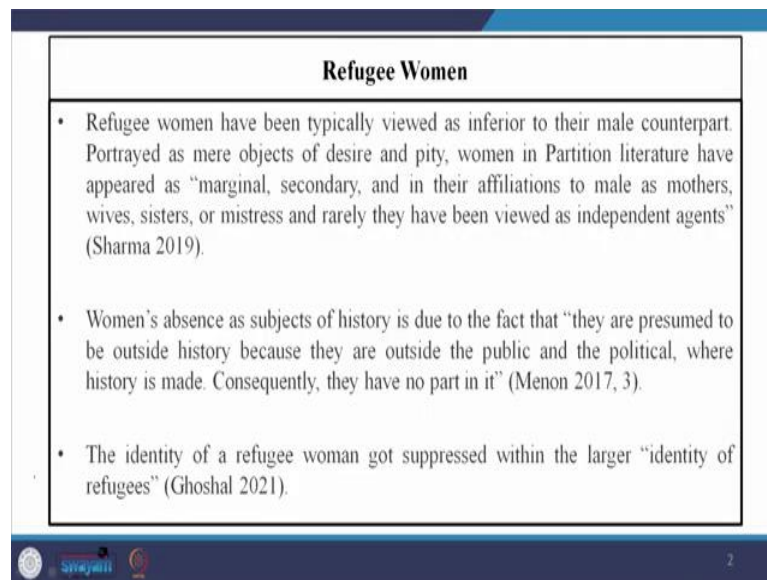


**Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema**  
**Prof. Sarbani Banerjee**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee**

**Lecture - 52**  
**Refugee Women and Patriarchal Society - I**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema. We are talking about Refugee Women and the Patriarchal Society today. We are going to discuss a very important work, a significant contribution made by Satyajit Ray on the situation of the situation of the refugee women through his cinematic work.

So, we are going to look at Satyajit Ray's work Mahanagar or the Big City, where a middle-class ...the case of a middle-class refugee family and the journey of the Bengali refugee woman, which he depicts through the character of his female protagonist Arati in this film. Her journey from being an ordinary homemaker to becoming a working woman in a metropolitan city such as Calcutta in the post-partition times. (Refer Slide Time: 01:51)



**Refugee Women**

- Refugee women have been typically viewed as inferior to their male counterpart. Portrayed as mere objects of desire and pity, women in Partition literature have appeared as “marginal, secondary, and in their affiliations to male as mothers, wives, sisters, or mistress and rarely they have been viewed as independent agents” (Sharma 2019).
- Women’s absence as subjects of history is due to the fact that “they are presumed to be outside history because they are outside the public and the political, where history is made. Consequently, they have no part in it” (Menon 2017, 3).
- The identity of a refugee woman got suppressed within the larger “identity of refugees” (Ghoshal 2021).

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So, refugee women, when we talk about refugee in the larger discussion of partition, women have been typically viewed as inferior to their male counterpart who did not have as much stake in the process of independence, in the process of rebuilding what has been lost. So, they were generally seen as objects of desire and pity.

And, so, partition literature has appeared as... women in partition literature, as critics note, have appeared as marginal, secondary, and in their affiliations to males as mothers, wives, sisters or mistress rather than as independent agents. So, this also harkens back what Udit Sen talks about.

The four stereotypes that categorize the refugee woman; she could either be the spinster and you know someone that is in a way remembered with a lot of...a kind of reverence and yet with a sense of pity because she is someone that never could have her own family, and in a bid to earn for her... earn single-handedly for her family, for her kin.

Then we have the figure of the refugee woman as the prostitute, someone that has resorted to prostitution in order to earn the bread. So, in order to become the bread-winner in the family. And also the over-inflated image of the refugee woman as a pioneer, who becomes the first working woman, which is also a kind of historically placing her on the plinth of success, which disregards in the past women's struggles in the pre-partition times within Gandhian feminist factions.

So, it erases women's contributions in the anti-colonial struggles, especially as parts of you know Gandhian feminist wings. So, women's absence as subjects of history is due to the fact that they are presumed to be outside of the history. They are not considered as part of the public and the political, where history... from which history actually draws its ingredients, from which history is made, history is shaped and so, she has [is projected as having] no role whatsoever in history, in the process of history formation, according to Ritu Menon. So, we see that the case of the refugee in a way subsumes the case of the refugee woman. Women have been traditionally treated as the honor of the community, to which they belonged and so, during violent religious, communal and ethnic conflicts, they become the receptacle, they become the major targets as a way of translating humiliation and insult to the entire family and community to which they belong. (Refer Slide Time: 05:45)

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- Within patriarchal structures, women are often believed as the embodiment of the honour of the community to which they belong. In times of ethnic, religious or other violent conflicts, they become major targets as attacking a woman's body signifies an assault on the family and the community.
- In nationalist imagination, the nation is seen as a feminine entity. This gendering of nation legitimizes the idea that nation as mother/woman needs to be protected by its (male) citizens from outsiders, thereby sanctioning communal wars (Dey 2018).
- The discourse of women's chastity was deployed to counter issues of foreign domination during the Swadeshi period. Historically, the Indian state was identified as *Bharat-Mata* (Mother India), and the role of the men was to protect the honor of their mother – a metaphor implying protection of 'their' women from the alien.

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So, we see that the nation... we have also spoken about how the nation is imagined as the mother. The nation is seen as the feminine entity and so, the gendering of the nation legitimizes the idea ...legitimizing the idea that the nation needs to be protected by the male citizens from the illegitimate outsiders, and this process of insider-outsider dynamic actually also sanctions or justifies civil wars, communal wars.

So, we see that India has been historically identified as Bharat Mata. This imagination drew its life blood, its spirit especially from the Swadeshi movement, where the role of the men was to protect the honor of the mother. This became a metaphor of protecting one's own female kin from the outsider, from the other community. (Refer Slide Time: 07:13)

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- Deniz Kandiyoti (1991, 429) in her essay *Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation* states – [w]omen bear the burden of being 'mother of the nation' ... as well as being those who reproduce the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, who transmit the culture and who are the privileged signifiers of national difference.
- Paulomi Chakraborty's *The Refugee Woman: Partition of Bengal, Gender, and the Political* - explores the connection between the ordinary, banal, political world and an extraordinary violence, such as the Partition."
- Chakraborty – the interface between "everyday world" (Dorothy E. Smith) and the "extraordinary historical times" of the Partition that can be profitably traced through the lives of refugee women.

4

Deniz Kandiyoti notes that women wear the burden of playing the mother of the nation and also have to assume the role of reproducing the boundaries of ethnic, national groups. They are.. their bodies are like the fault lines between different social groups and so, they transmit the culture and they are you know, they are markers.. their bodies.... women's bodies are markers of differences among different social....So, their bodies are markers of differences between social groups. Paulomi Chakrabarty notes that there is a connection between the ordinary banal life and the extraordinary violence or cataclysm which define.. which defines the partition or you know, the time period encompassing partition.

So, she argues that the interface between one's everyday world, the mundane existence, and the extraordinary historical times could be further investigated in favour of discovering the... which would enable to discover and identify the lives of the refugee women. So, women's lives actually lay somewhere at the interface of this ordinary everyday and the extraordinary historical moments.

So, we see that...we have already talked about the numerous obstacles that women faced in the refugee camps, where they had to resettle. Especially, we are thinking of the Permanent Liability camps for women that did not have any male guardian. So, they had to face challenges at the time of conflicts and even beyond that. (Refer Slide Time: 09:33)

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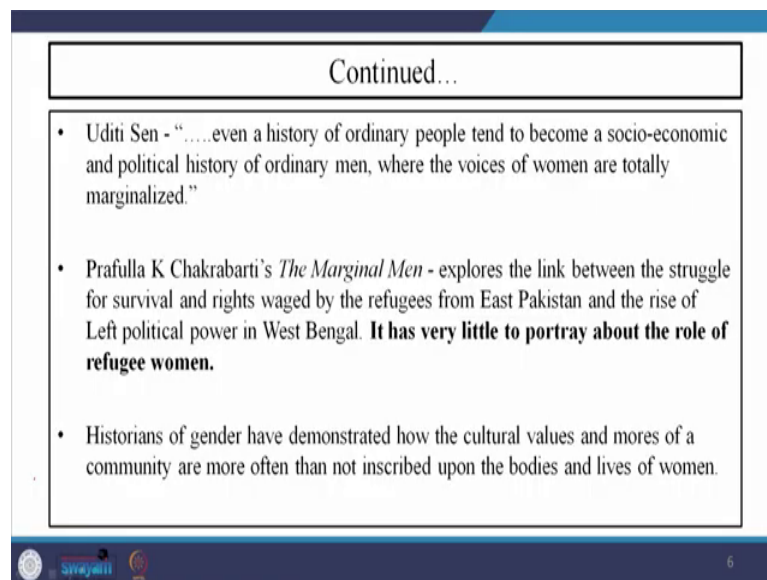
- In addition to the challenges women face in zones of conflict, there are numerous obstacles that come about in the refugee camps they flee to.
- Rather than finding solace in a refugee camp, many women face continued victimization both within the community and amongst their family.
- Their experiences remain overshadowed by the more salient issues of the conflict itself, the lack of humanitarian aid needed to efficiently run the refugee camp, and the relationship between the camp and the country in which it resides.

5

Rather than finding solace in refugee camp, a lot of women fell victims both within the community and in their own families.

So, these experiences remain in the oblivion and we see that the question of lack of humanitarian aid in refugee camps and the discourse, the popular discourse running between or the discourse available between the camp-life and the government, the authorities actually obliterate or silence the specific case of the refugee woman.

In the refugee-government dialogue, in the refugee-mobilizations and demands, what becomes... what tends to take a back seat is the case of the refugee woman. (Refer Slide Time: 10:59)



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- Udit Sen - "...even a history of ordinary people tend to become a socio-economic and political history of ordinary men, where the voices of women are totally marginalized."
- Prafulla K Chakrabarti's *The Marginal Men* - explores the link between the struggle for survival and rights waged by the refugees from East Pakistan and the rise of Left political power in West Bengal. **It has very little to portray about the role of refugee women.**
- Historians of gender have demonstrated how the cultural values and mores of a community are more often than not inscribed upon the bodies and lives of women.

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So, Udit Sen notes that even a history of ordinary people tend to become a socio-economic and political history of ordinary men. So, when we are talking of the case of a people, we are referring to the case of the men, where the voices of women are, in a way, obfuscated and muffled and marginalized.

Prafulla Chakrabarti's *Marginal Men* is also dealing only with the survivals and rights and demands that were waged by the refugees from East Pakistan, and the rise of Left politics in West Bengal, which is all a very male or you know, male-centric... which is all a very male-centric discourse. It has very little to portray or reveal about the role of the refugee woman.

However, it is ironical, like I have said, that the mores and the cultural values are inscribed not upon the bodies of the men, but on the bodies of the women. So, as far as retaining or upholding the social values or a community's values are concerned, the woman's body is always under the social scanner. She is in charge of either, you know, glorifying or downgrading or humiliating her community.

Her actions actually can uplift as well as downgrade or disadvantage her.. disadvantage her larger community from where she comes. Set against this background of this discussion about the refugee women, we are going to look at *Mahanagar* by Satyajit Ray. (Refer Slide Time: 12:53)

*Mahanagar* by Satyajit Ray


- Amaresh Misra - *Mahanagar* defines Satyajit Ray's liberal classical bourgeois affiliation, criticizing the capitalist, anti-humanist and pro-technological biases of the social system.
- Misra - while Ghatak referred frequently to the traditional myths and symbols, and emphasized the instinctual non-rational aspects, bringing in a fragmented "modernist" experience, Ray, rooted in the Indian reality, demanded reconstruction of conventional situations and relations.
- *Mahanagar* was released on 27<sup>th</sup> September in 1963. In presenting the multi-layered human saga, Ray dissolved the Westernized divisions and aesthetical parameters between physical and psychological realism, mise-en-scène and montage, form and content.

Amaresh Misra notes that *Mahanagar* defines Satyajit Ray's liberal classical bourgeois affiliation and it criticizes the anti-humanist, pro-technological biases of the social

system. So, Misra compares Ghatak and Ray and notes that while Ghatak would frequently refer to the traditional myths and symbols and emphasize the instinctual non-rational aspects, Ray would be more rooted in the Indian society and demand reconstruction of conventional situations and relations. So, Mahanagar or the Big City was released on 27th of September in 1963.

It depicts the multi-human, it depicts the multi-layered human saga, and Ray dissolved the Westernized divisions and aesthetic parameters between physical and psychological realism, mise-en-scene, montage, form and content. (Refer Slide Time: 14:16)

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MAHANAGAR

- By departing from the patriarchal-paternalistic traditionalist models, Ray focused instead on the more overbearing but less humane male features.

8

So, Ray's focus in this film is chiefly on the more overbearing, but less humane male figures or male qualities, male features that with which a woman has to negotiate, once she is in the public space, in the public domain. So, the film is based on a novel by Narendranath Mitra; it's called *Abataranika*. (Refer Slide Time: 14:47)

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- *Mahanagar* is based on *Abataranika*, a novel by **Narendranath Mitra** narrating the story of a housewife who sheds her traditionalist familial boundaries by getting a job as a saleswoman and breaking a number of gender roles.
- The film is set in Calcutta and Ray, through his lens, portrays the daily rituals and habits of a '*moddhyobitto*' or middle-class, upper-caste Bengali family, for whom honour is the trophy that they hold close to their heart.



So, it's called *Abataranika* and it narrates the story of a housewife, who has to shed her traditionalist, familial limitations or boundaries, in order to be ...in order to get into the skin of a job, a job as a saleswoman. And in the process, she has to break a number of gender roles. She has to assume a different self-image.

So, the narrative is also a very interesting play and experimentation with a woman's self-image, how a woman is experimenting and playing with her own self-image. So, the film is set in Calcutta and Satyajit Ray is portraying the daily rituals and habits of the middle-class upper caste Bengali family, for whom the most valuable possession is their honor.

We must remember the history of the middle-class refugee's migration/ immigration from East Pakistan. More than Dhan or Pran, it was also the question of Maan, which acted as an incentive, a propellant in making them decide to you know leave, quit their homeland for Calcutta or for you know settling in West Bengal or in India.

So, the question of Maan or self-respect is seen as something very important and upheld among the middle-class Bengalis, and here we are looking this case of the middle-class refugee Bengali family. We see the transformation of the middle-class housewife into that of a working woman and how it leads to a cold war in the family.

Although her in-laws do not directly or openly tell her not to go out and take a job. There is a kind of, you know, there is a kind of resistance, there is a kind of passive resistance and some altercations, following which the woman can decide to take up the work... her job as a saleswoman.

So, the Second World War had provided the stimulus for one of the greatest social upheavals in the 1950s and so, there was an economic boom and, women were participating in the job arena. A lot of women had become professionals, it was also due to the shifting/changing domestic circumstances. And so, this transition or this transformation was/ could also be perceived as a movement towards gender equality. The consequence, the economic boom following World War II led to some sort of a or a relatively greater situation of gender parity or gender equality. (Refer Slide Time: 18:49)

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- *Mahanagar* (a.k.a *The Big City*) shows that female empowerment, driven by economic necessity, was as much a phenomenon in India as it was in other modern capitalist democracies across the world.



So, Mahanagar shows that female empowerment, which is driven by economic necessity especially in the post-partition times, was a phenomenon that you know affected India as much as it affected other modern capitalist democracies across the world. India was no exception.


Women were coming forward due to their changed circumstances; many had the chance to take up job, many were forced to take up job. However, in the case of India, the prevailing gender roles were rigidly demarcated -- where a woman belonged and what she was supposed to do, such as the domestic chores and bringing up/ rearing the children, were tasks traditionally associated with the female members in a family.

And this...these you know traditional constructions were being revised...if not revised they were undergoing certain changes, they had to be reshuffled and accommodated within the new framework as demanded by the new circumstances and new challenges that especially the refugee's family, especially the refugee families faced, as in the case of many.

Arati symbolizes and she is constructed and inspired... her character is inspired by the case of innumerable refugee women in the post-partition Indian society. (Refer Slide Time: 21:19)

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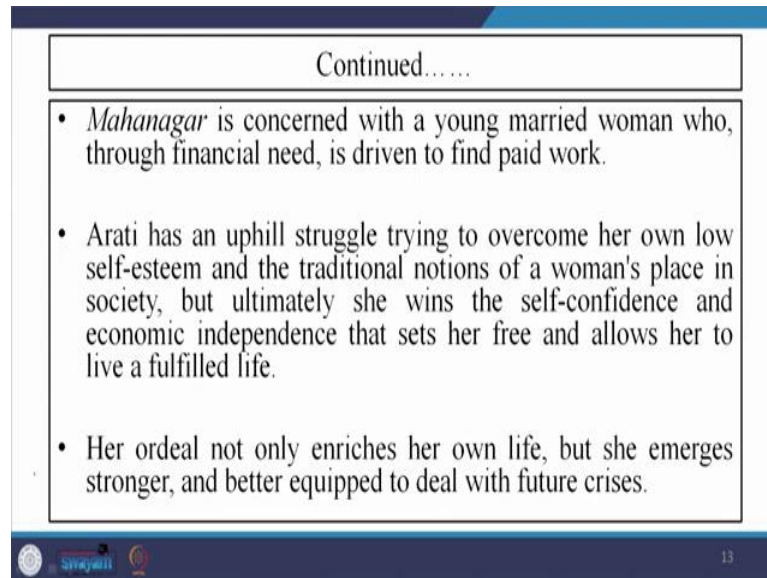
- In India, the prevailing gender roles were rigidly delineated, and so the mismatch between one's personal aspirations and one's expected role in society was much more pronounced, as this film powerfully demonstrates.



12

And, what kind of tension or conflict would follow when the woman's personal aspirations and the expectations of the society were not meeting smoothly?

This is something that the film powerfully demonstrates. How or rather, what happens when the woman's personal aspirations do not tend to follow the prescriptions of the social mores or the social conventions laid out or you know charted for her. (Refer Slide Time: 22:10)



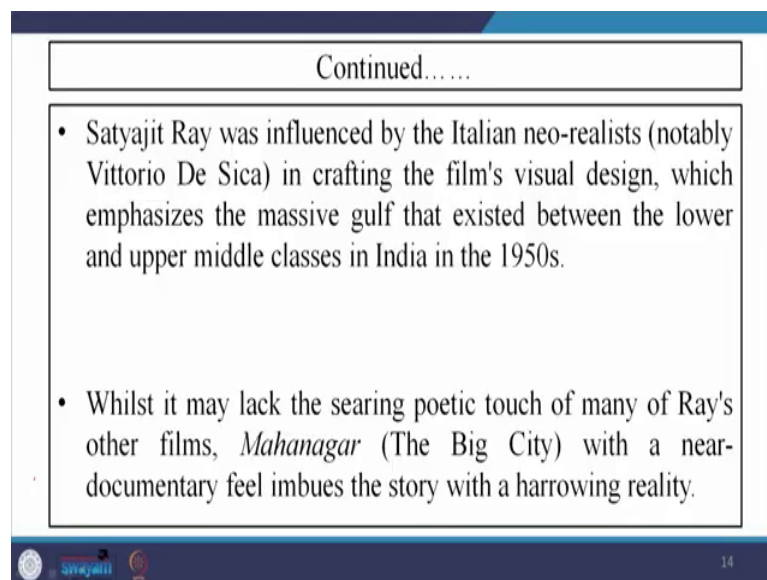
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- *Mahanagar* is concerned with a young married woman who, through financial need, is driven to find paid work.
- Arati has an uphill struggle trying to overcome her own low self-esteem and the traditional notions of a woman's place in society, but ultimately she wins the self-confidence and economic independence that sets her free and allows her to live a fulfilled life.
- Her ordeal not only enriches her own life, but she emerges stronger, and better equipped to deal with future crises.

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So, we see the young married woman Arati in Mahanagar, whose family is undergoing some financial need, and it drives her to find a paid job. And initially, it's an uphill struggle for her to try and overcome her low self-esteem. And so, the traditional notions of a woman's place in society is something that she needs to further...you know is something that the nature of her work challenges.

She is constantly negotiating with her, you know, her ideal role as a homemaker, as a housewife, as a good mother, as a good daughter-in-law and yet she emerges as self-confident and economically independent. And so, her ordeal not only enriches her own life, but makes her stronger and better equipped to deal with future crisis. (Refer Slide Time: 23:34)



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- Satyajit Ray was influenced by the Italian neo-realists (notably Vittorio De Sica) in crafting the film's visual design, which emphasizes the massive gulf that existed between the lower and upper middle classes in India in the 1950s.
- Whilst it may lack the searing poetic touch of many of Ray's other films, *Mahanagar* (The Big City) with a near-documentary feel imbues the story with a harrowing reality.

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For making this film, Satyajit Ray was influenced by the Italian neo-realists, notably by Vittorio De Sica, in crafting the film's visual design.

And, through his lens, Satyajit Ray very successfully depicts the gulf, the gap that actually existed between the lower and the upper-middle classes in India in the 1950s immediately after the partition. So, there is a documentary touch, in the making of Mahanagar. And yet, the film actually engages with the harrowing reality of the Calcuttan society, the Metropolitan reality, which the middle-class people had to deal with in the post-partition times. The question of job, the question of one's class belonging, the question of family values and, you know, division or demarcation in terms of gender roles, the people...and this especially we see the case of this refugee family, in

the film that are constantly coming to terms with the new reality. They have to face up to new facts, changed facts, right. (Refer Slide Time: 25:17)

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- Critics also spurn Ray's sanguine message in *Mahanagar*, which he made against the backdrop of the Indo-China War (1962) and in the aftermath of Partition, showing the steep infiltration of refugees into West Bengal, high statistics of unemployment and breakdown of urban economies (Banerjee 259).
- In this film, Ray projects Calcutta in the light of infinite possibilities. Many critics find it objectionable that the film ends optimistically with the couple aspiring, after all, to make a living for themselves in the Calcuttan metropolis.

So, many critics actually spurn the sanguine or the positive message that Ray gives the audience through *Mahanagar*, where the film is set against the backdrop of the Indo-China War that happened in 1962. And of course, the aftermath of partition, where there is a steep immigration of refugees into West Bengal and high statistics of unemployment, and a breakdown of urban economies.

How does a family stand on its feet and also, you know, maintain its/ retain its spinal cord (as it is commonly said) - in other words, how does the family not only survive, but also retain its self-respect is the question that Ray is dealing with in this film. So, Calcutta is projected in the light of infinite possibilities; that is the positivity, that is the optimism which informs Satyajit Ray. His humanitarian [position] or his faith in human capabilities is remarkable and amazing and it shows in the making of *Mahanagar*. So, critics would find it objectionable that the film ends so optimistically with the couple Arati and her husband Subrata actually aspiring to make a living for themselves in the Calcuttan Metropolis amid a dearth of jobs, amid so much of financial crisis. So, there is a point in *Mahanagar*, where Arati's Eurasian colleague Edith asks her a very important question. (Refer Slide Time: 27:34)

### Arati in *Mahanagar*

- In *Mahanagar*, Arati's Eurasian colleague Edith asks a vital question– why red on the lip should be considered derogatory for a Hindu woman, if the same “red-ness” is obligatory on her hair-parting and forehead, and in fact inscribes her “pureness”
- It throws a deep ironic statement about the Hindu *bhadralok* and the way he has reduced the social meaning of *bhadramahila*.
- Misra - “...an apparently inconsequential act of a traditional woman applying lipstick took the contours of a social event interlaced with a variety of meanings.”
- Lipstick as a symbol brings instabilities into Arati's life, with respect to her poise as a Hindu housewife.

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16

So, what Edith says points out, it points to the question of what is pure and what is not? Edith who is an Anglo-Indian asks Arati when she is shaky, when she is unsure of using a lipstick...Edith asks, why a woman could use the red or the vermilion in the parting of her hair and on her forehead as a Bindi, but it would be seen as derogatory as soon as she applies it on her lips, as one you know colours the lips with a lipstick.

So, why red on the lips should be considered as something negative for a Hindu woman, if the same redness is obligatory and highly desirable on her hair parting and forehead and, in fact, it inscribes, it defines her pureness. So, this throws an ironic statement and it reveals the duplicitous you know construction of the Hindu Bhadrlok or the duplicitous values that shape the Hindu Bhadrlok and the way they have reduced and they have curbed/limited the meaning of their counterpart - the Bhadramahila.

So, how the Bhadrlok has limited and reduced the social meaning of his counterpart, the Bhadramahila. So, Amaresh Misra notes that an apparently inconsequential act of a traditional woman applying lipstick took the contours of a social event interlaced with a variety of meanings. So, lipstick became a symbol, it is seen as a symbol that brings instabilities into Arati's life and it actually disrupts her poise as a committed housewife.

Arati's in-law's family has a background in Eastern Bengal or East Pakistan. So, they were originally based in Pabna and after the post-partition you know after the post-partition economic rearrangement, the traditional family relations are also being reshaped, being reconstructed in a way. (Refer Slide Time: 30:26)

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- Having moved from their earlier base in Pabna, the post-Partition economic rearrangement in Arati's in-laws' family calls for a change in the traditional family relations.
- As a respected teacher and a reigning patriarch, the audience can imagine the power that Arati's father-in-law used to command prior to Partition. In the post-Partition overpopulated milieu of Calcutta, he suffers from an identity crisis that widely marked the jobless older generation migrants.

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So, we see the case of the father-in-law, Arati's father-in-law who was a respected teacher and he was a reigning patriarch, he still is, but there has been a fall.

There has been a setback that he has gone through. He used to command a lot of power and position in the pre-partition life. However, in post-partition, overpopulated Calcutta he is a case of identity crisis, he cannot secure a job at this advanced age, no one offers him a job. And so, he becomes a symbol of the jobless older generation migrants.

He is going... there is a scene, where he is going to his former student's home, he is going to his student's home who is currently very prosperous and well-established in Calcutta and asking him to buy him... asking him for new you know, asking him to pay for his new glasses, new spectacles; that is the plight, that is the helplessness and the kind of you know loss of agency that the older generation were going through. So, the family relations subsequently changed. (Refer Slide Time: 32:19)

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- Arati's husband Subrata is a direct product of such male-dominated household, as reflected in his remark about Arati's professional success: "Exit husband, enter wife."
- Subrata is an "over-educated under-paid" male (Callenbach 48), who is in the process of receiving newer cultural jolts in a Calcutta demographically bursting at its seams.
- His insecurity is explicit when his younger sister Bani encourages Arati to take up a film-star's job in Bombay, and imagines the latter as a sunglass and lipstick-decked glamorous, rich woman.
- Subrata reflexively slights Bani after this comment for being a student of home-science, a field of study designed for grooming ideal housewives and mothers.

18

Arati's husband is a product of a male-dominated household. He takes after his own father and so, once Arati starts working and not only working, but becoming professionally successful, her husband quips with the statement "Exit husband, enter wife". So, Subrata is the symbol of the "over-educated, underpaid" male according to Callenbach, who is in the process of receiving newer cultural jolts in Calcutta, that is demographically you know bursting at its seams.. demographically bursting at it seams.

So, his insecurity shows when his sister Arati's sister-in-law Bani encourages Arati to take up the role.. or to take a filmstar's job in Bombay, where the the sister-in-law... she

very fondly imagines her sister-in-law wearing sunglasses and lipstick and becoming a glamorous and rich woman.

To this, Subrata reflexively you know slights Bani after the statement. He slights Bani saying that she is a student of home-science and home-science actually has its own history-- it shapes from the pre-partition times, you know. In colonial Bengal, home-science was quintessential to the shaping/to the making of the Bhadramahila.

So, it's a field of study designed for grooming the ideal modern housewife, who can complement the needs of a modern husband and a new, you know, a modern family structure. And so, it's I mean.. when Bani is quipped about her field of study, it actually pushes her in a kind of gender niche. So, her possibilities are certainly very narrow; after studying home-science Bani would become a housewife and nothing more than that, this is what is implied. (Refer Slide Time: 34:46)

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- After Edith gifts a lipstick and sunglasses to Arati, she, as a saleswoman, momentarily meets Bani's fantasy about her as a "film star."
- Chakrabarty - for Arati's husband Subrata, this lipstick is "a metonym of his wife's unrestrained sexuality, her unsuitable, inappropriate and disruptive modernity" ("The Refugee Woman and the New Woman" 82).
- His feeling becomes more obvious, as he discovers the lipstick at a moment of gender-reverse performance - while opening Arati's purse and taking out money to pay the maidservant - a task conventionally associated with the non-earning housewife.



19

So, we see that after Edith gifts lipstick and sunglasses to Arati, she momentarily meets Bani's fantasy about her becoming a filmstar. So, Paulomi Chakrabarty would note that for Arati's husband this lipstick becomes a synonym of his wife's unrestrained sexuality and her unsuitable, inappropriate and disruptive modernity, something... a transformation that ill-fits or that does not go suitably with the mores of a middle-class family, with the values of a middle-class family, which cannot be contained within the bounds of middle-class Bengali, within the you know norms of a middle-class family.

His feeling, his insecurity, Subrata's feeling of insecurity becomes obvious and, as he discovers the lipstick at a moment of a gender-reverse performance, the lipstick becomes a more outrageous symbol, as it is discovered by Subrata from Arati's purse while he is trying to pay the maid-servant. He is trying to pay the salary to the maid-servant out of Arati's purse. It's a gender-reverse moment because traditionally, men earn the bread, men earn the money for running household's errands or household expenses, whereas women customarily pay out to the domestic helps. But here, we see that the task is reversed. The task is kind of... the task is switched. So, the conventional roles... Arati's lipstick actually in a way reifies or in a way defines her journey, her process of coming out of her position, her [previous] role as the non-earning housewife. We would continue on this, but in our next lecture.

Thank you so much.