Chapter 4

Midnight’s Women: Structural Violence and Women In

Mammo and Khamosh Pani

I have become a djinn

Mammo

And what heaven is there for me – a Sikh heaven or a Muslim heaven

Khamosh Paani

In this chapter, Shyam Benegal’s cinematic text Mammo (1994) and Sabiha Sumar’s Khamosh Paani (2003) have been taken up, to understand how the state policies and patriarchal society affected the lives of the Muslim women survivors of Partition by using Johan Galtung’s notion of structural violence. This in turn will help to investigate ideas about home and belonging, nation, citizenship and religion. The chapter also takes up Ritwik Ghatak’s Partition trilogy to compare the narratives of women survivors in the East and West.

I

Shyam Benegal can be termed as one of parallel cinema’s favourite child. Mammo belongs to this genre of cinema. As against the commercial films, a new kind of cinema emerged in the late 1970 (Ira Bhaskar 2013: 218). It was “a critical movement with a social conscience” (Das Gupta 1982: 16) which focussed on the “ills
of Indian society ... the inherent violence of social structure” (Bhaskar 2013: 215). According to Sangeeta Datta:

The new cinema film-maker turned away from formulaic, sentimentalised melodrama ... following the European neorealist tradition, they opted out of studio environments and set their narratives in realistic settings – in most cases rural locales. The economics of taking small units out into remote areas also suitably matched the ideology of new films. Parallel cinema filmmakers experimented with form, technique and content, often working in different directions. (Sangeeta Datta 2002: 111)

Apart from this, the characters were not stereotypes – the good wife versus the bad prostitute, and so on. Such changes propelled filmmakers like Shyam Benegal to concentrate on the minorities and underprivileged. Even the plot structure underwent major changes. Popular Indian cinema gained their narrative structure from the epics like Ramyana and Mahabharata (Martin Jones 2011: 208). The pleasure is in hearing the familiar story told differently. In the same way, in popular Hindi Cinema the pleasure is not derived from how a story finishes but how it is done (Thomas 1985: 288). So there are the mandatory song and dance numbers and action sequences. But this was not the case with Benegal or the other filmmakers of parallel cinema. As far as content was concerned, the focus was exclusively on the people on the margins of society. Commenting on the content and form of Benegal’s films, Dutta writes:

Benegal’s cinematic text ... can be seen to operate within this paradigm of subaltern histories. In his narratives, Benegal privileged subaltern
subjectivities – the low caste peasant women, the film actress, performing women, Muslim, Christian and Dalit histories and identities. Benegal draws the viewer into the dramatic conflict of characters who live on the periphery of the nation state. It is almost as if the filmmaker reveals the underbelly or hidden text of the nation in his oeuvre. Over 28 years, his films have continued to express concern about human rights in an unequal society and to possess a reformist zeal for improving the condition of the oppressed ... cloaked in the new cinema ideology, Benegal offered independently financed, engaging character driven narratives set in specific socio-political contexts. Realism in his films was a product of new social forces and relationships, depicting action which was contemporary, an ideology which was secular and at the same time (like Ray’s films), universal. (Datta 2002: 28)

Through Mammo, Benegal continues his projection of marginalized people. It is a part of a trilogy of films which explores the personal histories of three Muslim women. The other two films are Sardari Begum (1996) and Zubeida (2000). This focus on the lives of Muslim subjects arose after the Bombay riots of 1993 whereby in a bid to “counter Hindu right wing ideology” there was a “conscious effort to create space for the minorities and to represent the cultural space of the Indian Muslims” (Datta 2002: 186). However making a movie on such a sensitive issue had its drawback as Benegal spoke about the difficulties of finding finances for the film:

The beginning of the 1990s was a very particularly difficult time. Private television channels began to mushroom ... The film industry was going
into a crisis mode ... In order to attract audiences to cinema, films had to be bigger, brassier, with great emphasis on size and spectacle ... Raising funds for non-traditional films, not always easy, now became impossible ... the only outlet for such films now were on television channels but this did not help to make the film viable since production cost increased proportionately after the economy was liberalized ... given this circumstances, NFDC had worked out a strategic collaboration with Doordarshan to produce films. It was this scheme that came to my rescue. (Benegal 2002: 183)

Made from NFDC funding on a shoestring budget, it was not a commercial hit but managed to garner critical acclaim. It bagged the National Award in 1995 for Best actress in a Supporting role for Surekha Sikri and also National Award for Best picture. Shunning the popular melodramatic mode of Hindi Cinema for a more realistic ambience, Mammo is the story of partition survivor, Mammo or Mehmooda Begum who goes to Pakistan during the turmoil of 1947 along with her husband. After her husband’s death, her family members ill-treat her and take possession of her property because she is childless. Mammo returns to take refuge in India with her sister Fayazi and her grandson. Every month, she has to report to the local police officer in Mumbai. She keeps extending her visa by bribing the officer. When he is transferred, his replacement targets Mammo and deports her back to Pakistan and she loses touch with her sister and Riyaz. The film moves ahead twenty years in time and Mammo returns to India and with the help of Riyaz, who has become a writer, fakes her own death in order to avoid deportation. The film was inspired from a piece of newspaper article where
screenwriter Khalid Mohamed describes the story of his great aunt. Benegal narrates how the article in the *Times of India* affected him:

> It was about a woman who had married a man from Lahore and moved there after partition. On the premature death of her husband, unable to deal with the hostility of her husband’s relative, she decided to return to Bombay to live with her only surviving relative, her older sister. She intended to live the rest of her life in her sister’s home. She managed to stay long after her visa expired. When the immigration authorities eventually found out, she was unceremoniously deported back to Lahore, where she had neither a family nor a home. The account was by Khalid, the well known film critic. The woman he had written about was his great aunt. I was deeply moved by the story. It was one of the myriad human tragedies that took place in the aftermath of the Partition of India, tragic stories of families torn apart by man-made borders and barriers. It was an exquisite miniature and in a microcosm expressed the trauma that had affected the entire subcontinent. I felt that the little piece had the makings of an excellent film. (Benegal 2002: 177)

The film opens with a grown up Riyaz having a dream about Mammo and waking up and asking Fayazzi about her. The dream is shot like a *montage* compiled of shots, starting with the arrival of Mammo to her deportation and is accompanied by a haunting music. According to Sergei Eisenstein, “Montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots” (Eisensenstein 1949: 45-71). He states that a number of shots put together moving at a great pace which gives out information in a short span of time. In *Mammo*, the grainy dark montage shots of the past contrasts sharply to the shots
in the present – of Riyaz and Fayazzi going about their mundane domestic chores. The montage conveys a sense of foreboding and articulates the power of the past to disrupt the harmony of the present. In this case it would be the after effect of partition on the women survivors of partition. The film does not follow a linear progression. The film begins with a grown up Riyaz and then moves back in time when he was a child, and then moves again to the present. After Riyaz’s dream in the beginning, Riyaz is seen typing the story of Mammo. Riyaz and Fayazi start wondering about Mammo’s whereabouts, when the doorbell rings. The shift from the present to the past is done when a grown up Riyaz goes to attend the doorbell. The door opens to reveal Mammo. In the reverse shot, instead of the grown up Riyaz, the audience sees Riyaz as a child, thereby indicating that the shift in time as taken place.

The film brings to light the struggles of Mammo as she adjusts to life like a refugee in the place of her birth. What makes her position more heartrending is the fact that she is not an official refugee. In the years following partition, the Hindu or Sikh refugees from Pakistan were easily given citizenship (Zamindar 2007: 197). This is not possible for Mammo even though she was born in India, as she is a Muslim. Vazira Zamindar writes about the discriminatory politics of the Indian government in granting citizenship to Muslims on the one hand and Hindus and Sikhs on the other, saying that the Indian Muslims who wanted to return to India after staying for some time in Pakistan were not able to procure citizenship easily (Zamindar 2007: 198). She writes, “a visit to Pakistan for even a month could be interpreted as migration and result in the loss of Indian citizenship” (Zamindar 2007: 198) Because Mammo is a woman she has a double identity crisis because “women were not entitled to autonomous
citizenship...their domicile was dependent on that of their husbands” (Zamindar 2007: 209). Elaborating further on this topic, Zamindar writes that:

There were two articles in the citizenship provisions which were particularly significant and established key relationships between birth, residence, migration and citizenship. Article 5 established “domicile” and birth in “the territory of India” as criteria for citizenship ... the domicile of women was dependent on that of the father until marriage and then in her marriage was defined as that of the husband ... by making domicile, a condition of citizenship, the new Indian citizenship laws ... were not unique in subjecting the citizenship of women to fathers and husbands. Gendered studies of citizenship point out that well into the twentieth century and virtually everywhere in the world, wives were subjects of their husbands and could not be autonomous citizens ... these citizenship laws, gendered rules of belonging in the nation-state, placed women’s identity and belonging within a patrilocal familial order and did not allow for exceptions otherwise accommodated within unofficial kinship practices ... Partition’s extraordinary and diverse displacements disrupted kin networks and the normative patrilocal family ... there were women ... who left behind entire kin networks to accompany their husbands to Pakistan, but when their marriage ended, either through estrangement, divorce or death, they were left without the resources of kinship for material support. (Zamindar 2007: 211)

Mammo becomes a “scum on earth” who belong neither here nor there (Arendt 1973: 267). For people like Mammo, it is not that they have simply lost a home but in the
newly etched boundaries of nation states, it has become totally impossible and unconceivable for them to think of building a new home and belonging to any community anywhere (Arendt 1973: 297). More often they are perceived as a “threat” (Malkki 1995: 68).

This fear regarding refugees can be understood somewhat in terms of Derrida’s notion of hospitality. According to Derrida the idea of hospitality requires a person to be in complete control of one’s home/ nation or there is the possibility that any guest may take over. Thus Derrida’s idea of hospitality is dependent on the idea of keeping guests under control. So hospitality has to be conditional. As he writes, “it is as though the laws of hospitality in marking limits, powers, rights and duties consisted in ... those rights ... that are always conditioned and conditional” (Derrida 2000: 77).

We can transpose this notion of hospitality to look at the relation between the nation state and its refugees. The nation state/ host deny certain rights to the guest/refugee for fear that they might take control of the house/nation. In the Indian context, this anxiety was manifested in the unequal citizenship laws as stated by Zamindar.

The anxiety of the nation regarding refugees/other is played out in the domestic spaces of Mamma itself when we see the attitude of Riyaz and Faiyazzi on the arrival of Mamma at their doorstep. Her own sister Faiyazi is seen worrying whether there is enough space and the means to fit in Mamma. Time and again she speaks about Mamma having occupied the house and at one point reminds Mamma that she is merely a guest. To which Mamma wonders, “How can I be a guest in my sister’s house?” (1: 28: 02). Even Riyaz is wary at her arrival and complains to his friends that she is a
stranger (ajnabi). He is unhappy about having made to give up his bed for her and not being able to do the things he likes.

Through the figure of Mammo, Benegal shows the absurdities of borders which compel people to procure visas to come back to places which they called their homes. By virtue of the fact that she is a Muslim, she cannot find refuge in the place of her birth even though she has familial ties which brings to light the “liminal position” (Kumar 2008: 200) occupied by Muslims in India. The disjunction between what she calls home and what the nation states construct for her is brought out in the scene when she is deported. She is dragged out of her home like a criminal taken to the station to be put on a train. Commenting on Benegal’s critique of the role of the bureaucracy and the police, Datta writes, “Benegal’s impatience with the corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy is this time evident in his treatment of the system – corrupt officials and bullying police who humiliates this helpless widow” (Datta 2002: 192). A constable asks her, “Why are you crying? You are returning home” (1: 52: 02) To which Mammo retorts, “This is my home” (1: 52: 07). But against the patriarchal laws of the new nation states, her definition of what she calls home is at odds with those defined by the state laws. Even though she was born here and has got relatives, yet she cannot make a claim to stay here permanently. As Daiya writes:

The film makes visible the affective economies of this peripheral existence eeked out by these two widowed Muslim women and a grandson/grandnephew whose familial relations cannot grant Mammo refuge or citizenship in her country of birth ... although she eloquently rejects the structures of citizenship that forcibly constructs the Pakistani
nation as her home here, her articulation of belonging is powerless within a system of nation states. (Daiya 2014: 276)

Mammo’s inability to understand the complexities of borders of modern nation states can be compared to the character of Thamma in Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Shadow Lines*. While filling out her passport, Thamma realises that by writing Dhaka as her place of birth, “her place of birth had come to be at odds with her nationality” (*Shadow Lines* 152). Thamma’s notion of her visit to Dhaka as a homecoming is debunked when she realizes that for immigrants like her to return to her place of birth is to be tagged as a foreign. As Tridib reminds her, “But you are a foreigner now, you are as foreign here as May” (SL 195). Both Thamma and Mammo’s predicament illuminates the tug of war between official and personal notion of home and belonging. The stories of Thamma and Mammo makes one question the “special enchantment in lines” (SL 233) which cannot separate the memory and experience of the people. The division of India did not make the “two bits of land... sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland” (SL 233) rather it created conditions which were incomprehensible for people.

Benegal’s Mammo is lively and humorous protagonist unlike the survivors documented in other works. She teaches Quran to the children in the neighbourhood, yet does not hesitate to smoke a cigarette with Riyaz. Yet again as in films like *Pinjar*, there is a nostalgic yearning for pre-partition life. She is seen going through old photographs and reminiscing about her childhood and talking about singers of the 1940s. Most revisionist works on partition which focussed on the testimonies of survivors has brought to light the unspeakable horror, trauma and grief of the survivors. Butalia comments that the accounts of the survivors whom she questioned and interviewed were
so horrific that after a certain point, it became impossible for them to recount and for her to continue listening (Butalia 19). Benegal’s Mammo is not an abducted woman. Neither was she raped and forced to marry her abductors. But she endures a violence of a kind which Johan Galtung terms as structural violence.

The term structural violence was first coined by Johan Galtung in the 1960s. It refers to a form of violence based on the ways in which a given socio-economic or political structure can annihilate or kill people by preventing them from getting their basic needs. While war or fighting falls in the category of direct violence, structural violence is embedded and rooted in the socio-economic and political structures that constitute society. The means through which this kind of violence functions are exploitation, fragmentation, marginalisation and so on. As, there is no direct spilling of blood, it is deemed as normal (Galtung 167-191).

In the film, the structural violence against Mammo is manifested twice. Once at the very beginning of the film when Mammo is thrown out of the house in Pakistan after the death of her husband as she does not have a child. Thus the patriarchal society regulates the lives of women in such a way that any kind of shelter, protection and basic rights for the women is dependent on her ability to produce an heir for the family. The patriarchal violence against Mammo highlights the fact that the partition violence against women was a continuation of the violence which was prevalent in pre-colonial and colonial India. It nullifies the idea that the violence against women during partition was a unique phenomenon (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 57).

Another way in which the structural violence against Mammo is shown is through the draconian state laws regarding women refugees which have been discussed
earlier. Because of the laws, there is no way that Mammo can hope to get citizenship in India. The only way in which she can hope to stay in India is by “killing” herself – by turning into what Mammo says, a *djinn*. Unlike the abducted women of partition who did not have a say in where they wanted to reside, Mammo by faking her death defies the state “through a manifest act of subaltern agency” (Priya Kumar 2008: 227).

Commenting on the agency given to women in the film, Datta writes:

> It goes against the grain to depict kinship ties through women – in this case, sisterhood. The two Muslim sisters, citizens from two nations, painfully try to forge and preserve a family ... We are reminded several times of Fayazzi’s independence and how she managed to rear her grandson under extremely difficult circumstances ... yet this is an unusual family desperately trying to hold together against the forces of law and politics. (Datta 2002: 192)

Benegal uses the image of the aquarium to convey a nuanced understanding of Mammo’s plight. The aquarium is a constant feature of Fayazzi and Riyaz’s home. Throughout the film, there are repeated close ups of it. At one point Mammo tells Riyaz to free the fish and throw it in the ocean. To which Riyaz replies that in the ocean the big fish would swallow it up. The aquarium, once a simple image of a household decorative becomes the image defining the plight of women like Mammo for whom giving up freedom by faking death is better than being “swallowed” by the laws of the state.

Benegal’s choice of not depicting any direct violence can also be linked to his choice of narrator. It is not Mammo from whose point of view the film is narrated. But
Riyaz – someone who haven’t witnessed partition. Right from the moment he opens the door to a young widowed Mammo to twenty years later when he opens the door to an older Mammo who has finally come “home” – it is Riyaz who drives the narrative. Thus the audience watching the film in 1995, many of whom have not witnessed partition, are invited to occupy the position of Riyaz. For people like Riyaz and others who have not witnessed partition, the only recourse to understanding the personal dimensional is by encountering those who have survived it (in Riyaz’s case Mammo) or by turning to literature and cinema.

It has already been mentioned earlier in the chapter that the film is inspired by the story of Khalid Mohamed’s great aunt. The fact that he is the screenwriter of the film may also have played a pivotal role in the choice of narrator. The condition of post-memory – the memories formed by the children of survivors of partition based on the accounts given by their parents and relatives - then operates twice: one through Khalid Mohamed and the other through Riyaz. In the film, Riyaz’s introduction to partition begins when Mammo asks him about the kind of things he would like to write.

Riyaz: “I want to write, whatever I have seen”.

Mammo: “So, you want to write like Manto”.

Riyaz: “Did he do the same thing?”

Mammo: “Yes, whatever he had seen, he used to write.

Riyaz: “I want to write about my personal experiences too”.

Mammo: “In life there are many incidents from which God should protect
people. Your grandfather and I, fled to Pakistan, leaving everything behind and taking whatever we could carry in our hands and pockets. Along with other Muhajirs we were taken to the border. From there, on foot. Those were terrible times. It was hell. Fire, blood, looting, dead bodies, screams It send shivers down my body. While we were crossing from this side of the border, almost the same number of people were crossing from the other side of the border. The people who were crossing across from this side of the border were Muslims and from that side of the border, Hindus were crossing over. There was a woman who walking beside me. She had two small children whom she was hugging very tightly. One baby died. The poor woman who was not in a right frame of mind, threw away her living baby. I can never forget the haunted look in her eyes” (1: 10: 12))

As Mammo narrates her ordeal, the camera focuses on a close up of her face. The camera then cuts to a brief scene of people caught in the midst of rioting. The images are blurred. It quickly cuts to Mammo’s face. The link between the two shots is done through a sound bridge (screams of people from the flashback is carried on to the scene in the present where Mammo is narrating the events). When Riyaz tells her that he would write about her experiences, Mammo retorts, “Who will read it. No one wants to read about such sordid tales” (1: 11: 31). This comment brings to light the silencing in official narratives about the gory details of 1947. The film then breaks through the silence regarding the sordid uncomfortable details of partition. Mammo’s account is in sharp contrast to the accounts taught in schoolbooks. This is highlighted when Riyaz is about to miss school for a movie screening and a friend reminds him that the teacher is
going to teach them about the Sepoy mutiny of 1857. The mutiny is the first organised revolt of the Indians against the British. Texts abound in narratives about the valour and courage and sacrifice of the Indians while omitting the bloodbath or relegating it to a footnote. Mammo’s account brings up the brutal happenings which took place “at the stroke of midnight” and the simultaneous movements from both sides of the border.

While commenting on the function of such post-memory narratives, Jonathan Greenberg writes that these narratives:

help to produce a far more comprehensive account of Partition ... than first generation official narratives had allowed. By this process of reclaiming repressed memories in often searing detail, these writers and artists are making a significant contribution to the evolution of the subcontinent’s collective memory. Helping to loosen the grip of fossilized, ideologically charged versions of the past, they encourage members of the communities to confront and work through pain, grief and guilt that had previously been insufficiently addressed in a larger social text. (Greenberg 2008: 268)

As Mammo/ Khalid’s aunt narrates the events and passes on the memories of partition to the next generation that is to Riyaz/Khalid there is, what Priya Kumar calls a “double witnessing” (Kumar 1999: 212-213). Riyaz and Khalid both became witnesses to the testimonies of Mammo and Khalid’s aunt respectively. And in return, Khalid through the script of the film and Riyaz through his writing, turns the partition experiences into their testimonies.
In the film, the importance which Benegal attributes to cultural texts (and their task of reconstructing history) is manifested when he makes intertextual references to Saadat Hasan Manto (one of the earliest writers on partition) and the film *Garam Hawa* (a film depicting the trials of a Muslim family in post partition India). Mammo, Riyaz and Fayazzi are seen watching a screening of *Garam Hawa*. The screening of *Garam Hawa* serves the purpose of highlighting the subsequent marginalisation of the Muslim subject in India. In *Mammo*, the difference the Muslims are made to feel is exhibited when Riyaz is mocked by his friend for keeping Roza, “When did you start becoming a Muslim?” (1: 21: 11) Talal Asad’s term “ideological hybrids” has been used by Gyanendra Pandey to describe the Indian Muslims. For once partition took place, the Muslims who choose to stay back had to demonstrate “the sincerity of their choice: they had to prove they were loyal to India and hence worthy of Indian citizenship” (Pandey 1999: 611). The unequal citizenship laws which have been discussed earlier in the chapter is also a fallout of this fear psychosis against the Muslim subject.

The audience viewing *Mammo* catches the movie, *Garam Hawa* at the point when Salim Mirza brings back his old mother to their old haveli which they no longer own. As the camera cuts from a close up of Mirza’s mother to the figures of Fayazzi, Mammo and Riyazz, a teary eyed Mammo says, “It is as if they have made my story ... O God, no one should be made homeless” (1: 13: 45). Most partition scholars while talking about the need for bringing to light the stories of the partition survivors, feels that it would help other survivors open up about their ordeal and help in the healing process. Benegal’s film highlights this aspect of partition narratives. After watching *Garam Hawa*, Mammo is able to narrate for the first time since her arrival in India, about the circumstances leading to her state of homelessness “Till the time, my husband
was alive, I lived a life full of luxury. But the day he died, he looked at me as if he was asking forgiveness for leaving me alone. His brothers refused to pay a single penny for his coffin. They called me a childless woman who had eaten up her husband and would now devour them. How long could I have tolerated” (1: 14: 55). Her narration shows the violence a woman has to endure not only when she loses the protection of her husband but also when she is unable to fulfil the duty designated to her by the patriarchal society – that of bearing a child.

The device of showing a partition film within a partition film is in a way similar to the alienation technique of Brecht where the spectators instead of becoming emotionally invested becomes aware and conscious of the issue being raised. Benegal himself raises the question of the purpose of the film when he makes a character in the film pose the question. In one scene, Riyaz’s friend asks him, “What is the purpose of narrating a story about an old woman who returns home?” Riyaz simply replies, “Roots. People always return to their roots.” (1: 21: 30). It is interesting to note that when Riyaz starts narrating his version of Mammo’s story, he constructs her movement to an unknown land as a “journey to an unknown land” (1: 22: 15) and her journey back as returning to her roots which is in sharp contrast to what the laws of the nation states. Thus returning to one’s roots is not that simple. The story of an old woman who tries returning to her roots not only reveals “the fragility of partition” (Kavita Daiya 200) but shows how borders, passports or visas create more confusion regarding identity rather than give a fixed one. By making Mammo fake her death, film shows how the displacement of 1947 shapes contemporary ideas of belonging. The film exposes the failure of the idea of the modern Indian nation state based on Nehruvian goals of industrialisation and socialism which the founding fathers believed would quell any sort
of communal disharmony. Partition realigned identities and relations via the borders on maps and also on minds. The film dispels myth about India’s all inclusive secular nature and shows the subsequent marginalisation of the Muslim subject.

The film drives home the point that a nation cannot be built only by taking in the views of the people in power. It cannot be understood unless viewed from the point of view of the common people. For this, the past must be revisited and represented. And it is in this re-envisioning that the merit of Mammo lies. The film does not resort to any stock tropes or characters. It steers clear of any aggressive Hindu nationalism, or anti-Pakistan rhetoric. Benegal’s Mammo treads a path less taken in another aspect. He does not demonise the Muslim subject and present him/her as “a threatening, fundamentalist other against whom Indian secular nationalism ... must be guarded” (Devadas 2013: 212). Talking about the normative function of films, Benegal writes:

Making a film to promote a cause is no recipe for success. Yet somewhere along the way, I developed a firm belief that cinema does have a normative role to play in society. It serves as a platform to initiate, engage and extend public debate beyond its signified role as entertainment. It frequently does more than simply entertain. Films by their very nature, intended or not, reinforce collective prejudices and have the persuasive power to demonise or ridicule individuals or sections of the community. A film is largely successful on account of its ability to articulate the wish-fulfilling dreams and the aspirational ideals of significant sections of the population. Because of this power, the normative role cannot be entirely overlooked. (Benegal 2002: 190)
Here Benegal invokes the normative function of cinema to break down the stereotyping of Muslim characters. Riyaz is like any other middleclass schoolboy who likes to watch movies, bunks school to watch Hitchcocks’s *Psycho* (1960) and experiments with smoking. However he is aware of his difference from the other boys. In one part of the film when Mammo throws a birthday party for Riyaz, he is displeased and gives the explanation, “We are not like them” (1:12:46). As he lashes at her, Mammo leaves their house. Riyaz and Fayazi goes out in search Mammo and finds her in a mosque. A wide shot captures from the three of them walking back home, the wind threatening to blow off their umbrella. Commenting on the significance of the scene, Datta writes:

> When Riyaz and his grandmother find Mammo in the mosque and walk back along the raised pathway across the sea, their passage is made difficult in the face of rising storm. The three figures huddled together form a picture of vulnerability; in the background we see several pavement dwellers hold up their little plastic sheets against the coming rain. This metaphor for a threatened community could not have been more touching. (Datta 191)

The film not only looks at how state policies, beginning from partition itself, regulates the lives of people but also shows a shift in the way the Muslim figure is presented – not someone who induces fear but one struggling to prove their Indianness.

II

*Khamosh Paani* is a joint collaboration between people of different countries: an Indian screenwriter (Paromita Vohra), Pakistani director (Sabiha Sumar), Indian and Pakistani actors and a crew comprising of people from France, Pakistan, India and
Germany. As already mentioned earlier, Hindi films have reflected different phases of the Indo-Pak relations. This joint collaboration is itself a result of the efforts by the governments of both India and Pakistan to improve relations between both countries after the Pokhran tests. Many initiatives, like the Delhi-Lahore bus service, cricket diplomacy, exchange of artists from both the film industries – were measures taken up to improve relations (Sharma, Goria and Mishra 48). Though time and again, relations have soured, yet films have provided the space to improve relations. As Kirron Kher states in an interview with Kaveree Bamzai, “Borders have become soft borders, especially for actors. This film is proof of it” (Bamzai 2018: n pag).

*Khamosh Pani* is the story of a Sikh woman Veero who stays behind in Pakistan during partition and assumes a Muslim identity after resisting the fate laid out by her family – that of death. The film is set in 1979 in Pakistan before the rise of fundamentalism. It was a time when women could freely move around without wearing a burkha, men and women freely mingled and music was not considered as blasphemy. Veero or Ayesha as she is now known, lives a quiet life with her son by stitching clothes and teaching Quran to young girls. No one knows about her past. The only witness to her past is the silent waters of the village well and she suppresses that memory by shunning it and subsequently becomes known as the “one who never goes to the well.”

Ayesha’s story is presented in the form of flashbacks. Flashbacks according to Deleuzian philosophy are a type of time image. For Deleuze, the genesis of time images can be traced to the Second World War. As Quendler writes, “Deleuze stages the second world war as a theoretical paradigm. The Holocaust and the atomic bomb function as traumatic kernels of an unrepresentable (and inconceivable) reality that can call for a
new visionary rationale” (Quendler 2007: 182). Time images are those which are retained by the mind. To recollect, to recognise and to dream are re-enactments or visualisations of the mind. Time images are used by people all the time. We conjure images in our memories. There are three kinds of time images: recognition-image (any image from the past which helps in the recognition process), dream image and recollection image (an image from the past which can aid in the reconstruction of a memory). He views time images as signs. Flashbacks are a type of recollection-image and they are not merely images as they function as signs (Deleuze 1989: 42-45).

The flashbacks or analepsis in Khamosh Paani is done through a departure from the colour of the present narrative. The voice of Ayesha overlaps on the flashbacks as she narrates about the breakdown of families in 1947. The forbidding tone of her voice is an indication of the power of the past to impinge in the present which is a reiteration of what partition scholars have said that it is something that continues to affect us in the present. The flashbacks start when a young child asks Ayesha the reason as to why she avoids the village well. The function of the flashbacks in Khamosh Paani is to fill in the gaps of the first narrative – events in Pakistan in 1979 – by providing the viewers with the necessary information that was missing. The flashback depicts the hold of the past on the present. Another important function of the flashback is to present the point of view of the women survivors of partition and how the past continues to haunt them. The focalization helps the viewers to squarely align with the perspective of the women. The first flashback is only a shot of girls playing and running around the well which changes to a shot of running feet. Ayesha’s voice gives us the context of the scenes depicted in the flashback, “The summer of 1947 seemed hotter than usual. How we ran. How did we know it would be forever” (9: 18) The image of the girls playing around the well is a
reference to – using Ashis Nandy’s term – utopianism or a “reference to life in undivided India as flawless rosy in every aspect, a utopia of nostalgia in every aspect” (Ghosh 1997: n pag).

Running parallel to Ayesha’s flashback is the narrative of the rise of fundamentalism in Pakistan after the rise of General Zia ul Haq. The radicalisation starts with the coming of two followers of President Zia. They try to brainwash the young boys, including Ayesha’s son Salim, by preaching about restoring Islam to its old glory. The first target of the radicalisation is the girls’ school. The most significant change however is seen Salim. As he gradually becomes indoctrinated, changes are visible in his appearance and his behaviour. He stops playing the flute and starts going to the mosque more frequently. He shuns the company of his friend Zubeida and blames her for leading him astray. His tone towards his mother changes from docile obedience to angry outbursts.

Changes can also be seen in general amongst the people of Charkhi. According to George Bluestone, films use physical space to show a change in time (Bluestone 1957: 61). In Khamosh Paani, as against in the beginning of the film, when men are seen enjoying dance performances, men are now seen attending political meetings. Shopkeepers are shown closing the shutters of their shops even at peak hours to go to mosques. Instead of cricket matches and entertainment programmes, television sets are seen airing programmes of leaders preaching anti-India propaganda.

Another impact of the radicalisation is the attitude towards the mujahirs. Quoting from the 1951 census, Zamindar writes that the Mujahirs were people who had
gone to Pakistan for an unspecified period (Zamindar 2007: 48). There was the opinion that:

while some mujahirs were to remain permanently in Pakistan ... some other mujahirs ... might return to India. Thus in many respects mujahir was not conceived as a fixed or stable refugee category to be folded into citizens of the new nation. (Zamindar 2008: 48)

The suspicion with which they are treated has been highlighted through the way the barber is treated by the Muslim maulvis. It is revealed through his conversation with a Sikh pilgrim who has come to Charkhi. His hospitable behaviour towards the sikh pilgrims incurs the wrath of the maulvis who gives him subtle hints about his precarious position.

As the radicalisation increases and religion becomes, as in 1947, a marker of identity politics again, the frequency and length of Ayesha’s flashback also increases. Frequency of a flashback is important as it can “describe the relation between an event and narration ... an event that happens once can be narrated an unspecific number of times ... or an event that happens an unspecific number of times can be narrated once” (Jung 2010: 69). The flashbacks in Khamosh Pani reveal one event, that of the escape of Ayesha/Veero from her parents and her capture by her abductors. However the whole episode is chopped and spread throughout the film so that each time a new episode of the event is shown. From close up shots of water inside the well, to a recurring shot of the camera moving swiftly in a direction which gives the impression of a person running away, the flashbacks now show images of girls being forced to jump inside the well. The panic stricken elders are seen shouting, “Hurry up, the Muslims are coming”
During partition, men of one community would inflict violence on women of another community in order to create, what Veena Das calls a “future memory” so that men of a particular community would never forget that “women as territory had already been claimed and occupied” (Das 1997: 85). This use of the women’s bodies as texts can be linked to the nineteenth century reimagining of the nation as mother by the nationalists, in order to combat the influence of the British. But this reimagining was not meant for any real progress of the women but for control over the state (Leonard and Bhattacharya 2017: 17). Violence against women is inherent in this comparison. As the nation becomes a “magnified image” of the mother, “it becomes possible to inflict all kinds of violence on those who resist this or who create counter images” (Das 1997: 45). Partition violence was unique in the “metamorphosis it achieved in the idea of appropriating a territory as nation” and reimagining the women as territory (Das 1997: 52). Men could be deemed fit for creating a nation if they could offer protection to the women of their own community. Thus sexual violence against women becomes an act of destroying the honour of the nation and also weakening the authority of men. In order to avoid this, men would inflict violence on their own women.

The forcing of women to jump into the well in Khamosh Paani is symbolic of men trying to assert their claim to rule in the guise of protecting the women. So reification of the land as mother does not translate into any real devotion, respect or regard for women as was evident by the violence inflicted on women during partition. The physical violence against women, by members of both the communities, was not a random anomaly. Patriarchy took the garb of religion to normalise violence against women.
Going back to *Khamosh Paani*, in yet another flashback of Ayesha, girls are shown jumping in the well and one girl is seen to resist it by running away from the well and being captured by Muslims and locked up. In another flashback, the same girl is eventually seen marrying one of her captors. A few scenes later, Ayesha is seen standing in front of a picture of the abducted girl posing as a bride with her captor, indicating that it is Ayesha herself who had resisted the fate curved out by her family. Veero dies, making way for Ayesha to be born. The dispersal of flashback all throughout the film increases the cinematic time – time taken to show an event on screen as against the actual time taken for the event to take place – of Veero’s escape from her family during partition. In films, time can be both extended and condensed and thereby changing the narrative speed which in turn can serve an important function. Thus in *Khamosh Pani*, instead of showing Veero’s past in one flashback, the use of multiple flashbacks makes Veero’s terror more impactful. As the images of the past intrude into the Ayesha’s consciousness, it is a reminder of the intensity of the traumatic experience. The silence of Ayesha regarding her ordeal can be interpreted using Veena Das’s idea of vilapa. According to Das:

In the mythic imagination in India, victory or defeat in war was ultimately inscribed on the bodies of women. The texts on the vilap – mourning laments of Gandhari in the Mahabharata or of Mandodari in the Ramayana, whose kin were all slain in the epic battles – are classic examples ... When women’s bodies were made the passive witness of the disorder of partition, how did women mourn the loss of self and world? ... When asking women to narrate their experiences of the Partition, I found a zone of silence surrounding it. The silence was achieved either
by the use of language that was general and metaphoric ... it was common to describe the violence of the partition in such terms as rivers of blood flowing and the earth covered with white shrouds right unto the horizon ... These memories were sometimes compared to poison that makes the inside of the woman dissolve, as a solid is dissolved in a powerful liquid. (Das 1997: 85)

The women used the silence as a shield to protect themselves. Sometimes, women referred to the trauma as an unborn child which must never be allowed to be born (Das 1997: 86). The use of the body as the keeper of knowledge helped the women merge their ordeal with everyday reality and move forward in their lives. Zamindar uses the term ‘drone of silence’ to interpret the silence of women regarding the pandemonium of 1947 as a tussle between ‘not-being-able-to-speak’ and ‘ought-not-to-sleep’ (Zamindar 2007: 3). In the film, Ayesha is caught in this tussle. She does not use any metaphoric language, for her the silence is complete and the ordeal is to be re-lived partially only in the realm of memory. However the shield of protection which her silence buys her is broken when her brother goes in search of her and her identity is revealed. The group of Sikh pilgrims with whom he makes the journey, dissuades him from searching, saying that the women themselves wanted to be killed. The conversation between the Sikh pilgrims goes like this:

Sikh pilgrim 1: “I heard a rumour that some of the women were left behind”.

Sikh pilgrim 2: “Who said that? What’s his name?”

Sikh pilgrim 1: “How would I know the name?”

Sikh pilgrim 1: “Not one woman survived. The women went to my uncle and told
him to shoot them. And my uncle kept on shooting and shooting
till all 22 women died. Our honour was saved. We killed them.
The Muslims didn’t touch them” (1: 02: 17)

The lack of remorse underscores how much importance was given to the notion of constructing women as symbols of the honour of a community. Das writes that family narratives glorified the sacrificial death of women (Das 1997: 85). The contrast between Ayesha’s memory about the intra community violence against women and that of the Sikh pilgrims, is used by Sumar to highlight how memory can be used to construct a certain version of the past which suits a person/community/nation’s needs. However it is Ayesha’s version of the past which is validated by Sumar, when she gives a witness to Ayesha’s past – her brother. In one flashback, as she is running away from her family, she is shown to hand over to her brother a locket. The locket helps her brother to identify himself in front of her when he finds out about her identity. It is because he is a witness to his sister’s incident that he can contradict the other pilgrims by saying, “Many were abducted. For years they tried to come back. No one wanted them.” (1: 03: 45).

It is Ayesha’s Muslim neighbour who reveals the true identity of Ayesha to her brother. His act of helping Ayesha’s brother is prompted by his guilt of having left behind his sister in India at the time of partition just as Ayesha’s family leaves her behind in Pakistan. In the scene when is debating with his wife whether to tell Ayesha’s brother about her identity, he admits “I know their pain” (1:10:13). Thus by focussing on the story of Ayesha’s neighbour, Sumar reiterates the findings of partition scholars who have written about the ordeal being equally felt by both sides. In this regard Butalia writes that:
We found in both India and Pakistan that partition was difficult to confront and talk about. In order to talk about it, we would have to acknowledge that both sides were guilty of violence. ... Both sides were aggressors and victims. Often, there were histories of violence within families which they silenced. There could have been history of complicity in the violence they subjected their own women to. (Ashraf 2016: n pag)

By focussing on both sides, Sumar does away with the “static taxonomy of melodramatic Hindi films” which relies on oppositions between the good/bad, Indian/Pakistani, civilised/savage (Munjal 2008: 87). A movement away from the melodramatic mode helps to focus on multiple realities and perspectives (Munjal 2008: 89). So, in the film, on the one hand we see people who have no qualms about killing the women in the family rather than being captured by the enemy while on the other hand there are people like Ayesha’s brother who is consumed by guilt over having left her behind. Another way, Sumar succeeds in presenting a balanced perspective of both the sides is by taking actors from both Pakistan and India. Hindi cinema’s vision functions as a form of soft power (Khan 70). So, by roping an actor from the Hindi film industry like Kirron Kher to play the protagonists, not only ensured a market for the film in India, but also helps to propagate the idea that women suffered both inter community and intra community violence.

In the film when Ayesha’s brother ultimately finds her, she refuses to accompany him. Her refusal is a critique of the notion of equating a family/community/nation’s honour with the purity of a woman’s body. The revelation of her identity brings about a different kind of violence which Johan Galtung terms as
structural violence which has been discussed earlier in the chapter. For Ayesha, the structural violence begins when the women of the village start avoiding her and her own son keeps forcing her to stand in the middle of the market place and proclaim her loyalty to Pakistan. The son’s distrust can be analysed using Ashis Nandy’s finding that the children of partition survivors were more “bitter” about 1947 as they received information in a “packaged manner”. As he says in his lecture at UC Berkeley:

Those who actually faced the violence, those who are direct victims, the first generation of victims, those who have been subject to the violence, those who have seen it first-hand, mostly were those who had lesser prejudice and lesser bitterness about their experience than their own children and their grandchildren because they had lived in communities where the other side was the majority. They have lived with them and they had very warm memories and experience ... whereas the children have a packaged view mostly of those violent days and how the family survived ... so they carry more bitterness and more hostility. (“A psychological study of India’s partition—a sketch of Ashis Nandy’s recent lecture at UC Berkeley”)

It is because of this bitterness that Ayesha’s son refuses to accept her past as a Sikh woman. But she has to deal with the unkindest cut in the form of the refusal of the women to bring water for her from the well. Men of her village are seen taking up arms and marching to the pilgrimage centre and demanding that Ayesha’s brother be handed over to them, reminiscent of the violence of 1947 fuelled by religious hatred. The slogans of “Pakistan Zindabad” triggers another minuscule flashback of the waters of the well. According to Deleuze, flashbacks are triggered by experiencing “situations
which we no longer know how to react to” (Deleuze 1989: ix). The past and the present merge for Ayesha when the slogans of the men in the present, spills over to the flashback through a sound bridge.

The aura of distrust that surrounds Ayesha prompts her to engage in the very act which she resisted in 1947 – that of jumping into the well. The scene is executed using a long shot so that viewers only see a figure of a woman jumping into a well. By making the identity of the woman vague, the shot combines the death of Ayesh/Veero and the deaths of those countless women in 1947 who were the victims of the politics of the nation and community and in this process achieves “narrative and imagistic unity” (Mckim 39). According to Savi Munjal, through “the recurring snapshot of the well, the structuring leitmotif of Khamosh Pani, time makes a prominent appearance in the cinematographic image ... the well chronicles “layers of time-past, present and future” in an attempt to portray how the exploitation of women –be it in 1947 or in 1979-remains the same (Munjal 2008: 90). It is this realisation that makes Ayesh/ Veero embrace the silent waters of the well, though in an apparent act of rebellion she resisted the same in 1947. Not only is there an “avoidance of melodrama” (Munjal 2008: 90) in the portrayal of Ayesha’s death but the director’s use of flashbacks mitigates the “voyeuristic aspects” (Jung 2010: 68) in the portrayal of violence against women. Berenike Jung comments that “flashbacks can be considered an aesthetic response to the challenges of representing” (Jung 2010: 68) violence as the repeated “stop and go” format of the flashbacks used in the Khamosh Paani interrupts the “viewing pleasure of the audience” (Jung 2010: 68). It also reminds the audience how the violence of 1947 continues to have the power to cause turmoil in the present.
After the death of Ayesha, it is through Zubeida’s perspective that the rest of the narrative unfolds. Salim is seen immersing Ayesha’s belongings in the river and giving Zubeida the locket of Ayesha in what seems like a final act of severing all ties with both Ayesha and Zubeida. As Salim walks away, Zubeida reminisces to herself, “So this is how Veero left and Ayesha stayed behind. Do we know who left and who stayed” (1:33:58). Her musings highlights the way how the narrative of 1947 and the growing fundamentalism made it difficult for women survivors to belong to one community or another. After her abduction and marriage, though Veero converts and lives her life as a practising Muslim, she still kept a photo of Guru Nanak inside her Koran, a fact revealed to the audience when her son goes through her things after her death. In this regard, Nandy writes that, “In South Asia, living with multiple selves is not an exception, we don’t diagnose it as schizophrenia” (“Psychological study of India’s partition- A Sketch of Ashis Nandy’s recent lecture at UC Berkeley”) However, the increasing communal tension makes it impossible for Ayesha/Veero to live with this multiple selves.

The film fast forwards to 2002 in Rawalpindi with the camera panning and capturing the hustle bustle of the crowded streets in Rawalpindi – the moving vehicles, the vendors, the movement of people. The scene moves to the flat of Zubeida and the camera follows her around the flat. Though her profession is not stated, from the contents of the flat – the books, computers – implies that she is a working woman. As she puts on Ayesha’s necklace, she muses to herself, “I remember Ayesha chachi very clearly. But what is the point of remembering her? Does it change the price of onions? I preserve each and every dream so that they never leave me” (1: 34) Through Zubeida’s musings, Sumar raises the question of whether the death of one ordinary Veero /Ayesha
can make any real difference to the world or whether any lessons can be learned. The world moves on, as the ghosts of divisive policies of the past continues to haunt in the present, making people like Ayesha/Veero, the inhabitants of no man’s land. As Zubeida promises to keep Ayesha alive in her personal memory, the shot capturing the busy street of Rawalpindi symbolises the insignificance of the stories of women in the public space. Zubeida’s musings act as a:

communicative act which initiates a dialogue with the reader/spectator.

Will women like Zubeida get to voice their dilemmas? Or is Ayesha’s end the only route to freedom? Will women like Ayesha and Zubeida be able to envisage other alternatives for themselves?” (Munjal 2008: 94)

The increasing radical world which is depicted shows the ebbing of opportunities for women like Ayesha and Zubeida. The increase in the number of radical elements is portrayed through the character of Salim. The final transformation of Salim as a hardcore radical is seen through the eyes of Zubeida. As she walks through the streets, her head covered with a dupatta (unlike in the beginning when women did not have to cover their heads), a speech of Salim which is being aired on television, makes her stop in front of a television shop. As the camera zooms in for a close up of the television, Salim’s name and his designation as the general secretary of an influential political party, flashes on the screen as he talks about the importance of Islam for Pakistan, “We are a Muslim nation. The ways of Islam are a part of our culture. We have followed the ways of Islam for centuries. Now legalising Islamic customs is simply a formality. After all why did we create Pakistan? Pakistan was made for Islam?” (1: 36: 27). This speech marks the ways, how the communal politics of partition is still evoked in the present political scenario, thus making way for a never ending cycle of violence and
displacement. The camera shows Zubeida watching multiple images of Salim, flashing from the television sets in the shop, through a shoulder shot. The camera then cuts to a close up of Zubeida as she registers the transformation of Salim from a simple young man to a hardcore radical. The use of television sets, highlights the negative impact of mass media in propagating ideologies which can be detrimental for society.

Through the story of Ayesha/Veero, *Khamosh Paani* or *The Silent Waters* attempts to do away with the silence surrounding the violence, displacement, breakdown of family ties, and so on. 1947 was not simply a moment when two nation states with fully formed borders were formed and neither was there a seamless merging of people displaced by it. Though both Mammo and Ayesha exercise their agency at the end – that of choosing death, yet the choice itself highlights how difficult it was for the women to find a space in the new nation states. The politics of borders create conditions where the symbols of the nation ironically do not find a place which they can call their homes. Thus partition can be said to be played out at the nexus between “high politics and everyday life” (Zamindar 2007: 238). In both India and Pakistan, we continue to be affected by the after effects of Partition. And according to Zamindar ‘it is by placing it along with contemporary histories of violence which is carried out in the name of “ethnically cleansed national identities” that we can comprehend the world that we have inherited (Zamindar 2007: 12). It is through films like *Khamosh Paani* and *Mammo* which focus on the impact of the high political drama on the lives of the common people that it is possible to understand the narrow politics of borders. Unlike the conception of scholars like Debali Mookerjea Leonard and Sisir Kumar Deb that the trauma of partition in the Western frontiers is restricted to the physical violence in and around 1947, films like *Khamosh Paani* and *Mammo* have shown that the ghost of
partition still continue to haunt the people. In the next part of the chapter, Ritwik Ghatak’s partition trilogy will be taken up to compare the partition narratives of the western and eastern borders.

III

Partition for Ghatak was a very personal traumatic experience. The trauma of having uprooted and having to see Bengal divided had a deep impact on him. This experience was the driving force behind his obsession for Partition narratives. Using Freud’s analysis of melancholy and mourning as enumerated in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia”, writes that Ghatak shows the signs of a melancholic and his films can be seen as “mourning work”:

The melancholic has to work through the loss of self sufficiency caused by the sudden eruption of an other in the midst of a self. In Ghatak, we see such a loss caused by an exogenous splintering of the ego. The very base of his Bengali identity (the geographic area designated as Bengal, Bengali people, Bengali culture, Bengali society) is fragmented, and he suddenly confronted with another Bengal. His films ... may be understood as attempts to work through the loss of a unitary self. (Sarkar 228)

His films show how the characters struggle to accept the new structures. He looks at the socio-economic fallout of partition and the moral decay that has set in and traces its roots to the bifurcation of 1947. Like the films taken up in this thesis, Ghatak too focuses on women characters to articulate the impact of 1947. In Meghe Dhaka Tara, it is the story of Nita, while in Komal Gandhar it is Anusuya and in Subarnarekha it is
Seeta, through whose stories the impact of partition is shown. In both *Mammo* and *Khamosh Paani*, the protagonists are shown trying to find a place which they can call home amidst the borders of the new nation states. However in Ghatak’s trilogy, the place of the women in the new nation state is never threatened. They are seen to be struggling with the change in the structure of family life. The displacement and poverty stemming from partition resulted in women stepping into the public sphere as potential earning members for the family.

*Megha Dhaka Tara* revolves around the eldest daughter, Nita, of a refugee family living in a relatively poorer section of the city. In order to support her family, she starts giving tuitions to small children and then starts working at an office, in the process giving up or having to give up her own dreams. Nita is called “Meghe Dhaka Tara” by her lover Sanat which can be taken as a euphemism for someone burdened down by trying conditions. The economic hardships have pushed morals and ethics to the back foot as her sister marries Sanat with help from her own mother who is afraid of losing Nita as the earning member of the family. Through the story of Nita, the film puts forward a “Marxist critique of women’s commodified exploitation ... in post partition India” (Daiya 144). In the end when the family learns that she is suffering from tuberculosis and would no longer be of any use, she is unceremoniously told to leave the house. As she leaves the house, the strains of the song “Ai go Uma Kole Loi” fills the space thereby equating Nita with Goddess Uma (another name of Goddess Durga). Commenting on the importance of the song, Vartika Kaul writes that the song symbolises:
The ritual farewell given to the goddess’ idol after the traditional nine day festival of Durga Puja in Bengal. As the myth goes, the Goddess Parvati spends a few days at her parents’ home on earth, where she ... is nurtured, worshipped and venerated every day with great fervour and festivity. The farewell is complete only after the idol is immersed in the river ... the baul song used by Ghatak at several different points situates the myth of Durga Puja and Nita’s life side by side in a tragic continuum. As the distressed father commands her to leave the house ... a terminally ill Nita steps out in the pouring rain with the ritualised farewell song reaching its plentitude”. (Kaul 2014: 136)

Here, again Ghatak by comparing Nita to a Goddess, highlights the paradox of putting women on a pedestal, while at the same time subjecting her to various forms of violence. Nita is not a rape or abducted victim of partition, yet the conditions created by it are such that women are exploited one way or another. But the ultimate disenchantment with the post – Independent India is brought out in the scene when a dying Nita is visited by her brother in the sanatorium in the hills which he had arranged. As he starts talking to her about mundane things, Nita suddenly says, “But I did want to live”. The camera rotates around the hills as Nita’s heart rending cry echoes all around. Nita’s dream of visiting the mountains is realised but not as she has envisioned it. Her situation is a commentary on the failures of the new state. As Sarkar writes:

In one sense, Neeta allegorises the predicament of the Indian nation: years of collective dreaming and struggle end in blighted nationhood. Through the defiant, melodramatic articulation of her desire to live,
Ghatak protests the tragic vitiation of nationalist aspirations and the subsequent disillusionment of statehood. (Sarkar 2010: 228)

If the partition of Punjab, created conditions where families were torn apart then the partition of Bengal too resulted in circumstances where relationships were sacrificed in a bid for survival.

In the next film Komal Gandhar chronicles the life of Anusuya, displaced by the riots of 1946 who tries to pick up the broken pieces by joining a theatre group. The pain of displacement brought about by partition is enacted through a play in the film (much like the screening of Garam Hawa within Mammo). The play captures the pain, bitterness and fragmentation experienced by the refugees when they had to leave behind everything. The pain of displacement is captured through the song, “Aey Paare padma/oee paar padma/”. The politics of division is brought out through the cracks in the theatre group. As Kamyani Kaushiva says:

He enacted the politics of Partition vis-a-vis the theatre group that was had been a unified, whole, and eventually became embroiled in ugly politics and faced division and acrimony ... this allegory can be seen as an allegory for the division of India. (Kaushiva 105)

Anusuya tries to overcome these divisions within the group and makes new bonds. Thus, unlike in the other movies, through the story of Anusuya and her artistic and romantic fulfilment, Ghatak tries to bring up the possibility of moving forward in life by overcoming the loss. Bhaskar Sarkar notes that in Komal Gandhar, Ghatak tries to “substitute the broken dreams with new dreams of integration, to attempt to transcend the boundaries and forge a new integrative order of identity” (Sarkar 2010: 229).
Ghatak’s own words, there is a nostalgic yearning for the union of the two Bengals and he tries to portray this through wedding songs of union, which are dispersed all throughout the film. As he writes, “The main note of my Komal Gandhar was set on the unification of the two Bengals. Hence ... we played the tunes of old wedding songs” (Ghatak 2000: 75). In the previous chapters Ashis Nandy’s notion of a pre-partition utopian world of the partition survivors has already been discussed. And this aspect is also highlighted in Ghatak’s film, especially in Komal Gandhar. The scene where the troupe goes to perform at the border town between the two Bengals, evokes strong memories of the past, reminiscent of Ghatak’s own nostalgic yearning for a pre-partitioned Bengal.

Amidst the possibility of moving forward, Ghatak also brings up the issue of double displacement brought about by new socio economic condition. In Komal Gandhar, Anusuya is caught between staying in Bengal or moving westwards for new opportunities and as Sarkar puts it her dilemma, “dramatizes the very palpable costs of severing one’s ties with one’s homeland, of becoming part of a diasporic drift ... and foregrounds the precarious ... status of the nation” (Sarkar 2010: 229).

His third film Subarnarekha, is a much more darker portrait of the after effects of Partition. It revolves around the stories of three refugees from East Pakistan- Ishwar, his sister Sita and Abhiram, whom they meet in the refugee camp and who is adopted by Ishwar. The film portrays the plight of people living in the refugee colonies under inhuman conditions and the complexities of rehabilitation. The name of the colony is “Navajivan” which is in stark contrast to the circumstances in which they live. Ishwar’s tries to give his sister a home. For this, he sets aside his idealistic notions and becomes a factory manager much to the disappointment of his friend Hariprasad. Ishwar’s choice
shows the compromise that Partition forced on the refugees. Later Sita falls in love with Abhiram but their union is opposed by Ishwar because of Abhiram’s caste and he connives to marry her off to a man of higher caste. As against religion, the politics of caste makes its presence felt here. Sita elopes with Abhiram. The narrative takes a time leap and Sita and Abhiram are shown happily living together with a child. Meanwhile Sita’s elopement has a negative impact on Ishwar who wastes away his life. Abhiram is a bus driver. But he is killed by a mob after accidentally running over a child. In order to support her child, Sita is forced to become a prostitute. But in a cruel twist of fate, her first customer turns out to be Ishwar which leads to Sita taking her own life. Commenting on the scenes leading up to her suicide, Bhaskar Sarkar adds that there is a “strong sense of decay and disorientation” (Sarkar 2010: 211). The film ends with Ishwar taking on the responsibility of Sita’s son. The final scene of the movie, shows Ishwar walking with Binu, in search of a “natun bari”. The film’s ending shows the physical, economic and psychological difficulties encountered by the refugees in their quest for a new beginning.

As in Meghe Dhaka Tara, a mythical dimension is again added to in this film through Sita’s character. In Indian mythology Sita is abducted by Ravana. And when she returns to Ayodhya, she is abandoned by Rama when her reputation is questioned. The tale of mythical Sita is “one of continuous cycle of exile, which can end only if she merges with the very earth in which she was born” (Kaul 138). The death of Sita in the film is the only way she can break the endless struggle of exile, just like the mythical Sita of yore.

In his trilogy, Ghatak has highlighted how the structural violence against women continued after the partition of Bengal in the same way it happened after the partition of
Punjab, as shown in films like Mammo and Khamosh Paani. However the economic implications of partition for the women in these films have not been brought out as explicitly as in the trilogy of Ghatak. In the trilogy, even though the women are not victims of rape or abduction, they had to endure the harsh conditions brought about the displacement. What is interesting to note is that, death seems to be the only way out for the women in two of Ghatak’s films and also in Mammo and Khamosh Paani, even years after the rupture of 1947. In Ghatak’s trilogy as well as in the Hindi films, the women are shown to be the worst sufferers in the newly erected nation states.

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