

Tribute to Ritwik Ghatak: Paper

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**Women, Silence, and the Cinematic Production of
Melancholy in Ritwik Ghatak**



Ritwik Ghatak, one of the few genius filmmakers of his time, remained underappreciated and largely unnoticed by the wider audience during his lifetime. His personal life, and the reality of it, was as melancholic as his films. Rather, I would say it is *because* of his own sufferings that he could portray melancholia on screen with such piercing beauty. In the essay “My Coming into Films,” Ghatak writes, “My coming to films has nothing to do with making money. Rather it is out of a volition for expressing my pangs and agonies about my suffering people. That is why I have come to cinema” (20) Sara Ahmed reminds us that the word ‘passion’ comes from the Latin *passio*, meaning suffering (2). In that sense, Ghatak’s films are born out of a profound internal torment, his pain transformed into an artistic force that animates every frame he composes. His cinema becomes a space where he transposes his melancholia, offering it to the audience not merely as narrative but as lived affect, as shared anguish.

Thus, this paper will attempt to understand how Ghatak mobilizes various cinematic techniques to evoke and intensify the feeling of melancholia in his two works: *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) and *Subarnarekha* (1965). We will first examine the melancholy embedded within the characters themselves, and then explore how Ghatak represents this affective landscape through songs, music, sound effects, silence, and cinematography respectively, revealing how each element becomes a conduit for a grief too large for words, a sorrow that cinema alone can hold.

Melancholy of the characters:

In the famous essay “Mourning and Melancholia”, which forms the basis of our analysis of the characters in Ghatak’s films, Freud differentiates between mourning and melancholia. He points out that mourning is the natural reaction to the loss of an object, be it a person or a state of being, such as liberty or one’s country, that has been lost. Melancholia, on the other hand, is a “pathological disposition” (Freud, 243) according to Freud, which he believes should be treated medically. Freud writes: “The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-reviling, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.” (244)

Thus, in mourning, which is a healthy way of dealing with loss, the outer world seems empty and devoid of joy. But in melancholia, it is the ego itself that becomes emptied. According to Freud’s narrative of melancholia, the ego is said to “turn back upon itself” once love fails to find its object, and it then takes itself not only as an object of love but of aggression and hate as well (Butler, 168). Analysing Freud’s essay, Judith Butler explains that melancholia arises when

there is a ‘turn’ from the lost object to the ego (in the Freudian sense), and the ego becomes a substitute for that lost object. “In melancholia not only does the ego substitute for the object, but this act of substitution institutes the ego as a necessary response to or ‘defense’ against loss” (Butler, 169). She also notes that the ego ultimately fails to be a complete or successful substitute for what has been lost.

Thus, in mourning, the person slowly detaches from the lost object. But in melancholia, the person turns inward subconsciously: either they are not fully aware of the lost object, or they refuse to acknowledge it, and therefore they cannot detach from it easily. The person suffers internally, grieving this loss for a long time and becoming unable to articulate their suffering in words. Silence, therefore, becomes a very important element in Ghatak’s films.

Nita in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* loses everything as the film progresses. She is betrayed by her sister and the love of her life, sacrifices her studies to earn money, and is eventually neglected by her family once she is no longer of use to them. We see that Nita embodies all the signs of melancholia Freud describes. Her loss of the capacity to love herself is evident in her actions: she puts everyone’s needs before her own, she does

not seek medical attention when she becomes ill, and these choices become a form of self-reproach and self-reviling. Nita is thus consumed by melancholia. By the end of the film, when she cries out, “*Dada, ami kintu bachte cheye chilam!*” (“Brother, I wanted to live!”) (Meghe, 1:54:55), we realise that she finally wants to emerge from this state. From the dark shadows of the hut where Ghatak confines her during her ailment, she finally comes into the light of the mountains for her tuberculosis treatment. It is at this moment that she recognises she had ‘turned’ inward and substituted her lost object of love with her ego. When she finally lets go of the letter given to her by her former lover Sanat, she admits she wants to live. The melancholia finally transforms into mourning, and Nita is momentarily set free.

In *Subarnarekha*, Sita goes into this kind of melancholy once she comes to know about her husband’s death. But more than Sita, it is her brother Ishwar who undergoes this form of melancholia. After Sita leaves him and marries her friend-turned-lover Abhiram, Ishwar refuses to acknowledge the lost object of his love, that is Sita, and recoils within himself, becoming irritable and withdrawn. His melancholia grows unbearable, leading him to attempt suicide, only to be interrupted by his friend Haraprasad, another character suffering from melancholia. While Ishwar had eventually moved on from the earlier lost object, his country and home left behind during Partition, Haraprasad could not. No work could satisfy him, and his melancholia drove his family into extreme poverty.

What becomes evident through these examples is that melancholia, as Freud and

others explain, is essentially an internal and deeply individual experience, and therefore cannot be expressed directly through dialogue. This is why Ghatak turns to visual and auditory techniques to reveal what the characters themselves cannot articulate. What cannot be spoken becomes sound, silence, shadow and frame in his cinema. The inner world of the characters is externalised through the recurring darkness of their surroundings, the long stretches of silence, the sudden eruptions of music, the use of empty spaces, and the constant interplay of nature with desolate landscapes. These cinematic choices show how the melancholia of Partition is not merely historical but psychological, carried within the bodies of the characters. Thus, Ghatak translates the internal condition of melancholia into a sensory, cinematic language so that the audience can experience what the characters themselves are unable to say.

Use of Sound and Music to evoke Melancholy:

Ritwik Ghatak believes that there are various kinds of auditory elements which complement the visuals of a film: “They are five: speech or dialogue, music, incidental noise, effect noise and silence.”(38) Ghatak uses all of these to bring out the emotions of the characters and show the audience, in this case, melancholy. For music, he says that the main idea is that the music should be such that it complements the theme of the movie. He gives the example of Ray’s *Pather Panchali*, where the same musical motif is used multiple times to establish it as the ‘theme’ of the film. Thus, in a similar fashion, we will focus on how Ghatak uses music, sound effects,

dialogue/silence etc. to craft a finely balanced union of image and sound.

Music:

While detailed information on Ghatak's musical choices is limited, I will present what I observed through a close reading of the two films. Ghatak uses what Michel Chion calls the "empathetic effect" of music (Audio-Vision, 8). As the name suggests, empathetic music is the kind of music that "appears to be in harmony with the scene." Such an effect helps in generating empathy for the characters, allowing the audience to feel what the character is feeling - happiness, melancholy, tension, or despair.

Ghatak uses Nita's brother very effectively to mark the musical shift from a happy state to a sorrowful one. In the first half of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, we frequently see Nita's brother doing his *riyaaz* under a tree, and the inclusion of P. T. Kanan's melodious classical pieces, along with the early-morning *raagas* he practises, creates a calm, peaceful atmosphere. Later, Ghatak uses a folk song ("*Susamay Ae Din Goaiya*," which translates to "the good days have gone by") to show that both the film and its protagonist are now moving from a simple, steady state into an emotionally unstable one. The lyrics of this beautiful song roughly translate to:

*I have wasted all my good days,
Now in bad times,
I've come to the river's edge,
Boatman, I do not know your name,
Who shall I call out to? (x 2)
Oh my heart, who will take you across?
(Meghe, 43:11 - 44:05)*

The lyrics work as an emotional mirror to Nita's inner world. The lament over "wasted good days" resonates with the film's transition from youthful hope to an irreversible decline, Nita's life is slowly turning upside down. In Ghatak's filmography and in his songs, a river is never just a landscape; it becomes a threshold, a liminal space where one confronts destiny and despair. The song's words imply that Nita has lost direction and control of her life. The boatman, just like the recurring symbolism of a train, becomes a figure who can take her from despair toward some possibility of happiness. The image of the boatman also appears in *Subarnarekha*. When Sita and her love interest Abhiram grow up and their relationship shifts from friendship to love, we see the boatmen rowing along the river, taking a new turn, just as their lives do.

Ghatak then brings in a Rabindra Sangeet ("*Je Raate Mor Duarguli*") in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. The lyrics express how drastically the protagonist's fate has shifted, and the mournful tone of the song deepens the sense of melancholy that has gradually taken over Nita's life. All the songs are carefully placed within the film to match the mood of the scenes that come before and after them. The movie also begins with a mostly upbeat score, because the early scenes are, in general, quite happy, but as the film progresses, we notice a gradual shift in the background score as well.

Songs play a very important role in *Subarnarekha* too. Sita's externalisation of her pain is mostly through the songs she sings. One of the main recurrent songs is another Rabindra Sangeet ("*Aaj Dhaner Khete Rod O Chayar*"), which talks about the metaphorical

hide and seek of sun and shade, representing happiness and despair respectively. The entire film, in a sense, is a game of hide and seek between the joys and sorrows of the characters. Whenever Sita is heartbroken and needs to express it, she sings. She sings the melancholic “*Shyam Tu Sovat Ho Ab Kaahe*” when Abhiram is away for his studies, and later she sings “*Mora Dukh Ka Se Kahu*” (To Whom Should I Tell My Sorrows). Sita’s brother even points out how she always sings songs that are distinctly sad and melancholic. But that changes once Abhiram returns after his studies. She sings “*Ajo Ki Anando*” (What bliss it is today!). So, Ghatak utilises songs incredibly well to audibly convey a character’s melancholy.

Sound effect:

While talking about sound effects, Ghatak says that reverberating sounds like a bed creaking, or those that do not correspond to the visuals, such as a train passing by in the distance but not visible in the scene, can express things that the characters themselves do not say. Michel Chion also says something similar. Alongside the empathetic effect, Chion discusses the “unempathetic effect,” where the music or sound progresses with a distinct indifference to the emotional situation of the scene. He writes that “this juxtaposition of scenes with indifferent music has the effect not of freezing emotion but rather of intensifying it, by inscribing it on a cosmic background” (Audio-Vision, 8).

This is deeply relevant to Ghatak. When Nita suffers a huge emotional blow, such as discovering betrayal or facing yet another loss, she clutches her throat as if she is suffocating, and we hear the whip lashing

in the background. This sound is indifferent to the exact action on screen, yet it amplifies her grief. Ghatak uses the sound of a pressure cooker or the loud whistle of a train engine to externalise the extremely repressed feelings Nita has bottled within her heart. The loud beating of drums or tabla, echoing the quickened rhythm of an anxious heartbeat, accompanied by the melancholic, recurring strains of the flute and shehnai, and the pained expression on Nita’s face together create an atmosphere heavy with sorrow and emotional turbulence. Because this musical arrangement returns again and again, it imprints itself on the audience, making it impossible to miss that the film has entered a distinctly melancholic terrain.

We may also understand some of Ghatak’s sound design through Michel Chion’s idea of acousmatic sound - sounds whose source is unseen. The distant train whistle, the unseen whip, or the pressure cooker in another room are all sounds that do not belong directly to the frame. Chion argues that acousmatic sounds create psychological tension and open up a deeper emotional space, because they make the viewer imagine more than what is shown. In Ghatak’s films, these unseen sounds often represent a threat, a memory, or an internalised pain that the character cannot voice. Thus, acousmatic sounds become another way of expressing melancholia, an interior grief that leaks into the sonic world even when the characters remain silent.

Silence of the characters:

But according to Ghatak, what is most symbolic of the theme is: Silence (40). Elaine Scarry has rightly pointed out in her book *The Body in Pain*, that physical pain shatters all

barriers of language, meaning that no language can adequately express the level of pain that a person is going through (5). I believe it is even strongly applicable to emotional and mental agony. The language becomes sparse and no human language or word can express your feeling that you are suffering, accurately. Silence becomes your only refuge. Silence, as opposed to preconceived notions by people, holds greater meaning than words when a person suffers. As Susan Sontag observes in “The Aesthetics of Silence,” silence is never an absence but an intensified mode of expression, one that arises when language proves inadequate for the magnitude of suffering.

Thus, the silence of women characters like Nita in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and Sita in *Subarnarekha* becomes a very important tool in conveying their deep-seated pain and melancholia that they experience. While there are not many sound effects or incidental noises (as Ghatak calls them) in *Subarnarekha*, silence becomes the dominant auditory mode of the film. One of the best examples of this is the silence that precedes Sita’s tragic death, a silence that draws out the dread and shame of the moment more powerfully than any dialogue possibly could. The prolonged quiet between siblings, especially as Sita confronts the horror of her fate, becomes more expressive than any scream or protest; the close-up on her blank face, her hollow eyes, makes the audience feel the suffocation, the tightness of chest that comes with despair. The same is seen when Nita realises that Sanat has moved on to her sister and, in a symbolic gesture of loss, she silently walks away: the silence itself

becomes her grief, the only “voice” she has left.

In this context, silence in cinema is rarely empty. As The LA Film School notes, even the quietest moments in a film carry with them a “room tone”, a subtle ambient hum, distant breath, faint echoes, that keeps the world of the film alive even when nothing is “happening.” (“Cinematic Silence”) When dialogue and music drop away, our senses sharpen: we hear every breath, every creak, every half-heard sigh; our imagination fills the gaps. That makes silence a kind of heightened realism, a way for suffering to be felt, rather than explained. The absence of overt sound forces the audience to lean in, to notice the smallest details, and to feel the inner world of characters more intimately than any spoken words could manage. So, in the films of Ghatak, silence is not just a lack of sound, it becomes the language of grief, the only medium available to express a despair that defies speech.

Visuals:

In both films, nature plays a crucial role in shifting the mood from joyful to melancholic, mirroring the characters’ internal states. The trees, the waterbody nearby, the chirping birds, all reflect the characters’ emotions from within. Water, in its various forms, serves as an important element and a liminal space in both films, so much so that Ghatak named one of them after a river - *Subarnarekha*. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the bright, well-lit space under a large tree beside a waterbody becomes central to Nita’s journey, associated with the happy moments of her life, and is contrasted with the dark, enclosed space of the small room where Nita spends her time when she is sick or

heartbroken. Similarly, in *Subarnarekha*, Sita is positioned in front of the river when she is happy, and the river is shown dried up, exposing bare rocks, when she is sad.

At the very beginning of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Nita is seen walking with a large tree in the background while her brother practices classical music in the early morning - a bright, uplifting raag that fills the scene with freshness and hope. Nita stops to look at her brother, who sits on a riverbed as a train passes in the distance. The tree symbolizes Nita's life, full of vitality, and her emotions, calm and peaceful like the surroundings. In *Subarnarekha*, nature is less prominent, but when Abhiram returns after completing his studies, Sita and Abhiram confess their love in a nearby forest. In both films, nature helps establish the initial mood, which gradually turns darker.

The symbolic train appears whenever a major change occurs in the characters' lives. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, a train horn blows loudly as Sanat and Nita share a romantic moment, and again when Nita decides to delay her marriage to support her family. In *Subarnarekha*, the train appears when young Sita learns that Abhiram is leaving for studies, or when Abhiram discovers his lower-caste status at a train station while finding his long-lost mother. In both cases, trains signal pivotal moments in the plot and in the characters' lives.

Once these settings are established, they are juxtaposed with the characters' later misfortunes. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Nita's first major misfortune is her father falling gravely ill, forcing her to become the sole breadwinner and abandon her education. This is depicted as she descends a long, winding

staircase, symbolizing her downward spiral. The staircase, accompanied by loud drums and trumpet, evokes the sense of a ritualistic sacrifice. Nita is next shown in a dark saree holding an umbrella for the first time, a recurring trope. Usually dressed in white, the dark saree marks melancholic and turbulent emotions. The umbrella becomes a metaphor for aversion, a gesture of shutting herself off from sunlight and rain, the forces that nurture growth and joy.

Later, she descends the stairs after discovering Sanat's betrayal and emotional replacement by her sister, clutching her throat, a physical manifestation of psychic suffocation. It is not merely sadness but the collapse of her entire emotional world. The throat, associated with voice, breath, and vulnerability, externalizes her anguish. The downward staircase mirrors her emotional decline, symbolizing the hellish life she is forced to endure. The lighting of subsequent scenes darkens progressively, reflecting her emotional descent. Nita is confined to her small room, her shrinking sense of freedom mirrored by the limited space. She stares out of the window, with flickering reflections of water suggesting a world she can see but not reach. Later, lying silently on her cot in dim light, her stillness conveys loneliness and exhaustion beyond words. At the end, engulfed in darkness and coughing violently, she learns she has contracted tuberculosis. Freud's theory of melancholia resonates here, as we visually see Nita retreating 'within,' confined to the dark space of her heart and room.

In *Subarnarekha*, the primary setting is Ishwar and Sita's home on the city's edge, along the Subarnarekha River. Jagged rocks

scattered across the landscape echo the inner turbulence of displaced refugees searching for traces of renewal in hardened hearts. Sita sits on these rocks when missing Abhiram or after disagreements with her brother. Her barely visible figure among the enormous rocks portrays her engulfment in loneliness and emotional isolation. On two occasions, Sita is shown walking or sitting on a desolate airstrip, once after Abhiram leaves for studies, and again after Ishwar forbids their marriage. The empty runway, traditionally a site of movement and possibility, stretches as a long, vacant space offering no direction, arrival, or departure. Its stark emptiness reflects her inner hollowness and the slow, inward collapse marking melancholia.

Through these visual and auditory metaphors, Ghatak consistently intertwines nature, space, and movement with the inner lives of his characters, crafting a cinematic language of melancholia that is both deeply personal and universally resonant.

Conclusion:

As we reach the climax of both narratives, we notice that it finally rains. When Nita's brother learns about her illness and urges her to go to the mountain she had longed for all her life, it begins to rain. Nita steps outside, lets herself get drenched, and finally smiles, perhaps for the first time in the film, without restraint. In *Subarnarekha*, when Sita runs away from home and begins a new life as a wife and mother, living simply but happily, it rains as well. Rain, in Ghatak's cinema, is therefore not a coincidence but an archetype. As many critics have observed, the symbolism of rain as renewal and hope has deep literary roots. A key figure here is

anthropologist James Frazer, whose monumental work *The Golden Bough* influenced several modernists, including T. S. Eliot. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, with its parched landscapes yearning for rain, draws directly from Frazer's discussions of fertility rituals, seasonal rebirth, and the return of life through water. In Frazer's framework, rain marks not only natural change but the possibility of resurrection after despair. Thus, rain becomes a symbol of hope for both Nita and Sita.

Although this sense of hope dissolves quickly for both women, Ghatak still offers us a faint glimmer of light through the children - the next generation. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Nita's brother describes the little boy as mischievous and full of life, always trying to climb the stairs, as if embodying an instinctive push upwards toward possibility. In *Subarnarekha*, Sita's son finally achieves what all the characters had once dreamed of: he crosses the river and reaches the new home with trees, birdsong, and butterflies. He is the one who moves beyond the liminal, desolate space that trapped the previous generation. Thus, Ghatak leaves us with a small but meaningful hope: that the next generation may step out of the shadow of melancholia.

I believe Ghatak was a lover of nature. He uses the songs of the greatest nature lover of our country, Rabindranath Tagore, in his films. I also believe that he was a follower of the Romantics. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Nita's father quotes Keats, "the poetry of the earth is never dead" (Meghe, 24:33). And that is the hope Ghatak gives the audience. He shows the poetry of nature through his films, and any turn away from this beautiful nature becomes a moment of tragedy for the characters. By

juxtaposing nature with dark enclosed spaces, using melancholic music and the incidental sounds of everyday objects, by employing the symbolism of stairs and the runway, and most importantly through the profound silences of his characters, Ghatak reveals the melancholia at the core of their lives. In this, his work can be seen as an ode to melancholy itself, acknowledging its depth and beauty, yet, like Keats, suggesting that we should not

succumb entirely to it. Through these techniques, he immerses us in their suffering but also leaves us with the faintest reminder that the poetry of the earth and the fragile hope carried by the next generation is never entirely lost. In revealing how nature, sound, silence, and suffering intertwine, Ghatak ultimately shows us that melancholia is not only a psychological condition but a profoundly cinematic one.

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