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## From Marginality to Agency: Reimagining the ‘New Woman’ in Select Post-Partition Bengali Cinematic Narratives.

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### Abstract

Conventional patriarchal historiography of the Bengal Partition Narrative frequently places women at the periphery, representing them largely through domestic identities such as mothers, daughters, and sisters. Within such frameworks, women often appear as marginal figures or passive sufferers, while those who demonstrate independence are portrayed as deviant or disruptive. This paper challenges the limitations of the elite, male-dominated Bhadrolok discourse that foregrounds female victimhood by exploring the experiences of East Bengali refugee women following the Partition of India in 1947. While the Partition of Bengal caused immense dislocation, including the loss of homeland, identity, and community, it also produced conditions that enabled a redefinition of feminine subjectivity. The study examines how refugee women confronted displacement and social hostility to renegotiate their identities and actively contribute to the socio-cultural transformation of West Bengal, thereby reshaping the ideals associated with the womanhood. Through a critical analysis of female protagonists in the films *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Rajkahini*, and *Goynar Baksho*, the paper contends that these cinematic narratives foreground the emergence of a “New Woman.”

**Keywords:** Partition of Bengal; Womanhood; New Woman; Bengali Cinema; Refugee Women; Marginality; Gender and Agency.

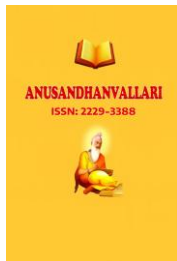
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Canonical literary texts and historical narratives of the Partition of India have largely emphasized men’s experiences and portrayed men as the principal agents of history. In these narratives, women often appear only as “small players,” a phrase highlighted by Urvashi Butalia in her book *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Within such accounts, women are rarely shown as having distinctive experiences of their own, except in relation to the traumatic violence they endured—rape, abduction, molestation, and killing.

Scholars like Urvashi Butalia have also drawn attention to a major gap in the historiography of Partition: the relative absence of detailed studies on the experiences of women in Bengal and in what later became Bangladesh. According to her, these histories require independent and focused scholarly attention. Consequently, several initiatives have emerged that seek to reconstruct and reinterpret the Partition experiences of Bengali women.

Traditional patriarchal histories, along with many male-authored literary texts, frequently portray women as marginal, secondary, and derivative figures. In such narratives, women are typically defined through relational roles—as mothers, housewives, chaste daughters, or sisters—and are largely confined to the domestic sphere. They are seldom depicted as leaders, decision-makers, or autonomous agents. In this framework, the idealized middle-class Indian woman is often imagined as best suited to a life centered on household responsibilities.

Furthermore, certain occupations—particularly factory and office work—have historically been coded as masculine and therefore considered unsuitable for women, as discussed by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in



their influential work *Borders & Boundaries* (1998). At the same time, other forms of labour have been categorized as “feminine,” thereby reinforcing socially constructed notions of femininity. This rigid division between men as workers in the public sphere and women as caretakers within the domestic space was strongly challenged by refugee women in Bengal during and after the Partition of India, as discussed by scholars such as Paulomi Chakraborty (Chakraborty, 2018).

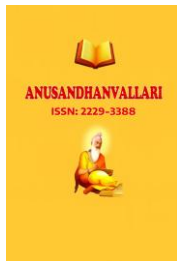
By questioning the dominant masculine narratives and the biases embedded in Partition historiography, feminist scholars and filmmakers have increasingly foregrounded women’s perspectives. Their work places women at the center of inquiry—not merely as victims but as subjects and active agents of history. Through such interventions, the period during and after Partition has been re-examined on a broader canvas, enabling a deeper understanding of women’s experiences within their own historical and social contexts.

In 1947, when the people of the subcontinent formally became citizens of a newly independent nation after the Partition of India, the refugees who migrated to West Bengal were often treated as what Nilanjana Chatterjee evocatively described as the “midnight’s unwanted children” (Chatterjee, 1992). A large number of these displaced people were forced to live in extremely harsh and impoverished conditions in refugee camps and colonies. They struggled continuously with the challenges of resettlement, securing employment, and sustaining their expanding families in an unfamiliar social and economic environment. Within this context of displacement and uncertainty, women emerged as the most vulnerable group. In this new and often hostile setting, they experienced a double marginalization—both as refugees uprooted from their homeland and as women within a deeply patriarchal social structure—making their position particularly precarious and disadvantaged.

So many earlier histories of Refugee women focus on the grim stories of victimization of women. By only highlighting the victimhood image one tends to marginalize women's other areas of experiences-how the partition intertwined great loss i.e. the loss of a home with a new beginning, how they faced enormous challenges of rebuilding and reshaping their fate in alien conditions. My objective is to highlight how the rootless homeless women reconstruct their own identity and individuality, establish themselves in history and nation, subvert the stereotypical role of women, interrupt the mere representation of women as a metaphor of the nation ,change the digits of feminine aspirations of the Bengali Bhadramahila and thereby emerge to be ‘new women’. In this connection I have taken for analysis three Bengali visual texts like Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Srijit Mukherjee's *Rajkahini*, Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho* all the leading women characters of which contribute to the emergence of “new woman” (Mahajan & Randhawa, 2016). In addition to these filmic narratives, I would like to refer to some historical figures and facts and literary text to strengthen my argument in this paper.

In order to reinterpret refugee or *bastuhara* women as “new women,” it is necessary first to provide a brief conceptual understanding of the idea of the “new woman” and to examine how women’s identities are connected with the structures of family, community, and nation. The concept of the “new woman,” symbolizing shifting gender norms, began to take shape in the late nineteenth century. According to Oxford Dictionaries, the term “new woman” refers to a woman who is perceived as distinct from earlier generations—particularly one who questions or refuses conventional expectations of being solely a wife, mother, or homemaker, and instead supports women’s independence and equality with men. Such women increasingly claim the freedom to participate in public life, entering fields such as employment, politics, and cultural activities beyond the confines of the domestic sphere (The Ohio State University, n.d.).

To understand the condition and transformation of middle- and lower-middle-class refugee women in Bengal, it is necessary to examine both historical records and literary representations from the region. Scholars such as Jashodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta have recently demonstrated that refugee women gradually moved



beyond the identity of passive victims. Instead, they developed resilience, self-confidence, and the capacity to overcome severe hardships in order to survive and succeed (Bagchi & Dasgupta, 2003).

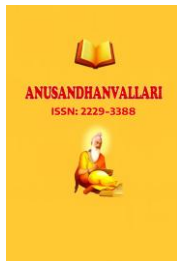
Following the Partition of Bengal, refugee women began to assert themselves as tireless breadwinners, thereby reshaping the traditional ideals associated with the Bengali *bhadramahila*. Their entry into economic life marked a significant shift as they moved out of the private, domestic sphere into the public domain. Women with some formal education sought employment in schools, colleges, government and semi-government offices, as well as private firms. Those with limited educational opportunities relied on skills acquired within the household economy. Many of them produced and sold items such as pickles, *papad*, *badi*, and other homemade food products, while others earned livelihoods by making paper packets or rolling *bidis*. A number of refugee girls, particularly from middle-class backgrounds, also entered the world of performance. Some pursued careers in acting within the Calcutta film industry and commercial theatre. Distinguished actresses such as Sabitri Chatterjee and Madhabi Mukherjee illustrate this phenomenon. In addition, a few women worked as bar dancers in hotels in Kolkata, among whom Miss Shefali gained notable recognition. However, severe economic distress sometimes compelled a small number of women to enter professions such as prostitution (Bangalnama, 2009). This harsh social reality is also reflected in literary works such as *Alor Britte*, a short story by Samaresh Basu.

At the same time, refugee women increasingly became active participants in political and social organizations. Many joined Mahila Samitis and the Communist Party of India, which advocated for women's rights. By 1955, the party had collected 14,102 signatures demanding employment opportunities for women in the government sector. It also campaigned for financial assistance related to marriage and for the welfare of widows (Nagpal, 2017).

Literary texts also reflect this growing agency. In the novel *Swaralipi* by Sabitri Roy, many female characters—several of them refugees—are portrayed as politically conscious individuals. The narrative highlights the political awakening of refugees, especially women, within the newly independent Indian nation-state. The economic and political mobility experienced by refugee women in an unfamiliar urban landscape also brought about changes in gender roles. It led to a redefinition of what it meant to be a “modern” or “new” woman. As Gargi Chakravarty observes, the transformation was not limited merely to women's physical presence in public spaces. Rather, it signaled the emergence of a “new woman” who was self-reliant, independent, and capable of challenging the rigid structures of patriarchal authority both within the household and in the broader social sphere (Chakravarty, 2005).

Let us now turn to the three selected films chosen for analysis. Ritwik Ghatak's renowned film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, adapted from a novel by Shaktipada Rajguru, explores the life of a refugee family and the wider refugee community in post-partition Bengal following the Partition of India. The narrative centers on the life and struggles of the female protagonist, Nita, a devoted daughter whose relentless sacrifices ensure the survival of her entire family.

By reversing conventional patriarchal expectations of gender roles—where the eldest son, Shankar, would traditionally assume the role of family provider—Ghatak instead portrays Nita, the eldest daughter of this displaced household, as the primary breadwinner. In the harsh and uncertain conditions of refugee life, she takes responsibility for sustaining her family, striving for basic necessities such as food, shelter, and stability. The film opens with a striking image of Nita pausing to fix her torn slipper while on her way to work, symbolizing the hardship and endurance that shape her life. The concluding scene mirrors this opening moment: however, it is no longer Nita but an unnamed young woman who occupies the frame, suggesting that another woman must now shoulder the burden of supporting her refugee family. This visual parallel between Nita and the anonymous woman implies that Nita is not an isolated figure; rather, she represents the collective experience of countless refugee women (Chakraborty, 2010).



Through this portrayal, Nita emerges as a powerful representation of the “new woman.” She works alongside men and challenges the conventional gender division that confines women to the home while assigning men the role of public workers. By stepping into the public sphere and exercising agency both within and beyond the domestic space, she disrupts this binary framework. Nita’s life is marked by multiple transformative journeys: from the private sphere to the public domain, from sheltered domesticity to the realities of economic struggle, from immobility to active participation, and from dependence to responsible independence. These transitions collectively reflect the broader experience of a generation of working, resilient, and self-reliant women. In this sense, Nita’s transformation challenges the stereotypical image of women as passive victims of circumstance and instead foregrounds their strength and agency (Chakraborty, 2010).

Another significant Bengali film for discussion is *Goynar Baksho*, directed by Aparna Sen and adapted from the novel written by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay. The film vividly portrays the theme of women’s self-empowerment in India, emphasizing how determination and resilience enable women to challenge restrictive social structures. This women-centered narrative focuses on three seemingly ordinary Bengali women belonging to three different generations, each of whom, in her own way, initiates a form of resistance within a male-dominated society.

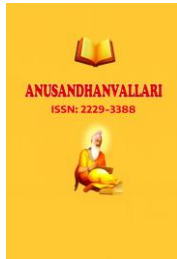
The character Rasmoni reflects the life of a widow in mid-twentieth-century Bengal. Despite the limitations imposed upon her, she preserves her dignity and continues to assert her voice even after death through her symbolic possession of the jewellery box. Rasmoni openly criticizes and resists male chauvinism, and her lingering presence as *Pisima* Rashmoni can be interpreted as a guiding force and moral authority. Her spirit becomes a motivating agency that inspires Somlata to question the social expectations imposed on women and to reconstruct her own identity as a free and independent individual.

The film also challenges conventional gender roles through Somlata’s entry into public life. By establishing and managing “Rashmoni Sharee Stores,” she validates her own agency and determination. The business not only restores the declining economic stability of a once-prosperous zamindar family but also symbolically subverts patriarchal norms, since the enterprise bears the name of a woman. Within the male-dominated *bhadralok* culture, engaging in paid employment or running a business was often perceived as diminishing the prestige of a zamindar household. Yet Somlata, an ordinary housewife of the mid-twentieth century, takes the radical step of starting a business—encouraged by the spirit of Rashmoni. Through this act she breaks long-standing orthodox conventions within the zamindar family and liberates herself from patriarchal restrictions.

The third female figure, Chaitali, represents the modern generation. She is portrayed as a confident young woman who rides a scooter to college, smokes cigarettes, and actively supports the independence movement of East Pakistan. Ultimately, the jewellery box—*Goynar Baksho*—which remains a powerful symbolic possession shared by the women across three generations, is dedicated to the noble cause of the liberation struggle of Bangladesh.

Through these narratives, the film illustrates how all three female characters challenge predetermined gender stereotypes and transcend traditional expectations. In doing so, they collectively embody the evolving idea of the “new woman,” characterized by independence, agency, and the courage to resist patriarchal authority.

Another women-centric visual text *Rajkahini* can be seen as a reflection of women's experience of partition of Bengal through their eyes. The first scene of this film shows victimization of a daughter. She is dumped near the medical camp after being brutally raped by men. This narrative underscores the traumatic violence meted out to a numberless women at the time of partition. As women's body is projected as the repository of our community and family's honor and her respectability and existence in a community is valorized by patriarchy to the degree to which she is able to retain her sexual purity. Therefore in a situation of communal riots or conflicts rape becomes a form of dishonoring the community and humiliating men as being



unable to protect the community's honor. So, Shabnam's raped and 'impure' body can be read as a text which is loaded with communal riots and the politics of patriarchy.

As the story goes forward, the director deliberately focuses on an alternative narrative that shows a group of prostitutes in a brothel house as not helpless victims but independent strong and defiant female prostitutes. All the women characters from different cultures and communities live an excluded life of freedom and independence economically and sexually at the brothel house. The protagonist Begum Jaan, is a prototype of self-empowerment, determination, who rejects the Radcliffe border line.

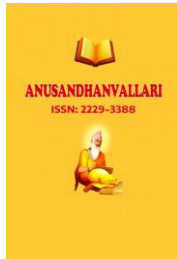
In a story where the integrity of the brothel house becomes a kind of microcosmic representation of the undivided Bengal, the struggle of the women (prostitutes by profession) to keep the house intact by taking recourse to radical violent measures can be read as an instance of the women's direct and active participation in the process of an anti-partition movement, the intense physical almost soldier-like representation of women in the sense that they take up guns to protect their home from falling apart can be seen as the women's penetration into male-dominated space of nationalist armed movement.

After analysing both historical accounts and visual narratives, it can be inferred that the principal female characters ultimately emerge as embodiments of the "new woman." In the period during and after the Partition of Bengal, women—particularly refugee women—began to move beyond the earlier image of helpless victims. Instead, they gradually transformed into active participants in society, becoming working, responsible, and self-reliant individuals through their engagement in public, political, cultural, and economic spheres.

In this process, women contributed significantly to the broader project of nation-building while simultaneously striving to free themselves from the long-standing structures of hegemonic patriarchy. By challenging and overturning the stereotypical expectations traditionally imposed upon them, these displaced and uprooted women were able to reconstruct their identities and assert their individuality. Through such acts of resilience and agency, they established themselves as representatives of the "new woman" within both historical narratives and the evolving national consciousness.

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