



Novel Insights, *An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Research Journal

ISSN: 3048-6572 (Online) 3049-1991 (Print)

Impact Factor: 4.25(IIFS), 8.2(IJIN)

Volume-II, Special Issue, February 2026, Page No. 136-141

Published by Uttarsuri, Sribhumi, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://novelinsights.in/>

DOI: 10.69655/novelinsights.vol.2.issue.specialW.079



Beyond the Boundaries: Decoding the Representation of Femininity in *The Final Solution* and *Meghe Dhaka Tara*

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Received: 01.01.2026; Accepted: 20.02.2026; Available online: 28.02.2026

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Abstract

The partition of Bengal in 1947 was one of the significant and sudden political and socio-cultural shifts in the twentieth century. The partition also had a profound impact on the lives of the women of Bengal. The struggle of females during this process was much more challenging and depressing as they faced more brutality than death i.e. rape, suppression, violation etcetera. These challenges have been largely overlooked and unacknowledged by mainstream historical narratives. This research paper critically examines how Manik Bandopadhyay's *The Final Solution* and Shaktipada Rajguru's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* decode the representation of women through the characters of Mallika and Nita. In *The Final Solution* the character Mallika stands up against sexual harassment and refuses to be a victim. Through the exploration of Mallika's narrative, the study delves into the theme of social discrimination, emotional torment, and other challenges faced by women during the partition. While the struggle of Mallika is more obvious, the character Nita, in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, faced psychological and silent challenges and discrimination in society. Nita represents the class who relentlessly struggle to survive despite all odds. Both the characters, Mallika and Nita, are being marginalized and oppressed by socio-political institutions in the process of their struggle to support their families. This research paper aims to deconstruct the very construction of femininity and challenge traditional gender roles and expectations. It shows that women can be empowered and assertive in the face of injustice and celebrates their resilience in the face of adversity.

Keywords - Partition, Crisis, Discrimination, Femininity

The Indian subcontinent, especially the Bengal and Punjab provinces, faced a sudden and significant political and socio-cultural shift in the twentieth century through the partition in 1947. While Punjab faced more aggressive and brutal consequences, the impact of the partition of Bengal was more peripheral, psychological, and inherent, causing social, economic, and political upheaval. While men were killed and banished from their land, females faced more depressing realities and brutalities inherent in anarchy, such as rape, exploitation, trafficking, harassment, etc. These unfortunate events diminished the taste of independence and pushed an entire generation to their limits of tolerance and resistance. The representation of women as weaker reflects the prevailing societal attitudes and gender dynamics. In most cases, the power dynamics show women as inferior and subordinate to

Beyond the Boundaries: Decoding the Representation of Femininity in The Final Solution and... Shrirupa Das men. Women are mostly equated with traditional feminine qualities such as gentleness, domesticity, and passivity. However, Manik Bandopadhyay's *The Final Solution* and Shaktipada Rajguru's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* deconstruct the meaning of femininity.

Manik Bandopadhyay was one of the prominent avant-garde Bengali writers of the 20th century. He portrayed the struggles and challenges faced by women in *The Final Solution*. Through Mallika's character, Bandopadhyay represents the voice of many women in post-independence Bengal, as she faced challenges due to societal expectations as a woman and as a mother. Mallika is a woman who is oppressed by post-independence incidents. The vision of femininity that Bandopadhyay cherishes is phenomenal. In *The Final Solution*, the female character Mallika is depicted as a strong-willed and independent woman who stands up against all societal harassment and discourse about gender. The story revolves around a refugee family that has migrated from East Bengal and taken shelter at a railway station. Mallika's family suffers from a lack of food, her little child whimpers for milk. When Mallika was searching for food or a job, at that time, Pramatha, a social worker, offered, "Some jobs are still available for women" (Bandopadhyay, 21). The word 'some' vulnerably denotes something terrific. Mallika understands the danger, but as the only breadwinner of her family, no other ways are left for her, so she agrees by saying, "There's no other way out for us" (21). A mother can never see her child in pain. Society always creates a standard for a 'good woman' with respect but never follows it. Society always talks about women's chastity or *lajja*, but in most cases, they fail to maintain it. Mallika says to her sister-in-law Asha, "I would be ready to die if that could keep my child alive" (23). She surrenders, "Okay, I'll do whatever you ask: dance naked if you so wish. But you will find a room for us first, won't you? An enclosed space and a drop of milk for my child, otherwise, he will die." (22). It is not only about Mallika; she is just a symbol that mirrors how so-called social workers like Pramatha target women as sexual objects. Pramatha was ready to engage Mallika in prostitution. Pramatha murmured, "It is how I want you... come and be with me for a while and then you can go back..." (29). This line highlights how patriarchal society pretends to help women, according to them, women are just objects to be used. This dystopian psychology wants women to surrender before them first. Pramatha's desire to exploit Mallika's body is a betrayal of her trust. As Pramatha breaks the boundaries of her patience, she kills him. Here, Mallika breaks the boundaries of so-called societal femininity, which prefers women to be soft, gentle, and to shut down their voices in the face of adversity because, according to society, *lajja* is everything to a woman. Mallika's actions detail the mental trauma and physical trauma that harshly wound women. Mallika's actions convey a powerful message about the importance of speaking out against harassment and standing up for oneself. She says, "What did he take me for? Am I weak just because I'm a woman?" (30).

She does not remain silent or simply accept all the harassment; this is the main point here. Society often expects women to respond in a muted manner, but here is the shift from muted too loud. Bandopadhyay skillfully depicts Mallika's struggles as a mother in a post-independent patriarchal society. Mallika's every decision is dictated by the needs of her family. She boldly says, "Have you all eaten?... We'll never be hungry again... My son will have milk four times a day... I will go to the railway station every evening in my frayed saree. The sharks will come to pick me up for sure..." (46).

She is unable to break free from this cycle of responsibilities. She is weighed down by the expectations and responsibilities placed upon her by society. Bandopadhyay also explores Mallika's desires as a woman, she longs for freedom, independence, and self-fulfilment. However, these desires are constantly suppressed by the patriarchal norms and values of society. Bandopadhyay realistically portrays Mallika's inner conflict as she grapples with societal expectations. Mallika's character reflects the dilemmas faced by many women in post-independent Bengal, which glorifies how women were torn between traditional values and responsibilities. Bandopadhyay's portrayal of Mallika's character is significant, poignant, and realistic, capturing the complexities of women's lives in post-independent Bengal. Mallika's struggles as a mother and a woman resonate with many readers, as they reflect the challenges faced by women in a constructed patriarchal society. Manik Bandopadhyay's novel *The Final Solution* depicts a powerful portrayal of Mallika's struggles as a woman and mother in post-independent Bengal. Through Mallika's character, Bandopadhyay sheds light on the societal expectations and economic hardships faced by women in a patriarchal society. Mallika's story is a poignant reminder of the challenges faced by women in their quest for autonomy, independence, and respect.

After independence, the gender gap in Bengal remained wide, with women facing numerous challenges in terms of access to security, education, and economic opportunities. As society depicted, women were often forced to depend on men for their livelihoods, and for security, and were expected to prioritize the needs of their families over their own personal ambitions and aspirations. Shaktipada Rajguru's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* depicts the struggles of women in post-independence Bengal. It follows the story of Nita, a young woman who is forced to become the breadwinner for her family. Nita was forced to abandon her dreams to support her mother and siblings. Nita's struggles glorify the struggles of many women in post-independence Bengal. Women were often forced to sacrifice their own ambitions in order to care for their families.

Meghe Dhaka Tara mirrors the societal expectations placed on women to prioritize their families over their own personal fulfilment and the challenges they face in navigating a society that is hostile to their aspirations. Through Nita's narrative, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* sheds light on the ways in which women in post-independence Bengal continue to be marginalized and oppressed, focusing on their struggles to assert their agency and independence.

The protagonist, Nita, challenges traditional notions of femininity by taking on the role of a breadwinner for her family. Through her actions and experiences, Rajguru deconstructs the idea that femininity is inherently tied to domesticity and that women are always dependent on men. She creates her own identity against the backdrop of a patriarchal society. Nita's journey as a breadwinner begins when her father becomes ill and is unable to work, which leaves her family in a dire financial situation. Despite societal expectations, Nita's step provides an act of rebellion against traditional gender norms. As Nita navigates the world as a breadwinner, she is confronted with the harsh realities of economic inequality and gender discrimination. She faces multiple challenges and obstacles that test her resilience and determination. She refuses to be deterred by societal expectations of what is and isn't acceptable for a woman to do because there is no option left for her. Through her journey, Nita challenges the notion that women are inherently weaker or less capable than men. As her brother Sankar says, "She is Nita. With Large dark eyes and messy complexion, wearing dingy clothes a girl used to go to the office and tuition, through the path of the colony, daily,

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two times a day." ("সে নীতা । কালো ডাগর চোখ, জীর্ণ মলিন রঙ, আধ ময়লা শাড়ি পরে একটি মেয়ে
দুবেলা যাতায়াত করতো কলোনির পথ দিয়ে আপিস আর টুইশানিতে ।"; my trans.; Rajguru; 128).

Throughout the novel, Rajguru portrays Nita as a multi-dimensional character and blurs the lines between masculinity and femininity. Nita's identity as a woman masquerading as a man challenges the binary understanding of gender. It highlights the fluidity and complexity of identity beyond traditional definitions. By earning as a man, Nita subverts the idea that femininity is synonymous with weakness or dependence. It also proves that gender is not a limiting factor in one's ability to provide for their family. By taking on responsibilities traditionally reserved for men, she challenges the idea that women are inherently dependent on male support.

"Kadambini said- try to schedule a marriage for that girl. There's no avail ny studying. Enough happened" ("কাদম্বিনী বলে ওঠে- ও মেয়েকে বিয়ে-থা দেবার চেষ্টা করো। পড়িয়ে কাজ নেই।
ডের হয়েছে।"; my trans.; Rajguru; 13). This highlights the ways in which gender stereotypes limit women's potential and agency. Through Nita's journey, Rajguru invites readers to reconsider and deconstruct the ways in which society constructs and enforces gender roles. By deconstructing the notion of femininity through Nita's experiences as a breadwinner, Rajguru challenges the idea that women are inherently limited by their gender. It offers a vision of empowerment and liberation beyond traditional expectations. Nita's journey serves as a powerful reminder that gender is not a determining factor in one's ability to succeed and provide for their family. Women are capable of defying societal norms and expectations.

Nita's emotional journey and difficulties are depicted compellingly and poignantly. As the story progresses, Nita faces numerous challenges and struggles, both from her family and from society, which ultimately shape her character and leave a lasting impact on her emotional well-being. "Madhab Babu said- then say, who will marry that dark girl? Even without dowry? Nita stands still just before entering. She has no beauty, yet she has the symphony of youth throughout her body. By hearing those words Nita becomes stunned." ("মাধববাবু বলেন- তা ছাড়া ওই কালো মেয়েকে কে বিয়ে করবে বলো? তাও বিনা পণে? ঢুকতে গিয়ে নীতা
দরজার কাছে থমকে দাঁড়াল। তার রূপ নেই, সারা দেহ ঘিরে যৌবনের ব্যর্থ গুঞ্জন, সেই কথাটাই পুরুষের
কাছ থেকে শুনে চমকে ওঠে নীতা।"; my trans.; Rajguru; 13).

Despite all her efforts for her family, Nita always feels a sense of hopelessness and despair, as she is unable to escape the poverty and hardship that surround her. One of the most significant emotional journeys that Nita goes through in the novel is her love. As Nita grapples with the absence of love and hope, she begins to question her own world purpose in life. She feels lost and adrift, unable to find solace or comfort in the world around her. Her emotional turmoil is made even more poignant by a profound sense of loneliness and longing. "A prayer is going on for the well-being of Mantu. It's called to beg for god's blessings. Nita doesn't in this believe the saying anymore. What has the life given her? What they have gotten from God of Life. There's no gratitude for them." ("মন্টুর কল্যাণে আজ পূজো
হচ্ছে। এর নাম দেবতার কল্যাণ ভিক্ষা! কথাটা আজ বিশ্বাস করে না নীতা। কি দিয়েছে তাকে জীবন? কি তারা
পেয়েছে জীবন দেবতার কাছে? কোন কৃতজ্ঞতা সেখানে তাদের নেই।"; my trans.; Rajguru; 109).

Nita experienced severe mental trauma knowing that Sanat had feelings for Gita, the sister of Nita who has more pretty face than her. Nita hoped to spend her life with him, but the betrayal highlights the complexity of human relationships and the profound impact that they can have on one's mental well-being. The behavioural changes in Sanat also catches the eyes of Madhab Babu, the father of Nita and Gita, and surprised him: "Till then, he only saw them to accompany each other - Nita and Sanat. The sudden changes in Sanat catches his eyes but not in a good way. Everything is changing. Even the heart of man. Otherwise, why people gather glasses instead golds." ("এতদিন ওদের দুজনকেই মিশতে দেখেছেন- নীতা আর সনৎ। হঠাৎ কেমন যেন সনতের এই পরিবর্তন তার চোখেও ভালো ঠেকে না। সবকিছু বদলাচ্ছে। মানুষের মনও। নইলে কাঞ্চন ফেলে কাচ কুড়োবার এত ধুমধাম চলবে কেন চারিদিকে!"; my trans.; Rajguru; 45).

By the end, Nita learns to survive in a state of physical and psychological turmoils and discovers herself to live in the moment even through sacrifices. Even in the face of death, she struggles and deals with her internal soul and sacrifices by herself, making herself detached from others to live in solace. Her distress and helplessness can be seen through her conversation with Shankar, after the discovery of her fatal illness, when she smiles and says: "Now I hope I will get leave from everything, Brother! My job has done - as well as my need" ("এবার বোধহয় সব কাজ থেকে ছুটি পাবো রে বড়দা। আমার কাজও ফুরিয়েছে - সেই সঙ্গে আমার প্রয়োজনও।"; my trans.; Rajguru; 114). In Ghatak's version, there is a line at the end, where Nita Cries by saying, "Brother, I also desired to live..." ("দাদা আমি কিন্তু বাঁচতে চেয়েছিলাম..."; my trans.; *Meghe Dhaka Tara*; 2.00.42-2.02.04). Through the struggle, survival and moreover her death, the novel, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, skilfully engraves Nita's journey of resilience and self-realization. She becomes a more realistic character who faces marginalization and discrimination from every aspect of life and highlights the sociopolitical and economic exploitation towards the women like her in such a society. Her discovery of solace and relentless struggle depict the unyielding spirit that can't be defeated and diminished.

Conclusion:

Two avant-garde writers of the 20th century, Manik Bandopadhyay and Shaktipada Rajguru, have created a new perspective on femininity, where women are not portrayed as helpless but glorified their strength. This is very different from the so-called narrative that has been around for ages, this new perspective discusses strength and their capability to fight against injustice.

After independence in Bengal, women's conditions remained the same. They continued to be marginalized and oppressed in society. In a patriarchal society, women are expected to fulfill traditional roles, and society denies their access to education and employment opportunities. They are also expected to be submissive, obedient, and muted in the face of violence and discrimination in both the public and private spheres. Here, both texts decode the representation of women by showcasing their strength, resilience, and agency. It challenges the traditional notion of the portrayal of women as passive and weak. Both texts' protagonists are dynamic, multifaceted individuals who have the ability to shape their own destinies which highlight the diversity and complexity of women's experiences, offering a nuanced and empowering portrayal of women in society. As we can see in the story *The Final Solution*, written by Manik Bandopadhyay, Mallika has become a symbol of the entire

Beyond the Boundaries: Decoding the Representation of Femininity in The Final Solution and... Shrirupa Das female race. A mother who can lovingly hold her child in her arms, who can sacrifice everything for her family, can also hold the image of 'Durgatinasini'. Not just women or men, but as a part of society, everyone has the right to maintain their self-respect and protest against injustice. Mallika's twisted protest shows that women are not just objects of consumption, they can raise their voices and know how to fight. This text is open-ended, Bandhopadday does not provide any conclusion or judgment about Mallika's act, even readers are also unable to make any judgment about it. It remains open for feeling, sharing, and celebrating against injustice. Whereas Shaktipada Rajguru deconstructs the process of becoming a woman, Nita's capability to help financially without anyone's help highlights her strength. In Ghatak's adaptation of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, we come to know that Nita was born during Jagadhatri Puja. In the term 'Jagadhatri,' 'Jagat' denotes 'Earth,' and 'Dhatri' denotes 'Bearer,' it is an incarnation of Goddess Durga. Just as Goddess Durga protects the world by destroying all enemies and negativity, similarly, Nita suppresses all negativity in society and moves forward with all the responsibilities of her family. Yes, perhaps her path wasn't smooth, society and even her own family eventually forgot the struggling Nita, but her loneliness provided her with some relief. Nita understood that loneliness is much better than being surrounded by a toxic environment. Both texts break the traditional stereotype of femininity. Women are not born only to endure injustice, nor they are incapable to handle a family alone without anyone's help, these two characters have proven that. They have broken the traditional construction of femininity.

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