. When Jyotirmoyee Devi writes that the “language for it is yet to be fashioned,” she is offering a critique of the social. The critique is, thus, not restricted to the violent time of the Partition but also extends to the everyday social world that surrounded the Partition.

This analysis aims to develop our understanding of silence not in opposition, but further, in a different direction than our usual understanding of the silence as being silence of a *speaker*. In her classic essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Spivak has charted the silence of the gendered subaltern. Her position is too well known for me to detail here. I would, however, briefly sum the most valuable points of this reading for the purpose of this discussion: it is a warning against the fallacy of the presumption that “the oppressed can know and speak for themselves” (“Can” 279; *Critique* 263) and that a transparent intellectual can hope a “retrieval” (“Can” 295) of that voice and of the subjectivity of the oppressed. The warning is also that “codification” of the subaltern voice cannot take place without an “epistemic violence” (“Can” 281; *Critique* 268).²⁰ These are fundamentally useful lessons. I would like to advance this argument by putting the emphasis on the aspect of *social* critique that is built in this understanding of the silence of the subaltern. It is with this aim that I turn to proving the aspect of silence that is “hearer-related” (Moitra 40).

²⁰ Jill Didur’s reading of silence in *The River Churning in Unsettling Partition* discusses the revised version of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *The Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Didur evokes Spivak’s articulation of the “double bind” that is concomitant with “excavation, retrieval and celebration of the historical individual, the effort of bringing [the gendered subaltern subject] within accessibility” (Spivak, *Critique* 198, quoted in Didur 135).

Shefali Moitra, in her essay titled “Silence: The Unspeakable and the Unspoken,” probes silence as a category and provides us with a very useful understanding of “hearer-related” silence. Moitra categorizes “silence” as representing either the unspeakable or the unspoken. The former is related to metaphysics, while the latter to communication. Metaphysical silence, the unspeakable, “does not admit a metalanguage;” but communicative silence, the unspoken, may be made eloquent by a metalanguage. The notion of silence comprising of the unspeakable is readily recognized in discussions of trauma and silence, as for example in Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* in the context of the Jewish holocaust. It is also indicated in Spivak’s work I cited above. However, it is the unspoken that I would like to emphasize and explore.

Within the rubric of the unspoken, Moitra creates a category of silence called “responsive silence.” “Responsive silence,” is not rooted in the speaker. Instead, “it is rooted in the audience and his [/her] reaction to the speaker. This “hearer-related” silence “comes as a reaction to something said or done” (40). Moitra further describes:

responsive silence may demand a total restructuring of life or it may just be a novel way of adding a dimension to our already existing language. In extreme cases of non-conformation one tries to break away from language altogether, not with the aim of escaping into one’s depth consciousness or to some singularly transcendental plane. The silent protest is against the

existing language models which they feel are representative of oppressive social systems” (42).

This category opens up new possibilities for analysing *The River Churning*. The third-person narrator’s silence in *The River Churning* can be seen analogous to responsive silence. The novel’s silence about the rape is the kind of silence that “demand[s] a total restructuring of life,” and through silence it “protest[s] against the existing language models.” In this, the silence of the narrator also responds to the silence of Sutara, the representative survivor of gendered crime of the Partition.

Sutara’s own silence is best understood as a subtype of responsive silence, which Moitra calls “regressive catatonic silence.” It is “a form of total resignation, recoiling or a decision to opt out through silence, the root cause being the feeling that language as society uses it is oppressive, artificial and crippling; one way of getting away from this oppression is through silence” (46). It “is an attempt to save one’s identity by non-participation.” The silence in this category is one that is aimed at “self-preservation” (47). In the chart in which Moitra classifies silence into unspoken and the unspeakable, comes a curious confusion with this subtype of silence. While in the chart “regressive catatonic silence” is listed as a type of the unspoken, Moitra admits in the conclusion that “Of the types of silence discussed above we would say only the diagnostic silence of the catatonic regressive variety could be called unspeakable since it is an avowal to a total rejection in speech and therefore any form of speech will be anathema” (46). It is productive to note that even such a meticulous classification by Moitra

betrays a duality in the silence that comes closest to what we can understand as Sutara's silence.

The schema here allows us to ask whether Sutara's narrative is unspeakable or unspoken. Or, keeping in mind that the two categories are mutually constitutive, the schema here allows us to deconstruct the binary form of the problematic and to recognize that Sutara's silence is *both*. It belongs to the grey zone in-between the two categories, as also indicated by the contradiction that Moitra allows in her otherwise careful taxonomy of silence. This strongly suggests that the Aristotelian dual-logic of "either-or" binary would not accommodate the marginal, gendered experience of a character like Sutara. Nevertheless, it is important, I concede, to allow the debate of the unspeakable-unspoken to play out for Sutara's narrative. It allows us to see that the psychic-unspeakable, the ontological failure of speech of a trauma victim like Sutara, is also the failure of the communicative, and thus is the social-unspoken.

To pursue the politics of understanding silence as hearer-related is also useful in bringing the critical focus on the audience. All studies on trauma—including collective trauma—emphasize the role of the audience in any way we can imagine or hope for post-trauma recovery, however partially and contingently we imagine such recovery.²¹ My evocation of the role of the audience in this instance is slightly different. I am not only interested in the role of the audience in the recovery of the victim, but in their role to cause, maintain, and perpetuate the silence in the first instance. This is especially relevant when being mindful of the

²¹ About the limits of the term 'recovery' and its contingency, see David Lloyd's essay "Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?" I have briefly outlined the central argument in the Introduction.

nature of gender trauma in collective violence. I do not doubt that the ontological condition of the trauma victim is constituted by silence. Yet, we can too easily push it in the category of the metaphysical-unspeakable.

Feminist scholarship in India that has studied Partition and other instances of Partition-like communal violence, especially with respect to gender, provides ample reason to argue not only for the complicity of the community but for the active role of the community in disallowing the trauma victim to speak. In the light of the fact that speaking is integral to any possible recovery, we can further imagine the extent of the violence the role of the community participates in. In this body of scholarship, it is also clear that the silence here is gendered and subject to a gendered-censorship of what is permissible to be spoken about or when it is permissible to speak at all. Menon and Bhasin explicitly state, “With women [...] the shame-fear-dishonour syndrome presents itself differently: fear at the prospect of being sexually used; the unspeakable shame of being raped; fear of death and afraid because without defenders; and the twin dishonour of violation and disaster” (59). While some kinds of stories could be narrated—those, for instance, of “honourable” deaths—there was less sanction for accounts of those women who survived (Butalia 213). We will remember Gandhi’s prayer speech, which I quoted in the previous chapter, where he praises the “brave women in India” who “did not want to lose their honour and chose to die.” Revealingly, therefore, Butalia calls her chapter on consensual killings “Honour” while Menon and Bhasin call theirs “Honorably Dead.” Menon and Bhasin write:

How often were we told of the courage and strength of the women who came forward to be killed, or who set an example of self-negation by taking their own lives; and again and again, we heard men say with pride, “They preferred to die.” This not only released the men from the responsibility for their deaths it also put a closure both on the women’s lives and in their speech. [...] The subsequent taboo on recall drove many, many women into silence and a willed amnesia regarding their violation.

(60)

The social censorship works at all levels, making the space for speaking narrower still. The speech and silence of the women are appropriated in the existing patriarchal-communal rubric and deployed to reinforce notions of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ As Butalia writes, “If we hear little about the rape and abduction of women in historical accounts, what we do know about violence in general relates only to the men of the other community. There is seldom, if ever, any acknowledgement (except perhaps in fiction) that the Hindu and Sikh women could have become targets of Hindu and Sikh men” (193). What we can conclude from these observations is that while trauma is by all means silencing, in case of women, there are additional forces that demand silence. Like the event of the trauma, the traumatized life, of which silence is a part, is also caused and conditioned by social and political factors. Gender is a key component of the role of the society that causes and conditions these traumatized lives.

Thus, the political role of the audience is crucially important. Bringing the critical focus on the audience allows us, the readers, to earnestly attempt to

understand our role as audience/listener/critics in hearing difficult narratives of trauma. It is to bring the audience under critical focus that I had engaged in the debate whether the silence of gendered trauma victims such as that of Sutara is because the experience is unspoken or unspeakable. To me, this seems to be a crucial question because choosing one or the other suggests vastly different politics on our part. If the trauma is unspoken, it is because the right language, the right time and space, and the right audience have not been available to the subject, thus allowing for the possibility that the subject *could* speak under radically different conditions. Thus, that it is unspoken is also at once a critique of the ‘everyday’ state of society in which the victim resides and the linguistic possibilities it makes available. It is a critique of ‘us,’ and of ‘our’ failure as well.

It is a question of believing, then, that a trauma victim’s silence /speech lies in the realm of *both* communication and metaphysics. I am not advocating the category of the unspeakable as an apolitical category (even if it is imagined as a ‘metaphysical’ one). Nevertheless, there is a finality, a premature closure, to our interest in understanding silence as essentially unspeakable. For, if we posit the silence of a trauma victim as purely unspeakable, we also relieve ourselves of our complicity in creating the conditions that disallow articulation of trauma especially when such trauma involves the gendered burden of shame.

This position of social critique I am taking by emphasizing hearer-related silence is, I think, entirely compatible with the speaker-related silence that Caruth, in the context of the trauma-victim, and Spivak, in the context of the gendered subaltern formulate. The compatibility can be shown by citing Lyotard’s notion

of the “différend,” which I have used in the context of a rape narrative, and which Spivak also makes use of in her essay. Spivak reads the “différend” as the “inaccessibility of, or untranslatability from, one mode of discourse in a dispute to another” (CSS 300) and expands with a longer quote in *Critique* (295). The incommensurability that Lyotard points out in the concept of the “différend” is precisely where the role of the other discourse system of the hearer, which remains violently and radically exclusive of the discourse system of the speaker, can be noticed.

The departure of *The River Churning* from its narrative conventions to be silent on the details of the assault on Sutara, thus, both offers a critique of the linguistic community— within which a language to tell Sutara’s story without participating in the violence against her is not possible—and participates in a radical concept of communication that we can call feminist. The radical concept of communication is to consciously move away from the kind of communication that depends on, and facilitates a hierarchical power structure between the speaker and the listener/interlocutor. In the chapter on communication, titled “‘Speaking to...’ and ‘Speaking with...,’” in her book *Feminist Thought: Androcentricism, Communication and Objectivity*, Moitra outlines and analyses the “speaking with” pattern of communication. The participants of this kind of communication have to agree to a power sharing rather than opting for power as domination.

Moitra has called this form of communication, which she sees as part of a radical feminist practice, “speaking with” as opposed “speaking to.” By the latter phrase she refers to the standard communication practice that is built on “the two

supporting pillars of...objectivity and dichotomous categories of reason and emotion,” of which the “theoretical underpinnings” are “unattainable and damaging” (99). The ‘speaking with’ mode of communication, on the other hand, is “rooted” in “cognitive anxiety,” where both the speaker and the listener “acknowledge that they have a partial understanding” and “an irreducible plurality of perspectives” (93). The other signature features of the “speaking with...” mode are that, first, it is “reconfigured as power-with power, [where] power is no longer conceptually linked with domination. This is a coalition building power” (96). Second, it is “inevitably hermeneutic; therefore, it must be interactive” (ibid.). Further, to be “genuinely interactive,” role of listening gains paramount importance: “a considerable amount of ‘listening’ in a very special sense—an attentive listening, a heeding and not a mere reception of messages (ibid.). Third, it is “necessarily a form of discursive communication,” which permits “the problem to be problematised” (97) and “acknowledges the importance of narratives, vocabularies and styles of thinking that cannot be translated into our cultural vocabulary (98). In ‘speaking with,’ there are “no complete messages” (ibid.).

Thus, ‘speaking with’ opens up ways we can receive a tale like that of Sutara’s or a novel like *The River Churning*. What the ‘speaking with’ model of communication does is it puts the responsibility of receiving a difficult narrative on the audience as much as on the speaker to tell such a tale. The ‘speaking with...’ mode invites a different form of listening from us than in the standard

practice of ‘speaking to.’²² The ‘speaking with’ form of communication, where listening plays a key role, is a radical feminist practice, and it is, of course, a critical practice that needs to be distinguished from practices of cognitive certainty, uncritical empathy or sympathy felt by the audience through identification with the victim.²³ Thus, when we use this awareness of ‘speaking with, distinct from the mainstream mode of ‘speaking to,’ in a discussion of *The River Churning* we arrive at some insight on what Jyotirmoyee Devi’s novel seeks to articulate.

²² This thought on power-sharing communication is shared by listener-sensitive scholarship on trauma. For example, in the context of the Holocaust, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* focuses on the role of the audience in “witnessing” a historical traumatic event of the dimension of the Holocaust. The first chapter by Dori Laub titled, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening” is especially devoted to the act of listening. In this chapter, in a discussion of the “hazards of listening,” Dori Laub lists how certain defensive-mechanisms by the listener can shut down a trauma narrative (72-73).

²³ ‘Speaking with,’ thus, resonates with the arguments of Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* and a host of other scholarship in the field of Holocaust studies, which draws attention to the impossibility of the audience to ever ‘know’ fully. From a different angle, a part of this scholarship has also questioned the ethicality of the straightforwardness of the identification with the victim, which the discussions of the role of the audience and the role of listening by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in *Testimony* leaves unquestioned. Marianne Hirsch’s study of ‘postmemory’ has analyzed the projective fantasies in the reception of iconic images of the Holocaust. Hirsch argues that the images of child victims lure the audience into an unproblematic universalizing and homogenizing witnessing.

Susannah Radstone has gone further by taking into account Hirsch’s attempt to arrive at a more ethical witnessing, but she cautions against the ethics of “identification” with victimhood itself. “Taking as its case-study Marianne Hirsch’s writing on the ethical aesthetics of postmemorial photography,” in Radstone’s own words, she “concludes that recent work on trauma and testimony fails to acknowledge that identification may straddle victimhood and perpetration. The acknowledgement is only possible when some containment of aggression feels possible” (59).

As an alternative mode of relating to the trauma victim available to others, Dominick LaCapra formulates the concept of “emphatic unsettlement” in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. “Emphatic unsettlement” is an ethical form of affective involvement that entails “being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims” in a way that is not “the appropriation of their experiences. [...] Empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit” (41-42).

The ‘unspoken’ of the novel illuminates the narrative politics. By remaining silent at a critical moment, the novel essentially matches Sutara’s silence with its own silence. Moitra states that “[i]n ‘speaking with,’ silence is a corollary of listening. Listening entails a communicative role of silence. Listening is not confined to codified sources of meaning...It is only when we are silent that we begin to notice the muteness of deprived groups” (99). The task Moitra indicates by “our silence,” is the task *The River Churning* performs. The author/narrator is part of the ‘we’ (the audience) who has agreed to be quiet so that ‘we’ can hear the inability of a marginalized character such as Sutara to speak.

The silence of the narrator in the text draws attention to the fact that, in spite of the commitment to speak (on part of the author, as in this novel), there is no available language in the gendered ‘everyday’ world. Didur argues that “the silence in women’s accounts of sectarian violence that accompanied partition” is a “sign of their inability to find a language to articulate their experience without invoking metaphors of purity and pollution” (11). Analogously, for a narrator who wants to narrate the story of a refugee woman, a gendered victim of the Partition, there is a similar lack of language that is not corrupted by the metaphors of purity and honour. Thus, the novel cannot just tell, but has to *show* the failure of language to represent experiences of the kind Sutara has. Indeed, the function of this silence is very important: the silence is to record that there is no available ‘language’ to talk about it. The author/narrator is thus making a larger point of not having the linguistic space in history to talk about gender crimes. The narrative

can only perform the loaded failure of social language and how deep hegemony and 'shame' thwarts women from asking/answering/uttering even when they know the truth about gender crimes.

The critique of representative impossibilities that the novel advocates is based, I have tried to show above, on a socio-political understanding of language and silence. Thus, while making trauma narrative entirely gendered, my critique also makes trauma narratives and their representative possibility/impossibility a larger political question. The novel brings critical focus on the role of the audience/reader/society at large in the ways women's lives in ordinary 'everyday' world, not just during but also beyond traumatizing events of the Partition, are regulated. In making silence a crucial part of its own narrative strategy, the novel has tried to match the silence of the protagonist-victim with its own and allow for an ideological critique of patriarchy. Keeping in view the importance I have attached to the communicative—hence the socio-political and emphatically gendered—aspect of trauma and silence, I have read the novel's stylistic decisions also in terms of an attempt to problematize a 'rape narrative.' This has allowed me to plot gender violence not only as a mark of the extraordinary political upheaval of the Partition, but also as a mark of the patriarchal violence of the everyday. In my reading of the novel, the critique that the novel provides is strongly addressed to the everyday.

III

“A part of the history of women of all time:” Myths and ‘the Historical’ in *The River Churning*

The “Author’s Note,” which I quoted above, links the absence of a socially possible and permissible language that haunts the novel to the absence *in history* of the “Stree Parva” (The Women’s Chapter). Provocatively, the novel opens in middle of a history lesson, making history the point of reference where the novel begins. We meet the protagonist Sutara as a professor of history in a college for girls. We hear her caution her students, all young women, that history is not impartial to power. Significantly, in the middle of this lesson of what history can include and what it cannot, Sutara has a flashback from her traumatic past: of her double-victimisation; once by the ‘men of the other community’ in the Noakhali riots of 1946 and then by her ‘own community’ who refuse to take her back as she has become ‘polluted.’ It allows the omniscient narrator of the novel to poignantly reflect that no syllabus of history will include Sutara’s story/memory, or indeed any woman’s story/memory. The concern of this absence of the women’s part, the stree parva, is central to the novel.

Joan Kelly has written that from the “vantage point” of feminism looking for women’s history, the History of nations looks very different.²⁴ With similar thoughts, Jyotirmoyee Devi ends her poem “Sphinx,” with these three lines:

Hence kind God has made us liars, chaste

²⁴ For instance in her famous essay “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” Kelly finds that from the vantage point of women, there was in fact no Renaissance for women, at least not during the Renaissance, and then she questions the periodization that sees a Renaissance in the first instance.

Like the Sphinx of Egypt

Silent Spectators of the world's history.²⁵

In "Sphinx," Jyotirmoyee Devi points out the gendered quality of history in which the role of women is that of "silent spectator[ship]." Jyotirmoyee Devi clearly understood that it is power (or lack of it) that is the quintessential requirement for having a history (or not). With power, one has history. Without power, there are only stories. Thus, she begins another short story "Ahalya Draupadi Tara"²⁶ with the following reflection:

Whatever it may be called. May be its History. Because all over the world stories of such people are strewn about. If we add year, date, family history, we may be able to pass it off as History. Especially if the subjects of the stories are kings-emperors or just rich men, it would become History. And if such grandeur were lacking, if the narrative belongs to simple folks, people would think this is just a story. Any how, let it be presumed that this is a secret, unspoken, heart-rendering, eternal tale of women's happiness (where is happiness for women?) and sorrows, rise and fall. Not stylish enough to be lifestyle, but the fragmented history of life's struggles. In any case, even I don't know all the histories associated with the tale. Thus, it would be better to presume this as just a story. (My translation; *Rachana Sankalan: Volume 1* 221).

²⁵ Jasodhara Bagchi's translation ("Introduction" xxv).

²⁶ The story is about a young woman who gets lost in a large fair. When she returns a few days later accompanied by three young men, her family refuses to take her in.

Yet, the apparent opposition Jyotirmoyee Devi builds up between story and history is, I will argue, not one of simple binary opposites. While she clearly critiques documented history, ‘History’ if we may, for not including the women’s part, and discards such History as inadequate, she does not let go of the function of the historical. As I argue in this section, *The River Churning* does not simply underscore the lack of women’s history as a symptom of powerlessness and leave the problem at that. It understands that the lack of history also poses a serious challenge to imagining collective conditions of oppression and thereby to formulating oppositional politics. It knows that without history, or something like history, individual stories remain isolated problems, making invisible that they lie within systemic and structural relationships of power that frame women. In other words, without a history of women it is difficult to imagine a history of patriarchy or the possibility of critiquing patriarchy as a historical product. So, *The River Churning* cannot let go of the historical even while it critiques History.

However, to what can the novel turn that would be equivalent to finding a way to “restore women to history and to restore history to women,” as Joan Kelly has identified the task (1)?²⁷ I will argue that *The River Churning* tests the limits

²⁷ Commenting on an earlier draft of this discussion, Mridula Nath Chakraborty raises a series of questions which cumulatively lead to a very important fundamental question, to my mind, about the very idea of women’s history. She writes,

What would [women’s history] look like? How will its language necessarily not be non-inclusive? I contend that it is precisely because women stand in/outside of history that they are able to offer a critique to it. What if ‘spectatorship,’ to use Jyotirmoyee Devi’s word, itself is the radical position of women in history? That they participate in it as subversive in/outside to the foundational myths of history and make explicit its intrinsic violence. What would a women’s history do that was different? Is it not in the very nature of history to perpetrate such violence against its in/outside, others, and subalterns?

What if you were to imagine something more radical: i.e. women’s history not as a separatist endeavour, or not as a lack (very Freudian)? Either of those positions is

of history and exposes its gendered lacks, but it constructs the historical by turning to the mythic. The mythic too, as we have heard in the “Author’s Note,” has a patriarchal structure. Yet, in the attempt to counter the burden of historical silence, it can act as a tool. *The River Churning*, or any other novel, cannot reverse the process of historical silencing of women but it can illuminate the silence; it can eloquently point out the ellipses. As I have shown in the previous section, *The River Churning* does not try to circumvent the foundational absence. It does, however, use myths to register the loss and go further to probe alternative narrative practices. In absence of a history of women, the novel turn to the mythic to add the collective—both spatial and temporal—dimension to what are individual women’s stories. This is how it constructs its feminist resistance.

The mythic captures for the novel the epic reach—connecting all women of the Partition as well as women of all times—of the violence that surrounds women. The citation of the myths enables *The River Churning* to create an alternative site of collective imagination, in face history’s denial of such a possibility. In this way, the novel is able to rise above the level of the individual and offer a critique of patriarchy as a systemic condition of oppression that frames

ultimately an exercise operating within the terms of engagement of patriarchy. After all, oppositional politics takes as granted the grounds of the existing status quo. I would repeat that the radical import of women as a collective and of women’s collective lies in its acknowledgement of history as a patriarchal project but wherein lies the subversion outside of such a construction? Such a conundrum is evident in Joan Kelly’s identified task of restoring women to history and history to women. Are we not accepting the terms of the defined categories of ‘women’ and ‘history’ here?

The comments by Chakraborty alert us to the fundamental nature of the gap in history that cannot be filled in through a restorative move as Kelly suggests. Instead, I find her suggestion to recognize the criticality of the role of ‘spectatorship,’ from within, if I may add, very enabling. This suggestion conceptually furthers my attempt to attribute a position of criticality around the figure of the refugee woman who is both in/outside structures of power.

all women. In terms of the larger argument of this dissertation, the novel, thus, constructs the violence of the Partition itself as historical. It is also able to frame the violence of the Partition as an extraordinary instance (keeping in mind its magnitude), but nevertheless an extension of the ordinary and everyday—the historical—violence of patriarchy.

Myth, Hindu epics, legends, and other non-historical storehouses of collective narratives play a crucial role in the narrative of *The River Churning*. Allusions to the two Hindu epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are central to the novel, especially to the latter. In the very first page, it refers to partitioned India as the “truncated Maha-Bharata” (or Great-Bharata) reminding us of the resonance of the name of the epic with the name of the Sanskrit name of India (Bharata). It refers to Delhi as the ancient “Hastinapur” of the *Mahabharata*. The sections of the novel are named after three books of the epic as I already mentioned above. In the translated text by Chatterjee, the first section is called “Adi Parva: the Beginning” after the first book of the epic, “The Book of the Beginning.” The second section is called “Anusasan Parva: The Imposition” after the thirteenth book “The Book of Instructions.”²⁸ The last section, in which part of the original title survives, is called “Stree Parva: The Women,” after the eleventh book of the epic, which is usually translated as “The Book of the

²⁸ Chatterjee translates ‘Anusasan’ as “Imposition.” However, it is perhaps better translated as “Instructions” or “Education.” This is the book where the dying Vishma, lying on his bed of arrows, gives advice to all the warriors gathered around. The lesson is imparted in the battlefield of the Kurukshetra, against a landscape of ruin. There is an ironic deployment of the idea of “Education” in the second section of the novel, in terms of the ‘education’ Sutara receives from the Hindu household where she takes refuge after coming to Calcutta. This irony is lost if we translate Anusasan as “Imposition,” which is a more literal description of what actually happens to Sutara.

Women.” The allusion to the epic *Mahabharata* is of critical importance to the novel; so much so, that Meenakshi Mukherjee has felt that “the original title would have reflected the starkness of the theme better, highlighting the link with *Mahabharata*” (“Pawn”15). I absolutely agree with her. Indeed, in my reading the allusion to the epic is of further critical significance to the critique the novel offers. This linking of the Partition with *Mahabharata*, or ‘great India,’ is, I argue, an implicit connection the novel draws between the Partition and ‘the national.’

The allusion to the mythic is not just in the title, but permeates the narrative structure. The narrative is crisscrossed with allusions to Hindu-mythic women who were violated in different ways and were never redressed within an essentially patriarchal understanding of justice. The protagonist Sutara reminds one of Tara. There are several characters with that name in Hindu mythology, but the most likely source for Sutara’s name is the wife of Brihaspati, who was abducted and raped by the Moon.²⁹ Perhaps we are meant to also remember, ironically, the other Tara, wife of Bali, who is among the five *pativratas*, the five ideal epic wives. There are numerous allusions to Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*, several to Sita of the *Ramayana*, and also to other mythic characters. In spite of their high or divine births, the commonality of all the cited mythic women is that they are all insulted, violated, and wronged. Compositely, they become a prototype of the collective wrong done to women, and they can be examples to

²⁹ See the story “Ahalya Draupadi Tara.” The protagonist’s name, as the narrator “imagines” it because there is no “history” of her innocent life, alludes to a fourth mythic character, Durga. The title, which is constituted by names of three mythic characters, has no direct connection with the plot, but provides a mythic framework which universalizes one woman’s story.

which we can add the experience of Sutara and the thousands of women made targets of violence during the Partition.

Myths have duality built into their structures. They are at once, on one hand, foundational and fixed but also, on the other hand, flexible and fluid. Thus, they are best not thought of as ‘texts’ with clear boundaries, but rather they are narrative possibilities whose politics emerge after they have been deployed in a particular text.³⁰ Indeed, they are somewhat like liquids that takes the shape of the vessel into which they are poured. This dual quality of myths—that they are both fixed and fluid—allows them to be reread, reworked, and redeployed in varying contexts and to varying ends. Draupadi or Sita is at once an individual “character” as much as a narrative-possibility that can be placed in an altogether different milieu. This way, the mythic female characters become prototypes of the Partition victim. In particular, Draupadi of the Mahabharata has a very strong presence in *The River Churning*. Glossing the character of Draupadi in context of the novel, Cynthia Leenert comments:

³⁰ The mythic narrative structures are also no doubt male-authored and patriarchal. As such, they do not tell stories from the “vantage point” (to use Joan Kelly’s phrase) or “standpoint” (to use Dorothy Smith’s) of women. As we have seen in case of *The River Churning*, myths as narrative possibilities can be deployed for constructing a critique of patriarchy. One could also argue that there is an immanent critique of patriarchy in some strands of the myths. However, structures of myths or epics *per se* are patriarchal, and could just as well lend themselves as hegemonic authority to support patriarchal complacency. The novel itself reminds us of that. For example, Amulya Babu, the master of the household in which Sutara takes refuge when she first comes to Calcutta, runs a list of all the mythic women whom the nearest and dearest male relatives could not protect to the service of excusing his own inability to do anything for Sutara. Similarly, men who commit gender crimes in Partition riots also cite these Hindu myths as justification for their action, especially as justification for their targeting of women. They provocatively ask if one can point out “a single instance when women have not been molested, pushed about? Look at the stories in their Puranas – what about the abduction of Sita? What about Draupadi?” (14). The instances of these myths are used to justify furthering patriarchal violence against women. Therefore, I am not suggesting that myths *themselves* or *all* allusions to myths are necessarily radical.

Although Draupadi, as well as Sita, is one of the five *pativratas* [devoted to husband, ideal wives] the fact that she is married to five men puts her in a comparative disadvantage, despite the justification given in the *Mahabharata* for her multiple marriage. Only foolish characters question Sita's purity, most notably the straying wife [of a washerman] who uses Rama's acceptance of Sita after her rescue as justification for her own demand that her husband take her back. Conversely, only insightful characters such as Krishna fully understand Draupadi's innate virtue. This perceived difference in reputation—Sita's purity so evident that only the wayward and foolish cannot perceive it, and Draupadi's so subtle that one must almost be trained to see it. [...]

In Jyotirmoyee's novel, the protagonist and other Partition survivors endure rape and rejection, with only a few high-minded characters recognizing the true purity of this collective Draupadi. (85)

As captured in the story of Sutara, her "innocence" is wilfully misunderstood by the Hindu society. Unlike Leenert, I shall not presume that Sutara was raped. Even so, ironically, Sutara's fate is like both Draupadi and Sita. The text implicitly likens her to both, and it critiques the codification of "sexuality" of women in the binary of purity/virtue.³¹

³¹ Sita had to pass 'a test of fire' (by walking through the flames unscathed) according to demands of her husband before he could take her back. Even after all this, when the dispute between the washerman and his wife is overheard and reported to Ram, he banishes his pregnant wife. There are disputes about this ending, but this is the version in the Bengali translations of the epic that Jyotirmoyee Devi was likely to have read, the same editions Sutara specifies to have read in the novel, those by Kashiram Das and Kaliprashanna Singha (107).

The college where Sutara goes to teach in the last section of the novel is named after Draupadi: Yajnasweni College for Girls. Leenert notes Alf Hiltebeitel's observation that Yajnasweni means "she whose army is connected with the sacrifice," that the Tamil form of the name signifies "she whose army *is* the sacrifice, and that "not only does Draupadi's army perform the sacrifice of battle; it is the sacrifice of the battle" (Hiltebeitel 392, cited in Leenert 97; emphasis added by Leenert). At Yajnaseni college, "one indeed sees an army sacrificed on the alter of communal violence," Leenert argues, and states that "these women, who have faced humiliation, who have had multiple sexual partners forced upon them in an obscene parody of Draupadi's multiple marriage, literally come together as Yajnaseni" (97).

Other than the similarity lying in "obscene parody of multiple marriage," I think we should also remember the disrobing of Draupadi in the court of the Kauravas after Yudhishtir lost her in the game of dice. The commonality that the novel wants to highlight between Draupadi and the female victims of the Partition is that they could be 'pawned' out in the process of nation founding. I would also add on the aspect of the 'sacrifice' that Draupadi herself was born out of a sacrificial fire ("yajna") as part of the ritual her father Drupada was performing to bring on the destruction of his staunch enemy, Drona. Draupadi was born as one who would "cause" a great war in which Drona was to be destroyed. This is the great battle of the *Mahabharata* fought in Kurukshetra. Later, all her children are also killed in the same war. Hence, the aspect of sacrifice takes on multiple valences. The novel makes it amply clear that Draupadi herself is a sacrificial

figure. Like Draupadi, Sutara, too, embodies “sacrifice” as a Partition victim, a refugee woman, representing, metonymically, the people who were thought expendable in the scheme of the Partition.

When Draupadi dies, no one mourns her. Towards the end of the novel, when Sutara goes on pilgrimage to the Himalayas, she knows from her knowledge of reading several editions of the *Mahabharata* in Bengali that she is taking the same route the five Pandavas, the heroes of *Mahabharata*, and their wife Draupadi were supposed to have taken to ascend to heaven. Only the eldest brother Yudhisthira finally made it to heaven, the epic tells us, while the other members of the group had fallen one by one. The first to fall was Draupadi.

Sutara thinks:

But the writer of the epic had no time to lament her. Even the five Pandavas did not pause to mourn the woman who was so dear to them, who had remained at their side constantly in the royal court, in the thickest of forests. In the words of the Yaksha she was more than a friend, more than a partner, she was a most enduring shelter, the earth itself. A woman who was equally devoted to each of her five husbands – but the husbands did not shed a single tear for her.

Well, nothing is mentioned in the epic. It speaks emotionally [on other occasions]. But about this particular death, Vyasadeva is strangely silent.

All that is mentioned is a mere ‘Draupadi died on Mahendra Parvat.’

(108).

Sutara realizes how in spite of her virtues, Draupadi was expendable, neglected, and, in death, unlamented. Neither her husbands, nor the epic narrator spares her any words. Her death is surrounded by silence. The only lament she receives are in thoughts of Sutara and, meta-textually, in the novel *The River Churning*. Likewise, there was no one to lament the fall of the many ‘Draupadi’s in the Partition.

Through the citation of the mythic woman, the novel shows how the national/political intersects with the everyday life. The Punjabi colleague Sutara befriends is called Kausalyavati, and in short Kaushalya, after Rama’s mother in *Ramayana*. Kaushalyavati is a Partition refugee herself, and through her Sutara becomes acquainted with the experience of the Partition in Punjab—especially the violence on women that the event of the Partition brought on. There is transference of the resonance of the name Kaushalya from Kaushalyavati to another victim of the Partition whom Sutara meets through her friend. With Kaushalyavati, Sutara visits Punjabi households and gatherings and meets the elderly, lonely, and slightly-deranged “Mataji,” most of whose family was massacred in a brutal “train-killing” while fleeing from Lahore in the newly-formed Pakistan. We hear how her son and husband were killed and what happened to her daughter and daughter-in law was not known but was “anybody’s guess” (85). The details of her loss and the fact that she is referred to as “Mataji,” even if it is a standard address for an elderly woman, remind us that this is a “mother” who has lost her offspring to the Partition, as had the mythic Kaushalya,

who was forced to part with her son Ram and her daughter-in law, Sita.³²

Assessing the Partition violence through the life experiences of women, who are inhabitants of the everyday banal life—in this case in the familiar image of the bereft mother—allows the novel to bring the political and the personal lives together.

The radical use of myths allows the novel to critique both the mythical-traditional as well as the modern. The narrator, commenting on the name of the college where Sutara teaches, says: “Yajnaseni College stood in middle of this — a combination of modern and mythical” (1). The Bengali original has a slightly longer phrasing: “In middle of all this, with a name that combined both the mythic and the modern has come up Yajnaseni college. In the name, there is provision for Yajanseni as well as college” (97). The current tale is at once mythic as well as modern: the adaptability of the mythic in midst of the modern is what allows its use in a ‘modern’ tale.

Similarly, Promode likens the “descent” of “refugee women” to Sita’s “entering the darkness of the underground” (118). “Silenc[ing]” his audience of friends in an angry outburst, Promode points out that the condition of these women is worse than even “the case of Sita; in the *Ramayana*, at least “Mother Earth emerged from beneath the ground and disappeared again, taking Sita with her” (ibid.). In stead, in this case, there is

³² The lament of a mother whose children do not return home from the battlefield is also central to a poem by Jyotirmoyee Devi called “Gandhari.” Gandhari—the mother of a hundred Kaurava princes, who all died in the war that is central to the *Mahabharata*—“stands alone, her face clam, silenced by grief,” at the end of the war. (Bagchi “Narimuktibadi” 14).

a living hell into which people are forced to descend to take a profession, to keep body and soul together. Those who can't, die like Sita. Those who manage to survive lead a most precarious existence on the margins of the society. [...]

Sita was abducted. This was followed by a battle between Ram and Ravan. Ram and Bibhishan were made kings and put on the throne, but nobody could prevent the exile of Sita. King Ram and his favourites held court happily, unperturbed, in excellent health. Their asanas were luxurious, their cushions soft and comfortable. That was the arrangement in Ramrajya, and the tradition has continued. Sita followed Ram in his forest exile but Ram did not do the same for Sita.” (118)

The critique here is in two layers. On the one hand, the mythic tale itself is laid bare in terms of its vast gender injustice: its double standard when it came to women. On the other hand, there is an equally trenchant critique of the Partition mounted through the use of the myth. In the modern post-Partition time, too, “the same tradition” continues. Especially disadvantaged are the ‘Sita’s of the Partition—for compounding their refugee hardship is their gender. If they deviate, the society will especially punish them. If to keep body and soul together they enter the profession of prostitution (“descend underground”), their marginalization is going to be double. We should note that like all other writing by Jyotirmoyee Devi on prostitution, there is no moral judgement whatsoever, but a clear finger-raising at patriarchy for its marginalization of such women. The critique on offer is important, as is the temporal “continuity” that the mythic

elements provide the gender-injustice of the Partition with. It is also important to note that while there is a evocation of Hindu myths, and also possible Hinduization of the past, this is entirely in the spirit of critique. The evocation of the “Ramrajya” is done not in the view of its famed utopian quality, but to point out the gender injustice that permeates this so-called utopia.

Most importantly, the mythic provides the temporal continuity of the current in the past and provides a collective dimension. The narrator of the novel reflects: “Sutara felt the weight of age and experience of centuries added to her body, flowing in her veins. She became a part of the history of women of all time – Satya, Treta, Dwapar and Kali Yuga – of what had gone before. It was as though she represented all women who have been insulted, tortured, neglected, deserted, through history” (69). The narrator says “as though [Sutara] represented all women of all ages,” but I would argue that Sutara *does* represent women of all ages. The enlisting of mythic ages is in lieu of historical ages for women, but together they sum of “all” of human time. The “eternal” here, then, is paradoxically historicized though the mythic. This quality of the mythic is crucially useful to the narrative strategy of *The River Churning*. In lieu of history, *The River Churning* has myths. In this, myths perform the same task that history should perform.

By historicizing the modern in this fashion, the novel situates the protagonist and the women victims of the Partition in a collective imagined temporally as also spatially in the given moment in history. Cynthia Leenert has argued that in *The River Churning*, the image of Draupadi is used to represent

“the thousands of women violated during the Partition” (84). Therefore, the use of the mythic figure is not to present her as “the epic heroine writ large, but rather as the epic heroine writ numerous” (86). I suggest that the collective dimension of the oppression of women—both temporal and spatial—is of critical importance to Jyotirmoyee Devi’s text. Otherwise the story becomes reducible to a tale of one woman’s misfortune. That is not desirable for a novel that is dedicated “to all women of all ages, of all countries, who have been violated and humiliated” (Jyotirmoyee Devi “Dedication,” *Rachana Sankalan*; my translation from Bengali). The purpose of *The River Churning* is to mount a systemic critique of patriarchy, and for that the collective dimension is necessary.³³

The reason for the women to be especially targeted in ‘times of violence’ is also made clear by the myths: Kausalyavati points to how myths endorse “crime against women.” She explains, ““Perhaps men on both sides thought that this was the best way to punish and humiliate. Like Draupadi”” (90). Similarly, elsewhere, the narrator of the novel laments that in the Partition, “numerous Draupadis were disrobed and humiliated. After all the easiest way to show off one’s manhood is at the cost of helpless women like Sita, Draupadi and the others” (68). In this lies the power of the myths when radically used. The mythic temporally adds a collective dimension to what are individual women’s stories, especially in absence of the history of women and also the absence of the collective women’s history. Especially in context of the Partition, the mythic

³³ If we remember Aristotle’s distinction in *Poetics*: 9 between history and literature, history is the particular and specific (what has happened) and literature is the general and universal (what can happen). Nevertheless, history is a collective memory—plural because of narrative temporal continuity between individual stories.

captures the epic proportions of the violence that engulfed women. The citation of the myths enables the text to recreate an alternate site of narrative continuity of a collective dimension in the face of what is denied by history.

Jasodhara Bagchi has argued that because “the Stree Parva of the *Mahabharata* was no conventional chapter on women,” it “contained the potential of cross-cutting ‘myth’ with ‘history:’ the great ‘open secret’ that is kept carefully hidden from the public eye by a manipulative patriarchy” (“Introduction” xxvii). In a similar vein, I suggest that *The River Churning* brings the mythic and the historic together, illuminating the record of patriarchal injustice in one with the silence of the other. Neither history nor myths tell the story of women; in the few cases that they make formal gestures to include women, they evade the issue. Yet, when we read those silences with the meagre details afforded in the texts, when we read these texts against their grain, when we read them from the “vantage point” of women, we find that they bleed a story of humiliation, injustice, and violence done to women. Thus, “crosscutting” one with the other, we read a story of this ‘absence’ and ‘violence.’

Thus, analyzing the use of the mythic in the narrative strategy of the novel *The River Churning*, I argue that while on the one hand, such a use lays bare the absence of the “Stree Parva” from both History and available Hindu Myths, on the other, the text uses mythic elements, especially examples of mythic women from both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to situate the gendered-violence of the Partition in a temporal continuity of the violence done to not one woman, or even women in one particular moment in history, but to all women “in all ages.”

Allusions to myths allow the novel, thus, to constitute the Partition violence against women as historical and also point to the contiguities and continuities between the extraordinary violence of the Partition to the ‘banality’ of everyday life preceding the event.

IV

“Do women ever become independent?” Women and the Nation in *The River Churning*

In the above two sections, I have read how *The River Churning* constructs women as embodied subjects within a discourse that normatively fixes women as a sign. This embodied subject is also, I have suggested, situated in a collective. In this last section, I would like to further examine the relationship in the text of women, as embodied subjects and a plural, with collectives. Nation, of course, is the most immediately pressing dominant collective and is imbricated in the legitimacy of the newly found independent nation-state. The aim of this discussion will be to probe how *The River Churning* situates women against the formation of nation/nation-state in its immediate history.

Debali Mookerjea-Leonard contends, “Jyotirmoyee Devi situates Sutara within the ‘woman-as-nation’ paradigm, but in her writings the fallen woman is the symbolic representation of the nation. (39). To translate Mookerjea-Leonard’s argument to the vocabulary of this dissertation: *The River Churning* does not understand the violence of gendered metaphor formation in the process of nation making for what it is. My reading differs from Leonard-Mookerjea’s. To take an

example from the text that makes the most explicit reference to this: early in the second section, Amulya Babu sees Sutara's pitiful face, and thinking of the imminent Partition, likens her to "the blood[ied]³⁴ symbol of the [pain of the] mother figure we call our country" (38). Here, whereas Sutara *is* the symbol of the pain of the motherland, the text does not simply call her the symbol of the bloodied motherland. Instead, that she is the *bloodied* symbol points to recognition of the gendered embodiment of the symbol, to the violence of that embodiment, and to the critique of this process.

Therefore, in contrast to Mookerjea-Leonard's reading, I found, at least in *The River Churning*, that Sutara represents the fallen woman, or all women, rather than the nation. This leads me to argue that in *The River Churning* the female protagonist, Sutara, represents the nation, but metonymically—as a part of a whole, as a member—and not metaphorically. She stands for historical women, "women of all ages," within patriarchy, and she stands for the women marginalized and victimized in the moment of nation-state foundation through the Partition. This is a subtle but important distinction I would like to draw between Mookerjea-Leonard's argument and mine. In my reading, this text, in pushing the economy of representation around women from the metaphoric to the metonymic, even if the shift is a struggle in progress and not absolute, makes an important feminist intervention.

³⁴ Translation modified from "bloody symbol" in Enakshi Chatterjee's version to "bloodied symbol." The original line is "Sutarai jeno desh-jononiri shei bedonar ekti roktakto proteek" (121).

The construction of women as metonyms to the collective, as opposed to metaphors, animates the critique the novel offers to the relationship it perceives between women and the nation. This imagined relationship pushes *The River Churning* to be critical of the kind of nationalism that the Partition legitimized. Therefore, in *The River Churning*, we find that women and nationalism, certainly ethnic-nationalism, bear a conflict-ridden relationship to each other. When faced with the horror of violence in which her Hindu neighbours have been killed, abducted, or raped, Sakina's mother laments, "If only the men had confined to killing themselves ... [...]." She continues, "You want to partition the country, go ahead; you want to fight over it – do it by all means. But why don't you leave the women alone?" (13). Her words point to a crucial dimension of the relationship between women and the Partition: in this outburst, gender forms the binary, not religion. The "you" she addresses is not just her husband, or even a Muslim man; her addressee is all "men." It is men who want to partition the country, to "fight over it." The women from neither side have the same sense of ownership or stake in the country in this fight. It is also significant that a woman of the community that has perpetuated the violence in this instance speaks these words, rejecting the 'us' of the violator that is potentially available to her for identification. However, at no point can she think of 'us' as Muslims, who then are opponents or enemies of 'them,' the Hindus. Given that particularly gendered form of violence, the 'us' for Sakina's mother is "women," and the "you," the men. In these brief sentences spoken by Sakina's mother, *The River Churning* captures the difference between men and women's senses of collectives.

In this imagined alignment, the emphatic critique is aimed at patriarchy on both sides of the sectarian divide as agents of violence. The novel, thus, radically fractures Hindu-Muslim dyad, as the ‘us’ and ‘them,’ that is the foundational characteristic of mainstream Partition discourse. Here, the ‘us’ and ‘them’ shifts to human beings on two sides of the gender divide: and, the text emphasizes that Sutara’s victimhood is to be read as that of a woman, more than as that of a Hindu. Indeed, in this and in Sutara’s story, the novel seeks to mark in the unfolding of Sutara’s story is the violence of the patriarchal logic, by which patriarchy must first victimize a woman, and then punish her for its own actions.³⁵ This emphasis can also be read in the fact that the first section, covering the riotous killings in Noakhali, is very brief compared to the second and third sections that follow Sutara’s rejection from her own community.

Through Sutara’s experience in her ‘own’ country/community as a ‘polluted’ refugee woman, the novel again elaborates on the conflicting, and sometimes incommensurable, interests of women subjects with the interests of the patriarchal family-community-nation triad. Mookerjea-Leonard has argued that, in rejection of Sutara from her community as a ‘polluted woman,’ what the novel shows is “that women's citizenship is contingent not only on residence in the right country, following the right religious faith, but also on their possessing the right (inviolable) body. In the domain of the elite home, the definitive factor for belonging was unsullied virtue” (39). I think this argument conflates citizenship

³⁵ The critique of patriarchy is not hinged on a simplistic oppositional binary of men and women. Patriarchy is a system. Women in *The River Churning* can be implementers and supporters of patriarchy, often more vocally than the men. The women in the Hindu household act as the gatekeepers of patriarchy and are most vociferous against inclusion of Sutara back into the fold. This is an important detail that indicates that the text has no sentimental idea of ‘woman.’

with political belonging; for Sutara's nationality and citizenship has never been in dispute. However, this slippage in Mookerjea-Leonard's argument is illuminating: it points to the immense gap between citizenship and belonging for marginal groups. It shows that having the two, citizenship and national belonging, as coterminous is indeed a privilege, not a given. Sutara, as a gendered victim of the Partition, is precisely the category of citizens for whom citizenship is almost a mockery, marginal as they are within both the community and the nation-space. Jill Didur also argues in a similar vein: "Sutara's exclusion from the pool of marriageable women in the nation, because of her 'polluted' status, leaves her in a state of alienation from the nation-state and her community" (150). In the novel, in a discussion of the 'problem' of 'abducted women' by Promode and his friends—concerned male citizens in the new India—one says, "Let them die first, let them be wiped out. We have got our government, that is the main thing" (118). Also citing these lines, Didur argues that the community sees "this exclusion [...] as a necessary evil to maintain a homogenous and stable representation of the nation-state" (150). Thus, Didur, too, arrives at the conclusion that the prized "Indian citizenship" of the newly independent country comes to be nothing more than "an empty promise for Sutara" (151).

On a broader scale, Sutara, as a refugee woman, throws into relief the basic doubt about all women's claim to the nation/nation-state. In spite of being a member of the elite *bhadralok* class, Sutara, as a refugee woman, dramatizes, too, the fundamental question of freedom that touches—or does it?—all women citizens in the newly-independent India: the mismatch between the promise of

independence and their lived everyday lives. When Sutara finds a teaching position in the girl's college, a first generation paid-occupation for a female of her class and community, the omniscient narrator comments:

Although Sutara found a place to stay, it was neither home nor a household and least of all a nest created by a woman's love and care. But it was a room, a room of her own. And hers through her hard-earned money. [...] She would be a burden no more. Did that mean she was now independent? Do women ever become independent? (69)³⁶

The question of women's independence comes up in terms of female paid labour and of the financial independence of women of a certain class, but it runs into a broader context of liberation itself. The echo of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is unmistakable here. Yet, the ambiguity in the last two lines—the two questions—display the limits of Sutara's financial independence and, given her exile from her community, rings against the question of a broader political freedom, as well as against freedom in the everyday context of patriarchy.

Historically, for Bengali women at least, educated women of the bhadralok class entering paid workforce, with the refugee women in the vanguard, is a distinctly post-Partition phenomenon. This question of independence that the narrator raises, keeping Sutara in the forefront, and cannot quite answer has a larger historical resonance. These questions could not be answered then, nor can they be answered now. However, historically, these questions could at least be *raised* at that time in this particular manner. The changes in the lives of a large

³⁶ Jill Didur also discusses this passage. See 150-151.

number of refugee women begged these questions to be raised, and many of these women themselves must have raised them. This is, of course, not of meagre significance.

V

In conclusion of this chapter, I would like to remind the reader that I have read *The River Churning* by Jyotirmoyee Devi as a text that is able to posit the Partition for examination as an extreme event but not as an exceptional one. In other words, I have read it as a text that posits the Partition in relation to the banal 'everyday,' and hence as a historical, rather than as an ahistorical, problematic. It also shows us the limits of the historical itself as a gendered category and points to the absences, gaps, and fragments in the gendered narrative of trauma.

Therefore, it addresses the extremely divergent demands of representation that asks it to at once evoke the historical, even when not having a language for it, and to counter the historical by attending to the gendered trauma of the Partition.

Analogous to reading the Partition as an extreme event that is nevertheless also in a historical continuum with the everyday, I have read the novel's critique of the Partition violence as the violence of patriarchy.

The novel has made an intervention, I have argued, in the idiom of cultural nationalism that locates patriarchal 'honour,' as much as the nationalism itself, on women's bodies. The novel, thus, shows the details and nature of the violence of the metaphor. It radicalizes the female body by altering the salient features of this symbolic economy. It also shows the violence of this particular symbolic

economy from the vantage point of women. It seeks to find the violated woman's subjectivity and tries to counter her erasure from the narrative. I will now move on to the next chapter, and turn to a film by Ritwik Ghatak to read how it arrives at the violence of metaphor formation from a different angle. The major shift that we shall encounter from the intervention of Jyotirmoyee Devi to Ritwik Ghatak is a shift from an economy of sexual honour to that of gendered labour.

Chapter 3

A Critique of Metaphor-Making: Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*Cloud-Capped Star*)

In this chapter, I read Ritwik Ghatak's film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, released in 1960, commonly translated as '*Cloud-Capped Star*,'¹ as a text that makes visible the process of gendered metaphor making. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* frames the process that fixates 'women' as a metaphor by turning individual women into 'symbols' of motherhood. It shows that this process promotes a relentless and ruthless exploitation of women and, further, that such a process of metaphoric violence claims individual women through sacrificial victimhood. My central argument in this chapter is that the figure of the refugee woman, Nita,² in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* provokes a critique of the violence of the process of metaphor making. Although Nita dies at the end to embody the process, the film evokes 'the figure of the refugee woman' beyond the character of Nita. While registering the violence of the metaphor in Nita's death, the film also gestures towards a post-metaphor space for women.

¹ The translated title is listed as "Cloudcapped Star" in the filmography in *Rows and Rows of Fences: Ritwik Ghatak on Cinema* (Ghatak Rows 140). The British Film Institute also lists "Star Under the Cover of Cloud" as an alternative translation. (<<http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/42263>>). Ghatak took the phrase 'cloud-capped' from the last speech of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and translated it to the Bengali "Meghe Dhaka Tara."

Unless specified otherwise, the quotes of dialogues are the subtitles from the British Film Institute DVD. In a few cases, while quoting the BFI subtitles, I have inserted my translations in square brackets.

² Some write the name as Neeta.

In the previous chapter, I read Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning* as an intervention in the discourse of the nation as a woman and the concomitant one of 'women' as a metaphor of the nation. I identified both the processes, in which the novel intervenes, as violent gendered processes wherein 'women' is eminently a sexualized category. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, too, there is a similar staging of the tension between 'women' representing a figurative category and a historical one respectively. However, in Ghatak's film, in contrast to Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel, there is a shift in the comprehension of the source of violence. Whereas in *The River Churning* violence emanates from 'women' being fixed as a metaphor in an economy of patriarchal 'honour,' *Meghe Dhaka Tara* exposes the violence of metaphor formation in the register of gendered labour. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* comes to the issue of sexuality from the opposite end than does *The River Churning*; in the film, the violence on the refugee woman stems from the suppression of her sexuality that shoves her into becoming a sexless worker within a labour system that is nevertheless deeply gendered.

Meghe Dhaka Tara locates the gendered violence of the metaphor in the historical particularity of nation formation. In all his films, as well as in the commentary he provides in his essays and interviews, Ghatak explicitly and repeatedly critiques the Partition and disavows the process of nation foundation that results in the Partition. In his Partition films, of which *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is one, the refugee woman stands in the interstice between the violence of the Partition and nation making, on one hand, and the historical gender violence of

the everyday, on the other. She makes visible the interconnection between the two.

This critique of the Partition also constitutes a larger critique of the bhadralok class for its complicity in the processes leading to the Partition. Indeed, the critique of gender violence is absolutely enmeshed with the critique of the Partition as a violent event; the constitutive relationship of the two makes it impossible to speak about the one without also referring to the other. The bhadralok class that is so acutely under critique is the class to which Ghatak himself belonged. The film is essentially, in my reading, an intensely self-critical one. Emphasizing this class-critique, other commentators—most importantly Ashish Rajadhyaksha in his *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic* (1982)—have also argued that Ghatak's critique is rooted in his irascibility with the class character of the bhadralok in the history that leads to the Partition.

My reading of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, like the reading of *The River Churning* in the previous chapter, concerns itself with the economies of representation that address three categories—language, history, and myths—through which I attempt to locate the everyday world. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* attempts to reflect back on its historical past and see the violence of the Partition as a historical violence. However, in this task, because it understands the Partition as a foundational trauma that obliterates the very ontology of the 'self' and/in the collective, the text encounters profound ellipses in a historical language. I suggest that it is in reaction to this elliptical history that *Meghe Dhaka Tara* alludes to myths, as does *The River Churning*, to elucidate the violence of the Partition. The

use of myths in Ghatak's films, as I propose to show in this chapter, brings the regime of the patriarchal 'everyday' under critical scrutiny.

The central myths to which *Meghe Dhaka Tara* alludes are those of the mother-goddess Durga, the main and iconic deity Hindu-Bengalis worship. Although Ghatak himself described his allusion to be to the archetype of the 'Great Mother,' *Meghe Dhaka Tara*'s central allusion necessarily resonates with a local and historical formation of nationalist semiotics of the nation-mother. We will remember that the hymn "Vande Mataram" in Bankim's *Anandamath*, the ur-text and manifesto for constructing nation as mother, explicitly addresses nation-mother as Durga in the later stanzas. The film, thus, also constitutes a commentary on the foundational myths and semiotics that engender the process of nation foundation. The use of myths in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, I contend, allow us to claim the film towards a feminist critique of the process of metaphor formation, specifically in the way it congeals around the symbol of motherhood that is also central to nationalist semiotics. I find it particularly productive to read this film from my standpoint of feminist enquiry in this dissertation, and to forward my argument about the figure of the refugee woman as an interventional figure developed in the previous chapter on Jyotirmoyee Devi.

All three films by Ghatak that constitute the Partition trilogy are women-centric and provoke us to seriously grapple with gender. Yet, this provocation has been largely ignored and there is very little criticism in Ghatak scholarship from a

sustained gender-based perspective.³ The only academic essay, I find, that comes closest to the subject I have taken up in this chapter —women and the nation—is Erin O’Donnell’s “‘Woman’ and ‘homelessness’ in Ritwik Ghatak’s films: Constructing post-Independence Bengali Identity.” O’Donnell takes up the task of charting the obvious gendered character of the cinematic language of Ghatak’s films and identifies the links between “women,” “landscape (both exterior and interior)” and “sound and music” in Ghatak’s films (2).⁴ She argues,

In his films, Ghatak consistently layers these three components to convey both utopian and dystopian visions of “Homeland” in an independent Bengal. He employs Bengali folk music and frames Bengali landscape to inform, both aurally and visually, his representations of Bengali women as symbolic images of the joy, sorrow, and nostalgia that he associated with the birth of the Indian state. (2-3)

³ Although there are some deeply insightful close-readings in Ashish Rajadhyaksha’s *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic* that address the function of gender, the primary analytical category in focus in that study is class, not gender. Rajadhyaksha has traversed some of the territory that I visit in this chapter in my reading of the Durga myth, but the rubric of his discussion, theoretical agenda, and the conclusions lie in a somewhat different plane from mine. Moinak Biswas’s essay, “Her Mother’s Son: Kinship and History in Ritwik Ghatak” offers a powerful reading of the Ghatak’s films, and its central claim has a singularly significant bearing on a gender-focussed reading of Ghatak. Yet, that is not the place Biswas went in his brief essay. Nevertheless, both have been influential in my understanding of Ghatak’s films, and I will pay close attention to these two pieces in my discussion. Together, they illuminate the function of myth (Rajadhyaksha’s book) and history (Biswas’s essay) in Ghatak’s films, which I have found useful in developing my reading of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. Jasodhara Bagchi’s review of Rajadhyaksha’s book also addresses the function of myth in films of Ghatak; I have found a strong support of my position in this piece.

⁴ Page number of the print version of this essay from the internet version of the journal. In citing the page number, I have contradicted the usual practice of citation, which is to indicate paragraph number of essays available from the web. Here, however, there is no indication of paragraph number in the website. Moreover, the spacing before and after indented long quotes being the same as that between paragraph, it is hard to agree upon a standard paragraph count. Therefore, I have thought it useful to provide the page number of the print version as opposed to no page/paragraph number at all.

O'Donnell is correct in observing these sets of links in Ghatak's films at least on the surface, but she frames her thesis argument as though such symbolization were a politically innocent enterprise, a "critical" or a radical one even: immediately after stating her thesis, O'Donnell goes on to add that her analysis of scenes from Ghatak's films "illustrates this critical relationship between women, landscape, and sound and music which is fundamental to his construction of a 'resistant' narrative of the new Indian nation" (3). That I would find this statement a slippage, and a problematic one at that, is perhaps clear from the premise of this dissertation. Indeed, it is not at all clear to me how "representations of Bengali women as symbolic images of the joy, sorrow, and nostalgia [...] associated with the birth of the Indian state" automatically lend themselves to construction of a "critical" or "resistant" narrative of the nation. Given that at least from the time of Bankim and right through patriarchal nationalism 'Bengali women' have served as 'symbolic images' of the nation in the minds of the Bengalis, I would be given to think rather the opposite. As I said, I agree with O'Donnell's observation that there are links between women and landscape in Ghatak's films. This is, however, only a part of the story. In my reading of Ghatak's films, as I will read below in the case of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, there is a critical address of the very process of 'symbolization'—what I have been calling metaphor formation—and thereby, if implicitly, stands accused the process by which the film makes connections between woman and landscape.

Before I proceed to the core of this chapter, as I have done in the previous chapter, I include a section that details upon the filmmaker and his film text I have

selected for analysis. I have also included a brief discussion of Ghatak's film language to aid the discussion that follows. In Section II, what I would call the core section, I present my reading of the Durga myth in the film. In Section III, I elaborate on the use of history, language, and myths in the film. In Section IV, I attempt a central reading of the text around the question of collectives. In the last section, I address the question of the refugee woman's subjectivity and agency.

I

Ritwik Ghatak and *Meghe Dhaka Tara*

Meghe Dhaka Tara (*Cloud-Capped Star*; 1960), is one of the three films by Ritwik Ghatak that are explicitly about the Partition; the three films are together retrospectively sometimes referred to as the Partition trilogy. This thematic trilogy consists of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komol Gandhar* (*E Flat*, 1963), and *Subarnarekha* (*Golden Line*, 1965). Unlike Jyotirmoyee Devi's, Ritwik Ghatak's relationship to the Partition itself, therefore, needs no lengthy elaboration: Jasodhara Bagchi calls him "*the* filmmaker of the Bengal Partition" (emphasis in original; "Freedom" 27); Bhaskar Sarkar calls him "the most celebrated cinematic auteur of Partition narratives" ("Allegories" 305); and Ghatak himself says many times in the course of his essays, interviews, and through his creative works that he was a child of East Bengal and a refugee. What bears scrutiny, however, is how Ritwik Ghatak maintains the paradoxical position of being both iconic and iconoclastic within Bengali culture, especially vis-à-vis the Bengal Partition.

Ghatak's contemporary criticism displays a puzzlement and, sometimes, even irritation at the supposed obsession of Ghatak's cinema with the Partition. Predictably, it is precisely this 'obsession' that specifically interests me and many others today. The irony that his contemporaries should dismiss his preoccupation with the Partition as something of an eccentricity comes to light in retrospect when we take into account that an event of the scale of the Partition elicited almost complete silence in an otherwise robust Indian cinema of the '50's and '60's, be it regional Bengali or national Hindi film industry, or be it popular or art cinema.⁵ In this vacuum, it is Ghatak's films that stand practically alone to address the Partition.

Ritwik Kumar Ghatak was born in Dacca (Dhaka) in East Bengal (what is now Bangladesh) in 1925⁶ as the youngest son of Indubala and Sureshchandra Ghatak, who was the District Magistrate of Dhaka. Ghataks were a family distinguished for their association with literary and creative arts.⁷ Ritwik's artistic

⁵ Bhaskar Sarkar argues persuasively in his doctoral dissertation, "Allegories of Dispersal: Nation and Partition in Indian Cinema," that the Partition made itself felt allegorically in popular films in very specific and discernable ways. Nevertheless, there is no direct address of the Partition as in Ghatak's films with one notable exception, that of Nimai Ghosh's *Chinnamul* (The Uprooted; 1950).

⁶ For a more detailed account than I present here, see "A Biographical Profile" in *Rows and Rows of Fences: Ritwik Ghatak on Cinema* (Ghatak Rows 130-133). Some of the information here is from this source. Other details are from his interviews given to Jagat Bandyopadhyay in 1969 and to the Bengali film journal *Chitrabikshan* in 1973. Both from *Sakhyat Ritwik* (Ritwik Himself; Bengali) edited by Shibaditya Dasgupta and Sandipan Bhattacharya (27-31) and (57-71) respectively. I have also consulted the biographical chronology in Rajat Ray's edited *Ritwik Ghatak* (199; Bengali).

⁷ Sureshchandra was also a poet and playwright. Ritwik's eldest brother Manish Ghatak was a professor of English, a social activist, and an eminent writer in Bengali in the Kallol era. Through him, Ritwik came to know personally leading Bengali writers who were active in the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA). Another of his elder brothers, who, according to Ritwik, was India's first "television expert," returning to India in 1935 after working for several years as a documentary cameraman in England, and joining as a cameraman in New Theatres in 1936 (Dasgupta and Bhattacharya 57-58; Bengali). The now internationally known writer Mahasweta

career started with short stories. Then Ritwik moved to theatre, and finally to films. He died in 1976, at the age of 51, before his last film was released.

Although he leaves behind many short stories, plays, and film scripts, in a career as a film-director spanning twenty years, he managed to complete only eight full-length feature films.

Ghatak moved to West Bengal after the Partition, and continued his education in the newly independent India, passing his Bachelor of Arts in 1948 with Honours in English Literature, and earning a first class. The same year, he started an M.A. in English in Calcutta University. He never finished his Master's, quitting just before the final examination to work for the undivided Communist Party of India instead (CPI). He became an active member of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the cultural wing of the CPI, and involved himself in the CPI itself. Ghatak's future relationship with IPTA and the organized political left is worth outlining. In 1951, Ghatak was given the task of drafting a document by the Provincial Draft preparatory Committee of IPTA that would outline the political and cultural ideology of the IPTA in West Bengal.⁸ In 1954, he accordingly prepared a thesis titled *On the Cultural Front*. There was a controversy about his views within the CPI, and apparently some members undertook "a 'smear' campaign" against him (O' Donnell 3). As a result, he was forced to leave IPTA and the CPI in 1954. Ghatak himself said in an interview

Devi, Manish Ghatak's daughter, is Ritwik's niece although the age difference between the two was only of three months and they shared a close relationship.

⁸ I gather this information from Erin O'Donnell's essay "'Woman' and 'homelessness' in Ritwik Ghatak's films: Constructing post-Independence Bengali Identity" (paragraphs 2-3). All citations from this essay are to paragraph numbers.

given in 1973 to *Chitrabikshan* that he was never a “card-holder” of the CPI, choosing to describe himself as a “fellow traveller” and a “close sympathizer” (Dasgupta and Bhattacharya 58; phrases in English; Bengali). He also claimed that he had left IPTA of his own volition (O’ Donnell 3). However, as O’ Donnell points out, the letter of dismissal, striking his name from the membership rolls of the CPI, is printed in the newly published edition of *On the Cultural Front* (ibid.).

The value of Ritwik Ghatak’s work in the eye of the film critics went through a radical change over time. As I have already mentioned, Ghatak was largely ignored during his lifetime. Ghatak’s insistence on talking about the Partition broke a taboo piously observed by all mimetic art of the time, and made his audience uncomfortable and, sometimes, irate. Other than his topic, Ghatak’s choice of style and genre also exasperated the audience. Ghatak’s use of a Brechtian aesthetics in deliberate alienation effects, his penchant for the excessive, and a disregard for the codes of realism clearly made his films unfit to be considered ‘alternative’ and ‘art’ cinema or as purveyor of good taste and culture, as established and exemplified by sober lyrical realism of Satyajit Ray’s cinema. Also, the Partition films of the 1960s were seen as excessively melodramatic. Melodrama was identified as the prerogative of the commercial films of Bombay’s Hindi film industry; therefore, the ‘intellectual’ filmgoers were bewildered by Ghatak’s choice of this form. Film analysts may now recognize that Ghatak has constantly altered and radicalized the conventions of the melodrama, but his contemporary film critics were largely embarrassed by his choice of genre. What is more, and needless to add, his use of a ‘popular’ genre

did not win him any popular audience. Further, his alcoholism and his general refusal to follow the *bhadralok* codes of gentility also had much to do with his marginality during his lifetime. Producers did not want to risk their money on him “such was his reputation as the *enfant terrible* of the Bengali cinema” (Malcolm 186). Most of his career, he worked with serious budgetary constraints, and several of his projects remained incomplete because producers pulled their money out at several stages of film making, including after completion.

Not very much later than Ghatak’s death, starting in the early 1980s, critical appreciation of Ghatak started to undergo a dramatic change. In 1982, the first book-length scholarly analysis of Ghatak’s films, Ashish Rajadhyakshya’s *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic* appeared. The same year, Derek Malcolm, a film reviewer for *The Guardian*, wrote a highly laudatory piece on Ghatak in *Sight and Sound*.⁹ In 1989, an influential volume *Questions of Third Cinema*, edited by Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, included two essays on Ritwik Ghatak’s last film *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo (Reasons, Debates and a Tale)*.¹⁰ These collectively recuperated Ghatak for serious consideration among filmgoers and critics and possible inclusion in academic projects.

⁹ Malcolm writes,

The first occasion a group of Western critics were able to look at the body of [Ghatak’s] work was at the Madras Festival in January 1978. The prints were tattered, the subtitles virtually unreadable when they were there at all and the projections were below even Indian standards. But the impact of the films on all present was considerable. Here, we all felt, was a passionate and intensely national filmmaker who seemed to have found his way without much access to the works of the others but who was most certainly of international caliber. (184)

¹⁰ By Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Geeta Kapur respectively.

The dramatic reversal of appreciation appears simultaneously with a posthumous formation of a discernible range of myths around the man and the filmmaker by the name of Ritwik Ghatak.¹¹ Soon after Ghatak's death, all the things that exasperated his evaluators earlier began to contribute towards his perceived genius.¹² Bhaskar Sarkar argues that "the very disillusionment and frustrations that inspired Ghatak's iconoclastic activities also fuelled his intemperate lifestyle: that through his life and work, he attempted to at least make good—if not overcome—his alienation" ("Allegories" 307). If he fulfilled the cultural stereotype of a Marxist intellectual in Bengal, "revered for his perspicacity and integrity," he was also equally "dismissed as an inveterate drunk, prone to decadent indulgence" (ibid.). He gets described as "film-director and bohemian, Marxist and alcoholic, craftsman and derelict" and earns the reputation of being "a film-maker's film-maker, an artiste's artiste" (Sarkar 307). All these narrative strands congeal around articulations of paradoxical extremes to make

¹¹ Malcolm's essay of 1982 records his reactions after viewing Ghatak's films for the first time in 1978:

Two years after his death, he was already a legend—as a radical intellectual who had destroyed himself but whose career had also been blighted by the circumstances of his life as an emotional refugee, and by the refusal of the establishment to recognize his talent. Arrogant, overbearing and hopelessly unreliable, he was also much loved and admired as a restless iconoclast whose dreams were never likely to be wholly fulfilled but still worth dreaming in the fractured society he seemed to epitomize. (184)

¹² For example, if Ghatak's dismissal earlier was articulated through an unfavourable comparison to Ray, in later times, exactly the opposite is aimed by the same comparison. Jacob Levitch writes:

If Satyajit Ray was the suitable boy of Indian art cinema – unthreatening, career oriented, reliably tasteful – Ritwik Ghatak, his contemporary and principal rival, was its problem child. Where Ray's films were seamless, exquisitely rendered, conventional narratives that aim for the kind of psychological insights prized by the 19th century novelists, Ghatak's are ragged, provisional, intensely personal, yet epic in shape, scope, and aspirations. With Ray, you feel safe in the hands of an omniscient, authoritative master. Viewing Ghatak is an edgy, intimate experience, an engagement with a brilliantly erratic intelligence in an atmosphere of inquiry, experimentation, and disconcerting honesty. The feeling can be invigorating, it's never comfortable. (Levitch 30).

Ghatak an enigmatic, “legendary” figure, and, in retrospect, the quintessential child of the Partition (Sarkar 306-307). These legends, together with the style of filmmaking, pose a “daunting challenge” (Sarkar 307) to the critic. They also contribute to the fact that Ghatak’s films have a minority exclusive following to whom Ghatak is a cult figure.

As an outcome of Ghatak’s posthumous cult status—the passionate affect Ghatak’s films have ostensibly generated in commentators, and the claiming of Ghatak for all kinds of identity constructions within Bengal—is that while plenty has been written on him in Bengali and some in English, a very large part of that writing threatens to become variegated hagiographies. They bestow an iconic status on Ghatak that obscures the fact that Ghatak was a marginal, iconoclastic figure during his lifetime for very good reasons. For instance, in some writing, we note a celebration of Ghatak as a “pure Bengali” by the Bengali bhadralok (Rajat Ray 12; Bengali),¹³ which refuses to take seriously the kind of critique of the bhadralok that Ghatak offers. Further, these tributes sometimes eclipse that the existing critical readings of Ghatak remain sporadic, scattered, uneven, some of it dated, and even at the most generous count, only a handful. Writing today, it is with some bewilderment that I realize that, to the best of my knowledge, Ashish

¹³ In the “Introduction” to the volume *Ritwik Ghatak*, the editor Rajat Ray, writes: “Ritwik Ghatak was in heart and mind a pure Bengali artist; he wanted to disseminate in the international medium of cinema the indigenous culture of Bengal” (12; my translation from Bengali). It is possible that in this claiming of Ritwik as a ‘true Bengali’ filmmaker, Rajat Ray was echoing Satyajit Ray. The latter, in the remembrance piece included in Rajat Ray’s edited volume, describe Ghatak as a “Bengali director, in mind-and-soul, a Bengali artist—much more Bengali than even me” (Rajat Ray 24; my translation from Bengali; the original is “Ritwik mone-prane Bangali porichalak chhilo, Bangali shilpi chhilo—amar thekeo onek beshi Bangali”). Satyajit Ray, though, had a context for this claim. He was speaking about lack of foreign influence in Ghatak’s films and Ghatak’s strangely solitary style.

Rajadhyaksha's *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic*, out of print for many years, remains the *only* critical monograph of its kind. Again, to my knowledge, there is no edited collection of critical essays on Ghatak's films. The most pressing problem of the hyperbolic writing tradition on Ghatak, however, is that it makes it somewhat difficult to offer a *positive* appraisal of his work that is not, however, also interested in affiliating with the cult-formation and its complacent and uncritical appropriation of Ghatak. It is outside this tradition of a I would like to think, belongs the reading I offer of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*.

Meghe Dhaka Tara's screenplay, written by Ghatak himself, was based on a short story by Shaktipada Rajguru called "Chena Mukh" (Known Face). The film was modestly successful, enough to earn some revenue, and was the only film by Ghatak to do so. At the level of plot, in the simplest sense of the term, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is the story of a refugee woman, Nita, her struggles, and her death. The film is set against a backdrop of the Partition, in a refugee colony on the outskirts of Calcutta, and depicts the struggle of a single family in the wake of its displacement from East Pakistan. Nita, played by actress Supriya Chaudhury, is the eldest daughter of the household and is at the centre of the story. She toils selflessly, day after day to support her family members: her retired school headmaster father Tarankrishna Chakrabarti (played by Bijan Bhattacharya), her mother (Gita De), her younger sister Gita (Gita Ghatak), her elder brother Sankar (Anil Chatterjee) who is an aspiring classical singer, and her younger brother Mantu (Dwijju Bhawal). She even financially helps out her lover, Sanat (Niranjan Roy), so that he can continue his research work in science and not be pushed into

leaving his academic career for a more financially stable job. Her family members, in their struggle for existence, ruthlessly exploit her; everyone—her siblings, her parents, even Sanat—constantly demands more from her. The male members of the family are or become useless as breadwinners: Sankar, as an artist, refuses to take responsibility for the family; Taran Babu loses the use of both legs by falling badly; and Mantu meets with an accident at the factory where he works. Nita becomes the sole breadwinner for her family. As a result, she cannot finish her university education, takes a job, and works long hours. She cannot marry. Her mother almost conspires against her and sabotages her matrimonial hopes: with tacit encouragement from her mother, her younger sister Gita draws Sanat away, and eventually marries him. Finally, unable to bear the hardship any longer, after the family is saved from the worst financial catastrophe, Nita comes down with tuberculosis; we last see her dying in a sanatorium.

Meghe Dhaka Tara traces the exploitation of women through the life story of Nita, the refugee woman. Jasodhara Bagchi calls Nita “an epic figure,” through whom Ghatak “has epitomized the new refugee woman” (“Freedom” 27). I would like to elaborate on the concept of the “epic figure,” as it is of critical importance to my reading. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is not the story of the misfortune of one ‘character.’ The very concept of character needs to be complicated here. The film locates Nita’s exploitation as part of the social, gendered class-structure of the bhadralok to which Nita belongs. There is a tension, therefore, in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, indeed in all of Ghatak’s films, between the personal and the social, the individual and the collective. The characters have vast symbolic import and lie

outside psychological realism, evoking the socio-historical. At the same time, there is a commitment here to chart an intensely personal, affective response to the Partition and, through Nita's story, to assess the violence of history on the individual. This individual is, nevertheless, always located within a collective. The import of the mythical-symbolic is to the end of emphatically evoking the socio-historical.

Comments by other interlocutors are instructive in assessing the relationship between the plot-characters-individuals triad and the larger symbolic-collective. "The dramatic," Ashish Rajadhyaksha writes, "is a vital level to Ghatak's structuring. It does not, as convention would demand, give way to more complex interpretation; it is instead woven into more complex level so that there is a constant receding and dramatic intervention that extends to its form [...]. As we move deeper yet, we see the human character as itself a product of social forces." (53). Similarly, Paul Willemen also writes,

the drama and the analytical presentation of socio-historical processes fit so closely together that it is impossible to say whether the environment is there to explain the characters and their drama, or whether the characters are selected/constructed as exemplary and necessary to convey an analysis of the social. In effect, the question becomes irrelevant: people are presented as living in and determined by history, superseding the false oppositions between the subjective and the social, between the individual and the society [...].

When Willemen writes “people are presented as living in and determined by history,” I do not think he suggests that there is any kind of historical determinism. Instead, history is a palpable force in lives of the characters. The characters are shaped by history although, being partitioned away from their histories, they cannot represent history through the eye of the camera. Nevertheless, the characters in the films of Ghatak are products of history and the social. Similarly, Moinak Biswas has argued that there is a “materialist conception of character [...] in Ritwik Ghatak’s experiments with melodrama” (“Historical Realism” 138).¹⁴

Therefore, the collective is crucially important to characterization in Ghatak’s films. Rajadhyaksha’s book reads Ghatak’s films to move from an individual “tragic” mode to an “epic” one, the latter being a genre that allows for an experience of a collective. In a very similar vein, Bhaskar Sarkar writes, “the epic form allowed Ghatak to shift attention from individual level to the collective, thereby subverting the kind of realism that had come to crystallize around the individual as the psychological and moral centre of the universe” (“Allegories” 312). The shift was a crucial element in Ghatak’s politics of countering hegemonic nation foundation as a basis of modernity because, as Sarkar argues, “this process of individualism had already emerged as a core element of a

¹⁴ He distinguishes this materialism in Ghatak’s films from the practices of conventional popular melodrama, which had reached a very developed form in Bengali cinema in the 1950s. The latter also “tends to eliminate intermediary characters and collapse the world into an exchange between the protagonists” such that “remembrance, even when historically shrivelled and tied to the destiny of the person, is a romantic aspect of the world, not so much an internal, individual mechanism.” In these melodramas, however, “it does not mean that memory, being relatively independent of the individual, is scattered into contexts and structures” (“Historical Realism” 138).

nationalist cultural project: it promised to deliver a coherent, modern subject as true representative of the nation” (ibid. 312-313).

In doing away with the individualism of the characters, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* enters the realm of the symbolic. The symbolism here, being determined by history itself, however, deconstructs the nationalist semiotics. *The language* of the film is deliberately analogous to the process of metaphor formation within the nationalist tradition that it seeks to critique. To a large extent, this is enforced by the medium of cinema itself, whereby the film has to enter a representative economy of ‘images.’ That is to say, on screen, it is through *the image* of the refugee-woman that the film arrives at a critique of metaphor formation. However, as I have been arguing above, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* does not go outside the economy of the symbolic and enter a realist aesthetics where the formal signalling through characters is to ‘real’ people. Instead of naturalizing the representative economy, the film makes it visible and exposed.

Indeed, Ghatak’s film interrogates the form of cinema itself as its mode of representation. Moinak Biswas description of Ghatak’s cinema can illuminate the point I wish to make. Biswas writes:

[Ghatak’s] cinema was intellectual in the sense that there was a conscious attempt to make cinema itself a tool in the search of what, rephrasing Bertolt Brecht’s words, one can call a ‘fighting conception of the modern.’ It was a matter of inventing a modernity which would seek to resolve the trauma of the continuing encounter with the modern. To choose cinema as the site and the tool for such experimentation was to assume the avant

garde position without the signals of the avant-garde cinema familiar to us.
 (“Historical Realism” 190)

Further, explaining Ghatak’s style, Biswas calls it “discursive” (“Historical Realism” 193), where Ghatak “takes realism [itself] as a discourse” (192). This for Ghatak “would mean a synoptic manoeuvre at the outset: he would work with a fully elaborated realist aesthetic in mise-en-scene and editing, and introduce a simultaneous fracture in its integrity” (212). Therefore, in terms of my argument of the film having a structure of representation analogous to the one it critiques, I read the film as constituting a critique from *within*. It itself performs a particular form of violence and brings it to a critique by making it visible.

II

The Great Mother: Durga

Through the character of Nita, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* evokes the most privileged of archetypes in Ghatak’s repertoire, that of the Great Mother. This supposedly universal archetype, of course, acquires a thorough and particular form, implication, and affect. The refugee woman Nita is associated in the film specifically and explicitly with Durga.¹⁵ The allusion is not towards evoking

¹⁵ The association is fairly obvious. Ghatak himself has spoken about it in his interviews on a few occasions. An early essay to make the connection and elaborate on it is Ira Bhaskar’s “Myth and Ritual: Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara*.” Rajadhyaksha’s discussion of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* in his book *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic* (50-79) also traces the connection between Nita and Durga. Rajadhyaksha also reads a “sacrifice” of the individual (54) and suggests that Ghatak “seeks not only an allegorical portrayal, he attempts to also open it out” (59). From this point, however, Rajadhyaksha’s argument is different. He continues, “This [Ghatak] does by exposing the ritualism of the myth, by playing it out to its end but, in doing so, suddenly raising it to the tragic” (59). He takes his argument towards a reading that charts “the material base that is hidden within the ritual that brings the past to us” (77) and assesses the consequence of “assimilation of archetypal images into dominant consciousness” (60).

woman-power through the mother-goddess, but towards the exploitative, sacrificial aspect which is forcefully planted onto motherhood. Accordingly, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* evokes through a central allusion with the Durga myth not just a mother figure but a mother-daughter dichotomy. The dichotomy is built in terms of the duality inherent in the Durga myth itself of the mother who is also a daughter.

Part of the Durga lore is that, in her human *avatar*¹⁶ as Uma she is the daughter of King Dakshya and his wife Menaka, and she is the consort of Shiva, the god of destruction in the Hindu trinity. Uma is renamed Sati in her married life. Sati dies in the righteousness of a devoted wife.¹⁷ After her death, Uma/Sati is

¹⁶ The word *avatar* is derived from the verb ‘to descend’ (*avataran*). I would have translated the word *avatar* as ‘incarnation,’ but Spivak reminds us that “the Sanskrit word for ‘incarnation’ (*avatar*)—has nothing to do with ‘putting on flesh.’ It means rather ‘a come-down [being].” (“Moving Devi” 123).

¹⁷ The ritual practice of *sati*, of which I have written in Chapter 1, very likely links itself to versions of this legend. I have found a useful glossing of the Uma-Sati myth in Gayatri Spivak’s essay “Moving Devi.” Spivak writes, quoting Sukumari Bhattacharji’s version for children:

Here is the story, told by Sukumari Bhattacharji, the source of the learned passage above, now for children:

One day, while Sati was sitting outside her house, she saw a number of gods and goddesses passing by. . . . “Where are all of you going?” They answered, “Don’t you know of Daksha’s magnificent sacrifice?” . . . [Sati] could not believe that they had been deliberately overlooked. . . . Sati asked her husband if he could explain her father’s abnormal conduct. Shiva was sure he could. . . . Daksha intensely disliked Shiva and his unconventional way of life. . . . So, Sati ran to her father, ignoring the banter and sneers directed at Shiva, and said to Daksha, “What kind of sacrifice is this, father, where the supreme god Shiva has not been invited?” The status-conscious Daksha . . . replied sarcastically, “. . . You have married beneath your social status, my child. I cannot insult these assembled dignitaries by asking that lunatic loafer to be here!” . . . Unable to bear the insults uttered against her dearly beloved husband she fell down in a swoon and died. . . . [Shiva] was mad with fury and . . . rushed to Daksha’s sacrifice. . . . Shiva tore Daksha’s head from his neck and threw it away. The sacrifice itself assumed the shape of a deer [...] and fled. Shiva, with his Pinaka bow in hand, chased and shot it. . . . Shiva now came to where his beloved Sati lay dead and an uncontrollable fit of madness seized him. . . . [P]icking up Sati’s body, he walked, jumped, danced, and traversed long distances for many days on end, oblivious that the mortal remains of Sati were dropping off, bit by bit, over

re-born as Parvati, a name literally meaning ‘daughter of a Mountain,’ as the daughter of the mountain king Himavan, a personification of the Himalayas. Parvati is again married to Shiva. In the typical domestication of a mythic-lore, Durga is imagined as both a ‘mother’ and a daughter, who stays with her husband Shiva in the heavenly abode, and visits her father’s house on earth only for four days a year. Every year, the Bengali Hindus worship Durga in autumn, evoking her as a ‘mother.’ Yet, because she is also imagined as a daughter of the earth, as Uma and Parvati, she is simultaneously evoked as ‘our daughter.’ Durga’s lore in Hindu Bengali households, thus, signifies a mother-daughter duality.

This duality of the mother-daughter is constructed as a dichotomy in Ghatak’s film. This dichotomy is not the same as in Mukunda Das’s call to the daughters of Bengal, as I stated in Chapter 1, to rise as a “Mayer jati,” “race of mothers.” Mukunda Das’s poetic formulation came at a time when women were beginning to enter public politics under the aegis of nationalist struggle. Das’s call desires agency of women and, at once, contains such agency by circumscribing it within an evocation of motherhood. In this formulation, there is a desire that daughters should always-already become mothers. In Ghatak’s use of the mother-

many places. All these places, including those where parts of her jewellery fell, later became places of pilgrimage. (Bhattacharya 46-47)

In most Puranic accounts Sati’s death is more theologized than in the intuitive popular story. In the *Ka-lika-pura-na* she meditates a moment upon the undivided pre-semantic possibility of utterances—*spho-ta* not *mantra*—splits the top-center of her skull, and gives up her life. In the *Devibha-gavata* she burns herself through the fire of her concentration (*yoga-gni*) in order to satisfy the ethics of good womanhood (*satidharma*) because her father had engaged in unseemly sexual behavior under the influence of a magic garland indirectly conferred upon him by another one of her fictive manifestations! In one the dismemberment is motivated by the other gods’ caution rather than the husband’s frenzy. In another the gods enter the corpse, cut it up from the inside, and make the pieces fall in specific places. (Spivak 130-131).

daughter duality of the Durga myth as a dichotomy, the effect is quite the reverse: it brings the mothers back as daughters. The use thereby makes visible the violence of the process through which a daughter is pushed towards the role of motherhood.

It is significant here that the actual mother depicted in the film is not the mother figure who is a sustaining, nurturing, giving, and ultimately sacrificing mother. Indeed, her aggressive desire to live and sustain her family fractures any naturalness we may want to attribute to the normative ideas of Bengali motherhood within which mothers are always kind, compassionate, gentle, giving, sacrificing and so on. Here, the mother is almost the opposite. Some commentators have read the character of the mother as a version of the goddess Kali, a fearsome goddess of destruction, an ‘other’ of the giving Jagadhatri/Annapurna.¹⁸ As I have traced in Chapter 1, even this idea of motherhood was central to the nationalist imagination, starting with Bankim and continuing through the Swadeshi age. Together, the malevolent Kali and the benevolent Jagadhatri/Annapurna/Durga form the dichotomy of the mother in the nationalist semiotics. In constructing the mother of the film as a Kali-like figure, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* works with the dichotomy of the mother inscribed by the dominant imaginary, but imports the radical energy of the destructive mother in such a way that it fractures the ‘discourse of love’ and of sacrifice that the patriarchal nationalism of late-nineteenth century promulgated. Further, by precipitating the role and the performance of motherhood on the daughter, Nita,

¹⁸ Ira Bhaskar is perhaps the first to do so in her essay “Myth and Ritual: Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara*.” This is repeated by Ashish Rajadhyaksha.

the film inserts a third term alongside the dichotomy of the good mother and the bad mother. Thereby, the film forms a new dichotomy, that of the mother and the daughter. In so shifting the dichotomy, the film makes explicit that normative motherhood is a constructed motherhood.

Meghe Dhaka Tara traces the ‘rise’ of the daughter Nita, an ordinary refugee woman, into an iconic, larger-than-life motherhood. This ‘rise,’ as constructed in the film, is far from natural. Nita is ‘framed’ into motherhood through multiple registers, such as plot details, visual economy, the ‘melodic’ component of the melodrama, and so on. At the level of plot, what the film shows is how sacrificial motherhood is thrust upon Nita by every member of the family. Nita is imagined through her association with Durga and Uma, as both the archetypal mother and the archetypal daughter. Nita is, we are told, born on the calendar day of Jagadhatri Puja, the worship of Jagadhatri, an incarnation of Durga, literally meaning the mother of the world. Yet, her girlhood is emphasized in her nickname Khuki, a name commonly given to Bengali girls, whose meaning suggests “little girl.” The rhyme with which her brother jocosely teases her refers to her being a “khuki,” too much of a little girl:

mother, your girl is such a khuki

She wants to catch the moon

She can’t make out anything

She’s such a khuki, mother

The rhyme, which displays a touching moment of sibling love, also equally establishes her within the mother-daughter dichotomy, and it emphasizes that she

is the daughter of the house. In fact, one of the most violent deeds the family does to her is that they do not allow her to grow out of this daughterly role.

Visually, the film traces the elevation of Nita into a larger-than-life iconic symbol in the very opening shot of the film. There are several such signals in the film to show the association of her with the mother-goddess. The film starts with the frame of a giant tree. Nita, the protagonist, visually tiny, emerges from the corner of the frame and walks towards the camera, growing bigger as she moves closer. The impression is as though Nita has walked out of this giant tree. The tree is next to a lake, and Nita is soon framed next to the water. Both the tree and the lake clearly signify natural plenitude, sustenance, and life-giving qualities that we associate with cultural notions of motherhood. The camera establishes the insignificant ordinary refugee woman, Nita, as a tiny dot, and also that she starts to grow and become the larger-than-life force. As Rajadhyaksha writes, unlike in the standard practice in commercial melodrama, “where the birth of the hero or the separation of the twins is accompanied by a raging storm to indicate the cataclysmic nature of the event[,]” the visual association with nature “instead heighten[s] the ordinariness of Nita” (62). Nita crosses her brother Sankar, who is practicing his singing. The particular *khayal* he sings is also suggestively an evocation to the mother goddess.¹⁹ Soon after, he chases her and asks for some money. The opening shot foreshadows the process of Nita’s gradual growth into this symbol of the giving mother. The rest of the film continues to develop and trace the process. The two natural symbols, the giant tree and the water, keep

¹⁹ “‘Jai Maata Vilumbh taj de Ma gaan guna de’ in Raag Hamswadhani” (Bhaskar 47).

appearing all through the film, but their signification, but not meaning, changes. If in the earlier scene there is a harmonic superimposition of these symbols with Nita, as the symbolic values of motherhood turn violent and begin to claim Nita, these natural symbols also begin to gather both ironic and violent overtones. We shall see where nature stands at the end of the film.

The first half of the film traces the 'rise' of Nita to the goddess-mother. Initially, the shots of Nita are in high angle, emphasizing her ordinariness. As the film progresses, however, and as Nita gets more and more deeply trapped into her role of surrogate motherhood, shots of Nita become predominantly low angle. In these shots, Nita becomes an iconic, towering, larger-than-life, goddess-like figure. Given the already established association verbally in the film, the film starts to trace the visual connection between Nita and Durga. For example, in a famous shot that Raymond Bellour has called the most beautiful shot of the film (12), right after she finds out about her lover's betrayal, Nita is seen descending a set of stairs. It "is a very flattened shot, strongly marked by a powerful low angle" (Bellour 13). The camera captures Nita from knee up as she descends a set of stairs; these signature low-angle shots liken Nita to the towering idol of Durga as she looks from below to devotees. The camera moves in focus, step by step, in the rhythm she descends. Eventually there is a full-face focus of Nita from chin up. In this, especially noteworthy is the framing of the eyes of the actress; we see the large, exaggerated iconic eyes of Durga. Writing about a later scene, again, Rajadhyaksha has noted how the camera constructs as "the main feature of [the icon of] Durga, [her] her captivating, mesmeric eyes" by framing "the whites of

Supriya Chaudhury's eyes in extreme close-up" (64). When the face is framed, writes Bellour, it is by "the camera moving only the little it takes to allow her face to be framed in an intolerable static image, in a moment of pure affection: the immobile face, the eyes always raised, one hand convulsively clasping the throat" (13). In the earlier shot, we can read similar camera-work noting the beginning of the process of idolization, or, as I would say in the vocabulary of this dissertation, metaphor-making.

Although the process was anticipated earlier, compressed into the very beginning of the film, this moment of betrayal captures a very concrete move towards an elevation into metaphoric motherhood. This metaphoric motherhood is not an entrance into the woman-power of the goddess, but a process of consecration through which the body of the woman is invested with iconic and metaphoric meaning. In the close-up, when Nita clutches her throat, as if she were choking, her lips are parted, but no sound escapes her lips. She is utterly silenced. The sound that accompanies the shot is a non-diegetic sound montage, which accentuates the violence. The sound begins at the beginning of the shot, as Bellour describes it, "punctuating the descent, step by step [...] very punchy shrill notes, punctuated by lacerations, like a whipping sound hissing through the air and striking a body. This continues almost to the end of the shot" (13).

Within plot economy, also, there is no mistaking the violence of this moment. In terms of the story of the film, the process of consecration starts when she discovers her betrayal by her lover and her sister. As Nita grows into the role of motherhood, it begins to ironically strip her body of sexuality and symbolically

deprives that body of any chance of actual motherhood. This ironic juxtaposition of a constructed role of motherhood and a natural one does not, I think, suggest only the violence of the former. It also makes visible, through an evocation of motherhood in its dichotomy with daughterhood, the constructedness also of the 'natural' role and its violence. This becomes clearer with the choric lament that accompanies the scene of the marriage of Gita and Sanat that soon follows.

On one hand, in this marriage scene, there is an emphasis on the violence that Nita will never get married. Her role of supportive, surrogate motherhood to the rest of her family necessarily demands that she sacrifice her chance of marriage and motherhood, and embrace a life of barren asceticism. Soon after Nita finds out about Sanat's betrayal, the mother broaches the topic of the marriage of her younger daughter Gita and Sanat with the father. When Taran Babu violently protests against the idea, the mother brusquely reminds him that had Nita gotten married and left them, the family would have nothing to eat. On the morning of the wedding day, Nita's mother comes and asks her for her gold bangles so that she can give them to Gita. There is a blatant suggestion that Nita will never get married, and therefore she will never need those bangles. The bangles here symbolize not only any marital hopes that Nita may have harboured, but also her femininity. The symbol of motherhood that is bestowed on Nita here can indeed not be called symbolic anymore: it intervenes into the material and violates her body.

This form of motherhood, which is not carnal, throws into relief the exploitative labour that goes into constructing motherhood. The barrenness of

Nita's life is also emphasized in the juxtaposition with the celebration of the marriage of her sister and also with the celebration of the image of Durga as a sign of fecundity. In a scene that soon follows, when Nita is already dying with tuberculosis, Sankar, now an established and famous classical singer, returns home in the refugee colony for a visit. On his way back, he sings a classical song addressed to Durga: "On this auspicious day, you are happy with your [lord and] friends"²⁰ The rest of the song is as follows:

Your perfumed body, your forehead
 Marked with sandal paste
 Doe-eyed, with sweeping lashes
 May your wisdom be for your people
 And [may you] be happy with your lord and friends.

The song resonates in its immense irony against the situation in which Nita is trapped. This is violence of one kind.

On the other hand, the scene also evokes the patriarchal violence of institutional marriage itself. This other kind of violence is registered when we hear fragments of a traditional folk song exposing the violence of the patriarchal marriage arrangement in which a daughter is 'given away.' It is a lament that Uma's mother Menaka sings, "Come, my daughter Uma, to my lap."²¹ The song dramatizes Uma's departure from her parental home after her wedding. Let us remember that in the myth, Uma, in her later life as Sati, will also be soon dead.

²⁰ The words in the original are "Laagi Lagan Pati Sakhi Sang Parama Sukha Ati"

²¹ "Ai go Uma, kole ai" in the Bengali original.

The wailing lament is a wedding song, usually sung by women at the moment of the departure of a young girl from the home of her childhood after her wedding and relocation to the unknown, often unfriendly and hostile, house of her in-laws to lead a regimented life as a wife. We do not hear the full song until a later scene that follows shortly, but the song is one that evokes Durga's daughterhood as Uma. The words of this non-diegetic choric lament sung by many female voices are as follows:

Come, my daughter Uma,
 Let me garland you with flowers
 You are the soul of my sad self, Mother deliverer
 Let me bid you farewell, my daughter
 You leave my home desolate [for your husband's place].
 How can I endure your departure?

Other than the context of the wedding, the song also evokes the sadness of the eve of Durga's 'departure' every year after the four-day-long worship and festivities of the Durga Puja. At the end of the period, the idol of the goddess is desecrated and sacrificed in a ritual immersion. The mother is to be again bid farewell as a daughter. The imagination that anthropomorphizes the goddess also echoes the heartbreaking but banal displacement daughters of Bengali households suffer. The annual welcome of the mother-goddess Durga is couched in the narrative of a married daughter visiting her parental home from her husband's house, and is narrated in terms of the lived experience of the everyday life of

married daughters of Bengal, who visit their parental home for their annual holiday during the Durga Puja.

The use of the song also evokes the violence of the archaic practice of *Gouridan* (Gouri is another name for Durga) in Bengal which involved the giving away of an eight-year old girl in a marriage, often to a stranger. In an interview, in regards to his use of old folk songs in his films, Ghatak spoke of his use of *Umagiti* and *Gourigiti*, the genre of songs of which the Uma lament is one. He rhetorically asked, “in our society how much space do we give to women? They are the most exploited class/section [“sreni”]” (Bengali, translation mine; Dasgupta and Bhattacharya 156). Rajadhyaksha cites Ghatak writing of *Gouridan* in another instance: “This created along with fear, a deep nostalgia. [...] Our folklores are full of this ... this is why Durga is a daughter to us; that is why autumn is a season of nostalgia for us” (Rajadhyaksha 75). Bhaskar Sarkar interprets the allusion to *Gouridan* as one that “underscores the pathos of Nita’s impending separation from her family” (“Allegories” 324). I agree that the central association is with Nita: the choric lament will resurface again several times in the context of Nita’s impending death. However, in this moment, in a sequence which has to do with a wedding, the surfacing of the lament provides an associative sense of loss and violence that exceeds just Nita’s death and includes the violence of the parental giving away of daughters that mark the gendered everyday life. It reminds us that within patrilineal marital arrangements in Bengal, as elsewhere in South-Asia and in most places in the rest of the world, women are the “original ‘displaced persons’” (Bagchi and Dasgupta 3-4). If we take the film’s indication

of the violence of Nita never getting married as an anomaly, as a sign of a world turned ruthlessly exploitative, an out-of-the-ordinary event caused by the Partition, then the lament connects this violence to the gendered violence of the ordinary everyday world that is not attributable to catastrophic events such as the Partition. Therefore, as I have done in the previous chapter, I will argue that the evocation of the myth is a gesture towards a historical function.

Nita's association with Durga is followed through to the end: the violence of the Durga myth, in its demand of sacrificial motherhood, registers as the violence of Nita's death. The violence of the Duga myth is one that displays the process of consecration, through which a goddess is made out of an effigy, and deconsecration, by which the effigy is not only emptied of holy signification, but also sacrificed. Ira Bhaskar writes,

A prevalent story about the genesis of Durga is the concept of Havyagni (oblation to the sacrificial fire). In the ritual of the Havan (the act of consigning mortal offerings to the sacrificial flames) is symbolized the surrender of human desires and aspirations, which are carried to the heaven in the smoke of the flames. It is believed that Durga was born out of this smoke as a transmutation of human desires, taking the form of 'Jagadhatri,' the universal sustainer. (47)

While Bhaskar writes of the sacrifice of human desires—"oblation," "surrender of human desires"—in the creation of Durga, I am interested in interpreting the story in a manner that would attend to the oblation/sacrifice of the goddess *herself* in the process in which she becomes the "universal sustainer." The goddess certainly

emerges as the symbolic depository of the value of sacrifice in this myth. In addition, when we think of the process by which a goddess is made out of a lifeless clay idol for a period of the worship and the idol is sacrificed at the end, we notice the ritual sacrifice of the effigy which was the goddess for a while. Therefore, I am tempted to deliberately misread the story of Durga's genesis here, although only to a small degree, and suggest that the goddess (a daughter?) is sacrificed here in order to make her 'jagadhatri,' the mother of the universe.

The association of Nita with the Durga myth brings out the sacrificial aspect of *both* the goddess and Nita's life. This duality of the Durga myth—the mother as the daughter—captures the duality of Nita, who is at once a daughter and a mother; and in either role, she needs to be given away. The mythic allusion is brought to its most affective and emphatic climax in a scene towards the very end of the film. By now the family is well established: Sankar is a famous singer, Gita is pregnant, Mantu has recovered from the accident, earned a solid financial compensation, and returned home, the mother is dreaming of her refugee hut to be replaced by a two-story concrete house. When Sankar comes back to visit, he finds out—as does the rest of the family for the first time—about Nita's tuberculosis, which is at the very last stage. The sequence following this revelation starts with thunder and a torrential downpour, and with a joyous instrumental Malhar—the monsoon raga—playing. Nita, sleeping, wakes up to look at the rain and smiles. At that moment, in middle of the night, the helpless, agonized, near-mad father comes to her, asking her to leave the house. He tells her,

Go away. I've packed your things. You go away. They dream of two storey houses! You have been 'successful' [word in English in original]. You have put them on their feet, dear. [It matters little today if you are no longer there.] They pity you today. You weren't made for carrying the burden, but you had to. You are a burden yourself now. There's poison in your breath. This room is for the new-born. Go away, dear!

The shots of Nita in this sequence are, again, as in the beginning, high angle shots. These visually accentuate that Nita is no longer the goddess. In one of the shots in this sequence, the top half her face fills the frame, her large eyes at the bottom of the screen. This shot is the reverse of the Durga-like high angle shots we have seen earlier, marking the beginning of the process of deconsecration. At the end of her father's bid for her to leave, the "Come to me, Uma" lament returns. The camera now stays focussed on Nita, inter-cutting only once to frame the tearful, downcast face of the father.

We see Nita pick up the bundle of clothes her father brings for her, the framed childhood picture of her and her brother, and step out in the rain. In violation of the dramatic requirement of the plot or character development, Nita smiles. We see the full-face of Nita, her open lustrous hair and the Durga-like eyes. Rajadhyaksha comments on the "tremendous full bloodedness of this image of Nita smiling" (65). At one level, the irony of the Uma lament is of course is that unlike Durga, Nita's father does not give her away in marriage but sends her away to her death. However, as I have suggested earlier, the original Uma myth, which the lament dramatizes, is also equally violent, as all giving away of

daughters are, even if that violence is not explicitly acknowledged in the ‘everyday’ world. Ghatak’s use of the Uma myth tears open its cover and exposes the violence of the original myth.

The end of this shot is with a close-up of Nita’s rain-drenched face. One cannot call this a high-angle shot; it is rather a low angle shot turned upside down. The visual reminder and the allusion are to the effigy of the goddess floating in the water after its ritual immersion. Then there is the quick jump cut to the mountains. The camera pans, not in a smooth sweep, but in a visual reverberation, from right to left. The cut traces the custom of idol immersion in which every year, after praying to Durga for four days, the devotees drown the idol in the holy river Ganga, or really, in the nearest significant water body they can find, caring little for environmental pollution. The idol now needs to be symbolically emptied of significance, and the ritualistic drowning of the effigy allows the goddess to return home to the Himalayas, where Durga is believed to stay with her husband for the rest of the year. In the jump cut, Ghatak captures the sacrificial aspect of the idol-immersion. At the literal level of the plot, the idol becomes not a painted wood-and-straw effigy but a living woman. Now that Nita has given every bit she could give, she is no longer the goddess, and her body needs to be discarded.

The pan of the camera from the right to the left, framing the rock-faces of the Himalayas in the Shillong hills, is a disorienting shot. Commenting on motion in cinema in an essay on film grammar, Ghatak writes, “the shutter blade of the camera moves clockwise, i.e. from left to right. Hence a pan or a track from right

to left, particularly done in haste, causes a distortion” (*Rows* 67).²² Ghatak’s comments here are probably the best way to explain the particularly disorienting feel to this shot. Compared to the evocation of nature in the opening shot of the film, the giant tree and water, nature now has changed to an indifferent, “passive” (Rajadhyaksha 74), violent, bare, disorienting, cruel rock face.²³ If the earlier evocation of these symbols of nurture highlighted both the ordinariness of Nita and how she came to acquire the attributes of symbolic qualities, now the bare rock face signifies how she is no longer the repository of the symbolic values of motherhood, but is a caste-away effigy, emptied of metaphoric significance. In terms of the plot, Sankar arranges for his sister to move to a sanatorium in the Shillong hills. When Sankar comes to visit Nita, he seems to be carrying a hen caged in a wicker basket, presumably bought from the local market. He gives this to a nurse in the sanatorium as a gift or for his sister. The symbolic signification of the cage is obvious here, but so is of the bird inside it, who will soon be presumably killed and eaten.

Soon after this, we see Nita for the last time, leading to another panoramic shot, the penultimate shot of the film. This shot is key to the reading I am offering here. At the beginning of this shot, Nita is dwarfed, a mere dot on the landscape in the right hand corner. The camera again zooms back and starts panning the landscape, but this time gently, from left to right to come to Nita. If these camera

²² The essay is titled “Two Aspects of Cinema.” Original in Bengali, published in 1969. Translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay.

²³ Reading within his Marxist criticism of the film, Rajadhyaksha reads this separation of nature from the individual as “the emphatic denial of the romantic false-consciousness,” which he links to “indictment of the romantic sensibility itself” and, in turn, to “romanticism strongly etched into the middle-class” (75).

movements dwarf Nita, I argue that this is to emphasize that she is no longer the symbolic mother, the goddess, or a metaphor for a force larger than life. At the end of this shot, in the middle of an innocuous homely conversation when Sankar starts to report about the happenings at home in Calcutta and how Gita's toddler "is full of life," we hear Nita cry out: "But, I wanted to live, Brother." She tries to control herself, but she cannot, and in a desperate cry, she breaks into a long-drawn cry, that is part scream part howl: "But I really, really wanted to live ... Brother I really love to live ... Brother, I will live...Brother I will live ... You just say once that I will live ..." [my translation]. She repeats the last phrase of the cry, "I will live," several times and the cry starts to reverberate. Here, two more pan shots, one from right to left, and the other from left to right, is interspersed by a shot of the brother and the sister. The cry reverberates against the mountains and continues for a long time, piercing the mountains, as it were; but the mountains remain indifferent. This shot, for which Ghatak was criticized as indulging in the worst possible kind of sappy melodrama, I argue, is key to his critique of the power of the metaphor and the sacrificial victimhood of the individual women it claims. The individual in her, who is about to die, for whom it is too late to live, cries helplessly against the force of the metaphor which has already claimed her life. This is a moment when the individual and the metaphor completely separate from each other and stand face to face.²⁴

²⁴ Rajadhyaksha also argues in similar vein, "This is the only point of expression of the conflict between the archetype and the individual, but the violence with which the release comes shows the nature of the bondage" (74). However, we have a different idea of what constitutes this "bondage." Rajadhyaksha suggests it is the "suffering of a whole people like her, and bound down to the rituals that have come down from her predecessors and designed to keep future generations of humanity in bondage" (ibid.).

III

Absent Language, History, Myths

In an essay, Ritwik Ghatak writes:

Is it possible to do something without standing on one's grounds? Is it possible to plumb the true depths without it? I don't know. Perhaps some day, after enduring severe struggles and beatings, it might be possible. But I have not yet reached that stage, and I doubt I ever shall. At the start of a creative career, however, when one is beginning to work, if one goes bankrupt of the provisions of his past, what is he to do? I am talking of the Partition. I am a child of East Bengal. Very few people like my work. Among them, some say that Ritwik Ghatak is often in touch with the immediate present and at times even [with] the future. But he has no past, no tradition.

Those words haunt me. A work which is pastless, unsupported, 'airy-nothing,' is no work at all. But who will give me back my past?

[...] These [memories ...] full of life, full of intensity [...] are all I have. If I could write, be a poet or a painter, I would have matured from these. But I am a filmmaker. No one has lost like me: what I have seen, I am not able to show. (Rajadhyaksha and Gangar 19)²⁵

Ghatak's citation of the failure of viewing the loss—a spatio-temporal affect combining a lost past and a lost home—through a camera is an evocative modern

²⁵ In an essay written in 1969. Translated by Mitra Parikh.

statement, but specifically so coming from a refugee. Ghatak's films particularly remind the viewer of this time-space that cannot be accessed. It is a 'history' that cannot be shown, especially through the realistic triumph of the camera. It can only be evoked in its absence. While the past-and-home is not representable, history is evoked in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* as the film registers the very non-representability of the past as a violence of history.

It is perhaps also in this context that we sense the relevance of Ghatak's choice of melodrama as a form for expressing Partition trauma. As far as Ghatak was concerned, there was no direct language available to him to describe the trauma of the Partition. He could not access the codes of rational realism, as exemplified, for instance, by Satyajit Ray's cinema. Ghatak turned to melodrama and excesses of melodramas to fashion a very personal language of affects. He, however, fractured the melodramatic form in very curious ways. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Moinak Biswas argues, "the melodramatic content was subverted from inside," while in *Komol Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*, Ghatak went a step further and "made [melodrama] part of a field of interrogation" (Historical 190).²⁶

This crafted language of affect, however suitable to gesture to the violence of the trauma of the Partition, also threatens to displace the historical. I suggest that *Meghe Dhaka Tara* withstands this threat. Its use of myths is a radical narrative practice, which posits myths in relation to a non-representable history as a gesture to the function of the historical. It allows the filmmaker to address the

²⁶ See Moinak Biswas's essay "Her Mother's Son: Kinship and History in Ritwik Ghatak" for a suggestive reading of Ghatak's manipulation and subversion of melodrama as a form.

Partition as a *historical* violence that touches a collective. In order to substantiate how a particular kind of mythic insistence in the film affects the historical, instead of mythologizing the everyday that flattens out history, I will have to remind the reader of the argumentative trajectory I have laid out in the previous chapter.

There, in my reading of Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel, however, the absence in history is more emphatically a gendered elision, the silence of the 'women's part' from history. In Ghatak's films, the unrepresentable history is more centrally attributable to the violent trauma of the Partition itself, although, as I have shown in the previous chapter and here, the evocation of the mythic as an alternative to history is also gendered. As indicated by the excerpt from Ghatak's essay above, the traumatic and violent rupture with the past is a condition that is central to the film-narratives of Ghatak. The allusion to the mythic elements is to contest and bring to crisis the notion of linear progressive historicity itself.

Within Ghatak's own commentary on his films, his evocation of the cultural notions and practices of motherhood under critique in the film would have to do with his primary preoccupation with the universal archetype of the 'Great Mother,' which Ghatak derived from the psychoanalyst Carl Jung. As Bhaskar Sarkar explains, "Archetypes are fundamental symbols that have come to imbibe and signify the deepest attributes of collective existence. Ghatak describes archetypes as constituents of social collective unconscious" ("Allegories" 316). As Moinak Biswas further explains, "Ghatak often felt obliged to explain his work through the study [comparative] of mythology, inspired by Joseph Campbell and Eric Neumann" ("Historical Realism" 213). Ghatak wanted to work with the

unconscious, but given his Marxist convictions, very likely found Freud too individualistic for his purpose. In comparison, the “collective unconscious” of Jung proved more attractive. Ghatak saw no problem using these diverse debts and influences.²⁷ The “structuralist-type universalism” and “belief in essential human nature” that Ghatak imported via Jung is obviously contentious” (Bhaskar Sarkar, “Allegories” 316-317). Certainly, they pose challenging problems to any feminist appraisal of Ghatak’s work. However, I think that this evocation of Jung by Ghatak in his essays and interviews as a way of explaining his films is effectively a reductive description of what his films achieve. Bhaskar Sarkar agrees with my position here; he states that “Ghatak’s films avoid the problems that mark his subsequent theorization” and that, “unlike his theoretical writings,” his films “transcend these oppositions” and “polarized distinction[s] between the personal and the social” (“Allegories” 317). What is more pressing in his films, and also “in several threads in his writing,” according to Sarkar, is “the absolute primacy that Ghatak accords to the social existence of humans, his insistence on the materiality of human life” (ibid.). What Sarkar suggests allows us to argue that Ghatak’s “invocation of fundamental commonalities that transcend spatial and temporal differences” was an attempt to “resolve the tension” Ghatak felt between the “intensely personal dimension” (ibid.) through which he came to an experience, and his political commitment to collectivism.

²⁷ In one interview, for example, he calls the relation between Jung and Marx complimentary, saying that between the two he saw no “inner contradiction” (the phrase in English in an interview in Bengali; Dasgupta and Bhattacharya 76); if Marx allowed him to think through the social, Jung did so about the unconscious in a collective sense (ibid.).

The use of myths is, again as in *The River Churning*, not towards constructing an ideal and hegemonic version of the past. Nor is there, as Ghatak repeatedly assured his “Marxist interlocutors,” anything “religious and retrograde in his engagement with the mother goddess, the Upanishads, the epic [traditions]” (Biswas, “Historical Realism” 214). Most critics writing after the 1980s are in agreement about this. A few have compared Ghatak’s use of mythologies and archaic symbols to that of Walter Benjamin’s.²⁸ Moinak Biswas’s “caution” against using Ghatak’s “example as one of questioning modern modes from the side of tradition as is sometimes done” is useful (“Her Mother’s Son” 2).²⁹ Biswas’s essay, “Her Mother’s Son: Kinship and History in Ritwik Ghatak” provides a very useful elaboration on the complicated relation of Ghatak’s films, as texts of trauma, to history. In this essay, Biswas writes:

To come to terms with history did not mean in Ghatak’s work accepting it essentially as progress, or accepting the present as the only possible outcome of its processes. [...] His work, in film or in writing, on the other

²⁸ Bhaskar Sarkar works with Benjaminian ideas of ‘allegory’ and ‘dispersal’ in his dissertation “Allegories of Dispersal,” Sarkar’s reading of Ghatak in the last chapter is also Benjamin inspired. Sibaji Bandyopadhyay’s essay “Smaran Pratisharan: Ritwik Ghatak er Shilpa” (Bengali; ‘Memory Re-memory/Counter-memory in the art of Ritwik Ghatak’) is a very good Benjaminian reading of Ghatak. Also see Pravina Cooper’s essay “Ritwik Ghatak between the Messianic and the Material.”

²⁹ Biswas cites Amiya Kumar Bagchi’s essay “Ritwik Ghatak” (*Frontier*, July 7, 1984) as an example,

where [Bagchi] tried to read Ghatak's work in conjunction with the 'conservative' tradition of 19th century Bengal, a tradition that, in the work of the poet Iswarchandra Gupta or dramatist Dinabandhu Mitra, was more critical of the colonial rule than its liberal counterpart. The general leftist reaction to the 'traditional' aspect of Ghatak's cinema was negative, contributing to his isolation from the most likely of his patrons in the radical period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. For typical examples of such reaction see the essays by Iraban Basu Roy and Prabrit Das Mahapatra in *Ritwik Ghatak O Tar Chhabi, Vol 2*. The Assamese Marxist critic, Hiren Gohain, raised similar objections to Bagchi's essay cited above in *Frontier*. (Biswas Her f.n. 6)

hand, does not leave any scope to lapse back into a history versus myth argument; it proposes a much more difficult course: to lay bare the irrational substratum of the present [and] to make history face its other as its heart. (4)

In this regard, Rajadhyaksha draws a significant distinction of Ghatak's use of myths from practices of evoking the idealized past in traditions such as that of Ananda Coomaraswamy. Jasodhara Bagchi, in "A Statement of Bias," her review of Rajadhyaksha's book *Return to the Epic*, also concurs.³⁰ "In case of Ritwik," she writes, "confronting the reality of a semi-feudal society like India, the compulsion of the mythic life has to be understood somewhat differently than is the case with Western artists such as Thomas Mann. [...] Ritwik uses the mythic structure to bring out the epic dimension of the violent tenor of modern Indian life" (56). She adds, "Ritwik's Marxist conviction kept him particularly alive to the material base of myths which he has constantly used to open out the narrative structure of his films. This is why he has avoided the typical idealist trap of an aesthete like Coomaraswamy who has used the mythic image to seal off the historical present" (59). Overall, Rajadhyaksha's book reads the use of myths in

³⁰ Jasodhara Bagchi's discussion of Coomaraswamy is highly illuminating:

Coomaraswamy is taken as a high watermark in our nationalist idealism when a return to the unchanging eternity of the so-called Indian mind is offered as a viable critique of the fragmented sensibility of the 'modern' soul in a capitalist society. [...] Within the image of unchanging India, the Brahminical culture of the dominators co-existed happily with the 'folk' culture of the dominated. This benevolent paternalistic order generated myths which exuded beatitude and timelessness. The hierarchical vision of Coomaraswamy could offer a critique of modern society only because it had the right kind of legitimization from within the system. The ideal of contemplation propounded by him had already had the blessing of critics and art-historians in Western society. In fact, the glorification of 'myth in idealized terms that we witness in Coomaraswamy, need not be seen as entirely alien to the 'modernist' revolution in the West. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards myth has been increasingly used in art and literature. (55-56)

Ghatak's films as the central tool which allows Ghatak to move from an individual "tragic" mode to an "epic" one. Both Rajadhyaksha's and Bagchi's positions point to the centrality of not only a material history but also that of collectives in Ghatak's use of myths.

The reading of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* I have offered in this chapter, although working in a critical framework outside Marxism, is at one with the interlocutors I have cited here. However, in my reading, gender plays a critical role in the gesture towards the historical and the collective. The central myths that Ghatak chooses in his Partition films are all women-centric.³¹ Their usage opens up the myths in their gendered content as well as illuminates the context of the Partition to which they are applied. As my reading of the Durga myth in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* above suggests, there is an intricate evocation of the "everyday" world of women not only in a post-Partition refugee colony, but also in the patriarchal organization of society in ordinary everyday life.

My reading of the not-representable history and the evocation of the historical, gendered "everyday" is in disagreement with a brief but strong critique which Himani Bannerji has provided of Ghatak in "Partition and Its Meaning," her review of Bagchi and Dasgupta's *The Trauma and the Triumph*. Bannerji addresses "Ghatak's films, along with "numerous [other] short-stories, novels, poems and other films," but the specific example she takes is that of Ghatak's films (3807). I agree with Bannerji's description of the normative Partition

³¹ Durga/Uma/Gouri in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Shakuntala in *Komol Gandhar*, and Sita in *Subarnarekha*,

narrative (“numerous [other] short-stories, novels, poems and other films), but I do not take Ghatak to be an example of the normative.

My disagreement with Bannerji’s reading is about what constitutes history and loss in Ghatak’s films. “Moving as they are,” Bannerji argues of Ghatak’s films, “they don’t tell half the story. Their expressive voice contains a patriarchal elite tone.” In these, “the world before the Partition of Bengal has a prelapsarian quality” (3807). First of all, there is *no* represented world before the Partition. These films are strictly plotted as post-Partition narratives.³² On this account, they evoke a deep traumatic non-representability of the time-space of a ‘lost past-lost home.’ This is a major difference between Ghatak’s Partition film and numerous other nostalgic texts of the Partition, of which *Chhere Asha Gram* (The Abandoned Village) is one example. Ghatak was acutely aware of this as his articulation of his helplessness as a filmmaker above suggests. I do not think he could bear the idea of shooting a village or river in West Bengal as representing the lost East Bengal. The only scopic-representation of that which is lost is found in the film *Komol Gandhar* when two characters, Anasuya and Bhriku, face the river Padma and gaze across it, saying that their lost home lies on the other side of the river. It is through their eyes that we look at the river and at the land across it, which cannot be seen. *Titash Ekti Nadir Nam*, plot-wise not a Partition film, is the only film by Ghatak to ‘show’ East Bengal, but was made after the formation of Bangladesh and was actually shot in Bangladesh. Indeed, this is an elliptical mark of trauma in Ghatak’s films and part of their representative politics. There is

³² Partha Chatterjee also makes this observation in his “The Films of Ritwik Ghatak and the Partition.”

emphatic record of, and even a resistance through, the inaccessibility of the past. This is a registration of the historical violence of the Partition.

Bannerji takes Ghatak's films to be solely a narrative of trauma, which "freezes time" (3807), whereas for me, they also incorporate the gendered historical. If the past is inaccessible to representation in Ghatak's films, it is not because of the past's "prelapsarian quality" as much due to the politicized nature of the displacement (not a 'lapsus' or 'fall' in a Biblical sense) itself. The non-representability of this past is not a negation of the past, however. As I have argued above, in the face of this non-representability, the film gestures to the "everyday" and to the collective of the historical through its use of myths.

Bannerji writes that the sense of Partition as a "tragedy is never held up to the query of issues of property/class and gender pre-existing the Partition and the migration" (3807). *Meghe Dhaka Tara* does not, in a direct manner, tabulate "issues of property/class and gender pre-existing the Partition and the migration," but the film is nothing if not a trenchant critique of the class and gender dynamics of the bhadralok class that pre-existed the Partition and was, as the film understands them to be, complicit in the outcome of the Partition. The intense critique in the film of the bourgeois aspirations and the gender violence of this class—around which the film revolves in general, and to which Ghatak himself belonged—is most visible in the character of Nita's father, Taran Babu, the Wordsworth and Keats-quoting retired school headmaster.

After the family learns that Nita has tuberculosis and is dying from it, it is this character who mouths a violent "I accuse," pointing his finger towards and

looking straight at the camera. In one way, his accusation is aimed at the viewer and at the world at large. However, to Sankar's angry retort "Whom?," he almost collapses and mumbles "no one." The unuttered answer to that question, as suggested by the film, is 'all of us.' The point to Taran Babu's feeble 'no one' is not so much his impotence in making the accusation, as much as his complicity in the act which he accuses others of. In Ashish Rajadhyaksha's reading, a critique of Taran Babu is part of a larger "indictment of the romantic sensibility" in the film (75). On the one hand, Rajadhyaksha writes, Taran Babu "is the only person who holds a value-system outside the exploitative petty-bourgeois aspirations of the family. At one level the character has been portrayed with great sympathy, with his inability to reconcile himself to the change caused by his exile" (77). On the other hand, "the violence with which Tarun [sic] Babu is rendered impotent, then pathetic and even superfluous, the almost surreal accident in which he loses both feet, his refusal to accept that his son has joined the 'labour' class, and finally the inane 'I accuse ...' each brings with it a merciless indictment of the man and his class" (ibid.).

Bannerji further argues that, for Ghatak "'the Partition' become solely an icon of destruction, an ideological moment, both a signal of degeneration and estrangement and an occlusive veil," and there is "in these films, and in other cultural productions, a desperate, frenzied tone of moral crisis" (3807). The argument is well taken in relation to the normative discourses of the Partition, about which I have written in the same vein at the end of Chapter 1. However, it is one thing to say that this is how the trauma of the Partition is most commonly

represented, and another to assess this as *the trauma* of the Partition. I differ on the latter account. The trauma of the Bengal Partition, let us be clear, is not only that of loss of property and caste, class, and patriarchal privilege of a certain section of the bhadralok even if it is often articulated by the bhadralok as exactly that. The trauma, we have to understand, is also of a failed political polity and possibility. Seen from this viewpoint, “The Partition” is *indeed* “solely an icon of destruction:” a destruction of the possibility of political cohabitation with difference on both sides of the partitioned border. That, to my mind, and in Ghatak’s film, is the most singular ‘tragedy’ of the Partition although tragedy is not an appropriate word here. Whatever be the later history of changes brought in by the Partition, it does not make good of this fact.

The “desperate, frenzied tone of moral crisis” Bannerji notices in Ghatak’s films is not merely a crisis of the elite patriarchal privilege, as she suggests and critiques. Ghatak himself told an interviewer who asked him about the “refugee problem as a recurring theme” in his work: “I have tackled the refugee problem, as you have used the term, not as a ‘refugee problem’. To me it was the *division* of a culture and I was shocked.” (Emphasis mine; *Rows* 95). The loss that triggers the “moral crisis” in Ghatak’s films is a far more complex one than a loss of privilege. It was a division of a culture and a people, a loss which incorporates, along with displacement, a particular political failure of polity.

IV

The Violence of Metaphor-Making

Meghe Dhaka Tara's critique from *within* a tradition of metaphor making exposes the violence of the process of gendered metaphor making. The critique is specifically of the gendered abjectness of the sacrificial role that Nita takes on through her role of the surrogate mother of her family. Sanat, her former lover and now brother-in-law, tells Nita towards the end of the film that she need not continue her "acting" (word in English) of sacrifice alone. Nita replies that "it is not an act, it is [perhaps] penance." Perhaps a more appropriate translation of what she says is atonement ("prayaschitto" in original Bengali). To the startled question from Sanat, "Penance? What [sin have you committed]?", Nita says, "I have never protested against [any] injustice. That [indeed] is my sin." Keeping this statement of Nita in front of us, it appears, that her death is almost a punishment, an atonement, for her unquestioning fulfilment of the 'unjust' demands everyone else piled upon her. Whether or not the end is suggested as a kind of heartbreaking poetic justice, it is clear that the film attaches no heroism or martyrdom to the gendered—'maternal'—self-sacrifice of Nita. The film does not preach, or even morally sanction, the kind of gendered violence to which Nita allows herself to be subjected. This is, I think, an important point to note in terms of the reading I offer here.

Indeed, the process of metaphor making that I have suggested throughout this dissertation, and am offering here through my reading of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, is under critique by being acutely and particularly palpable in this film. There is a

complete suppression, a forceful erasure of the body that is present, corporeal, and labouring *for* the metaphor. The stronger the metaphor grows, the greater is the erasure of the body on which the metaphor locates itself. Through the sensuous representative economy of the cinema, the film makes acutely perceivable exactly what is under erasure under the regime of the metaphor. For instance, in the scene when the dying Nita is driven out of her home in the rain by her senile father, in a symbolic sacrifice of the mother/daughter, the camera emphasizes and draws attention to what Rajadhyaksha has called the “tremendous full bloodedness” (65) of the present female body that is being sent to death. Indeed, the visibility of this body always-already reminds the viewer of what is to be lost, what is to be violated, what is to be sacrificed. If *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is an allegory, a term which literally means ‘speaking otherwise,’ telling a story in which the story of the refugee woman Nita is also the story of Durga/archetypal motherhood, it shows that this symbolic motherhood consumes the body of the woman who represents it.

Now, on a larger level, cinema as a medium is essentially about the sensuality/palpability of the image, often in excess of authorial intention. The affect Nita, as a ‘metaphor’ of Durga, generates in us, or the affect of the Durga myth on the Bengali audience, is itself made through equally sensual image making as is the ‘metaphor’ it seeks to critique. In that sense, working both *for* and *against* Nita as a metaphor of Durga is the sensuality of the visible image of the body. This is the reason why I have called *Meghe Dhaka Tara* a critique from *within* while elaborating on its film language. The reason *Meghe Dhaka Tara*

steers clear of complicity and makes its critique *work*, even while it is a critique from within, is because it is able to separate the two different significations performed by its images of the female body: one that points to a socially embedded woman (whom I call a metonym; Nita the individual woman) and the other to that of the ‘woman’ who signifies sacrificial motherhood (whom I call a metaphor; Nita as Durga). The film shows a trajectory from one to the other and then back, laying bare how a metonym becomes a metaphor and how, indeed, the metaphor is a construct which can be broken by the metonym. As I have shown in my reading above, it is only in the penultimate sequence, that the film brings Nita as a metaphor and Nita as a metonym together, standing face-to-face, dramatizing their conflicting interests.

In this dissertation, I have located metaphor-making in the context of a particular historic relationship between women and a collective imagination, specifically nationalism. I accord that *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is not explicitly *about* the historical process of metaphor formation within the rubric of nation-imagining as I have described it.³³ However, although not obviously working with nationalism, the film also illuminates the historical process of gendered metaphor formation—in terms of the nation and its ‘women’—and its historical violence. I say *not obviously*; however, being an engaged Partition film, it could hardly escape the historical representative economies of nation making or of

³³ Within a narrow rubric of authorial intention, I must note that Ghatak was very likely not working explicitly within this semiotic tradition. He certainly was no nationalist; his affiliation with the left traditions which critiqued the Independence and his agony over the Partition makes him call the Independence in an interview “fake and sham” (Rows 92). We could not even argue with any certainty if he was even explicitly addressing the nationalist semiotics.

national/historical gendered metaphor-making. Further, if the central characteristic of melodrama as a genre is that in it social/national concerns are projected onto the familial, as Peter Brooks suggests in his seminal study *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, as a melodrama, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*'s engagement with the family is also tied to the nation. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is the only film of Ghatak's Partition trilogy that actually engages with the structure of a family; Ghatak would move away from the family *Komol Gandhar* onwards, never to return to a family again. Being a melodrama, however sophisticatedly it fractures the form, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* has to engage with the tectonics of nation formation.

From the standpoint of the critical questions that are of interest to this dissertation, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* taps into a strong metaphoric tradition in Bengal in representing the nation as a woman. The link between Durga and Bengal and the link of both to a discourse of the nation are explicitly traceable to Bankim, specifically to *Anandamath* and "Bande Mataram," as I have shown in Chapter 1. Regardless of authorial intention, for my purposes, the set of images and affects *Meghe Dhaka Tara* evokes allows me to situate it within a tradition metaphor making traceable to Bankim. I take the film to be a critique from within this tradition. The film thus makes possible the articulation of a strong feminist critique of the gendered process of metaphor making. This particular critique eminently lends itself to be read as constituting the larger critique of the historical process of metaphor formation that I present throughout this dissertation.

V

Nita as a Collective: Refugee Woman Post-Metaphor

There are several metonymic readings of Nita.³⁴ I read Nita as a representative refugee woman; in my reading, she metonymically constitutes the refugee women of Bengal. The character of Nita is an individual, but she does not signify a singular. While her death dramatizes the victimization of an individual woman at the hands of a metaphor, the exploitative victimization is not the predicament of Nita alone. Nor is the victimization of an individual woman—or of historical women, dramatized through Nita’s death—the final point of the film. To understand this crucial point, we must scrutinize the final sequence of the film.

The film does not end with the Nita’s reverberating cry that she wanted to live, or with the suggestion of her death. The final sequence strongly mimics the movements and images from the second shot-sequence of the film. There, in the second sequence, as Nita entered the colony, she was called by the colony grocer Bangshi (played by Gyanesh Mukherjee). She had a brief exchange with him, and as she has started to walk away, one of her sandals had suddenly snapped. She had looked down, frowned, sighed, taken her sandals off in her hand, and walked away barefoot.

³⁴ In her reverberating cry that she wanted to live, according to Rajadhyaksha, Nita ventriloquizes “suffering of a whole people” and “the anguish of a struggling class” (74). Kumar Sahni reads Nita to stand in for “us” (Rajadhyaksha and Gangar 59). It is not clear where exactly the perimeter of this “us” lies, but in the beginning of the essay, “Violence and Responsibility,” where he makes the claim, the “we” are the students of Ritwik Ghatak. Sahni writes, Ritwik Ghatak’s “work is the violent assertion of our identity. It is the cry of the dying girl in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* which echoes through the hills, our right to live” (ibid.).³⁴

The earlier shot is mirrored at the very end of the film. Here, in this *final* sequence, is a similar set of events, except that Nita is, of course, absent. This sequence strongly evokes the earlier shot of the film in a manner that Bellour describes as “an art of looping” (18). Bangshi, the grocer—whom Moinak Biswas has called “choric” (“Her Mother’s Son” 26)—asks Sankar about Nita. Sankar cannot answer. Interpreting his muteness to imply the worst, Bangshi goes on to talk about Nita in the past tense, saying “no one even remembers her here anymore. She went by everyday, sandals flapping. Such a quiet girl ...[how could she endure] such suffering?” Sankar’s face grimaces with grief, and he turns away from the grocer to find another refugee woman, much the same as Nita in appearance—with her simple cotton sari, her braided hair, her side bag—coming by, probably returning from work.

This woman is a friend of Nita’s, and we have seen her come up to Nita earlier in the film. There is an emphatic similarity between Nita and this friend of hers. The similarity is not in their facial features but in their appearance, their clothes, the quick, determined gait. In other words, their similarity is in that of being the image of an iconic refugee woman from the refugee colony who has started working in a petty clerical job. Once, earlier, looking at her from behind, Sankar had mistaken her for his sister, and had rushed forward, calling out by Nita’s nickname, “Khuki... Khuki...,” only to realize his mistake when she had stopped and turned.

We viewers, too, were once tricked by this friend’s appearance. When Nita had first joined the workforce, there was a sequence set in the ‘office

neighbourhood' in the heart of the city, which started with shots of Escher-like stairs and an elevator moving up, its serpentine cable coiling down to a sound montage of drums and accentuated cymbal-like metallic sounds. We caught a glimpse of a woman climbing down the stairs in a light-coloured sari. In the beginning of the shot, we tend to think she is Nita. Then the camera focuses on the moving feet and the woman's hanging, swinging bag on the busy streets outside. We still think she is Nita. Then there is a cut, and we see Nita coming from the opposite direction, in a dark sari and with an umbrella. Nita walks past the camera and meets the woman in the light-coloured sari, who turns out to be her friend, and who asks Nita what she was doing in the office neighbourhood. We do not know if this woman, Nita's friend, is necessarily the same woman we had seen in the preceding 'stairs' shot, but in this scene we were visually tricked into thinking that she was Nita.

In the last scene, Nita's friend reappears, walking past Sankar and the grocer. Sankar looks on at her. She briefly meets his eyes, smiles, and walks on. The camera leaves Sankar and follows her, dipping to focus on her moving feet. Then, in explicit visual echo of Nita's experience from the beginning of the film, one of her sandals snaps. The camera cuts to a close up of the back of Sankar's head as he looks on at the woman bending down to examine her sandal in the depth of field. She tucks the broken sandal in place and stands up. At this point, the Uma lament starts again (it would continue to the end of the film, even after the screen has gone dark). Then, there is a close-up of her face as she looks at Sankar watching, and smiles. The camera then briefly dips again to the lower half

of her body to show the whole of her as she walks along, away from the camera, limping. Sankar looks on at this disappearing figure; his eyes fill up; his gaze becomes unfocussed, and eventually unable to bear that vision and his grief for his absent, dying sister anymore, he covers his face with his two hands.

My analysis of this film is strongly invested in this last sequence. The strong resonance of the second sequence of the film with the final sequence and its near repetition, with two significant differences, point me toward *Meghe Dhaka Tara*'s construction of historical gendered violence. The similarity of Nita and her friend, the unnamed woman, and the visual confusion between the two women signals that Nita is not singular. She is one of many refugee women. This is, of course, a critical aspect of Ghatak's cinema's commitment to think of the collective. Among the two differences, between the second and the final sequence, the first is the absence of Nita herself from the latter. The second is the difference in how the two women treat their torn sandals. We realize the symbolic import of the torn sandal in the second sequence of the film only when we arrive at the end of the film. In the beginning, Nita's sandals, much damaged by wear and tear, had finally given in. Nita had sighed at them, picked them up, and walked barefoot, giving in, just as her sandal had. The torn sandal had, in the beginning, symbolized Nita's impoverished life, her struggle for existence, her long journey, both physical and in life in general. In retrospect, her torn sandal becomes a metonym of herself, and her walking barefoot a metonym of her giving in. In contrast, the other woman does not give in. Her sandal, too, breaks, but she drags the damaged sandal along, preferring to limp along to walking barefoot. In

my reading, this woman is the woman limping towards a space that is post-metaphoric. She signifies the collective of women who live on beyond the death of the individual Nita, and struggle against the metaphor through their labour, staking a claim that the metaphor denies them.

Other interlocutors are in agreement that this woman in the last shot signals a collective, but they interpret the ideological charge of the signal differently than I do. Ashish Rajadhyaksha argues that, “in the end, as her tragedy becomes universal we see the archetype going beyond Nita, as the individual in her cries out her desire to live” (54). I take Rajadhyaksha to be talking of the woman in the last shot when he writes about “the archetype going beyond Nita” in the above quote. Similarly, in Bhaskar Sarkar’s reading, “as another young woman drags her feet to work in worn-out sandals[,] the oppressive structure lives on, the exploitation continues” (Allegories 321). To Ira Bhaskar, the appearance of the friend at the end signals perpetuation of the ‘archetype’ that Nita represents. She writes, in Nita’s death, in her

reunion with the hills, a symbol of eternity and Mahadeva [Shiva], the regeneration of the archetype is effected. After the ritual deconsecration, Durga returns to her consort in [a] symbolic union [...], ensuring the continuity of life. [...] After the deconsecration is complete, Nita ceases to be of any importance as an individual but the archetype is continually perpetuated. In the last sequence wherein Sankar mistakes, for a moment, the friend of Nita, is contained in the archetypal process itself. (50)

My reading fundamentally differs from these. I think the film both laments the cruel death of Nita from the violence of the metaphor *and* also gestures to historical, individual women who struggle on, and live on beyond the violence. The last scene is filled with the ‘absence’ of Nita; the Uma lament on the soundtrack underscores the tremendous violence of this absence. However, this absence does not erase the presence of the other girl. The symbolic gesture—with her different relationship to her torn sandal—suggests that unlike Nita, she will struggle and live on. This is also in keeping with similar gestures of living on which Ghatak repeated in other films that end in catastrophes: the child Binu singing the song his now dead mother, Sita, taught him at the end of *Subarnarekha*; or, the child running across a lush paddy field that Basanti imagines while dying alongside an entire culture, on the bank of the dying river in *Titash Ekti Nadir Nam*. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, I suggest, the end is a similar gesture; in this case, a particularly rich feminist gesture of ‘living on’ beyond the metaphor.

VI

The Refugee Woman’s Subjectivity and Agency

I have discussed above Himani Bannerji’s critique of Ghatak’s films and my disagreements with her reading. In this last section, I come to perhaps the most significant aspect of Bannerji’s reading for the purposes of this chapter. Bannerji critiques *Meghe Dhaka Tara* specifically by describing it as “another powerful film on the everyday life in the refugee colony, the working sister Nita’s life is

conceived as a tragedy, not a triumph through the transgression of gender roles or extension of social space and presence” (3807). I take the import of Bannerji’s critique to be one relating to refugee women’s agency. I do not agree with the terms in which Bannerji lays out her critique—“tragedy” versus “triumph”—, but at the same time, I find that the core point she makes cannot be dismissed.

While there is no *denial* of agency to the refugee woman, I accord that the question of agency cannot be fully evoked within *Meghe Dhaka Tara*; it needs to be gestured towards and located in a space that is literally beyond the film. Much of this has to do with *Meghe Dhaka Tara*’s status as a *critique from within*, but perhaps more with its film language that disallows the question of agency in a character-centric way. As I have indicated above, the story of a family and the *characters* cannot be read simply in terms of psychological realism even in a conventional melodrama; in Ghatak’s melodramas, this is possible even less so. In Ghatak’s films, there is always an emphatic attempt to evoke the socio-historical and to move past the individual subject to the project of nation-founding developmental modernity. Accordingly, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* takes on the question of agency outside the character of Nita. In the figure of Nita’s friend, there is an emphatic gesture to agency. However, even here, as in the case of Nita’s helplessness and her friend’s enabled stride forward, the gesture to agency is symbolic in the same way the characters are themselves symbolic and, for many purposes, inadequate.

Along with this conclusion, however, I must also underscore that *Meghe Dhaka Tara* approaches the very question of agency in a mediated way by taking

a much more difficult route than one chartable through a tragedy-triumph binary. In the film, there is no straightforward, exclusive binary conflict between a developmental modernity—what Bannerji calls “triumph through the transgression of gender roles or extension of social space and presence”—and the Partition trauma/tragedy. However, this ‘failure’ needs to be scrutinized for what it is. It is, after all, relatively easy to imagine the refugee woman as an icon of progress. Women have been fixed as the site, and the ‘measure’ of a time’s modernity (whether imagined as progress or decadence); the ‘new woman’ as the sign of her time has been around since the ‘women’s question’ took centre stage for national and nation-making debates in late nineteenth century. The new ‘refugee woman’ is no exception, and there is nothing inherently disruptive in signalling a symbolic progress onto her.

This becomes clear if we compare *Meghe Dhaka Tara* with the popular Bengali melodramas of the 1950s and the 1960s, especially the films of the super-star pair Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen.³⁵ Bhaskar Sarkar argues that the characters played by Sen, along with the actress’s “screen persona [...] emerged as the embodiment of the *adhunika*, the modern Bengali woman,” and that the “the characters that Sen played exuded a sense of agency that was essentially iconographic [...] never really posing a serious challenge to the status quo. Indeed

³⁵ The screen couple acted in some thirty films together; “as many as twenty of these were released in a five year period between 1954-1958, widely acknowledged as the golden years of Bengali commercial cinema” (Sarkar, “Allegories” 217).

For a fuller discussion, of popular Bengali melodramas as texts of the Partition, see Sarkar’s “Chapter 3: Desires for a Lost Plenitude: the National Dialectic” (“Allegories” 177-252).

Also see Moinak Biswas’s extremely useful essay, “The Couple and Their Spaces: *Harano Sur* as Melodrama Now.”

her purported agency was consumed by an emerging consumerism and to certain extended class anxieties” (“Allegories” 224-225). Several of the characters played by Sen, a ‘Bangal’ herself, were characters from East Bengal, and would technically belong to the category ‘the refugee woman,’ although her glamorous ‘image’ could not be more different than that of the refugee woman in Ghatak. In some ways, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, as a radicalization of melodrama from within, is superficially very close to the melodramatic form exemplified and exalted by Uttam-Suchitra films. Therefore, it was surely possible for *Meghe Dhaka Tara* to invest in its women an “iconographic agency” following the well-defined convention already in place.

My point about the ‘failure’—in Bannerji’s terms— of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*

is also

exemplified by comparing *Meghe Dhaka Tara* to Satyajit Ray’s film *Mahanagar* (*The Big City/The Metropolis*; 1963).³⁶ Both are Partition-refugee films although, in the latter, this detail is admitted almost as an aside. The reason *Meghe Dhaka Tara* embraces an idiom of failure (“tragedy” in Bannerji’s terms) is because it has a different relationship to the Partition than does *Mahanagar*. In *Mahanagar*, the city is a prominent space as a location of post-Independence modernity and is a site for bourgeois celebration of the newfound citizenship.³⁷ The city is so

³⁶ The subject matter of *Mahanagar* is comparable to *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, both are about the new social category called the refugee woman. In *Mahanagar*, the wife of an extended household, Arati finds a job to alleviate the poverty of the family and to ‘help’ her husband fulfil his traditional masculine duty to provide for his family.

³⁷ For a discussion of the city as a space in context of post-Partition Calcutta and cinema, see Moinak Biswas’s essay “The City and the Real: Chinnamul and the Left Cultural Movement in the 1940s.”

crucially important to the film that we can think of it as the main protagonist: the title of the film also reflect that. In the film, the camera romances with the city as a new space, framing sight and sounds of the city, investing the space with the affect of the celebratory modern. In this, if Ray was only following the common practice in Bengali literature that depicts modernity as a journey from the village to the city and constructs the city as *the* site for modernity, he was changing the narrative from ‘a fall from innocence’ to a journey that involves an arrival into progress. The fact that the family at the centre of *Mahanagar* is a refugee family is tucked in uneventfully into the film narrative, but in effect Ray’s film appropriates the *displacement* of the refugee from East Bengal, their forced migration, into a story of progress, *an arrival* into modernity.

In contrast, in any of Ghatak’s films, the journey of the refugee from East Pakistan to the metropolis of Calcutta in the new India is an ontological and violent displacement; it could not constitute a story of progress. If in his films, too, the city was a site for modernity, of the inescapable present, this modernity was a violent one. The arrival here needs to be underscored in terms of a violent loss of the past, and the space of the city needs to be reconstructed by inserting into it the violence of the lost memory.³⁸ Significantly, most of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is shot inside the refugee colony at the outskirts of the city. There are very

³⁸ I owe this particular inflection of the argument to Moinak Biswas’s essay “The City and the Real: *Chhinnamul* and the Left Cultural Movement in the 1940s.” In the Partition film *Chhinnamul*, Moinak Biswas writes, “The city [...] seems to lack memory” (“The City” 57). He continues, “The drunken Haraprasad says as much over the shots of passing street lamps in *Subarnarekha* [the third film of Ghatak’s Partition trilogy] as he takes a taxi ride with the protagonist Ishwar: ‘Never. Haven’t seen the War, haven’t seen the Famine, haven’t seen the riots, haven’t seen the Partition....’ This city is caught in the grip of the present. It is a place to which memory must be restored” (ibid.).

few shots of the actual *city*. The space of the city, when evoked—for example, in the shot of the office building with its Escher-like stairs and serpentine coils of the elevator cable moving up and down—is decisively violent.

The body of the refugee woman is of crucial importance to the progress narrative of *Mahanagar*. The modernity project here needs to, and *does* appropriate the mobile female body of the refugee woman; it is the crucial presence of the female body that allows the modernization of the space of the city. In Ray's film, we see that whereas the husband and in-laws are originally resistant to the female protagonist, Arati, working as a door-to-door sales girl, her mobility is ultimately highly desirable in *Mahanagar*.³⁹ The desirability distinguishes the 'new' as different, and thereby modern, from the old traditional view that indicts women's mobility. It is precisely in that binary of modern versus traditional, in 'allowing' its women mobility that the new patriarchy emerges as jubilantly 'modern' and self-congratulatory. Women on the streets and in the workplace in *Mahanagar* are *signs* of this self-congratulatory modernity and make available that modernity for consumption. It is not that Arati does not have real agency in *Mahanagar* or that her agency is merely iconographic. In Bhaskar Sarkar's words, she "achieves a certain degree of agency in that she learns to take on and transgress many of the structural limits imposed on a middle class Bengali wife-mother: her questioning attitude, her strong-willed actions challenge and critique familial structures and behavioural codes" ("Allegories" 223). I will add that in

³⁹ I am reminded of Rachel Weber's report of her interviews with surviving male refugees in Calcutta, that they were "extremely proud of their wives and working daughters and readily accepted that women had been liberated by their experiences" (76).

defending her Eurasian colleague-friend against false accusations of sexual promiscuity by her Bengali bhadralok boss and walking out of her job in protest, she even disrupts the bhadralok code of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ However, we cannot discount that such agency is appropriated into Ray’s hegemonic project of making the new urban Bengali bhadralok. This entry of the woman of the bhadralok class, the bhadramahila, into the paid labour force is not under critique in *Mahanagar*, but at the heart of the film is a gradation of labour into what is a suitable job for a bhadramahila.

My point in briefly comparing *Meghe Dhaka Tara* with the popular melodramas and *Mahanagar* is to suggest that there is little challenge in constructing the refugee woman with some agency, and even less difficulty in appropriating such agency for a hegemonic project. Surely the question of agency needs to be evoked in tandem with the question ‘to what end?’ *Meghe Dhaka Tara* does not attempt to engage with the ‘subjectivity’ of the refugee woman as Bannerji would like it to, but I disagree with the suggestion that it constructs a hegemonic subjectivity for the refugee woman. There is no “triumph” of the refugee woman here, but there is a record of the refugee woman’s renegotiation with new place, space, patriarchy, and history itself, and to me these do not constitute a collusion with patriarchy. The subjectivity of the refugee woman here is not constructed as one that can be retrogressively folded back into patriarchy. There is an emphatic and accented gesture of a space beyond the violence of the old patriarchy and a negotiation with the new. The ‘failure’ of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*

appears more radical to me than the facile success of the more agential narratives that I have exemplified above.

The most urgent question Bannerji's critique above raises is this: does a feminist position foreclose the acceptance of a critique of modernity? Surely not? I understand the feminist suspicion of a position that hastily indicts any critique of modernity, especially when such critique pits tradition against modernity. However, it *should* be possible to formulate and recognize a critique of modernity only as progress narrative, in somewhat Benjaminian fashion, without any conflict with feminism. As it is, there is an equal need to assess the gendered violence of progressive modernity, as of the violence of tradition. In the case of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, modernity is not, as I have already cited Moinak Biswas's caution above, in binary opposition with tradition. Indeed, in this chapter, through my reading of the Durga myth, I have shown how 'tradition' is under critique in the film.

I also understand that there is a significant feminist investment on part of Bannerji, one that I do partly share, in the figure of the refugee woman. I am not arguing that we need to reduce the figure to a mere pawn in the changing game plan of patriarchy. However, I do think that we need to allow the space to articulate and accept a critique of modernity that would disrupt the notion of history as inexorable progress. *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, as indeed all Ghatak's Partition films, belongs to this space. As I understand, there is no compromise of our feminist interests in finding useful the film's critique of modernity. After all, the developmental modernity in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is registered in a particular violence of dislocation that is also gendered. The Partition trauma, it shows, is not

only as much of women as of men, it is probably more so. Implicit in the suggestion that the Partition is less traumatic for women is an assumption that women are less than political subjects, with little investment in the political “everyday” life of the polity that was fractured through the Partition. I disagree with this presumption. It is precisely the question of women’s stake in the question of polity that I will ask in the next chapter.

To sum up, then, in this chapter I have read Ritwik Ghatak’s film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* as an exposition and critique of the process of gendered metaphor-formation. I have located in the film a radicalization of the trope of motherhood, specifically through the use of the cultural icon of Durga. I have read the film as a critique of these coalescences of cultural motherhood as exploitative metaphoric regimes, which exploit and victimize women. In my reading, the film makes visible the violence of the process of metaphor formation, and, by using a counter-language of intense affect, breaks the hypnotic power of the metaphor. I have read the film as an intervention in the process of metaphor formation in the register of gendered labour.

I have read Ghatak’s film as a text of trauma, which posits the past as non-representable due to the violence of history. *Nevertheless*, it does not lapse into an erasure of history. In my reading of the use of myths in the film, I have argued that the film brings the gender-mediated of the ‘historical’ under its critical scrutiny. I have also emphasized the place of the collective in this film. I have, finally, reflected on the film as a Partition film, which fractures the notion of linear progressive teleology in the refugee’s arrival to the new country/the city.

On the latter account, I have suggested that the film has complicated the *progressive* agency in a tale of ‘arrival to modernity’ that some critics like to invest in the category of the refugee woman. It takes on the question of agency in a remove, but not, I have argued, to deny it to the figure of the refugee woman.

Chapter 4

Imagining Metonym: Women as Political Subjects, Women in Collectives in Sabitri Roy's *Swaralipi* (The Notations)

In this final chapter of this dissertation, I move beyond a critique of the metaphor and read Sabitri Roy's *Swaralipi*¹ (1952) as a novel that is deeply engaged with the possibilities of imagining the signifier 'women' as metonyms, in the sense of subjects who constitute the collective in the post-Partition terrain of the independent nation. *Swaralipi*'s women characters—many of whom are refugees—are imagined as political subjects. The novel also shows the politicization of the refugees, especially the refugee women, in the newly formed Indian nation-state. The refugee woman in *Swaralipi*, politicized in a particular way, opens up the signification of 'women' in post-Partition politics and polity. This is an important gesture which makes the refugee woman a historical, *transitional* figure who can no longer be read only as enabling a critique of the colonial past, but who also becomes an agent of radical politics within and against the state in the start of a different kind of political struggle.

The women in *Swaralipi* stake claims to the tasks of imagining and materializing a political collective as though nothing could have been more obvious for them to do. There is an always-already knowledge that the larger

¹ As my text, I have used the edition included in Vol. 1 of Sabitri Roy's collected works, edited by Sumita Samanta (*Rachana Samagra: Pratham Khanda*; Bengali). All quotes from the novel are in my translation.

political questions of collectives are also gendered and therefore as much women's to ask and answer as men although the imagination of any possible political participation is clearly understood in the novel to be mediated by the gendered reality of the world. The novel is an articulation of a politics where not only 'the personal is the political,' but also one where the political is the personal. The approach to the collective by its women is not in their capacity as gender-less subjects; that is, the participation by these women is not *in spite of* or *other than* their being women. The claims the women make to the collective and the deep responsibility they feel to it are imagined from their gendered position as women. The intervention in politics is not, however, based on some presumed intrinsic 'feminine values.' Rather, the possibility of intervention grows from a critical perspective developed by closely taking into account the 'everyday' world and the gendered lived-experience.

Swaralipi is a historical novel as it is a political one even while its relationship to both politics and history is, again, gendered. In this moment, the history that is before the novel is constituted by an independence that has been gained at the cost of the Partition and by crushing the spine of the peasant struggle and all other organization and networking the communist workers had painstakingly build up in both sides of Bengal. The bourgeois limits, and the Hindu bias, of the nationalist struggle and nationalist gains have become plainly and painfully apparent. From the vantage point of the gendered subject, the political question with which the novel engages is the question of a collective: what kind of political collective is possible and desirable? How can the political

collective move beyond the detritus left behind by its immediate history: the Partition, the failed fight for Tebhaga, at the moment failed leadership by the Communist Party, the communalizing of the population who are so obviously divided by class, the hundreds of thousands who have become ‘minorities’ and refugees? And above all, it always keeps an eye on the personal-political gains made and those that remain to be gained by women within patriarchy through this struggle to give shape to a collective.

The primary commitment of *Swaralipi* for the political collective is socialism. As an alternative to political world order imagined and shaped by bourgeois nationalism, *Swaralipi* recognizes and embraces a Marxist-communist one in accordance with its deep dedication to the ultimate goal of a classless society. In this particular aim, it recognizes the leadership, commitment and responsibility of the Communist Party. Yet, a significant aspect of the novel is that it critiques the practices and corruptions of the Communist Party and offers a scathing examination of its failed leadership at the critical juncture of post-Tebhaga and post-Partition. This critique is not one from outside of communist politics or from a position of anti-left; it is a critique articulated from within the communist culture of contemporary Bengal but from the vantage point of the lived experience of a gendered world and its history.

Swaralipi sees that the struggle to do away with the class divide—under the aegis of Communism—is itself scripted within a violently constructed split between the personal and the political. The novel articulates its political corrective as a critique against this split. This critique extends to several other analogous

divisions that the novel perceives in the script of available political resistance to bourgeois hegemony: between men and women, the private and the public, the personal and the political, the emotional and the rational, the inner and the outer, the home the world and, the village and the city. The astute analysis of the problem that cripples the Communist Party at this time is also built from this understanding that political leadership to shape a polity cannot start from the divided world where the political splits itself from the personal, where the world of politics cannot recognize the gendered space of home as also a political space, where the rational hegemonically controls the emotional, where the men marginalize the women, where the city supersedes the village, where the Party practices a top-down control of its workers, or where the urban workers feel superior and, ignoring local knowledge, dictate terms of conduct to the peasant comrades.

A larger critique of the Partition is anticipated in the questioning of these sets of divides. Through its portrayal of an everyday lived history and the spatial politics of this history, the novel examines the perceived and practised divisions and suggests that these divisions are imaginary, gendered, and hegemonic. The critique is constructed from the vantage point of the gendered lived experience of the everyday world. Partition is not the only divide that the novel comes face to face with. The gendered everyday world of bourgeois nation *and* the alternative possibilities that the novel encounters, which *could have* countered the divisive force of the Partition, are all threatened and damaged by many other painful inner divisions corresponding to the split between the personal and the political. The

refugee women in *Swaralipi* are key figures who straddle the variously ‘divided’ worlds—places and spaces—and question the validity of these divides themselves. The refugee men also conceive the violence of the Partition, but it is only from the gendered perspective of the refugee women that the limits and violence of the divided world are assessed. I argue that the novel attributes the violence of the divided world not only to historical nationalism, but also to the limits of oppositional alternatives to nationalism imagined through politics of communism/socialism.

The tenet of the particular critique *Swaralipi* offers, as some readers will recognize, is borne out of the same feminist politics that finds articulation in the later slogan ‘the personal is the political.’ Here, however, there is a suggestion of the reverse of the slogan, that the political is also personal. *Swaralipi* also uses a spatial politics of connecting the private and the public that is recognized as the central aim of feminism.² Dorothy Smith’s spatio-temporal concept of the ‘everyday world’ is also, as I have outlined in the Introduction, designed to bridge the gap between the two ‘domains’ of the private and the public, the personal and the political. The personal, here and in *Swaralipi*, is not reducible to liberal individualism but is imagined in relation to a collective.

We could think of *Swaralipi* or Sabitri Roy’s writing as feminist, but it bears noting that feminist liberation is not an explicitly articulated goal here. The political goal remains socialism. Tanika Sarkar has proposed the “somewhat

² As for instance, as I have cited before, Carol Pateman argues in *The Disorder of Women* that the “dichotomy between the private and the public” is what is crucial to “almost two centuries of feminist struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is all about” (118).

slippery, amorphous concept of the woman socialist or samajbadini as the distinguishing self-inscription of this woman novelist (“Foreword,” Harvest Song vi).”³ This provides a particularly useful rubric within which to understand Roy’s and *Swaralipi*’s politics. The lack of feminism as a political programme could be attributable to Roy’s personal position, a sign of her time, or the historical distrust of feminism by the left in general and the left in India in particular. Or, it could be attributed to the novel’s political imagination commitment to a collective life, where it has encountered the lack of feminist programme at the level of the state.⁴ However, the vision that allows *Swaralipi* to offer an astute assessment of the failing of organized socialism, indeed of all politics, is attributable to a feminist politics even if it is not articulated explicitly as such. The political vision is constructed from a conscious gendered position, from a lived experience of the gendered ‘everyday’ world, from a minutely observed—if at a remove, from the periphery—collective politics. The political-personal ethics which *Swaralipi* offers as a corrective to organized politics, the Communist Party in the immediate sense, to shape the collective is a profoundly useful and significant contribution.

Swaralipi is also an intervention into the signification of ‘women’ that it finds within the historical nationalist script. It alludes to Rabindranath Tagore’s political novels *Ghare Baire* (1916; *The Home and the World*, 1919) and *Char*

³ Where, Sarkar clarifies, “socialism” does not refer to “Party politics of the Socialist Party with which Roy’s novels have nothing to do.” Instead, “socialism” here is “a structure of sensibilities and values, as a passionate doctrine of egalitarianism and freedom of conscience” (“Foreword,” Harvest Song vi).

⁴ As I have cited in the Introduction, in Etienne Balibar’s formulation, “from an emancipatory stand point, *gender is not a community*” (emphasis in original; Balibar 67, cited in Sunder Rajan, *Scandal of the State* 14).

Adhyay (1934; *Four Chapters*, 1950) as texts in which to find the nationalist script *and* possible interventions within that script. In the previous two chapters, I have read how the Partition texts use myths to construct the historical-everyday and locate the myths as the narrative into which to intervene. In *Swaralipi*, in spite of the name of one of the most important characters being Sita, there is no extended evocation of this mythic allusion; we only hear of a few comments on the mythic connotation of Sita's name in passing. In comparison to the use of the mythic by texts in the previous two chapters, *Swaralipi* takes the two novels of Tagore as the scripts to intervene into, critique, and rewrite. Here, as the mythical was earlier, the textual world of Tagore's novels constitutes the 'historical.'

The allusions to Tagore's novels do not work in simple ways to set up a binary opposition between *Swaralipi* and the former. Tagore's two novels, while unmistakably 'bourgeois,' are also rich critiques of nationalism.⁵ In so far that *Swaralipi* chooses these critiques as a point of departure—advancing their ethical positions in some ways but also pointing to their limits in others—we can think of *Swaralipi* as *a critique of a critique*. In *Swaralipi*, these two novels of Tagore become a frame of reference that is both agonistic and antagonistic. Both these set of references are used in *Swaralipi* to construct a critical commentary on the Communist Party and its culture, in which the novel is deeply invested, and also to re-imagine the role of women in the political world/world of politics.

⁵ In his *Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*, Ashish Nandy reads the two novels together along with the remaining one of the three explicitly political novels of Tagore, *Gora* (1910), as a composite and consistent critique of nationalism itself. Anchoring his reading on Tagore's essay in English, "Nationalism in India" (1917), which he gave as lectures in his international tour, Nandy reads a renouncing of nationalism in favour of both universal humanism and local pluralism.

On the one hand, *Swaralipi* cites, as a historical caution, the critique of nationalism, of the violence of terrorism, and of the exploitation of impressionable idealistic youth by corrupt power-hungry leadership that is present in both the earlier novels. *Swaralipi* also cites the critique of the Hindu bias of the nationalist imagination that is in *Ghare Baire*. It finds the Communist Party, at the historical moment, guilty of the same mindless embrace of violence, corruptions of its leadership, and victimization of its youth that Tagore's novels specifically critique in his contemporary political extremism and revolutionary terrorism. The culpability of the Party in this regard is particularly bitter because to *Swaralipi* it is the only organized viable political alternative to bourgeois nationalism which legitimizes the newly independent state. As a manifestation of its fundamental failure, the novel indicts the Party as also powerless against the communalization of people in Bengal and for ultimately giving in to the Partition.

On the other hand, *Swaralipi* rejects the gender politics of these earlier novels. Both these novels agonize over the entry of women into public politics and, finally, suggest such entry to be catastrophic not only for the women themselves but also, more damagingly, for the very collective for whose benefit the women embrace politics. *Swaralipi* wants to rewrite this particular gendered script even while it borrows a critique of nationalism and corruption within organized politics from these earlier novels. In comparison, *Swaralipi* painstakingly and painfully shows, neither has the Communist Party nor the Communist culture allowed a different modality of imagination around the issue of women's sexuality and of gender. The fundamental gender inequality that

constituted mainstream nationalism *and* its critique in Tagore's novels also live robustly in the Party. The collapse of the Party policy and political culture into the same marginalization of women prompts *Swaralipi* to form a critique of the progress and egalitarian vision that the Communist Party espouses.

The most important intervention *Swaralipi* makes is into the spatial politics of nationalism and the construction of women within this restrictive spatial politics that Tagore's novels condone and political culture of the Communist Party never questions. As I have elaborated upon in the first chapter, the home and the world divide is central to the distinction between inside and outside—*ghar/andar* and *bahir*—in the nationalist imagination as Partha Chatterjee's thesis construes. Tanika Sarkar rejoins that the binary is untenable and alternatively suggests that in nationalist imagination home is an embryonic nation. Whichever way we look at the construction of home, it becomes amply apparent that there is a political alignment of home with the nation, on the one hand, and of women with both the home and the nation, on the other. However, in the anti-colonial nationalist imagination, while home itself had become the site of the nation, such imagination did not lead to the space of home being politicized. In fact, we see a reverse attempt. The division and *difference* between the home and the world became acutely critical to imagine and maintain. *Swaralipi* intervenes into the cultural desire to construct and protect home as an apolitical space and attempts to politicize it. In this last endeavour, the novel also goes against the tacit gendered presumptions of the Communist Party.

Swaralipi, through its critique of the split between the divisions of personal and the political, is a gendered critique of the place of women (and the analogous values ‘women’ metaphorically represents—the emotional, the private, the homely) in *all* forms of collective politics historically possible at the time: both nationalist politics and what it seems to the novel its radical alternative, socialism. I suggest that Roy develops an idiom of disillusionment to formulate a kind of critique of the ubiquitous failure of gender equality in organized politics.

However, I will also argue that *Swaralipi* is more than just a critique and rises above the idiom of disillusionment. The Bengali title ‘Swaralipi’ means musical notations. The word ‘Swaralipi’ is made up of two words ‘Swara’ and ‘lipi.’ The word ‘swara’ primarily means scales here, but it also means sound or voice. It is also related to the word “Swa’ which means ‘self’ or ‘of self.’ ‘Lipi’ means both script and inscription. The suggestion implicit in the title “Swaralipi” is that the novel is an endeavour to compose an inscription of selfhood that is new. I find this particularly apt keeping in mind the attempt of the novel to also compose a new political subjectivity for women. *Swaralipi*’s looking back to Tagore’s novels as a point of departure, especially in regards to their recounting of the possibility and consequence of women’s participation in politics, is what specifically interests this chapter. The stake here is imagining a form of female subjectivity in relation to the collective that also incorporates the political and the imagination of women as parts of the collective in such a way that the signifier ‘women’ becomes a metonym as opposed to a metaphor.

Swaralipi is also, as its title suggests, an attempt to rewrite the notations so that new and different creative political possibilities relating the collective imagination and practice can emerge. It strives to construct a worldview and a living practice that do not fall back on the imaginary divisions they critique. As alternatives to the pervasive divides, the novel attempts to compose a way of living in which there is no disjunction between personal and political ethics. In this way of living, the question of ethics has to be taken up in negotiation with both the personal and the political. This particularly feminist politics, the novel suggests, is relevant to not only struggles to give shape to a collective but also to bring equality in a class-caste-religion divided and a gendered world. Beyond this, the novel is not a doctrinal blueprint for political success. Face to face as it brings us against a particularly bleak time in the history of collective struggles and against a series of political betrayals, it is not easy for us to tell if what it offers is hope or merely a strategic gesture of hope.

The reading I offer here starts with a discussion of the two novels of Tagore that serve as the point of departure for *Swaralipi*. It is illuminating to read *Swaralipi* comparatively with Tagore's novels; therefore I have discussed Tagore's novels in some detail. These are followed by two other sections: the first is on the critique the novel offers on the constructs of a divide between the personal and the political and its analogous home and the world and its attempt to construct home as a political space. The second is the novel's attempt to construct a form of ethics that conjoins the personal and the political. This latter section also reads the novel as an attempt to construct a political subjectivity for women

and an idiom of belonging that allows for participation in the politics of the collective. Before these sections, however, as I have done in the previous two chapters, I start with a section on the author and the remarkable text. In this section, I include a brief overview of *Swaralipi* and its characters to aid the discussion.

I

***Swaralipi* and Sabitri Roy**

The publication of *Swaralipi* (The Notations; 1952) marginalized Sabitri Roy early in her career. The novel offered a trenchant critique of the contemporary Communist Party from a gendered insider's position for the failure of its political leadership, wrong-headed doctrines, and corruption. It must have created an uproar in the Communist Party and among many communists associated with the party, who, we can imagine, constituted the primary readership and community within which Roy placed her novel. We do know that three months after its publication, in December 1952, Roy got a notice with the following words (in English): "The Central Committee of the Communist Party of India directs that no book written by the authoress of *SWARALIPi* should be advertised by our party journals until she unconditionally express regret for writing the book" (Notice in English; Sudakshina Ghosh 8; Bengali). Her husband Santimoy Roy, an active member of the Party, was suspended.

The available details on the novel do not specify when this suspension was lifted from her husband or if Sabitri Roy ever did offer the demanded apology. It

seems, however, that she did not even though she was heartbroken with this outcome. In a personal letter, she wrote with “deep disappointment that this book, on which she had spent so much of her craft, will simply be used to make *thongas* or paper bags to pack groceries!” (Bagchi and Dasgupta 9). For all effective purposes, this ban made her novel disappear from circulation. There were no new editions of the novel until Sujit Ghosh edited one forty years later.

Sabitri Roy was born in East-Bengal 1928 to Naliniranjan and Sarajubala Sen.⁶ Her home was in the village of Palang in Fairdpur district. There was no school for girls in her village, so her primary education was in the boys school in the neighbouring village of Upashi. She came to Calcutta before the Partition to do her Bachelor of Arts in Bethune College and a further Bachelor of Education (B.T.—Bachelor of Teaching—in those days) from Calcutta University. She worked as a schoolteacher in East Bengal and Calcutta for several years.

While socialism was the most important political philosophy with which Roy affiliated, through her life she also came into contact with several opposing political ideologies. Her father was an activist, working for female education and village reform. Her brother Debaprasad Sen was a revolutionary-terrorist in the anti-colonial movement. She married Santimoy Roy, who was at the time also a revolutionary terrorist and a friend of Debaprasad from their prison days together, in 1940. Later, Santimoy Roy became a communist. As Tanika Sarkar writes, Roy

⁶ All biographical details presented in this discussion are gathered from Roy’s daughter, Gargi Chakravarty’s brief sketch, “Byaktimanush Sabitri Ray;” (Sabitri Roy as a Person; Bengali), Sujit Ghosh’s introduction to his edited volume of *Swaralipi*, published in 1992 (“Bhumika;” Bengali), and Sudakshina Ghosh’s introductory essay to the first volume of Granthalay’s collected works of Ray “Sabitri Ray er Uponyas: Byatha ar Buddhir Sammilan” (Sabitri Ray’s Novels: An amalgamation of Pain and Intellect; Bengali) .

had lifelong exchanges with multiple political formations. She grew up in the middle of heady anti-colonial civil disobedience movements that Gandhi led, she had close relations with revolutionary terrorists within her own family, some of whom later followed Subhash Chandra Bose's political trajectory of a war against British imperialism with Japanese aid. She chose to marry a communist who had moved away from a life of the revolutionary terrorist and who spurned the dedication to Bose's path that several member of her own family espoused. She worked her way through these difficult choices, retaining from each certain conviction, and valuing each as she distanced herself from almost all of them. Her own preference, ultimately, lay closer to the path of communism, particularly to the struggles that they had initiated. ("Foreword," *Harvest Song* vii)

However, through all of this difficult sorting through, Roy remained non-complacent and critical, a "true Marxist in the way she understood the true ineffability of contradictions" (ibid. viii). In the end, Sabitri Roy was an insider-observer of the communist culture in Bengal, belonging to what we may call a 'communist family,' and she largely shared the political philosophy of the party. However, she was never a card-carrying member herself; her relationship to the organized left and the Communist Party always remained difficult as reflected in *Swaralipi* and its reception by the Party.

Roy started writing early in her life. The first hand-written notebook of her poetry got lost in a police search—in connection with her revolutionary-terrorist brother—of their home. Her first novel *Srijan* (Creation) was published in 1946.

In 1952, she published *Swaralipi*, her third novel, and a collection of short stories. Despite the set back with *Swaralipi*, she did not stop writing and went on to pen nine more novels (two titles were trilogies and one title was in two parts). Her last novel, *Badwip* (The Delta) was published in 1972 along with a collection of stories for children. Later, in 1980, a collection of her personal letters to her grandchild came out. However, between 1972 and her death in 1985, Roy did not write anything.

In Roy's daughter Gargi Chakravartty's sketch, her mother felt loneliness and pain about not being able to write in the last years ("Byaktimanush" 16; Bengali). Indeed, Tanika Sarkar, the historian and a close family-friend of hers, writes, "all her life, Roy suffered from acute ill health which made her a nervous and excessively sensitive person, and which also added a delicate and strained note, a quivering tremulousness to her prose. Her frail body and limited movement made her introspective, even brooding" ("Foreword," *Harvest Song* viii). Her ill health and the duties of motherhood prevented her from continuing her career as a schoolteacher. It appears that she suffered from guilt about not working. Her work as a writer did not seem to alleviate her anxiety about this until she met a well-known male writer who assured her that writing was a legitimate occupation ("Byaktimanush" 15; Bengali).

Yet, as we can see, the writer Roy never received the kind of acceptance that she must have hoped for. Like Ritwik Ghatak, Roy was also marginalized by her contemporary readership. Unlike Ritwik Ghatak, however, she still remains a largely obscure figure. Only very recently, has there been a surge in interest in

Roy. We are now beginning to value her writing on the turbulent 1940s in Bengal and recuperate her as the first woman to write explicitly political novels in Bengali; along with Sulekha Sanyal, critics now place Roy at the start of a political literary tradition of women's writing in Bengali to which Mahasweta Devi would later belong. Roy's two novels explicitly dealing with the Partition—*Swaralipi* (The Notations; 1952) and *Badwip* (The Delta; 1972)—are now being recognized as not only topical, but rewarding critical novels that allow us to enter the complexity of the Bengal Partition, especially in terms of the connection of the Partition to the history of the organized left in Bengal. The editors of *The Trauma and the Triumph* (2003) refer to Roy's writing in their Introduction, indicating its significance in the context of engaging with the Partition of Bengal.

In 2005, a prominent Calcutta publisher, Granthalay, started to publish Roy's collected works. The first two volumes have already appeared while two more volumes are awaited. There has been a handful of other initiatives: in 1999, the School of Women's Studies of Jadavpur University along with Dey's Publication brought out an edition titled, *Sabitri Rayer Nirbachita Rachana Sankalan* (Selected Writing of Sabitri Roy) comprising of two of her earlier published collections, one of short stories and the other of letters written to her grandson. In 2006, Stree Publications of Calcutta published *Harvest Song: A Novel on the Tebhaga Movement*, an English translation of her most-well known trilogy *Paka Dhaner Gan* (1956-58).

However, if my own experience of finding her novels in 2004-05 is anything to go by, until these very recent publication ventures and surge in

interest in her, Sabitri Roy had all but disappeared from the book shelves of libraries and book shops and, indeed, from the literary memory of the reading public excepting a small, select group. Like the paucity of the editions of Roy's writing in circulation, there is also very little critical commentary on her work that I could find. We can only speculate as to why she remained marginal in the literary market place and gradually disappeared from it when she had written a sizeable volume of work, which holds much interest for us today. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that she was writing for a small, select readership. The banning of *Swaralipi* early in her career by the Communist Party to some extent marginalized her within the very community who would have constituted her primary and immediate readership; although, the fact that the trilogy *Paka Dhaner Gaan (Harvest Song)* following four years later became well-known among the same readership and the work the author came to be known by somewhat complicates this speculation. Perhaps, then, their churning of immediate tumultuous times as contemporary history, their women-centric sensibility, and their direct references to the Partition all contributed to their marginality. Yet, I imagine these very aspects of her work interest many, including me, today.

Swaralipi is set against, and is a response to, the turbulent two years following the Partition/Independence. The time span of the novel closely corresponds to late February 1948 to the Summer of 1950. The setting of the novel is the history of the undivided Communist Party of India during these years

and the contemporary historical-political events in Bengal.⁷ Writing on another earlier novel of Roy, a critic has commented, “there is [neither a] hero [or] heroine, nor a plot. The masses, I take it, have been presented as the substitute for the former and history for the latter.”⁸ This is largely true for all of Roy’s novels and also for *Swaralipi* to some extent. *Swaralipi* is episodic and epic in nature, with the narrative moving from Calcutta to East Bengal either through flashback or through characters travelling to East Bengal. The events of the novel constantly

⁷ I am in disagreement with Sujit Ghosh, who in the introduction to his edited volume of *Swaralipi*, published in 1992, writes that years 1946-51 are the setting of the novel (iii; Bengali).

The political event the opening of the novel refers to is a shift in leadership of the Communist Party to an ultra left position: this very likely corresponds to the historical replacement of the expelled, more centrist, leader P. C. Joshi by the hardliner, militant B.T. Ranadive as the general secretary of the Party during the Calcutta congress of the Party from February 28 to March 6, 1948. The novel also incorporates in its plot the banning of the Communist Party in India soon after.

I find explicit mention in the text that the time the novel spans is two years. Towards the beginning of the novel, what appears the very day the novel opens, we find Prithvi sitting under a *Shishu* tree in late winter, with a thin fog hanging (316). Towards the end of the novel, he sits in the same spot on a hot April day and remembers the day “two years back” when he had sat under the same tree (548). Historically, April 1950 is when Ranadive’s views are first discredited.

Joya Chatterji calls this a period of “doctrinal confusion” in CPI (*The Spoils* 278). She explains, Ranadive’s group backed the ‘Zhadanov’ line of armed insurrection against the ‘bourgeois-landlord’ state. A year later in June, 1949, the Soviets presented the CPI leaders with an impossible dilemma by requiring that the revolution in independent India ‘be anti-imperialist and not anti-capitalist’. To pile chaos on mountain of confusion, Moscow now ordered the CPI to follow the Chinese path to revolution. By 1950, Ranadive’s strategy of revolutionary insurrection had been discredited. In 1951, Ajoy Ghosh led the party back to constitutional communism, proclaiming its support for a broad democratic alliance with other left-wing parties, to challenge the Congress at the polls.

The latter date may have given Sujit Ghosh the outer cut-off year as 1951, but there is no indication of the CPI going to votes at the end of *Swaralipi*. In any case, I have already cited the textual evidence that suggests a time span of two years.

Moinak Biswas describes the city of Calcutta in these years as the time when “Calcutta became the city of *michhils*, political processions and rallies. [...] There were literally hundreds of these between 1945 and 1950. [...] The first workers strike (and the police attack on it) in West Bengal came only eight weeks after independence (“The City” 56).

⁸ Critic’s name not known; in English. Included in *Sabitri Roy Rachana Samagra* Volume 1, edited by Sumita Samanta, 561.

move from the city to the countryside and involve the various intertwined but distinct histories of the Communist Party politics, Tebhaga in rural Bengal, the aftermath of the Partition, the refugees in newly formed refugee colonies in Calcutta, and the police repression of the Tebhaga workers and Communists all over Bengal along with police firing in the squatter colonies of the refugees. The characters in the novel are too numerous to list: they are drawn from almost all social classes and from the urban and the rural places. The communists—Party workers drawn from both the middle-classes and the peasants—occupy a prominent place in the novel: Prithvi, Rathi, Phalgu, Nikhilesh, Parswanath among the men, Sumitra, Sagari, Parvati, Kuri, Radha among the women.

At the emotional centre of the novel, however, lies Sita. Resembling the author Roy in some aspects, Sita is a schoolteacher, a refugee woman, and deeply involved with the Communist Party without being a card-carrying member. Her relationship with Prithvi, a communist and a writer, forms the emotional core of the novel. The other important characters in the novel—all communists—are related to Sita and Prithvi. Phalgu is Sita's brother. Kuri is Prithvi's sister. Rathi is a close friend of Prithvi; Sagari is Rathi's wife. Sita is now a widow with a young daughter, Mithu and lives with her mother-in-law, Menaka, also a widow. Although her household is poor, depending exclusively on the meagre salary Sita draws from her school, her dead husband, Debajyoti, belonged to an erstwhile zamindar family from East Bengal. Sita's parents, Pramila and Bisweswar, live in the refugee colony and befriend other refugees, old Kshetramani, Tulsi, and Tulsi's wife among others.

II

The Point of Departure: Tagore's *Ghare Baire* and *Char Adhyay*

Historically, at some point early in the twentieth century, women had entered the public anti-colonial struggle. In Bengal, this started with the Swadeshi; later, in all of India, including in Bengal, non-elite women also came forward to participate in nationalist struggle under Gandhi's leadership. As I have suggested in Chapter 1, since nationalist discourse primarily appropriated 'women' as a sign, a metaphor, for the nation and not as subjects, certainly not subject-agents, this particular entry into participation posed acute tension within that discursive system. It was Rabindranath Tagore's political novel *Ghare Baire* (1915; *The Home and the World*)⁹ that sensed the crisis, in the duality of women as both signs and subjects in a political space, that had erupted and was soon going to increase in amplitude with the entry of women in public/politics. At the core of the tension was the boundary that held 'home' as a gendered space as much as the question of sexuality. Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*) acutely dramatizes the tension around the character of Bimala. In his last novel, *Char*

⁹ *Ghare Baire* was first serially published in 1915 in Pramatha Chaudhury's *avant garde* journal *Shabuj Patra* (Green Leaf). It came out as a book a year later. Its English translation, *The Home and the World*, appeared in 1919. It had been serialized from December 1918 as *At Home and Outside* in *The Modern Review* (Datta, "Introduction" 9). The translation was claimed to be done by Surendranath Tagore and to be author-revised. Later scholarship however shows that Rabindranath had not only revised the translation but translated a significant part of the text himself (Datta 10). Although the novel drew vituperative criticism from its contemporary audience, there was a turn of tide in opinion from 1930s, spearheaded by the Kallol group of writers (Jayanti Chattopadhyay 187-204). From this point onwards, *Ghare Baire* starts to become canonical. The text became important again in public memory when Satyajit Ray made it into a film in 1983. In recent times, the English translation—which really is a significantly different text than the Bengali original and a self-standing novel in English in its own right—has become fairly well known to a wide academic international audience.

Adhyay (1934; *Four Chapters*),¹⁰ Tagore presents the insertion of women in politics, in the character of Ela, as no longer just a source of tension but a *fait accompli* disaster.

Ghare Baire, first published in 1915, is set in the height of the Swadeshi movement, 1905-08, after the first Partition of Bengal. It is a scathing critical assessment and, ultimately, a rejection of extremist nationalist politics. The novel presents a repulsive face of extremist political idiom, the roots of which goes back to Bankim's *Anandamath*, and shows such extremism at the heart of the Swadeshi nationalist movement—within which, let us remember, Tagore himself was a key player until he dissociated himself from the movement after the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1906-07. More than in *Ghare Baire*, however, what we find in *Char Adhyay* is a virulent rejection of terrorism as a political mean towards nationalism. *Char Adhyay* was written and published in 1934 and is set against its contemporary milieu. In her essay “Bengali Middle-Class Nationalism and Literature: A Study of Saratchandra's *Pather Dabi* and Rabindranath's *Char Adhyav*,” Tanika Sarkar describes this as a time when, “the political situation in Bengal had changed in several crucial directions. Vastly-intensified official repression during 1932-34 had already exerted an ultimately crippling effect on

¹⁰ The English translation, *Four Chapters*, was first published in 1950. A new translation by Rimli Bhattacharya, also called *Four Chapters*, has appeared in 1992. Tanika Sarkar describes the novel as “one of [Tagore's] poorest productions—a brief, hurriedly-written piece [...]. The exceptional failure of his literary genius lies in the fact that it is more an indictment message than a novel, a polemic that he had to hastily convey through an acceptable literary form” (Tanika Sarkar, “Bengali Middle-Class Nationalism” 456). Thus, if it was understandably ill-received by his contemporary audience, but perhaps not merely for its ideology. Tanika Sarkar points out that *Char Adhyay* “carries echoes” not only from *Ghare Baire* but also a “more recent and more influential novel on terrorism—Saratchandra's *Pather Dabi*” (456-57). *Pather Dabi* (1926; *The Demand of the Road*) was a novel where the very popular novelist Saratchandra Chattopadhyay had presented a fantastic revolutionary-terrorist leader and a glamorous face to his ideology. As Sarkar's essay shows, *Char Adhyay* almost certainly alludes to and critiques this novel.

the organized second phase of Civil Disobedience movement” (455). More significantly, after more than a decade of strong support, “Hindu middle class support and sympathy that had provided both the breeding ground and the shelter for terrorist youth was at last broken” (ibid. 456).

However, even accounting for the fact that the novel is perhaps a “symptom of the loss of middle-class sympathy,” Sarkar remarks that “the violence and bitterness of tone are astonishing” (458). She notes that “the picture is of unmitigated gloom and disgust: all the romance, excitement and heroism of a band of hunted young men and women who at that moment were baffling and terrifying the might of the Government seemed to have passed Rabindranath by” (459). When we also take into account his “ringing protests against shootings in jail and the occasional expression of empathy with terrorist sufferings,” we can probably see both these as the “manifestation of a distressed Liberal conscience that deplores violence and intolerance on both sides with impartial and equal vigour” (ibid.) Nevertheless, Sarkar contends, this alone does not explain the “venom” in *Char Adhyay* (ibid.). Rather than just with politics of nationalism or repudiation of violence alone, Sarkar suspects, it has to do with Tagore’s view of women in politics.

While Tagore grew more radical on his views of nationalism and polity as he grew older, we see an almost reverse trajectory of his views of women in politics. This is best demonstrable through, among other things, his relationship to his Bankim-legacy. This is clear if we juxtapose *Anandamath* against *Ghare Baire*. As Jasodhara Bagchi shows in her essay “*Anandamath* and the *Home and*

the World: Positivism Reconfigured,” there is a clear case for “what Harold Bloom calls ‘anxiety of influence’” (181) of the former. On ideas of what constitutes polity or what is ethical political duty, Tagore had intervened forcefully against reactionary ideas in Bankim. With representation of women, however, there is a more curious relationship. Bagchi’s analysis notes that “Bankim subscribed to the refined Victorian ideal of womanhood which possessed two faces—one, the partner in marriage conceived as *sahadharmini* [well-matched, dutiful wife] and its other, the temptress” (181). In *Ghare Baire*’s Bimala, on the one hand, Tagore had taken away the mobility of the good-wife Shanti in *Anandamath*, who “belongs naturally to the world outside, in the forest” (Bagchi 179). Also, Bimala is not allowed the sanctioned-militancy of Shanti. As Bagchi writes, “the heroic struggle to liberate the motherland provides an outlet for Shanti’s unusual energy. [...] British soldiers are no match for her: Shanti unhorses Ensign Lindley and rides away on his horse!” (179-80). On the other hand, politically inclined Bimala in Tagore is a version of the temptress figure in Bankim. Ela of Tagore’s *Char Adhyay* also has a similar Bankim ring. In Bankim’s domestic novel *Bishbrikshya* (The Poison Tree), the sexuality of an orphan, unmarried, young woman had caused havoc when she was inserted into the domestic space of a family. Kundanandini, the unattached woman of *Bishbrikshya*, has to kill herself out of remorse at the end. Tagore transports the threat of unbridled sexuality of a woman to a political plot. The revolutionary-terrorist leader Indranath chooses the orphan, single Ela not just for her brilliance but also for her unattached sexuality. She is inserted in the political space to

create havoc. She does this, in spite of herself, trapping her future lover Atin in a spiral of violence and betrayal of what Atin describes as his sense of self. In the end, she also has to die: Atin is sent on the political mission to kill her. When she realizes the purpose of his visit, she embraces her impending death in Atin's hands, seeing it in erotic terms. The novel ends with Ela willingly going to her death.

“In matters about dignity of women,” Tanika Sarkar suggests, “Tagore was often much in advance of his times. But his concept of women's integrity had very definite bounds [... he believed in] her essential femininity. [...] Angry militant political involvement does not go with attributes of that concept” (459). He struggled with the idea of women in politics in face of the idea already turning to reality in his lived time. As Indrani Mitra astutely observes,

Tagore had been preoccupied with this question since his previous novel *Gora* (1910), and he was to resolve it in an unequivocal espousal of a traditional role for women in his later work *Char Adhyay* (1934). Bimala [of *Ghare Baire*] marks the transitional moment when Tagore's faith in the happy synthesis of private virtue and public life that characterized Suchorita, the heroine of *Gora*, had been shaken along with the breakdown of the humanist political ideal he had explored in the earlier work. (254)

Even *Ghare Baire*, which has a much more ambiguous relationship to the issue of public/political women, depicts the damage done when the politics of the world outside enters the home finding a conduit through women. Bimala is both blamed

and punished for the catastrophic end. In Sangeeta Ray's reading of the novel, "it is Bimala who is denounced by her sister-in-law as 'cannibalistic' and therefore ultimately held responsible for the tragedy that befalls her husband, Nikhilesh, and the household in general" (100). Indrani Mitra notes the end of the novel to observe that it is only Bimala who "is left with her burden of sin, awaiting judgment. Bimala's own conviction of her guilt would be judgment enough, but her designated punishment in the text is more severe: the boy Amulya (Bimala's adopted "little brother") is shot through the heart, and Nikhilesh is critically, perhaps mortally, wounded" (254).

Both Ray and Mitra point to Bimala's sexuality as both the source and the site of guilt and punishment. Ray argues that in the above indictment of the sister-in-law for Bimala's actions, "nationalism is not only gendered but sexualized, and it is in the imaginings of nationalism as a devouring female that Tagore's critique is rendered shrilly censorious" (100). Mitra puts her finger on the pulse of the problem when she writes that, with Bimala, Tagore was face to face with the "possibility that essential female nature (perhaps human nature) is a potent and destructive sexuality" (254) and that "what remains unnamed in [the novel] is the dangerous truth the text must forcibly repress. The highly troubled question that the novel seems to confront is not *how* Bimala can be liberated, but *if* she can be liberated without dismantling the fundamental structures of society" (ibid.).

In a departure from these characteristic feminist readings of *Ghare Baire*, to which she says she herself would have contributed unequivocally earlier in her career, Tanika Sarkar's essay on *Ghare Baire*, "Many Faces of Love: Country,

Woman and God in The Home and the World,” takes note of Bimala’s character, her autonomy, and her politics to emphasize that Bimala is already interested in nationalist politics before she meets her seducer, the Swadeshi leader, Sandeep. It is her political belief, to which her husband does not agree, that draws her to Sandeep, not the other way around. What eventually repulses her about Sandeep is the discovery of his unscrupulousness and political duplicity, not her marital duties or sexual morality. I also argue, along this line, that Bimala is political minded—whether her political views are mistaken or superficial by standards of her husband, Nikhilesh, of the author, or of the reader is beside the point. Like Tanika Sarkar, P.K. Datta has arrived at a reading of the novel that would complicate a straightforward reading of *Ghare Baire* as a compromised text in its depiction of Bimala. Especially compared to the radical wife Mrinal of Tagore’s short story “Streer Patra” (Wife’s Letter), who rejects her husband and domesticity, Datta reads that it is Bimala not her author who fails to make a radical choice (Introduction 15-16). He argues, “Bimala’s character is founded on the possibility that the capacity of choice in women may not necessarily lead to a radical critique of traditional social beliefs” (15). Given that *Ghare Baire* appeared in the *avant garde* journal *Shabuj Patra* in the same period with several other stories which critiqued the contemporary state of conjugality, especially “Streer Patra,” the comparison is certainly instructive.¹¹

In her reading of *Char Adhyay*, Tanika Sarkar has commented, as I have quoted above, on the nature of Tagore’s problem with women in politics. Therein

¹¹ Sumit Sarkar’s essay “Nationalism and ‘Stri-Swadhinata’: The Contexts and Meanings of Rabindranath’s *Ghare-Baire*” is also a persuasive reading along these lines.

lies a big hint to our understanding of Bimala. Thus, it is I think instructive to not only juxtapose Bimala to Mrinal but also to Sucharita of *Gora* and Ela of *Char Adhyay* as Indrani Mitra has done. These latter connections illuminate just what is particularly troubling about Bimala for Tagore. Therefore, I think the difference between Bimala and Mrinal does not entirely lie in their respective characteristic difficulty and ease in radically leaving domesticity and its confinements. Their difference also lies in the fact that Bimala, unlike Mrinal, seeks her freedom and expresses her sexuality in a *political* space and idiom. Bimala's resistance to gentle-loving disciplining by her husband so that she can be freer within conjugality is not her only failure. At the end of the novel, in fact, Nikhilesh realizes that he has been wrong in expecting that his wife will be free in the way *he* wanted her to be. Here, he shares Bimala's failure to some extent. However, it is her wilful insertion of herself in the political world that, in my understanding, Tagore finds more disruptive and it is what is finally damning for her. Keeping in mind Ela of *Char Adhyay*, we could say that Bimala's entry into politics is always-already doomed: Tagore could hardly allow her the 'correct' political views that he allows Nikhilesh. Paradoxically, then, it is in her interest in politics that Bimala has a radical potential, exceeding as it does the authorial design of Tagore.

III

The Home and the World

As it is, both Bimala and Ela are significant to *Swaralipi* as it is deeply engaged with the question of women in politics. It is instructive to compare Sita and Sagari, two prominent female characters of *Swaralipi*, against Bimala and Ela respectively. Sita, a widow of a feudal family, encounters politics ‘at home’ like Bimala does.¹² Sagari, a political worker of the Communist Party, married to a comrade and then estranged from him, is located in the world of politics as Ela is. I do not suggest Sita is a later-day Bimala or that Sagari a reincarnation of Ela. As characters these are all different: for example, Sita does not share the indignation with which Bimala views the poor and the weak; Sita, a socialist at heart, is deeply class-conscious. Even the concept of Bimala’s freedom, circumscribed as it is within elite individualism, is of little interest to Sita’s politics. Instead, there is a commentary and rewriting in *Swaralipi* of the political-personal possibilities of women as desiring-agents in private-public domains that is signalled by these earlier characters. There are very significant continuations and discontinuities between Tagore’s understanding of these two situations and Sabitri Roy’s. I trace some of these in this section. I argue that the most significant intervention that

¹² It is perhaps not gratuitous that the central character of *Swaralipi* is called Sita. The obvious mythic suggestions of that name bear no commentary in the novel except at the very end where Sita is ‘abducted’ by the police (I will comment on this later). It is also possibly significant that Bimala has been likened to the mythic character Sita from the epic *Ramayana* and her seducer Sandeep to Ravana, the abductor of Sita and the demon-king of the epic. For example, Jasodhara Bagchi writes, that Bimala is “presented as something of a Sita although for the modern Sita, abduction belongs to the region of mind and passion. In a matching move, Sandip is presented as a modern Ravan—a man motivated by crude materialism, a later-day Darwinian who however regrets not going one better on Ravan. Like the Sita of the epic, Bimala has to go through a fire ordeal in her mind” (“Positivism Reconfigured” 185).

Roy offers to Tagore's imagination of women in politics is that it radically questions the divide between home and the world as spaces, that is so critical to Tagore's novels, and therefore the private and the public and the personal and the political.

Ghare Baire shows the tension inherent in maintaining the two exclusive spaces, home and the world, and women's mobility from home to the outside. Of course, as many other commentators have pointed out, Bimala never actually comes out to the world. The novel ends in a tragedy on the eve of her departure to Calcutta. In effect, if she leaves 'home' as a space, it is by entering the library and drawing room of their feudal household where she had met men not related to her—Sandeep and Amulya. Instead, what is pressingly clear is that the violence in the novel results from the politics of the outer world entering the space of home, the intimate space of the couple's bedroom. In other words, the violence that is held responsible for the tragic outcome in *Ghare Baire* is when the boundaries of the home and the world are violated. Bimala is the conduit through which this happens, and as I have contended above, she is held responsible for the destruction that follows.

Swaralipi situates itself into this gendered relationship of home and its outside/the world in a different paradigm. It shows that such neat division is an exclusive privilege that has never been available to the urban or to the rural poor. Under the upheaval of the Partition the boundaries, however, the imagined line between the home and the world *even* in bhadrak homes become impossible to maintain. The upheaval also makes visible that even under the regime of the

everyday, the neat exclusion of home as an apolitical space has always been imaginary as much as it is imagined.

The novel disrupts the legitimacy of the home and the world divide in multiple ways. One way it does this is by portraying the everyday home, not as a sanctified, pristine space, but as a particularly fraught political one, where relationships are already scripted in a language of power. This is particularly palpable in Sita's household with her widowed mother-in-law Menaka and her daughter Mithu. Here, the feudal-patriarchal rubric that holds it in place is under scrutiny since before the Partition, giving us no chance to read the *corruption* of an earlier, pure home space by a catastrophic political event. Home, the novel shows, is not a static place, but one that is undergoing historical change. The dynamics of her in-law's feudal household, as we see in Sita's flashbacks, point out that the household has always been written within a system of power. After the Partition and Sita's widowhood, the novel presents a close observation of this all-women household run by the two widows. The observation suggests that this household is not only not exempt from the rules but also reels under the powerful onslaught of feudal-patriarchy. It is this rubric of power that holds and determines Sita's relationship with Menaka. It is only at the end of the novel, that Sita and a dying Menaka can reach a point where they can come out of their vituperative in-law relationship and relate to each other as human beings. Not as not-gendered human beings—nursing Menaka, Sita feels as though she were “a mother to an ailing child” (511)—but outside the dictates of patriarchal or feudal roles and duties.

For the length of the novel, however, their relationship and their household is firmly within a rubric of power that can only be described in a language belonging to the world outside. Sita feels that “stricter than the international laws are rules that govern the domestic life” (341). Later, Prithvi laughingly describes Sita’s skills in domestic politics as comparable to that of “Patel Saheb,” the leader of rightist factions within the Congress and home minister under Nehru’s ministry. To this, Sita responds, “Why should I not be? I have been politicking in the domestic world for six years. Today in household after household there are duels being fought between Feudalism, semi-Feudalism, Individualism and Egalitarianism” (357).

To *Swaralipi*, it is a major limitation of the world of politics that it sometimes forgets, sometimes ignores, and always marginalizes the gendered space of home. The communist worker Phalgu visiting his home village reflects “amidst the vast spread of revolutionary activities, in a momentary respite, never has he thought about how Paran’s elder sister, Mana’s grandmother, Annada-didi spend every day of their lives in the lonely shade of their homestead in the deserted country” (369). In her daily struggle within the patriarchal-feudal household and its norms, Sita protests in her private thoughts, addressed to her political-worker brother, “in your world of big events, the significance of these small petty details of the domestic life is perhaps smaller than even an atom. But, in my great hopes from the spirit of humanism, I cannot ignore the pettiness, the narrowness of the minds of householders” (389). With some indulgence, but with deep pain she realizes that her brother Phalgu and his comrades “do not know,

cannot even begin to find out the deep ugliness that is hidden in every household of this great city, even in the loving-home of his sister” (391). The kind of politics that emerges in *Swaralipi* is where the personal is the political and it is the small events, which get sidelined in the world of politics, that claim a place within a spectrum of possible points of intervention.

This is especially so because it is not as though that the outer world of politics really stays outside. The novel disrupts the boundaries of the home and the world by narrating situations wherein the big events and struggles for collectives find place within the premise of home amidst domestic gendered labour, making the political also deeply personal. The novel tells the story, among others, of the peasant, Tebhaga fighter, and communist Parshvanath and his wife Batashi. Their conjugal life is minutely and painfully composed to the rhythms of Parshvanath’s fugitive life: his long absences, his occasional sudden and secret return after dark, and his furtive flee before dawn. Batashi’s role as a wife is also, in a complex negotiation of choice and helplessness, tuned to this rhythm.

Similarly, in all the communist households we see in the novel, we find women providing gendered labour for political ends: giving shelter to fugitives, serving meals, providing tea and snacks to members in meeting, cleaning up afterwards, nursing wounded comrades to life and many such minute everyday activities. The labour is inevitably written within the gendered personal relationships of these women. Sita does this, to a large extent, out of her romantic love for Prithvi and for her sisterly love for Phalgu. Similarly, Kuri gets scripted in the same role for her sisterly devotion to Prithvi and for her love for Phalgu.

Pramila, Sita and Phalgu's mother, hides communist fugitives in her home because they are comrades of her son. Haran's mother raises money by pawning her few meagre and most precious belongings and works hard towards releasing her Tebhaga-fighter sons who have been arrested.

However, their participation in the political struggle 'indirectly' through domestic labour is not reducible to the gendered demands of their personal family relationships alone. Each of these women is also consciously supportive of the political goal that her loved ones are fighting for. Sita is a figure that is closest to the author, Sabitri Roy; in no way is Sita not political and her support of Phalgu and Prithvi is an extension of her political conviction.¹³ While not a member of the Communist Party herself, as Sabitri Ray never was, we see her engaged in the core of her being with the questions that motivate the party. Her activities blend into both the domestic and the outer spheres. Sita is politically aware and active: she works to organize strikes against police firing on her students; when money needs to be raised for fighting court cases for political prisoners, she runs to raise money; she runs to convey news of arrests and take the allowed few amenities to political prisoners. Similarly, Kuri deeply loves Phalgu and insists on nursing him when he is shot in the leg by the police. Yet, before rushing to meet her wounded

¹³ There is a noticeable lingering anxiety in Roy's writing about the status as a house-wife in relation to not only a working woman's career, but also to the woman-workers of the Communist Party. In novel after novel, there is a dichotomy between the female comrades and the 'wife' of a male comrade. Roy's sympathy often lies with the latter figure; it is very likely legitimate to read a biographical component in this trajectory. However, the position Roy's novels take is not reducible to vindicating the housewife just because she projected herself onto this figure.

In this novel, there is less pronounced conflict between the female comrade and the 'communist housewife' than some of her other novels, but there is a clear articulation of the political position of the housewives in communist households. Indeed, there is a political reclaiming of home, the domestic space, and gendered labour in that space as political.

comrade and beloved, she prioritizes appearing for the procession that women are taking out on the streets as a political demonstration against the government. She then gets arrested and patiently waits for the first opportunity to visit Phalgu. Pramila takes care of the comrades as a mother until, as a refugee, she too joins the procession to voice refugee demands. For each of these characters, the home and the world, the personal and the political blend into each other.

Yet, the political culture of the Party takes these women for granted and exploits the women's gendered labour. Indeed, as *Swaralipi* suggests, it commits a deeper violence when it cannot attribute any political subjectivity and agency to these gendered, labouring women. There is a complete inability to recognize and notice the female labour at home as political because of the presumed divide that separates home from the world and, thus, from politics. The presumption also is that the labour that happens at home is by definition not political. I will return to how *Swaralipi* rewrites the political possibilities of action within the personal and its reverse, the personal possibilities within the political. For now, let me continue with the discussion of home as a political space.

Swaralipi constructs a world where the divide between the home and the world is itself a class-specific construct and a chimera that cannot hold when accounted for in spaces other than feudal or *bhadralok* households. In this world, we find that the biggest of events enter the innermost quarters of home and invade the most private spaces of relationships and the most intimate folds of the human body. The peasant rebellion of Tebhaga is a fight over a fair share of paddy grain—such an intimate bodily-household object—so that those who raise the

crop are able to eat rice all through the year. It is no accident that Tebhaga happened in the years immediately following the man-made famine when the poor all over Bengal were reeling under hunger even more acutely than the usual. Hunger for rice, again, portrayed through and after the famine, is a category that belies the distinction between world political event and the privacy of not only the home but also the body. Narrating Tebhaga makes the novel inevitably take account of the deep bleeding of political events into the gendered space of both home and the body. When the police comes to round up Tebhaga fighters, the third-person narrator's comments ring in the peasant kitchen over gendered labour: "But why. What crime have they committed? They have distributed the paddy of a full granary of one person to five others—where is the wrong here? The housewife does not understand. Lost in her thought, she does not notice that the fire below the boiling pot of paddy has gone out" (439). The intimacy of that space and the insertion of the political question amidst, and interrupting, everyday gendered labour of the peasant household indicate the inseparability of the personal and the political.

Among all the punitive violence that the police inflict on the peasant community, the most vicious in the novel is registered on the gendered body of Batashi. The police inspector, livid at not finding Parshvanath at home, kicks pregnant Batashi to her death in the *uthan*, the space just outside the hut. There is a significant dichotomy here between the intimate space of the body and the in-between space of the *uthan*. We could read the *uthan* as a threshold space, but these rural-peasant households that become involved with Tebhaga are not, and

have never been, a site where a rigid home and the world divide could be imagined in the first place. In the nationalist imagination, which invested so much in the imagined and practiced home and the world divide, these households would have never been relevant sites. The assault of Batashi in the *uthan* is itself a reminder of the overlaps between inside and outside of body and space and that of the home and the world in her world. This should remind the reader of the elite limit of the idiom of freedom, which involved crossing the threshold of the home and coming out into the world, that could be imagined as relevant for Bimala.

There is another instructive confusion of the alignment of home with the privacy of the gendered body in the police torture of arrested communist women who lead the Tebhaga. The characters of Parvati and Nikhilesh in the novel are clearly modelled on the historical Ila Mitra and Ramen Mitra, leaders of the Tebhaga. Ila Mitra is legendary figure in the context of Tebhaga.¹⁴ They belonged to a well-to-do zamindar family. Both of them had, however, become communists and led Tebhaga in their region. Ila Mitra was arrested and severely tortured, including sexually, in police custody in East Pakistan. In *Swaralipi*, descriptions of Parvati's torture echo verbatim the testimony of Ila Mitra. The details of the torture in the testimony which the novel reproduces suggest that in the police cell there is no sanctity of the body or its 'inside' the as a private space.

Similarly, we can understand the gendered violence of the Partition that the novel represents in this analogy of the outer world invading the gendered

¹⁴ Much has been written on Ila Mitra. For example, Bangladeshi writer Selina Hossain's Bengali novel *Kantatare Projapoti* (Butterfly on a Barbed Wire) is based on her. For a political-biography, see Maleka Begam's *Ila Mitra* (Bengali).

spaces of the body. When riots break out in East Bengal,¹⁵ news reaches Calcutta of Hindu women being abducted and raped in East Pakistan. The narrative in *Swaralipi* does not travel to East Bengal, but reports the stories that arrive with the bewildered refugees from East Bengal. The comrades helplessly brood with misgiving at the news and at the rhetoric of revenge that froths in Calcutta. In one instance, Pramila hears a story of an old man who had returned near-mad to report that he had pushed his own sixteen year old daughter into the Padma river and drowned her rather than give her away to the Muslims.¹⁶ Here, we have a narrative that we have heard many times in the context of the Partition of Punjab. It is a narrative that shows how the nation-making politics situates itself on the gendered body of women. That the death of the woman/girl comes at the hands of a father also shows that such politics does not stop at a border that divides the world of politics and an enclosure of home, family, and privacy of the body.

When the waves of terrifying stories of abductions reach Calcutta, a section of the city becomes ready for retaliation. The Muslims amidst the city become the logical target in many minds. In this context, in a spiral of events, Hnashiya, a fifteen-year-old girl is abducted by a bunch of hired goons and gang-raped. Hnashiya is a threshold figure. Her mother, a beggar, had died in the “year of the famine” on the wayside, beside the pond where a group of Bihari-Muslim washer-folks, in Calcutta for two-three generations, do their washing (319). Since then she has been given shelter by a washerwoman and her family. Unlike her

¹⁵ The allusion is to the riots in Khulna and Barisal in 1949-50, which were the second major riots in East Bengal after the one in Noakhali in 1946.

¹⁶ Original in Bengali: “Phire eshe streeke bolechhe bhadrlok, tomar meyer ami maan bnachaichhi. Jabaner haate dei nai—Padmar jwole dia ashchhi” (522).

foster family, it is not clear if she herself is a Hindu or a Muslim. In a very literal sense Hnashiya is a refugee, although not politically so, living in the shelter provided by strangers. The only sari she owns is in tatters, so she wears saris from the piles that comes to the her foster family for washing. She is a destitute body, ‘class cross-dressed’ in bhadrakalok garbs.

It is she who becomes the easiest target. Hnashiya was about to get married to the rikshaw-puller Shona. Kalu, the leader of the hired goons paid to riot, has personal rivalry with Shona. Kalu and his gang, therefore, choose Hnashiya, calling her “Shona’s (Muslim) wife” (original “Shonar Bibi”; 528), as a Muslim female body to punish. They seek to teach the Muslims in the neighbourhood a lesson, as also to beat in a match of strength the Hindus in the neighbourhood who were protecting the Muslims—“agents of Muslims” they are called (528)—one of them being Prithvi. Hnashiya gets abducted not from her foster home but when she is out in the neighbourhood tending to her daily task of gathering her goat after it has grazed. As in the case of Batashi’s assault, the space from which she is abducted is in one way an extension of her home. However, it is also a symbolic reminder that due to daily necessities of labour there is no rigid enclosed space of home for Hnashiya or Batashi, figures who literally inhabit the threshold and move ‘in’ and ‘out.’ It is a reminder that home as a kind of protective and restrictive enclosure can be practiced, or even imagined, only in privileged classes.

In the novel, we encounter women political workers who already have this mobility between the home and the world, as do the peasant women and the urban

poor. We see the women workers of the Communist Party and the Tebhaga fighters who are already politicized, mobile, and in the world. Comrade Radha is a peasant woman and a Tebhaga fighter, working and travelling from village to village but staying and hiding in peasant households. The absurdity of asking the home and the world question—which is the home and which is the world?— in her case shows the limits of these categories. In the urban space, we see many women workers in the Communist Party—not all of them refugees. Most of them are politicized and active members of the Party at the opening of the novel, who already have done away with a rigid, divide of the home and the world. They work, move, travel, organize picket lines and strikes in schools and colleges, demonstrate and march in the streets, and raise slogans in the streets and, when they get arrested, inside the prison. While we see these in a post-Partition Calcutta, the Partition itself is not the causal event here. The political women and their movement are far more linked through their association with the Communist Party.

It is through an analogous disappearance of the boundary between home and the world that *Swaralipi* imagines the politicization of the women refugees, who belonged earlier to a bhadralok household and would have maintained the home and the world divide to various degrees in their earlier everyday practice. I suggest that we are to understand the refugee colonies in the novel, where the divide between the home and the world is fractured, in light of these different kinds of instances in which the notions of separate spheres of home and the world are shown to be either incongruous, utterly disrupted, or deliberately willed away.

In the case of refugee households, many of them bhadrak families, we see an analogous disappearance of that very boundary, that symbolic threshold which existed before.¹⁷ In the nightly raids by the police and the hired goons alike, the makeshift homes the refugees have set up are burnt or broken down. The refugees belt up and raise the walls again. Sometimes, when the families sit down for a meal, there are no walls; all there is are four-posts to mark the perimeter of the house. The neighbour hears of their meagre meal of boiled rice and is ready to share half an aubergine with them. Even otherwise, within thin walls of light bamboo canes and *hogla* leaves, in houses huddled together, there is no privacy. In this struggle and, by necessity, in the opened up space, the clear boundary between the private and the public or the home and the world that was so crucial and seemingly concrete now disappears.

Post-Partition, we see a specific kind of politicization percolate to an inner space and into the households and reaching women who are not directly associated with any political party or embrace politics in a clear decisive way. For them becoming politicized comes as the most obvious thing to do at this moment in history because such politicization is really an extension of how they see their roles within their homes. They take on a political role under the aegis of their roles within the family. Although not all, many women refugees find it inevitable to join the communist-led processions to protest against police firing in refugee colonies. Pramila, whose political role has been domestic until now, sets out for the streets of the city. Along with her go the aged woman Kshetramani and

¹⁷ See Rachel Weber's essay "Re(Creating) the Home: Women's Role in the Development of the Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta" for a discussion of these refugee colonies as a space.

Tulsi's young wife, the new mother with a baby in tow, whose husband has been recently killed in the police firing at the refugee colony. Rathi's sister Urmi, who belonged in a comfortable semi-feudal bourgeois home in East Bengal and now lives in a refugee colony, goes as well. In spite of being indulgently supportive of her communist brother, Urmi would have never considered lending her body and voice to a procession earlier.

A few page before the above procession, Prithvi witnesses another protest-demand march by refugee women:

A long procession of refugees shouting slogans comes forward. In the vanguard of the procession are refugee women in tattered clothes. They carry half-naked skeletal children. In their eyes are congealed blobs of hatred and appeals for mercy. In the slipper-less feet of village women, bewildered stiffness.

Rural housewives from East Bengal, heads covered with their sari end, walking on the open avenue of the metropolis, shouting slogans. The faces of the children they carry are harrowed and lean in hunger, their eyes pleading.

Even aged women, bent with age go along with them. [...]

As though a personification of protest against the government is moving forward.

Prithvi's questioning mind thinks: is this how history peeks out from the cracks of the skeletal of patriarchal society? (537).

One way to read this going out of the female characters to the streets to protest is to notice that they do so because the streets become an extension of the space called home. The mobility of each of these characters is also, as is amply clear in the line-up, written within their personal gendered relationships of the family.

This is already noticeable in the procession Prithvi witnesses, but more acutely in the group of characters from the refugee colony who decide to join the procession. Pramila is a mother and has a son injured by the police firing earlier. When Pramila asks Kshetramani if she would go to the procession, she says in her ‘Bangal’ dialect: “I won’t go! How can you ask? They will fire at our sons and husbands! Can we bear it?” (537-38). Tulsi’s wife, remembering her dead husband, goes to seek solace in the political gathering of many. She sees the “shadow of Tulsi moving along the procession” (537). Their mobility within their roles as mothers and wives is clear in the language the novel uses to describe their joining the political procession: “Tulsi’s wife walks with the procession in awkward steps covering her three-month old under her sari, her breast in his mouth. Behind her walks Pramila with slow steps—the first protest-march of her life” (538-539).

Here, the claiming of political agency happens not entirely under the auspice of choice as much as a historical necessity, even compulsion. The argument can be that their insertion of themselves in the public space is under the safety and legitimacy of their roles scripted within patriarchy, as wives and mothers. Writing on the feminist-geography of stepping outside their home in refugee colonies, Rachel Weber, in her essay “Re(Creating) the Home,” argues,

“refugee women did not really move into public life, but rather the domestic world expanded to include their participation in political, community, and economic affairs” (75). Weber’s interviews with women also suggests that this could happen “because women’s entrance into the public sphere is and was legitimated on the basis of women’s domestic roles as wives, mothers and daughters” (76). To a large extent, these are valid arguments for reading gendered negotiation with space and power in *Swaralipi*.

However, we cannot shut down the question of agency by these arguments alone. That is to say, while we cannot overdetermine agency here, nor can we erase it. Even if in *Swaralipi* we find women taking their first uncertain steps in protest marches under the authority of their roles as mothers within patriarchy, other relevant questions remain. We need to ask how does, if it does, this mobility change women’s lives within patriarchy including within that space demarcated as home? The novel itself imagines cracks in the skeleton of patriarchy. It suggests that the disappearance of the divide of home and the world and women’s insertion of themselves in the world change the space of home as well. The insertion also changes the historical possibility of imagining subjectivity. As I have been arguing, for *Swaralipi* the disappearance of the divide between the home and the world, the agential expansion of home to include the political, is an enabling starting point; partly because it is inevitable. As it appears in the novel from its representation of the lived experience of everyday life, the political has and will enter home even if it were possible to imagine and maintain such an enclosed space. To the novel, it is the limitation of organized politics that it ignores and

dismisses home as a political space. Expanding the space of home to include the political is a reverse strategy that also provokes the political to imagine home under its purview.

IV

The Personal and the Political: the Question of Ethics

The artificially inserted divide between the personal and the political plays out in the gendered terrain of personal relationships of the novel. Instrumental to the presumed divide between the personal and the political is gender. It is a perceived alignment of women with the personal and home that bring about the exclusion of women from the public-political domain. However, as I have argued above, the novel questions the validity of this exclusion. This questioning is largely tied up with the placement of women within the larger political world and, more immediately, within Party life. In examining women's role in the Party and their role as a political subject-agents within the rubric of collective politics, the novel tries to reassess women's place in the collective and the Party and construct an idiom where personal love and political love are intertwined inseparably.

In their youth, Prithvi and Sita's relationship fails because Prithvi imagines a barrier between his personal commitment to Sita and his political commitment to his Party. He breaks off their relationship in a letter to her from jail, in which he writes, "I do not want to entrap my higher idealism in attachments grown in personal life, Sita. In the tender care for one homestead, I cannot ignore the call of millions of human beings. I wish you a fulfilling life in

choosing another home” (315).¹⁸ It is significant that he does not ask Sita to choose another partner, but another home. An oppositional dichotomy is operative here not only between the personal and the political but also between the home and the world.

Prithvi rejects Sita because he aligns her with not only the personal, but also with home. He cannot imagine her being a comrade in arms, as he cannot imagine himself setting up a home. His rejection of Sita had also been predicated in anticipation of his own masculine failure in being a good husband who provides for the family and attends to his family’s needs. This larger pattern, of a gendered expectation of women’s role in the political world, and men’s in their home life, is repeated in Phalgu and Kuri’s relationship as well. Phalgu, echoing Prithvi before him, comes to be deeply sceptical of making an emotional commitment to Kuri. That he had witnessed, and opposed, Prithvi and Sita’s break up does not seem to convince him that a commitment to a political cause and to a personal relationship could be possible and that there are no antagonism between the two.

Prithvi comes to regret this breakup later in life not only because he loses Sita, whom he continues to love, but when he sees other women workers of the Party—Sumitra, Sagari, Parvati—he realizes that his judgement had been incorrect and unfair: women need not be thought of as belonging only to a “homestead.” Witnessing Rathi and Sagari’s relationship, or that of Parvati and Nikhilesh, he comes to correct his earlier presumption that his female life partner

¹⁸ The last phrase in original Bengali is “Tomar sukhi jibon kamona kori grihantare.”

cannot be a comrade or that there needs to be a disjunction between the personal and the political. When he meets Sita again, through his friendship with her, he also realizes that he had been plainly mistaken in judging Sita's desires and expectations from him. She had not, as it becomes acutely clear to him, imagined their relationship within the confines of the traditional roles of the masculine and the feminine in a patriarchal bourgeois household, nor needed it to be conducted in those terms. She was just as committed to the cause as he was, and she could compose their personal relationship so that it was at one with their political commitment.

If we compare Bimala with Sita here, we will note that here is an attempt to compose a style, an idiom, of romance that does not depend on a cleavage between politics and femininity. This is particularly where Rabindranath's imagination of Bimala had failed: as Tanika Sarkar writes,

The turn of the century modern woman acquired split representation: either lampooned as a mimic Victorian lady or a shrewish folk-devil, or as the preternaturally solemn, puritanical, sexless, creature of reformist homes, while the transcendent icon at all times is always that of a luminous, gracious, mother figure. Her [Bimala's] autonomy had no adequate image from which it could be reflected back to her as a coherent fullness. (39).

Bimala was a childless woman. Later in the novel, she begins to feel a growing maternal affection for her adopted little brother Amulya. However, the same politics that she had embraced earlier, as her punishment according to Indrani

Mitra, kills Amulya. There clearly was a circular connection between Bimala's failed maternity and her seduction by politics: she gets seduced because she is no mother; because she gets seduced, she cannot be a mother. Sita, unlike Bimala, has a young daughter, Mithu. In both these cases of sexual love and maternity, *Swaralipi* attempts to rewrite an idiom of love in which sexual love, maternal love, and political love flow into each other. I will return to the specific politics of motherhood again below.

It takes the novel practically its entire course for Prithvi to finally come to terms with his need of Sita. Prithvi most acutely senses his needs for Sita and her need of him *through*, not in separation from or in spite of, political events in his life. In *Ghare Baire*, when there was an amalgamation of emotional-sexual relationship and politics, it had taken the shape of Sandeep, the seducer who was both personally and politically corrupt. Prithvi is the man in *Swaralipi* who, like Sandeep, seeks an emotional partner in his political life. As in case of Sandeep, his personal relationship with Sita, including its romance, is constructed in an idiom such that politics forms a crucial ingredient. However, Prithvi is no Sandeep. In fact, in his kindness and sensitivity, he is more like *Ghare Baire's* Nikhilesh. Like Nikhilesh suffers in quiet patient fortitude when Bimala moves away from him, so does Prithvi suffer Sita's absence. Prithvi hums lines from a song by Rabindranath "I desire to give, not just to take" ("Hriday amar chai je dite, kebal nite noi" 534) that Nikhilesh could have easily uttered. There is every indication that Prithvi in *Swaralipi* encompasses the political character, but not the corrupt morality, of Sandeep and superimposes Sandeep with the integrity of

Nikhilesh. This bringing together of the two is a way of removing the fragmentation in Bimala's desire that *Ghare Baire* imposes.

The political idiom is not something that develops later in Prithvi and Sita's relationship, but something that has been present as the bedrock of their mutual attraction; only Prithvi does not realize it as the time. Their relationship started in 1934, the year *Char Adhyay* was published. Prithvi at eighteen, fighting in armed revolutionary struggle against the British and a fugitive on the run, had met Sita at thirteen. He remembers Sita as a dusky girl and her shy look as she had served him rice on the clay floor (361). Bimala had also first met Sandeep while serving him lunch.

Indeed, each of Prithvi's arrests marks significant points in his personal relationship with Sita. In their first meeting, Prithvi had asked the adolescent Sita to hide a heavy black pistol for him (360). He gets arrested by the police of the colonial state, but Sita's help saves him from the worse possibility of being shipped as a political prisoner to the notorious Cellular Jail in the Andaman islands. In middle of 1940, he had broken off his relationship when he was arrested for the second time, in a letter from jail. When he meets her again in 1948, he comes to know his love for her as true, in the sense of encompassing all aspects of his life. However, when he is arrested again soon after meeting Sita again, eight years later after his previous arrest, he feels for the first time Sita's emotional dependence on him: "He had never understood so deeply *as this moment* how much Sita depended on him" (emphasis added: 499). The novel

explicitly states “How much Sita occupies his innermost feelings even today, he realized *the very day he got arrested*” (emphasis added; 506).

Irrespective of what this specific example suggests, this particular political idiom of a personal relationship is developed in the novel not as Prithvi or male-centric but as a mutual one between him and Sita. Sita desires Prithvi within an idiom that encompasses his political personhood. Here, *Swaralipi* questions the bleak judgement that hangs on Bimala to have confused the personal and the political and being unable to maintain a pristine separation between the two. Along with the very domestic role of serving rice, the political role of giving shelter to a fugitive, and later hiding a gun for him are seamlessly intertwined in Sita’s giving. Sita had, she reminisces later, found herself in a great predicament when Prithvi asked her to hide the pistol. Its owner had disappeared; she heard that he was caught but nothing incriminating had been found on him. She was relieved but did not know what to do with the precious pistol meanwhile! She buried it in a hole dug in the floor of her clay hut, but could not stop worrying if the pistol would be damaged. If it was, how could she face the owner when he came back? So, she narrates, she digs it up every night and checks that it works, and buries it back. Lest people suspect something, she re-wipes the floor with new clay everyday. Later, she receives a note in hands of a fellow-fighter just saying “send it” (original phrase is “haate dio;” 361). She recognizes the handwriting and acts on it, but the significance of the note exceeds far more than its function. She cannot throw the note away and reads it secretly again and again through the day:

“adolescent Sita had not known what love was then, but for the first time she encounters the first-felt a mysterious swing of emotions” (361).

In this narrative of the incident by Sita, it is clear that the gun and the note become both erotic and sacred objects—the first props—in Sita’s budding love for Prithvi. The phallic symbolism of the gun is too obvious for me to note, emphatic as it is in the ritual of being dug out of the floor and dug back in every night. What is interesting is Sita’s appropriation of the symbolic import. She is not only the only enactor of the ritual but also the storyteller, reminiscing of this secretive incident of the past. The two-word note, too, although written by Prithvi, becomes Sita’s secret fetish object. Here, the written-note lends itself explicitly to the particular task of self-inscription that Sita is embarking on. This starts for Sita the process to build an idiom of love, where the erotic of the political intertwines with the personal.

This idiom of love was also Bimala’s. However, there is no moral indictment of Sita by the novel as was the case for Bimala by *Ghare Baire*. Several years after their first meeting, Sita again meets Prithvi, now a communist, giving a speech to a peasant gathering in East Bengal. This is how the third-person narrator describes the ‘seeing:’ “From far she sees, the meeting has started. The glow of the sun is bathing the red flag. The red hue of the setting sun has lit up the face of the speaker too. Sita’s enchanted eyes look from far. Her heart palpitates restlessly in a quivering unwarranted hope. Whose is this magical body language? Who is speaking? Prithvi!” (335). Here is an explicit echo from *Ghare Baire* when Bimala had first seen Sandeep at a moment of rhetoric

exaltation while giving a political speech. There, too, Bimala had noticed “a miraculous figure” in Sandeep and “the sun had descended [...] and suddenly lit up his face” (my translation; 22). Both Bimala and Sita are political and desiring subjects, and personal and political love run into each other in their desire.

We see a similar attempt to write a narrative of personal romance within the political in the early stages of Sagari and Rathi’s relationship. When Sagari wants to join the Communist Party, Rathi goes to her with a form to fill out. Sagari promptly writes Rathi’s name in the form in the place where the form solicits the name of the spouse of the applicant. As the gun and the letter in case of Sita and Prithvi, the membership form of the Communist Party becomes the chosen prop for their relationship. After they get married, there is an attempt to picture an egalitarian marriage where husband and wife are comrades who share both political and domestic duties. They write posters together and edit pamphlets as they share household chores.

If Ela of *Char Adhyay* was an example of the perils of women in politics, Sagari in *Swaralipi* is a probing of the same problematic that also leads to a disastrous end for Sagari. In both cases, a political leader uses these young women, known for their beauty: Indranath in case of Ela and Nandalal in case of Sagari. Indranath is a revolutionary-terrorist leader in the anti-British movement in pre-Independence Bengal while Nandalal is a leader high up in the Communist Party. Both the similarities and dissimilarities in the two cases are instructive to understand the ideological point that *Swaralipi* makes. The similarities point to the bitter irony of the failure of the Communist Party—that it could not rise above

or go beyond the corruption of the earlier times in the bourgeois nationalist movement. The dissimilarities, in contrast, are an attempt to rescue the political-worker woman from the damning ideological judgement that Rabindranath passes.

In *Char Adhyay*, there is a clear verdict: Ela had betrayed her essential femininity, her *stree-dharma*, in not only joining politics but also in her prioritizing falsely-believed political ideals above her love for Atin. She had betrayed personal love for her political beliefs; that is what brings on her physical, as well as that of Atin's spiritual, death. In *Swaralipi*'s rewriting of a character such as Ela into Sagari, the story is exactly the same up to a point. Sagari does not trust her personal love for Rathi or her judgement of his character; she falsely presumes that her personal love is in conflict with her political ideals. She is deliberately misled, manipulated and preyed upon by Nandalal. Unlike Indranath, who had used Ela to attract young men to his political movement, Nandalal's interest in Sagari is personal. His eventually expressed sexual interest in Sagari is a double betrayal for her. On the one hand, it reveals to her that her sacrifice of her personal relationship with Rathi had been based on a deception: there was no greater political ideal that needed this sacrifice. On the other hand, she is reduced at this moment to a sexualized entity whose political subjectivity has been completely and violently erased. She is not, nor has been, she realizes, of interest to the leadership represented by Nandalal, as a political worker useful to the Party let alone for a greater struggle for political freedom; she is just a female body whose sexuality is consumable, and that is all there is to her.

The difference in the cases of Ela and Sagari is that Ela had known—Indranath had explicitly told her in the first chapter of the ‘Four Chapters’—that she was necessary to the group to draw in young men. Ela does not seem to object to this particular usefulness attributed to her although she feels protective of the young brood that she is bringing to a dangerous course. Sagari, in contrast, had joined the communist Party as a dedicated worker because she believed in the ideas that the Party was struggling to realize. She had also believed in her political subjectivity that was not in conflict with her gender. It is at the moment of ‘the indecent proposal’ that she learns that her subjectivity had been always precarious and there was a mismatch between how she perceived herself and how others perceived her. In the case of Ela, the cause of her ‘tragedy’ had been that she had embraced politics at all. In the case of Sagari, the cause is that she falsely presumes that political and personal ethics are in conflict. She comes to a disastrous end not because she has embraced political ideas that require her to work for a party or take part in a political struggle but because she betrayed her personal ethics.

The particular ethical journey that Sagari undertakes from the beginning of the novel to her end illuminates this reading. Sagari’s parents were Gandhian, both dying in police firing in the August Movement of 1942. She and her elder sister Sumitra become Communists, but many other members of the Party always suspect their Gandhian past and unkindly taunt them. Early on in the novel, the difference between Sumitra and Sagari in dealing with this painful predicament already suggests that Sagari does not, even for a second, pause to recognize a

personal conviction or personal history when it gets into the way of the Party line. Sumitra painfully questions herself if she was betraying her parent's politics, but not Sagari. Sagari chastises her because she "has a weakness in [her] mind" and suggests a "simple solution" to her predicament. Sumitra thinks of Sagari: "there is not even a trace of dilemma in her mind. Whatever she accepts, she accepts with reason and logic—and she can accept thereafter from her heart with ease" (322). While there is a certain amount of admiration in Sumitra's assessment of her sister at this point, the course of events in the novel go on to show that Sagari is vulnerable precisely because of this very reason.

Sagari's method of solving a perceived conflict between the personal and political is a refusal to recognize the personal. She also—misguidedly it would appear by the bias of the novel—attempts to maintain a separation between emotions and reason. *Swaralipi* strains to show that these constructed dichotomies between reason and feelings—patently mistrusted by many feminists—are untenable. Time and again in the novel there are indications of how damaging these binaries between the personal and the political, between emotion and reasons along with other analogous pairs are. Doing away with a reason-emotion dichotomy is not women's prerogative alone, nor are women aligned with emotions; even Prithvi has had to learn this lesson. If anything, the political vision that the novel offers for all its characters is one that does away with these false divides and becomes inclusive of the opposites in the binaries.

Sagari, herself, in a belated bildungsroman-like journey, learns this lesson. After her betrayal by Nandalal, although she is too ashamed of herself to return to

Rathi, she decides to go to ‘the battle field’ of Tebhaga in the countryside. There, in her new avatar as Comrade Jaba, the brand of politics she practices and tries to inculcate in her comrades goes against the dictates of the Party. She takes on a more moderate line asking comrades to pause to hear the local knowledge and opinion, to make a distinction between big zamindars and middle-rank, smaller *jotdars* when they go and loot their granaries. She asks them to pay heed to feelings of the people for whom they are fighting the battle. All these layers of politics appear to be an indication that Sagari has learnt a more inclusive and complex form of political activism where there is a rejection of the strict two term Aristotelean logic that the Party is following at the moment—the statement ‘you are either for us or against us’ keep appearing over and over again—which requires a ‘sacrifice’ of personal ethics, feelings, and the local. Sagari dies in police firing. Unlike that of Ela’s, however, her end appears a martyr’s death.

The critique in *Swaralipi* is directed at binary-formations that allow for a disjunction between the personal and the political. It strives to show that ethics cannot be split into conflicting personal and the political ones. This is a tenable politics because the personal here is not a narrow category defined within the prerogatives of liberal individualism. As I have discussed here, the critique emerges with two simultaneous attempts: first, to reconstruct a form of political subjectivity and belonging for women who are deeply engaged in questions of collectives and, second, to construct an idiom of belonging which encompasses the political and the personal. The latter takes the form of an attempt to negotiate a language of heterosexual romance that unifies the fractured world of women as

subjects. There are, of course, limits to this idiom. Here, a heterosexual relationship is the only viable form of romance. Further, there is no questioning, as perhaps one comes to expect from Sabitri Roy's novels, not necessarily of marriage itself as an institution but of "the communists' preference for women activists who were married to male activists" (Kumar 94). In spite of these limitations, the politics that *Swaralipi* offers is not only enabling but also astute.

This political corrective the novel offers to what it thinks ails the Communist Party of the time is surprisingly insightful and anticipates closely much of later political analysis of the time. There was a similar repetition of the same political blunders in the later Naxal Movement. Sujit Ghosh is entirely correct when he writes that if a reader did not know the history of the left in the 1940s, she could easily mistake the novel as a critique of the left in the 1970s. The critique of the Party the novel arrives at is through its realization of the damage brought forth by a disjunction between personal and political ethics and through its sense of politics as experienced in the gendered everyday world. To a reader engaged with questions of collectives and forms of political participation in collective life, the correctives the novel points out are immensely instructive.

The attempt to write an idiom that conjoins the personal and the political does not afford the novel only an incisive political vision. The novel is also able to imagine how such idiom is able to reconstitute the space of home and personal relationships and the everyday world that women inhabit. Within this is also an attempt to re-imagine gendered subjectivity. While Sagari's personal journey ends in her participation in a more inclusive form of politics, Sita's personal journey

ends in successfully putting to rest her internalized battles with guilt and what Prithvi calls feudal morality. Sita had married Debajyoti while she loved Prithvi and could not bring herself to love her husband. After Debajyoti's untimely death, she had embraced her widowhood as a penance. She could not, until the very end of the novel, come out of her internalized state of widowhood to accept Prithvi's love or declare hers. As also in her relationship with her dying mother-in-law Menaka, Sita arrives at a more enabled space that is not outside but at least gestures outside patriarchy.

V

Political Motherhood: Rewriting the Script?

The possible fulcrum on which the indictment of women in politics turns for Rabindranath, as evident in his political novels, is that it foregrounds women's sexuality over and above women's essential self-expression through maternity. For Bimala, as I suggested above, lack of maternity had been a form of vulnerability to corruption while Amulya's death a form of punishment that negates the maternal love she begins to feel for him. From the point of view of these notions of maternity as 'real,' the fetishist mother-worship of the Sandeep-led extremist nationalism—the Bande Mataram group, as they are derisively called—comes under critique. As I have shown in Chapter 1, motherhood as a trope had been central to the gendered imagination of the nation. It is to Tagore's credit that he recognized motherhood as precisely *the site* for the central contestation of nationalism. Although he arrived at a critique of worship of the

nation as a mother-deity from an essentially conservative position—by positing good practices of motherhood over bad/false ideas of the same—*Ghare Baire* does expose the tense heart of the problematic I have been calling metaphor formation. Bimala, under the spell of ‘Bande Mataram’ and the flattery of Sandeep, starts imagining *she* is the address of the worship. In Bimala’s vulnerability, Tagore exposes the very fine line separating the metaphoric idea of the nation-mother and flesh and blood women and the easy slippage of the former into the latter. The slippage takes place even while Sandeep revises the mother-worship to a worship of a mistress or a lover. In the ‘Bande-Mataram’ brand of nationalism, thus, Bimala is faced not with real motherhood but a ‘false’ one that celebrates her female sexuality.

If I am correct in reading *Swaralipi*’s Sita as a rewriting of Bimala, then it is important that Sita is the mother of a little girl, Mithu. Sita’s engagement with politics is not predicated on her childlessness as seems to be the case for Bimala. Sita’s motherhood is not a negation of her desires either. Towards the end of the novel, the once widowed Sita, the mother of a daughter, writes a letter of love desiring and accepting the love of Prithvi. Sita’s motherhood is not imagined in *Swaralipi* as antagonistic to her sexuality or to her desiring subjectivity. Nor is there any inherent conflict between her motherhood and her choice of a political worker as her lover or her choice to engage with politics itself.

We must also read *Swaralipi*’s reclaiming of motherhood against the historical order by the Communist Party in the late 1940s to its male members to send their wives away. Many sent their wives to their ancestral households in the

villages. This was supposed “to enable male comrades to undertake dangerous underground activities without worries about the children who had started to appear by this time” (T. Sarkar, “Foreword” *Harvest Song* viii-ix).¹⁹ In the novel, we find Sagari’s tormenting decision to sexually abstain as a guarantee against motherhood (379-80). Although Sagari suffers, she believes in the principle that this was not the time to bring children into this world. The politics of the novel, however, questions this presumption. There are multiple images of pregnant women, lactating mothers, mothers with small children, mothers who are hiding at night in fear of assault during the Partition, old mothers attacked by the police during Tebhaga or in the refugee colony. They are out in the open, caught in the violence of the world, and eventually are marching on the road. In these details, the novel attempts to insert motherhood into the realm of the political, just as it inserts ‘home.’

The politics of motherhood in the novel is, however, emphasized further at the end. Sita, who had gone to East Pakistan to nurse the dying Menaka, after Menaka’s death, embarks with Mithu on a journey from there to Calcutta. Along with her, travels a fugitive communist Suhrid. The latter accompanies Sita because it is not safe for Sita to travel alone. It is not made clear precisely what risk Sita runs: whether she is at risk because she is a woman or because she is, for

¹⁹ In several novels of Roy we see a bitter experience of the communist-housewife as a result of this policy, which was “perhaps, partially autobiographical” (T. Sarkar, “Foreword” *Harvest Song* viii). Writing, on the processes of marginalization of the communist-housewife Lata in *Paka Dhaner Gan* (*Harvest Song*), Tanika Sarkar notes: “They reveal the marginalization of the politically committed housewife, the exploitation of her domestic skills and the domestication in a cruel and conservative family environment [...]. Women like Lata who married out of love and political conviction, were pushed into a rural rich joint family, under the discipline of patriarchal elders, and without much support or comradeship from the Party” (ibid. viii-ix).

all purposes, a communist, or both. There are reports of mass abduction and rapes of Hindu women in East Pakistan a few pages prior, so the former will not be an incorrect guess. Whatever be it, the presence of Suhrid acts as a bait and an excuse for the police to surround Sita's boat mid-river and arrest both Suhrid and her without a warrant. Mithu is not allowed to go with her mother. Sita, finding herself in a non-negotiable predicament, finds courage, and firmly sends crying, pleading Mithu away to Calcutta along with the boatman and another escort in the boat.

Sita's arrest resonates with the historical witch-hunt of communists by the police of both East Pakistan and West Bengal right after independence. This arrest changes the terms of the Partition narrative of abduction. Sita is not abducted by the Muslim as would have been expected in a Partition narrative, but she is arrested in a manner that is in effect an abduction. Here, an alternative form of victimhood is established, one which is political. Sita is arrested for giving shelter to numerous communist fugitives, known to the police as she is for her association with the communists. Her victimhood at the hands of the police is bodily and not 'gender-discriminatory'—she is handcuffed and dragged away along with Suhrid—but the torture that awaits them is gendered. Suhrid is immediately sent to a cottage nearby where the treatment that awaits him can be guessed at by the male screams that ensue. What specifically awaits Sita, we are not told. Given the brief but graphic hint of Parvati's torture in the police custody, however, suggests the horrific possibilities of torture including, of course, horrific sexual assault. This arrest which makes Sita abject, however, is specifically a

political consequence, due to her involvement with communists, and not because she is a woman. After her arrest, Sita makes eye contact with Suhrid and steals a red salute at him. Her body language, the novel tells us, is that of a courageous political prisoner, matching that of her male companion.

This instance is also a moment of crisis for her motherhood. Torn away from her bewildered, pleading, wailing daughter, the moment is one of disruption and negation of motherhood and also, by this very negation, an emphatic underscoring. How do we read this moment? Is this a form of asserting a political motherhood, where being a mother is not ground enough for turning away from politics? After all, clearly, motherhood does not protect Sita from violent persecution at the hands of the police. If we return to the ambiguity that Suhrid accompanies Sita because it is not safe for her to travel alone, we would realize that Sita could have been also abducted from mid-river. Her maternity would not have protected her at that point either. Perhaps, therefore, there is an emphasis that motherhood cannot be a cause for not participating in the world of politics; as it is, the novel emphasizes, politics of the world does not spare the mother. In fact, not only is motherhood not a basis of turning away from politics, but also conditions the political subjectivity that Sita embraces, as emphasized in the moment of her arrest. Does this make her political subjectivity, as it enters the world, safer and more contained? Perhaps yes. However, we must also consider that this disrupted journey of Sita is one that not only snatches her away from her child but forestall her union with her lover. Motherhood has already been conjoined with, with no inherent opposition to, Sita's desire fulfilment.

However, in these very last pages of the novel, the arrested Sita and the arrested Parvati, both mothers of young children, become embodiments of collectives. This collective is not ‘the nation,’ but the collective that animates the socialist imagination; perhaps we could call them ‘the masses’ as in the socialist conventions. Or, they could embody vision or hope for a just world based on equality. Prithvi thinks that the mothers are now in jail, perhaps they will die in custody, perhaps they will be violated and tortured; the people must protest, raise their voices to demand the release of political prisoners. At the end of the novel, there is a huge political rally in that demand. Looking at this gathering, Mithu imagines that the people have gathered to rescue her mother. The language of hope that we encounter here is strongly reminiscent of the embodiment of the collective we are so accustomed to hearing about in the anti-colonial nationalist imagination (we may remember Aurobindo from Chapter 1). I have read the novel as a text that goes beyond the critique of the metaphor and one which starts with the negotiation that suggest an imagination of women as metonyms. Does the novel fold into its own critique at this instance where Sita and Parvati, both political prisoners, become mothers who need rescuing? Or is this an evocation of a familiar trope where the difference is under emphasis? The collective that Sita embodies is of communists or ‘the masses,’ whom they claim to represent, or even ‘hope’ for the leftist struggle/ for the communists/ masses. Whichever be it, the collective is not the nation. Also, in the case of Sita, the mother who embodies the collective in this case is a mother of a little *girl*. Even if Sita is a metaphor here, her daughter is the agent whose hope, desire, and duty it is to free her

mother one day. Woman as subjects are not negated here but are represented by the girl child Mithu.

To sum up, the reading of *Swaralipi* I offer here examines how the novel navigates the divides of the personal and the political and its analogous divisions, including that of the home and the world, to attempt to write a script of resistance where there is no disjunction between the two. This script has a very significant bearing on imagining women as political subjects constituting a collective, what I have been calling a metonym. The novel attempts to construct a political belonging for women within the Communist Party and in the larger world of politics in the post-Partition polity. To build the idiom of this script, I have read allusions to two novels of Rabindranath Tagore, *Ghare Baire* and *Char Adhyay*. I have shown that the references to these earlier novels serve as both point and counterpoint against which the novel constructs its idiom of expression.

VI

Epilogue: *Swaralipi* as a Partition Novel

I had started the reading of *Swaralipi* by noting that we cannot tell whether we have hope or a strategic gesture of hope at the end of the novel. In my reading above, in speaking to my own desire and attempt to shape this dissertation, I have privileged hope and the constructive struggle in the novel. In this, some of the fissures of the novel and its struggles against itself has got ironed out. Here, I would like to briefly trace a little of what got lost in my reading not only in the

interest of scrupulousness, but also to mark the important aspects of *Swaralipi* as a text of the Partition.

Prithvi and Sita, two of the most important characters in the novel, are from East Bengal. Sita is almost debilitated by an unexplained sadness all through the novel. Prithvi, the writer, is hit by grief like a jolt one morning. Addressing himself, he writes “Prithvi, you are not only a spectator to this tragic-ending drama. Your soul has an invisible bond with Meghna, Padma, Yamuna.²⁰ And so you have you such deep pain flowing through your nerves” (535). His earlier novel had been criticized by the Party for indulging in unnecessary and undesirable “sadness-ism” (368). He writes about the memory of the land lost and asks if there is “no permission for the marcher to look back, if he has to keep walking forward no matter what?” (ibid.) His mind rebels: he asks himself how he will ever be able to disregard that the past is blended in every particle of his body. Unable to answer these questions, Prithvi gives up writing and walks away. There is an unresolved question of the supposed dichotomy between the haunting sense of loss of the past and a commitment to the future that the writer of *Swaralipi*, like Prithvi, cannot resolve.

Swaralipi, in spite of its socialist conviction, is not a novel which imagines a linear teleology of progress from the past to the present. The structure of the novel is circular. Towards the beginning of the novel, we find Prithvi sitting in a particular spot hearing about Sita. Towards the end of the novel, two years later, he finds himself in the same spot. Prithvi’s relationship with Sita is in a different

²⁰ Rivers of East Bengal.

place than it was two years earlier: the progress is from lost to found love, but he is not still united with her. Sita has been arrested by the police on her way to Calcutta from East Bengal. In Sita's thwarted journey, the novel undermines the closure that it had been building towards. Indeed, as I have discussed at the end of the previous chapter, the journey from the village to the city is the recognized Bengali literary and cinematic trope of a journey to modernity. In standard Hindu-Bengali Partition narratives, there is always an one-directional, non-reversible, journey, an exodus, from a village in East Bengal/East Pakistan to the city of Calcutta. In *Swaralipi*, this one-way journey of arriving is complicated. We see constant border crossings. We see movements of communist workers from Calcutta to East Pakistan (for example, Parbati; 330) almost defying the Partition.²¹ We see Phalgu, on one occasion, and Sita and Prithvi, on another, return to see Phalgu and Sita's parents in Madhuban, a village in East Pakistan. Later, Menaka returns to her in-law's estate. Sita with Mithu, at the end travels to East Bengal to look after Menaka. Sita's inability to reach Calcutta at the end of the novel, because of her arrest in her last journey, stalls the narrative of closure and arrival.

In an analogous circularity, the novel opens with a political rally and ends with another. The two political rallies mark a change in the policy of the Communist Party. The change is understood in the novel to be the beginning of the end of its bleakest days. Yet, the very circularity of the novel's structure belies

²¹ There is a historical dimension to this. Faced with the Partition, the leadership of the Communist Party took a crucial decision to "challenge the logic of the Partition and continue to work as one organization in both India and Pakistan" (J. Chatterji, *The Spoils* 285). Until 1951, the members of the Party were told to "stay where they were" or face the ultimate sanction of the Party, expulsion (ibid.)

a sense of linear progress. It is as though the novel cannot entirely believe in the possibility of leaving the past behind and moving on. Although the novel ends in noting a period of bleakness being over with a feeling of new hope, not all the agonizing questions that were raised by the novel have been answered. If history of the Communist Party in the decades following *Swaralipi*—a similar bleak period in the 1970s—were to be taken into account, we realize that the lingering misgivings of the novel beyond its plot-resolution were particularly well founded.

CONCLUSION

I

In this dissertation, I have examined three significant texts of the Partition of Bengal (1947) and argued that each of these texts intervene into foundational scripts, whether mythic or textual or both, that have played key roles in constituting the gendered everyday world of the (Hindu) nation. The refugee woman in these texts, I have shown, is a figure that interrupts and critiques the signification of ‘women’ within historically formed, normative, Hindu nation-making discourses. This figure rewrites the meaning of women, such that women can be read as subject-agents in relationship to the nation (or alternative political collectives) and can become participants in, rather than be a site of, collective politics. I have described the two different relationships of women to the nation—site and participant, or sign and subject respectively—in terms of the metaphor and the metonym, tropes of substitution and constitution respectively.

Chapter 1 has shown that historically in the hegemonic and influential cultural nationalism in colonial, late nineteenth century Bengal, ‘women’ was formed as a location for negotiating nationalism and as a metaphor of the nation. In this dominant meaning of ‘women,’ women were not imagined as participant subject-agents. The three subsequent chapters have read three Partition texts as different forms of interventions into this dominant fixation of ‘women’ as a metaphor. Chapter 2 has offered Jyotirmoyee Devi’s novel *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* (*The River Churning*) as a text that assesses the ensuing violence of metaphor formation from the standpoint of a ‘polluted’ refugee woman. Chapter 3

reads Ritwik Ghatak's film *Meghe Dhaka Tara (Cloud-Capped Star)* as an exposition of the very process of metaphor formation—in the historical-cultural specificity of its trope of motherhood—as a violent process. Chapter 4 has analyzed Sabitri Roy's novel *Swaralipi (The Notations)* as an attempt to move beyond the metaphor and grapple with the political possibilities of women as metonyms in relation to the nation. However, nation itself is partly destabilized in *Swaralipi* by the pressure of the political collective animated by socialism, offered as an alternative legitimate claimant to the state.

In so framing the relationships of women to the nation and/or other political collectives, I have privileged women as metonyms over women as metaphors as a more enabling imagination of women within and against the latter. My choice of *Swaralipi* for the last chapter, as an example of an engagement with the metonym, has also inflected women as metonyms with the possibility of imagining the political collective other than as exclusively 'the nation.' My argument is that the women taken as metonyms are able to signal to a collective other than the nation and relate to the state in a way that the metaphor cannot. Conversely, the imagination of nation, in so far as it is imagined as a filiative community, necessitates that 'women' be fixed as metaphors. This is certainly the case, historically, in mainstream nationalism in Bengal and India in general, but is also probably true of most other nationalisms elsewhere. My reading of women as metonyms is not restricted by this constraint.

However, what my framing does not consider fully is that, if women as metonyms constitute a collective, this collective can also *be* the nation. I have

dwelt on the metonym in the final chapter. However, by taking *Swaralipi*, a socialist novel, as the text in this chapter, I have bypassed the possibility written within the imagination of women as metonyms of the nation to participate in identity politics determined by the nation. Positing the metonym through a reading of *Swaralipi* has allowed me to read the refugee woman as a resistant figure, but this positing has not apprehended the full force of the relationship of women to the nation that is signaled by the metonym. In the Conclusion of this dissertation, therefore, I would like to probe the nature—and register the limits—of my choice of the metonym. Indeed, the question I would like to raise is whether the figure of the refugee woman as a metonym—whom I have read as a resistant, interventional figure, who claims political subjectivity—can also be implicated in forms of identity politics that contribute to the hegemony of the nation. I attempt to anticipate in this Conclusion why it is premature to close the debate of gendered subjectivity formation in relation to the nation just by choosing the metonym as a preferred imaginary of belonging. I propose to show that while taking women as metonyms, within and against the nation, allows for recognizing women as participant subject-agents in relation to the nation, a metonymic framing is not determinant of the kind of politics women participate in or the kind of nation they might legitimize.

Towards that end, I examine again the texts I have already read in the core chapters. This time I probe the gendered identity of the East Bengali refugee woman as a metonym in relation to the (Hindu) nation in these texts by analyzing how the Muslim enters this construct. As I have shown in Chapter 1, by taking

examples of the paradigmatic *Anandamath* by Bankim, the history of gendered metaphor formation in Bengal—the nation as a woman, specifically the mother, since the late nineteenth century—is thoroughly invested in imagining a *Hindu* nation. In *Anandamath*, the holy apocalyptic war is to be waged against the Muslims. In the early twentieth century, discourses of *sati* and *jauhaur* in the heart of the mainstream anti-colonial nationalist movement also suggest that the chastity of the Hindu woman is the key site of this nationalism. The Muslim is the necessary ‘other’ in this imagination even when the energy of the nationalist movement remains for the most part directed against the British. Therefore, briefly probing the intersection of the political collective of the Hindu-Indian nation in my chosen Partition texts—within which the text situates the Hindu, East-Bengali refugee woman—and the Muslim is an illuminating exercise in identifying questions that my preference for the metonym is able to *raise* even if it cannot answer.

The task I have set up here is also relevant for the critique from *within* that this dissertation reads in its three chosen Partition texts. The figure of the East-Bengali refugee woman this dissertation privileges for analysis is inscribed as a caste Hindu and, even if *déclassé*, of the *bhadralok* class. Taking this figure as a point of critique to enter the problematic of the normative nation-formation has made other figures who were ‘other’ to the nation-making process relatively invisible. I would like to situate the absence of the Muslim voice among many other absences in this dissertation. However, this being a deliberation to understand the Partition, the absent Muslim perspective has become especially

problematic. Himani Bannerji's review of *The Trauma and the Triumph* has cautioned that the absence of Muslim perspectives/narratives gives rise to the problematic view that the Partition of Bengal was only "a Hindu tragedy" (3809). I have attempted to avoid, in spite of my focus on Hindu-Bengali texts, perpetuating such a view. In terms of the details within the dissertation, I have attempted to partially circumvent the problem by complicating the notion of a 'Hindu tragedy' itself. I have found a rationale for the narrow focus of this dissertation to read the Partition and its violence within the perimeter of the Hindu cultural nationalism, understanding that it did have a role to play, while certainly not an exclusive one, in the rise of communalism and in the historical outcome of the Partition. This legitimizes, I argue, a reading of the Partition circumscribed *within* bhadrakal negotiation with nation-making. Nevertheless, within these very parameters I have set up, it remains my task to ask how the Muslim other enters these Partition texts. In the discussion that follows, the two aims—to look for the Muslim in my chosen Partition texts and my attempt to underscore the limit of my use of the metonym—converge.

II

Both Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and Sabitri Roy's *Swaralipi* refuse to legitimize the post-Partition normative Indian nation as a (majoritarian) *Hindu* nation. It is possible that an affiliation to a leftist imaginary of the collective in these two texts allows an alternative framing of the collective that resists religious identity as a basis of the nation. In this, there is an elision of the problem of

religious identity in the post-Partition nation. It is, however, in Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga: The River Churning* that we find a frantic grappling with the constituency and perimeters of the nation that cannot ignore religious identity. The site of the grappling is also the refugee woman. Unlike the other two texts, *The River Churning* allows us to examine how and what kind of questions do not get answered but *begin* to arise when we are able to read women as political subjects in relation to the nation. I will dwell briefly on Ghatak and Roy but return finally to Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel.

In Ritwik Ghatak's film, there is an emphatic refusal to attribute a religious (Hindu) identity to the self. Gyan Pandey writes in *Remembering the Partition*, that

Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus were all redefined by the process of Partition [...]; but perhaps most fundamentally, as Sikhs and Muslims and Hindus alone. All over the subcontinent, for extended periods, at many times since 1947, men, women and children belonging to these communities – yet belonging to different castes, classes, occupations, linguistic and cultural backgrounds – have been seen in terms of little but their Sikh-ness, their Muslim-ness or their Hindu-ness. (16)

Ghatak's textual politics appears to be reacting to this very condition, that at this point in history there is a now a need to recognize the self as exclusively 'Hindu' and the other as Muslim. Playing into this stabilizes the Hindu-Muslim binary and, thus, the very logic of the Partition at its core. This reaction leads to a very dramatic ellipsis at the heart of Ghatak's text: there are no Muslims in the film or,

indeed, in any of his films. I read this ellipsis as a refusal to attribute a religious identity to either the self or the other in this moment of nation making. It is as though Ghatak's films want to protest against the fact that in this particular moment there is indeed no way to evoke the categories Hindu and Muslim without also condoning the logic of the Partition. After all, the consolidation of a stable, unitary category called 'Hindu,' as oppositional to Muslim, is intricately tied with nation-making.¹ Therefore, what Ghatak chooses as the site of recalcitrance is not the 'Hindu' but the caste-class privileged *bhadralok* identity of the self. Ghatak brings the *bhadralok* face to face with the untouchable, in *Subarnarekha (The Golden Line)*, but not the Muslim. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the chastity of the refugee woman is, as I have shown in Chapter 3, not played upon in relation to the Muslim other, but it is plotted along lines of labour and exploitative motherhood and critiqued from inside.

Resistance to the (Hindu) nation in Sabitri Roy's *Swaralipi* takes a different route. Her strategy is similar to one adopted by many leftist writers in western India/Pakistan, many of them part of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA), a branch of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).² She attempts to

¹ Creation of the 'Hindu' as a noun, as opposed to an adjective, is itself a fairly recent phenomenon, not going further back than cultural nationalism and the colonial censuses at the turn of the previous century. Even on the eve of the Partition, the Hindu Right had to put in a formidable effort to rally around an inclusive identity called 'Hindu' which could include many lower castes, untouchables, and other peripheral groups. In order to enter the discourse of the Partition, what should be rightly understood as caste-privilege inscribed within Brahminism now becomes a stable identity and noun called the Hindu.

² For a study of several important writers within the PWA, see Priyamvada Gopal's *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence*. The essay by Muhammad Umar Memon titled "Partition Literature: A Study of Intizar Husain" offers a clearly partisan and unflattering but insightful reading of the characteristics of Partition literature written by members of the PWA.

recognize as legitimate and equal the political rights of both the Hindus and the Muslims in the new Indian nation. However, in terms of depicting bodily—inevitably sexual—violence of the Partition, she chooses to balance the violence committed by one side with that of the other, as a way of nullifying the suggestion that one religious identity is more villainous than the other. The point it makes is that both sides are wronged and wronging and, essentially, equally *human*. In West Bengal, the normative Partition narrative is invariably one-sided: one of the victimization of the Hindus. Therefore, even the tokenism—for instance, of including in the plot of *Swaralipi* the story of a single Muslim woman abducted and gang-raped, along with reports of Hindu women abducted and raped in East Pakistan—does testify to a certain amount of courage to speak against the consensus. Roy is indeed the only Bengali-Hindu author I know who addresses the marginalization and eviction of Muslims from post-Partition Calcutta and the communalization of the city space in both *Swaralipi* and *Badwip* (The Delta). In *Swaralipi*, the abduction-like arrest of Sita on her journey from East Bengal to Calcutta deliberately overwrites the script of abduction of a Hindu woman by Muslims with that of a political worker being arrested by the police. These textual-political strategies allow *Swaralipi* the space to evade an engagement with women's relationship to religious identity in post-Partition India.

Unlike Ghatak's film and Roy's novel, Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel *The River Churning* addresses the ramifications of the religious/community/national identity for the women subjects in post-Partition India. This is discernible in a heteronormative, inter-national, inter-religious triangulation at the heart of the

plot of the novel. Sutara, the female protagonist, receives two marriage proposals. The first is from the family of Tamij Saheb, who rescued her and gave her shelter immediately after the Partition riots. The proposal comes later, when adult Sutara is living the life of an outcast in India. A few months following this proposal, Promode, a son of the family with whom she takes shelter after arriving in Calcutta after the Partition, also proposes marriage to Sutara. The two marriage proposals are mirrored against each other: soon after the proposal by Promode, the narration proceeds to comment, “He was filled with sympathy. What he did not know was that Aziz had an *identical* feeling for her” (Jyotirmoyee Devi, *The River Churning* 132; emphasis added). However, Sutara rejects Aziz and accepts Promode at the very end of the novel. The resolution of this triangulation is, I suggest, a difficult negotiation of post-Partition *Hindu* national identity for the refugee woman. The novel, then, presents a different context for understanding how women as metonyms of the nation may function within, and not against or outside, the nation, than I have done in the chapters of this dissertation.

Let us consider the details of the two proposals. The proposal for marriage to Aziz does not come from Aziz himself but from his mother, and is conveyed to Sutara by Aziz’s sister and Sutara’s childhood friend, Sakina. This is a wish long harboured by Sakina and Aziz’s mother since the days of the riots when Sutara found shelter in their family; the desire stems from the older woman’s deep fondness for Sutara as well as expressed misgivings about what awaits Sutara after her return to her ‘own’ community (26, 53). Originally before Sutara is sent to India, Aziz’s mother’s language suggests that she is thinking of adopting

Sutara; later, finding that Sutara is still unmarried and that her misgivings have been correct, she proposes the match. The men of Aziz's family including Aziz himself are completely ignorant of such a wish until the proposal is already made and rejected.

When Sakina, on behalf of her mother, asks her childhood friend's hand for her brother Aziz, Sutara is shocked, turns pale and breaks into tears: "How can I ever forget that night," she asks, "How can I ever forget the fate of my sister, my parents?" (93). Sakina's reportage of this exchange to her mother ends with "Perhaps I too would have made the same remark[;] I, too, would not have been able to forget the humiliation of my mother and sister and the death of my father" (93-94). There is nothing surprising in the fact that Sutara cannot forget that night or move beyond the immense trauma of that night imprinted on her mind that informs her very being. However, what does the citation of *this* as the reason for not being able to marry Aziz indicate? The suggestion is that an alliance with Aziz must mean forgetting that night or 'forgiving' the men who attacked her and brought devastation on her family. Aziz becomes a representative of the Muslim community, and the Muslim community at large becomes responsible for the assault on Sutara and her family. What is most troubling about these suggestions is the contrast they offer to Promode's situation. The rejection of Aziz indicates that, for Sutara, he remains a representative of his community; she is unable to think of a marriage with him as anything but marrying into the Muslim community. Promode, in contrast, does not become a representative of his family,

which was so heartless and quick to reject her, let alone for the community that makes an outcast of her.

If we contrast Promode's family with Aziz's, the latter is the one that protects Sutara, gives her shelter, and extends the acceptance and friendship that Sutara seeks and is so cruelly denied by her 'own' community. While both Promode and his sister Subha are sympathetic to Sutara, they are completely inhibited by their family and are never able to fully extend a hand of friendship towards her. Sutara is not unaware of or ungrateful for the role played by Aziz-Sakina's family in her life, and yet she is unable to accept the proposal of marriage which Sakina's mother and Sakina desire. Admittedly, Sutara has no sense of the personhood of the adult Aziz, let alone a cause for romance, but nor is there any indication of romance between Promode and Sutara. In fact, the lack of romance in the way the novel arrives at the proposal in the end is almost painful to notice, but we must also appreciate the lack of false piety there. In the beginning, while Promode clearly likes Sutara, what he feels when he sees the cruel treatment she receives from his family is pity for an orphan refugee girl. Later, he has a sense of injustice about it and suffers from the resultant guilt and shame. Finally, it is a citizenly duty that operates in the adult Promode's choice of Sutara as his bride. Sutara is, likewise, not only not infatuated by Promode, there is no indication in the text that she pays any special attention to him at any point.

Therefore, I must revise my earlier formulation. Promode *does* stand for his community; and Sutara can marry Promode, forgiving his family, precisely because he is, as is she, a *Hindu* and an Indian in the newly drawn national

boundaries. In fact, Promode's proposal is attractive to Sutara precisely because he is an Indian and Hindu; marrying him allows her to affiliate with the community within which she is an outcast. As it is, the novel sets up the 'love' triangle in a way that conflates Hindu with Indian and Muslim with Pakistani, making it unclear whether Sutara chooses Promode because he is an Indian or because he is a Hindu. I have argued in Chapter 2 that *The River Churning* emphasizes not the first instance of Sutara's assault, by 'their men,' but the second, of rejection by her 'own' community. However, when we consider that eventually Sutara cannot forgive the first, but she can forgive the second, it seems problematic to presume that to Sutara and for *The River Churning* the latter rejection is *equally* violent. The text remains critical of patriarchy, but when it comes to choosing one patriarchy over another, the text chooses 'our patriarchy' over 'their patriarchy.'

Or, does reading Sutara as a metonym of the nation foreclose an exclusive division between the different identities that Sutara straddles—Sutara as a woman, Sutara as a Hindu, Sutara as an Indian—? Although it is not articulated as such, is the fact significant that Sutara's marriage to Aziz would mean her return to East Pakistan, which could amount to a form of exile from India for Sutara? Is Jyotirmoyee Devi here contradicting the expectation that a woman has no 'jati,' (race/ethnicity/caste/nation), asserting that her subjectivity as a metonym includes a sense of ethnic/religious/nationalist collective? Is this a reminder that women, when we imagine them as metonyms, remain constrained within collectives? I suggest that it is in these particular questions that we encounter the contours of the

nature of the subjectivity that, by my use of the metonym, I have claimed the refugee woman allows us to imagine.

The questions women as metonym are able to raise in *The River Churning* resonate with the personal-law debates within Indian feminism post-1980s, which could not settle how much “recognition and weight to be given to women’s community identities” (Sunder Rajan, *Scandal of the State* 16) along with their identity as women. The question is also perhaps tied to the fact that “*gender is not a community*” (emphasis in Balibar; Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas* 67, cited in Sunder Rajan 14) and that women as political categories must “belong[...] instead more ‘naturally’ to mixed-gender (and hierarchical) families and communities” (14).

III

My reading of the refugee woman as a metonym, then, is not a solution to the historical problem of women’s relationship to the nation and to nationalism. Rather, it presents the problematic in a manner that allows for a more enabling form of analysis of the problem. In the section above, I show what positing the refugee woman as a metonym cannot inherently do: the metonymic imagination cannot predetermine one form of political belonging over another for the gendered subject. What is inherently ambiguous in the subjectivity I have claimed for the refugee woman through the trope of the metonym, however, is inherent in the very concept of ‘the subject.’ As Étienne Balibar has famously argued, the concept of the subject is paradoxically constituted by two opposites: *subjectum*

and *subjectus*, the first referring to “individual substance” while the latter to “subjection or submission” (“Subjection and Subjectivation” 8). However, choosing the trope of the metonym as a way of imaging women in relation to a collective can provide the *possibility* of raising the question of women’s subjectivity—hence that of participation, *including complicity*—in collective politics. It allows us to at least navigate the hazardous terrain of gendered subjectivity formation in the context of collective politics. Therefore, I argue, indeed as I have shown in this dissertation, the refugee woman, allowing us to imagine women as constitutive of the nation, is a useful category in comprehending women in relation to the nation.

Therefore, I make a feminist investment in the figure of the refugee woman. Nevertheless, I would like to alert the reader that the problematic the refugee woman illuminates and intervenes into—women as signs—could not be reduced to this moment of history alone. The history of women in the Indian nation-state provides ample proof that the feminist achievements discernable in the figure of the refugee woman, reflecting feminist gains made by the historical East-Bengali refugee women, by no means solved the problem of women as signs in relation to the nation once and for all. Gender dynamics in Partition-like violence that has become recurrent in the history of postcolonial India itself is one, but clearly not the only, example that proves that the old problem persists, taking different shapes. The history of women also testifies that the struggle to find subjecthood against erasure continues. What this means is, while some achievements of these historical refugee women did translate generationally in

some sure ways, we cannot begin to plot a definite progress story that ends with these women. As it is, most of their feminist gains did not disperse outside their class and caste.

IV

I would like to situate the findings of this dissertation and its arguments about the figure of the refugee woman in context of larger debates within feminism on the nation in general and within Indian feminism in particular. I propose that the dissertation, beyond its immediate task of charting the nature of the violence of the metaphor and its resistances in the given context, is ultimately directed to understanding the particularly vexed relationship between women and the nation and to probe if other forms of collectives become available as more enabling alternatives in defining political collectives. In this dissertation I especially address the relationship between women and the nation in the early years of postcolonial nationhood in the Indian context. I posit the refugee woman as a figure who signals a transition into the postcolonial and one who constitutes the possibility of political praxis in the early years of postcolonial nationhood. The reading of the figure of the refugee woman in this dissertation, therefore, situates itself within broader questions that mark the postcolonial.

This dissertation takes up its questions in the context of Bengal. Partha Chatterjee's seminal study *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* inserted Bengal and the Bengali bhadralok in the map of international scholarship on nationalism and postcolonialism. His work provided a

persuasive model for nationalism in the anti-colonial context and has remained *the* definitive work on the topic. This dissertation has benefited from Chatterjee's work in many ways; not least for its contribution in making a successful theoretical case, accessible and useful to students and scholars in multiple disciplines, out of material that in less powerful hands could have remained confined to area studies. This dissertation, coming to Chatterjee's work with the perspective provided by gender as an analytic category and by foregrounding the Partition, has attempted to grapple with some of the hidden implications of Chatterjee's explicatory model of postcolonial nationalism.

With a topic like this, a student runs the risk of both generalizations to the point of losing meaning in a local context and particularizations to the point of being irrelevant outside it. I have attempted to the best of my ability to steer away from such an outcome. The theoretical insights this dissertation affords should be useful, I like to believe, to a wide audience that is interested in the central problems this dissertation addresses even if they are not invested in the historical-geographical specificities of the discussions and texts. Nevertheless, the issues the dissertation addresses are political in nature and cannot be removed from the particularities of place and time. The discussions and texts I present here consciously locate themselves within Partition studies and address the omission of Bengal from Partition Studies in the context of India. In a small way, this dissertation attempts to redress the gap and suggests that valuable debates are added to the field by the inclusion of Bengal and texts from Bengal that have not hitherto been possible due to an exclusive focus on Punjab.

V

Finally, it remains for me to acknowledge that writing this dissertation has been a personal exercise as much as it has been part of an institutional requirement. Gayatri Spivak has talked of being “wary” of “nostalgic investigation of the lost roots of [...] identity [...] by the academics in the self-imposed exile of eurocentric economic migration” although, or perhaps especially, because she feels it herself (*Critique* 206). She has, instead, defended her choice of Indian material as an “accident of birth and education” (ibid.).³ Although I cannot deny the possibility that my “self-imposed exile” has had a role to play in my choice of material—I certainly know that the conditions of writing while away from Bengal for the most part and within the Anglo North-American academy has left a strong mark on my work—I have tried to consciously work against “nostalgia” or a search for “roots.” In any case, I have a different line of ‘defence’ than Spivak. I have thought it best to ‘start’ my academic work here because, as Antonio Gramsci tells us in *The Prison Notebooks*, “the starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you [sic] an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (324). I first encountered these lines in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Said added a few more words not translated in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith’s version of the *Notebooks*, “therefore, it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory” (24). This dissertation in some ways has allowed me to begin to address that imperative.

³ Writing “some seventeen years later,” in her essay “Moving Devi,” Spivak retracts her earlier ‘wariness,’ saying she is now “at ease with the Indic material” (120).

Therefore, like the texts analyzed here, this dissertation itself is an enquiry from *within* a certain discourse. The ‘other’ is not present here except at the margins, but this is not intended as an exercise in perpetuating the hegemony of the self. Rather, it is an endeavour to examine the constitution of the gendered self. If, admittedly, this is yet another instance of someone from the bhadralok class engaging with writers from the same class writing about themselves, the motivation of the exercise has been one of *critique*.

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