



# Sacrificial Daughters: Trauma, Myth, and Exploitation in Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*

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## Abstract

*This article examines the profound themes of sacrifice and suffering in Ritwik Ghatak's film Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud-Capped Star) focussing on the character of Nita. Nita, the eldest daughter of an impoverished family in post-Partition India, undergoes a Nita's tragic journey. The film depicts how the weight of societal expectations and family obligations compels the protagonist to forsake her aspirations. The narrative examines the complexities of gender roles, the impact of economic hardship, and the emotional toll of self-sacrifice showing how Nita's identity is shaped by her responsibilities as a caregiver. The article also delves into the interplay of Hindu mythology particularly the archetype of the Mother Goddess to frame Nita's experiences of exploitation and abandonment. This analysis ultimately reveals the deep-seated trauma faced by women in a patriarchal society, emphasising the enduring impact of Ghatak's work in contemporary discussions of gender and social justice.*

**Keywords:** trauma, post-partition, self-sacrifice, gender roles, exploitation

*Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star) 1960, directed by Ritwik Ghatak, portrays the struggles of Nita in the aftermath of the Partition. The movie is based on a story by Bengali novelist Shakipadha Rajguru and it examines the “displacement of refugees, unemployment, poverty and hunger, corruption, indifference and cynicism” prevalent in that era (Sarkar, 2010, p. 200). Nita, the eldest daughter of an impoverished family, sacrifices her own needs to provide for her relatives, which ultimately leads to her downfall as she succumbs to tuberculosis. She “embodies the generous and munificent daughter” and plays a crucial role in “establishing a sense of financial independence” for her family (Menon, 2013, p. 59).

Nita's trauma reflects the suffering inflicted by the Partition and depicts how women are often exploited for financial gain at the hands of their own families. Her only moment of expressing her desires and the toll of her exploitation comes at the end when she desperately cries out for the will to live. Ghatak draws upon the Durga/Uma myth from Hindu mythology by framing Nita within this archetype. The Mother Goddess archetype represents the cycle of birth, death, and regeneration (Bhaskar, 1983). So, Nita's role in the narrative highlights the violence of being pushed into a motherly role, revealing the exploitation faced by women (Chakraborty, 2010, pp. 216, 218).



Nita's struggle is evident when she confronts a shopkeeper about payment and later finds her broken sandals, which symbolise her hardships. Her siblings' requests, including Gita's desire for a saree to Montu's demand for shoes, reveal their self-interest. Nita mirrors the mythological figure of Durga or Jagatdhatri, the "universal sustainer" who sacrifices for others. Her own aspirations are neglected, even though she holds a prominent role in the family as a provider. She fulfils her siblings' desires by buying things for them, but doesn't even replace her worn-out sandals. This exploitation shows how Nita's "labor power" is used by others, finally resulting in costing her life (Menon, 2013, p. 60). Her trauma deepens with her mother's exploitation. When Nita returns home without her paycheck, her mother accuses her of spending it, symbolising how Nita's role as a provider is manipulated. Bhaskar interprets the mother as a "Kali" figure who drains Nita's life to sustain the family. This subverts traditional motherhood, as the mother prioritises her "self-preservation" over Nita's well-being (Menon, 2013, p. 63).

Chakraborty observes that the mother's actions fracture the ideal of the "sacrificing mother" (Chakraborty, 2010, p. 218). When Nita's father is disabled, she assumes the role of the family's head by becoming deeply "trapped in her role of surrogate motherhood" (Chakraborty, 2010, p. 219). The narrative culminates in her complete sacrifice for the family, reinforcing her tragic role as the sustainer. Nita's portrayal as the sole sustainer emphasises her exaggerated role of motherhood, which Chakraborty argues is far from natural (2010, p. 219). Overwhelmed by her responsibilities Nita neglects her own needs and desires, leading to a state of repression where she suppresses her aspirations and individuality. Her denial of self becomes evident in her unfinished studies and her assumption of her father's patriarchal role. This repression contributes to her trauma as she confesses to Sanat that her suffering is due to her inadequacy which she views as penance. In contrast, Nita's brother Shankar engages in singing while asking for money to visit the salon. Despite the high cultural value of music, the text downplays Shankar's pursuits, emphasises his failure to assume

familial responsibilities and shifts the burden onto Nita. The men in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* exhibit "depressive inertia and shrewd self-interests" (2013, p. 60, 61). Shankar and Nita's boyfriend, Sanat, who also relies on her income for research, inverts traditional gender roles. This role reversal and conflicting demands on Nita contribute to her tragic fate. The selfish actions of Gita significantly contribute to Nita's suffering. A devastating turning point in the story arises when Gita "draws Sanat away" from Nita. The situation escalates when Gita reveals her impending marriage to Sanat crushing Nita's hopes. This development facilitated by their mother's "tacit encouragement," exemplifies how Nita's role as a self-sacrificing provider demands she forsake her future (Chakraborty, 2010, p. 222, 223). By giving her bangles—symbols of marital bliss Nita signifies that she will "never need those bangles," further negating her prospects.

Nita's trauma intensifies with the betrayals of Gita and Sanat. Sanat, whom Nita has supported financially and emotionally, eventually proposes to her but she declines, prioritising her family's needs. This decision exacerbates her trauma when Sanat begins a relationship with Gita. Sanat transforms into a shadow of his former self by abandoning his research and taking a job while renting a room for secret meetings with Gita but Nita remains unaware of these changes. The "sensuality" of Gita is a stark contrast to Nita's asceticism, luring Sanat away from her. Sanat breaks the promise of love and support, and Gita disregards ethical boundaries by pursuing her sister's lover. This double betrayal is particularly disheartening for Nita who plunges into deep disappointment when she finds them together and realises that she has lost Sanat forever. Her grief is evident when she breaks down on the stairs feeling she has "lost something significant that had belonged to her" (Rajadhyaksha, 1982, p. 62). Nita's silence shows her inability to articulate her pain and deepens her sense of loss which further isolates her.

The struggle Nisha endures to express her trauma is compounded by a lack of language to describe her pain. She lacks the "narrative mastery" to navigate her grief which leaves her silent even as she learns of



Sanat's relocation and Gita's forthcoming marriage. The rare expressions of distress shown by Nisha like mentioning emotional distance from her mother and referring to her injustices as penances, are insufficient to convey the depth of her anguish. In this "traumatic enactment," Nita endures profound loneliness lacking "Second Personhood" and the support she needs from those around her. The support her father and Shankar provide Nita is also inadequate leaving her to confront trauma largely alone. Nita's relationships, once her sources of meaning, transform into sources of suffering, isolating her in her "enactment" of trauma. Her trauma emerges from those who should have supported her, particularly Sanat, who drives her toward tragedy. She confesses to Sanat that her current suffering is a form of penance for failing to stand up for herself when it mattered the most. This acknowledgement shows her acute awareness of her suffering and its origins. Despite recognising her trauma Nita struggles to integrate it into her sense of self because she lacks supportive figures. Her self-address or "Second Personhood," fails to facilitate any healing as integration requires "interaction with others" which is absent in her life. This absence leaves her unable to narrate her experiences exacerbating her trauma and complicating her healing process. The unresolved trauma manifests somatically as evidenced by her diagnosis of tuberculosis.

Shankar, after establishing himself in music, discovers Nita's illness when he finds a blood-stained handkerchief, which he mistakenly thinks is a love letter from Sanat. Her mother describes Nita's isolation: "In that room. Goes to work, then stays in there. Eats there, too. Talks to no one. Keeps everything hidden. Feverish, ill... she doesn't tell" (Chakraborty, 2010, p. 232). Shankar takes Nita to a sanatorium in Shillong but there too she continues to hide her pain. When he mentions home and Gita's son, Nita's wail of desperation reflects her yearning for a normal life and the warmth of home. This moment is the only time Nita articulates her trauma through a "heart-piercing Munchian scream" resonating through the indifferent hills (Menon, 2013, p. 68). This is a depiction of her unfulfilled desires and the emotional cost of her sacrifices marking a poignant, though

unhealing, expression of her suffering. Nita's marginalisation at the sanatorium is starkly evident when her father visits her room and tells her illness has turned her from a vital supporter of the family into a burden. Her presence is now seen as a risk to the newborn baby, and her room is needed for the new mother. His sarcasm reflects the family's abandonment of her once she is deemed unproductive. He forces her out aligning this act with the traditional ritual of giving away daughters in marriage while subverting the myth of Durga, where the goddess is also discarded. Chakraborty notes, "The idol ... needs to be symbolically emptied of significance," paralleling Nita's situation where she is "no longer the goddess" and must be "discarded" (Chakraborty, 2005, p. 230).

This scene subverts the traditional celebration of daughters being given away in marriage, but here depicts Nita's traumatic abandonment. Her illness once a symbol of her sacrifice later becomes a reason for her rejection and eventual "immersion" as a discarded figure. Nita's body which was once valued is now seen as expendable, and her trauma becomes both mental and somatic. Her deteriorating health reflects her exploitation leading to a breakdown of her mental resilience and a feeling of being "disembodied." The song that opens the narrative symbolises Nita as a "cloud-capped star veiled by circumstances," representing a self-worth she fails to recognize. This narrative portrays how the sacrifices of women particularly in family settings, lead to the suppression of their desires and self-worth. The barber whom Shankar frequently visits also criticises Shankar for relying on Nita's earnings depicting the broader exploitation and undervaluation of women's contributions.

Nita's father informs Shankar that no one remembers Nita anymore, emphasising how her tireless silent suffering has led to her current plight. He laments that, "In the past they married daughters off to the dying. They were barbarians. Now we are educated, civilized. We educate our girl, wring her dry and destroy her future" (Menon, 2013, p. 68). Despite his sadness and regret he feels powerless due to his disability and cannot alleviate Nita's suffering. Shankar, deeply affected, protests, "I can't take it



anymore. I'm leaving in protest. You'll continue to suffer in silence and be suffocated by it." The lamentations of father and brother fail to stop Nita's exploitation. Her endless sacrifices become a normal obligatory part of her life, reflecting her role as a sacrificial "illusion" rather than genuine fulfillment. The ending of the film portraying another girl returning home with broken sandals, symbolises the perpetual struggles of girls who abandon their dreams for their families without reward. While women's employment during the Partition era provided financial independence, it also highlighted how they were exploited, prioritizing family needs over their futures. Nita's ultimate collapse from tuberculosis reflects her total exploitation and abandonment, as she is left in a sanatorium, "collapsing from overwork and losing her voice" (Menon, 2013, p. 68).

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