

Article

Pranjal Borah

Cinema in a Fractured World: Film Language and Aesthetics in Ritwik Ghatak's Cinema of Exile and Partition



In the climax of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, as Shankar visits Neeta in the Shillong hilltop sanatorium scene, she suddenly collapses on him and cries she wants to live as the camera cuts away to the vast indifferent hills and empty landscapes in the background. The camp's distance from home, its high barren location, and the plea to someone who cannot hear are all visual reminders that she is exiled not only from home but from the social world too. Camera movement encodes Neeta's exile in an elaborate choreography of distance and emotional rupture. The camera's capture of her alienates her from space, Shankar and the spectator's casual supports. As Neeta pleads

with her cries to live, Ghatak famously leaves her audio on the soundtrack as his camera pans away from her body across the hills. The camera does not track the speaker's face but drifts away to survey the barren landscape. The smoothness of the pan is emotionally brutal. For it turns Neeta's desperate self-assertion into a disembodied sound, buffeting against hills that do not answer.

The act of movement brings a shift to the gaze itself, such that the camera "exiles" her by not staying with her, turning away from her cry, which is then rendered another noise in the environment. The almost fixed framing has a lot of vertical action and

position play. After the protagonist's outburst, the static shots of the mountains help to strengthen the idea of cosmic indifference. Neeta's body may be exiled within the institution but the landscape acts as a mute, disinterested witness to the erasure of a refugee woman. Ghatak once said that in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, he was conscious of using fewer cuts and allowing movement inside-the-shot – of bodies and of focus – to keep the frame alive. In tandem, the camera's sideways pans away from Neeta, its oblique angles and precarious axes and its ebb and flow of distance and closeness along with a matching tone of the 'melodramatic' sound track cumulatively perform displacement at the formal level. It does not merely picture the woman in exile in a sanatorium, but rather makes the spectator experience exile as the failure of the frame itself to provide her with any stable place to stand.



In an earlier scene, as a train passes with its shrill whistle rendering conversation impossible, Neeta and Sanat, seated at a riverside, are unable to access any emotional closure. The train serves as a visual and aural motif of the forced movements of Partition -- something that bears away others, leaving Neeta stranded in a constant limbo of duty and

deferred desire. The composition, two lovers by water, interrupted by the violence of a passing train, encodes exile as permanent interruption: neither fully settled in the present nor allowed to move towards the future.

In *Subarnarekha*, the brothel climax, where a drunk and half-blind Ishwar stumbles into a room to find his sister Sita, whom he has come to "visit", as the prostitute, is Ghatak's most brutal dramatization of exile. Sita's spontaneous decision to cut her throat rather than accept this affirmation signifies a total exile from all social bearings. Home, caste, family and even the body as a safe structure are obliterated in a single gesture. Critics have noted that in *Subarnarekha*, the *mise-en-scène* indicates Sita's transformation which is marked by her passage from the open and rural space of the house to the claustrophobic and paranoid space of the brothel. The change happens in the passage from shepherding displacement to a city exile so total that Sita can only flee by self-erasure.

Again Iswhar's state of inebriation harkens back to the song of the distasteful and loathsome outcast when he walks through Calcutta to the slum where Sita lives just before that. It intensifies the feeling of exile. His glasses are broken, and he suffers blurred vision as he fumbles through a hostile city captured in crooked, rickety shots. The framing at a distance in a distorted fragment of the street and the alley externalizes his moral blindness and historical blindness. He is the outcast of a refugee gentleman who has let down his own people and is now lost both spiritually and physically.

In *Komal Gandhar*, Ghatak stages a now-classic scene at the river Padma where a

rusted railway line runs towards East Bengal only to end abruptly at a fence on the Indian side. As the camera moves toward the end of the line, and stops at the iron barrier, this shot crystallizes all his displacing tropes, a trajectory made for continuity, now made into an idiotic image of rupture and exclusion. Anasuya and Bhriгу use the term “foreign” with reference to the land across the river, while ‘Bhatiyali’ song of “this side” and “that side” of the Padma chimes in. The landscape is an emotional cartography of exile homeland made inaccessible, memory fenced off and sacralized as forbidden distance.

The ‘Partition Trilogy’ of Ghatak encapsulates various forms of exile. While some scenes depict geographic dislocation, others depict the violent disruption of social, ethical, and affective ties. The separation is conveyed through social spaces, dead-end tracks, institutional spaces, and suffocating interiors that visually imprison Ghatak’s characters. Moreover, the Ghatak trilogy depicts compellingly cerebral and visually evocative cinema language.

In ‘Cinema and I’, Ghatak proclaims the truth emerges in jagged bursts. He rejects illusionistic smoothness for a trembling authenticity that articulates personal suffering to civilizational grief. His films are lauded for their engagement with the marginalised and socio-political realities. In addition, they feature audacious formal experiments. His films also convey unique and soul-searching philosophical ideas. The filmmaker was born during the partition of Bengal, and he expresses his cinematic view through an original and provocative film language. He refused to create ordinary realism but instead sought to produce a cinema of rupture where

the radical aesthetics (often fractured compositions, use of mythic symbolism and revolutionary use of sound) form the very essence of his political comment. The trauma and displacement his films are about are given a cerebral and sensitive form. Through the films, viewers feel the body’s traumatic dislocations of history. This is why the cinephile always finds it a formidable challenge to figure out the prodigious filmmaker in or film language of Ghatak. Nevertheless, it is equally intriguing to probe into the central elements of his film language and aesthetics and the roles these play in his most important films.

Ghatak’s aesthetics are underpinned by ‘fractured dislocation’ a visual and narrative strategy that deprives its characters of spatial or temporal fixity, much as the Partition fragmented Bengal’s inner life. In Ghatak’s films, the framing of dislocation is often marked by composition or mise-en-scène. Confidence violations in his image composition result in a psychological and social breach. His protagonists refugees, marginalized women, and disillusioned intellectuals are never placed at the centre of the frame. They are placed at the edges, dwarfed by it or trapped in it.

Unlike Satyajit Ray’s observational realism, Ghatak’s mise-en-scène resorts to geometry. The characters are decentered, cut up by shadows or bars, while their bodies are dwarfed by indifferent landscapes. The Marxist interpretation of history as rupture probably forms the basis of this technique that lays bare the non-linear character of trauma, where past and present bleed into symbol. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the refugee daughter, Neeta, whose sacrifices are ignored by a

patriarchal family representing the ‘declassament’ of Bengal after the Partition, illustrates this through her progression from student of biology to tubercular outcast.

Ghatak skillfully employed myth as a critical driving force into a number of his films. Ghatak's intense engagement with Bengali tradition caused him to propound myth, not as decorative folklore, but as a framework for dynamism and critique. His use of Ideals from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and folk cults makes personal tales ascend to the level of an epic tragedy, which questions the contemporary failure of society.



As a result, *Subarnarekha* is an inversion of Ramayana in a systematic way. The divine king does not banish his pristine heroine Sita, rather, she is made to inhabit history in exile and displacement. Her backward journey is not a divine trial but degradation. A folk performer donned in black with multi-coloured brass ornaments (A Kali-dressed Folk performer) suddenly enters the frame with a monstrous, masked face and says he will turn Sita into a demon. Sita's deed thus converts the sacred into the sinister. Essentially this myth shows how conventional ideas and roles become prisons in a fractured modern world.

In his "Partition Trilogy," the female characters are assigned the archetypes of Durga, Sati, and Jagadhatri not to worship

them but to illustrate the hypocrisy of India's patriarchal society. As scholar Ira Bhaskar points out, Ghatak had a “brutal critique of a Bengali culture that worships the Goddess while being cruel to women”. The use of myth creates a critique that is both timeless and devastating.

It is always interesting to see how through form one finds the political vision in his films. Ghatak's arresting frames and disruptive sounds coalesce into a coherent political vision in his films. This vision is rooted in his Marxist background and exile from orthodox Communist circles and direct experience as a refugee. He did not see cinema as an end but as a means to reach the masses to “show how truth trembles”.

In an age that demanded nationalist epics, his view was palpably anti-epic. While Satyajit Ray developed humanist tales of individual development within a changed India, Ghatak makes the nation itself a fragmented and unstable entity “doomed from the outset”. In his narratives, the protagonists are not on a heroic journey; they are victims of history and the aesthetics in his films make us feel their dislocation in our bones.

Ghatak reconceptualized the nature of sound as ‘aural mise-en-scène’ which he dialectically layered with the visuals in order to externally communicate inimitable grief, different from the song and dance routines of the mainstream Indian cinema. Ghatak was a sound experimentalist, unlike most of his peers. The soundscapes that he creates are rarely naturalistic in any sense. They are always filled with songs that break into scenes, discordant industrial noises punctuating melodrama and silence whenever it can help to amplify the psychological strain.

He employed Rabindra Sangeet and folk music not for sentimentality but as dialectical devices. In *Komal Gandhar*, music bears both a nostalgia for tradition and a resistance to the prevailing current of the day. The use of sound components is not just a technical feat. It is a formal extension of Ghatak's Marxist and Jungian ideals. For Ghatak, sound serves as another agent of rupture, reminding one of caste, class and cultural fractures, but still hinting at possible repair. For him, sound was never just atmospheric or illustrative. He employed it as a self-contained narrative force, often disruptive in nature, and a repository of creative and volatile ideas. It evokes collective memory and trauma through its amplified non-diegetic sounds (whips, thunder, trains) and dense layering of folk and classical music.

Meghe Dhaka Tara portrays scenes of family violence with sharp, rhythmic sounds of whipping which externalizes the violence of Neeta's exploitation. The songs related to goddess Durga (including "Jago Durga") associated with Neeta are not celebratory. In fact, their use at this moment is ironically undergirded as it draws an analogy between the woman who incarnates the divine and the one being exploited on the earth.



In *Ajantrik*, the car soundscape becomes a synecdoche of Bimal, probing man machine alienation in a mechanized post-colonial world. The strange, futuristic noises like groans and wheezes marking the deterioration of the car represent the bafflement of the character Bimal. The crying effects when the car breaks down are tragic and comic, making it absurdly tragicomic. The harshness of a tow away at the ending is jolted by a honked horn squeezed in by a baby giving it an ironic triumph.

Ghatak installed the sound post-dub, making the film to diminish and even dismantle dramaturgy. The ruptures (abrupt starts/abrupt stops) are similar to unpredictable contingencies of life and his techno-view as a philosophical mirror

In Ritwik Ghatak's cinema, melodrama is a deliberate aesthetic choice where the excess becomes energised in the political engagement but not sentimental. Ghatak accentuates the action and the sound, visual codes and coincidences, making it formally impossible for the spectator to ignore the wounds of Partition. Ghatak is regarded as a major proponent of melodrama in world cinema, ostensibly deploying 'heightened expression' rather than realist restraint with the intention of disturbing passive reception and stimulating critical attention. His style is an eclectic mix of folk and classical performance, Stanislavskian acting and Brechtian distance, together with wide-angle lenses, extreme camera angles, rough lighting scheme, and continuous sound design. It can be seen that disintegration of family as depicted by Ghatak is a reflection of the history of Partition. Ghatak's cinematic view thus converts domestic melodrama into an

allegory of broken Bengal. Ghatak's application of the melodrama technique was both honest and sincere. He used strategies involving music and performance, heightened emotional and dramatic excess, to establish the foreground of remembrance. This perspective shows how social conventions and myths combine to create and conceal the suffering of women. According to him, partition's psychological problems continued to haunt people, specially women.



In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Neeta's self-sacrifice and breakdown epitomises the 'resonant echo' of the uprooted refugee community, her tragedy being a substitute for history. Neeta's final scream is heavily sounded and framed up to almost mythic proportions, meandering between individual plight and a national disaster. The brothel episode in *Subarnarekha*, where Ishwar rediscovers Sita, deploys a sudden and brutal recourse to conventional melodramatic codes to expose incestuous aggression and the brutalisation of India's cultural heritage. His melodrama often works as a kind of shock therapy, using excess, coincidence and repetition to educate spectators and provoke political reflection rather than comfort them. The significance is carried by this double movement: as spectators, we not only get

overwhelmed but we are also urged to read woman, home and family as charged historical signs, not simply private sorrow. Ritwik Ghatak makes use of a range of distinctive visual devices to convey the experience of displacement, drawing from his trauma of Partition and his intense political awareness. Through these motifs, a cinematic language is forged that externalizes the pain and loss and dislocation of uprooted communities. Ghatak frequently places his characters in dry landscapes, the riverbank, dilapidated refugee colonies, and in-between spaces like railway tracks or wastelands. The river in *Subarnarekha* is always there. It becomes not only a boundary of home and exile but also a reminder of a fluid, unstable reality. His use of wide shots frames his protagonists like Neeta from *Meghe Dhaka Tara* or Ishwar from *Subarnarekha* as tiny beings isolated from a harsh and implacable environment that visually expresses alienation.

Ghatak's films use landscapes as more than just settings. They are charged with emotion, almost alive. The external world—be it the endangered river in *Subarnarekha* or rain-drenched fields and muddy refugee enclaves in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*—mirrors and shapes the internal world of the characters. Ghatak shows interest in the Jungian archetypes and collective unconscious through his use of landscape. Rivers, bridges, and wastelands are metaphors for division and transition. The characters are often pitted against the indifferent wide sky or confined loops of walls, a graphic language that signifies the dream of oppression and transcendence.

The montage sequences of Ghatak's films combine scenes of traditional rituals, folk performances, or mythic tableaux with suffering and divisive events. The visual connection between something traditionally sacred with something modern-day traumatizing allows for overlapping myth and loss in the same visual plane. In Ghatak's cinema, shadow and light are an important visual language. Light sneaking into dark, cramped, suffocating rooms radiates moments of hope amid looming darkness. The visual motif of twilight or dusk recurred frequently in his cinema, emphasising a space inexorably caught in a world between disappearing pasts and uncertain futures. A dying or lone tree, as in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, emerges often as a silent witness to history and family ruptures. Nature is an indifferent scenario and a vault of memory that symbolizes the inner state of the displaced.

Ghatak's cinema creates its own causal logic quite different from classical narrative logic. His storytelling is often associative and elliptical, punctuated with poetic interludes: flashbacks, dream sequences, fragmentary voice-overs, lapidary to the degree of absurdity and leaps in time. In *Subarnarekha*, the fractured narrativs make us realise how historical violence disrupts memory and identity. The interiors in his films often have a suffocating feel thanks to low ceilings and crowded rooms. Many of the characters are framed inside windows and doorways. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, we get to see how the fractured relations within the small family under one roof convey Neeta's suffocation within the four walls which do not feel like a home anymore.

Ghatak often employed a repository of high, low camera angles, circular pans, and wide angles, distorting the film world to reflect the characters' psychological disturbances. He frequently situates his subjects at the periphery of the frame, highlighting their social vulnerability. Rapid zooms or tracking shots replicate the unsettling experience of forced migration and social turmoil.

An "unmechanical" artist in a mechanical age, this is how Ritwik Ghatak described himself in an interview. The filmmaker whose non-conformism caused a cerebral turbulence in cinema created a passionate cinema that also revolutionised film form. Ghatak's distinct and radical approach to cinema and narrative reflects and embodies his vision in unique ways. More specifically, the master creates an aesthetic of crisis within which the disjunctive effects (a 'distorted' frame, a jarring sound effect, a deployed myth) bear the argument that articulates deeply felt wounds of partition, modernity and the dispossessed.

Ritwik Ghatak's cinema probably reveals the subversive and unbearable power of art like nothing else. An artist possesses an extraordinary power, a capacity to expertly orchestrate and manoeuvre over the self and the subject. His cinema is unsparing but also very personal – and, of course, eminently political. Through radical cinematic and narrative innovations, Ghatak could create a cinema with panache that does not easily sum up and, definitely, does not shy away from history and dream, the epic and the everyday.

Work Cited:

- Banerjee, H. (1985). **Ritwik Kumar Ghatak: A Monograph**. National Film Archive of India.
- Bhaskar, I. (1983). Myth and Ritual in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, **Journal of Arts & Ideas**, 3, 43–50.
- Bhaskar, I. (Ed.). (2022). **Ritwik Ghatak's Partition Quartet: The Screenplays (Vols. 1–4)**. Tulika Books.
- Chatterji, S. A. (2004). **Ritwik Ghatak: The Celluloid Rebel**. Rupa & Company.
- Ghatak, R. (1987). **Cinema and I**. Ritwik Memorial Trust.
- Ghatak, R. (2000). **On The Cultural Front: A Thesis Submitted by Ritwik Ghatak to the Communist Party of India in 1954**, Ritwik Memorial Trust
- Ghatak, R. (2000). **Rows and rows of fences: Ritwik Ghatak on cinema**. Seagull Books.
- Hood, J. W. (2000). **The essential mystery: The major filmmakers of Indian art cinema**. Orient Longman.
- Majumdar, R. (2021). **Art cinema and India's forgotten futures: Film and history in the postcolony**. Columbia University Press.
- O'Donnell, E. (2025). **Ritwik Ghatak's Cinematic Sensibility**. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Rajadhyaksha, A. (1982). **Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic**. Screen Unit.
- Rajadhyaksha, A. (2009). **Indian Cinema in the time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency**. Indiana University Press.
- Raychaudhuri, S. (2000). **Partition Trauma, the Oedipal Rupture, Dreaming: The Cinematic Will of Ritwik Kumar Ghatak**. Papyrus.
- Sarkar, B. (2009). **Mourning the nation: Indian cinema in the wake of Partition**. Duke University Press.
- Vahali, D. O. (2020). **Ritwik Ghatak and the cinema of praxis: Culture, aesthetics and vision**. Springer.

Dr Pranjal Borah is a member of FIPRESCI.