

Running Head: The land which cannot be forgotten

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## THE LAND WHICH CANNOT BE FORGOTTEN

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Partition is definitely considered to be one of the goriest catastrophic incidents in human history. The Radcliff Line (1) that was created several decades ago still remains to be one of the sole reason for religious prejudices which is ingrained in an individual's mind. Was it necessary to create a border to divide the entire nation in two parts, at the cost of mass exodus and then calling "Freedom"? On watching any film or reading any article, book, journal, pertaining to Partition might make us feel utterly feeble, but what if we get a ray of hope on watching or reading something which can ultimately give us a positive vibe? The same positive vibe or feeling of getting over religious prejudices while being engaged in the quest for one's root and learning new facts which can change one's thinking in a positive direction can be achieved on watching the Bengali film *Maati* (2018) directed by Leena Gangopadhyay and Saibal Banerjee. The official poster of the film displays the lead of the film Adil Hussain and Paoli dam standing on two sides of a cracked-up terrain.

The film begins with Meghla (Paoli Dam) teaching the history of Partition of India to a small group of students and she chides her pupils for merely taking down notes instead of listening carefully or contemplating the lecture being delivered to them. According to Meghla, history is too nuanced to be encapsulated in the lecture notes and points to a photo of an elderly woman who is the major reason why she took up the history of Partition as her subject for research. When Meghla says: "*lakhya lakhya lok nijer shojon ke haralen ar phire darate parlen na* ( lakhs and lakhs of people lost their family members, their loves ones and they could not make the situation better or get back to their lost land: translation mine) we come across Jinia (Monami Ghosh) Meghla's grandfather Satyabrata Chowdhury's (Chandan Sen) long lost Bangladeshi school friend, Monirul's granddaughter searching for Meghla's residence. So, while Meghla was teaching her students that due to Partition, many people lost their lives and despair prevailed majorly in the minds of every individual, is shown in contrast to Jinia searching for Meghla's home, which hints at the fact that something intriguing awaits Meghla. Further Meghla goes on to say: "*Bongsho Parampara bodlano jaye na, karon eta History, ar History ke kono bhabei bodlano jaye na*" (A family tradition cannot be changed since that is History and History can never be changed. Translation mine) Simultaneously we see, Jinia is very close to her destination, indicating the fact that, History, truly cannot be changed at any cost, yet the present and future can be made

better with one's effort. On reaching her desired destination, Jinia speaks to Satyabrata, Meghla's grandfather and quite obviously the aged gentleman was unable to recognize her. When Jinia says she is the grand daughter of his school friend Monirul Sk and she hails from Kutubdia, Satyabrata's village at Bangladesh and she is presently studying at Vishwabharti University, Satyabrata who initially could not comprehend her identity, gets startled on hearing the name of his village where he had spent almost half of his life. Meghla accompanies him to the main entrance of their home where Satyabrata caresses Jinia's cheeks as if he is reminiscing the touch of his long-lost Bangladeshi friend and learns that his bosom friend Monirul has passed away four years back. Jinia hands him over a diary which she says belonged to Kumudini Devi (Aparajita Adhyay) Meghla's grandmother which in physical appearance is a red cloth bound big book. The diary contained lucid description of the Chowdhury family's mansion at Kutubdia, the festivities they celebrated almost every month as well as their daily routine. Not only this, the diary also mentioned every minute details of the meadows, rivers and the changing seasons. All the descriptions are unconditionally graphic, redolent, high in their literary value. The diary however brings Meghla face to face with many questions. It brings her closer to Kumudini Devi as the lady in the framed portrait of her house comes alive in Meghla's mind, who as if takes the possession of Meghla and urges her to nudge on to get the truth about the Chowdhury family revealed. Jinia invites them to her wedding at Kutubdia, which comes as an opportunity for Meghla to go to Bangladesh, to visit the homeland of her ancestors and touch the soil which nurtured her father and grand parents. Inspite of several attempts from Meghla's family members to forbade her from visiting Bangladesh, she remains firm in her decision of visiting Kutubdia and get to learn more about her roots and her grand mother.

Jamil (Adil Hussain) a family friend of Jinia, arrives at the airport to receive Meghla and together as they drive towards Jinia's home, they discuss about history. Meghla says, "History is there. We have to dig it out, find it". The lines from her grandmother's diary runs in her mind as she identifies some spots mentioned in the diary. The camera hovers over the lush green landscape of Bangladesh and also glides above the river Ichamati, which ends up in mingling with river Padma. The bird's eye view of Bangladesh lends it a fairy tale like quality. Jamil drives into the premises of Dhaka University where Meghla recalls all the incidents she had heard from her grand father about his days as a student. On reaching Jinia's

residence where all the rituals for her wedding were taking place, every member of Jinia's family greet her with open arms and on learning that she is a member of Choudhury family she gets special attention from all of them. Though Meghla is elated to participate in Jinia's wedding, yet her mind becomes restless to see her mansion where her grandparents and father once resided. Jinia takes Meghla to the roof, shows her their mansion and tells her that Jamil and his mother, Amina (Sabitri Chatterjee) are now staying at their mansion which flabbergasts her and she jumps to the conclusion that, Jamil's forefathers murdered her grandmother Kumudini Devi and usurped the property of the Chowdhurys. Meghla at once loses the objective of a typical historian and becomes overwhelmed with emotions and hence she does not even participate in any of the ritual of Jinia's wedding. The contents of the diary act as a flashback in the film, portraying those days when the amiable relation between the Hindus and Muslims was eventually getting resentful which was evident during the rowing festival and minor football matches. The voice of Kumudini Devi narrates the several incidents which run analogously, thereby acting as a contrast between what the situation was prior to Partition and how the situation is in the present time. Kumudini Devi along with the other women of the neighborhood used to organize Durga Pujo and other festivals in which everyone staying at the village used to partake in some activity or the other irrespective of their religion. Kumudini Devi, in her diary, mentioned about an obedient domestic help named Jigir Ali (Koushik Roy) who was an integral part of the family and stayed in their mansion. During any festivity, Jigir Ali used to be an actively involved in all the household works. Ali and Satyabrata were more of friends and the relation of a servant and master was not prominent in the beginning of the film.

The film takes us to the present moment where Meghla and Jamil are having a heated argument since she is apparently having an idea that Jamil has forcefully occupied her ancestral mansion, while Jamil keeps his cool and says, he was born in that mansion and never thought it to be anybody else's property. On the night when Jinia gets married, Meghla seems to be lost and she leaves the venue in quest for her mansion when Jamil accompanies her to the mansion where, presently he and his ageing mother were dwelling. On stepping into her ancestral home, she very carefully scrutinizes all the nooks, crevices, objects and artefacts mentioned in her grandmother's diary. Meghla then comes across an easy chair which her grand father used while checking patients and it had one of its armrest broken.

Jamil says the damaged arm rest has been repaired, while keeping his cool as Meghla frantically goes through the entire mansion and the objects around her. When Jamil in a flippant manner says, Meghla seems to be knowing every bit of the mansion as if she has spent her previous birth in the mansion, which infuriates her and she says her predecessors are the owners of the mansion, hence it was something which she considers to be her very own. After this Jamil takes her to the Thakur Dalaan where the idol of Goddess Durga is still made and that happens to be the sole Durga Pujo of their village and Meghla notices the bamboo and hay skeleton of the last year's Durga idol. Before entering the Thakur Dalaan, Jamil takes off his shoes and Meghla did catch sight of this little gesture. Yet, behind the congenial, amiable exterior of Jamil, she continues to see a killer and usurper. Jamil then introduces Meghla to his aged mother, Amina, who offers her a home made sweet dessert which she did not accept as she was disconcerted, torn and tormented on seeing and knowing every little detail about her mansion and ancestors.

Even though Meghla gets a tour of the entire mansion, yet she does not get the fact out of her head that Jamil is now the occupant of her mansion and he did not even disclose about it to her. Meghla on getting back to Jinia's home refused to eat anything for dinner and also did not shed a drop of tear when Jinia was leaving for her in-law's place. Jinia being the empirical one asks Meghla why should she believe something which she has not witnessed, to which Meghla in an assertive tone says, history is always true. Jinia very gallantly contradicts her saying, history might not necessarily always be true since it is basically an amalgamation of facts and a human's imagination. The two women have a disagreement and Jinia is upset to know that Meghla whose roots are in Bangladesh will never consider her to be a friend anymore and nor does she consider Bangladesh to be her own country. This scene is metaphor of the fact that, the border that was constructed decades back, unfortunately continues to be a divide between a Hindu and a Muslim even in the present time and in order to overcome the hurdle both should take a step but, over here the effort is one sided. Meghla, who in the initial scene of the film is seen to be pleading the Bangladesh High Commission officer to grant her visa for more than merely three days, is in this specific scene has been shown in complete contrast, when she sort of disowns Bangladesh to be her own land. When Jinia heads towards her destination, every individual present at the household accompany her towards the main entrance with tears in their eyes

but Meghla stays on and does not accompany them, completely forgetting the fact that, it was Jinia who took the first step towards extending the hand of cordiality and most importantly handed over her the last remnants of Kumudini Devi, that is her diary which inspired her to come down to Bangladesh in quest for her family history. Jinia had no religious prejudice in her mind, but Meghla at this point of the film seems to have lost control over her logical thinking and is rather traumatized after visiting her mansion and was also under the impression that her grandmother was murdered, though she has no concrete proof of that.

Gradually the film takes the viewers to a positive turn, when the next day after Jinia leaves we find Meghla being accompanied by Jamil to Kumudini Devi's school and hospital. Meghla was surprised to see that, the people of that area still remember her grandmother since she was the only one who came up with the idea of constructing a hospital for the people of the locality and a school for girls. Meghla is extremely impressed to see Kumudini Devi's statue kept at the entrance of the hospital and her grandmother's name is being used for the sole girl's school which exists in that area. Jamil and Meghla visit the hospital and the school and Meghla now gets emotional and starts crying when she goes to the school and sings "*oh amar desher maati tomor pore thekai matha*"(2). The anger that was brimming in Meghla's heart because of the unfortunate end of her grandmother's life seemed to be reducing a tad bit. Jamil then takes her to a local play ground and requests her to take part in the kite festival since he wanted Meghla to cheer up and focus more on the present jovial situation and keep history aside. Meghla is very elated as she participates with all the other volunteers of the event and for the time being she feels as if she has always been an active participant in these kinds of cultural events. At this point of time, a flashback again is shown in order to compare the present scenario with the past, prior to Partition. Before political complications dawned, there was no separate teams for Hindus or Muslims, but the match where Satyabrata is the captain, Jigir Ali decides not to play for the team of the Hindus and joins the Muslim team. The two men overpower each other while trying to make a goal which is metaphorical of the fact that Hindus and Muslims fighting together against the oppressive administration will lead to success for certain, but when Hindus and Muslims part ways from their significant mission, they are bound to fall with no positive results as an outcome. Satyabrata was even ready to give away the trophy he ultimately won at the match to Ali, to which he insolently replies, the Muslims are no longer ready to accept any charity

from the Hindus and they pretty self reliant. Satyabrata on getting humiliated publicly, gets back home refuses to have dinner and says he shall not stay in Bangladesh anymore since his father has taught him to not stay anywhere where he gets disrespected. Ali goes against his master Satyabrata and becomes biased towards the Muslim League.(3)Ali in a very insolent manner says, he has dedicated his youth to service of the Chowdhurys and he does not wish to serve them any longer since he has joined politics and will be serving the Muslims but stay in the room which has been reserved for him by Satyabrata's father. Satyabrata and Kumudini both got emotionally impaired on hearing his words since the couple never considered him to be an opponent because of him being a Muslim. Satyabrata leaves, but Kumudini Devi stays on since she wants to protect her mansion, her roots and identity and refuses to displace herself from the place where she was nurtured and thought of upgrading it with each passing day. Satyabrata did not pester her any further and took his son and daughter and migrated to Calcutta. (4) The main entrance of the mansion, is focused in order to show it as the Radcliff Line which not only divided Bengal into two parts, but also the Chowdhury family in two distinct parts. With the departure of Satyabrata along with their kids, the future and security of Kumudini Devi becomes bleak. Kumudini Devi senses something wrong in the environment as political agitation become a regular affair in that area and many people show up at her doorstep to seek refuge. Kumudini knows for sure she too might be attacked someone day still the impending danger does not scare her and she is ready to face any situation come whatever may.

The scene again shifts to the present time when everyone seems to be enjoying the kite festival organized by Jamil's team of young volunteers. The event gets interrupted by some goons, the leader of whom says, a Hindu man's son has eloped with his daughter and was on the verge of attacking the Hindus who were participating in the events when Jamil comes to their rescue and tells one of the volunteers to take Meghla to his home. Meghla who is now perplexed at the turn of the events says she will stay beside Jamil to which Jamil sternly replies her safety is of utmost importance to him and she should immediately go to his mother at his mansion because the situation can go out of hand any moment. Meghla arrives at Jamil's house when she again meets his mother who on being informed that the kite festival got interrupted because of communal hatered, is on the almost on the verge of crying, since in her lifetime she has witnessed enough of bloodshed and riots.

Amina, then narrates her experiences of the Great Calcutta Killings where she lost her parents and siblings. Only her grandfather could rescue her and she was then sent to Bangladesh. That is the only past we get to know about that lady, who then ultimately cries and says she lost everything and now she has nobody in her original birthplace for whom she could long to meet. Meghla who has by now regained her rationality, says she will always be expecting a visit from her. Furthermore Meghla also gets to know how Jamil got separated from his wife and son, left his prosperous job as a medical practitioner at London and came down to Bangladesh just to serve his nation and people and preach peace, equality and do away with any kind of religious intolerance, Meghla though did not have anything to say at this moment to Jamil, since she realizes that she misjudged him to a great extent tries her bit to make him reconcile with his wife atleast for the sake of his son. Jamil says he has no acrimony towards his wife and is certain of the fact that someday his son will come to meet him in Bangladesh, but at no cost shall he in a foreign land and serve another nation. Meghla could to some extent understand the mental agitation he was going through, because she too was going through a rough patch with her fiancé as she took the decision of coming down to Bangladesh inspite of his objection. Meghla who in the middle of the plot was very infuriated since she got know that her grandmother Kumudini Devi was murdered by the predecessors but ultimately did not get any concrete proof as she came to know that her grandmother being killed was merely a rumour. Towards the end of the film however, in the form of a dream, Meghla just visualizes, Jigir Ali, killing Kumudini Devi which startles her and she wakes up. How did the lady die finally, in real remains shrouded in mystery. Meghla now realizes that an eye for an eye will make the world blind hence hatered will have to come to a halt somewhere and in the conclusion of every story pertaining to religious conflict, it is humanity which prevails, which is proved in the scene where we find Hindu boy marrying a Muslim girl and their respective family do have their full consent and they are ready to face any kind of consequences if the other villagers object to their children's wedding. Meghla who did not enjoy her family friend Jinia's wedding, now is now being a witness of a marriage where two adults belong to opposite religion and even though she does not know them, she seems to be way too overjoyed by being a part of them. Yet again Jamil accompanies Meghla to the airport and gifts her a plant in a pot containing the soil of Bangladesh. This gesture from Jamil means that, the soil of Bangladesh and India cannot merge, still she can carry atleast a

minor portion of the place she originally belongs to with her and revoke later about her trip to Bangladesh in future. Meghla returns home at peace with herself, accepting the nuanced narrative of the Partition of Bengal.

*“Maati”* is a film depicting the overtones in historical narratives about a family’s personal incidents merging with politics. The trauma that Meghla goes through when she learns that her grandfather being the head of Chowdhury family, did not take his wife along with him vexed her a lot. Though Satyabrata said, he tried to go back to Bangladesh but due to visa issues he could not, still Meghla contradicts his statements and replies by saying, how he in the first place did not stand beside Kumudini Devi when she needed him the most. Not only that she blames her father too for not going back or even trying to contact his mother. Amidst all these squabbles, Meghla’s mother says she should take Angshu, (Rishi Koushik) her fiancé along with her to Bangladesh. Meghla very correctly questions her mother by asking whether a woman’s security increases once she gets married and if that is so, why did her grandmother have to face such a tragic ending. None of her elders had an answer to this query. In a typical Indian society, we mostly stay under the impression that legacy of any family is passed from one man to another, but this film portrays a different concept by rather questioning the masculinity of Satyabrata and Meghla’s father for not protecting Kumudini Devi during tumultuous times. After Meghla visits her ancestral home, she learns many suppressed facts and comes back with a renewed self and all the more pleased about her grandmother in particular and all the religious prejudices of her mind gets eliminated too because of the main Muslim characters shown in the film. From Meghla’s point of view, it was pretty obvious for her to get angry with Jamil, since his forefathers once served her family and as per Kumudini Devi’s diary, Jigir Ali was getting biased towards the Muslim League and though the diary does not mention how her grandmother die ultimately, it was only as per rumours she blamed Jamil for ‘capturing’ her ancestral mansion. Once Meghla gets to know that not only her family members were compelled to migrate from one land to another, Jamil’s mother too had a traumatized childhood because of the riots that took place prior to Partition. Jamil’s mother accepted her destiny since she is helpless and does not blame anyone in particular. This thinking gets redirected to Meghla thankfully towards the end of the film, who also realizes that even though Kumudini Devi’s end was utterly deplorable, still their family’s legacy, fame remains in Kutubdia even though nobody from

her family lives in Bangladesh. Meghla wishes to come back to Kutubdia time and again, since she has gained a different perspective of her family history as well as about Partition of India, which now she in her improvised version of her own self, will pass on the knowledge to her students. Meghla finally gets over the trauma about her family or rather Kumudini Devi's name being completely erased, since her grandmother's name and position is something which is now assured will never be forgotten by the people of Kutubdia. Because of Jamil and his mother Amina, the Chowdhury mansion will always remain intact and from now onwards she will teach history to her students with a new attitude.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- (1) The Radcliff Line: On 17<sup>th</sup> August 1947, Radcliff's award on the boundaries of West Bengal was announced. It divided Bengal into West Bengal, which covered 28,000 square miles and had a population of just over 21 million people, and East Bengal, a territory of 49,000 square miles with a population of 39 million people. Over 5 million Muslims were left in West Bengal and about 11 million Hindus found themselves stranded in the eastern wing of Pakistan. In an unconscious irony, Radcliff's line bore a certain resemblance to Curzon's Line of 1905. Significantly, Radcliff's Award accepted the two 'cardinal principals' that had informed the Congress Plan: first that the two parts into which Bengal was divided should contain respectively as many of the total Muslim and Hindu populations of Bengal as possible and secondly, that 'the ratio of Muslims to Hindu in one zone must be as nearly equal as possible to the ratio of Hindu to Muslims in the other'. The two states created by Radcliff's Award in fact contained communities of Hindus and Muslims in almost exactly the same but inverse ratios. The Award gave East Bengal a population which was 71 percent Muslims and West Bengal a population which was 70.8 percent Hindu. Chatterji, Joya. *The Spoils of Partition Bengal and India 1947-1967*. p 57-58
- (2) "*oh amar desher maati tomor pore thekai matha*" : A Bengali Patriotic song written by Rabindranath Tagore, against the Partition of Bengal.
- (3) The All-India Muslim League (popularly known as the **Muslim League**) was a political party established in 1906 in British India. Its strong advocacy, from 1930

- (4) onwards, for the establishment of a separate Muslim-major nation-state. The party arose out of a movement that begun at The Aligarh Muslim University and was formed at Dhaka (now in Bangladesh) many years after the death of Syed Ahmed Khan who was a central figure for the formation of the university. It remained an elitist organization until 1937 when the leadership began mobilising the Muslim masses and the league then became a popular organization.
- (5) While the discourse of Partition victimhood of the East Bengali Hindus reflected their acute sense of insecurity with regard to “*dhon*” (wealth), “*praan*” (life) and “*maan*”(honour), the reason of the exodus of bhadralok, immediately after the Partition, was largely due to a fear of losing “*dhon*” and “*maan*” rather than “*praan*” in a numerically and politically subordinate group in a Muslim-majority nation. Anusua Basu Raychaudhury. Life After Partition: A Study on the Reconstruction of Lives in West Bengal. (December 2004) p.3
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- (2) Chatterji, Joya. *Bengal Divided*. Edited by C.A Bayly et al, Cambridge.Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- (3) Mukherjee, Rupayan. Sarkar, Jaydip. *Partition Literature and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* Routledge, 2020.
- (4) Anusua Basu Raychaudhury. Life After Partition: A Study on the Reconstruction of Lives in West Bengal. (December 2004)
- (5) "Maati is about a woman's quest for her roots – Times of India". *The Times of India*. Retrieved 10 November 2021.
- (6) "'Maati' directors Leena Gangopadhyay and Saibal Banerjee reveal their dream project! - Times of India". *The Times of India*. Retrieved 10 November 20214

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