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THE FALLACY OF AN AUTEUR AS A HISTORIAN: LOCATING THE PITFALLS OF
HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN RITWIK GHATAK'S REASON, DEBATE AND A STORY

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ABSTRACT

Ritwik Ghatak's *Reason, Debate and a Story* engages itself to delineate the schism prevalent in a society which undergoes several changes at a politically turbulent period. The film does not only purport to provide the excruciating narrative a wayward drunkard Nilkantha but also narrate the confrontation between the centre and periphery. The cultural saga of the post-partition Bengal with all the fissures within is portrayed in a narrative which continues to baffle the spectators with the innate sense of exhaustion. The mother archetype recurs throughout and merges with the nascent nation-state named Bangladesh. The character Nilkantha with his esoteric journey without any telos calls into question the idea of progress with his absolute non-conformity with the societal framework. In the film Ghatak projects his alter-ego Nilkantha who in his self-defeating attempt intends to search for an answer to all questions amid confusions around. In a revisionist manner Ritwik Ghatak never involves himself with romanticising the ethnic culture of rural Bengal but deploys it to point out the poignant tale of self-deception. But Ritwik as an auteur while pointing towards the collective conscience embedded in the deep structure of a society falls also in the trap of being positivist in his reductionist approach to deal with history in a scientific way through the medium of film.

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"My historical review of the idea of history has resulted in the emergence of an answer to this question: namely, that the historian must re-enact the past in his own mind. What we must now do is to look more closely at this idea, and see what it means in itself and what further consequences it implies."-- R.G. Collingwood

Ritwik Ghatak's *Reason, Debate and a Story* (1974) narrates the poignant tale of a dissipated drunkard Nilkantha Bagchi, who repeatedly proclaims himself as a 'humbug'. The film begins with the separation between Nilkantha and his wife Durga who leaves

her husband not because he causes her any harm but being incorrigibly wayward in nature. The breach between the inebriated husband and his wife strikes the keynote at the very outset while Durga confesses, "separation is essential" as the film moves forward amid decay and decadence culminating in the death of Nilkantha in the end. Ritwik as an auteur deploys separation as a leitmotif in order to denounce vehemently the partition of Bengal during the independence of India, which he has always marked as 'fake' and 'sham'. The low-angle shot which is taken to portray the estrangement between Nilkantha and Durga

becomes significant because it immediately refers to the terrible distress that each character is going to suffer from in the film. The experiment with camera angles by this eminent director enchants the audience who are awestruck by the kind of grandeur in the glorification of alienation. The momentary rift between Nilkantha and his wife is followed by the vehement urge of Nilkantha to return to her wife once again. With it also the flashback that the filmmaker deftly uses to delineate the intense endearment of the husband alludes to the harmony and inseparable attachment between Lord Shiva and Parvati whom Nilkantha and Durga symbolizes to a large extent respectively. Ritwik has more often than not falls back upon Hindu mythical figures or deities to illustrate the content of his films. This also becomes discernible in *Subarnarekha* in which the narrative of Sita's life is recounted in a different way. In the film Nilkantha, his alter-ego along with Nachiketa, a young and unemployed engineer, Bangabala, a refugee from Bangladesh and Jagannath, a poor Sanskrit teacher make a journey towards Kanchanpur where his wife Durga resides with their son Satya. The search for shelter and identity continues throughout the film and it echoes the search of thousands of people who becomes destitute during Indian independence and the birth of Bangladesh as a nation. Ritwik Ghatak fosters the idea of cultural integration among the people West Bengal and East Pakistan and it becomes evident in the film as the three wanderers who share a close company are actually from two different nations. Bangabala, the mother archetype in the film provides solace to the distressed Nilkantha who cherishes to name her as the spirit of Bangladesh. Ritwik Ghatak maintains in the film his much adored idea of nation-states as contingently imagined political entities. In his approach as a filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak is heavily influenced by Italian neo-realist cinema but he also curves a niche of his own by taking recourse to symbolic and metaphoric representation as Satyajit Ray deftly points out, "As a creator of powerful images in an epic style he was virtually unsurpassed in Indian cinema". (Ghatak ix) Cinema has always been, for Ritwik, "a matter of personal statement". (Ghatak 13) He has ever been critical of any approach in

which "stylistically divergent images strung together by the device of intrigue". (Ghatak 14) He never pretends to portray authentic details of life in general and breaks free from the tenets of neo-realism. Film, according to him, is the artistic projection of the filmmaker's personality and a filmmaker should imbibe within him the nuances of poetic perception as poet is the archetype of all artists. Ritwik Ghatak strongly contends, "Art does not exist merely of ambitious subjects or outlandish propositions or extreme wide-angle lens. It does not consist also of Montage and Manipulation of Filmic time and dedramatisation solely. It rather consists of bursts of fancy". (Ghatak 14) He has been visionary in his experimental films and sometimes resorts to melodrama which is a potential genre for him to make a point in a unique way. He relies on melodrama as an effective medium and defends himself by saying that "I think a truly national cinema will emerge from the much abused form of melodrama which truly serious and considerate artists will bring the pressure of their entire intellect upon it". (Ghatak 18) In his introspection into the lives of underprivileged people Ritwik Ghatak sympathises with Chauu dancers who need to toil hard to make their both ends meet. The glimpses of confrontation between the feudal landlords and the poor villagers are presented as Ritwik Ghatak as a filmmaker incorporates topical events several times in the film. Historical details perfectly merge with the framework of narration. Ritwik takes the position of a detached observer but his alter-ego undergoes excruciating suffering that emanates from the sense of exhaustion prevalent in that politically turbulent period. The restless Nilkantha in his incoherently baffling words points towards the ailing society that hardly cares for its own heritage. Panchanan Ustad deplores the fact that rich and privileged part of the society does not care a fig for the cultural tradition of the marginalized. This unveils the intolerable agony that Ritwik as a filmmaker undergoes and also figures out the ethnological essence that always remains inherent in Ritwik's films. When Bangabala insists to take part in Chauu dance Panchanan Ustad refuses to allow her to dance as it is not in their custom. But sheer resilience at the face of Bangabala makes Panchanan

to be aware of the fact that he should not resist her because society cannot progress further without the active participation of women in it. Thus the poor villager can rise above the patriarchal hegemonic construct. The Chauu performance also becomes significant because Bangabala as Goddess Durga is seen as a savior who is usually invoked to destroy the evil embedded in the contemporary society. Bangabala as Durga becomes quite evident when after the Chauu dance the mask of Goddess Durga gradually dissolves and is replaced by the face of Bangabala fading in over it. The custom of using the female figure as the physical manifestation of Goddess is very common in Ritwik's style of filmmaking as it is also perceived when in an intense moment in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* Neeta's face is shown in a close-up that immediately reminds the image of Goddess Durga.

The idea of progress has been severely critiqued by Ritwik as he attempts to figure out the loopholes of the Enlightenment project that nourishes the exclusivist notion of progress. The primitive experience of the tribal people is not romanticized by the filmmaker but the social injustice in the post-independent era has been unmasked. The masks used by the Chauu dancers are kept at the safe custody of the elite people who use the masks to decorate their households. Ritwik Ghatak as a cultural anthropologist points towards the commodification of the marginal identity. In the confrontation between Panchanan and Jagannath, the Brahmin Sanskrit teacher Panchanan expresses his disgust for Sanskrit language which is impure according to him. Sanskrit is impure because it is completely alien to the rural tribal people. The phenomenon of marginalisation is contextualized in the film by the auteur himself. At the same time the resistance to systematic discourse of stereotyping is also provided space to make the marginal class the subject of their own history. The agitated Panchanan Ustad threatens the Sanskrit pundit to throw him out of his house if he carries on uttering Sanskrit *slokas*. The resistant voice of the simple and naïve person has been to some extent curbed by the mother archetype Bangabala who scolds both Panchanan and Jagannath asking them to stop the verbal duel. Thus the personality of Ritwik Ghatak as

a filmmaker surfaces as Ritwik always champions the notion of integrity. The idea of artistic integrity is supplemented by the integrity between the centre and periphery in the socio-cultural context. The narrative of estrangement carries on as Nilkantha along with Nachiketa, Jagannath and Bangabala are separated from Panchanan when they leave behind the veteran Chauu dancer to move towards Durga's household. Nilkantha meets his destiny after uniting with his wife and son as he refrains from settling down in Durga's house. Throughout the film Nilkantha is seen as suffering from lack of conviction for being immersed in the abyss of confusion. Reason, Debate, and a Story marks the end of the journey of Ritwik Ghatak as an auteur who becomes conscious of the fact that with his acute introspection into the scheme of things around he fails to guide his audience towards any solution of the enormous questions which he has posed throughout the film. From the outset the filmmaker and his alter-ego Nilkantha knows very well that the journey in the film is going to be self-defeating. He wants to see his only son Satya at the Sal forest at dawn because he desperately searches for solace in life but fails for the last time as well because he gets killed when he comes in the way of a fight between Naxalites and the policemen. Thus the urge to look at the face of his innocent child remains unfulfilled forever. He happens to be one who is more sinned against than sinning as the arguments the director purports to put forth lives on while the story comes to a woeful end. Ritwik makes a strong statement against the wastefulness all around with the tragic demise of Nilkantha who barely gets the chance to arrive at the meaning of existence—the truth that he is in search of throughout but never comes close to in life. His son Satya stands for the truth incarnated in this regard and the naïve son of Nilkantha reminds the audience of the child in Ivan's Childhood by Andrei Tarkovsky who in an interview with Patrick Bureau in 1962 avowedly confesses, "I wanted all of my hatred of war. I chose childhood because it is what contrasts most with war." (Gianvito 3) However, the film ends with the quest for a new beginning as Durga, Satya and all others are seen to proceed towards a destination in broad day light. Nilkantha is invested with the

insight to see through the veil of events but the self-proclaimed humbug also at times becomes cynical and judgmental. He becomes perturbed within when he comes across deception. He deplores the fact that history has never been assessed scientifically. Ritwik Ghatak tends to be idealistic in his approach as a filmmaker to achieve integrity. But when he engages himself to observe factual details to uncover the laws of historical development he takes the role of a positivist historian who relies heavily on the scientific method as the valid source of knowledge. Though Ritwik imbues empathy and intuition while dealing with history in his film he also desires to follow the law of succession of events objectively. As a positivist historian he falls back upon the careful and disinterested observations. He never disassociates himself from the perception of history that Nilkantha possesses. The film evokes aesthetic pleasure through the conflict between the positivist deductions and the idealistic assumptions inherent in the character of Nilkantha. Before being effaced from the film Nilkantha philosophises that life is the attributes of the living being and it is infallible and irresistible. At that moment the audience anticipates the probability of a relationship to prosper between Nachiketa and Bangabala amid the worst possible hostile circumstances and this anticipation saves the film from the gloomy atmosphere of desolation all around by reconciling the audience with the belief in the blissful life that keeps on throbbing all the way. Above all Ritwik with his intrinsic idealism reaffirms in the film his liaison with the indomitable spirit of the pulsating life. He is at times in his historical reconstruction of the past in his film looks for the collective memory catch hold of the changes taken place in the society and the rupture in the flow of events. Ritwik as a filmmaker does not fall short of persuading the self-conscious engagement with the cultural remembrance being aware of the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. In his film Ritwik takes recourse to the perpetually authentic phenomena of spontaneous and ritualistic memory which is in fact antithetical to the problematised discourse of historical reconstruction. Historical

approach suppresses and curbs memory because this is a subjective process of selection and revision. Yet the filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak as a historian in his nuanced narrative of topical events never disassociates himself from the truthful accounts of collective memory. While talking about subjective aspect of a film Ritwik divulges, "It follows that all art is subjective. Any work of art is the artist's subjective approximation of the reality around him. It is a sort of reaction set in motion by the creative impulse of the human unconscious." (Ghatak 61) In the post-independent era Ritwik Ghatak is perhaps the one of the most gifted filmmaker who always vouches for self-expression and becomes an auteur with all his clarity, cohesion and perception. His first film Nagorik has been completed even before Ray comes with his brilliant masterpiece Pather Panchali but could not be released owing to few problems regarding it. Ritwik has ever stood in favour of the fact that the direction of any film is in fact a mode of articulation that has an immediate effect on the audience and the filmmaker always has to perform the task that he himself has assigned to with all responsibility. He sets out to betray his idea of filmmaking —"Normally, in cinema, the subjective element comes into play by way of straight objective shots. The "subjective" in it is born of the maker's vision. He impregnates this objective piece of recording with tensions and connotations born out of his consciousness and the unconscious." (Ghatak 63) The way Ritwik treats the subject that he opts for in *Reason, Debate, and a Story* he never falls short of producing the 'artistic pleasure' that he always longs for. The existential angst that Nilkantha endures throughout his life is portrayed by the director in such a way that reminds how the poets usually introspect into the scheme of things around him. However, Ritwik narrates the story much like a poet who becomes engrossed in his attempt to evoke aesthetic pleasure as he acknowledges, "Poetry is the archetype of all creativity. Cinema at its best turns into poetry." (Ghatak 63) According to Ghatak, film is the artefact that is created out of artist's personality as the most important part of a film is the filmmaker himself, who infuses his own perception into fact and fiction that he takes stock of. Though his film has a linear plot and the

filmmaker puts stress upon the faculty of reason as evinced in the title of the film *Reason, Debate and a Story* in the end no less than a poetical composition crafted by an auteur with the conviction of a poet par excellence.

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