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Reiterating the Eastern Theatre of Partition: Religion, Class, Caste, and Gender in Tanvir Mokammel's *Chitra Nodir Pare* (1999)

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Abstract

Whereas the western theatre of India's Partition seems to have its physical closure in the voluntary exodus and sanctifying attempts of relocation and rehabilitation by both the nation-states – India and Pakistan; the eastern theatre tended to be more dramatic as the population transfer on both the sides of Bengal was an unorganised and a prolonged, intermittent affair. This paper is an attempt to reiterate the prolonged and intermittent mass migration and displacement in the wake of the partitions of India and Pakistan in 1947 and 1971 on its eastern frontier via the critically acclaimed Bangladeshi film, *Chitra Nodir Pare* (1999). Tanvir Mokammel, the veteran filmmaker behind the film who has always observed a continuum from 1947 (division of subcontinent into India and Pakistan – West and East) through 1971 (liberation war and subsequent creation of Bangladesh as an independent nation-state) in his cinematic and literary oeuvres, strongly contends in *Chitra Nodir Pare*, that the shifting power dynamics in the eastern wing of the Pakistani nation-state since 1947 increasingly polarised the Muslim community as either sectarian or pro Hindu, and forced the Hindu minorities to leave their home and homeland behind to seek refuge in India. The paper cogently argues that the film, *Chitra Nodir Pare* brilliantly etches out how the intertwined rubrics of religion, class, caste, and gender became collectively responsible for the prolonged movement and colossal displacement of the Hindu minorities. The paper will specifically focus on the gendered angle to Partitions' migrancy and displacement vis-à-vis the film's chief protagonists – Shashikanta Sengupta and Minu. Additionally, the paper will also stress on the role of the persistently contesting power dynamics and identity politics in independent Bangladesh to contextualise the film within the independent auteur industry.

Keywords: Syncretism; Identity politics; Cultural modernity; Displacement; Home; Belongingness; Refuge.

Introduction: Identity Politics and Cinema in Bangladesh

Islam reached the Bengal delta in the thirteenth century with the Turkish officer, Muhammad Bakhtiyar and unlike the Abrahamic or Judeo-Christain-Islamic tradition expanded in a syncretic and polytheistic fashion. Richard M. Eaton in his seminal text, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, strongly contends that the intertwining of agrarian, political and Islamic frontiers, and its superimposition on the predominant Sanskritic civilization gave birth to a tolerant Bengali society, and a unique syncretic deltaic Muslim identity for the people in the region who considered themselves as "proud Bengalis and Muslims" (Tripathi 4). However, Willem van Schendel argues that since the early twentieth century identity politics turned dominant for politically mobilising the masses in the delta. In the first half, political parties mobilised the people in and around their religious identity that contributed to the formation of Pakistan,[1] and in the second half, identity politics operated around their ethnicity as "opposition to West Pakistani dominance over the delta made full use of linguistic and regional symbols" (van Schendel 233). The contested identity politics made a triumphant comeback in the independent Bangladesh with the military regime of General Ziaur Rahman in the year 1975, and since then nationalism in Bangladesh has continued to be a socio-political confrontation between 'Bangladeshiness' versus 'Bengaliness' – former, espousing the Islamic ideals and latter, the secular values.

The complex cinematic (re)appropriation of the ideas of nationhood and modernity, and nationalism sporting around the merged identity of 'Bengali Muslims' cumulatively evolved into two distinct factions of cinema in Bangladesh – a) national popular cinema patronised by the state and b) an independent auteur industry.

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[1] Krishak Praja Party that had an agrarian base channelled the Muslim communalism (as peasants in East Bengal region were largely Muslims), and the tussle between Muslim League and Indian National Congress further fuelled the communal polarisation. Refer to Rashid (2000) and Chatterjee (2010).

According to Partha Chatterjee, "the cultural identity of a nation is neither immemorial nor naturally given. It has to be fabricated, most deliberately so under the auspices of the nation-state" (qtd. in Raju 147). Since the late 1970s, the state in Bangladesh attempted to vernacularise the popular film industry via three broad initiatives – 1) ban on screening Indian and Pakistani films in theatres, 2) implementation of a tax system that incurred maximum profit to the exhibitors, and 3) patronising the industry with the establishment of a Film Development Corporation Studio. The National elites and the capitalists worked in close collaboration to fabricate the "nation-state modernity" via the popular cinema that envisioned "a monolithic picture of Bangladesh that tended to make the nation look like a largely undifferentiated and more-or-less stagnant entity" (149). They wished to carve for the inhabitants of the nation a quintessentially Muslim identity and the Bangladeshi nation as "the ultimate manifestation of the delta's Muslim-Bengali identity" (149). This pro-state initiative of harnessing identity politics on religious lines vis-à-vis the popular cinema frustrated the cultural nationalists who had always envisaged a "cultural modernity" for Bangladesh rooted in its agrarian life, deltaic riverine beauty and ethnic Bengali heritage as visualised by the pioneer art films from the delta – Abdul Jabbar Khan's *Mukh o Mukhosh* (*The Face and the Mask*, 1956) and Fateh Lohani's *Asiya*, 1960.[2] The western educated, middle-class, cultural nationalists perceived the popular Bangladeshi cinema as inept to articulate the essential 'Bengaliness' within the merged identity of 'Bengali Muslims'. These cultural nationalists therefore drew upon the national-cultural idioms and developed a parallel auteur cinema that aimed at "cultural modernity". The Bangladeshi independent cinema owes its origin to the film clubs that began in the delta in the Pakistan years with the Pakistan Film Society (1963) and Chittagong Film Society (1967). These film clubs exposed the western educated, cultural modernists, film enthusiasts to Western art cinemas and Hollywood classics.

In the vein of European art cinemas, the independent auteur Bangladeshi filmmakers not only ushered in the discourse of art into cinema but also attempted to indigenise their appreciation of 'film as art' as a counterpoise to dominant, popular

[2] *Mukh o Mukhosh* was the first talkie from East Pakistan, *Asiya* won the President's Award for the best Bengali film.

film culture and fashioned a cinema that was at once artistic, modern and nationalist. Bangladeshi independent art cinema made a kick start in 1984 with the short film movement initiated by Morshedul Islam's *Agami* (*Towards*) and Tanvir Mokammel's *Hulyia* (*Wanted*). Filmmakers such as, Tareque Masud, Morshedul Islam, Tanvir Mokammel, Alamgir Kabir, and Enayet Karim Babul created low budget 16 mm documentaries and short features that were released outside the public theatres and circulated in close-knit groups of cultural activists and students.

Textual form of the short films (actual locations, minimal editing, non-professional actors, and loose episodes) relied heavily on the Italian Neorealist films and Satyajit Ray School of Filmmaking. The films were produced without any aid from the state, though with certain exceptions by the international grants, and in true auteur sense the entire institutional process of production, exhibition and direction were single-handedly taken care of by the director. These short film makers to further develop the independent art cinema turned to full length feature films in the 1990s, seeking transnational platform of the film festivals in dearth of the exhibition spaces within Bangladesh, and also to disseminate the nation's indigenous culture across the globe. Following, the trend of 'global nativism' as practised by the various Asian auteur cinemas, the auteur Bangladeshi filmmakers showed a preference for the three sets of narratives – 1) liberation War – its aftermath as well as preamble, 2) rural landscape of Bangladesh, and 3) women and patriarchy as evident in the films of three stalwarts - Morshedul Islam (*Chaka* or *The Wheel*, 1993), Tanvir Mokammel (*Chitra Nodir Pare* or *Quiet Flows the River Chitra*, 1999) and Tareque Masud (*Matir Moina* or *The Clay Bird*, 2002).

Tanvir Mokammel, Rupturing of Syncretic Bengal, and Tainted Homeland

Unlike the nationalist historiography in Bangladesh that privileges the 1971 Liberation War providing an impetus to the Bangladeshi nationhood, Tanvir Mokammel's novels (*Dui Nogor* or *Two Cities*, 2016; *Bisadnodi* or *The Melancholy River*, 2019) and documentary and feature films (*Smriti Ekattor* or *Remembrance of '71*, 1991; *Chitra Nodir Pare* or *Quiet Flows the River Chitra*, 1999; *Jibondhuli* or *The Drummer*, 2014; *Rupsha Nodir Banke* or *Quiet Flows the River Rupsha*, 2020), unearth a continuum from

1947 through 1971 for the ruptures and aspirations that lie beneath the idea of the nation and nationhood in Bangladesh. Mokammel along with other independent filmmakers such as, Morshedul Islam, Shameem Akhtar, Yasmine Kabir and Tareque Masud holds the 1947 Partition of the province of Bengal on the religious grounds responsible for rupturing the history of syncretic existence in the delta. In one of his interviews, Mokammel stated,

> In my conscious mind, in the socio-political-intellectual plane, I believe that the Partition of 1947 was the root cause for all the anomalies we are suffering from in our present society now … By dividing Bengal, the very existence and emotions of our Bengali identity, our deeply rooted cultural traits have been shattered. It is true that Bengal, in different times in history, remained divided in different states … But never before the 1947 Partition was the division so decisive, so complete. Never was a barbed wire erected between our Bengali populations. Hence, the Partition of 1947 haunts me with a great sense of loss, and it keeps figuring in my films and writings repeatedly, like a leitmotif. (*The Daily Star*, 2017)

Mokammel's critically acclaimed, *Chitra Nodir Pare* (1999), reclaims the convoluted and brutal history of displacement and uprootedness in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition. The film scripts the micro history of a well knit community of Hindus and Muslims in the town of Narail located in the Khulna district of contemporary Bangladesh.

The prolonged process of movement and displacement, homelessness and statelessness experienced by the Hindu minorities "on the wrong side of the Radcliffe line" (Chatterji, *Spoils of Partition* 2); and the otherness experienced by the native Muslims under the West Pakistani subordination and provincialism initiated with the cultural imposition of Urdu as the state language, ruptured the ideal of pure and untainted homeland for the East Pakistanis. Mokameel attempts to chart out this convoluted history in *Chitra Nodir Pare* without which the evolution of Bangladesh as an independent nation cannot be construed. Finding a vital continuity between the years 1947 and 1971, Mokammel sets his film against the politico-historical backdrop of the agitations and state brutalities, and the persistent movement and exodus of Hindu minorities in the decade of the 1950s and 1960s.

Mobility and Immobility – Hindu Minorities of East Bengal

The very opening shot of the film articulates that displacement and uprootedness are the central motifs as the camera zooms in on to a decrepit wall of a forsaken house illuminating a pronged map of India along with the title of the film. The opening shot is followed by the film credits displayed on the other decaying walls of the dilapidated ruin. However, the unfolding of the narrative reveals to the spectators that the abandoned ruin on the banks of the river Chitra, now a playing spot for the children of Narail, once belonged to a rich Hindu landlord, Nagen Babu, who along with his entire family migrated to India leaving behind his material possessions. The constant to and fro exchange of population between India and East Pakistan is tacitly commented upon through the abrupt leaping of a wandering madman on the screen, who somewhat like Manto's Toba Tek Singh always utters a refrain, "Are you going or coming? It's all the same! Going and coming are same anyway". At the core of the film's narrative is the widower, Shashikanta Sengupta (Momtazuddin Ahmed); his son, Bolu or Bidyut; daughter, Minoti or Minu (Afsana Mimi); and widowed sister, Anuprava (Rawshan Jamil). Amidst the mass scale migration of Hindus, Shashikanta firmly resolves to stay rooted to his ancestral land and the ecology of being on the banks of the placid, Chitra. Shashikanta boldly contends, "Shashikanta won't go anywhere. One walks firmly on one's forefather's land".

Fig. 1. The opening shot of the film with the film's title imbricated on the pronged map of India on a decrepit wall.

As the time flies, Shashikanta, finds it difficult to stick to his insolence despite the support of the compassionate Muslim friend, Shamsuddin (Amirul Haque Chowdhury), who offers Shashikanta shelter and protection in his tenement during the anti-Hindu riots that erupted both in East and West Pakistan along with India in the wake of the Hazratbal incident in 1964. Sectarian Muslims of the town seeking to seize

over the properties of Hindus brand Shamsuddin as a pro-Hindu, espousing secular Bengali identity. In a fast growing polarised society and altering power dynamics, Shamsuddin, and his likes are rare. Common are the neighbours inflicting psychological violence on the fellow Hindus compelling them to flight. One such neighbour is the contractor, Hamid Mia, who cajoles pressure on Shashikanta. It is unfortunate that Hamid Mia is also the maternal uncle of Badal, Salma, and Najma; children sharing close ties with Minu and Bolu, Shashikanta's children. Ironically enough, it is Hamid Mia who extends help to Minu and her aunt on being constrained to leave for India. In stark contrast to the inconsistency of Hamid Mia, his sister, constantly retains her affection for Minu, letting an unrestricted access to their house to meet her once childhood friend and now love interest, Badal (Tauquir Ahmed). Srideep Mukherjee in his comprehensive study on the film argued that Mokammel aimed to depict that in an increasingly polarised East Pakistan, the conduct of women in domestic context and those of men in community life, differed entirely. Mokammel in a personal interview to Mukherjee stated,

> I think that was not abnormal among average Bengali Muslim families of that time, when someone was non-communal and sympathetic towards their Hindu neighbours, and someone else was communal and greedily eyeing their property. The gender factor or the binary between domestic ('*ghar*') and outside ('*bahir*') relationships between the two communities can also be factors here. Though being religious and a homebound woman, Salma's mother, also being Badal's mother, had sympathies for Minoti. That may not be the case for Hamid Mia, the man of the world maternal uncle who, during those unsettling days, was eyeing an opportunity to grab the house of Shashikanta's family. In the era of post-Partition East Bengal, the existence of this binary among Muslim families, far from being unusual, was rather common. (Mukherjee 124)

The elder brother of Shashikanta, Nidhukanta, living in a village on the other side of the river Chitra, complains that Muslim hooligans are generating fear among Hindus by threatening their women and pelting stones at their homes. In a similar manner, the Muslim caretaker of Narail's graveyard, subjects Shashikanta's son, Bidyut to psychological and physical torture for the petty offence of peeing in the graveyard that compels Shashikanta unwillingly to send him to Kolkata on latter's demand.

Throughout the film's narrative till his death, Shashikanta has to confront the queries of relatives and neighbours about his plans to emigrate. He is increasingly recommended to leave for India for the safety of his grown-up daughter, Minu.

Amidst the growing statistics of Hindus migrating to West Bengal, both the father and the daughter get more resolute on staying on in Narail. Shashikanta asserts, "I'm not going anywhere … Don't you realize that a place has a soul, leaving these banks of the Chitra, even heaven is not more attractive to me … I am not going anywhere". According to the geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan, 'space' and 'place' are the basic components of the lived experiences of humans and are often confused with one another. Tuan contends that spaces are more arbitrary and they turn to be places as humans endow meanings and values to them. Lawrence Buell, the ecocritic, adds the dimension of attachment and belongingness to the notion of 'place'. For Buell, 'place' is not only limited to the physical site rather has more to deal with affect and sense of attachment, "a deeply personal phenomenon founded on one's life-world and everyday practices" (Buell 71). Shashikanta is looked down upon as an eccentric and the children of Narail ridicule him in a specially devised limerick, "Shashikanta Sengupta the lawyer has a secret desire, he won't leave homeland, shall remain beside the Chitra, may be as a man or as an airy ghost". The children's rhyme is "a grim commentary on ways in which corrosive political rhetoric had pervaded mass culture to undermine the hitherto syncretic Bengali psycho-social mindscape" (Mukherjee 125). Music with a blend of Tagore's songs and folk lyrics is affectively pivotal to the film's narrative especially in the scenes and sequences pictured on Shashikanta. The scene where a boatman sings Abdul Latif's folk composition by the river Chitra, "*Porer jayga porer jomi ghar banaiya ami roi, ami toh shei gharer malik noi …*" (someone else place, someone else land, I reside making my house, I don't own that house ..), that drifts into the bedroom of Shashikanta sitting in a pensive mood, and in another as the solitary widower while casting a fond look on his wife's portrait listens to Tagore's record, "*Tumi ki keboli chobi …*" (Are you a mere picture?) on his gramophone "offer a moving commentary on the unfolding of his tragic life, both as a family man and as a citizen faced with the impending peril of statelessness" (130-31). Abdul Latif's

composition keeps recurring at crucial moments in the narrative and culminates with the funeral of Shashikanta connoting the transient character of human life.

Fig. 2. Shashikanta asserting his decision not to leave Narail, East Pakistan.

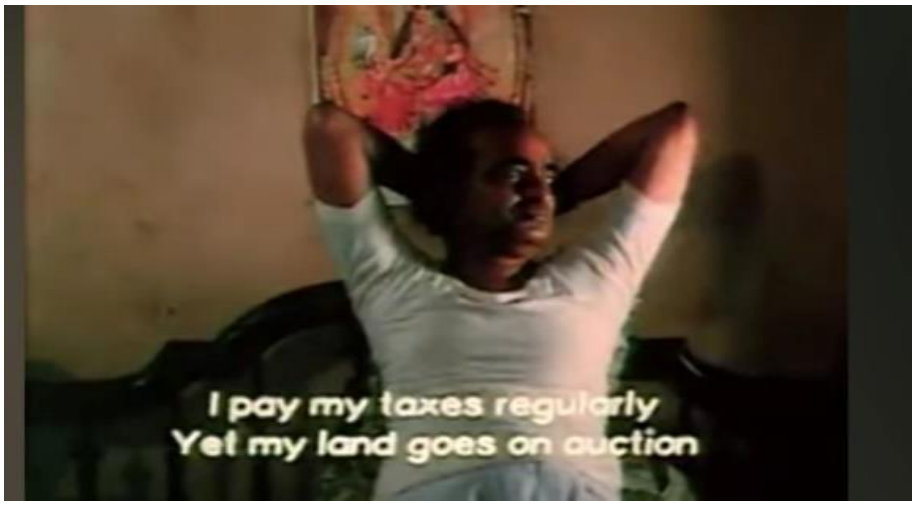

Fig. 3. The indefatigable Shashikanta listens to Abdul Latif's folk composition in a pensive mood.

Caste, Class, and Belongingness

According to the historian, Joya Chatterji, unlike the Muslim migration the Hindu migration rested on the dynamics of caste and class, although there were psychological pressures on the Hindu minorities who continued to stay in East Bengal. Chatterji discerns "that people left East Bengal when they did for a variety of reasons, not always because of an immediate threat of violence", and amidst the initial migrants "the overwhelming majority were drawn from the ranks of the very well-to-do and the educated middle classes, with assets and skills which they could take with them across the border and, in many cases with kith and kin on the other side" (Chatterji, *Spoils of*

Partition 115). Shashikanta an upper caste, Hindu, Bengali 'bhadralok', despite losing influence in his gradually changing homeland do not follow the path adopted by most of his peers. Almost like the protagonist, Salim Mirza in M.S. Sathyu's *Garam Hawa* (1975), Shashikanta, assumes tragic dimension as his "indefatigable nature makes him a character of recalcitrant micro-historic potential" (Mukherjee 125). Intriguingly enough, the narrative of the film also etches out that the migration of those from the lower castes started at a much later phase vis-à-vis the upper class and caste. Barber Bijoy's decision to stay on and own a shop for his son is an evident testimony to this. On the other hand, Nimai Babu's (Sashikanta's clerk) dilemma whether to move to India or stay, now that he is practically jobless shows the precarity of the middle class. However, the Hindu prostitute, Shikharani's pragmatic decision to stay on as after all she has to sell her body on either side, and there's no dearth of prostitutes in Calcutta as many from the 'bhadralok' families too have joined the profession adds a gendered angle to Partitions' displacement and migrancy.

This gendered angle to migration gets heightened with respect to Shashikanta's daughter, Minu, for whom unlike Shashikanta, migration becomes the only plausible alternative after the death of her father and the killing of her lover, Badal by the West Pakistani repressive police forces. Badal is a representative of the sane Muslim populace of East Pakistan that was non-communal and against the anti-democratic programmes of the West Pakistani autocracy. As the narrative of the film stretches from 1947 to the mid-60s, it is through Badal that Mokammel shrinks the depiction of East Pakistani students' agitation against the military regime of Ayub Khan at the University of Dhaka, that later turned to be the epicentre of the horrific killings on March 25, 1971. The failure of the bond that developed between Minu and Badal as childhood playmates and young lovers is after all a requiem for the lost hopes of both the Hindu and the Muslim communities of East Pakistan.

Fig. 4. Mokammel's strategic deployment of the children's games and riddles in *Chitra Nodir Pare.*

The themes of home and belongingness run saliently beneath Mokammel's depiction of the growing up of a well-knit group of Hindu and Muslim children in Narail. The film delineates the growing up of these children as evolving citizens of a country in turmoil. Mokammel makes strategic use of the make-believe games that Bidyut (Bolu), Minoti (Minu), Najma, Salma, Badal, and other children play at the banks of placid Chitra, to etch out delicately the religious biasness that tend to pounce upon the minds of young children. As in an early sequence, the sight of the migratory birds prompts the children's imagination, and ironically their utterances unconsciously capture their subject positions, either as Hindu or Muslim, especially in the case of Minu with a streak of incipient fear for losing one's home or homeland, for the children belonging to the Hindu community.

Minu: Wild ducks have no home. In different winters they live in different fens.

Salma: How happy they are!

Minu: Not at all. Father says who doesn't have own home is the most miserable one in this world.

As the children grow either to oppose or imbibe the point of view of their times, it subverts their affectionate bonds as evident in Minu's last conversation with Salma, before finally leaving, Narail.

Salma: You know … during our childhood Najma and myself used to taunt you and Bidyut

Minu: About what? …

Salma: You used to say sc-issor instead of scis-sor and something more odd … won't laugh, right? We would think that black ants are better as they don't bite, so they're

Muslims and red ants are Hindus as they bite. How childish we were!

Minu: (With a sigh). May be we still are …

All sorts of childhood dreams and riddles carry undertones for displacement and homelessness. While the Muslim woman need not have to bear the pain of losing her home or belongings, and can simply muse over the innocent memories of childhood, the Hindu woman whose future is now uncertain due to imminent displacement do not find these memories soothing any longer.

Conclusion: Chitra River, Ecology of Being, and Gender

Gender violence which was integral to communal politics that erupted in the wake of the Partitions (as argued by scholars such as, Urvashi Butalia, Nayanika Mukherjee, Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon, and Elora Halim Chowdhury) is also effectively invoked in the film, through the defiling of Basanti's honour, the widowed daughter of Nidhukanta. Basanti's suicide in order to avoid social stigma suggests the lost hopes and dreams of the newly carved East Pakistan. The montage simultaneously depicting the immersion of the idol of Goddess Durga, and drowning of Basanti reveals that the riverine Bengal once known for its syncretic culture and tolerant community existence, which struggled for liberation from the colonial regime is now embedded in the predicament of sectarian identity and politics. As Urvashi Butalia wrote, "… independence, and its dark 'other', Partition, provided the rationale for making women into symbols of the nation's [community's] honour" (Butalia 192). At the other end of the spectrum is Minu's plight whose situation is much more problematic as she needs to be resilient despite losing all emotional succour in her life. By projecting Basanti's suicide and the bare existence of Minu, a synecdoche of their displacements from the homeland, *Chitra Nodir Pare*, critically captures the gendered dimensions of the catastrophe.

There is also a gendered ecocritical trope in the distinct ways in which Bidyut and Minu look upon Kolkata. For Bidyut, it's a conscious and voluntary choice for refuge, but for Minu it connotes an estrangement from her roots and belongings. When Minu along with her father speak in unison for residing in Narail only, and not to leave for India, Minu's argument is that she finds Kolkata claustrophobic as Kolkata doesn't

have a river like Chitra. The ecocritical perspective in the film gains further poignancy in the visual presence of Chitra, and in the portrayal of the female characters as deeply attached to Chitra's habitus. The preoccupation with the rivers (considered feminine and analogous to mother figure both in India and Bangladesh) in Mokammel's films (*Nodir Naam Modhumati*, 1996; *Rupsha Nodir Banke*, 2020), and his fascination with the riverine topography of the delta, implicitly indicates the relentless presence of rivers in the shifting patterns of the existence of human society, and especially in the subsistence of women. This is evident in *Chitra Nodir Pare* in Anuprava's recollection of crossing the river in her life only twice, first when she was married, and next when she came back as widow to her brother, Shashikanta. Eco feminist critic, Mary Mellor, argues that women better recognise "humanity's relationship to the natural world, its embeddedness and embodiedness, through their own embodiment as female" (Mellor 2). This nuanced engagement in the film with the complex ecology of women's being, definitely raises the moot question, whether, women remain more deeply connected to their home, belonging and ecology in contrast to men.

Fig. 5. Minu's aunt, Anuprava's gendered attachment to the habitus of river, Chitra.

Fig. 6. Minu's boarding on the bus to Jessore accompanied with the childhood refrain.

In the final scene as Minu and Anuprava leave for Kolkata, a refrain from Minu's childhood days, "Open tea bioscope, nine ten trescope …" radiates as a background score implying that Kolkata shifts from the utopic locale of childhood's imagination to

the only plausible exile for the lone woman with the changed circumstances. This auditory impact is heightened by the wide-angled shots of the trees alongside Jessore Road, an iconic geo-spatial spot witnessing displacements since 1947. The rambling movement of the bus through the overarching trees till it disappears from the audience's eye is figurative of a metaphorical loss equally painful as physical death, the loss of home or homeland, equated with the loss of one's soul and being.

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